

Canon Frederick George Scott

The Great War as I Saw It

[Page 61] "It's a great day for Canada, boys." I said. The words afterwards became a watchword, for the men said that whenever I told them that, it meant that half of them were going to be killed. The battalion rose and fixed bayonets and stood ready for the command to charge. It was a thrilling moment, for we were in the midst of one of the decisive battles of the war. A shrapnel burst just as the men moved off and a man dropped in the rear rank. I went over to him and found he was bleeding in the neck. I bound him up and then taking his kit, which he was loath to lose, was helping him to walk towards the dressing station when I saw what I thought were sand-bags in the moonlight. I called out, "Is anybody there?" A voice replied, "Yes, Sir, there is a dying man here." I went over and there I found two stretcher-bearers beside a young fellow called Duffy, who was unconscious. He had been struck by a piece of shrapnel in the head and his brain was protruding. Duffy was a well-known athlete and had won the Marathon race. We tried to lift him, but with his equipment on he was too heavy, so I sent off the wounded man to Wieltje with one of the stretcher-bearers who was to return with a bearer party. The other one and I watched by Duffy. It was an awful and wonderful time. Our field batteries never slackened their fire and the wood echoed back the crackling sound of the guns. The flare lights all round gave a lurid background to the scene. At the foot of the long slope, down which the brave lads had gone to the attack, I saw the black outline of the trees. Over all fell the soft light of the moon. A great storm of emotion swept through me and I prayed for our men in their awful charge, for I knew that the Angel of Death was passing down our lines that night. When the bearer party arrived, we lifted Duffy on to the stretcher, and the men handed me their rifles and we moved off. I hung the rifles on my shoulder, and I thought if one of them goes off and blows my brains out, there will be a little paragraph in the Canadian papers, "Canon Scott accidentally killed by the discharge of a rifle," and my friends will say, "What a fool he was to fuss about rifles, why didn't he stick to his own job?" However, they were Ross rifles and had probably jammed. There were many wounded being carried or making their way towards Wieltje. The road was under shell fire all the way. When we got to the dressing station which was a small red-brick estaminet, we were confronted by a horrible sight. On the pavement before it were [Page 62] rows and rows of stretcher cases, and inside the place, which was dimly lighted by candles and lamps, I found the doctor and his staff working away like Trojans. The operating room was a veritable shambles. The doctor had his shirt sleeves rolled up and his hands and arms were covered with blood.

The wounded were brought in from outside and laid on the table, where the doctor attended to them. Some ghastly sights were disclosed when the stretcher-bearers ripped off the blood-stained cloths and laid bare the hideous wounds. At the end of the room, an old woman, with a face like the witch of Endor, apparently quite unmoved by anything that was happening, was grinding coffee in a mill and making a black concoction which she sold to the men. It was no doubt a good thing for them to get a little stimulant. In another room the floor was covered with wounded

waiting to be evacuated. There were many Turcos present. Some of them were suffering terribly from the effects of the gas. Fresh cases were being brought down the road every moment, and laid out on the cold pavement till they could be attended to.

About two in the morning a despatch rider arrived and meeting me at the door asked if I could speak French. He said, "Tell the Turcos and every one else who can walk to clear off to Ypres as soon as they can; the Germans are close at hand." Indeed it sounded so, because the rifle fire was very close. I went into the room and delivered my message, in French and English, to the wounded men. Immediately there was a general stampede of all who could possibly drag themselves towards the city. It was indeed a piteous procession which passed out of the door. Turcos with heads bandaged, or arms bound up or one leg limping, and our own men equally disabled, helped one another down that terrible road towards the City. Soon all the people who could walk had gone. But there in the room, and along the pavement outside, lay helpless men. I went to the M.O. and asked him what we were to do with the stretcher cases. "Well" he said, "I suppose we shall have to leave them because all the ambulances have gone." "How can we desert them?" I said. The Medical Officer was of course bound by orders to go back with his men but I myself felt quite free in the matter, so I said, "I will stay and be made prisoner." "Well," he said, "so will I. Possibly I shall get into trouble for it, but I cannot leave them to the enemy without any one to look after them." So we made a compact that we would both stay behind and be made prisoners. I went over to [Page 63] another Field Ambulance, where a former curate of mine was chaplain. They had luckily been able to evacuate their wounded and were all going off. I told him that I should probably be made prisoner that night, but asked him to cable home and tell my family that I was in good health and that the Germans treated chaplains, when they took them prisoners, very kindly. Then I made my way back. There was a tremendous noise of guns now at the front. It was a horrible thought that our men were up there bearing the brunt of German fury and hatred. Their faces passed through my mind as individuals were recalled. The men whom I knew so well, young, strong and full of hope and life, men from whom Canada had so much to expect, men whose lives were so precious to dear ones far away, were now up in that poisoned atmosphere and under the hideous hail of bullets and shells. The thought almost drove a chaplain to madness. One felt so powerless and longed to be up and doing. Not once or twice in the Great War, have I longed to be a combatant officer with enemy scalps to my credit. Our men had been absolutely guiltless of war ambitions. It was not their fault that they were over here. That the Kaiser's insatiable, mad lust for power should be able to launch destruction upon Canadian hearts and homes was intolerable. I looked down the Ypres road, and there, to my horror, saw the lovely City lit up with flames. The smoke rolled up into the moonlit sky, and behind the dull glow of the fires I saw the Cloth Hall tower stand out in gold defiance. There was nothing for us to do then and for nearly four years more but keep our heads cool, set our teeth and deepen our resolve.

The dressing station had received more stretcher cases, and still more were coming in. The Medical Officer and his staff were working most heroically. I told him I had given instructions about cabling home should I be taken prisoner, and then I

suddenly remembered that I had a scathing poem on the Kaiser in my pocket. I had written it in the quiet beauties of Beaupré, below Quebec, when the war first began. When I wrote it, I was told that if I were ever taken prisoner in Germany with that poem in my pocket, I should be shot or hanged. At that time, the German front line seemed so far off that it was like saying, "If you get to the moon the man there will eat you up." But the changes and chances of war had suddenly brought me face to face with the fact that I had resolved to be taken prisoner, and from what I heard and saw the event was not unlikely. So I said to the M.O. "I have just remembered [Page 64] that I have got in my pocket a printed copy of a very terrible poem which I wrote about the Kaiser. Of course you know I don't mind being shot or hanged by the Germans, but, if I am, who will write the poems of War?" The M.O. laughed and thinking it unwise on general principles to wave a red rag in front of a mad bull, advised me to tear up my verses. I did so with great reluctance, but the precaution was unnecessary as the Germans never got through after all.

All along those terrible fields of death the battle raged. Young Canadians, new to war, but old in the inheritance of the blood of British freedom, were holding the line. The dressing station was soon full again, and, later on, a despatch rider came from the 3rd Infantry Brigade Headquarters in Shell-Trap Farm to tell us that more help was needed there. One of the M.O.'s assistants and a sergeant started off and I followed. We went down the road and then turned to the right up to the moated farmhouse where the Brigade was. As we went forward towards the battle front, the night air was sharp and bracing. Gun-flashes lit up the horizon, but above us the moon and stars looked quietly down. Wonderful deeds of heroism were being done by our men along those shell-ploughed fields, under the placid sky. What they endured, no living tongue can tell. Their Maker alone knows what they suffered and how they died. The eloquent tribute which history will give to their fame is that, in spite of the enemy's immense superiority in numbers, and his brutal launching of poisonous gas, he did not get through.

In a ditch by the wayside, a battalion was waiting to follow up the charge. Every man among the Canadians was "on the job" that night. We crossed the field to the farmhouse which we found filled to overflowing. Ambulances were waiting there to carry the wounded back to Ypres. I saw many friends carried in, and men were lying on the pavement outside. Bullets were cracking against the outer brick walls. One Highlander mounted guard over a wounded German prisoner. He had captured him and was filled with the hunter's pride in his game. "I got him myself, Sir, and I was just going to run him through with the bayonet when he told me he had five children. As I have five children myself, I could not kill him. So I brought him out here." I looked down at the big prostrate German who was watching us with interest largely rooted in fear. "Funf kinder?" (five children) "Ja, ja." I wasn't going to be [Page 65] beaten by a German, so I told him I had seven children and his face fell. I found out afterwards that a great many Germans, when they were captured, said they had five children. The Germans I think used to be put through a sort of catechism before they went into action, in case they should be taken prisoners. For example, they always told us they were sure we were going to win the war. They always said they were glad to be taken prisoners. When they were married men, they said they had five children and so appealed to our pity. People do not realize

even yet how very thorough the Germans were in everything that they thought was going to bring them the mastership of the world. When a German soldier saw the game was up, he surrendered at once and thus was preserved to fight for his country in the next war.

In the stable of the farm, I found many seriously wounded men lying on the straw, and I took down messages which they were sending to their relatives at home. On the other side of the wall, we could hear the bullets striking. As I had the Blessed Sacrament with me I was able to give communion to a number of the wounded. By this time the grey of approaching day began to silver the eastern sky. It was indeed a comfort to feel that the great clockwork of the universe went on just as if nothing was happening. Over and over again in the war the approach of dawn has put new life into one. It was such a tremendous and glorious thing to think that the world rolled on through space and turned on its axis, whatever turmoil foolish people were making upon its surface.

With the dawn came the orders to clear the wounded. The ambulances were sent off and one of the doctors told me to come with him, as the General had commanded the place to be cleared of all but the necessary military staff. It was about four in the morning when we started. There was a momentary quieting down in the firing as we crossed the bridge over the moat, but shells were still crashing in the fields, and through the air we heard every now and then the whistling of bullets. We kept our heads low and were hurrying on when we encountered a signaller with two horses, which he had to take back to the main road. One of these he offered to me. I had not been wanting to mount higher in the air, but I did not like the fellow to think I had got "cold feet." So I accepted graciously, but annoyed him very much by insisting upon lengthening the stirrups before I mounted. He got impatient at what he considered an unnecessary delay, but I told him I would [Page 66] not ride with my knees up to my chin for all the Germans in the world. When I was mounted, we started off at a good gallop across the fields to the Ypres road. It was an exciting ride, and I must confess, looking back upon it, a thoroughly enjoyable one, reminding me of old stories of battles and the Indian escapes of my boyhood's novels. When we arrived at the main road, I had to deliver up my horse to its owner, and then I decided to walk to Ypres, as by so doing I could speak to the many Imperial men that were marching up to reinforce the line. I refused many kind offers of lifts on lorries and wagons. The British battalions were coming up and I was sorry for them. The young fellows looked so tired and hungry. They had been in France, I think, only twenty-four hours. At any rate, they had had a long march, and, as it turned out, were going up, most of them, to their death, I took great pleasure in hailing them cheerfully and telling them that it was all right, as the Canadians had held the line, and that the Germans were not going to get through. One sergeant said, "You put a lot of braces in my tunic when you talk like that, Sir." Nothing is more wonderful than the way in which men under tense anxiety will respond to the slightest note of cheer. This was the case all through the war. The slightest word or suggestion would often turn a man from a feeling of powerless dejection into one of defiant determination. These young Britishers whom I met that morning were a splendid type of men. Later on the machine-gun fire over the fields mowed them down in pitiful and ruthless destruction. As I journeyed towards Ypres I saw smoke rolling

up from various parts of the city and down the road, in the air, I saw the flashes of bursting shrapnel. I passed St. Jean and made my way to my house by the canal.

The shutters were still shut and the door was open. I entered and found in the dining room that the lamp was still burning on the table. It was now about seven o'clock and Mr. Vandervyver had returned and was upstairs arranging his toilet. I went out into the garden and called one of the sentries to tell Murdoch MacDonald to come to me. While I was talking to the sentry, an officer came by and warned me to get away from that corner because the Germans were likely to shell it as it was the only road in the neighbourhood for the passage of troops to and from the front. When Murdoch arrived, I told him I wanted to have breakfast, for I had had nothing to eat since luncheon the day before and had done a lot of [Page 67] walking. He looked surprised and said, "Fancy having breakfast when the town is being shelled." "Well," I said, "don't you know we always read in the papers, when a man is hanged, that before he went out to the gallows he ate a hearty breakfast? There must be some philosophy in it. At any rate, you might as well die on a full stomach as an empty one." So Murdoch began to get breakfast ready in the kitchen, where Mr. Vandervyver's maid was already preparing a meal for her master. I shaved and had a good clean up and was sitting in the dining room arranging the many letters and messages which I had received from men who asked me to write to their relatives. Breakfast had just been set on the table when I heard the loudest bang I have ever heard in my life. A seventeen inch shell had fallen in the corner of the garden where the sentry had been standing. The windows of the house were blown in, the ceiling came down and soot from the chimneys was scattered over everything. I suddenly found myself, still in a sitting posture, some feet beyond the chair in which I had been resting. Mr. Vandervyver ran downstairs and out into the street with his toilet so disarranged that he looked as if he were going to take a swim. Murdoch MacDonald disappeared and I did not see him again for several days. A poor old woman in the street had been hit in the head and was being taken off by a neighbour and a man was lying in the road with a broken leg. All my papers were unfortunately lost in the debris of the ceiling. I went upstairs and got a few more of my remaining treasures and came back to the dining room. There I scraped away the dust and found two boiled eggs. I got some biscuits from the sideboard and went and filled my waterbottle with tea in the damaged kitchen. I was just starting out of the door when another shell hit the building on the opposite side of the street. It had been used as a billet by some of our men. The sentry I had been talking to had disappeared and all they could find of him were his boots with his feet in them. In the building opposite, we found a Highlander badly wounded and I got stretcher-bearers to come and carry him off to the 2nd Field Ambulance in the Square nearby. Their headquarters had been moved to Vlamertinghe and they were evacuating that morning. The civilians now had got out the town. All sorts of carts and wheelbarrows had been called into requisition. There were still some wounded men in the dressing station and a sergeant was in charge. I managed to commandeer a motor ambulance and stow them in it. Shells were falling [Page 68] fast in that part of town. It was perfectly impossible to linger any longer. A certain old inhabitant, however, would not leave. He said he would trust to the good God and stay in the cellar of his house till the war was over. Poor man, if he did not change his mind, his

body must be in the cellar still, for the last time I saw the place, which henceforth was known as "Hell Fire Corner," there was not one stone left upon another. Only a little brick wall remained to show where the garden and house of my landlord had been. I collected the men of the Ambulance and started off with them to Vlamertinghe. On the way we added to our numbers men who had either lost their units or were being sent back from the line.

As we passed through the Grande Place, which now wore a very much more dilapidated appearance than it had three days before, we found a soldier on the pavement completely intoxicated. He was quite unconscious and could not walk. There was nothing to do but to make him as comfortable as possible till he should awake next day to the horrors of the real world. We carried him into a room of a house and laid him on a heap of straw. I undid the collar of his shirt so that he might have full scope for extra blood pressure and left him to his fate. I heard afterwards that the house was struck and that he was wounded and taken away to a place of safety. When we got down to the bridge on the Vlamertinghe road, an Imperial Signal Officer met me in great distress. His men had been putting up telegraph wires on the other side of the canal and shell had fallen and killed thirteen of them. He asked our men to carry the bodies back over the bridge and lay them side by side in an outhouse. The men did so, and the row of mutilated, twisted and bleeding forms was pitiful to see. The officer was very grateful to us, but the bodies were probably never buried because that part of the city was soon a ruin. We went on down the road towards Vlamertinghe, past the big asylum, so long known as a dressing station, with its wonderful and commodious cellars. It had been hit and the upstairs part was no longer used.

The people along the road were leaving their homes as fast as they could. One little procession will always stand out in my mind. In front one small boy of about six years old was pulling a toy cart in which two younger children were packed. Behind followed the mother with a large bundle on her back. Then came the father with a still bigger one. There they were trudging along, leaving [Page 69] their home behind with its happy memories, to go forth as penniless refugees, compelled to live on the charity of others. It was through no fault of their own, but only through the monstrous greed and ambition of a despot crazed with feudal dreams of a by-gone age. As I looked at that little procession, and at many other similar ones, the words of the Gospel kept ringing in my ears, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." These words I felt sounded the doom of the Kaiser. Many and many a time when the war from our point of view has been going badly, and men would ask me, "How about the war, Sir?" or, "Are we winning the war Sir?" I would reply, "Boys, unless the devil has got into heaven we are going to win. If he has, the German Emperor will have a good friend there. But he hasn't, and any nation which tramples on the rights and liberties of humanity, glories in it, makes it a matter of national boasting, and casts medals to commemorate the sinking of unprotected ships—any nation which does that is bound to lose the war, no matter how badly things may look at the present time." It was nothing but that unflinching faith in the power of right which kept our men so steadfast. Right is after all only another name for the will of God. Men who knew no theology, who professed no creed, who even pretended to great indifference about

the venture of eternity, were unalterably fixed in their faith in the power of right. It gives one a great opportunity of building the higher edifice of religion when one discovers the rock foundation in a man's convictions.

When we reached Vlamertinghe we found that a school house had been taken over by the 2nd Field Ambulance.

There was a terrible shortage of stretchers and blankets, as most of the equipment had been lost at Ypres. All that day and night the furious battle raged, and many fresh British battalions passed up to reinforce the line. As soon as it was dark, the wounded began to come in, and by midnight the schoolhouse was filled to overflowing. The men were lying out in rows on the cold stone floor with nothing under them. Ambulances were coming and going as hour after hour passed by. I went among the sufferers many of whom I knew. The sergeant would come to me and tell me where the worst cases were. He whispered to me once, "There is a dying man over here." We trod softly between the prostrate forms till we came to one poor fellow who looked up with white [Page 70] face under the candle light. I saw he was dying. He belonged to one of the British battalions that I had passed on the road. I asked him if he would like to receive the Holy Communion. He was pleased when I told him I could give it to him. He had been a chorister in England, and he felt so far from the ministrations of his church now. He made his confession and I pronounced the absolution. Then I gave him the Blessed Sacrament. Like many severely wounded men, he was not suffering much, but was dying of shock. We were now compelled to use the church and it also soon became a scene of suffering. The building to-day is a ruin, but then it had been untouched by shells and was large and impressive. We had only a few candles with which to light it. The wounded were laid out, some on the floor, some on chairs, and some sat up waiting for the convoys of ambulances that were to take them to the Base. It was a strange scene. In the distance we heard the roar of the battle, and here, in the dim light of the hollow-sounding aisles, were shadowy figures huddled up on chairs or lying on the floor. Once the silence was broken by a loud voice shouting out with startling suddenness, "Oh God! stop it." I went over to the man. He was a British sergeant. He would not speak, but I think in his terrible suffering he meant the exclamation as a kind of prayer. I thought it might help the men to have a talk with them, so I told them what great things were being done that night and what a noble part they had played in holding back the German advance and how all the world would honour them in after times. Then I said, "Boys, let us have a prayer for our comrades up in that roar of battle at the front. When I say the Lord's Prayer join in with me, but not too loudly as we don't want to disturb those who are trying to sleep." I had a short service and they all joined in the Lord's Prayer. It was most impressive in that large, dim church, to hear the voices, not loudly, but quite distinctly, repeating the words from different parts of the building, for some of the men had gone over to corners where they might be by themselves. After the Lord's Prayer I pronounced the Benediction, and then said, "Boys, the Curé won't mind your smoking in the church tonight, so I am going to pass round some cigarettes." Luckily I had a box of five hundred which had been sent to me by post. These I handed round and lit them. Voices from different parts would say, "May I have one, Sir?" It was really delightful to feel that a moment's comfort [Page 71] could be given to men in their condition. A man arrived

that night with both his eyes gone, and even he asked for a cigarette. I had to put the cigarette into his mouth and light it for him. "It's so dark, Sir," he said, "I can't see." I was not going to tell him he would never see again, so I said, "Your head is all bandaged up. Of course you can't." He was one of the first to be taken off in the ambulance, and I do not know whether he is alive or dead. Our Canadians still held on with grim determination, and they deserved the tribute which Marshal Foch has paid them saving the day at Ypres.

When they came out of the line, and I was living once again among them, going from battalion to battalion, it was not amusing to hear them tell of all their adventures during the great attack. The English newspapers reached us and they were loud in their praise of "the gallant Canadians." The King, General Joffre, and Sir Robert Borden, sent messages to our troops. One man said, amid the laughter of his comrades, "All I can remember, Sir, was that I was in a blooming old funk for about three days and three nights and now I am told I am a hero. Isn't that fine?" Certainly they deserved all the praise they got. In a battle there is always the mixture of the serious and the comic. One Turco, more gallant than his fellows, refused to leave the line and joined the 16th Battalion. He fought so well that they decided to reward him turning him into a Highlander. He consented to don the kilt, but would not give up his trousers as they concealed his black legs.

The Second Battle of Ypres was the making of what grew to be the Canadian Corps. Up to that time, Canadians were looked upon, and looked upon themselves, merely as troops that might be expected to hold the line and do useful spade work, but from then onward the men felt they could rise to any emergency, and the army knew they could be depended upon. The pace then set was followed by the other divisions and, at the end, the Corps did not disappoint the expectations of General Foch. What higher praise could be desired?

My billet in Vlamertinghe was in a neat little cottage owned by an old maid, who took great pride in making everything shine. The paymaster of one of our battalions and I had a cheerful home there when the poor old lady fled. Her home however did not long survive her absence, for, some days after she left, it was levelled [Page 72] by a shell. The church too was struck and ruined. Beside it is the military cemetery within which lie the mortal remains of many gallant men, amongst them the two Grenfells, one of whom got the V.C. There I buried poor Duffy and many more. The other chaplains laid to rest men under their care.

One picture always comes to my mind when I think of Vlamertinghe. In the road near the church was a Crucifix. The figure was life size and hung on a cross planted upon a rocky mound. One night when the sun had set and a great red glow burnt along the horizon, I saw the large black cross silhouetted against the crimson sky, and before it knelt an aged woman with grey hair falling from beneath the kerchief that was tied about her head. It was dangerous at all times to stay at that place, yet she knelt there silently in prayer. She seemed to be the embodiment of the old life and quiet contented religious hope which must have been the spirit of Vlamertinghe in the past. The village was an absolute ruin a few days later, and even the Sisters had to flee from their convent. The Crucifix, however, stood for a long time after the place was destroyed, but I never passed by without thinking of the poor old woman

who knelt at its foot in the evening light and laid her burden of cares upon the heart of Eternal Pity. [Page 73]