

# A TRIP WITH THE RATION WAGONS.

By Frederick G. Bull (American News Service).

"GET mounted! Walk—march!" shouted the Transport Officer, a trim, helmeted figure, as the cavalcade moved off through the scented dusk, redolent of growing things, and petrol, and the fine, flying dust of a great, sun-baked plain populous with life.

We rode side by side in silence for a time, the T.O. busy with his thoughts, and I eagerly scanning the tent-dotted terrain, humming with the industry of many races of an Empire at war.

As we slipped from the smooth surface of the beaten earth road on to the clattering animation of the great highway bordered by shadowy trees, I awoke from contemplation of the vast machinery of modern warfare as a kilted warrior on a dilapidated bicycle collided with my steed. Out of consideration for the public, I refrain from reproducing the exact phrasing of his disapproval, but I noticed with surprise that his accent and his selection of profanity hinted more of the water-front of Montreal than the wind-swept hills of Scotland. Indeed, his appearance was not what I have been led to suppose is that of a typical Highlander; and picturesque as the kilt may be, it is hardly adapted to bicycle riding.

By the wayside we passed a tent, noisy with song, bearing the familiar sign of the Y.M.C.A. A soldier song was in progress, "Stock All Your Rations in Your Haversack," and the triumphant roll of the strong, manly voices augured ill for the artillery-buffed sons of Germania across the way.

We rumbled through a rubble heap where once a populous village stood, and angled off up the sloping ridge. I had a momentary glimpse of a gun-pit housing a gleaming metal monster, a beautiful, sinister machine of shining steel, with grim-faced gunners grouped about in a silent knot.

"Eight-inch 'how,'" remarked the T.O. with the nonchalance of long usage.

As we rounded the swell of the ridge a scene of desolation, such as no human imagination could picture, shocked the sight. Even in the fast fading light which softened its rough contours the earth looked as though it had been tossed about at the whim of some irresponsible monster. The chalky subsoil heaping the jumbled waste seemed like the foam of a storm-driven sea. Trees lay uprooted or, broken and lifeless, protruded naked arms through the ruined ground. Over it all the road ran straight and true, its smooth surface a tribute to the incessant industry of the construction gangs.

In an offshoot of the main thoroughfare we halted to allow a string of ammunition limbers to pass—the courtesy of necessity. Then, with all cigarettes extinguished, continued on our way.

The stars were showing faintly in a mild summer sky as we dipped down the slope towards the firing line. Far in front German flares winked and glowed as they curved in a stately arc over the heaps of battered mud where Briton struggled with German for the mastery. Momentarily the intolerable blast of a heavy gun made one wince, the ear, after the initial deafness, catching the soft rush of the missile cleaving the strata of the upper air, to burst with a dull detonation far over the enemy lines. Here and there the sudden, wicked glow of German shell flamed in the sky a moment before the heart-shaking scream of its passage gave warning of its approach. Far over on the right the steady "Wump—wump—wump" of a heavy artillery action, and the flickering lightnings of innumerable batteries drew the remark from the T.O.:—"Something doing on the right!"

At a cross-roads beside the relics of a broken shrine stood a solitary figure, challenging all foot passengers—

one of that chain of sentries which forever keeps watch on all the lines of communication. There we swung off to the left, taking a track through the maze of shell holes.

We passed several parties of soldiers, "work parties," the T.O. called them, men whose office is to do a little light spade work for a short period occasionally. Oddly enough this duty seems to be almost universally unpopular with the troops, although, personally, I feel certain I should enjoy a little pleasant exercise of that nature in the balmy evening air.

We rumbled over a wooden bridge crossing an occupied reserve trench, and so to the skeleton of a house, the "ration dump." This place was called "The Castle in the Air," after the humorous style of these soldiers. Undoubtedly the name was very apt. The greater part of the building had gone into the air. A number of men were waiting in the lee of this edifice, ready to carry their food to the forward positions. As soon as the wagons drew up the soldiers received their rations in bags and boxes, and filed away into the night.

"Any of the good stuff?" asked a shadowy figure of one of the quartermaster-sergeants.

"Yes, two—of lime-juice," he answered.

I heard a groan of mortal agony, so limitless, so despairing, it froze the blood within my veins. Thinking he had been stricken down by one of the hissing messengers of death which were even now cracking and spitting against the farther wall, I jumped from my horse and asked him where he was hit.

"In the head, the throat and the stomach," he replied, but although I asked for the privilege of looking to his wounds, he refused, and carried on distributing rations as though nothing had happened. A true hero, and deserving of the V.C. if ever man was! Afterwards, when I mentioned the incident to the T.O., he looked at me with a curious smile, laughed shortly, and said:—

"The men are all like that."

But beneath his British stolidity I could read a limitless pride in the soldiers who could be wounded severely, perhaps even fatally, in three places, and yet continue at their duty. Truly a wonderful case of silent heroism!

Shortly after the Germans began to shell us, many of the missiles falling as closely as within five hundred yards of where we stood. At once I took cover in the cellar of the building, not that I had any fear for my own sake, but lest the public should be denied the enlightenment of my experience. I found another person crouching there in the dark. After a time I asked him for a drink of water. I think he must have misunderstood me, for, handing me his water bottle, he said, with rough generosity:—

"Here, take a sniff of the smelling-salts!"

I removed the stopper and did as I was bid. The odour was pungent, but not displeasing, reminding me of some rum punch I once smelt at a Press dinner. I inhaled deeply once or twice and returned the bottle to its owner.

"Wish I was your batman," he replied, with a compliment in his tone.

"A most refreshing scent," I answered, for the sake of conversation.

"Very!" he replied, with difficulty, his speech being followed by a curious gurgling sound, the origin of which I could not trace in the dark.

By this time the shelling had ceased, so I clambered out of the cellar and remounted my horse.

"Walk—march!" came the order, and we started back on our homeward trip over the rough, shell-torn track to the billets. As we plodded along through the soft night air I realised that only by personal exposure to danger are the intimate aspects of warfare revealed to one, and the uncomplaining heroisms of the modern soldier made plain