

THE LITERARY DIGEST

June 2, 1917

MR. GIBBS ON THE SOMME BATTLES

Gibbs, Philip. *The Battles of the Somme*. With Maps. Pp. 366. London: William Heinemann. Price, 6s net. Postage, 12 cents.

A famous American writer once set forth how a novelist takes life and turns it into literature. More, perhaps, than any other correspondent "at the front" in the great European War, Mr. Gibbs has illustrated how it is possible to take death and make literature of that. For in his book he pictures death, not less than life, and makes literature of it—makes chapters with a real literary flavor. Yet he tells us in his Introduction that these pages were "written on the evenings of battle hastily and sometimes feverishly, after days of intense experience and tiring sensation"—which may account for their quality. "There is in them," he says, "and through them one passionate purpose. It is to reveal to our people and the world the high valor, the self-sacrificing discipline of soul, the supreme endurance of those men of ours who fought, and suffered great agonies, and died, and, if not killed or wounded, came out to rest a little while and fight again, not liking it, you understand—hating it like the hell it is—but doing their duty, with a great and glorious devotion, according to the light that is in them."

There are reasons why, if you are liable to draft in this time of war, you should not read this volume. There are other reasons why you should. It visualizes the horrors that the Somme revealed. It also emphasizes the spirit of patriotism which inspired those brave men who made possible such horrors and became their victims or survived them. Some of these pages would make a coward halt on his way to the battle-field; they might even cause a brave man to hesitate. On many of them may be found bits of description as pure and sweet as if they pertained only to scenes in some valley of peace. As, for instance, this:

"It was a day when the beauty of France is like a song in one's heart, a day of fleecy clouds in the blue sky, of golden sunlight flooding broad fields behind the battle-lines, where the wheat-sheaves are stacked in neat lines by old men and women who do their sons' work, and of deep, cool shadows under the wavy foliage of the woodlands."

That was one of the days which witnessed "The Attacks on Thiepval." Other days followed not so beautiful, when the sun was "blazing hot," and the "fighting men baked brown"—when it was "not good fighting weather either for guns or men," with "a queer haze about the fields, as thick at times as a November mist and yet thrilling with heat." When the day of victory came it was because of "The Coming of the Tanks," which added a touch of comedy to the picture, albeit blood-red with the tragedies of war. But before its end, says this daring observer, "I went away from the battle-field, back to the quiet harvest-fields flooded with the golden glow of the sinking sun, luckier than the men who had to stay and ashamed of my luck. The enemy were flinging shells at long range. The harvest-fields were not quite so safe as they looked."