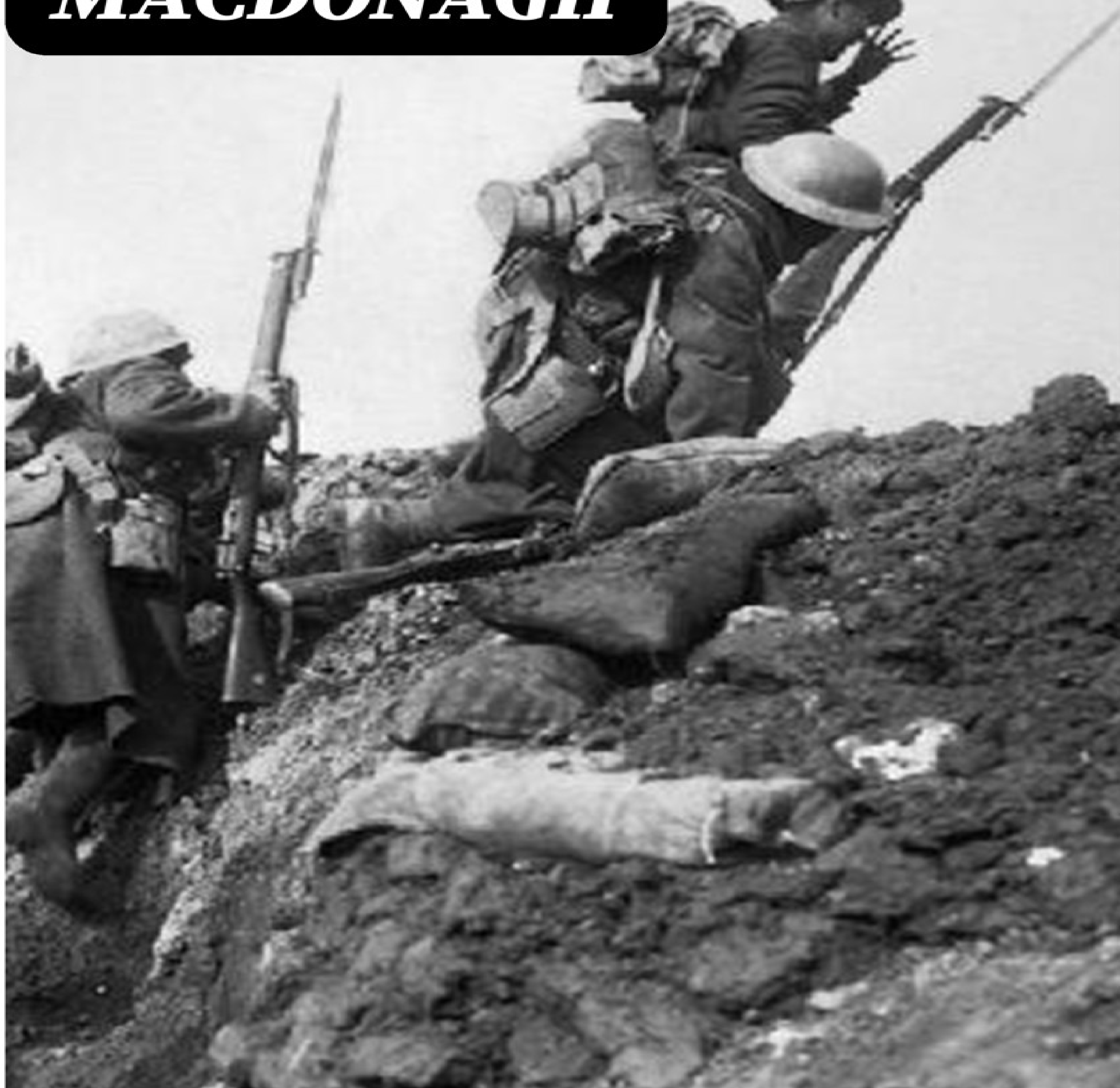
MICHAEL MACDONAGH



THE IRISH ON THE SOMME

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Michael MacDonagh

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Being a Second Series of 'The Irish at the Front'

EAN 8596547130239

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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CHAPTER I

IN THE TRENCHES WITH THE CONNAUGHT RANGERSToC

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SCENES COMIC AND TRAGIC

"The men are as anxious for the road, sir, as if 'twere to Galway races they were going, no less, or to Ballinasloe Fair," said the company sergeant-major to the captain. Those referred to belonged to a battalion of the Connaught Rangers ordered to the firing-trenches for the first time. "The real thing at last;" "The genuine McCoy, and no mistake," they said to one another as, in preparation for the march, they hurriedly packed their things in the barns and cow-sheds that served as billets, and, to provide further vent for their jubilation, danced Irish jigs and reels and sang national songs.

These Irishmen had read a lot about the fighting, and had heard a great deal more, but they felt that print and talk, however graphic and copious, left many strange things to be disclosed by the actual experience. Some of them would "get the beck"—the call from Death—but what matter? Were not soldiers who died in action to be envied, rather than pitied, by those who found themselves alive when the war was over, and had not been to the mysterious Front at all? So they thought and said, and now that they were on the road there was a look of proud elation on their faces, as

though they had been singled out by special favour for a grand adventure. They did not regard themselves in the least as heroes, these entirely unsophisticated men, without a trace of self-consciousness. They had volunteered for service in the belief that Ireland would be false to her historical self if she did not take part in this war for freedom, democracy and humanity. But now there was nothing in their minds about revenging the wrongs of Belgium, or driving the invader from the soil of France, or even of saving the British Empire. It was the fight that was the thing. It was the chance of having a smack at "the Gerrys"—as the enemy is called by the Irish soldiers—that they prized. More exalted feelings would come again when the battle was over and won. Then, and not till then, as they return with many gaps in their ranks, do Irish troops see themselves as an army of redemption and deliverance; and the only land they think of having saved is Ireland. To them Ireland personifies all the great causes of the war, and a blow struck for these causes, no matter where, is a blow struck for her.

By the light of many stars sparkling in the sky that dark October night the men could see signs that battles had been fought in the country they were traversing. It was a devastated bare expanse, stretching for miles and miles, very muddy and broken up with shell holes. Roads had been made across it, and along one of these the battalion went in the wake of the guides with swinging lanterns. The men were fully loaded. In addition to his fighting equipment, almost every one carried something extra, such as a pick or shovel, a bag of rations, or a bundle of fire-wood. The company officers also had heavy packs strapped on their

shoulders. Great good-humour prevailed. Whenever, at awkward turns of the road, or at very dark points, progress was interrupted, those in front would shout some preposterous explanation of the delay to their comrades behind. "Begonnies, boys, we're taking tickets here for Galway. Word has come down that the war is over," cried one joker. Deep groans of pretended dismay and disappointment rose from the rear ranks. "And poor me, without a German helmet, or even a black eye, to show that I was in it," was one of the responses.

When the open plain was quitted the battalion disappeared into a trench like a narrow country lane winding between high banks. It was much darker in these deeps than it had been outside. The gloom was broken occasionally by the light of lanterns carried by sentinels, or electric torches at junctions where several trenches crossed. Soon the trench became narrower and more tortuous. It also became more soaked with rain. Pools of water were frequently encountered. The battalion was now a floundering, staggering, overloaded and perspiring closely packed mass of men, walking in couples or in single file and treading on each other's heels.

The mishaps arising from this crowded scramble in the dark through mud and mire, between banks of unsupported crumbling earth, did not exhaust the Irish cheerfulness of the battalion. There was laughter when a man got a crack on the skull from a rifle which a comrade carried swung across his shoulder. There was louder laughter still when another, stooping to pick up something he had dropped, was bumped into from behind and sent sprawling. So

sucking and tenacious was the mud that frequently each dragging footstep called for quite a physical effort, and a man was thankful that he did not have to leave a boot behind. "Ah, sure this is nothin' to the bog away in Connemara, where I often sunk up to me neck when crossing it to cut turf," was the comfort imparted in a soft brogue. "True for you, Tim," remarked another. "It's an ould sayin' and a true one that there's nothin' so bad but it could be worse."

The trench certainly proved the truth of the saying. Bad as it had been, it sank to a still lower degree of slush. There were deep holes filled with water into which the men went with an abrupt plunge and passed through with much splashing. Just ahead of one of these particularly treacherous points singing was heard. The chorus was taken up by many voices, and its last line was rapped out with hearty boisterousness—

"Out and make way for the bould Fenian Men."

This joyous noise heralded the appearance of a party of the Dublin Fusiliers, belonging to the same Division, who were coming down the trench. By the light of lanterns and lamps it was seen that they had taken off their trousers and socks and, holding up their shirts, were wading in their boots blithely through the pools, like girls in bare legs and lifted petticoats paddling at the seaside.

The Connaught men laughed hilariously. "Sure the Dublin jackeens have never been beaten yet for cuteness," they cried. "They stripped to their pelts so as they wouldn't get the 'fluensy by means of their wet clothes. And, faix, 'twould

be the greatest pity in the world anything would ail stout and hearty boys like them." As they spoke, the men of the west lay close against the embankments to let the men of the east go by. But weren't the Dublins in the divil of a hurry back to billets? the Rangers went on to remark. And why not? answered the Dublins. Sure if they'd only sniff with their noses they would smell the roast beef and the steaming punch that were being got ready for them by special orders of Field-Marshal Haig for the great things they did away up in the firing-line. "Lucky boys!" shouted the Rangers, responding to the joke. "And tell us now, have ye left us a Gerry at all alive to get a pelt at, and we new at the game?" A Dublin man gave the reply as he went past. "To tell ye the truth, except there's a raid, there isn't much divarshion in the way of fighting; but every man of ye will have his full and plenty of mud and water before he's much oulder." "Well, there's nothing in that to yowl about." "Maybe not, if you can swim." The trench resounded with laughter at the exchange of banter. But for fear any of the Rangers might take some of the talk as half a joke and whole earnest, a kind-hearted sergeant of the Dublins, wishful to say the cheery word, called out, "Don't mind them playboys; there's no more water and mud in it than is natural in such wet weather as we're getting."

The Rangers reached their destination just as the day was dawning in a cold drizzle from a grey, lowering sky. They were all plastered with yellowish mud. Mud was on their hands, on their faces, in their hair, down their backs; and the barrels of their rifles were choked with mud. For the next four days and nights of duty in the trenches they were

to be lapped about with mud. War was to be for them a mixture of mud and high explosives. Of the two mud was the ugliest and most hateful. Soon they would come to think that there was hardly anything left in the world but mud; and from that they would advance to a state of mind in which they doubted whether there ever had been a time in their existence when they were free from mud. But through it all this battalion, like the others in the Division, preserved their good-humour. They are known, in fact, as "The Light-Hearted Brigade." Every difficulty was met with a will to overcome it, tempered with a joke and a laugh. No matter how encrusted with filth their bodies might be, their souls were always above contamination.

Men off duty at night slept in shelter pits dug deep into the soil by the side of the trenches. It was overcrowded in stark violation of all the sanitary by-laws relating to ventilation in civil life. No time was wasted in undressing. The men lay down fully clad in their mud-crusted clothes, even to their boots, wrapped round in blankets. During the night they were awakened by a loud explosion. "All right, boys; don't stir," cried the sergeant. "It's only one of those chape German alarum clocks going off at the wrong time. Get off to sleep again, me heroes." In the morning more time was saved by getting up fully dressed, and not having to wash or to shave, so as to spare the water. A private, looking round the dug-out and noticing the absence of windows, remarked, "Faix, those of us who are glaziers and window-cleaners will find it hard to make a living in this country."

As the battalion was new to the trenches, another Irish battalion of more experience shared with them the holding of this particular line. To a group of lads gathered about a brazier of glowing coke in a sheltered traverse an old sergeant that had seen service in the Regular Army was giving what, no doubt, he thought was sound and valuable advice, but which was at times of a quality calculated more to disturb, perhaps, than to reassure.

"Bullets are nothin' at all," said he. "I wouldn't give you a snap of me fingers for them. Listen to them now, flyin' about and whinin' and whimperin' as if they wor lost, stolen or strayed, and wor lookin' for a billet to rest in. They differ greatly, do these bullets; but sure in time you'll larn them all by sound and be able to tell the humour each one of them is in. There's only one kind of bullet, boys, that you'll never hear; and that is the one which gives you such a pelt as to send you home to Ireland or to kingdom come. But," he continued, "what'll put the fear of God into your sowls, if it isn't there already, is the heavy metal which the Gerrys pitch across to us in exchange for ours. The first time I was up here I was beside a man whose teeth went chatterin' in a way that put me in fear of me life. Sure, didn't I think for a minute it was a Gerry machine-gun—may the divil cripple them!—startin' its bloody work at me ear. Now, there must be none of that in this trench. If you're afraid, don't show it; remimber always that the Gerrys are in just as great a fright, if not more so. Show your spunk. Stand fast or sit tight, and hope for the best. Above all, clinch your teeth."

The bombardment of a trench by shells from guns in the rear of the enemy's lines, or by bombs thrown from mortars

close at hand, is probably the greatest test of endurance that has ever been set to humanity. The devastating effect is terrific. At each explosion men may be blown to pieces or buried alive. Even the concussion often kills. A man might escape being hit by the flying projectiles and yet be blinded or made deaf or deprived of his speech by the shock. All feel as if their insides had collapsed. The suspense of waiting for the next shell or bomb, the uncertainty as to where it is going to fall, followed by the shake which the detonation gives the nervous system, are enough to wear out the most stout-hearted of soldiers. It is then that companionship and discipline tell. The men catch from one another the won't-appear-frightened determination, and the spirit of won't-give-in.

Crash! A fierce gust of wind sweeps through the trench. Men are lifted from their feet and flung violently to the ground amid showers of earth and stones. There is a brief pause; and then is heard the most unexpected of sounds—not the moaning of pain, but a burst of laughter! Four men of the battalion were playing "Forty-five," a card game beloved of Hibernians, seated under a piece of tarpaulin propped up on poles, as much at their ease as if they lay under a hedge on a Sunday evening in summer at home in Ireland, with only the priest to fear, and he known to be on a sick call at the other side of the parish. The bomb came at the most inopportune moment, just as the fall of the trick was about to be decided. When the card party recovered their senses, the man who held the winning card was found to be wounded. "'Twas the Gerrys—sweet bad luck to them!—that jinked the game that time, boys," he exclaimed. His

companions, standing round him, burst into laughter at the remark.

Merriment is not uncommon as the shells are bursting. The spectacle of four or five men hurriedly tumbling for shelter into the same "funk hole," a wild whirl of arms and legs, has its absurd side and never fails to excite amusement. The way in which men disentangle themselves from the ruins caused by the explosion is often also grotesque. Racy oddities of character are revealed. One man was buried in the loose earth. His comrades hastened to rescue him, and to cheer him up told him he would be got out next to no time, for Tim Maloney, the biggest as well as the fastest digger in the company was engaged on the job. "I feel that right well," cried the victim, as he spluttered the mud from his mouth. "But I've enough on top of me without him! Pull me out of this from under his feet." There was an explosion close to a man at work repairing the trench. The man was overheard saying to himself, as he turned his back disdainfully to the shell, "Oh, go to blazes, with yez."

But it is not all comedy and farce. How could it be with stern, black-visaged Death always watching with wolfish eyes to see men die? Fate plays unimaginable tricks with its victims. A bullet stops many a casual conversation for ever. "Look at this!" cries a man, holding up his cap for a comrade to see the bullet-hole that had just been made through it. "A close shave," he adds; "but what matter? Isn't a miss as good as a mile?" And, as he was putting the cap on again, he fell a corpse to a surer bullet. There he lay, just a bundle of muddy khaki; and a dozing comrade, upon whom he dropped, elbowed him aside, saying impatiently, "Get out of

that, with yer andrew-martins" (jokes and tricks); "can't you let a poor divil get a wink of sleep?" Tragedy takes on, at times, queer, fantastic shapes. A man has his right arm blown off close to the shoulder. He picks the limb up with his left hand, shouting, "My arm! my arm! Oh, holy mother of God, where's my arm?" In raging agony he rushes shrieking down the trench carrying the limb with him until he encounters his company officer. "Oh, captain, darlin'," he cries. "Look what the Gerrys have done to me! May God's curse light upon them and theirs for ever! An' now I'll never shoulder a rifle for poor ould Ireland any more."

The night, and only the night, has terrors for the Irish soldiers, especially those from the misty mountains and remote seaboard of the west and south. In the daylight they are merry and prolific of jest. Strongly gregarious by instinct, they delight in companionship. They are sustained and upheld by the excitement of battle's uproar. They will face any danger in the broad daylight. But they hate to be alone in the dark anywhere, and are afraid to pass at night even a graveyard in which their own beloved kith and kin lie peacefully at rest for ever. They feel "lonesome and queer" as they would say themselves.

So it is that when by himself at a listening post in a shell hole in No Man's Land, lapped about with intense blackness, peering and hearkening, the superstitious soul of the Irish soldier seems to conjure up all the departed spectral bogies and terrors of the Dark Ages. He is ready to cry out like Ajax, the Greek warrior, in "Homer," "Give us but light, O Jove; and in the light, if thou seest fit, destroy us."

Even a Cockney soldier, lacking as he is in any subtle sympathy with the emotional and immaterial sides of life, confesses that it gives him the creeps proper to be out there in the open jaws of darkness, away from his mates and almost right under the nose of old Boche. An Irish soldier will admit that on this duty he does have a genuine feeling of terror. Crouching in the soft, yielding earth, he imagines he is in the grave, watching and waiting he knows not for what. Everything is indefinite and uncertain. There is a vague presentiment that some unknown but awful evil is impending. Perhaps a thousand hostile German eyes are staring at him through the darkness along rifle barrels; or, more horrible still, perhaps a thousand invisible devils are on the prowl to drag his soul to hell. The supernatural powers are the only forces the Irish soldier fears.

The senses of the sentry are so abnormally alert that if grass were growing near him he had only to put his ear to the ground to hear the stirring of the sap. But though he listens intently, not a sound comes out of the blackness. He regards the profound stillness as confirmation of his worst fears. All is silence in the trench behind him, where his comrades ought to be. He would welcome the relief of voices and the sound of feet in the enemy's lines. But the Gerrys give no sign of life. Is he alone in the whole wide world, the solitary survivor of this terrible war? What would he not part with to be able to get up and run! But he is fixed to his post by a sense of duty, just as strong as if he were chained there by iron bands. To cry out would afford immense relief to his overwrought feelings. But his tongue seems paralysed in his mouth. Then he bethinks him of his

prayers. From his inside tunic pocket he takes out his beads—which his mother gave him at parting and made him promise faithfully always to carry about his person—and, making the sign of the cross, he is soon absorbed in the saying of the Rosary. Resignation and fortitude came to his aid. The invisible evil agencies by which he had really been encompassed—loneliness, anxiety, melancholy—are dispelled.

Scouting is the night work that appeals most to the Irish soldiers. There is in it the excitement of movement, the element of adventure and the support of companionship, too, for four, five or six go out together. Oh, the fearful joy of crawling on one's stomach across the intervening ground, seeking for a passage through the enemy's wire entanglements or wriggling under it, taking a peep over their parapets, dropping down into a sparsely occupied part of the trench, braining the sentry and returning with rifle and cap as trophies! This is one of the most perilous forms of the harassing tactics of war, and for its success uncommon pluck and resource are required. Yet, like everything else at the Front, it often has an absurd side. A Connaught Ranger, back from such an expedition, related that, hearing the Gerrys talking, he called out, "How many of ye are there?" To his surprise he got an answer in English: "Four." Then, throwing in a bomb, he said, "Divide that between ye, an' be damned to ye." "Faix, 'twas the bomb that divided them," he added, "for didn't they come out of the trench after me in smithereens." Another party returned from a raid with tears streaming down their cheeks. "Is it bad news ye bring, crying in that way?" they were asked.

No! they hadn't bad news; nor were they crying. If it was crying they were, wouldn't they be roaring and bawling? and there wasn't a sound out of them for any one to hear. Only asses could say such a thing as that. 'Twas they that looked like silly asses, they were told, with the tears pouring out of their eyes like the Powerscourt waterfall. What the mischief was the matter with them, anyway? Well, then, if any one cared to know, was the reply, 'twas the Gerrys that treated them to a whiff of lachrymose gas!

The fatigue, the disgust, and the danger of life in the trenches are, at times, stronger than any other impulse, whether of the flesh or of the soul. "'Tis enough to drive one to the drink: a grand complaint when there's plenty of porter about," said a private; "but a terrible fate when there's only the water we're wading in, and that same full up—the Lord save us!—of creeping and wriggling things." "True for you; it's the quare life, and no mistake," remarked another. "You do things and get praise for them, such as smashing a fellow's skull, or putting a bullet through him, which if you were to do at home you'd be soon on the run, with a hue and cry and all the police of the country at your heels."

Back in billets again, for a wash and a shave and a brush up, and lying in their straw beds in the barns, the Rangers would thus philosophise on their life. The bestial side of it—the terrible overcrowding of the men, the muck, the vermin, the gobbling of food with filthy hands, the stench of corrupting bodies lying in the open, or insufficiently buried, and, along with all that, its terror, agony and tragedy are, indeed, utterly repellent to human nature. Still, there was general agreement that they had never spent a week of

such strange and exquisite experiences. Fear there was at times, but it seemed rather to keep up a state of pleasurable emotion than to generate anguish and distress. Certainly most Connaught Rangers will swear that life in the trenches has at least three thrilling and exalting moments. One is when the tot of rum is served round. Another is the first faint appearance of light in the sky behind the enemy's lines, proclaiming that the night is far spent and the day is at hand. The third is the call to "stand to," telling that a visit from the Gerrys is expected, when the men cease to be navvies and become soldiers again—throwing aside the hateful pick and shovel and taking up the beloved rifle and bayonet.

CHAPTER IIToC

EXPLOITS OF THE ULSTER DIVISION

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BELFAST'S TRIBUTE TO THE DEAD

"I am not an Ulsterman, but as I followed the amazing attack of the Ulster Division on July 1, I felt that I would rather be an Ulsterman than anything else in the world. With shouts of 'Remember the Boyne' and 'No Surrender, boys,' they threw themselves at the Germans, and before they could be restrained had penetrated to the enemy fifth line. The attack was one of the greatest revelations of human courage and endurance known in history."—A British officer on the exploits of the Ulster Division, July 1, 1916.

One of the most striking and impressive tributes ever paid to the heroic dead was that of Belfast on the 12th of July, 1916, in memory of the men of the Ulster Division who fell on the opening day of that month in the great British offensive on the Somme. For five minutes following the hour of noon all work and movement, business and household, were entirely suspended. In the flax mills, the linen factories, the ship yards, the munition workshops, men and women paused in their labours. All machinery was stopped, and the huge hammers became silent. In shop and office business ceased; at home the housewife interrupted her round of duties; in the streets traffic was brought to a halt, on the local railways the running trains pulled up. The whole population stood still, and in deep silence, with bowed heads but with uplifted hearts, turned their thoughts to the valleys and slopes of Picardy, where on July 1 the young men of Ulster, the pride and flower of the province, gave their lives for the preservation of the British Empire, the existence of separate and independent States, and the rule of law and justice in their international relations.

"The Twelfth" is the great festival of Belfast. On that day is celebrated the Williamite victories of the Boyne, July 1, and Aughrim, July 12, 1690, in which the cause of the Stuarts went down for ever. It is kept as a general holiday of rejoicing and merrymaking. The members of the Orange lodges turn out with their dazzling banners and their no less gorgeous yellow, crimson and blue regalia; and the streets resound with the lilt of fifes, the piercing notes of cornets, the boom and rattle of many drums, the tramp of marching feet and the cheers of innumerable spectators. There was no such demonstration on July 12, 1916. For the first time in the history of the Orange Institution the observance of the anniversary was voluntarily abandoned, so that there might be no stoppage of war work in the ship yards and munition factories. But at the happy suggestion of the Lord Mayor (Sir Crawford McCullagh), five minutes of the day were given reverently to lofty sorrow for the dead, who, by adding "The Ancre," "Beaumont Hamel" and "Thiepval Wood" to "Derry," "Enniskillen," "The Boyne" and "Aughrim" on the banners of Ulster, have given a new meaning and glory to the celebration of "The Twelfth" in which all Ireland can share. Major-General O.S.W. Nugent, D.S.O., commanding the Ulster Division, in a special Order of the Day, issued after the advance, wrote—

"Nothing finer has been done in the War.

"The Division has been highly tried and has emerged from the ordeal with unstained honour, having fulfilled in every part the great expectations formed of it.

"None but troops of the best quality could have faced the fire which was brought to bear on them, and the losses