

IN THE YPRES SALIENT

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The Story of a Fortnight's Canadian Fighting, June 2-16, 1916

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN THE YPRES SALIENT

Produced by Al Haines.

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THE YPRES SALIENT.
See Key on page 6
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IN THE YPRES
SALIENT
THE STORY OF A
FORTNIGHT'S CANADIAN FIGHTING
JUNE 2-16, 1916.

BY
BECKLES WILLSON,
*Author of "Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal,"
"The Romance of Canada" etc., etc.*

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IN THE YPRES SALIENT.

Long after the issue of minor engagements in this War are forgotten, and when everybody has ceased to care whether at any moment we gained or lost a hundred yards of ground or a mile of trench, the memory of how the Canadians fought against hopeless odds near Hooze will be remembered, and Canada will be proud and the Empire will be proud of these men. Nor will Canada or the Empire ever forget—what every neutral in the world should be told to-day—how the Germans called these men cowards.

The Times, June 12, 1916.

AVANT-PROPOS.

Je saisis cette occasion pour rendre un nouveau hommage à l'armée britannique, dont la longue et héroïque résistance a rendu notre ville inviolée. Si Ypres a été détruite par les barbares germains en haine d'Angleterre, notre magnanime protectrice, nous avons l'espoir que, grâce à votre pays, la ville martyre ressuscitera aussi belle, si non aussi prospère, qu'elle le fut aux siècles de sa splendeur. Déjà nous avons un Vicomte d'Ypres portant un nom anglais! déjà des hommes généreux de votre pays songent à faire reconstruire nos splendides monuments. Pourquoi ne pourrions nous pas espérer que le sol d'Ypres, arrosé du sang de vos enfants et où reposent vos héros morts pour nous, verra prochainement surgir une ville digne du nom Anglais et de notre ancienne renommée?

[image]

Signature of René Colaert, Bourgmestre d'Ypres

To the Memory
OF
MAJOR-GENERAL
MALCOLM SMITH MERCER,
C.B.

[image]

*KEY TO "THE YPRES SALIENT."
By W. L. WYLIE, R.A.*

PREFATORY NOTE ON THE SALIENT

On October 16th, 1914, the Ypres Salient, the theatre of three of the most deadly and critical battles in this War, was born. Up to that date the area it comprises—a few thousand acres at most—was merely a tract of well-tilled Flemish meadowland, with patches of forest and here and there a village or hamlet.

Ten weeks before the Germans had invaded Belgium, and in the fateful and anxious time which followed, the Belgians had been pressed slowly back, those who had not been utterly crushed. Antwerp fell, and a mighty German host, foiled in its advance southward to Paris, was moving relentlessly towards the sea-coast, destroying and desolating the land as it came.

A newly-landed British force advanced to check them and to take up a position in the long line of Allied troops. This force, the 7th Division, under Major-General Capper, and the 3rd Cavalry Division, commanded by Major-General the Hon. Julian Byng, marching through the quaint old Flemish city of Ypres, penetrated to a point six miles beyond the British, French, and Belgian alignment as it ran north and south. There they halted, their ranks causing the Allied front to project forward a bold "salient," or peninsula, on the map. To crush that salient—to flatten out that line at any cost—instantly became the aim of the enemy. Consequently, he flung himself on the point of the Salient (which was then Becelaere) and the fierce and bloody First Battle of Ypres was the result. It lasted from October 20th to November 11th. On October 30th the Kaiser told his troops that they must break through the line to Ypres, and to the Bavarian Crown Prince he said: "Take Ypres, or die." He considered the attack to be "of vital importance to the successful issue of the war." It was then that we became familiar with the names of these little villages and hamlets, first drenched with blood and then crumbled to dust, Zonnebeke, Zillebeke, Wytschaete, Hooge, Langemarcke, and the rest; with those fields, woods, and hillocks which have then and since seen some of the most terrible slaughter and the most gallant deeds in all military history, and where lie to-day more than one hundred thousand of our British dead. The enemy recoiled, bruising his legions against the sharpness of the Salient, and his failure marked a notable stage in the progress of the War.

For six months the two hostile armies faced one another in the crescent line of trenches defending Ypres towards the east. Spring came, and on April 22nd the Second Battle of Ypres began, lasting until May 13th, only two days less than the first. In that second action the Canadians won deathless renown. They had then only a single division at the front, commanded by Lieutenant-General Alderson, and at the end of February were entrusted with the task of defending the north-eastern segment of the Salient. Two days before the battle the bombardment of Ypres re-began—a bombardment which did not cease until the picturesque little city was a shapeless heap of ruins. While the shells rained upon Ypres, the Germans let loose the hideous fumes of poison gas upon the

French trenches, causing a four mile breach in the line, into which the foe came pouring.

But the Canadians, staggering under the crushing weight of the artillery assault, held firm. Although the losses of the British were appalling, and the Salient was blunted a little, the path to Calais through Ypres was still barred.

In the thirteen months which followed there was constant bombardment and much intermittent fighting, sometimes, as at St. Eloi last March, fierce and bloody. But the Salient was held fast; more and more was it consecrated by heroic deeds, as

A corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England.

”When,” wrote a gifted English chronicler,[#] many months ago, ”the War is over, this triangle of meadowland, with a ruined city for its base, will be an enclave of Belgian soil consecrated as the holy land of two great peoples. It may be that it will be specially set apart as a memorial place; it may be that it will be unmarked, and that the countryfolk will till and reap as before over the vanishing trench lines. But it will never be common ground. It will be for us the most hallowed spot on earth, for it holds our bravest dust, and it is the proof and record of a new spirit. In the past, when we have thought of Ypres, we have thought of the British flag preserved there, which Clare’s Regiment, fighting for France, captured at the Battle of Ramillies; the name of the little Flemish town has recalled the divisions in our own race and the centuries-old conflict between France and Britain. But from now and henceforth it will have other memories. It will stand as a symbol of unity and alliance, unity within our Empire, unity within our Western civilisation, that true alliance and that lasting unity which are won and sealed by a common sacrifice.”

[#] Mr. John Buchan.

Once again, foiled in his designs on Verdun, the greatest battlefield of the War, the enemy, perhaps for the last time, sought to wrest this sacred ground, the Ypres Salient and Ypres itself from our hands. This time the Canadians had three divisions in the fighting-line. The Corps commander, on the 2nd of June last, when the German fury burst forth anew, was that same General (now Sir) Julian Byng who had first, in October, 1914, at the head of his cavalry troops, marked

out the frontiers of the Salient.

What happened in this Third Battle, which began on June 2nd, and may be said to have finished June 16th, when we regained the ground lost at the outset, is imperfectly related in the following pages. It was written from day to day by one who was on the spot, and so may serve to convey to the reader something of the spirit with which our Canadians fought, and may also suggest a reason for their pride in having again successfully held the Salient against the foe.

It is said that Ypres and the Salient are chiefly retained for sentimental reasons. This is true, in the sense that this whole War was avowedly waged, in the first instance, for sentimental reasons.

Not long ago a French general said to me that the Germans were attacking Verdun, and the French were defending it, not for strategical, but for political and dynastic reasons. "If they took Verdun to-morrow, they could not advance, but to lose Verdun would be for France a blow over the heart."

If we have pledged our honour to Belgium, we are pledged to the hilt to guard the soil of Ypres inviolate from the heel of the living enemy. It is only a heap of ruins, but it is an eternal memorial of British valour. It is only a shell-swept graveyard, but the graves are those of our heroic dead.

To abandon Ypres now would tarnish our banners. It would be like offering our sister for violation because she had been bruised and buffeted with stones.

Military strategy very properly takes into account political and moral prestige, and to "straighten out the Salient" by the voluntary abandonment of a single mile of ground would inflict upon us a moral and political loss equal to an army corps. If Ypres goes, Belgium goes, and if Belgium goes, whatever the final issue, something of glory passes from the Allied arms.

It is a terrible responsibility to stand steadfast, but every soldier who has died in the Ypres Salient has yielded his life to protect his country's honour. Vulnerable the Salient may be, but our troops are invulnerable. While they continue so, Ypres and this little remaining fragment of Belgian soil and the path to Calais are safe.

IN THE YPRES SALIENT

I.

WITH THE BRITISH ARMY IN THE FIELD,

June 3rd.

From the summit of the Scherpenburg the eye sweeps over a low-lying, gently undulating tract of country chequered by field and copse and traversed by roads. On the extreme left the crumbling towers of the city of Ypres upstand white in the morning sunlight. Far on the right the spires and chimneys of Menin loom on the distant horizon. Between these two points in the range of vision a broad swathe of naked red earth, torn and fretted and pitted with "craters," marks the eastern and southern boundary line of the bloodiest battlefield of the War—the Ypres Salient. The northern portion of this famous area, which is almost exactly bisected by the Menin road, is hidden behind the city. Here are Langemarcke, St. Julien, St. Jean, and Zonnebeke, the scene of Canadian valour thirteen months ago in the Second Battle of Ypres; the segment we now overlook touches just east of Hooge and curves along past Zillebeke, St. Eloi and Hill 60, which is the south-western extremity of the Salient.

When the sun rose on Friday, June 2nd, the whole of this part of the Front, from the battered little hamlet of Hooge on the north to Hill 60 on the south, and passing through Sanctuary Wood, a distance, roughly, of a couple of miles, was held by 20,000 soldiers from the Overseas West. They were drawn from all classes—ranchers, farmers, miners, merchants and clerks from Winnipeg, Calgary, and Vancouver. There was a sprinkling of professional soldiers. Some hailed from Toronto, and others from as far East as Montreal. On their extreme left, where it linked up with a British Division, was a famous regiment whose deeds have already thrilled the Empire, which, repeatedly shattered, has returned again and again to take up a post of danger on the firing-line. The two divisions to which all these troops belong have been serving in the Salient for months, watching eagerly and ardently every move of the enemy's game. What that game was every man knew well. It was to push past them and gain that tragedy-haunted grey heap of crumbling masonry whose name is already writ large on the page of Canadian history. This they were—each man of them—pledged to frustrate to the last drop of his life's blood. Were the Germans to break through here, all the efforts of our race for nineteen months would be as naught, all the valour and sacrifice would be in vain.

[image]

THE RUINS OF YPRES.

View taken from an aeroplane.

By courtesy of Illus. Lon. News.

For weeks there had been a lull in the artillery fire, which is generally heavy in this sector. Battalions weary with work and tension came in and out, as they were relieved or went to relieve. Yet uppermost in every man's mind was this: When will the next offensive come, and where? Twice the Germans have come on in smashing force to blot out the Ypres Salient from the war map—two deadly battles have been fought. Am I fated to take part in a third?

For several days it had not gone unobserved that the enemy was unusually active in pushing forward saps and trenches towards the centre of this line. It has since been asked: Did the General in command of the Third Canadian Division suspect that something unusual was impending? If his suspicions were aroused, the Germans had worked in impenetrable secrecy, and even the reports of his advanced scouts and of the Army aerial reconnaissance could not have told him that on this brilliant June morning behind those hostile parapets, from one to three hundred yards away, the Hun had been for weeks massing his artillery—guns of every age, shape, and calibre, but chiefly the terrible 5.9 naval guns (the "Silent Lizzies" which our men have learnt to dread), and howitzers, mountains of shells, pyramids of bombs. Long rows of German gunners along those two miles of front to-day awaited the signal, and the hour for the signal had come. It is stated that this divisional commander, the gallant General Mercer, ever alert, often astir soon after daybreak, never before had gone forward to the front trenches at so early an hour as six o'clock. Small wonder, therefore, that his appearance there caused comment. He was accompanied by his aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Gooderham, and was met by Brigadier-General Victor Williams, commanding the brigade then holding the front trenches. These, in company with Colonels Shaw and Ussher, made the inspection.

The soil hereabouts is loose, damp, and sandy, and only by rigid care and incessant exertions can the trenches be maintained in effectiveness. After breakfast the men were observed to be everywhere in high spirits, and went about their tasks of digging, repairing, rifle cleaning, and general tidying up with unusual good humour. General Mercer entered a number of the observation stations and officers' dug-outs and examined machine-gun emplacements with care. The day's work had begun well—all were at their appointed posts. Occasionally a sniper's rifle rang out, or a shrapnel shell burst harmlessly overhead. A soldier told me he was watching a flight of birds immediately above him in the clear blue sky, when lo! "the Thing" happened. This man did not see the sky again for hours, and when he did he was on his back, being borne on a stretcher to the rear.

It was the lull before the storm. For at ten minutes to nine o'clock, without any warning, hell broke loose. The detonation, from being stunning, grew absolutely overwhelming. It did not come from one part, but from the whole length

of the opposing line opposite the Canadian Third Division. It not only deafened the ear and paralysed the nerves, but darkened the firmament. For the next hour or two dazed men groped about in the storm, unable to hear any word of command from their officers, clutching their rifles, trying to save the surrounding earth from engulfing them, waiting for what was to happen. The two Generals, attempting to reach the communication trench, found their retreat cut off.

At the outset it appears that no shells, or very few, fell into the front trenches, and the machine gunners and trench-mortar men held to their posts. But behind our front line a high wall of descending shells, screaming, crashing, exploding, emitting clouds of noxious smoke, shut off chance of escape by the communication trenches and all hope of support and succour, from the reserve trenches in the rear. Moments passed that seemed hours, and then the iron and steel missiles began to rain down and explode in the front line, scattering death and destruction. Nothing could live for long in such a tempest. The sides of the trenches began to crumble and fall in. Yet by a miracle our men held on, darting from one devastated section to another in order to gain refuge.

Beginning with Hooze, which was held—600 yards of front—by the men of the Royal Canadian Regiment, there came a fifty yards' gap in the line, low-lying sodden ground which was undefended—it being thought it might prove a trap for the Germans; then came the section of front held by the Princess Patricia's, which included the embowed hollow known as the "Appendix" (only forty yards from the German trenches) and the Loop. On their right was a brigade of the Canadian Mounted Rifles, who defended a portion of Sanctuary and Armagh Woods.

In the fatal Loop was stationed a whole company of Princess Patricia's Light Infantry. As the men hung on there, grim and expectant, there was a terrific explosion. When the flying fragments had subsided, a watcher from a balloon would have seen only a jagged and enormous crater—awful in its stillness. The Loop had been mined by the enemy, and the entire company of brave men had perished. Another monstrous German mine exploded, but with less deadly effect.

By this time all the communication trenches were battered flat. Orders had somehow been conveyed to the troops to flee for their lives, and some few hundreds attempted to beat a retreat through the deadly barrage. Only a handful of them got through. The majority of the survivors stayed on the ground or hid in such refuge as they could find. One—two—three hours passed; not for a moment—not for a single second did the hideous thunder slacken.

It was now that there took place in the intervening ground between the enemy's barrage and our own a thousand struggles between brave men palpitating with health and life and hundreds of merciless hidden machines belching forth fragments of insensate metal. For this is the essence and image of modern warfare. It was flesh and blood grappling with lead and iron.

On our own side the sound of our artillery was indistinguishable; but a great volume of British shells did pierce that infernal barrage and crash eastward into the German line. Once, it is related, two shells from opposing sides collided in mid-air with a shriek like a woman in agony. Our gunners worked madly, and it is certain they wrought havoc amongst the enemy. But they were severely handicapped. It was an unequal contest. The Germans seemed to know the position of every Canadian battery, and all of these got their share of the enemy's attention.

In the intervening territory many gallant men were ministering to the wounded who, torn, splintered, and bleeding, lay strewn upon the ground. Stretcher-bearers were moving backwards and forwards as though their nerves were of steel. Officers were huddling their men together in places of uncertain sanctuary. Colonel Shaw, of the Canadian Mounted Rifles, directed eighty of his men to Cumberland dug-outs—a little shallow square. When it became too hot there, he forced them all out through a gap and bade them run for their lives. He himself refused to leave his wounded men, and remained there valiantly at his post until a shell struck him and he was killed.

Seventy yards from this spot was the dressing-station of the battalion. Here the medical officer in charge toiled unceasingly all through that terrible morning, the wounded coming to him, some crawling on hands and knees, by scores. Before the war Captain Haight was a jovial ship's surgeon on a steamer plying between Vancouver and Honolulu. He was a man of infinite courage—"nothing ever rattled him or upset his temper," said one survivor to me. When the dressing-station was shelled, he moved with his assistant, Lieutenant Atkinson, calmly and coolly to another on more exposed ground, and continued his humane work to the last, when he was dispatched by a bayonet in the most revolting manner.

Another officer, Captain Harper, who hailed from Kamsack, in distant Saskatchewan, was ministering to an officer and three desperately wounded men. He refused to leave them when the lull came and the Germans were seen advancing, although they urged him to do so. "I said I'd stand by you boys," he said, "and I will." A few minutes later and he, too, was gone.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the barrage, two battalions of desperate men were watching for a chance to cleave their way through to their comrades in peril. But there was little hope that any in the front line of trenches survived.

It was now ten minutes to one o'clock. After four hours' steady bombardment the storm of shell ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Fortright from the opposite trenches sprang a swarm of grey-coated Huns. They must have been firmly convinced that amidst those rugged, battered, seared, and bloody mounds and ditches, which four hours before had been the British trenches, not one single soul had escaped. Fully accoutred and with overcoats and full haversacks,

they advanced in high spirits. Apart from a few bombers, not a man of those advancing hordes appears to have been in proper fighting trim. They came forward gaily, light-heartedly, as victors after a victory.

It was then the most wonderful thing of the day happened. Out of the earth there leapt a handful of wild-eyed soldiers, two officers amongst them, pale, muddied and reeking with sweat, who, running forward with upraised rifles and pistols, bade defiance to the oncoming foe. On they ran, and having discharged their weapons, flung them in the very faces of the Huns. Death was inevitable for these—the only surviving occupants of the British front line—and it was better to die thus, breathing defiance to a cowardly enemy, than be shot in a ditch and spitted through with a Hun bayonet. Thus they perished.

Few but the wounded fell into the hands of the enemy. A Toronto officer, himself in the very thick of the fight, and performing wonders of valour, told me that he had last seen General Mercer sitting dazed and wounded on the ground, just as the shell fire ceased and the Germans were advancing. Amongst the prisoners were General Williams and Colonel Ussher, both of whom were lying in a communication trench at "Vigo Street." General Williams was wounded in the face.

The cessation of fire was the signal for the Canadian supports to hasten forward to meet the enemy, who was now advancing in force and bringing up his machine-gunners and bombers. The battalion holding Maple Copse became planted firmly and refused to budge, and having dug itself in, held that position all day. Colonel Baker, M.P., of the Mounted Rifles, was unhappily hit by shell in the lungs, and died later in the day. The Princess Patricia's fought with their accustomed gallantry, led by the brave Colonel Buller, lately Military Secretary to H.R.H. the Duke of Connaught, and helped, although at terrible cost, to check the further German advance.

Buller, his blood up, seeing his men giving way a little, ordered them to charge along a trench known as Gordon Road. They obeyed with a rush, and, not to impede their onset, Buller leapt up on to the edge of the trench and ran forward, crying: "On, boys, on! Break them to pieces!"

He was thus encouraging them when a bullet pierced his heart.

"I never saw a finer death," one man told me. "He looked very brave and handsome up there, outlined against the sky, the only figure on the bank above, his helmet off, and his face very pale and blazing with anger, and his right arm pointing forward. He fell down headlong, but we never turned back until we gave the Germans hell. Two hours later, I was told, the Colonel was still lying there on his face on the edge of the trench. Then they turned him over and brought him in."

The second-in-command of the Patricia's, Major Hamilton Gault, was

severely wounded, and many gallant officers fell.

The machine-guns of the Royal Canadian Regiment inflicted fearful mortality. Between them and the Princess Patricia's was a gap, fifty yards wide, into which the Germans poured on finding it undefended, and were smashed on both flanks, and mowed down by scores. On their arrival at the "Appendix," only forty yards from the enemy's front trenches, they were met by a withering fire which almost obliterated them. A little further south they were more successful, and from the "Loop," where the company of the Princess Patricia's had perished, they penetrated to Gordon Road and beyond, and then commenced a fierce attack to the north. But here a swift and stern retribution was to be exacted from them.

A company commander, Captain Hugh Niven, who, although already twice wounded, was still full of valour and resolution, gathered the remainder of his men together, some seventy rifles in all and two machine-guns, and, hidden behind sandbags, awaited the foe in silence. The order was given: "Not a man must shoot until I give the signal!" Apparently the Boche was taken unawares. The volley which blazed forth was reminiscent of the immortal front rank fire of Lascelles' Regiment on the Heights at Quebec.

One stalwart French-Canadian, Arseneau by name, who had often faced wild animals in the backwoods, burning with ardour, could not be restrained from leaping up on the improvised parapet and repeatedly emptying his rifle, before the enemy could recover from his astonishment. His captain tells me that no fewer than eight Germans fell to this man's marksmanship alone in that swift encounter. When it was over, at least one hundred of the enemy slain lay on the ground. Afterwards the officer mentioned shepherded his men into a section of trench, he himself spending the whole of the ensuing night perambulating the trenches, directing defences, ministering to and encouraging and directing his men. It was truly an astonishing feat of physical endurance.

"We had lost so many," he said, "I felt I ought to be on deck as long as I could crawl." He was still giving orders when the stretcher-bearers lifted him out and bore him away to the field hospital.

A gallant youth in his twenty-fourth year was Captain Cotton, son of a Major-General, sometime Inspector-General of the Canadian Forces. Cotton was ordered to take two machine-guns and dig them in in such a manner in the front line that they would enfilade the enemy's trenches on the left. If the Germans rushed his own position, he was to disable his guns and retire with his men. After fighting valiantly for a time, the enemy charged, whereupon Cotton, instead of retiring, coolly hauled both guns out of their emplacements and turned them on the advancing Germans. He and his men continued firing until all were slain, and lay a heap of mangled flesh about their guns.

On the edge of the craters the bodies were seen of a stalwart Sergeant-

Major of the Mounted Rifles and two privates of the Princess Patricia's. Lying around them and beneath them were the bodies of no fewer than twelve Germans whom they had slain with the bayonet.

By half-past five o'clock the enemy had penetrated and possessed themselves of about a mile of our front line trenches in the middle of the arc they had attacked with such demoniac force. The trenches south of Hooge for 1,000 yards we still held, and also the front east of Hill 60. After nightfall the Germans, renewing their bombardment, pushed on 700 yards further towards Zillebeke, and proceeded to entrench themselves firmly. For the moment their artillery had won them an advantage, but the price they had paid was at least as terrible as our own—how terrible we shall not know until the close of the War, and the German official records or the German survivors of this battle speak and tell us.

[image]

(Photograph—street in Ypres)

I write in haste, surrounded by the terrible evidences of a bloody struggle. It would be impossible within the limits of time and space to recount even a tithe of the outstanding deeds of heroism of yesterday's battle, which waged without cessation until nine at night. Albeit one more incident I must relate. It is the story of the Rev. Gilles Wilken, a parson from Medicine Hat, on the Bow River. At the outbreak of war Wilken flung aside his surplice and enlisted as a private. He came to England with his battalion, where his talent for ministration and good works could not be concealed, and he was promptly, when a vacancy occurred, appointed chaplain. Having on this day, in Sanctuary Wood, done all he could for the dead and dying, Wilken felt it his duty to strike a blow of sterner sort for his country. He seized a rifle, wielding it with accuracy and effect as long as his ammunition lasted, and then went after the Germans with a bayonet. After one particularly fierce thrust the weapon broke. Whereupon this astounding parson, baring his arms, flew at one brawny Boche with his fists, and the last seen of him he was lying prone and overpowered.

The outstanding feature of the day was, however, not the numerous traits of individual valour. It is the marvellous tact and moral impetus of the officers and non-commissioned officers, and the discipline and cohesion of the men which I

find evokes most praise. When one was struck down and unable to give or receive orders, another took his place automatically, and was obeyed implicitly and instantly. In one battalion only two officers survived. In some other battalions the losses have been very severe. One lost three-quarters of its strength. But the morale of all ranks was unimpaired, and the troops, who had endured this day an experience which might well weaken the purpose of the strongest and stoutest, were fit and ready at dawn on the morrow to undertake a counter-attack.

II.

June 4th.

That Friday night, while the enemy was preparing to hold his new front, and the stretcher-bearers and Red Cross workers on both sides were bringing in their wounded and dead, General Sir Julian Byng, the Corps Commander, was planning a counter-attack to recover the ground which had been lost. This attack was delayed for some hours, owing to the necessity for assembling artillery in such force as to silence the enemy, who still maintained a vigorous and occasionally an intense bombardment.

The advance was timed for six o'clock in the morning, but still the barrage did not lift, and it was nearly half-past nine when our troops moved forward in earnest. These troops belonged to the First and Third Divisions, but the brunt of the fighting was borne by survivors of the 7th and 8th Brigades of the latter Division, assisted by two companies of the King's Royal Rifles, an Imperial regiment which had been serving in the Salient to the left of the Canadian troops.

A bombardment of a vigour almost equal to that of the Germans of the previous day created a shelter for our advancing battalions. The enemy guns replied, and at one time the spectacle was witnessed of a double barrage of appalling intensity. None the less, the Canadians pushed on, and after fighting all day succeeded in reaching a portion of their old front-line trenches in the northern section. On the way thither they came across numbers of enemy dead lying about unburied. But the trenches were battered to pieces, and our troops were not in sufficient strength to hold on until the works could be reconstructed. The same was true of the battalions of the 8th Brigade, who advanced south of Maple Copse and east of Warrington Avenue, although the 49th Battalion, which

had lost its commanding officer, Colonel Baker, struggled valiantly for a time to maintain itself. The upshot was that we were forced back to a new front line of trenches near Zillebeke.

The losses of these two days have been grievous—some 7,000 killed and wounded. It is to-day known that the commander of the heroic Third Canadian Division, Major-General Mercer, has fallen. Just as the Huns were making their advance at half-past one o'clock, the General was seen supporting himself against a parapet at the entrance of a dug-out known as the Tube, suffering from shell shock, and there beyond doubt he met his death, and there his body lies buried. A brigade commander and a battalion commander were taken prisoners. Two other colonels, Buller and Baker, have been slain.

The earth is all torn, seared, and fretted hereabouts, but a surprising amount of timber still stands. All through those two fierce days' fighting, wounded men were crawling about or lying motionless for hours, either helpless or to avoid observation. One man told me he had spent two nights on his back in No Man's Land without food, drink, or succour. Another was thrice buried by the effects of the much-vaunted minenwerfer shell—which ploughs up the surrounding earth—and thrice dug out by a passing officer. Machine-guns were repeatedly buried, and then rapidly and diligently excavated and brought by our gallant fellows again into action, much to the enemy's amazement and discomfiture.

It is now Sunday afternoon at Corps Headquarters.

As I write, staff officers hurry to and fro; occasionally a general or a battalion commander dashes by, all deeply preoccupied and intent on the business in hand. Some of them have not slept for three days. The troops who have borne the brunt are now going into rest billets.

As to these two days' struggle, if you were to take all the actions along the British front from the very beginning, there is none that illustrates so vividly, so intensely, the whole character of the fighting in this War. It combines the essential features of all, with the exception of poison gas. Brief, compact, and murderous, it was by far the greatest artillery ordeal to which the Canadians have yet been subjected. As an exhibition of German frightfulness on the one hand, and British steadfastness on the other, it is unsurpassed in the War. "Comparable only to Verdun," is the comment to me of a distinguished commander, when I mentioned the fury of the German bombardment.

Down the road leading from the battle front to the divisional headquarters appears the head of a long column of mud-stained, grimy-faced Canadians, with rusty, tattered accoutrements, their heads in the air, still keeping step, and singing—actually singing—with a sort of wild humour and abandon. And one catches the sound, not of the "Maple Leaf for Ever," or "My Little Grey Home in

the West," but of the latest London music-hall ditty—the one a famous comedian chants nightly at the Alhambra:

"If you were the only girl in the world,
And I were the only boy!"

But make no mistake about it—retribution is in the air. Look into the men's eyes, and their glances tell the same tale. The men are excited—they are feverish; all this that you see is reaction. They know, every man of them, the game is only just begun. The question is: How long will the German be permitted to hold on to his winnings? I have just had a brief interview with the Corps commander, Sir Julian Byng, who gave me this message:—

"I am proud of the Canadians under my command. Their behaviour has been magnificent. I have never known, not even at Vimy Ridge, a fiercer or more deadly barrage, nor have I ever seen any troops fight with more earnestness, courage, endurance, and cheerfulness. It is regrettable that our losses are heavy, but the slight penetration of our line will cost the Germans dear."

Yes; it is possible that the battle is only just begun. The next few hours may reveal much, but it will reveal no secret of German strategy for which we shall not be fully prepared.

III.

June 7th.

It is all a question of artillery preparation. The enemy momentarily holds a large portion of the ground formerly held by us. It is only a few acres, when all is said, but it is as precious to us as our life-blood. We have been given a charge to keep, and the honour of Canada is involved in our keeping it intact. Evidently the Hun commander had convinced himself that here was a vulnerable point in the

British line, and he delivered a ruthless onslaught. It was carefully planned and meditated; this is clearly demonstrated by the enormous weight of metal, which must have been accumulating for weeks. The bombardment of June 2nd was without a parallel even in this shell-devastated region, and yesterday he repeated it. Four mines were exploded directly under our front trenches at Hooge, and he pressed forward a few steps further and captured the ruins of the hamlet.

Two short years ago the Chateau of Hooge and all the land hereabouts belonged to a Belgian nobleman, the Baron de Vinck, who dwelt here with his family and dependents. Now his chateau is as immortal as Hougomont. Thrilling scenes have been enacted in this park—the flower of the chivalry of England and France have perished in its defence. Hooge was on October 30th, 1914, the headquarters of the 1st and 2nd Divisions. On that day General Lomax was wounded, General Munro stunned, and six staff officers killed. It was once also the headquarters of Byng's 3rd Cavalry Division. On this very ground that we are now again fighting to recover, on November 6th, 1914, the 1st and 2nd Life Guards and the Blues advanced to make their never-to-be-forgotten stand against the Prussian Guards, who fought under their Emperor's eye.

It was to Hooge that were borne the dead bodies of Fitzclarence, Cavendish, Wellesley, Wyndham, Cadogan, Gordon-Lennox, Hay, Kinnaird, Bruce, and Fraser, and not far from there they are chiefly interred. Close at hand also is the grave of the brave young Prince Maurice of Battenberg.

It has long since—chateau, hamlet, and wood—been smashed to fragments by their guns; but we continued to hold it, and now it is theirs. It is of no strategic significance, perhaps, but it brings them nearer to Ypres, and the graves of so many of our heroic dead.

From the hill where I am stationed, the line of the new German trenches is clearly visible, even if it were not indicated by their shell-fire, which just now continues particularly hot in the neighbourhood of St. Eloi. Our line has been slightly indented, but the high ground to the east was already theirs, from which they could belch forth all their artillery resources, and it is difficult to see what strategical advantage they have gained from their late bloody effort. From all I can gather, the cost to them in casualties, as well as ammunition, has been very great—much greater than was first supposed.

Earlier in the war the shelling I am now witnessing at the turn in the loop which encloses this blood-stained amphitheatre of three thousand acres would have seemed a serious bombardment. Now it is merely an artillery diversion. Twenty thousand Canadian soldiers, hidden in what seems an absolutely deserted plain, are looking upwards at those great white or yellow puffs of smoke with quiet unconcern, awaiting the appointed hour. For the present, the Boche has done his worst. He has given a violent tug at the loop, and if he has shortened

it by a few inches, it is possible it has also made it stronger. It has cost him thousands of lives and yielded him a few battered trenches and a brick-heap.

Elsewhere on the British front numerous raids, adroitly planned by us, and almost invariably successful, have been the order of the day. At one point an enormous white placard has been exhibited on the enemy parapet:

ENGLISCH-TAKE WARNUNG BY
KITCHENER'S FATE.
GERMANY IS INVINCIBLE.

It is impossible to reproduce the character or the spelling, both of which were atrocious. This was brought in by a raiding party, and provoked infinite amusement amongst our men.

[image]

Map-Ypres and area

IV.

June 14th.

The expected has happened. The Canadians, chafing over the results of the fierce German offensive of the past ten days, successfully carried through in the early hours of yesterday morning a counter-attack which restored every rod of valuable ground they had lost. Observatory Ridge, the whole of Armagh Wood, and the uplands to the south, including Mount Sorel, are again firmly in our hands.

It was a most brilliant feat of arms. The night was wet, cold, and thoroughly disagreeable, but the men were in the highest possible spirits at the prospect of an advance to recover their old position. This time our artillery was fully prepared, and at 1.30 o'clock in the morning, under cover of a heavy fire, the advance began. A fresh Canadian division had been sent into the Salient, and there remained a mixed brigade of those Canadian mounted troops who have figured in the recent

fighting. General Lipsett, the new divisional commander appointed to succeed General Mercer, deferred taking up his command in order to lead his old brigade into action.

To three battalions the attack was mainly entrusted. A fourth battalion to the right, opposite Hill 60, provided a diversion for the enemy, so as to protect the attacking battalions from being enfiladed, while on the extreme left, where there was less ground to be retaken, a fifth battalion advanced. The orders were to take three lines of trenches, and to establish bomb posts in the fourth.

These four trenches were (1) the new German front line which they had recently made, (2) our old reserve trench, (3) our old support trench, and (4) our old front line.

The troops pressed forward, the Germans felling back sullenly under the impetuosity of the attack. Some fierce fighting took place here and there in the territory south of Warrington Avenue, especially for the possession of Observatory Ridge, but the enemy seemed helpless before the fury of our impetus. Early in the engagement, two of his guns mounted on high ground south of the famous "Appendix" fell into our hands, and we then learned from men captured there that the Germans actually had planned a further attack upon our lines at that point, to take place at 6.30 that very morning. Owing to circumstances over which they had no control, it has been postponed.

"My battalion," narrates one officer who greatly distinguished himself this day, "went forward in four waves, two under Major Kemp and two under Major McCuaig. The first of the trenches was taken without opposition. It had been practically obliterated by our artillery. While we were taking this trench, the artillery lifted until 1.50, to give us time to reach the second trench, which we also took with little opposition. Major Kemp was hit before we reached the first trench. The third trench was taken by the first three waves, supported by the fourth." But it was here that opposition was encountered. A Boche machine-gun on the left had been dragged up from below, and ably handled by a Boche sergeant, whose face was streaming with blood, enfiladed our line in a most disastrous manner. Four of our advancing officers were struck down, and for a few moments it looked as though that single weapon was going to check this part of the line.

"Silence that Hun machine! Put it out of action!" roared one of our officers. And a machine-gun officer, Lieutenant Hamilton, ran backwards with a single private, armed with bombs, and charged the Boche offender in the dark, guided only by his own fire. Their first bomb killed the sergeant, but another sprang in his place, and the crew had to be beaten off with fists and the butt of a revolver. The gun was captured, mounted, and trained on the enemy.

Meanwhile Lieutenant Giveen, the bombing officer, having been killed, his

place was filled by Lieutenant Saunders, who led a bombing party up the communication trench to the fourth and foremost trench, which was the front Canadian line of ten days ago. Having rapidly issued instructions to his men to establish blocks, the gallant Saunders could not refrain from raising a cheer of triumph. At that very moment he was struck down, probably by a bomb. He had led the way, and others followed, and a red rocket, sent up by Major McCuaig's orders, announced to those behind that the final objective of the counter-attack had been reached. In less than ten minutes a party of engineers and a company of pioneers, armed with picks and shovels, were on the spot, and the work of digging in—of "consolidating"—began. All this while another force had been toiling madly at digging out the third line of trenches. Communication was established at dawn with the battalions to right and left, who had also advanced under the same difficulties, and suffering heavy losses, which were to be heavier during that terrible day when the Germans began their bombardment. The rain continued to descend pitilessly, there was nothing visible anywhere but a sea and watersheds of mud, ploughed and churned by shells and bombs, and strewn with corpses and the litter of a battlefield. When the men sat down to rest, their hips were sunk in heavy brown slime. Yet even under such conditions the spirit of the men was amazing. As one of their officers has declared—

"Even men who had joined as reinforcements a month ago behaved like old and seasoned soldiers."

A Vancouver officer bears similar testimony.

"When we reached the German front line," he states, "there was no trench left. We met with no opposition, the Germans at first seeming to be too dazed by the heavy fire to which they had been subjected to do anything. The ground, as we advanced, was in a frightful state, all in holes, which were made the more trying by the pouring rain. We should never have got through had it not been for the splendid work of the artillery, for progress through this ploughed up mud was slow. We took some fifty to sixty prisoners. All the men were keen as mustard. Some of the newly-joined had never been in a serious engagement before, but they were just as steady as the old hands."

Another says: "The trenches were in a sad state, and conditions generally bad. The men had to sleep anyhow in the open. We lost pretty severely, in coming up, through shells. When at length we advanced, we went forward so rapidly that we were through the first trench and up the hill before the Germans realised what was happening. Our losses here were comparatively slight. At length we reached our old front line, where we attacked with bombs and bayonets. The Germans made an effort at a counter-attack, but it was easily handled by our bombers. We were relieved that night. The ground, I should add, was in an awful state. One of our men who had sunk deeply in the mud during the advance was discovered

still tightly held in the mire afterwards, when two men pulled him out.”

Another officer of the same battalion said that the bombing battalion on their right did its work very effectively, and kept the Germans on Hill 60 well occupied. After reaching the objective, this battalion had some stiff fighting on the extreme right, the Germans counter-attacking with bombs. But soon the old British line was made tenable with sandbags. The Germans came back twice, and had to be bombed out of the German front line, and even then some came back again. After the last trench had been taken, the Germans shelled it heavily, and there were many casualties. The men behaved with great gallantry, and were crazy to reach the German trenches. At one time four different men of the battalion went out of the trench after a wounded comrade, and all were killed in the attempt to save him. The wounded man was subsequently brought in at night.

”Lord, it was fine,” relates still another officer who was in the thick of the fighting. ”I could feel that terrible fretting of the past week just oozing out as the boys jumped the parapets and smashed across to where our old first line had been. I don’t think anything could have stopped them. I didn’t get in with the first bunch, because my company was held on the edge, watching for the counter-attack, if it came too soon for our fellows to make a stand.

”When we got going we went through the Germans like a knife through cheese. They didn’t know what to do with us but throw down their rifles and bolt, or hold up their hands. They said we ran. You should have seen them skedoodle for home and ma, what didn’t throw themselves on the ground and beg to be taken. We went clean to the old line, and captured some hundreds of prisoners. Our artillery had kept them from doing much in the digging-in line, and so we had a chance to slam them good and plenty. And you bet we did.

”Then we had to take ours. They had the range of us to a nicety, and they gave us particular hell with shell-fire for days before and during the assault. When we went up and took over the line from the assaulting troops, we had to take another dose of iron which the Huns put on while they were getting their counter-attack ready. But the counter-attack never came off—at least, not what we’d call an attack. Our artillery got them in the belt and cut them up too bad to want to come to close steel with us. So we settled down in a day or two as if there hadn’t been even a brush, and Fritz was glad to let it go at that.

”During nearly all the last turn-in the rain poured down in torrents off and on, and you can imagine the state the lads were in, with freshly dug trenches and everything being blown to smithereens by shell-fire. Towards the last our trenches consisted of shell holes connected by ditches and carpeted with water and some Flanders mud. If a shell burst within a hundred yards, we had to get someone to scrape the plaster from our eyes before we knew if we were hurt.

You couldn't tell a captain from a Tommy, and it didn't matter much just then, since all we could do was to lie low and hang tight.

"But we did it, we did it. We got even with them for trying to wipe out our old battalion. Why, the Huns were lying so thick when we drove through that we had to jump over them all the way, but we got 'home' at last, and 'home' we mean to stay."

Thus was trench after trench retaken, the Canadians sending up a mighty cheer when they discovered that a great quantity of stores which they had left there ten days before, half buried by the force of minenwerfer shells, had been undiscovered or at least unremoved by the enemy, and were practically intact. Three German officers and 130 men were made prisoners. Another enemy officer was subsequently discovered wounded in the intervening territory and brought in. The utmost frankness was expressed by these prisoners as to the result of the engagement, one going so far as to say:—

"We knew that it was a point of pride with you, and that you would never stop until you had got back your trenches. I knew it—but I had to obey orders—and—here I am!"

In the progress through the darkness and in the hand-to-hand fighting of the day, the struggling up the slimy slopes of Observatory Ridge under heavy shell-fire, many brave officers and men fell. One who will be sadly missed is Major Gibson, of the Royal Canadian Highlanders. In addition to his other qualities, Gibson enjoyed fame as the only man in the Expeditionary Force who wore whiskers. He was a Scottish-American, who had seen service with the American army in the Philippines, where he was wounded in the jaw and throat, necessitating a growth of beard. On his mother's side he was a Macdonald, and very proud of his connection with that clan. A fighter born, Gibson enlisted at the beginning of the War, earning his commission and subsequent promotion by sheer merit. On the eve of battle he begged that his company should be placed on the right, for, said he:—

"The Macdonalds have always been on the right since the '45." And the right this morning was a post of danger. Gibson was heard cheering his troops on in the darkness, and continually pressed on always in the van. When he reached the first parapet of our old trenches he cried: "Come on, boys, home at last!" That moment he was fatally hit by a bullet.

There was a famous race between rival battalions to see which should first reach a certain well-known point which I may call Rutland House. Although under heavy fire, the men's zeal could not be checked. On they pounded, panting in the darkness, until a gleam of red fire shot up, and the hoarse voice of a brawny Canadian Highlander was heard calling:—

"We're in first, you beggars o' the -th!"

As showing the spirit of the men, there is the case of two wounded soldiers hit by the same bullet, one in the face and the other in the arm. They were quarrelling as they lay there on the ground side by side. An officer approached and asked what was the matter. The bone of contention was the bullet. One argued warmly that he ought to have it as a souvenir, as he was the first to be hit by it, but the other contended that it was his by rights, as it stayed in him.

On the whole, the Germans put up a poor fight that first day of the counter-attack, and allowed themselves to be taken prisoners by scores. A batch of eight was put in charge of a corporal, with orders to conduct them to the rear. The little procession moved backward, and was seen by other Germans, scattered about in the supporting trenches, who promptly threw away their rifles and joined it, so that instead of being depleted when it reached battalion headquarters, the astonished corporal found that he had nearly twice as many prisoners as he had set out with.

When Major Kemp was wounded, and he and a wounded private were making their way down a trench, they heard a movement in a dug-out. Neither had any weapon. Out came a German. Kemp seized him, took his rifle from him, and gave the private the bayonet. With the German rifle, and his companion with the bayonet, Kemp took six more prisoners. Thus, when they arrived to have their wounds dressed, they had a following of seven prisoners.

Once an unarmed German private advanced towards two of our men, and, shaking his fist in the direction of his compatriots, badly begged for a British rifle that he might fight on our side. A Canadian officer, since mortally wounded, Lieutenant Kitson, was invited by two German privates to enter their dug-out, where he found four other Germans, who, in broken English, begged to surrender.

Later that same day, when the enemy barrage behind and bombardment in front became hotter, so that the supports we wanted could not come up easily, one brave officer, Lieutenant Richardson, who had received his promotion from the ranks, took charge, with only three men, of a whole line of trenches. "You can count on me, sir, to keep them," he said to his colonel; and he held on to the trenches amidst a most terrific shelling the whole of that day. The supports came up at last, but just too late: the brave Richardson had disappeared—it is feared for ever.

June 15th.

In the observation post at my side is a young engineer who three years ago visited Belgium with his sister. They spent the night at Ypres, and the next day strolled out to Zillebeke, and at Zillebeke Meer they got into a boat and rowed for an hour in the shade of the willows (the vestiges of the boat are there yet amongst the rushes; it is known to many of our soldiers, and the bottom of the lake is paved with splintered metal), and they went on to the old mill at Verbranden. On their left they noticed a bare mound or hillock—perhaps a hundred feet high—not a natural feature, they were told, but made by man's hands from the cuttings of the Ypres-Comines Canal.

"We thought of climbing it for the view. But the day was warm, and we changed our minds and walked back to the city along the banks of the canal. We lunched beneath the trees yonder, close to that little chapel. Exactly where we sat are now our front trenches, and that bare, lonely mound is one of the most famous places in the world—Hill 60."

Just one mile east of Zillebeke is Sanctuary Wood, full of poplars, elms, and maples, and below it to the south is another wood which our soldiers call Armagh Wood. All this is just within the Salient. It is all low-lying ground, save here and there a ridge or mound—for the enemy has all the high ground to the east—that low ridge of hills lying some 150 feet above the level of Ypres, which is only fifty feet above sea-level. The boundaries of the Salient are not imaginary; they are real boundaries, for all that they lie hidden. A deep and narrow trench encompasses the territory, which juts out half a mile east, but south of Hooge, and three-quarters of a mile due west of the Chateau of Herenthage, the scene in happier days of garden fêtes and rustic merry-making.

Yesterday, pushing along past Zillebeke lake, the supporting battalions came through the deadly barrage to relieve the weary troops who had spent the whole of Tuesday in constant fighting. "It was a magnificent thing," one of their colonels told me, "to watch those fellows moving on past three barrages, many of them hit and stopping a while to bind up their wounds, and then up and at it again, like dare-devils that nothing could stop. I have never—never seen anything finer."

[image]

(Photograph—street in Ypres)

Once the relieving force was well within the recovered British trenches, the

bombardment of the latter grew fierce, and in those sections of the line where our old outposts had not been reached, much desperate fighting took place in the ensuing forty-eight hours. The tide of battle flowed this way or that, as hill or trench was taken by us or retaken by the enemy. One officer had advanced his machine-gun in a favourable position to prevent enfilading, in case the Germans should return to this particular trench. The Germans did return. A shell lifted the gun clean out over the officer's head, and he lay stunned for a while on the ground. When he recovered consciousness, the Germans were behind him. In a moment, with a little assistance, he had it working briskly in the opposite direction, and was hard at it, when a shell gave him a mortal wound.

I was told to-day of one gunner who, thoroughly exhausted, went to sleep by his gun, and was actually not awakened by Wednesday's terrific Boche artillery onslaught. When the enemy pushed through, he still slept. Two of them, thinking him dead, laid hands on his gun and proceeded to work it, when he awoke at last and realised the situation. He sprang upon them in fury, and was in close conflict with them when some of our men came up, giving chase to a platoon of flying Huns. The subsequent effectiveness of his weapon our gunner put down to his having got forty winks of slumber at a time when the enemy was having everything his own way!

I have mentioned one American as having distinguished himself in this fighting in Armagh Wood. He was not alone amongst his countrymen. Major Stewart was formerly an officer in the United States cavalry. He fought hard and well, and died with his face to the foe. Yet another was Captain Stanley Wood, of Missouri, who had served in the Fifth New York Regiment. He became interested in aviation, and joined the Flying Corps earlier in the war, until a commission was offered him with the Royal Highlanders of Montreal. "Wood was a fine fellow," one of his fellow-officers said to me, "and we all hoped great things of him. And he has not disappointed us, for he died in fine fashion."

What nobler epitaph for a soldier could be uttered?

I have just seen some significant documents captured from the dug-out which served as headquarters of a German grenadier regiment.

It is admitted that the regiment had already lost heavily in a heroic defence against the furious counter-attacks for this position wrested from the enemy, and in the murderous artillery fire. This is sterling testimony to the effective work of our artillery. The document continues:-

"The fighting is not yet finished, and the enemy will not cease attempting to regain Doppelhoche 60, which is so important, but it is a point of honour for the regiment to retain this position.

"Faith in the superiority which we have shown hitherto will enable us to carry out this difficult task."

Stress is laid upon the necessity to collect all the débris after the fight. It is urgently enjoined that search be made for the recovery of "boots of all kinds, all sorts of weapons, and parts of their entrenching tools, steel helmets, leather equipment, cartridge pouches, all kinds of weapons for close fighting, belts, tents, material of all kinds, haversacks, tunics, trousers, and sandbags. These goods are of the most decisive importance to the final success of our great cause."

It is ordered that "the enemy's dead will be divested of articles of woollen clothing and boots."

Special instructions are given to guard against the deterioration of German fighting material. "This must be brought back from the first position and its communication trenches as soon as possible. The exceeding disorder of the second line must be at once thoroughly cleared up." It is to be feared that the co-operation of our artillery has in this instance hardly effected the desired result.

One sentence conveys what the Germans really think of the men opposite to them in the Ypres Salient more eloquently than a column of Teutonic abuse: "In view of the enemy's characteristics, we have to expect a strong attack at any time." And six days from the date upon which these words were written the strong attack came. And the issue of the whole struggle is that the integrity of the Salient has been valiantly maintained. I may here quote the lines written concerning the Canadians' part in the Second Battle of Ypres:

Mother, perchance thou hadst a tender doubt,
Not of our love, or strength, or will,
But of our gift for battle and our skill
To stay the foeman's desp'rate fury out.

If so, against this doubt let Ypres plead;
We gained, yea—inch by inch—our little glory, too,
Helping the store of pride we share with you,
Proving us also of the Island breed.

VI.

June 16th.

Forty-eight hours after the relieving battalions went in they in turn were relieved. For two days and two nights they had been subjected to a terrific hammering, and few of either officers or men had had a moment's sleep. When the respite came, many of them on the way back sank down in the mud of what three days before had been No Man's Land and slept peacefully, utterly worn out. Several told me that, when they awoke, it was to find an equally exhausted slumbering Boche a few paces away. These stragglers continue to come in, some of them, wholly unwounded, having been for days wandering about, virtually without food, and drinking only such water as they find in the rain-drenched ditches.

A leading article in the *Times*, which has just come in, truly says:—

"It was undoubtedly the hardest action fought on Belgian soil since the Second Battle of Ypres, more than a year ago."

As for our men, a day has made a wonderful difference to those who have emerged unscathed from the shock of battle. Not soon shall I forget the spectacle which greeted me an hour ago when one Scottish Canadian battalion passed me in the road on the way to neighbouring rest billets. A stalwart band of pipers marched behind a sleek regimental goat, who ever and anon shook his horns in conscious pride. The pipers droned "Bonnie Dundee," and on came the long column of troopers, still unkempt and unshorn and in strangely fitting headgear—for scarce a man had kept the bonnet he had gone out in—but each with a dogged, invincible air that those forty-eight hours' hell in the trenches had failed to subdue. There was a terrible thinning of the ranks, and there were some chargers without riders. I followed them to their new camp. One other battalion had already arrived, and some of the officers, taking advantage of the sudden spell of sunshine, were already playing tennis. It was a strange scene. Our aeroplanes had come out to reconnoitre, and numerous puffs of smoke high overhead showed that they were the target for the German anti-aircraft guns. Other guns boomed forth in the distance, but otherwise amidst these green and peaceful surroundings there was little enough to suggest the tragedy of war.

"Thirty—love!" called out Colonel Rattray, of the 10th Battalion, lowering his racquet at the end of a fine rally. You would never imagine that this clean-cut, debonair figure had just emerged from the jaws of death and the mouth of hell.

The kilted Canadians were in sight of their billets when a slim young officer, pushing a bicycle, stepped off the road with his companion to allow them, their triumphant goat and their pipers, to pass. Not a man of these battle-scarred heroes recognised him. I am sure they would have raised a cheer if they had known.

For this slender young officer, his breast covered with many-hued bits of ribbon, was His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, a captain in the Guards.

VII.

June 23rd.

Exactly one week after I had watched our scarred and shaken but still valiant Canadian soldiers on their way out of the trenches of Maple Copse and Sanctuary Wood, after the third fiercest struggle that has taken place in the Ypres Salient, I stood and marked the passage of the men of the relieving battalions. It was in the chief street of a little town whose church and houses were cruelly disfigured by German shells. The sound of drum and fife was heard, and the whole populace ran to doors and windows. On every lip the cry was heard—

”The Guards—the Guards! They are coming out!”

On they came in column of route, these tall, stern, bronzed men, chins up, eyes front, jaws set, marching with all the firmness and precision of a dress parade, marching as if the eyes of His Majesty the King were upon them, as I had seen them march in scarlet tunics and monstrous busbies in Hyde Park, at Aldershot, on the Horse Guards Parade, the same men, and yet, alas, not the same. You forgot—nay, you did not see—their shabby, faded, stained khaki uniforms, the shapeless steel basins on their heads, the untidy linen sacks slung on their shoulders; you only saw the men, the brave, strong men, the triumph of training, the justification of discipline, the vindication of the old despised Imperial military system, the glory of the British Army—the Guards.

No wonder eyes gleamed and cheeks mantled in that little Flemish town, which has seen so many units of the British Army pass and repass the mouth of hell, whose lips are the hitherward parallel roadways and whose gnashing teeth are the front trenches. Six days before the same scene had been enacted when the cry ran—

”The Guards! They are going in!”

And they went in—the Coldstreams and the Grenadiers—to take over the trenches from the Canadians, to delve and sweat, carrying loads of ammunition on their backs, crawling into No Man’s Land, laying mines, shooting Germans or braining them with the butts of their rifles, or treating them to the cold steel, as imperturbable as you see them now—it being all in the day’s work. The popularity of the Guards arouses no jealousy in the other divisions. ”We don’t grudge ’em what they get,” remarked a sergeant in a line regiment; ”they work hard, and they deserve it. They’ve got a big name to keep up.”

And yet it was one of these same Guards who an hour later, with more emotion than I would have thought credible, waving his brawny hand backwards

towards the line, said:

"The Canadians—yes, sir, perhaps we have something they haven't got. But—excuse the liberty, sir—by God, we take off our hats to them! I tell you what, sir, they're MEN! They saved the Salient!"

EPILOGUE.

YPRES, *June 24th.*

Fuit Hupra! The ancient city has at last crumbled into dust; but if she is blotted out amongst the cities of Belgium, she will live for ever in the hearts and the history of Canada and the British Empire. She belongs—her halls and churches, her streets and houses, all her people and her past—henceforth to us and those who come after us. She is, spiritually, as much a part of the British Empire as Vancouver or Toronto. Her quaint memorials will be cherished by us; her story will be told by our children's children. She is a city of the dead—our British dead.

It is strange that it should be reserved for Ypres to play such a prominent part on the stage of this war. For the city was itself but a symbol of a past greatness and a melancholy survivor of centuries-old tragedy. No town of its size in Europe—no town of ten times its size—has suffered more.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Ypres was the metropolis of Flanders, taking the lead of Bruges and Ghent. In 1267, in a petition to Pope Innocent IV., the aldermen estimated the population at 200,000 souls. It possessed 4,000 looms, and counted seven parish churches. Then was built the vast and splendid Drapers' Guild Hall, the most remarkable secular monument of the Middle Ages. Merchants from all over Europe had counting-houses within its territory. The Kings of France and England and the Emperors of Germany granted special privileges to the men of Ypres who came to trade in their realms.

Then came ruinous and bloody wars against the Counts of Flanders and against the Kings of France; came civil dissensions, riots, and massacres. After being besieged by English troops under Richard II. in 1383, the town found its suburbs destroyed, and its industrial population terribly depleted by exile. In the following century it was visited by repeated misfortunes, and in the sixteenth it became the scene of religious persecution, massacres, and pillage. In 1566 Ypres was sacked by a mob, and the same fate befell it in 1578. It was used as a fortress

against the Spaniards, and when it fell, after a siege of eight months, the population had dwindled to 5,000 souls, and within its walls all was in ruins. Sieges and bombardments continued at intervals until, at the French Revolution, Ypres fell into the hands of the troops of the Convention, and once more—"for the last time," says the local historian—became a victim of violence and destruction. Alas, not the last!

Briefly, that is the tale of Ypres, relentlessly pursued by misfortune. And yet, despite all the city has endured, it fronted the world bravely and even with an imposing aspect, repairing the ravages of war with patience and fortitude.

This time is it possible that this noble city should rise again? Its pride—the glorious Guild Hall—the mediæval churches and mansions are all but level with the ground. There is scarce a single house in the city whose walls are undamaged, and most of them are mere heaps of bricks and mortar.

I have just made a tour of the streets, accompanied by a young Canadian engineer. It is a desert whose silence is only broken by the thunder of guns, for the Germans are bombarding again. Occasionally a 4.5 shell crashes perilously near, or a shrapnel explodes over our heads, and instinctively we dart into cover. But for these reminders of a savage and felon present we might be walking in a city buried like Pompeii or Herculaneum, and now exhumed to display to curious eyes the crumbling memorials of a remote and peaceful past.

My companion reminds me, as we pass the convent of the Irish Nuns of Ypres, that the Princess Patricia's carried their colours through Ypres, and that while they halted here one of their officers quoted some lines of the famous ballad:

In the cloisters of Ypres a banner is swaying,
And by it a pale, weeping maiden is praying.

There have been, in dreams, many pale, weeping maidens praying beside that banner wrought by the royal Princess Patricia. God grant soon that the prayers of all women be heard!

APPENDIX.

I.

Hooghe.—The Baron Gaston de Vinck, Belgian ex-Senator and Burgomaster of Zillebeke, writes me that the name and proper orthography is the Chateau de la Hooghe. "All has been blown up by dynamite and burnt. My fine collection of antiquities of great value, my furniture, pictures, and family portraits, all have perished. The chateau was built in 1721: my family acquired the estate in 1740, and since then six generations have dwelt there. I know with what martial glory on my old and beloved lands your compatriots have covered themselves. Of this, I and those who shall come after me, will keep an imperishable memory."

II.

GENERAL MERCER'S DEATH.—Lieutenant Gooderham, the General's aide-de-camp, now a prisoner in Germany, writes: "I was beside my beloved general when he was killed. He lay on the battlefield for two days, suffering from shell shock, until picked up by a German patrol. He was first shocked by large shell, and I tried to get him away, but it was impossible. He was shot through the leg, which was broken. He lay on the field, in no pain, and next day was killed by shrapnel instantly."

The General's body was found in the Armagh Wood and buried in a military cemetery near Poperinghe, Sir Julian Byng and a large number of officers attending the funeral.

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN THE YPRES SALIENT ***

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