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Opening Extract from...

England, Their England

Written by A. G. Macdonell

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ENGLAND, THEIR ENGLAND

A.G. Macdonell

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To J. C. Squire

The English Poet

CHAPTER ONE

THE EVENTS WHICH ARE DESCRIBED in this book had their real origin in a conversation which took place between two artillery subalterns on the Western Front in the beginning of October 1917.

But although this first short chapter has to be devoted to the circumstances and substance of that conversation in order that the rest may be more intelligible, and although the words of the conversation were spoken upon the slopes of the Passchendaele Ridge, no one need be afraid that this is a war book.

From Chapter II to the end there will be no terrific descriptions of the effect of a chlorine gas cloud upon a party of nuns in a bombarded nunnery, or pages and pages about the torturing remorse of the sensitive young subaltern who has broken his word to his father, the grey-haired old vicar, by spending a night with a mademoiselle from Armentières. There will be no streams of consciousness, chapters long, in the best style of Bloomsbury, describing minutely the sensations of a man who has been caught in

a heavy howitzer barrage while taking a nap in the local mortuary. There are going to be no profound moralizings on the inscrutability of a Divine Omnipotence which creates the gillyflower and the saw-bayonet, and Shakespeare and Von Mackensen (or, as in the translations, Unser Shakespeare and Ferdinand Foch), on the lines of the Ode to Baron von Bissing which borrowed, and rightly borrowed, Blake's famous question, "Did He who made the lamb make thee?"

And, finally, there are going to be no long passages in exquisite cadences and rhythms, shoved in just to show that I am just as good as Ruskin or any of them, about the quietness of life in billets in comparison with life during a trench-mortar bombardment, and about the blue spirals of smoke curling up from the tiny French hamlet nestling in the woods which have echoed and re-echoed the thunderous footsteps of the army of Charlemagne, which have waved their green leaves above Hugh Capet and Louis the Saint and Henry of Navarre (always a sure card), which have screened the rustic lovers and the wheeling hawks and the marching Emperors, and so on and so on and so on.

In a word, after this first chapter there will be, to borrow the name of an ardent society of left-wing pacifists, No More War.

The conversation between the artillery officers took place in one of those rectangular, reinforced concrete, frog-like boxes with which the German military engineers sprinkled Flanders in 1915 and 1916 in order that their effete and pampered infantry, unlike the more virile troops of Britain, of Belgium, and of Portugal, and of one French corps, should not have to sleep in six inches of water under a quarter-inch sheet of corrugated iron.

It was in 1917 that the British High Command got wind of the existence of these structures, or "pill-boxes," as our irrepressible combatant soldiers had christened them when they first appeared.

It is thought that the news reached G. H. Q. in its peaceful little backwater of Montreuil from an agent in Berne, who had it from an agent in Amsterdam, who had got it from a journalist friend in Rio de Janeiro. But some people believe it was the special illustrated supplement in the *Chicago Tribune*, giving pictures of twenty-seven different types of pill-box, that first put our Intelligence Service, admittedly the finest in the world, upon the track. But whichever it was, there is no doubt at all that by February 1917 British G. H. Q. had decided, in principle, that a good way of checking the alarming wastage of manpower through influenza, frost-bite, and trench-feet, with all their accompanying opportunities for malingering, would be to house the front-line troops in pill-boxes. There was some opposition, of course, from the tougher-fibred, harder-bitten school of fighter, who maintained, at Montreuil, that nothing sapped the morale of troops so quickly as temporary security from shell-fire. The only way one could steel the nerves, this school argued, was to expose oneself all the time to shell-fire, until one got so accustomed to it that one simply did not notice it at all. This weighty argument was only silenced in the end by the production of the influenza statistics and, especially, the estimated malingering statistics.

But the High Command, having decided in principle that pill-boxes were, on the whole, desirable, was not so foolish as to make a present of them to the already over-mothered infantry. There is no maxim so true as the one about gift horses and their mouths. Small boys despise free seats at cinemas and unearned chocolates, and fighting soldiers are very like small boys. And the High Command at that moment was still smarting from a painful experience of the truth of this maxim. For, in a moment of warm-hearted, impulsive generosity, it had decreed that combatant officers might in certain circumstances be considered to be entitled to as much as half the amount of leave which every staff officer always got, and

the reception of this free gift had not been so full of enthusiastic gratitude as the High Command had expected, and had been justified in expecting.

The infantry were to have pill-boxes – good. But they were to get them for themselves. In this way a double purpose would be achieved. The pill-boxes would be appreciated, valued, and kept clean, and the infantry would get further practice in the art of offensive warfare. And, besides, Montreuil was a little uncertain how to set about making pill-boxes. And, besides, Montreuil had only just mastered the art of making deep dug-outs, invented by the Germans in late 1914, and was reluctant to dabble in new mysteries.

So during the month of August, in which it rained three-quarters of the time, and during September, in which it rained half the time, and October, when it rained all the time, the infantry were busily employed in getting hold of these pill-boxes, and, at the end of the three months, at the cost of a good many lives and a good many shells, they had acquired several hundreds of them.

It was true that they smelt most vilely of stale cigars and that the entrances all faced the wrong way and that the mud was inclined to ooze into them when no one was looking. But, as the Fifth Army staff officer said who was detailed to make a report upon their structure, composition, thickness, seating capacity, field of fire, siting, and shell-resistance, and who examined what he thought was one of them through a powerful telescope from the roof of the Château des Trois Tours, behind Brielen, “After all, you can’t have everything.” With which eternal verity upon his lips, the staff officer handed the telescope to one orderly, dictated his report to another, stepped into his motor-car and departed on leave. But he was well rewarded for his hazardous toil, for in the drawing rooms of Mayfair and Belgravia he was now able to add enthralling accounts of his experiences in the Front Line, almost, to his predictions about

the trend of forthcoming campaigns and the plans of forthcoming battles, on which he had previously had to rely for the captivating of feminine hearts. And a few weeks later he received a well-merited bar to his D.S.O.

Upon the slopes of the Passchendaele Ridge, about two hundred yards east of the Steenbeek river (when I say “east” I mean on the wrong, or German side, and when I say “river” I mean a ditch about nine feet wide at its widest) and about two hundred yards west of the front line, there stood a pill-box so large, and with walls so thick, that it served as the headquarters for two adjoining battalions, and as no battalion headquarters ever dreamt of stirring a yard without the company of an artillery subaltern, there were consequently two gunners in this particular box.

The reason for the indispensability of these young gentlemen – for they were seldom more than twenty or twenty-one years of age – was a curious one. It had been discovered long before, right away back in the almost pre-war days of the early days of the war, that by some mysterious freak of Providence no infantry soldier, of whatever rank or with however long a row of campaign medals, can distinguish between shells that are fired from in front of him and shells that are fired from behind him. Whenever, therefore, a heavy artillery barrage fell upon their trenches, the infantry, their natural optimism damped by interminable digging and carrying, always assumed as a matter of course that it was their own artillery firing short. Indeed there were times at the beginning of the war when it was difficult to convince them that the German artillery ever fired at all, and the fact that a British six-gun field battery of eighteen-pounder guns had a strict ration of thirty-six shells, all shrapnel, to last them for an entire week, was held to be no proof that it had not plastered our front line with a thousand six-inch high-explosive shells in two hours.

The result was that a young artillery gentleman had to be attached to each battalion headquarters in the Line, whose duty it was to point out the fundamental difference between east-bound and west-bound projectiles and thus soothe the fighting troops into a feeling of partial, at any rate, security.

The two battalions, of which the colonels, adjutants, signal officers, runners, batmen, and general hangers-on were housed in this long, gloomy, dank, cigar-smoky, above-ground tunnel during the second week of October 1917, were the seventeenth battalion of the Rutland Fusiliers and the twenty-fourth battalion of the Melton Mowbray Light Infantry. The artillery officers were Lieutenant Evan Davies, tenth East Flint Battery, Royal Artillery, Territorial Force, who was attached to the Rutlands, and Lieutenant Donald Cameron, thirteenth Sutherland Battery, R.A., T.F., attached to the Melton Mowbrays, each for a period of four days.

The East Flint artillery belonged to a Welsh Division, the Sutherland to a Scottish, but it was the usual practice to leave the gunners in the Line while their infantry was out at rest, thereby doubling the artillery strength of the Line, and sometimes, when divisions were plentiful, trebling and quadrupling it. It is true that this practice had its drawbacks, and a perspicacious civilian, a temporary major, who had by an error of drafting been placed in quite a high-up position in the Montreuil backwater, pointed out that it meant that the artillery never got a rest at all. The perspicacious major – in happier times a professor of Greek, a man of subtle intelligence, and great learning, and a capacity for working seventeen hours a day – was duly transferred to the command of a Chinese Labour battalion, and spent the rest of the War in building a wharf at a fishing village near Finisterre, which was to be used as a base for the British Army in the event of one of Von Ludendorff's brisker drives capturing Le Havre. But though

the major had gone, the dilemma remained. If the artillery strength in the Line was to be doubled, trebled, or quadrupled, the artillery personnel would get no rest. The ultimate solution was simple, as all ultimate solutions are, and consisted of the words, "Oh well, it can't be helped," and everyone was delighted, except, of course, the artillery personnel.

Mr Davies and Mr Cameron naturally gravitated towards each other in the corner of the pill-box furthest from the door – artillery officers always seemed to drift into the corner of the pill-box furthest from the door – and in a short time were deep in conversation. They discussed the usual topics, the general bloodiness of the war, the shocking hold-up in the leave-rotation since the Passchendaele offensive first began, the tragic sublimity of the Staff, and the foulness of the weather. They compared the number of consecutive days on which their respective batteries had received marmalade in their rations instead of jam – the East Flint battery apparently was leading by a hundred and eighteen days against ninety-six – returned to the general bloodiness of the war, and then settled down to discuss, in discreet whispers, their infantry hosts and, finally, the general characteristics of the nation from which both Rutland Fusiliers and Melton Mowbray Light Infantry were recruited.

"I've lived for five years in London," said Davies, a big, pleasant man whose five-and-thirty years were an exception to the general youthfulness of liaison officers, with steel-rimmed glasses and a heavy black moustache, "and I must admit I find the English are extraordinarily difficult to understand."

"I was never in England before the War," replied Cameron, "so I've really only seen them as soldiers. I've been in London for a day or two when I was on leave, of course."

Donald Cameron was a boy of about twenty, slender and fair-haired with a small fair moustache and small hands. He was about

five feet nine or ten, and even the changes and chances of war had not battered his natural shyness out of him. He spoke the pure, accurate English of Inverness-shire.

"What do you think of them as soldiers?" asked Davies.

"They're such an extraordinary mixture," replied Cameron. "The last time I was liaison to an English battalion was about a month ago. It was a battalion from Worcestershire or Gloucestershire or somewhere. The Colonel wore an eyeglass and sat in a deep dugout all day reading the *Tatler*. He talked as if he was the *Tatler*, all about Lady Diana Manners and Dukes and Gladys Cooper. We were six days in the Line and he had the wind up all the time except once, and that time he walked up to a Bosche machine gun emplacement with a walking stick and fifty-eight Bosche came out and surrendered to him. What do you make of that? Do you suppose he was mad?"

"I don't know," replied Davies, puffing away at a huge black pipe. "We had an English subaltern once in our battery who used to run and extinguish fires in ammunition dumps."

Cameron dropped his cigarette. "He used to do what?"

"Used to put out fires in shell dumps."

"But whatever for?"

"He said that shells cost five pounds each and it was everyone's duty to save Government money."

"Where is he buried?" asked Cameron.

"In that little cemetery at the back of Vlamertinghe."

"I know it."

Donald Cameron lit another cigarette and asked:

"Why do the English always laugh when Aberdeen is mentioned?"

"Heaven knows," replied Davies. "Why do they have a Welsh Prime Minister and a Scotch—"

"Not Scotch. Scots. Or Scottish."

“Sorry. – A Scottish Commander-in-Chief and a Scottish First Sea Lord of the Admiralty, and think it funny?”

“Lord knows.”

“And here’s another thing, Cameron. The English pride themselves on having always beaten the French except at Hastings.”

“Yes.”

“Then why is it that the French Army is so much more successful in this War than the English?”

“The French staff-work is supposed to be miles better.”

“It must be, I suppose. Because the English soldier, the chap who actually does the fighting, is amazingly good.”

“Why do the English,” asked Cameron, “crack up the French seventy-five as being the most marvellous gun in the War? Our own 18-pounder is just as good.”

“If not better.”

“Exactly. If not better.”

“But then why does the average Englishman,” said Davies, “pretend he is a perfect devil with his fists when really he is the most peaceable soul in the world, and then, in spite of his peaceableness, suddenly turns into a first-class soldier?”

“Yes, but then why does the Englishman—”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake!” cried Davies laughing, and hauling a great flask out of his pocket, “this is going to drive us mad. Have a drop of Scotch. I beg your pardon! Have a drop of Scots or Scottish.” They each had a good swig at it, and then Davies went on: “I’m a publisher by profession – I’ve got an office near Covent Garden – and the more I see of the Englishman as a business man, or as a literary man, or as any kind of man, the more bewildered I become. They’re the kindest souls in the world, but if they see anything beautiful flying in the air or running along the ground, they rush for a gun and kill it. If an earthquake devastates North Borneo, they dash off to the

Mansion House and block up all the traffic for miles round trying to hand over money for earthquake relief, but do you think they'll lift a finger to abolish their own slums? Not they. If you assault a man in England and bash his teeth down his throat and kick him in the stomach, that's just playfulness and you'll get fourteen days in jug. But if you lay a finger on him and pinch his watch at the same time, that's robbery with violence, and you'll probably get eighteen strokes with the "cat" and about three years in Dartmoor. You can do pretty nearly anything you like to a stag or a fox. That's sport. But you stand up and say you approve of bullfights, and see what happens to you! You'll be lucky if you escape with your life. And there's another thing. They're always getting themselves up in fancy dress. They adore fancy dress. Look at their Beefeaters, and their Chelsea Pensioners, and their barristers' wigs, and their Peers' Robes, and the Beadle of the Bank of England, and the Lord Mayor's Show, and the Presenting at Court, and the Trooping of the Colour, and all that sort of thing. Show an Englishman fancy dress, and he puts it on."

"They sound rather fascinating," murmured Donald.

"They're fascinating, all right," replied Davies. "I love them. I don't understand them, but I love them. I've got a theory about them, which I rather want to test some time, if I can extract myself unpunctured from this bloody Armageddon."

"What is it?"

"I've got an idea that all their queernesses and oddities and incongruities arise from the fact that, at heart, fundamentally, they're a nation of poets. Mind you, they'd be lurid with rage if you told them. Imagine what Colonel Tarkington over there would say if you told him that he was a poet."

Colonel Tarkington was the C.O. of the Melton Mowbrays. He was a cavalry major who had transferred into the infantry for the sake of promotion – a neat, dapper little man who ate sparingly in

order to keep his weight down for post-war polo.

"I'd rather like to write a book about them some day," said Cameron thoughtfully.

"It's a book that wants writing," replied the Welshman. "Come and look me up after this bloody war is over, and we'll discuss it."

"Seriously?"

"You bet your life I'm serious. I told you I was a publisher once, and I hope to be a publisher again. That's a bargain. If ever you want a job in London, come to me and we'll talk it over. You'll find me in the telephone book, Davies and Llewellyn Glendower, Henrietta Street."

Cameron made a note of it in his gun registration book, and in his turn produced a large flask. Evening was drawing on. The rain was falling steadily, in grey sheets, hour after hour. The German artillery was tuning up for its evening performance, and an occasional thud shook the pill-box when a shell pitched near. But it was not the shells that worried the two gunners. They were in the corner furthest from the door, and both knew that the reinforced concrete was twenty-eight inches in thickness, for both of them had measured it independently as soon as they had arrived, and both knew perfectly well that nothing short of a direct hit from an eleven-inch or eight-inch howitzer, both fortunately rare in Flanders mud, or repeated hits on the same spot from a 5.9, which was unlikely, could do them any real harm. The real danger was that the infantry might get agitated, and ask for an S.O.S. to be sent to the protecting artillery.

The two gunners shuffled their feet uneasily, and tried not to watch the Colonels and their staffs at the other end of the pill-box. A lot of talking was going on at that other end, and runners kept on arriving with messages. The air was now throbbing and thudding and hissing and quivering, and the pill-box was filling up with orderlies and signallers, taking cover from the thickening barrage. The atmosphere was heavy with smoke and the smell of wet

macintoshes and sweating runners and the bitter fumes of a shell which had pitched at the entrance. The adjutant of the Rutlands came elbowing his way towards them through the crowd. Davies saw him coming and sighed.

"Hell! Now we're off," he murmured. "Retaliation wanted. Five pounds to a bun that my wire is down." He stretched out for his gas mask and tin hat.

"All the wires will be down," said Cameron.

"Listen. It's a regular corker of a barrage."

"Have you got any rockets?" asked Davies. "Mine were blown into a shell hole on the way up."

"Four. Two red and two green; we might try them first."

The adjutant reached them, with the usual request for an S.O.S. "It might be an attack," he explained.

The two gunners struggled through the mob to the door, carrying their clumsy rocket apparatus. Outside was a maelstrom of noise and mud and death.

"God Almighty!" exclaimed Davies as he peered out. "If they don't see the rockets, Cameron, one or other of us will have to run for it. No one in the world could mend a wire in all that."

"Let's hope the damned things work," said Cameron, feverishly propping the rocket stand against what was left of a parapet. A moment or two later the first rocket soared up into the dripping twilight and burst into a rain of green stars. The second, the red one, followed at once and failed to burst.

"Damnation!" exclaimed both gunners simultaneously. The S.O.S. signal was green followed by red. Green alone would not be enough. They fitted the other red rocket, and then the matches wouldn't strike. The matchbox was soaked. Cameron rushed inside and came out with another box. The rocket spluttered and soared away and broke into a beautiful red shower.

The two gunners crouched down behind the broken parapet and waited. Davies counted the seconds aloud from his wristwatch. If the rockets were not seen by the artillery, one of the two subalterns would have to try to cross the open mile and a half to the nearest battery, with a five-hundred to one chance against getting through. And if he failed, the other would have to try. It was of some considerable importance to them, therefore, that the rockets should be observed. The seconds passed. At seventy-five, Davies made a cup of his hand and shouted into Donald's ear, "It looks like a wash-out." At ninety he held up his ten fingers, and at a hundred, he half-turned to Cameron and yelled, "We'd better toss. Will you call?" He spun a franc and Cameron shouted "Heads!" and at that moment a gun fired from behind them, and then another gun, and then five or six together in a straggling salvo, and then like a giant thunderbolt the whole of the British artillery sprang to life and the western sky was a blaze of yellow flame. The iron curtain was down.

With a huge grin across his face Davies sprang back into the shelter of the pill-box. Cameron paused to retrieve the franc from the mud and a 5.9 high-explosive shell pitched beside him, and he woke up a fortnight later, suffering from concussion and shell shock, in the Duchess of Westminster's Hospital at Le Touquet.