

THE ONTARIO S-T-R-E-T-C-H-E-R

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THE FIRST CONVOY.

A TOUCH of the dreary had crept into the life of the Hospital when May passed out and still no convoy. True, there had been for three or four weeks from 20 to 40 medical cases, mostly men who had in the early days of the call to the manhood of the Empire answered with a ready "Here I am, send me." They had been sent; many months had passed since they had had their baptism of fire. The Huns' bayonet had never touched them; the Huns' bullet had not found in one of them a billet; the Huns' high-explosive shell had not dug the grave of any of them; but cold, wet, exposure, and other auxiliary forces of dread disease had accomplished where bullet, bayonet, and shell had failed, and had laid low these two score sons of the Empire, who were the only cases for many weeks. What were two score patients among nearly as many medical officers, not to speak of four score nursing sisters? The best from the skill of all was of course ungrudgingly given, but this, in extent at least, was not the fulness of work for which practices and homes and friends across the sea had been abandoned. True, there was no lack of pleasure of its kind—golf, tennis, visits to London and to historic places, social meetings—to healthy men and healthy women these things spell enjoyment, but again, not for a holiday had old Ontario been left for the Motherland. The call that had been heard and had been answered readily was the call of the wounded. But May was out and the wounded had not come. It was not a churlish discontent with conditions that in so many ways spelt enjoyment that made for the restless, unsatisfied spirit that was closely akin to dreariness in the last days of May and the first week of June. It was surely a divine discontent of earnest spirits that had so far been denied the opportunity of manifestation of skill and care, of battle against bullet, bayonet and shell, in the bodies of the still-living—to offer which as a contribution of personal effort in the Great War the members of the unit had come afar. Appreciation of the lesser things could not stifle discontent with the absence of the "real thing." But the day came at last. "A convoy of 150 will arrive at 7 to-night" was the word that passed along in the afternoon of June 8th. There had been rumours on previous occasions which had failed to materialise, and there was a certain amount of scepticism for a time. But once the official declaration had been made, scepticism, dreariness and discontent vanished. Quietly and without fuss all preliminary orders were carried out. Fifteen minutes before the time the train was due the motor ambulances were in line outside Orpington station: stretcher bearers were lined up: the officers in charge

at various points had everything in readiness. Young Orpington and older Orpington of either sex gathered in strong numbers on either side of the road leading from the station. There was a wait of ten minutes; unusual quietness pervaded the station in spite of the many in the immediate proximity. A signal drops: a whistle is sounded. "Here she comes" came sharply from the lips of a station official, and as he spoke, around the bend away up the track glided the powerful engine drawing a train as long as the station itself. And the freight that was borne on that long line of carriages! It was a freight of men who not three days before had as at the mouth of hell fought against and helped to drive back the minions of the foe not only of England and of the Empire, but of humanity, who, in his bedevilled lust, had for years drawn upon and perverted for his ultimate hellish purpose, every God-given faculty incarnate in himself or his people, so that when the day of Seeming Opportunity should arrive he might most readily and ruthlessly smash from off the face of the earth those men, be they in thousands or ten times ten thousand, who should dare to lift the hand of manhood to stay the slaughtering march of a mighty brutality. Relatively those borne on that train were but a little sample of the fruitage of the horrors of war. To those who in the earlier days of the war had at one or other of the fronts been among, or of, the wounded, the message of the train, whose sinuous length glided into Orpington station in the soft, waning light of that evening in early June, and of the eager faces which in spite of bandaged heads or splintered arms were pressed against the carriage windows, was not, we presume, as startling and as impelling as it was to the far greater number for whom this was a first experience of close, personal contact with a large number fresh from the field of carnage. Yet to all it must have been a message of irresistible appeal to that which is best in man, woman or child. Some master of oratory may from platform in crowded hall tell the story of what our men have gone through and how great their claim upon the unfighting and the unfought, with such power and eloquence as shall make his hearers, even though they be strong men, blink their eyes and bite their lips as they listen; some skilled painter in words may so use his pen to tell the story that strong men will mutter something twixt an oath and a prayer as they read, but neither speech nor screed of the greatest of orators or greatest of writers will ever tell the story with the eloquence and soul-reaching, silence-impelling power with which the "first convoy" brought it home to the greater number of those who for the first time in their lives gazed upon such a procession as emerged from train and from

station. First "the walkers," or in some cases the hobblers—those who, wounded and torn in places, could yet walk or get about without being carried; then slowly and tenderly one by one in long succession were borne on stretchers to the ambulances those so broken and smashed—in body only—that they were practically helpless. As the first ambulance loaded with "walkers" turned out of the station yard it was greeted by the crowd—with a silence that was intense, but broken suddenly by a cheer, which, however, as cheers are ordinarily counted, was not a pronounced success. But the lack of sustained volume spoke not of waning appreciation or of wilted patriotism, but of other things at work deep down in the hearts of those who looked and looked and wanted to cheer, but could not. So well had plans been organized and so well had they been carried out that within an hour and a half of the arrival of the train at Orpington Station the last of the 150 of the "first convoy" had been fed, bathed, and put to bed.

An arm gone from this one; a leg off another; bullet or shrapnel with lodgment, as it seemed to a layman, in every part of the human body—battered, mangled, and badly smashed were most of the 150 who formed the "first convoy." There were those whose homes and dear ones are in Old Ontario, or eastward to the Atlantic, or west over the Rockies; and others whose closest ties reach out beneath the Southern Cross, and who look for the day when they will once more "be home" in Australia or New Zealand; and others again to whom England, Ireland or Scotland is homeland and birth land; but no matter whence they had come to answer the call, they were men of the Race: men of one effort and thought in the hour of the Empire's need; men of one spirit still. The Hun, by bullet and gas, by shell and shock, had scattered their limbs and broken their bodies, but had failed to crush or wound or change the spirit of the men of the "first convoy." Glad, thankful, to "have come through," and that it "was no worse," anxious to "make the best of it"; grateful in manner and in word for any attention or kindness; prepared, "if fit," to go back, but no boastful keenness to do so: of such as we have seen and heard them are the wounded of the first convoy—Canadian, Australian, New Zealander, Old Countryman, English, Irish, Scotch—battered and torn in body in one hundred different ways, but one still in the spirit of the Race. And as we see and hear them and take in the full significance of it all, which of us among the unfighting and the unfought does not find it a hard struggle not to invoke the curse of Heaven upon the enthroned barbarian and his even, if possible, more brutal broodling, whose lust of self and tyranny have wrought