

The Untold Agony of the War

What the Fighting Men Suffered With Heroic Silence

BY PHILIP GIBBS

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It has not been hidden from the world that modern warfare has surpassed in horror anything that has been recorded in the black history of human strife. The vast casualty lists published month after month and year after year darkened human imagination by their statistics of sacrifice; and every name in those closely printed columns meant a cry of agony in some little home where a father, mother, or wife had tried to stifle the fear of the heart by faith in the luck of their man at the front. The tide of maimed and broken men, of blind and crippled and sick, which flowed back into England and France after the first battles of 1914 and for four and a half years afterwards, was overwhelming in its flood of tragedy, in great cities and in tiny hamlets, and it was only the courage of race and blood which refused to yield to despair because of this continual slaughter and torture of youth. So the soul of the world cries out "Never Again," and in this period of re-shaping the structure of civilization says: "For God's sake let us devise some new philosophy which will cut out this horror. Let us get at the root-causes of war so that we may kill them, and let us establish safeguards against any nation likely to let loose the old devil of international hatred in bloody conflict." That is the present mood of civilized mankind, and I think it is out of that general emotion of revolt against the sacrifice and agonies of its manhood that a new philosophy of life based upon new international relations may be evolved. The danger is that in a generation, or less, the memory of what this war meant in human suffering may fade out, leaving only the remembrance of heroism touched by romance. The danger is, even now, that when people talk about the horrors of war, it is but an abstract idea to them and that they do not really understand the depths of abomination through which our men

passed so bravely, so patiently, so silently. For the fighting men did not tell what was happening to them. In their letters home they wrote of the brighter side of things for the sake of those who were anxious and afraid; and, when they came home on leave, in answer to questions about their sufferings they said: "Let's go and see a show which will make us laugh. Thank God for laughter." As a war correspondent in the field I too had to tone down the black side of war. Apart altogether from censorship it was my duty to keep up the heart of the people and not to add to their torture of anxiety for those they loved by harrowing descriptions of carnage and misery. And there were things the enemy wanted to know which I was not going to tell him—the exact effect of his poison gas. The sum total of his slaughter in particular places. The success of his flame machines and other devilish devices. So, in spite of the tragic spirit which the front, and my descriptions of battlefield scenes which were grim enough, God knows, in their realism, I did not give the full picture of our men's agony.

The need of secrecy is now passed. It is due to our men that the world should now know how much they suffered with such stoical courage. The misery and the beastliness and the terror of it all should be stripped of all their romantic "camouflage" so that the truth should be etched deeply in the pages of history.

After the Retreat From Mons. The worst suffering of the British army began after the retreat from Mons of the "old contemptibles" the gallant little regular army—in 1914, and when there began that long period of stationary warfare in entrenched positions which neither

side count break through. The Germans by good generalship and superior numbers had established themselves on high ground almost everywhere on the whole line of the front. Through Belgium and France the British troops were in a hideous position in the Ypres salient lying in a saucer-like hollow rimmed round by the Germans on the ridges of Pilken, Westhoek, Wytschaete and Messines. When later in the spring of 1915 they took over a longer line to liberate the 10th French army for the defence of Verdun they were again in low-lying ground round Lens and Arras, with the enemy above them on the Vimy Ridge, Monchy Hill, and the banks of the Scarpe. This was the cause of much misery and enormous slaughter. The Germans had complete observation of the British trenches and of the roads and tracks which led to them. They stared straight down into villages held by British garrisons and into other villages six miles or more behind the lines—Souchez, Ablain, St. Nazaire, Vlamertinghe and many more—through which our troops had to march on their way to the front or where they were billeted. With immense superiority in gun power, until the end of 1915, they turned their artillery on to these places with ruthlessness and method, by day and night. They pounded them into fragments and then into dust, so that of Souchez town and sugar factory there is not even a rubbish heap, and Ablain, St. Nazaire, could not be found except for the skeleton ribs of its church. Beneath those ruins and in that dust lie the bones of British soldiers. Many of them were buried alive. That happened scores of times in Ypres where platoons of men billeted in vaults below the cloth hall, the Cathedral and houses were entombed by tons of masonry hurled down by high explosives. I remember in the spring of 1915 that forty men were buried like this be-

low a house in Ypres which was piled above them by German shell fire. Their groans were heard by their comrades, who made frantic efforts to rescue them, but during this work of rescue the enemy's fire was intensified around the living tomb of the forty. It happened not once, but hundreds of times, not only in Ypres, but in Albert and Arras and many other towns under German gunfire into which we went with the raging little devil of thought that at any moment death or horrible agonies, preceding death might happen to us.

Our Men Whistled at Death. Yet our men went into these places and lived in them, laughing and whistling, taking the risk day after day, and kidding that cold steel which was somewhere in the heart of the bravest of them. Our troops and our transport went up the tracks which the Germans had registered with their guns. It was just luck, however, whether they passed between the bursts of shellfire at "Sulicide Corner," and "Shrapnel Corner," and "Hellfire Cross Roads," and out of Ypres along the Menin Road. Often luck was against them, and I saw the unlucky ones blown to bits, senseless, whether they passed between mere fragments of human flesh lying among dead and mangled horses, where a gun team had tried to dash past Arras station, or a transport column had come through Albert with its falling virgins. Yet no man ever shirked going up those roads of ill-fame, and if one transport column were destroyed another followed past the dead bodies of their comrades, past the dead horses and the broken wagons so that the men in the line should not feel for food or consolation. And this happened not for one week or one month or one year, but for four years until the cemeteries behind our lines grew like forests of white crosses.

Behind the front lines where the communications began, no body of men moved in daylight without being "strafed" by the enemy's guns directed by watchful observers on the ridges—with telephones connected with the batteries, so that all movements in the trenches and battalions were horribly in foul and perilous conditions. The Germans on the high ground made their drainage flow into the British trenches and the heavy rains of Flanders flowed down the front lines, and the mud of our trenches was waterlogged. Even in August I have waded waist-deep in water through trenches where English soldiers were holding the front line. "That Grand Fleet of ours don't seem to be very active," said one of them, getting a joke out of his misery. "It's a pity it don't steam down these blinking trenches and do a bit of fighting." That was in summer. In winter when the water was ice cold it may be imagined what our men endured. They were always wet. They slept in wet clothes, sat in wet dugouts, stood in wet boots and the cold slime of mud in Flanders encased them and put its clammy touch about their very souls. In the first two winters of the war they were stricken with a disease called "Trench Foot." Its symptoms were exactly like those of frost bite, a sense of burning until all sense was deadened and the feet blackened and rotted. Battalions lost forty per cent. of their men for this variety of gas poisoning. The old Ypres salient I have seen men of the 49th (Yorkshire) division crawling back from the trenches, or carried picka-back by their comrades, unable to walk a yard, and with their feet wrapped in cotton wool at the field ambulance. There was no comfort for them in their dugouts, which were miserable holes in the wet earth without any of the comfort or safety of those deep tunnelled dugouts which the Germans had built for themselves. They slept in their wet clothes, and our officers and men from decent, clean homes, some of them used all their lives to the delicacies and refinements of civilized life, should not feel for food or consolation. They hated this worse than the danger of five-point-nines and trench mortars with the risk of being buried alive in their dugouts or killed by a flying scythe of steel across their parapets. For the lice did not leave them by day or night, and the stench of life itself, a foul and disgusting thing. Larger vermin—rats and mice—invaded the trenches and romped and squealed in the dugouts, attacking food supplies and careless sleeping men, though they liked death more best, and outside in No Man's Land, or in the bogs of Flanders, the worst hell of all where our men sat and lived amidst the corruption of human flesh—gnawed dead bodies until their bones were bare and white.

once but scores of times the long trail of the walking wounded, staggering back under shellfire with their arms about each others' necks, or nobbling alone until they dropped to die, so patiently that they hardly groaned—men with ghastly wounds revealed miserably with one hand tightly clutching a wounded comrade, men so hideous in masks of clotting blood that I dared not look at them after the first glance. The Flanders battlefields were worst of all because of the intensity of fire there and because of the state of the soil in five months of heavy rains so that each shell hole merging into another pit ten or twelve feet deep was filled to the brim and made great bogs in which dead bodies floated. Our men could only get through that ground duck board tracks, a foot and a half wide and greasy with slime, and "taped out" by German shellfire. They went into action at night up those narrow ways of death, and if they slipped off the duck boards they fell up to the armpits or deeper into the slime-filled pits, and their cries came walling down the gusty wind. Woe betide a wounded man who fell like that. If there were no comrades handy to haul him out he sank deep into those bogs of Glencorse Wood and Inverness Copse, and drowned.

The Slimy Bogs of Flanders. After a battle in those swamps there were many wounded men lying there and one of them told me how he recovered consciousness at dawn and thought himself placed like the Hottentots and their duties with the awful consciousness that at any moment the ground might open beneath their feet and bits of their bodies be hurled sky high. So it happened many times, by a cruelly cunning and completely defeated the enemy's underground work. Then the "Flammenwerfer," or flame-thrower made its appearance, and our King's Royal Rifles in the Ypres salient were the first to see this new form of terror. As they stood-to in the trenches they were aware of some liquid falling lightly upon them, and it smelt of petroleum. A few minutes later they saw German soldiers advancing upon them with canisters strapped to their shoulders and hose-pipes from which jets of flame gushed out twenty yards ahead. Some of the King's Royal Rifles caught fire and were charred to cinders. Others beat the flames out of their clothes, crying and cursing, and others in spite of their burning were driven through their tongues of flame, and Germans carrying canisters were buried to death in their own fire.

What Poison Gas Really Meant. The first use of poison gas was in the second battle of Ypres, in April of 1915, when our men did not understand its meaning and retreated before the vapor of death through a wild stampede of civilians in Ypres and others in the fields around. One despatch-rider, carrying urgent orders, rode forward through the tide of retreat until he fell from his motor cycle, which dashed sixty yards ahead until it crashed into a ruined wall. That was in the spring of 1915, and until the end of the war the Germans and ourselves developed and intensified the most dreaded means of destruction. The enemy was devilishly ingenious in his methods, and varieties of gas poisoning. He made it heavy so that it filtered down into our cellars in Arras and Armentieres, where our men lay sleeping and breathed in its poison. He made it invisible and odorless so that when gas masks were invented our men did not know when to wear them. He made a gas which caused us to vomit, and when we took off our gas masks sent over another gas which killed. And then he invented "mustard gas," the worst of all, which deposited a brownish powder and burnt through men's clothes and raised enormous blisters and blinded them. With this gas he sent over in shells, he "strafed" our batteries and put many of them out of action, and caused thousands of casualties among our infantry, month after month. It was a dreadful sight to go through field hospitals where hundreds of these gas cases were lying, parting for breath, with their lungs turned to water, with their bodies burned, and with bandaged eyes. On one day in one section of the line there were 1,500 of these cases, and every day for many months there were hundreds. It was but poor comfort to our men in agony that our gas was even more deadly.

Slaughter on Battlefields Worst of All. After all, these devices were but the trimmings and decorations of that death which is war. The slaughter in the battlefields by artillery heavy and light, by machine guns and trench mortars, was the main business of the enemy and ourselves, and both sides did their job thoroughly, with superiority on our side towards the end. In those four and a half years our losses were nearly 700,000 killed and over 2,000,000 wounded. High figures. Crying out to the pity of God and man for all this sacrifice of splendid youth, and with much suffering of spirit and body to each individual before he lay quiet below a wooden cross or went home with a mighty wound, who can describe the terrors of the battlefield? I cannot, though I have gone through those fields on days of great battle and seen our gas blowing into the air by high explosives with their teams killed beside them, and have walked through tracks strewn with our dead and German dead, headless, with arms and legs flung far from their bodies, with dreadful mangled faces, or with no faces. I have seen not

the cold in their bones, and how the grey slime of the Flanders mud was clotted on them, engrafted in the skin of their faces and hands, and plastering the clothes to their bodies, so that they seemed to have been buried and dug up again. For five months in 1917 our British soldiers endured those things, and our losses reached fantastic heights. It amounted in the case of some divisions to all but annihilation. The two Irish divisions lost two thousand men each before attacking a line of German "pill boxes" (or concrete block houses) in August of 1917. They were shelled for hours as they stood-to in their trenches before the battle—and then when they went into action each division lost over two thousand more. In one case their loss was 62 per cent. of their total strength. In the other it was 64 per cent. During all the years of war, until the last phase, there were dreadful episodes like that when whole bodies of men, round Ypres, in Delville Wood and High Wood, on the Somme, at Gommecourt and Thiepval, were slashed to death by German gunfire. They were fine men, boys for the most part from English counties and Scottish farmsteads and cities, and Irish villages, and I had many friends among them, and loved them all so that it was hard to go to a battalion mess after one of these battles and to find few familiar faces, but new faces of other boys who had come out to fill up the gaps, knowing that in a little while their turn would come. But they came, and did not try to shun their fate. They walked among the dead and knew the horrors of war, but they put on a mask of cheerfulness and hid any fear they might have in their hearts. God knows we were all afraid—and they were gallant to the end, and this war as the hell it was, but going through with it and drinking to the very dregs its cup of agony, for the name and honor of the British race and for their own pride of manhood which would allow no surrender.

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- CONSTANT HEADACHES.** Mrs. E. C. Taylor, Ascot, avenue, Toronto, says: "A few years ago I was so run down with anaemia that I could scarcely walk about the house, and was not able to leave it. I had no color; I was constantly troubled with headaches, dizzy spells and general disinclination to move about or do anything. I tried many medicines, but none helped me, and my friends thought I was in a decline. One day a friend who was in to see me asked if I had tried Dr. Williams' Pink Pills. I had heard of this medicine often, but had not used it, so I determined to give it a trial. I certainly got a pleasant surprise, for after using two boxes I could feel an improvement in my condition. Continuing the use of these pills I began to regain my health, the headaches and dizzy spells were disappearing, and I began to gain in weight. People began enquiring what I was taking and I was not slow to give Dr. Williams' Pink Pills the credit. I took the pills for less than two months, and completely regained my old-time health and strength. I hope my experience may convince some doubting person as to the great merit of Dr. Williams' Pink Pills, as I have cause to be a firm champion of them."
- ALWAYS FELT TIRED.** Miss A. Sterenburg, Halleybury Road, New Liskeard, Ont., says: "I have much reason to be grateful to Dr. Williams' Pink Pills as they restored me to health, if, indeed, they did not save my life. In 1914 I began to feel run down, and the doctor who was called in said that mine was a bad case of anaemia. I lost flesh, always felt tired, and I got so nervous that I could scarcely hold a cup to take a drink. My health would flutter alarmingly. The doctor did not seem to be able to help me at all, and my family and friends all thought that I was in a decline and could not recover. I was in bed for some weeks when an aunt came to see me and urged that I try Dr. Williams' Pink Pills. My father got a supply, and by the time I had taken three boxes there was a noticeable improvement, and from that on I steadily progressed toward recovery. I continued using the pills for some time longer, and they restored me to my old-time health and strength. I shall never cease to praise this medicine, and to urge all weak run-down girls to give it a fair trial as I have proved in my own case their great merit."
- PALE AND BLOODLESS.** Miss Dorine Bastien, St. Jerome, Que., says: "For over a year my blood was gradually failing, my health had seemed almost to have turned to water, my cheeks were pale, my lips bloodless, and the slightest exertion left me breathless. I suffered frequently from severe headaches, my appetite failed, and my friends feared I was going into consumption. I had been doctoring but did not derive any benefit, and finally I had to give up my work and return home. It was at this stage that a friend brought me a box of Dr. Williams' Pink Pills and urged me to try them. By the time the box was used I thought they were helping me, and decided to continue using the pills. I took a half dozen boxes more, when my strength had completely returned, my appetite was restored, my color returned, headaches had disappeared and I was feeling better than I had been for years. I would urge Dr. Williams' Pink Pills a fair trial, for every weak and ailing girl to give

them a fair trial. See that the full trade mark name, "Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People," is printed on the wrapper around the box. If you cannot get these Pills through your dealer they will be sent by mail at 50 cents a box, or six boxes for \$2.50, by The Dr. Williams' Medicine Co., Bro. Kenville, Ont.

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