

The City of Tragedy and Hope

AN AFTERNOON IN SHELL-TORN AND BATTERED VERDUN.

(By R. D. B.)

The martyred city of Verdun, battered, shaken, blasted, burned, and crumpled, stands still, in its silent, magnificent dignity, in defiance of the German projectiles which shriek incessantly across the shell-blasted valley of the Meuse. If you stand on the eminence to the right at the end of the town, as I did a few days ago, you find yourself on a level with the battered cathedral and its surrounding palaces that are now merely the crumpled monuments of lesser days.

From here you look down into the work of the German. It is a vast acreage of demolition, yet there is no suggestion of disorder or disruption. The city of Verdun was not built for a day, and so its houses stand up, for the most part taking their pounding under silent protest, showing terrible wounds, great gaping holes, and awful breaches. There is not a roof among all the thousands of red roofs that has not been penetrated by a shell, yet the town seems to stand firm and erect and proud. It is, perhaps, at the moment the most wonderful sight in the whole world.

The silence is uncanny. The stillness is accentuated by the periodical whistle and rumble of shells hurled from over the grey hills to the north and east, and the quickly following crack of the explosion somewhere below in the town or in the fields beyond. There are no inhabitants. The city is wholly deserted save for the presence of the soldiers, who clear the few passable roads or do the necessary guard work at the citadel, or carry off their dead or wounded comrades, the daily victims of the bombardment. For the rest, you look upon a city that seems to be dead.

Shell of Welcome.

As I entered the great gates of Verdun by the citadel, where a huge German shell had ploughed a hole thirty feet wide through the wall, I saw at the entrance of the citadel, which is merely a burrow in a great protected mound, a couple of dozen soldiers of all ranks, and in front of them a little man in a steel helmet covered in blue cloth, on which were sewn two stars.

This was General Dubois, the commandant of Verdun, a smiling, quiet, simple soldier of the old school, with grey moustache and slight imperial and eye-glasses covering a pair of twinkling eyes which belie the story of the terrible days and nights through which he and his soldiers have existed for many months. Even as he spoke his quiet words of welcome a great hurrying shell, flinging itself through the air like an express train, brought its message of death across the valley into the town and killed and wounded twelve of his men. The coming of this shell, like that of its fellows, failed to excite interest. No one paid the slightest attention to it. More followed, and no notice was taken until a messenger brought the news from the interior of the town that twelve men of a working party had been struck down.

The general took me in to see them. Our car picked its way gingerly through the wrecked streets. In the residences you could see the curtains still hanging in the frameless windows, the overturned tables, the disordered beds, the household treasures now piled up in orderly fashion and covered with dust and debris. The shops were all open—what was left of them—but there was nothing to sell, no one to buy, and no one to offer. Just open, gaping doorways and great gaps where there had been walls and staircases and life and contentment and hope. Thus, I imagine, Pompeii must have looked before it was completely buried.

In the Hospital.

In the middle of the ruined city we found the hospital. A huge, black Senegalese soldier, speaking not a word of French, and looking quite happy and satisfied, stood at attention as we entered. Inside was the hospital, as busy, as complete, and as efficiently staffed as any other on the line. The surgeon-major in command eagerly showed us his newly-wounded charges; the general patted one of them on the hand and we gave them a cigarette or two, and off we went, leaving behind us the most astonishing evidence of devotion to duty under the most extraordinary conditions imaginable. A minute after we had gone a shell fell within twenty yards of the hospital door.

Verdun was beautifully built on the side and top of a hill overlooking the plain of Meuse, which has witnessed the most terrible carnage that the world has known. It must have been a pleasant town to live in, for it had some fine business streets, which, being more severely punished than the others, are now for the most part merely rubbish heaps, and its residences higher up show now evidence of comfort, ease and happiness. A view over the tortured roofs today, showing the quiet city, with its utter absence of life, reminds one for all the world of those panoramas that used to be a feature of Earl's Court exhibitions, where you walked along a circular gallery and looked down on an imitation of the Battle of Waterloo or the Falls of Niagara. The only difference here is that the silence is broken every minute or two by the crack of a bursting shell.

The Bishop's Cat.

The cathedral of Verdun stands like a great guardian over the stricken city. Its roof shows pitiful gaping wounds. Its beautiful windows have

been shattered and its treasures destroyed beyond recovery, and yet there it stands four-square to the foe, hammered, pounded, and defaced, but still erect. The museum at its back is such only in name, with one side completely blown away; the bishop's palace would no longer give shelter even to a monk, for it has no roof. Yes, it gives shelter to one living object, and that is apparently the bishop's cat, a large tabby, which, evidently wounded, limped out of a pile of domestic debris and slunk back again as we approached.

Across the road stood a girl's school of the higher order. Only its gaping walls remain to tell the tale of patient teaching and plodding study, of girlish confidences and joyous happy in his comfortable, large house, perhaps dreaming of the days when he might aspire to become mayor, or if indeed he had not already been so. That he was, and perhaps is, a man of substance I can have no doubt from the location of his house, which stands among those of the elect of the town.

M. Pierrard may have his door plate back with my compliments if he will be so good as to let me know his present whereabouts. Also Mlle. Lelorrain may have her book of French studies by following the same prescription. I did not have the heart to loot the door plate of "L'Abbe Aboucourt" or "De Jardins, Officier d'Artillerie," who lived in a fine old Roman house under a magnificent chestnut tree, and I now wish I had, for the German shells will sooner or later take them away.

In the citadel, where General Dubois had given luncheon to Mr. Lloyd George two days before, and where he entertained President Poincaré and General Joffre the day after, I was taken to the officers' mess, a long, low, dark, mediaeval chamber, very much like a brewery vault. A narrow plain deal table fills the chamber. At one end of the room presides the cook with his apparatus, and at the head of the table sits the general, urging you to try the fine cakes that have come all the way from Bar-le-Duc, which is famous for this particular culinary product. It is a strange, barely-furnished apartment, and it is perhaps the simplest abode of a general to be found anywhere in the war zone. There he has lived through the hell of bombardment, never hurrying, always alert.

"How do you stand it?" I asked. "Oh, well," replied the little hero, "I am always busy, and I am always a fatalist."

As he said it we heard the great crash of a bursting projectile near by. The general called a sergeant. "If there is anything of that shell to be found," he ordered, "please have it brought in and give it to the gentleman."

As my car drew out of the broken portals of the citadel my last view of Verdun was a smiling little general in blue jacket and red breeches, waving a kindly farewell. Overhead a white cloud of shrapnel hung unsteadily in the air; beyond, across the hills, the Germans were sullenly venting their disappointment by wasting their precious projectiles on the city which is not dead, but will live again to show the world that Verdun is the apotheosis of German failure.

General Dubois, the little Governor of Verdun, faded into the background, but from my mind will never be erased this picture which has for its centre the personification of a France that looks on in the face with a smile of confidence and fortitude.

"LAND IRONCLAD"

Mr. H. G. Wells' Forecast of The Trench/Dreadnought

Mr. H. G. Wells, who has anticipated history with such frequent success, may find it naive to hold with almost uncanny prescience the evolution of some such war monsters as are now helping the British victorious advance on the Somme.

His short story, "The Land Ironclads," was written eight or nine years ago, but in offering it for publication to the St. Dunstan's Hostel for "The Blindfold Soldiers and Sailors' Gift Book," Mr. Wells expressed the hope that it might still be of interest. His hope has been speedily realized.

The story describes the sudden ending of a long period of the trench warfare. While a bored war correspondent is conversing with an equally bored officer and an artist, the party are surprised by something unusual happening.

The war correspondent came with bawling ranks, "What the deuce was it? Shooting our men down!" "Black," said the artist, "and like a fort. Not 200 yards from the first trench."

He sought for comparisons in his mind. "Something between a big blockhouse and a giant's dish-cover," he said.

"And they were running!" said the war correspondent.

"You'd run if a thing like that, with a searchlight to help it, turned up like a prowling nightmare in the middle of the night."

In the flickering pallor it had the effect of a large and clumsy black insect, an insect the size of an ironclad cruiser, crawling obliquely to the first line of trenches and firing shots out of portholes in its back.

And on its carcass the bullets must have been battering with more than the passionate violence of hail on a roof of tin.

Monster's Advance.

The soldiers attacked by the monsters still had faith in their trenches and big guns. The story gives snatches of their talk.

"We're evacuating them trenches where we can. And chaps are coming back by the zigzags. . . . No end of 'em hit. . . . But, when we get clear our turn'll come. Rather! Those things won't be able to cross a trench or get into it before they can get back our guns'll smash 'em up. Smash 'em right up. See?"

The lean man with the strident voice ceased firing to turn and reiterate his point. "They can't possibly cross," he bawled. "They—"

And all the while that great bulk was crossing. When the monster's spongy turned his glass on it again it had bridged the trench and its queer feet were rasping away at the further bank in the attempt to get a hold there. It got its hold. It continued to crawl until the greater bulk of it was over the trench—until it was all over. Then it paused for a moment, adjusting its skirt a little nearer the ground, gave an unnerving "Toot, toot!" and came on abruptly at a pace of, perhaps, six miles an hour straight up the gentle slope towards our observer.

The defenders rush off along their trench.

As they dropped down, the vision of a hillside of trench being rushed by a dozen vast cockroaches disappeared for a space, and instead was one of a narrow passage crowded with men, for the most part receding, though one or two turned and halted. The correspondent never turned back to see the nose of the monster creep over the brow of the trench; he never even troubled to keep in touch with the artist. He heard the "whit" of bullets about him soon enough and saw a man before him stumble and drop, and then he was one of a furious zig-zag ditch that enabled the defenders to get under cover up and down the hill. It was like a theatre panic.

Here and there were little rallies and attempts to wait and do some-

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thing vague; but the general drift was away from any concentration. Then on the southern side was the elaborate lacework of trenches and defenses, across which these iron turtles, four feet of them, spread out over a line of perhaps three miles, were now advancing as fast as a man could trot, methodically shooting down and breaking up any persistent knots of resistance. Here and there stood little clumps of men, outflanked and unable to get away, showing the white flag, and the invaders' cyclist infantry was advancing now across the open in open order, but unmolested, to complete the work of the machines. So far as the day went, the defenders already looked a beaten army.

A mechanism that was effectively ironclad against bullets, that could at a pinch cross a thirty-foot trench, and that seemed able to shoot out rifle bullets with unerring precision was clearly an inevitable victor against anything but rivers, precipices and guns.

But the guns had their own problem. There is a natural reluctance to fire in one's own broken men, and many of the guns, being intended simply to fight in advance of the enemy's artillery, were not in position to hit anything in the second line of trenches. After the advance of the land ironclads was swift. The defending general found himself suddenly called upon to invent a new sort of warfare in which guns were to fight alone amid broken and retreating infantry.

As soon as a gun came into play the monster turned itself almost end on, so as to get the biggest chance of a glancing hit, and made not for the gun, but for the nearest point on its flank from which the gunners could be shot down.

Crawling Death.

Just for a moment it seemed splendid, and then it seemed horrible. The gunners were dropping in heaps about their guns. To lay a hand on a gun was death. In another moment half a dozen surviving artillerymen were holding up their hands amid a scattered muddle of dead and wounded men, and the fight was done.

Mr. Wells describes his monsters in some detail:—

They were essentially long, narrow, and very strong steel frameworks carrying the engines and home upon eight pairs of big pedral wheels, each about ten feet in diameter, each a driving wheel and set upon long axes free to swivel round a common axis. This arrangement gave them the maximum of adaptability to the contours of the ground. They crawled level along the ground with one foot high upon a hill and another deep in a depression, and they could hold themselves erect

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and steady sideways upon even a steep hillside.

The engineers directed the engines under the command of the captain, who had lookout points at small ports all round the upper edge of the adjustable skirt of 12-inch ironplating, which protected the whole affair and who could also raise or depress a conning tower, set about the portholes through the centre of the iron top-cover. The riflemen each occupied a small cabin of peculiar construction, and these cabins were slung along the sides of and before and behind the great main framework, in a manner suggestive of the slinging of the seats of an Irish jaunting car.

You must conceive the cabins as hung clear above the swing of the axle and inside the big wheels upon which the great elephant-like feet were hung, and behind these cabins, along the centre to which they opened, a tall gallery into which they opened, and along which worked the big compact engines. It was like a long passage into which this throbbing machinery had been packed, and the captain stood about the middle, close to the engine that led to his conning tower, and directed the hunt, alert engineers—for the most part by signs.

The captain, of course, saw both sides of the battle. When he raised his head into his conning tower there were the dewy sunrise, the amazed and disordered trenches, the flying and

falling soldiers, the depressed-looking groups of prisoners, the beaten guns; when he bent down again to signal "Half-speed," "Quarter-speed," "Half-circle round towards the right," or what not, he was in the oil-smelling twilight of the ill-lit engine-room.

THE CHATHAM FIREMEN HAD STRENUOUS FIGHT

Chatham, Oct. 9.—Fire Sunday morning completely destroyed the old unused building known as the haul-up mill, built by the Miramichi Sulphite Fibre Co. and used during their operation of the pulp mill here to haul logs from the river for conveyance to the barking mill. The fire started about three o'clock. The firemen worked until eight trying to get the fire out of the cribwork upon which the mill was built and which forms part of the railway extension to the Canada dock. The firemen had to return to the scene of the fire about ten o'clock p.m., the fire having got under way again. The loss is small, only a boiler and engine being in the building.

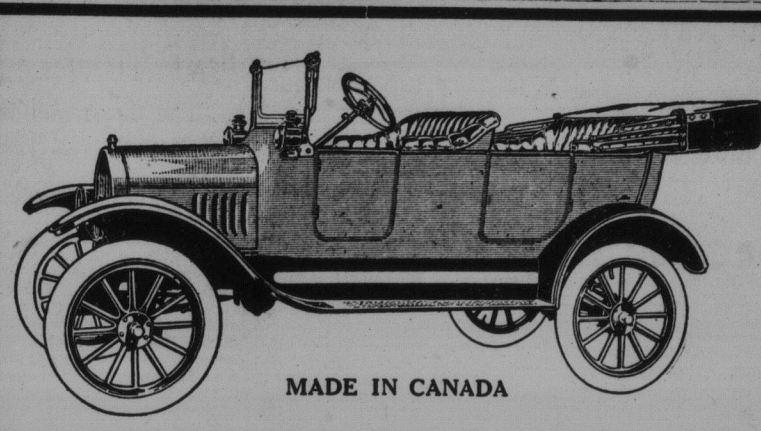
Messrs. W. R. Dearson, C. N. Sand-

ford, R. Irvine, three American sportsmen, who have been in the Tabusintac woods with Guide Fred Connell, left for their homes in Connecticut today, taking with them a moose, two caribou and a deer. They also secured a large bear. They were delighted with their trip.

A sailor jumped off an outgoing vessel on Saturday afternoon in the hope of escaping passage, but was drowned in trying to swim ashore. A boat went to his assistance from the ship, but was too late in reaching him. The vessel proceeded to sea.

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