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The Siege of France

By Bernhard Kellerman

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AND the siege continues! On this front, hundreds of miles long, our brave fellows lie in the trenches—by night, by day, and at this very moment as I write these words. Away up yonder in Flanders the water reaches to their knees. The pumps are kept steadily at work, but that does not help much. In spite of cement, beams, props, and wickerwork, trenches cave in here and there every day; and the toilsome task of piling up the sandbags must be begun again and again. When the men leave the trenches they have to wade through the water for half a mile or more. In the Champagne district they are white with lime and chalk; in the Argonne and the Vosges they are covered with mud to their very ears. Here, too, the pumps are hard at work to keep the water down.

It snows; the wind roars; the rain falls in torrents. Then a change, and we are frozen by the cold. When the men leave the trenches for a spell of rest away from the firing line they have to support themselves on sticks and crutches, for the water and the frost have played havoc with their weary limbs. No army of earlier times could have brought to its task such a store of energy. Even Napoleon himself would hardly have ventured to make such claims on his veterans. The stubborn will of our warriors has doubled, quintupled itself. The very blood is ankle-deep—the blood of the enemy, and often also, alas! of their own comrades as well—and their brows are worthy of the laurel.

In mud and water, between rows of rain-sodden and bullet-ridden sandbags, stands the soldier on guard—on guard in the narrow labyrinth of trenches, behind walls of sandbags, behind the shreds and tatters of walls that have been shelled over and over again, behind tangled tree stumps, arranged criss-cross fashion.

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On guard from the Belgian coast, where the cruel Winter sea hurls its waves against the bleak shore, all the way down to the Swiss border, where the mountains stretch up to the Alps. As I write, a hundred thousand men on this line are employed on guard duty alone. There they stand, five or ten paces from one another, their rifles at their shoulders, and keep watch. Behind row and row of sandbags the machine guns lie in wait day and night. The gunners lie or squat in the damp soil, awaiting the signal to rush to their posts and throw their lives to the hazard, as they have been doing for the last seventeen months. The water drips from their caps. They are silent; their eyes turn toward the Fatherland. There they lie in their little dugout of loam or chalk, their boots and overcoats thick with mud; and they try to sleep and to think of nothing. The guard calls, and they start to their feet. They drink their portion of soup, while the water trickles in between the sandbags and the downpour of rain soaks them to the very skin.

Here lie two or three crooked spikes, there a coil of wire choked with mud; two or three bundles of clothes are scattered about, half sunken in the earth; a dead body or two, which have lain just outside the trenches for weeks and cannot be buried—and over yonder, perhaps 30, 50, or 100 yards away, the enemy. That is all they see; that is their world. Between the wire entanglements, stretching over a distance of hundreds of miles, between the two opposing lines of trenches, lies thick the girdle of dead. Nothing, either by day or by night, springs from this lifeless strip of land, still as the grave. Platoons, companies, battalions, and whole regiments have sunk into this girdle of dead—hundreds of thousands of strong men, summoned once upon a time to live and to carry forward the work of humanity. Death and his cursed lieutenants (who avoid this lifeless zone!) have reaped a good harvest this year.

The rats swarm out of the shattered villages; the ravens cry greedily. War is merciless. And nobody who is not

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actually there has any right to express horror. For, by heaven! it is not much to ask that these who rest in security shall know the whole truth about conditions at the front. A dead man is dead; and there are many things in this war worse than being dead.

And Death, Death is everywhere. As long as there is a front at all, from the sea to the mountains, Death will be everywhere. The long bullets hiss through the air; hand mines and hand grenades find their mark. Projectiles come crashing down from the trench mortars. A portion of the trench shivers for an instant; then is hurled high in the air. Death stretches forth his hand and clutches officers and men—he is ubiquitous. He is to be found in the ruined villages, where the weary soldier is seeking his rest; in the woods, behind the shelters where the field guns are concealed; up in the sky, under the ground—everywhere.

Last year, in the Winter of 1914, as men in Flanders still tell one another, a huge aeroplane suddenly appeared to spring from nowhere and flew proudly against the sky. It showed no signal, but no one fired. Then it seemed to the on-lookers, awestricken, that a great white flag was gradually unfurled from beneath its wings. It betokened a truce—peace!

No sign of the aeroplane was seen this year, and the siege goes on. The soldier stands at his post, fearless, faithful, noble, and he will remain there, fearless, faithful, and noble, so long as the needs of his Fatherland demand it—until he falls.

Never, either by day or night, should we forget our heroes in the field.