

AFTERTHOUGHTS OF
ARMAGEDDON

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AFTERTHOUGHTS
OF
ARMAGEDDON

THE GAMUT OF EMOTIONS PRODUCED
BY THE WAR, POINTING A MORAL
THAT IS NOT TOO OBVIOUS

BY

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To
THOSE WHO WON THE WAR
THE MILLION DEAD

1915

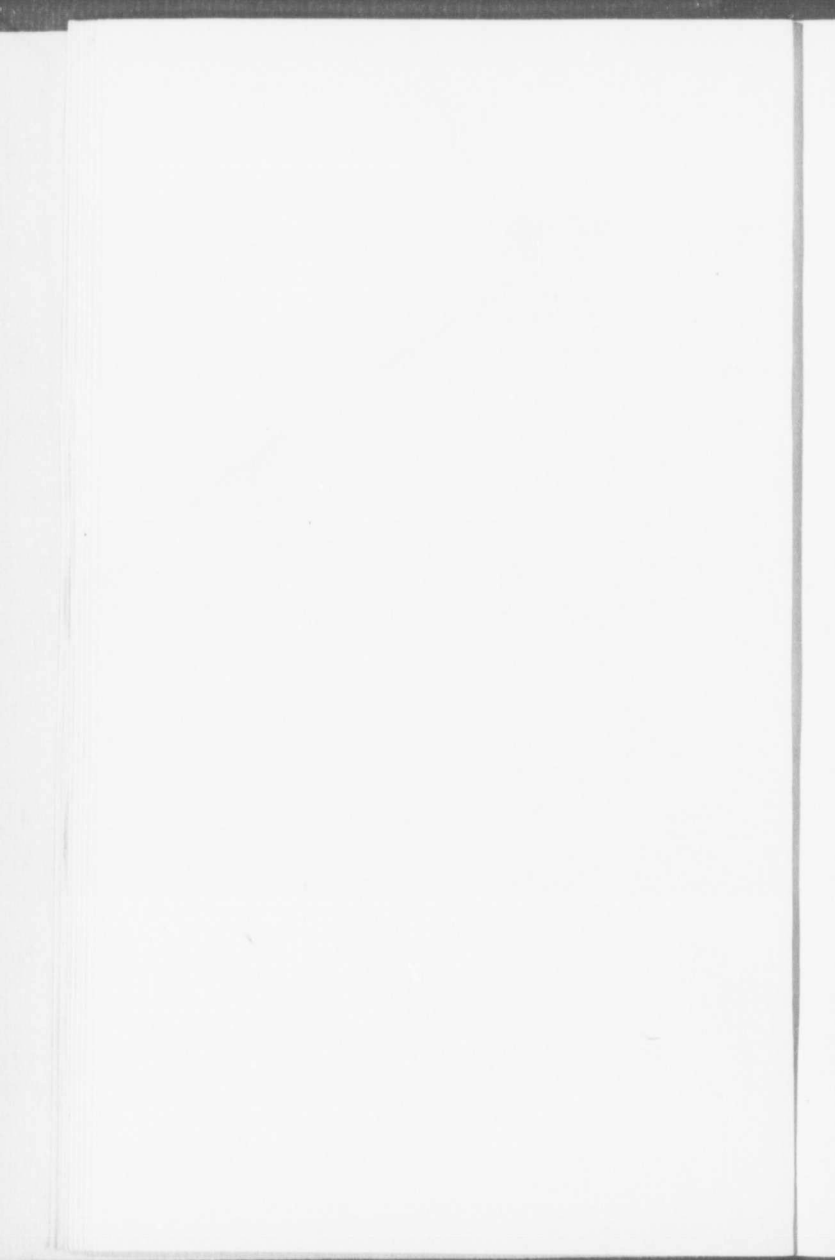
1916

1917

1918

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1915—The Development of Hate

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WAR! What thoughts of romance—of chivalry—of the splendid crusades of all ages, were inspired on that fateful 5th of August, 1914! Then followed the breathless excitement of preparation and the joyous rigour of training, mingling with that ever-present and proud realization that we were the standard-bearers of Canada's honour—we who formed part of that first Canadian Contingent pledged to help the Mother Country in her splendid and unselfish protection of the helpless smaller nations—the brave adventure o'er the great oceans in our modern argosies to that land of historic battlefields—Europe! That great Armada, in its three lines of ships, twelve deep and three abreast, bringing back vivid memories of Nelson's day.

No deep, intense hate pervaded our beings; merely an implicit belief that we were in the right and must help to punish some impersonal transgressor of the world's humane laws; which deepened, as we neared the scene of the Homeric contest, into a sportsman's indignation against one-time fellow-

players whose minds had become clouded, temporarily, with greed and self!

Then, like a flash of blinding lightning, came the awakening! The change from light-hearted, unthinking young adventurers to men!—men with a corroding hatred in their souls—a shame of their modernity as exemplified by "Teuton Kultur" in their hearts. And this hate came to us on that fateful day, April 22nd, 1915.

Who amongst us on that smiling Spring day, as we held the line in front of ancient Ypres, can e'er forget that silent, menacing, all-devouring, grey-green cloud of poison gas—let loose by, as the Algerians gaspingly cried, "The Father of all Evil." Men in their splendid strength sinking to the ground in dreadful contortions—dying after hours of agony—their dying words crying curses upon the fiends in human form who could be such damnable cowards, and could violate in such a manner all the tenets and creeds of a humane world! And what of the thoughts of us who survived, powerless to ease, by one iota, their terrible suffering and agony! Truly—an awakening! Changing clean, kindly-

disposed gentlemen into primitive beings with no thoughts beyond the lust to kill, in any manner, those men—lower than the filthiest beasts, who had done or countenanced this vile thing! And as we withdrew, battered and dismayed, our hearts were indeed filled with the blackest, most hellish hate of fellowmen that this old world has ever known.

Thus ended our first great trial, bringing us, after the shorter hells of Festubert and Givenchy, to the sodden trenches of the Bois de Ploegsteert; and thus began the long, dreary, soul-deadening trench warfare—that strange, unnatural life which made of some men angels and others devils! For man was forced to think and learn to know himself, to analyse his deepest thoughts, and, sometimes, perhaps, in those solemn moments when one hovers between life and death, a few of us may have seen beyond the veil, where *all* things are known; and so—our vivid, horrified hate of the enemy, roused in the bloody salient of Ypres and kept fresh by Festubert and Givenchy, slowly changed, as we sat through the long, weary winter days, to another, perhaps, deeper feeling.

1916—The Personal Hate changes
to Impersonal Loathing

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THUS came we, after twelve long months of daily struggle with our almost invisible but ever-present enemy—"Les Exécrables!" Changed we were—grimmer, harder in mind and body—our souls revolted by the tales, which crept through the lines, of hideous secret atrocities, perpetrated on innocent women and children, on defenceless wounded, on unprotected seaside villages! And, imperceptibly, that great personal hate changed to a greater, but impersonal, loathing!—Not of those men a few hundred yards away who represented our tangible enemy which we were pledged to destroy for humanity's sake; but against that greater, unseen, Machiavellian Being who bent them to his will,—who outraged all our instinctive feelings of right and honor and decency.

These thoughts were vague, unformed, but steadily growing and assuming definite form and cohesion;—at times, even, we almost felt a fellow-feeling for those individual enemies we came into contact with, in our patrols, our raids,

our minor and major battles. For were they not undergoing similar privations, hardships, and dangers to ours? Then, again, would recur, at lengthening intervals, that first primitive hate, and we would again take a strange savage pleasure in avenging our helpless comrades' death.

So ran our thoughts and feelings throughout that long-drawn, bloody year of warfare—1916—the desperate local struggles around the craters of St. Eloi—the shell-torn trenches of Hooze, when whole battalions were swept into eternity in the holocaust of Sanctuary Wood.—The dreadful, futile months on the Somme, with its acres of sacrificial corpses—all testifying to the selflessness of Man in his support of the Christ-principle of right. Always numerically inferior to the German hordes—but infinitely superior in our morale—our knowledge of the right and our God-given power of justice, as bearers of the Torch, handed to us to carry on, from those martyred comrades of 1914 and 1915.

And still our souls struggled to present to our frail mortality the true perspec-

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ive of right and wrong, of that greater humanity which the Supreme Being was trying to convey to a strangely distorted world.

1917—The Loathing Changes to a Sil-
ent Contempt, always Impersonal,
but tinged with Pity for a
hopelessly misguided Peo-
ple, and an acquired
Degeneracy

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THE year 1917 dawned with the Western Front a stalemate. We had become accustomed to our unnatural existence, supremely confident of ultimate victory for right and humanity, enduring the hardships and dangers, if not cheerfully, then with a stoic indifference—veiling our depression and sadness in the loss and drain of the world's best manhood, in an outer covering of war levity—to the uninitiated and unthinking, verging on callousness. But what a sham this was to us in the midst of it all, whose very souls were like a raw and continually reopening wound;—dimly realizing the terrible futility and uselessness of this never-ending destruction and suffering; but ignorant, in our idolatry of precedence, of a better method. And so we fought on, systematically and automatically, destroying and being destroyed, feeling instinctively that we must exterminate those mentally diseased beings who represented Germany and had made foul a beautiful world, in order that a better and more humane world should survive; in which, in the

decades to come, even the offspring of those degenerate enemies might be admitted to the council of nations—cleansed and purified of their bar sinister!

And thus our thoughts ebbed and flowed—the unspoken thoughts of a thousand soldier-men, expressed in myriad ways, but always groping towards the same and the right solution; our outer selves sometimes joyously elated and sometimes unutterably depressed as the struggle swayed backward and forward—as we scaled the bastion of Vimy Ridge, swept out on to the plains of Douai, laboriously encircled Lens, battled desperately over the sternly-defended ramparts of Hill 70, and finally marched north to that hell on earth—the morass of Passchendaele—a bloodier, fiercer, and still more futile effort than the Somme, where, for seemingly endless days and nights we fought to achieve the militarily impossible—and did! By sheer, indomitable Divine Power of each and every man; e'en though not one in a hundred would ascribe aught other agency than man's inherent courage in the face of insuperable difficulties.

And so we emerged from 1917, still struggling, slowly fighting forward towards some vaguely-distant goal; our only tangible knowledge of victory, an inherent intuition that, despite all, we would conquer because of that age-old prophecy—"Right shall conquer over Might." As for our thoughts, truly they had passed through an æon of emotions—for now they had metamorphosed from the cocoon of hate, of loathing, of contempt; and had become, as it were, an almost disinterested spectator of some huge, revolting, but necessary sanitation of the world—where we were the sanitary engineers, world's health-inspectors, scavengers—call us what you will—and the German nation was the offal, the waste, the decayed vegetation in the sewers of the world which must be eradicated, ere the world could again move forward on its sweet, clean way. Whereas, for the German peoples, their coming generation, their young children, even their *mutilés* who, in their mutilation, had partially expiated their personal guilt in the nation's crime—there came a great pity, tinging our

contempt with tolerance and silencing our spoken revilings. The inner contempt remained—but always for that undermined, weak soul of Germany which had permitted the dominance of hell's agents in their native land. But the pity, the pity of a suffering world for all manner of pain and disillusion was there—to remain unaltered. No longer were we possessed of that soul-crushing hate which had so inspired our pioneer efforts, driven the boyish smile from our features and drowned the gladness of our hearts; no longer the after-personal loathing, no longer disgust, no longer, even, that contempt for all things Teutonic, whose every facet we knew so well, remained! For in truth our beings had verily been subjected to, and drained of, every negative human emotion—as though we had passed through some cataclysmic reaction and were about to pass the last and final test—the test of victory—of complete domination—of that long-dreamed-of heaven on earth, the end of this Armageddon. And so we came to 1918.

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1918—The Final Thoughts

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THE year 1918, the last stupendous struggle for the mastery of the world and its liberties. Who can ever pen the thoughts of us soldier-men, in those dark, soul-shaking days of late March—when the long, horrible months of warfare we had passed through, with all the suffering and pain and tragedy, seemed to have been offered in vain. The dense German lines that broke our weakened front in the south—the gigantic hammer blows to the north—the almost resistless onslaught in the centre—tales of epic heroism from every source—yet, seemingly, all in vain! Verily, God alone could know our thoughts in those days of the world's birth labours.

And yet, that ever-abiding inner knowledge — that in spite of every diabolical agency in league against us, and the feeling that we could do no more, we would yet win through and vindicate the right—possessed us, body and soul, to the exclusion of all else! Calling forth powers within us that seemed of divine origin, obliterating all thought of self in the realization that in this—the

supreme test—we must not, could not fail, else would that splendid, clean, happy world of the future for which we had battled and striven throughout those long, long years—be lost. For on us, the vanguard, rested all her hopes, her immeasurable possibilities and—her life!

And so—thus thinking—came the God-given power to turn and make one last God-sustained, defiant stand; and with it came victory—that o'erwhelming, unanswerable victory, like a brilliant sun emerging from black, earth-enshrouding clouds—bathing a world of a thousand wounds in Balm of Gilead—relieving the agony of a score of nations and destroying, God grant, the last vestige of that world cancer and menace—military despotism.

Verily, the world was unmade and made between those epic dates, March 21st and November 11th in that year of our Lord, 1918.

And so came we soldier-men, after four long, soul-searing years, to our great reward—that reward which comes of the righting of a great wrong, of the final accomplishment of a God-given task—

the succouring of the helpless and suffering; and this reward was a tangible one—more tangible than all the material rewards the unthinking ones of this earth could shower upon us. For in Armageddon we achieved that which we sometimes do not achieve in a lifetime! We learned to know ourselves and read our souls—to believe in our fellow men—to know right from wrong—to have sympathy and tolerance for the world's weaknesses and failings—and finally, to rise above our environment and see good in all things, and thus, perhaps, supply the foundation of that future brotherhood of man which will make of this crippled old universe that fair, joyous habitation which all the world hungers for, and which if it be born, will deem even this cataclysm, a fair and just remuneration for such a priceless boon.

These, then, are the after-thoughts of one soldier-man who lived through the entire gamut of the emotions of which he has spoken, and which culminated on Christmas Eve in occupied Germany, as he sat in a billet at twilight, five Christmastides from his home in far-off

Canada—a little weary, a little wistful, wondering if the world would ever be grateful for the sacrifices of the million soldier-men such as he, and the super-sacrifice of those other millions of soldier-men who had passed beyond the wondering stage.

Then, softly, he heard, in a neighboring room, two tiny German babes, the coming generation, sweetly singing "O Heilige Nacht, Stille Nacht" (O Silent Night); and then his wonders ceased, and he knew that all was well; that, at last, the world was safe for all the babes of the world—the coming splendid world—which, thank God and the men of to-day, would never again undergo the agony, the pain and the heart torture of another such Armageddon; and in the days to come—the hate, the loathing, the unutterable contempt, even the after-pity for a diseased band of nations such as Germany and her Allies, would never repeat itself. For if, as this soldier-man is convinced, the fighting men of this war have thought and found themselves likewise, then, since they are to be the moulders of

the world's thought in the days that are upon us, the world will be as we sometimes picture it in our dreams—all happiness, content and joy, and Armageddon may, at long last, be blessed instead of cursed. And the million anxious dead of all the nations will rest tranquil and serene beyond the veil.

FINIS

L. M. C.