

Life's Little Comedies



RUDYARD KIPLING'S STORY OF THE WAR

The Irish Guards Leave Ypres for Somme—Brigades Cease To Exist In An Hour.

By RUDYARD KIPLING.

V.—Fog shadows of the Great Battle. The outstanding wonder that anyone in the sultry should be alive at all is not referred to in the diary. Men who watched the shape of that cape of death, raked by incessant aeroplanes and cross-cut by gun fire that fell equally from the flanks and, as it seemed, from the very rear, sometimes speculated, as did the French in the livelier hells of Verdun, how long solid earth itself could hold out against the upheavals of the attack. Flesh and blood could endure—that was their business—but the ground on which they stood did not abide. As one man said:

"It 'ud flee away in lumps under the sole of your foot, till there was no rest anywhere."

There is a tale of half a platoon among whom a heavy gas shall dropped as they lay in the flank of a cutting beside a road. Their platoon commander hurried to them, followed by the sergeant, calling out to know the extent of the damage. No one replied. The question was repeated. Then, "Speak up when the officer's askin'," cried the sound-dazed sergeant. But even that failed. They were all dead where they lay, and human nature being what it is, the sergeant's words became a joke against him for many days after.

England's Turn. Meanwhile Verdun had been in the



Rudyard Kipling tells of the Irish Guards' journey from Ypres to the Somme and little humorous incidents

fire since February, there was no sign of the attacks on it weakening, and France and the world looked on easily at that dread point of contact where men and stuff consumed as the current. It was time that England should take the strain, even though her troops were not fully trained or her guns yet free to spend shells as the needs of the war demanded. What had gone before was merely the initial deposit on the price of national unpreparedness; what was to come, no more than a first instalment. It was vital to save Verdun; to so hold the enemy on the western front that he could not send too much help to his eastern line or his Austrian allies, who lay heavy on the Italian army; most vital, to kill as many Germans as possible.

The main strength, the actual spine of the position, so far as the British front was concerned, was some twenty-five miles of high ground forming the watershed between the Somme and the rivers of Southern Belgium, which ran, roughly, from Maricourt in the south, where our line joined the French, to Gommecourt in the north. Here the enemy had sat untroubled for two years, looking down upon France, and daily

strengthening himself. His trooped and quadrupled lines of defense, worked for him by his prisoners, ran below and along the flanks and on the tops of 500-foot downs.

First Wounded Stripes.

The regimental band arrived from England for a three months tour. The officer who accompanied it wore a wound stripe—the very first which the battalion collectively had ever seen—and men wondered whether wound stripes would become common and how many one might accumulate. It was removed from the officer by laughing friends as a matter of something too suggestive in present company, and the band played in the still, warm evenings, while the dust of feet going Somme-ward rose and stretched unbroken along the Doullens-Albert pave. Here the very tree holes, before they began to be stripped and splintered by shell fire, were worn and rubbed beneath the touch of men's shoulders, and gnawed by the halting horses.

The King came on Aug. 3 to visit the division. Special arrangements were impossible so bombing assault practice went on, while the officers of the battalion were presented to him "in the orchard where the messes were pitched." He made no orations, uttered no threats against his enemies, nor guaranteed the personal assistance of any tribal god. His regiments merely turned out and cheered the inconspicuous car as long as they could see it. But there is a story that a Frenchman, an old Royalist, in whose wood some officers had rigged a temporary hut of which he highly disapproved, withdrew every that the chair in which the King of England had sat should be handed over to him, duly certified. Which was done.

By this date [April 11, 1916] the Battle of the Somme was six weeks old, and our troops had eaten several—in some places as much as five or six—thousand yards deep into the area.

Villages Vanished. Villages and woods vanished in the

rest billets, amusing themselves by making a beautiful Irish star from fragments of rock.

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and Pozieres of the Australians. The few decenties and accommodations of the old settled trench life were gone; men lived as best they could in the open among eternal shell holes and mounds of heaped rubbish that were liable at any moment to be dispersed afresh, under constant menace of gas, blinded with the smoke screens of local attacks and beaten down from every point of the compass either by enemy fire, suddenly gathered and loosed, or that of their own heavies searching from miles off some newly-cleared hollow or skyline of the uplands where our troops lay indistinguishable from the skinned earth.

ceased to exist.

Battalions, brigades and divisions went into the fight, were worn down in more or an less time, precisely as

the chances of the ground either screened or exposed them for a while to the fire blasts. Sometimes it was only a matter of hours before what had been a brigade ceased to exist—had soaked horribly into the ground. The wastage was brought down and back across the shell holes as well, as might be, losses were made good, and with a half, two-thirds or three-quarters, new drafts, the original battalion climbed back to its task. While some development behind the next fold of land was in progress or brought to a standstill, they would be concerned only with the life-and-death geography of the few hundred yards immediately about them, of those few score yards over which profitable advances could be made. A day, even an hour, later the use and value of their own hollow or

ridge might be altogether abolished. What had been a hardly-won foothold would become the very pivot of a central attack or subside into a sheltered haven of refuge, as the next dominating ridge or lap of the large-homed French landscape was cleared. Equally suddenly, even while the men thanked God for their respite, German batteries or a suddenly pushed forth chain of German machine guns would pound or spray their shelter into exposed torment once more.

As one philosopher of that unearthly epoch put it some time afterward:

"We was like fleas in a blanket, ye'll understand, seein' no more than the next nearest wrinkle. But Jerry and our generals, ye'll understand, they kept us hoppin'."

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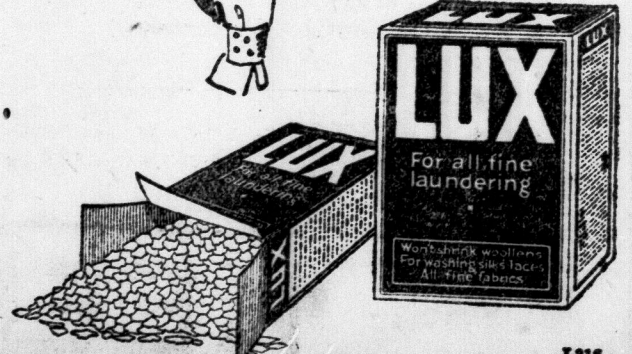
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