

THE FIRST CANADIANS IN FRANCE

By F. McKelvey Bell

CHAPTER VII.

IT was my fate, or fortune, to be in charge of the advance party which was detailed to prepare for the opening of our hospital.

Captain Burnham and I, with about forty N.C.O.'s and men and two days' rations, left Boulogne one cold November afternoon, a few days after the concert. At the end of a slow journey lasting three hours, we were deposited at the railway station of a fishing-village on the coast.

If Boulogne prides itself on its odour of dead fish, this little place must be an everlasting thorn in its side; for all the smells of that odouriferous city fade into insignificance before the concentrated essence of the back streets of Etaples. We didn't linger unnecessarily in the village, but pushed on at the quick march and, crossing the bridge, were soon on the broad paved road which runs through Le Touquet forest.

It was just dark, and snow had fallen to the depth of about two inches; the most we saw in two winters, during our stay in that part of France. It was a crisp, cold evening, and the swinging pace of our march did much to keep us warm.

From time to time we passed large summer residences and artistic villas partly hidden in the woods, but all the doors were closed, and all the windows were dark. Not a human being passed us on the road, and the noise of our shoes crunching through the crusted snow was the only sound which broke the solemn stillness of the air.

Our men, too, seemed oppressed with the weird solitude of the forest and seldom spoke above a whisper.

"Seems as though the world were dead," said Burnham, after we had walked nearly two miles in silence.

"Yes," I replied, "it gives one a creepy feeling passing through this long dark avenue of pines. The houses, too, look as if the inhabitants had fled and that no one had the courage to return."

"I understand the Bosches were through quite close to here," Burnham remarked, "in their first mad dash for Paris, and that some German soldiers were killed near the outskirts of this wood."

"By the gruesomeness of it, I can imagine they were *all* killed," I replied.

By this time we had turned at right angles to our former path and entered