

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



"Good God, Garrett, don't go so fast. Wait a minute."

"All right; let your end down, then."

Garrett and Peterson had been assigned to the job of litter bearers. It was now the third time that they had carried a wounded man from the ravine to the first-aid station, almost two miles away. To do so they had to escape the shells that fell so numerous in the ravine, and, with their masks on, to carry their burden through the gulley filled with gas. On arriving at the first-aid station the first time they found their burden to be dead. His arm had been severed from his body. The second man was unconscious when he was lowered to the ground in front of the first-aid station. Now they were on the way from the ravine once more, carrying a man whose middle had been pierced by a fragment of shell casing. As they lowered the stretcher to rest, the man groaned and pleaded with them to go on. Garrett tried to reason: "We'll never get there, if we don't take a little rest. We'll be there soon, buddy. Do you want a drink?" He offered his canteen.

"No, just take me away from here," the man groaned piteously.

They rested until they could endure the man's groaning no longer; then they started off. They had no more than started when a shell struck directly in rear of them. They plodded on with their burden, stumbling over the boulders in the gulley. A little farther on and another shell exploded. On they went until the mustard-like odor of gas filled their nostrils. Then they stopped to put on their masks. Letting his end of the stretcher sink slowly to the ground, Garrett asked the wounded man: "Can you wear a mask, buddy?"

"Yes, oh, yes, give it to me. I'll die without it." Fear in the man's voice was stronger than pain.

Garrett bent over the man's chest for the familiar respirator. It was gone. "Where is your mask?" he asked.

"I don't know."

Gently Garrett raised the wounded man's head and placed his mask over the face of the wounded man. They started on again. Rapidly, successively, three shells struck close by. The rear end of the stretcher dropped to the ground.

"Peterson!" cried Garrett.

Peterson did not answer, and Garrett, putting down his end of the stretcher, walked to the other end and felt along the ground. Peterson was lying on his side. His neck was wet with blood. A large piece of shell casing had struck him below the ear, and he was now quite dead. His mask was in shreds.

The wounded man was unconscious.

Until he was hoarse and the gas had burned his eyes so that they were coals of fire, Garrett called for help. But none came. His eyes smarting dreadfully, Garrett wrapped his coat around his head and took up his night's vigil beside the wounded man. The bombardment continued most of the night.

When the sun made its pilgrimage over the rim of the distant field and showered the scene with light, Garrett was still sitting on a small rock beside the stretcher, his chin supported by his knees, the coat over his head.

For a distance of two miles, from the ravine to the village where the supply wagons were stationed, men lay dead and dying. In the woods and particularly in the gulley that ran through the woods to the village, the thick yellow gas clung to the ground. Whenever the gas had touched the skin of the men dark, flaming blisters appeared. Like acid, the yellow gas ate into the flesh and blinded the eyes. The ground was a dump-heap of bodies, limbs of trees, legs and arms independent of bodies, and pieces of equipment. Here was a combat pack forlorn, its bulge indicating such articles as a razor, an extra shirt, the last letter from home, a box of hard bread; another place a heavy shoe, with a wad of spiral puttee nearby. Where yesterday's crosses had been erected, a shell had churned a body out of its shallow grave, separating from the torso the limbs. The crosses themselves had been blown flat, as if by a terrific wind.

In the gray light of early morning Garrett felt the fury of impotence as he tried to rise. He unwound the coat that covered his head, forgetful, unmindful for the moment of the man whom he had guarded during the night. He seemed fastened to the surface of the stone. Dimly, he knew that his legs burned with an awful pain. But the feeling of pain was lost in his marveling at his inability to rise. Not far, distant voices sounded. Soon a detail of men filed along the gulley, commenting among themselves upon the havoc of the night. Garrett called weakly to the men who were approaching.

Garrett's mind was a blank, as if conscientiousness itself had a switch that could be maneuvered to the off position. Too much had occurred in such too little time for any person to comprehend. As unknown hands touched him he lost his senses and his next remembrance was concern with a badly jolting ambulance in which men all about him were groaning.

