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A GERMAN DESERTER'S WAR EXPERIENCE

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**TRANSLATED BY J. KOETTGEN
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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

The following narrative first appeared in German in the columns of the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, the principal organ of the German speaking Socialists in the United States. Its author, who escaped from Germany and military service after 14 months of fighting in France, is an intelligent young miner. He does not wish to have his name made public, fearing that those who will be offended by his frankness might vent their wrath on his relatives. Since his arrival in this country his friends and acquaintances have come to know him as an upright and truthful man whose word can be relied upon.

The vivid description of the life of a common German soldier in the present war aroused great interest when the story presented in these pages to the English speaking reader was published in serial form. For here was an historian of the war who had been through the horrors of the carnage as one of the "Huns," one of the "Boches"; a soldier who had not abdicated his reason; a warrior against his will, who nevertheless had to conform to the etiquette of war; a hater of militarism for whom there was no romance in war, but only butchery and brutality, grime and vermin, inhuman toil and degradation. Moreover, he was found to be no mean observer of men and things. His technical training at a school of

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mining enabled him to obtain a much clearer understanding of the war of position than the average soldier possesses.

Most soldiers who have been in the war and have written down their experiences have done so in the customary way, never questioning for a moment the moral justification of war. Not so our author. He could not persuade his conscience to make

a distinction between private and public morality, and the angle from which he views the events he describes is therefore entirely different from that of other actual observers of and participators in war. His story also contains the first German description of the retreat of the Teutonic armies after the battle of the Marne. The chief value of this soldier's narrative lies, however, in his destructive, annihilating criticism of the romance and fabled virtues of war. If some of the incidents related in this book appear to be treated too curtly it is solely due to this author's limited literary powers. If, for instance, he does not dwell upon his inner experiences during his terrible voyage to America in the coal bunker of a Dutch ship it is because he is not a literary artist, but a simple workman.

The translator hopes that he has succeeded in reproducing faithfully the substance and the spirit of the story, and that this little book will contribute in combating one of the forces that make for war—popular ignorance of war's realities. Let each individual fully grasp and understand the misery, degradation, and destruction that await him in war, and the barbarous ordeal by carnage will quickly become the most unpopular institution on earth.

J. Koettgen.

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A GERMAN DESERTER'S WAR EXPERIENCE

I

MARCHING INTO BELGIUM

At the end of July our garrison at Koblenz was feverishly agitated. Part of our men were seized by an indescribable enthusiasm, others became subject to a feeling of great depression. The declaration of war was in the air. I belonged to those who were depressed. For I was doing my second year of military service and was to leave the barracks in six weeks' time. Instead of the long wished-for return home war was facing me.

Also during my military service I had remained the anti-militarist I had been before. I could not imagine what interest I could have in the mass murder, and I also pointed out to my comrades that under all circumstances war was the greatest misfortune that could happen to humanity.

Our sapper battalion, No. 30, had been in feverish activity five days before the mobilization; work was being pushed on day and night so that we were fully prepared for war already on the 23rd of July, and on the 30th of July there was no person in our barracks who doubted that war would break out. Moreover, there was the suspicious amiability of the officers and sergeants, which excluded any doubt that any one

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might still have had. Officers who had never before replied to the salute of a private soldier now did so with the utmost attention. Cigars and beer were distributed in those days by the officers with great, uncommon liberality, so that it was not surprising that many soldiers were scarcely ever sober and did not realize the seriousness of the situation. But there were also others. There were soldiers who also in those times of good-humor and the grinning comradeship of officer and soldier could not forget that in military service they had often been degraded to the level of brutes, and who now thought with bitter feelings that an opportunity might perhaps be offered in order to settle accounts.

The order of mobilization became known on the 1st of August, and the following day was decided upon as the real day of mobilization. But without awaiting the arrival of the reserves we left our garrison town on August 1st. Who was to be our "enemy" we did not know; Russia was for the present the only country against which war had been declared.

We marched through the streets of the town to the station between crowds of people numbering many thousands. Flowers were thrown at us from every window; everybody wanted to shake hands with the departing soldiers. All the people, even soldiers, were weeping. Many marched arm in arm with their wife or sweetheart. The music played songs of leave-taking. People cried and sang at the same time. Entire strangers, men and women, embraced and kissed each other; men embraced men and kissed each other. It was a real witches' sabbath of emotion; like a wild torrent, that emotion carried away the whole assembled humanity. Nobody, not even the strongest and most

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determined spirit, could resist that ebullition of feeling.

But all that was surpassed by the taking leave at the station, which we reached after a short march. Here final adieus had to be said, here the separation had to take place. I shall never forget that leave-taking, however old I may grow to be.

Desperately many women clung to their men; some had to be removed by force. Just as if they had suddenly had a vision of the fate of their beloved ones, as if they were beholding the silent graves in foreign lands in which those poor nameless ones were to be buried, they sought to cling fast to their possession, to retain what already no longer belonged to them.

Finally that, too, was over. We had entered a train that had been kept ready, and had made ourselves comfortable in our cattle-trucks. Darkness had come, and we had no light in our comfortable sixth-class carriages.

The train moved slowly down the Rhine, it went along without any great shaking, and some of us were seized by a worn-out feeling after those days of great excitement. Most of the soldiers lay with their heads on their knapsacks and slept. Others again tried to pierce the darkness as if attempting to look into the future; still others drew stealthily a photo out of their breast-pocket, and only a very small number of us spent the time by debating our point of destination. Where are we going to? Well, where? Nobody knew it. At last, after long, infinitely long hours the train came to a stop. After a night of quiet, slow riding we were at—Aix-la-Chapelle! At Aix-la-Chapelle! What were we doing at Aix-la-Chapelle? We did not know, and the officers only shrugged their shoulders when we asked them. After a short interval the journey proceeded, and on

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the evening of the 2nd of August we reached a farm in the neighborhood of the German and Belgian frontier, near Herbesthal. Here our company was quartered in a barn. Nobody knew what our business was at the Belgian frontier. In the afternoon of the 3rd of August reservists arrived, and our company was brought to its war strength. We had still no idea concerning the purpose of our being sent to the Belgian frontier, and that evening we lay down on our bed of straw with a forced tranquillity of mind. Something was sure to happen soon, to deliver us from that oppressive uncertainty. How few of us thought that for many it would be the last night to spend on German soil!

A subdued signal of alarm fetched us out of our "beds" at 3 o'clock in the morning. The company assembled, and the captain explained to us the war situation. He informed us that we had to keep ready to march, that he himself was not yet informed about the direction. Scarcely half an hour later fifty large traction motors arrived and stopped in the road before our quarters. But the drivers of these wagons, too, knew no particulars and had to wait for orders. The debate about our nearest goal was resumed. The orderlies, who had snapped up many remarks of the officers, ventured the opinion that we would march into Belgium the very same day; others contradicted them. None of us could know anything for certain. But the order to march did not arrive, and in the evening all of us could lie down again on our straw. But it was a short rest. At 1 o'clock in the morning an alarm aroused us again, and the captain honored us with an address. He told us we were at war with

Belgium, that we should acquit ourselves as brave soldiers, earn iron crosses, and do honor to our German name. Then

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he continued somewhat as follows: "We are making war only against the armed forces, that is the Belgium army. The lives and property of civilians are under the protection of international treaties, international law, but you soldiers must not forget that it is your duty to defend your lives as long as possible for the protection of your Fatherland, and to sell them as dearly as possible. We want to prevent useless shedding of blood as far as the civilians are concerned, but I want to remind you that a too great considerateness borders on cowardice, and cowardice in face of the enemy is punished very severely."

After that "humane" speech by our captain we were "laden" into the automobiles, and crossed the Belgian frontier on the morning of August 5th. In order to give special solemnity to that "historical" moment we had to give three cheers.

At no other moments the fruits of military education have presented themselves more clearly before my mind. The soldier is told, "The Belgian is your enemy," and he has to believe it. The soldier, the workman in uniform, had not known till then who was his enemy. If they had told us, "The Hollander is your enemy," we would have believed that, too; we would have been compelled to believe it, and would have shot him by order. We, the "German citizens in uniform," must not have an opinion of our own, must have no thoughts of our own, for they give us our enemy and our friend according to requirements, according to the requirements of their own interests. The Frenchman, the Belgian, the Italian, is your enemy. Never mind, shoot as we order, and do not bother your head about it. You have duties to perform, perform them, and for the rest—cut it out!

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Those were the thoughts that tormented my brain when crossing the Belgian frontier. And to console myself, and so as to justify before my own conscience the murderous trade that had been thrust upon me, I tried to persuade myself that though I had no Fatherland to defend, I had to defend a home and protect it from devastation. But it was a weak consolation, and did not even outlast the first few days.

Traveling in the fairly quick motor-cars we reached, towards 8 o'clock in the morning, our preliminary destination, a small but pretty village. The inhabitants of the villages which we had passed stared at us in speechless astonishment, so that we all had the impression that those peasants for the most part did not know why we had come to Belgium. They had been roused from their sleep and, half-dressed, they gazed from their windows after our automobiles. After we had stopped and alighted, the peasants of that village came up to us without any reluctance, offered us food, and brought us coffee, bread, meat, etc. As the field-kitchen had not arrived we were glad to receive those kindly gifts of the "enemy," the more so because those fine fellows absolutely refused any payment. They told us the Belgian soldiers had left, for where they did not know.

After a short rest we continued our march and the motor-cars went back. We had scarcely marched for an hour when cavalry, dragoons and huzzars, overtook us and informed us that the Germans were marching forward in the whole neighborhood,

and that cyclist companies were close on our heels. That was comforting news, for we no longer felt lonely and isolated in this strange country. Soon after the troop of cyclists really came along. It passed us quickly and left us by

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ourselves again. Words of anger were to be heard now; all the others were able to ride, but we had to walk. What we always had considered as a matter of course was now suddenly felt by us to be a great injustice. And though our scolding and anger did not help us in the least, it turned our thoughts from the heaviness of the "monkey" (knapsack) which rested like a leaden weight on our backs.

The heat was oppressive, the perspiration issued from every pore; the new and hard leather straps, the new stiff uniforms rubbed against many parts of the body and made them sore, especially round the waist. With great joy we therefore hailed the order that came at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, to halt before an isolated farm and rest in the grass.

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II

FIGHTING IN BELGIUM

About ten minutes we might have lain in the grass when we suddenly heard rifle shots in front of us. Electrified, all of us jumped up and hastened to our rifles. Then the firing of rifles that was going on at a distance of about a mile or a mile and a half began steadily to increase in volume. We set in motion immediately.

The expression and the behavior of the soldiers betrayed that something was agitating their mind, that an emotion had taken possession of them which they could not master and had never experienced before. On myself I could observe a great restlessness. Fear and curiosity threw my thoughts into a wild jumble; my head was swimming, and everything seemed to press upon my heart. But I wished to conceal my fears from my comrades. I know I tried to with a will, but whether I succeeded better than my comrades, whose uneasiness I could read in their faces, I doubt very much.

Though I was aware that we should be in the firing line within half an hour, I endeavored to convince myself that our participation in the fight would no longer be necessary. I clung obstinately, nay, almost convulsively to every idea that could strengthen that hope or give me consolation. That not every bullet finds its billet; that, as we had been told, most wounds in modern wars were afflicted by grazing shots which caused

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slight flesh-wounds; those were some of the reiterated self-deceptions indulged in against my better knowledge. And they proved effective. It was not only that they made me in fact feel more easy; deeply engaged in those thoughts I had scarcely observed that we were already quite near the firing line.

The bicycles at the side of the road revealed to us that the cyclist corps were engaged by the enemy. We did not know, of course, the strength of our opponents as we approached the firing line in leaps. In leaping forward every one bent down instinctively, whilst to our right and left and behind us the enemy's bullets could be heard striking; yet we reached the firing line without any casualties and were

heartily welcomed by our hard-pressed friends. The cyclists, too, had not yet suffered any losses; some, it is true, had already been slightly wounded, but they could continue to participate in the fight.

We were lying flat on the ground, and fired in the direction indicated to us as fast as our rifles would allow. So far we had not seen our opponents. That, it seemed, was too little interesting to some of our soldiers; so they rose partly, and fired in a kneeling position. Two men of my company had to pay their curiosity with their lives. Almost at one and the same time they were shot through the head. The first victim of our group fell down forward without uttering a sound; the second threw up his arms and fell on his back. Both of them were dead instantly.

Who could describe the feelings that overcome a man in the first real hail of bullets he is in? When we were leaping forward to reach the firing line I felt no longer any fear and seemed only to try to reach the line as quickly as possible. But when looking at the first dead

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man I was seized by a terrible horror. For minutes I was perfectly stupefied, had completely lost command over myself and was absolutely incapable to think or act. I pressed my face and hands firmly against the ground, and then suddenly I was seized by an irrepressible excitement, took hold of my gun, and began to fire away blindly. Little after little I quieted down again somewhat, nay, I became almost quite confident as if everything was normal. Suddenly I found myself content with myself and my surroundings, and when a little later the whole line was commanded, "Leap forward! March, march!" I ran forward demented like the others, as if things could not be other than what they were. The order, "Position!" followed, and we flopped down like wet bags. Firing had begun again.

Our firing became more lively from minute to minute, and grew into a rolling deafening noise. If in such an infernal noise you want to make yourself understood by your neighbor, you have to shout at him so that it hurts your throat. The effect of our firing caused our opponent to grow unsteady; his fire became weaker; the line of the enemy began to waver. Being separated from the enemy by only about 500 yards, we could observe exactly what was happening there. We saw how about half of the men opposing us were drawn back. The movement is executed by taking back every second man whilst number one stays on until the retiring party has halted. We took advantage of that movement to inflict the severest losses possible on our retreating opponent. As far as we could survey the country to our right and left we observed that the Germans were pressing forward at several points. Our company, too, received the order to advance when the enemy took back all his forces.

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Our task was to cling obstinately to the heels of the retreating enemy so as to leave him no time to collect his forces and occupy new positions. We therefore followed him in leaps with short breathing pauses so as to prevent him in the first place from establishing himself in the village before him. We knew that otherwise we should have to engage in costly street fighting. But the Belgians did not attempt to establish themselves, but disengaged themselves from us with astonishing skill.

Meanwhile we had been reënforced. Our company had been somewhat dispersed, and everybody marched with the troop he chanced to find himself with. My troop

had to stay in the village to search every house systematically for soldiers that had been dispersed or hidden. During that work we noticed that the Germans were marching forward from all directions. Field artillery, machine-gun sections, etc., arrived, and all of us wondered whence all of this came so quickly.

There was however no time for long reflections. With fixed bayonets we went from house to house, from door to door, and though the harvest was very meager, we were not turned away quite empty-handed, as the inhabitants had to deliver up all privately owned fire-arms, ammunition, etc. The chief functionary of the village who accompanied us, had to explain to every citizen that the finding of arms after the search would lead to punishment by court-martial. And court-martial means—death.

After another hour had passed we were alarmed again by rifle and gun firing; a new battle had begun. Whether the artillery was in action on both sides could not be determined from the village, but the noise was loud enough, for the air was almost trembling with the

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rumbling, rolling, and growling of the guns which steadily increased in strength. The ambulance columns were bringing in the first wounded; orderly officers whizzed past us. War had begun with full intensity.

Darkness was falling before we had finished searching all the houses. We dragged mattresses, sacks of straw, feather beds, whatever we could get hold of, to the public school and the church where the wounded were to be accommodated. They were put to bed as well as it could be done. Those first victims of the horrible massacre of nations were treated with touching care. Later on, when we had grown more accustomed to those horrible sights, less attention was paid to the wounded.

The first fugitives now arrived from the neighboring villages. They had probably walked for many an hour, for they looked tired, absolutely exhausted. There were women, old, white-haired men, and children, all mixed together, who had not been able to save anything but their poor lives. In a perambulator or a push-cart those unfortunate beings carried away all that the brutal force of war had left them. In marked contrast to the fugitives that we had hitherto met, these people were filled with the utmost fear, shivering with fright, terror-stricken in face of the hostile world. As soon as they beheld one of us soldiers they were seized with such a fear that they seemed to crumple up. How different they were from the inhabitants of the village in which we were, who showed themselves kind, friendly, and even obliging towards us. We tried to find out the cause of that fear, and heard that those fugitives had witnessed bitter street fighting in their village. They had experienced war, had seen their houses burnt, their simple belongings perish,

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and had not yet been able to forget their streets filled with dead and wounded soldiers. It became clear to us that it was not fear alone that made these people look like the hunted quarry; it was hatred, hatred against us, the invaders who, as they had to suppose, had fallen upon them unawares, had driven them from their home. But their hatred was not only directed against us, the German soldiers, nay, their own, the Belgian soldiers, too, were not spared by it.

We marched away that very evening and tried to reach our section. When darkness fell the Belgians had concentrated still farther to the rear; they were already quite near the fortress of Liège. Many of the villages we passed were in flames; the inhabitants who had been driven away passed us in crowds; there were women whose husbands were perhaps also defending their "Fatherland," children, old men who were pushed hither and thither and seemed to be always in the way. Without any aim, any plan, any place in which they could rest, those processions of misery and unhappiness crept past us—the best illustration of man-murdering, nation-destroying war! Again we reached a village which to all appearances had once been inhabited by a well-to-do people, by a contented little humanity. There were nothing but ruins now, burnt, destroyed houses and farm buildings, dead soldiers, German and Belgian, and among them several civilians who had been shot by sentence of the court-martial.

Towards midnight we reached the German line which was trying to get possession of a village which was already within the fortifications of Liège, and was obstinately defended by the Belgians. Here we had to employ all our forces to wrench from our opponent house after house, street after street. It was not yet

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completely dark so that we had to go through that terrible struggle which developed with all our senses awake and receptive. It was a hand to hand fight; every kind of weapon had to be employed; the opponent was attacked with the butt-end of the rifle, the knife, the fist, and the teeth. One of my best friends fought with a gigantic Belgian; both had lost their rifle. They were pummeling each other with their fists. I had just finished with a Belgian who was about twenty-two years of age, and was going to assist my friend, as the Herculean Belgian was so much stronger than he. Suddenly my friend succeeded with a lightning motion in biting the Belgian in the chin. He bit so deeply that he tore away a piece of flesh with his teeth. The pain the Belgian felt must have been immense, for he let go his hold and ran off screaming with terrible pain.

All that happened in seconds. The blood of the Belgian ran out of my friend's mouth; he was seized by a horrible nausea, an indescribable terror, the taste of the warm blood nearly drove him insane. That young, gay, lively fellow of twenty-four had been cheated out of his youth in that night. He used to be the jolliest among us; after that we could never induce him even to smile.

Whilst fighting during the night I came for the first time in touch with the butt-end of a Belgian rifle. I had a hand to hand fight with a Belgian when another one from behind hit me with his rifle on the head with such force that it drove my head into the helmet up to my ears. I experienced a terrific pain all over my head, doubled up, and lost consciousness. When I revived I found myself with a bandaged head in a barn among other wounded.

I had not been severely wounded, but I felt as if my

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head was double its normal size, and there was a noise in my ears as of the wheels of an express engine.

The other wounded and the soldiers of the ambulance corps said that the Belgians had been pushed back to the fortress; we heard, however, that severe fighting was

still going on. Wounded soldiers were being brought in continuously, and they told us that the Germans had already taken in the first assault several fortifications like outer-forts, but that they had not been able to maintain themselves because they had not been sufficiently provided with artillery. The defended places and works inside the forts were still practically completely intact, and so were their garrisons. The forts were not yet ripe for assault, so that the Germans had to retreat with downright enormous losses. The various reports were contradictory, and it was impossible to get a clear idea of what was happening.

Meanwhile the artillery had begun to bombard the fortress, and even the German soldiers were terror-stricken at that bombardment. The heaviest artillery was brought into action against the modern forts of concrete. Up to that time no soldier had been aware of the existence of the 42-centimeter mortars. Even when Liège had fallen into German hands we soldiers could not explain to ourselves how it was possible that those enormous fortifications, constructed partly of reinforced concrete of a thickness of one to six meters, could be turned into a heap of rubbish after only a few hours' bombardment. Having been wounded, I could of course not take part in those operations, but my comrades told me later on how the various forts were taken. Guns of all sizes were turned on the forts, but it was the 21- and 42-centimeter mortars that really did the work. From afar one could hear already the

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approach of the 42-centimeter shell. The shell bored its way through the air with an uncanny, rushing and hissing sound that was like a long shrill whistling filling the whole atmosphere for seconds. Where it struck everything was destroyed within a radius of several hundred yards. Later I have often gazed in wonderment at those hecatombs which the 42-centimeter mortar erected for itself on all its journeys. The enormous air pressure caused by the bursting of its shells made it even difficult for us Germans in the most advanced positions to breathe for several seconds. To complete the infernal row the Zeppelins appeared at night in order to take part in the work of destruction. Suddenly the soldiers would hear above their heads the whirring of the propellers and the noise of the motors, well-known to most Germans. The Zeppelins came nearer and nearer, but not until they were in the immediate neighborhood of the forts were they discovered by our opponents, who immediately brought all available searchlights into play in order to search the sky for the dreaded flying enemies. The whirring of the propellers of the airships which had been distributed for work on the various forts suddenly ceased. Then, right up in the air, a blinding light appeared, the searchlight of the Zeppelin, which lit up the country beneath it for a short time. Just as suddenly it became dark and quiet until a few minutes later, powerful detonations brought the news that the Zeppelin had dropped its "ballast." That continued for quite a while, explosion followed explosion, interrupted only by small fiery clouds, shrapnel which the Belgian artillery sent up to the airships, exploding in the air. Then the whirring of the propellers began again, first loud and coming from near, from right above our heads,

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then softer and softer until the immense ship of the air had entirely disappeared from our view and hearing.

Thus the forts were made level with the ground; thousands of Belgians were lying dead and buried behind and beneath the ramparts and fortifications. General assault followed. Liège was in the hands of the Germans.

I was with the ambulance column until the 9th of August and by that time had been restored sufficiently to rejoin my section of the army. After searching for hours I found my company camping in a field. I missed many a good friend; my section had lost sixty-five men, dead and wounded, though it had not taken part in the pursuit of the enemy.

We had been attached to the newly-formed 18th Reserve Army Corps (Hessians) and belonged to the Fourth Army which was under the command of Duke Albrecht of Wurttemberg. Where that army, which had not yet been formed, was to operate was quite unknown to us private soldiers. We had but to follow to the place where the herd was to be slaughtered; what did it matter where that would be? On the 11th of August we began to march and covered 25-45 miles every day. We learned later on that we always kept close to the Luxemburg frontier so as to cross it immediately should necessity arise. Had it not been so oppressively hot we should have been quite content, for we enjoyed several days of rest which braced us up again.

On the 21st of August we came in contact with the first German troops belonging to the Fourth Army, about 15 miles to the east of the Belgian town of Neufchateau. The battle of Neufchateau, which lasted from the 22nd to the 24th of August, had already [Pg 18]

begun. A French army here met with the Fourth German Army, and a murderous slaughter began. As is always the case it commenced with small skirmishes of advance guards and patrols; little after little ever-growing masses of soldiers took part and when, in the evening of the 22nd of August, we were led into the firing line, the battle had already developed to one of the most murderous of the world war. When we arrived the French were still in possession of nearly three-quarters of the town. The artillery had set fire to the greatest part of Neufchateau, and only the splendid villas in the western part of the town escaped destruction for the time being. The street fighting lasted the whole night. It was only towards noon of the 23rd of August, when the town was in the hands of the Germans, that one could see the enormous losses that both sides had suffered. The dwelling-places, the cellars, the roads and side-walks were thickly covered with dead and horribly wounded soldiers; the houses were ruins, gutted, empty shells in which scarcely anything of real value had remained whole. Thousands had been made beggars in a night full of horrors. Women and children, soldiers and citizens were lying just where death had struck them down, mixed together just as the merciless shrapnel and shells had sent them out of life into the darkness beyond. There had been real impartiality. There lay a German soldier next to a white-haired French woman, a little Belgian stripling whom fear had driven out of the house into the street, lay huddled up against the "enemy," a German soldier, who might have been protection and safety for him. Had we not been shooting and stabbing, murdering and clubbing as much and as vigorously as we could the whole night? And yet there was scarcely one amongst [Pg 19]

us who did not shed tears of grief and emotion at the spectacles presenting themselves. There was for instance a man whose age it was difficult to discover; he was lying dead before a burning house. Both his legs had been burnt up to the knees by the fire falling down upon him. The wife and daughter of the dead man were clinging to him, and were sobbing so piteously that one simply could not bear it. Many, many of the dead had been burnt entirely or partly; the cattle were burning in their stables, and the wild bellowing of those animals fighting against death by fire, intermingled with the crying, the moaning, the groaning and the shrieking of the wounded. But who had the time now to bother about that? Everybody wanted help, everybody wanted to help himself, everybody was only thinking of himself and his little bit of life. "He who falls remains where he lies; only he who stands can win victories." That one learns from militarism and the average soldier acts upon that principle. And yet most soldiers are forced by circumstances to play the rôle of the good Samaritan. People who could formerly not look upon blood or a dead person, were now bandaging their comrades' arms and legs which had been amputated by shells. They did not do it because they were impelled by the command of their heart, but because they said to themselves that perhaps to-morrow already their turn might come and that they, too, might want assistance. It is a healthy egotism which makes men of mercy out of those hardened people.

The French had formed their lines again outside the town in the open. At the moment when the enemy evacuated the town an error was made by the Germans which cost many hundreds of German soldiers their lives. The Germans had occupied the rest of the town

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with such celerity that our artillery which was pounding that quarter had not been informed of the changed situation, and was raining shell upon shell into our own ranks. That failure of our intelligence department caused the death of many of our comrades. Compelled by the firing of the enemy and our own artillery we had finally to give up part of our gains, which later on we recovered, again with great sacrifice. Curiously enough, the residential quarter with the villas I mentioned before had not suffered seriously; the Red Cross flag was hoisted on the houses in which temporary hospitals were established.

It is here that the Belgian citizens are said to have mutilated some German wounded soldiers. Whether it was true, whether it was only rumored, as was asserted also many times by German soldiers who had been in the hospitals, I do not know. But this I know, that on the 24th of August when the French had executed a general retreat, it was made known in an army order that German soldiers had been murdered there and that the German army could not leave the scenes of those shameful deeds without having first avenged their poor comrades. The order was therefore given—by the leader of the army—to raze the town without mercy. When later on (it was in the evening and we were pursuing the enemy) we were resting for a short time, clouds of smoke in the east showed that the judgment had been fulfilled. A battery of artillery that had remained behind had razed house after house. Revenge is sweet, also for Christian army leaders.

Outside the town the French had reformed their ranks, and were offering the utmost resistance. But they were no match for the German troops who consisted largely of young and active men. Frenchmen

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taken prisoner explained that it was simply impossible to withstand an assault of this war-machine, when the German columns attacked with the bayonet and the cry of "Hurrah! hurrah!" which penetrated to the very marrow. I can understand that, for we sometimes appeared to ourselves to be a good imitation of American Indians who, like us, rushed upon their enemies with shrill shouts. After a fight lasting three hours many Frenchmen surrendered, asking for quarter with raised hands. Whole battalions of the enemy were thus captured by us. Finally, in the night from the 23rd to the 24th of August, the ranks of the enemy were thrown into confusion and retreated, first slowly, then flying headlong. Our opponent left whole batteries, munition columns, ambulance columns, etc.

I found myself in the first pursuing section. The roads we used were again literally covered with corpses; knapsacks, rifles, dead horses and men were lying there in a wild jumble. The dead had been partly crushed and pounded to a pulp by the horses and vehicles, an indescribably terrible spectacle even for the most hardened mass-murderer. Dead and wounded were lying to the right and left of the road, in fields, in ditches; the red trousers of the French stood out distinctly against the ground; the field-gray trousers of the Germans were however scarcely to be noticed and difficult to discover.

The distance between ourselves and the fleeing Frenchmen became greater and greater, and the spirit of our soldiers, in spite of the hardships they had undergone, became better and gayer. They joked and sang, forgot the corpses which were still filling the roads and paths, and felt quite at ease. They had already accustomed themselves to the horrible to such

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a degree that they stepped over the corpses with unconcern, without even making the smallest detour. The experience of those first few weeks of the war had already brutalized us completely. What was to happen to us if this should continue for months—?

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III

SHOOTING CIVILIANS IN BELGIUM

At 11 o'clock all further philosophizing was put a stop to; we were ordered to halt, and we were to receive our food from the field kitchen.

We were quite hungry and ate the tinned soup with the heartiest of appetites. Many of our soldiers were sitting with their dinner-pails on the dead horses that were lying about, and were eating with such pleasure and heartiness as if they were home at mother's. Nor did some corpses in the neighborhood of our improvised camp disturb us. There was only a lack of water and after having eaten thirst began to torment us.

Soon afterwards we continued our march in the scorching midday sun; dust was covering our uniforms and skin to the depth of almost an inch. We tried in vain to be

jolly, but thirst tormented us more and more, and we became weaker and weaker from one quarter of an hour to another. Many in our ranks fell down exhausted, and we were simply unable to move. So the commander of our section had no other choice but to let us halt again if he did not want every one of us to drop out. Thus it happened that we stayed behind a considerable distance, and were not amongst the first that were pursuing the French.

Finally, towards four o'clock, we saw a village in front of us; we began at once to march at a much brisker pace. Among other things we saw a

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farm-cart on which were several civilian prisoners, apparently snipers. There was also a Catholic priest among them who had, like the others, his hands tied behind his back with a rope. Curiosity prompted us to enquire what he had been up to, and we heard that he had incited the farmers of the village to poison the water.

We soon reached the village and the first well at which we hoped to quench our thirst thoroughly. But that was no easy matter, for a military guard had been placed before it who scared us off with the warning, "Poisoned"! Disappointed and terribly embittered the soldiers, half dead with thirst, gnashed their teeth; they hurried to the next well, but everywhere the same devilish thing occurred—the guard preventing them from drinking. In a square, in the middle of the village, there was a large village well which sent, through two tubes, water as clear as crystal into a large trough. Five soldiers were guarding it and had to watch that nobody drank of the poisoned water. I was just going to march past it with my pal when suddenly the second, larger portion of our company rushed like madmen to the well. The guards were carried away by the rush, and every one now began to drink the water with the avidity of an animal. All quenched their thirst, and not one of us became ill or died. We heard later on that the priest had to pay for it with his death, as the military authorities "knew" that the water in all the wells of that village was poisoned and that the soldiers had only been saved by a lucky accident. Faithfully the God of the Germans had watched over us; the captured Belgians did not seem to be under his protection. They had to die.

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In most places we passed at that time we were warned against drinking the water. The natural consequence was that the soldiers began to hate the population which they now had to consider to be their bitterest enemies. That again aroused the worst instincts in some soldiers. In every army one finds men with the disposition of barbarians. The many millions of inhabitants in Germany or France are not all civilized people, much as we like to convince ourselves of the contrary. Compulsory military service in those countries forces all without distinction into the army, men and monsters. I have often bitterly resented the wrong one did to our army in calling us all barbarians, only because among us—as, naturally also among the French and English—there were to be found elements that really ought to be in the penitentiary. I will only cite one example of how we soldiers ourselves punished a wretch whom we caught committing a crime.

One evening—it was dark already—we reached a small village to the east of the town of Bertrix, and there, too, found "poisoned" water. We halted in the middle of the village. I was standing before a house with a low window, through which one

could see the interior. In the miserable poverty-stricken working man's dwelling we observed a woman who clung to her children as if afraid they would be torn from her. Though we felt very bitter on account of the want of water, every one of us would have liked to help the poor woman. Some of us were just going to sacrifice our little store of victuals and to say a few comforting words to the woman, when all at once a stone as big as a fist was thrown through the window-pane into the room and hurt a little girl in the right hand. There were sincere cries of indignation, but at the same

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moment twenty hands at least laid hold of the wretch, a reservist of our company, and gave him such a hiding as to make him almost unconscious. If officers and other men had not interfered the fellow would have been lynched there and then. He was to be placed before a court-martial later on, but it never came to that. He was drowned in the river at the battle of the Meuse. Many soldiers believed he drowned himself, because he was not only shunned by his fellow soldiers, but was also openly despised by them.

We were quartered on that village and had to live in a barn. I went with some pals into the village to buy something to eat. At a farmer's house we got ham, bread, and wine, but not for money. The people positively refused to take our money as they regarded us as their guests, so they said; only we were not to harm them.

Nevertheless we left them an adequate payment in German money. Later on we found the same situation in many other places. Everywhere people were terribly frightened of us; they began to tremble almost when a German soldier entered their house.

Four of us had formed a close alliance; we had promised each other to stick together and assist each other in every danger. We often also visited the citizens in their houses, and tried to the best of our ability to comfort the sorely tried people and talk them out of their fear of us. Without exception we found them to be lovable, kindly, and good people who soon became confidential and free of speech when they noticed that we were really their friends. But when, at leaving, we wrote with chalk on the door of their houses "Bitte schonen, hier wohnen brave, gute, Leute!" (Please spare, here live good and decent people) their joy and thankfulness knew no bounds. If so much bad blood

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was created, if so many incidents happened that led to the shooting by court-martial of innumerable Belgians, the difference of language and the mistakes arising therefrom were surely not the least important causes; of that I and many others of my comrades became convinced during that time in Belgium. But the at first systematically nourished suspicion against the "enemy," too, was partly responsible for it.

In the night we continued our march, after having been attached to the 21-centimeter mortar battery of the 9th Regiment of Foot Artillery which had just arrived; we were not only to serve as covering troops for that battery, but were also to help it place those giants in position when called upon. The gun is transported apart from the carriage on a special wagon. Gun-carriage and guns are drawn each by six horses. Those horses, which are only used by the foot artillery, are the best

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