

# The Schoolboy in the War

By  
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By NELLIE SPENCE

“DON'T be too hard on that boy! He's Wallace's brother, you know. You ought to show a little mercy for Wallie's sake.”

The scene was a class-room in a well-known Canadian school; the time about four in the afternoon some seven years ago. I was in charge of a motley assembly of delinquents who had been gathered in from all the forms to do a half-hour's penance for various sins of the day. A small boy occupying a back seat had been into some mischief, and I had just brought him up to the front and was in the act of delivering a little homily for his benefit when one of my colleagues entered the room and whispered the above admonition. The small boy overheard the whisper and smiled a roguish and knowing smile, as much as to say, “I guess I'm all right now!”

That little mischief-loving lad of seven years ago was destined to lay down his life in the last and most epic phase of the great World War.

In his History of the Battle of the Somme, John Buchan pays a high tribute to the School-

boy in the War. "When our great armies were improvised," he says, "the current fear was that a sufficient number of trained officers could not be provided to lead them. But the fear was groundless. The typical public-school boy proved a born leader of men. His good-humour and *camaraderie*, his high sense of duty, his personal gallantry were the qualities most needed in the long months of trench warfare. When the advance came he was equal to the occasion. Most of the fighting was in small units, and the daring and intrepidity of men who a little while before had been schoolboys was a notable asset in this struggle of sheer human quality. The younger officers sacrificed themselves freely, and it was the names of platoon commanders that filled most of the casualty lists."

Though speaking in general terms, Buchan has evidently in mind the English "public"-school boy, the boy of Eton and Rugby and Harrow. Following afar off his great example, I wish, while writing under a general title, to pay a tribute to the Canadian Schoolboy in the War. Some recognition of his work and spirit is long overdue; and, failing a worthier voice and pen, I am constrained to essay the high, heroic theme. *Arma puerumque cano*—and oh, how much more inspiring a figure is the Boy than the Man to-day! the Boy who went forth, even as did the lad David in the days of old,

and with the self-same purpose—to slay Goliath!

“O men with many scars and stains,  
Stand back, abase your souls and pray!  
For now to Nineteen are the gains,  
And golden Twenty wins the day.”

As it is easier to deal with a subject in the concrete than in the abstract, I am going to describe the Canadian Schoolboy soldier in the person of that one whom I have known best, perhaps, of all the boys—between four and five hundred in number—who passed (many of them directly, some after an interval at college or business) from the study of history in my classroom to the making of history overseas. That one is the little lad to whom I showed mercy for his brother's sake some seven years ago. If I can succeed in drawing a faithful picture of him, I shall have succeeded approximately in describing the Canadian Schoolboy in general. And perhaps the picture may stand for the Schoolboy in a still more general sense, since (though I may be pardoned for thinking that there is no Schoolboy in the world quite like the Canadian Schoolboy) it is likely that the Schoolboy is much the same the world over; or, at any rate, in free countries, where he is allowed to grow up as a plant in God's own sunshine; where discipline at home or school rests more on moral than on physical force; where the stress is laid on the spirit rather than on the letter of the law; where a real comradeship

is possible between child and parent, pupil and teacher.

Is it necessary to express the hope that, in these days when we are all being drawn together by a feeling of kinship and by a sympathy which is born of sorrow, the personal note (none other is possible in such a sketch as this), and the mention of things intimate and sacred may be pardoned?

My acquaintance with the boy Alan, begun thus dramatically, did not develop much until two years later, when he entered one of my classes. So my knowledge of him extends back over the past five years—one *lustrum*, to use the old Roman time-unit, of a life that numbered only four.

From the beginning I found him a very interesting pupil, especially because a certain complexity in his character baffled me for a long time. It was only when I made the discovery that he was not, as I had thought, all-Scotch, but Irish on his mother's side, that I began to understand him. He had lost that mother shortly before my acquaintance with him began, and I know her only through a beautiful picture and some very lovable traits transmitted to her children. But the Scottish side of Alan seemed to predominate, and it was Lowland Scotch at that (and surely the Lowland Scot is the least understandable as he is the least expansive of human beings). "You may be half-Irish, but you

are still three-quarters Scotch," I said to him more than once; and I tried hard to coax that Irish part out to a more equable proportion. It was that part, with its mysticism and its poetry, that appealed to me.

My second year's acquaintance with Alan was his last at the school, the year 1914-'15. That first year of the war was the most wonderful in the history of our school, as, I daresay, of all Canadian schools. There never was, there never could be again, a year like it. We were all in a state of patriotic exaltation, and the relationship of teachers and pupils became a much closer and finer thing than could have been possible under any other circumstances. Of all the boys in attendance that year three became especially endeared because of their active assistance and interest in our patriotic work. There was George, English of the English, to whom loyalty was as the very air he breathed. There was Raymond, the Yankee lad (but of old Acadian stock), who was almost the best Britisher of us all. And there was Alan, who had a double heritage of the fighting spirit, and, moreover, like the other two, a beautiful enthusiasm for all that was noble and fine. All three were prominent in the school life because of natural qualities of leadership, and because of offices to which their fellow-students had elected them in the Literary Society, the Rugby Team, and other organizations. When the girls of the

school were "mobilised" into a Knitting "Brigade," these boys volunteered to act as our financiers. "Don't you worry about money," they said. "We'll get it out of the fellows. If the girls are going to do the knitting, it's only fair for the boys to find the money." It was never necessary to tell them that our exchequer was empty, for every little while one or another would come along with the anxious inquiry, "How are you off for cash?" I never quite got over the novelty of the sensation caused by such solicitude on the part of a pupil over the state of my finances. Not to make too heavy demands upon the boys' pocket-money, we got up a play or two (we seemed to be overflowing with energy), and our relationship became thus closer than ever. We all liked to have George and Alan act together, for they "played up" to each other perfectly, and were such an interesting contrast—George, the typical Anglo-Saxon, with fair skin and warm colouring; Alan, the typical Gael, with dark hair and deep blue eyes. Both had real histrionic ability; but, while George acted upon all instructions with readiness and quickness, Alan, with a perversity that was probably a blending of Scottish and Irish obstinacy, often proved intractable to the very last, when he would come out with all the requisites of his rôle according to instructions given at rehearsals, and with improvements and additions

of his own inventive fancy. Once during the year the boys put on a wonderful Minstrel Show, in which Alan, with Tartan facings on his coat-lapels and a rich burr in his accent, played the part of one Sandy McTeich in inimitable fashion.

All too soon the year sped away, shadowed toward the close by St. Julien and Festubert. At the latter place Alan's eldest brother, Gordon, was killed. I had never known him personally, but, as Alan often used to slip into my class-room after hours to show me his letters and talk about the war (what an event a letter from overseas was in those days!), I seemed to know him very well indeed. All through the winter Alan was straining at the leash, though he was not seventeen till April; and I was afraid of the effect which his brother's death might have on his intense Scoto-Irish nature. When, as soon as the Matriculation Examination (on which he was writing) was over, I heard that he was going over to Niagara Camp, I hastened out to his home on the little Credit River, carefully preparing on the way an array of arguments to persuade him to wait another year. But my arguments were so many blank cartridges, and my reference to his youth only roused his ire. He was old enough—almost a man—he must go. Oh, the infinite pity and pathos of it all!—the way these boys, little more than children, assumed the responsibili-

ties of the war! "What a mistake," wrote a friend to me on hearing of Alan's death, "our voluntary system was! It seemed so fine and free, symbolic of our national liberty; but it just drained our country of its very best—so much youth, hope, ambition, apparently wasted! The Americans have profited by our lesson. The Draft System is the only one, and twenty is quite young enough to take these lads for service."

George and Raymond and Alan all joined the Colours about the same time, in the summer of 1915; and, after a winter in camp at Toronto, went overseas in 1916; Alan in March, George in May, Raymond in September. With them went a large number of their comrades of the campus and the class-room, many of them skipping a year or two in their haste to reach military age and their eagerness to die for their country. Each year since has seen a similar exodus, and the old school has become a rather forlorn and desolate place. In fact, it has seemed as if part, and that the better part, of the school were overseas; and, like the Jacobites of old, who drank to the King over the Water, we have pledged our hearts' dearest allegiance to the lads who crossed the sea, the lads whose deeds proved them to be of the real Blood Royal and whose Right Divine was therefore not to be gainsaid or questioned. If only I had space to tell of their endeavours and achievements here!

There was Fleetwood, in whom I was given "a third legal interest" by his parents, and who was sometime to take me for my first flight through the blue Empyrean—when he had made quite sure of his landings (but poor Fleetwood never made quite sure of those landings). There was Harry, who did take me for a flight one day, very real even though imaginary, away up over the lines on the western front, assuring me that I need not be afraid, for he would "twist and turn all over the place," and I should see "Archie" shooting wild; but Harry took a last flight all alone in his little fighting 'bus just before Vimy, and whither he went no one knows to this day. There was Walter, whom we all thought quite safe because he was a Medical Officer in Shorncliffe Hospital, until one day, like a bolt from the blue, came the news that he had died suddenly of overwork. There was Charlie, whose face was never seen without a smile, even in death, when they found his body lying in No Man's Land beside that of the comrade whom he had tried to carry through the deep Flanders mud. There was Arnold, the intrepid Naval Airman, who, having to descend on the German side in Belgium, passed through a month of such adventures and escapes as make the wildest fiction seem tame, and who, after a brief leave in Canada, returned to duty only, alas! to be claimed a victim by the insatiable North Sea. There was Douglas ("Duggie" of

beloved memory), a hero if ever there was one, who went to the war at seventeen and returned a scarred but decorated veteran, only to have to fight all his battles over again in the delirium of pneumonia, and, worn out with the double struggle, to lay down his arms at last. There was Max—but no, I will not speak of him or of others now. There is not room on my canvas for so many figures; I must keep to my one sketch.

I have been going through two bundles of letters received from Alan: the one covering the year that elapsed till his Canadian furlough; the other the year and more since his return to the front. The early letters, written in England, are brimful of enthusiasm—everything was so fresh and interesting. One letter—a long one—describes a review of the Fourth Canadian Division by the King shortly before its departure for France. After speaking of the preliminaries, the boy goes on: "Then came a blast on a bugle, and you could hear the mutter, 'The King is coming!' Finally came another blast, and the Division sloped arms. First a big car rolled up with the Queen in it, and then we could see the Royal Standard coming over the hill. The King rode up to the saluting base with his staff grouped round him. . . . The command came: 'Fourth Canadians—Royal Salute—Present Arms!' and the Division came to the present, while the massed band played the

National Anthem. Then we sloped arms again, and there was a minute's quiet, when Gen. Watson stood up in his stirrups and called for three cheers for the King. You should have heard a Canadian Division cheer! I never heard such a noise in all my life. Every man put his cap on the end of his rifle and cheered his lungs nearly away. When everything was quiet again, the King turned his horse and trotted down beside the crowd, followed by his staff. He circled around past the artillery at a walk, and came slowly up the infantry line. As he came up to us, I heard Gen. Watson say, 'This is the 75th, Sir, another Toronto Unit.' Then the King said, 'There is one thing we notice about your Canadians——' and they passed on." The letter ends with a reference to the preparations for departure for France, "the place I have been longing to reach for two years." And now his dear young body rests in France forever!

The first Battle of the Somme, begun on Dominion Day, 1916, had been in progress for about a month when our boy crossed the Channel. From August to December he was in active service. Like other correspondents, he was reticent about his experiences and feelings; but occasionally he broke silence and I remember, in particular, a reference to Courcellette in one of his letters, and an enthusiastic tribute to the 22nd French-Canadians, who covered themselves

with glory in this action. Just before Christmas he was stricken with appendicitis and taken to England. Writing from an Epsom war hospital on Dec. 25, he says, with a touch of the humour that was part of his Celtic heritage: "This is the biggest hospital under one roof in this country. It was, before the war, the London County Insane Asylum; so, you see, I have at last found my level—I am an inmate."

In March of 1917, almost an exact year from his departure, he came back on a well-earned furlough. Shall I ever forget that Saturday morning when, answering a tap which I took to be that of the janitor, I found him at the door of my little flat? One fears almost as much as one hopes to see these lads again; but a single look was enough to show me that he was the same clear-eyed and clean-souled boy who had gone away—the war had not coarsened or corrupted him in the least. In fact, he seemed quite unaltered that day; but, within twenty-four hours, I noticed a great change come over him. For the very day after his arrival news came of the death of his beloved Commander, Col. Beckett (who had been like a father to him); and, though he received the word with stoical composure, he was greatly affected by it. He scorned to speak of nerves, but to those of us who knew him well he could not help betraying himself occasionally; and I have reason to know that he spent many a night, in a terrible

dream life, roaming up and down No Man's Land, vainly searching for the body of his lost leader. He should not have gone back for a long while, if at all; but, when I spoke to him about the matter, as I was asked to do in a letter from his brother Wallace, who was then in France, he said decidedly: "I could never look George and Ray and the other fellows in the face again if I didn't go back. I *must* go."

And so, one evening in June, I saw my Boy Benjamin for the last time, when he ran in for a few minutes to say Good-bye. He was cheery and brave, as a matter of course, only saying, in answer to some inane remark of mine: "Yes, I know what I am going to, but I've got to go. Don't you see that I have got to go?" And I did see that to a lad of his mettle there was no staying at home, no accepting of the "cushy job" that I knew had been offered to him in Canada. So I could only summon up my poor pennyworth of Irish and say to him, "Dia Leat!" explaining that it had more virtue than its nearest English equivalent, "God bless you!" or "God be with you!" "'Leat' is a Dative, Alan," I remember saying, and I had a queer subconsciousness of how absurdly pedagogical were my last words to the boy—a little lesson on Irish grammar. Oh, the smiles we put on just to cover our tears! Oh, the poor little trivialities with which we camouflage our love!

He had scarcely left our shores before news

came of the death of George, and, a fortnight later, that of Raymond also. George had been mortally wounded at Fresnoy, Raymond at La Coulotte. Had the news come earlier, I think that I should have moved heaven and earth to keep Alan home. But, though I might have moved heaven and earth, I know that I should have failed to move the stubborn resolution of a boy in his 'teens, made more adamant as it would have been by the loss of his two friends. And somehow, though I often wondered what he had meant when he had said, "I know what I am going to," I was buoyed up by a faith that the last of my beloved Trio would bear a charmed life, and, winning through the war, come tapping at my door again some happy Saturday morning.

He was in England only a short while—England was dull and uninteresting to him now—and presently word came that he had rejoined his old Unit, now under Col. Harbottle, in France. That was in August, 1917; and, since that time, with the exception of two brief furloughs in "Blighty," he was at the great and grim game in France and Flanders to the end. For a long time he was Scout Officer for the Battalion, and his work was, of course, very dangerous. But, as I heard from other officers, he seemed to know no fear. "That boy," said a returned Captain of the 75th to me once, "used to go up and down No Man's Land as if it had

been his own back yard"—whereupon there was dashed off a dissertation on the text, "Discretion is the better part of valour." In due course came an answer, pleading "Not Guilty" to the implied charge. "You see," he wrote, "my work is not easy, and my nights are spent in the front line and in No Man's Land; but my business takes me there. . . . You need not worry. I know enough about this game to keep me from taking fool risks, and I have seen enough sights to last till the end of my life."

A few months after his return to France he was promoted in rank, and became a Captain at nineteen. A little later, in the spring of 1918, came a Decoration, the Military Cross, "for continuous good service at the front and conspicuous bravery on the field of battle." When I gave this news-item to the press and innocently sent him the clippings, this erstwhile pupil of mine sent me back a gentle reprimand, saying that he disliked publicity, and that there had been too many references to his family in the papers to suit his taste. I was reminded of Donald Hankey's Average Englishman, who glories in never having had his name in the newspapers. But I think that, if he could speak to-day, my boy would not refuse me the privilege of penning this little tribute to his memory.

In a letter dated August 16, he described the drive which began on the 8th, praising the gallantry of Col. Harbottle (who evidently proved

a worthy successor to Col. Beckett), but grieving over the loss of brother officers, especially Major Bull, D.S.O., and Captain Commins, M.C. But, proudly describing the advance, he says: "You can hardly imagine our feelings as we marched through mile after mile of conquered country, past long rows of German guns, through wooded dells which but a few hours before had belonged to the enemy, finally going through our own glorious phase of the attack and handing over the advance to another of our Divisions, as well as to Divisions of Cavalry, and hundreds of Tanks, which poured through for miles."

Early in September he was in England on leave, and could scarcely have more than got back to the line when, in that wild storm of wind and rain with which Nature fittingly accompanied the Third Battle of Cambrai, a battle greater, more epoch-marking, more heroic than that in which gods and men contended

"Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy,"

he fell, with so many of his peers, Schoolboys of Yesterday, fighting grimly, and yet, I like to think joyously, to the very last.

I thank God that, though He denied the dearer boon for which I prayed, He yet granted, in lieu of life, so glorious a death. Not for a young, heroic soul the tame and quiet passing

desired by an old Poet who, with all his strength and fineness, was scarcely a Combatant, and never, surely, a real Boy. Rather the death desired by another Poet who was "ever a fighter," and, even in old age, something of a real Boy still. I seem to hear a voice from Marathon and from the market-place of Athens. It is the voice of young Pheidippides, the runner, the soldier, shouting his exultant *χαίρετε νικῶμεν* in the very moment of a death the most beautiful surely, with the One Great Exception, that past history records. And now the voice changes to one dearer and more familiar, one that I have heard on many a hard-fought Rugby field. It is a little raucous, yet it makes music to my ear. It comes from Bournon Wood and from Cambrai. It uses a language less melodious but not less virile than the ancient Greek, the language of Britain and of Canada and of that America of which Canada is a part. It is the voice of the Schoolboy in the War, shouting as exultantly as did the young Pheidippides, but with an added note—"Rejoice, we are victorious! Oh, Death, where is thy sting?"

Almost at the moment of Alan's death came his latest photograph; and, sharing as I do that sweet Celtic fancy that wherever one's picture goes, something of oneself must needs go with it, I feel as if the spirit of our boy, when his body was struck down, winged its flight back

to the Canada that he loved so well. Placed beside a photograph taken just before he went away, it makes an interesting study. Less than three years separate the two pictures, but they seem at least a decade apart. The one shows a boyish face, eager, wide-eyed, wondering; the other the face of a man, stronger, sadder, gentler. The boy is ready to set out on the Great Adventure; the man has come through that adventure, and is about to fare forth on the Greater Adventure that lies ahead.

Since that fateful April 22, 1915, and most of all since that more fateful August 8, 1918, a cloud, growing ever larger and blacker, has overspread our once serene Canadian skies. To none of us can life ever be the same as it once was; and many there be who now turn longing eyes towards that Land of Heart's Desire that lies, we hope, beyond the setting sun. We take comfort in the thought that there are for us only

"A few more years at most, and then  
Life's troubles end like summer's rain;  
The pattering on the leaves will cease,  
And we shall meet our boy again."

If only some more daring and successful Columbus could voyage forth on a wide Sea of Discovery, and, returning, link this little planet up forever with the great Spirit World! Perhaps the lads who "go west," these young Captains Adventurous of ours, do return to visit

us sometimes; but we, earth-bound creatures that we are, do not hear their quiet coming, do not rise to let them in. That is a delicate fancy of Barrie's (the middle name of the boy of whom I have been writing was given him in honour of that gentlest and truest and perhaps profoundest of present-day writers) in the little play, "A Well-Remembered Voice," in which the spirit of the soldier-laddie appears not to the table-rappers, but to an unbeliever in such crude devices, the boy's father. He comes not in the uncanny fashion familiar to us in the old-time ghost stories, but in a dear and natural manner, and chats in the old boyish way. And, though he may not stay long, he promises to come again when he can get the password—"Love bade me welcome"—and meantime his father must be brave and cheery.

Yes, though the laughter has died out of our lives, we should dishonour our beloved dead if we did not try to emulate their marvellous courage and good cheer. We must "carry on" as best we may, and each do our little part in the reconstruction of a world that has been turned topsy-turvy; and we must somehow see to it that neither Caesar nor Demos shall henceforth have power wantonly to destroy the fair handiwork of God or man. We shall have to recast our theology, perhaps after the manner suggested by the clear-visioned Student in Arms. But we cannot lose faith in the human

or the divine; for, if the war has shown the deviltry to which man may descend, the Schoolboy in the War has shown the divinity to which he may attain. Perhaps the world is on the backward swing from the extreme of materialism of which German science has been the exponent. Perhaps we are on the eve of strange and new discoveries in the world of thought—who knows? At any rate we must go on, patiently working at the problems of this mysterious life of ours, and hoping against hope that by and by the light will break in upon us, and that we shall at last understand, and in our understanding rejoice and be exceeding glad.

#### NOTE

The chief figure in the foregoing sketch is that of Captain Alan Barrie Duncan, M.C., who was killed in the Battle of Cambrai, Sept. 30, 1918. Though only twenty years of age, he was Second in Command of his Battalion at the time. He was the last original officer of this famous "Suicide Battalion." The other persons mentioned are: Capt. George O. Hall; Lieut. A. Raymond Minard; Lieut. Fleetwood E. Daniel; Lieut. Harry Saxon Pell; Capt. Walter McKenzie; Lieut. Charles H. Sparrow; Flight-Commander Arnold J. Chadwick, D.S.C.; Lieut. A. Douglas Gray, M.C.; Lieut. H. E. Maxwell Porter. These are only a few of the many young heroes whose memory I should like to honour; perhaps that privilege may one day be mine, but for the present it is denied me.

N. S.