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Laughing at Terror on Dead-Strewn War Front

Coningsby Dawson's Letters Tell Vividly the Story of Battlefield and Trench, of Heroes and Horrors in Northern France



CONINGSBY DAWSON, English novelist, resident in the United States, was busy trying to follow up the success of his novel, "A Garden Without Walls," when the war came. He realized that, as he was a Briton of military age, it was his duty to put literature behind him and fight for his country. Delaying only long enough to finish some work which he had promised his publishers, he crossed from this country into Canada and there qualified as an officer in the Canadian forces. Shipped thence across the ocean last Summer, he found himself, after only a short stay in England, plunged without further ado into the hell on the Somme.

For months thereafter he dealt and dodged death from morning to night, with scarcely the time to get a really good wash or change of clothes. He saw men killed a few feet from him; saw corpses by the hundred lying in hideously lifelike postures amid the black mud of shell holes; and, faithful to his profession as a writer, he fought with the full strength of his intellect to grasp and visualize and set down on paper the terrific impact of new and horrible impressions which the war brought to him. He could not do it—who can?—but Coningsby Dawson, novelist, has given us something better than a novel in his latest volume, "Carry On," made up of letters from the trenches to members of his family on this side of the Atlantic, collected by his father and published by the John Lane Company.

His new book is one of the most interesting productions of the subjective side of war that has yet appeared. He makes you see the reactions to the war of a civilian in uniform, a man accustomed to the ease of life who is abruptly plunged into carnage and barbarism and stench.

"This war will be won by tired men who will never again pass an insurance examination," is one of the phrases, one of many, that flash the Somme horror to his readers. And throughout the book the novelist remains always a writer; in a candle-lit dugout, with shells screaming overhead, he tries to plan the novel of tomorrow.

Coningsby Dawson sailed for Europe last July. "I've become a little child again in God's hands," he wrote to his family after months of training in a Canadian camp, "with full confidence in His love and wisdom, and a growing trust that whatever He decides for me will be the best and kindest." A short two months later he was in Northern France, hurled without easy gradations into the midst of the carnage of the Somme. In one of his first letters from the trenches he wrote to his sister:

"It's extraordinary how commonplace war becomes to a man who is thrust among others who consider it commonplace. Not fifty yards away from me a dead German lies rotting and uncovered—I dare say he was buried once, and then blown out by a shell."

Admiration for the coolness of the men engaged in the deadly work constantly overcame the young novelist as he grew to know his comrades better. "If unconscious heroism is the virtue most to be desired," he wrote to his father last September, "and heroism spiced with a strong sense of humor at that, then pretty well every man I have met out here has the amazing guts to wear his crown of thorns as though it were a cap-and-bells." And, in the same letter, he gave this description of being under fire:

I dare say you'll wonder how it feels to be under shell fire. This is how it feels—you don't realize your danger until you come to think about it afterward—at the time it's like playing coconut shies at a coon's head—only you're the coon's head. You take too much interest in the sport of dodging to be afraid.

One of the best passages in the entire collection of letters is this description of a battlefield as it is in the Northern France of today:

Well, I've seen my first modern battlefield and am quite disillusioned about the splendor of war. The splendor is all in the souls of the men who creep through the squalor like vermin—it's in nothing external. . . .

A modern battlefield is the abomination of abominations. Imagine a vast stretch of dead country, pitted with shell holes as though it had been mutilated with smallpox. There's not a leaf or a blade of grass in sight. Every house has either been leveled or is in ruins. No bird sings. Nothing stirs. The only live sound is at night—the scurry of rats.

You enter a kind of ditch, called a trench; it leads on to another and another in an unjoyful maze. From the sides feet stick out, and arms and faces—the dead of previous encounters. "One of our chaps," you say casually, recognizing him by his boots or khaki, or "Poor blighter—a Hun!" One can afford to forget enmity in the presence of the dead.

It is horribly difficult sometimes to distinguish between the living and the slaughtered—they both lie so silently in their little kennels in the earthen bank. You push on, especially if you are doing observation work, till you are past your own front line and out in No Man's Land. You have to crouch and move warily now.

Zing! A bullet from a German sniper. You laugh and whisper, "A near one, that."

My first trip to the trenches was up to No Man's Land. I went in the early dawn and came to a Mme. Tussaud's show of the dead, frozen into immobility in the most extraordinary attitudes. Some of them were part way out of the ground, one hand pressed to the wound, the other pointing, the head

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sunken, and the hair plastered over the forehead by repeated rains. I kept on wondering what my companions would look like had they been three weeks dead. My imagination became ingeniously and vividly morbid. When I had to step over them to pass, it seemed as though they must clutch at my trench coat and ask me to help.

Poor lonely people, so brave and so anonymous in their death! Somewhere there is a woman who loved each one of them and would give her life for my opportunity to touch the poor clay that had been kind to her. It's like walking through the day of resurrection to visit No Man's Land.

Then the Huns see you and the shrapnel begins to fall—you crouch like a dog and run for it.

Soon after that a terrifying adventure befell the novelist, of which he makes light in a letter to his mother:

Today I had the funniest experience of my life—got caught in a Hun curtain of fire and had to lie on my tummy for two hours in a trench with the shells bursting five yards from me—and never a scratch. You know how I used to wonder what I'd do under such circumstances. Well, I laughed. All I could think of was the sleek people walking down Fifth Avenue and the equally sleek crowds taking tea at the Waldorf. It struck me as ludicrous that I, who had been one of them, should be lying there lunchless.

"Oh, if I get back, how differently I shall write!" he exclaims in another letter, and he adds:

When you've faced the worst in so many forms you lose your fear and arrive at peace. There's a marvelous grandeur about all this carnage and desolation—men's souls rise above the distress—they have to, in order to survive. When you see how cheap men's bodies are you cannot help but know that the body is the least part of personality. * * *

I plan novels galore and wonder whether I shall ever write them the way I see them now. My imagination is to an extent crushed by the stupendousness of reality. I think I am changed in some stern spiritual way—stripped of flabbiness. I am perhaps harder—I can't say. That I should be a novelist seems unreasonable—it's so long since I had my own way in the world and met any one on artistic terms.

Here is a fine passage, in a letter to his sister:

The great uplifting thought is that we have proved ourselves men. In our death we set a standard which in ordinary life we could never have followed. Inevitably we should have sunk below our highest self. Here we know that the world will remember us and that our loved ones, in spite of tears, will be proud of us. What God will say to us we cannot guess—but He can't be too hard on men who did their duty.

He relates some terrible anecdotes of the front, among which the worst is this:

I met a solitary private wandering across a shell-torn field. I watched him and thought something was wrong by the aimlessness of his progress. When I spoke to him he looked at me mistily and said: "Dead men. Moonlit road." He kept on repeating the phrase, and it was all that one could get out of him. Probably the dead men and the moonlit road were the last sights he had before he went insane.

"I don't know whether I have been able to make any of my emotions clear to you in my letters," says Coningsby Dawson, writing after months of constant fighting. "Terror has a terrible fascination. Up to now I have always been afraid—afraid of small fears. At last I meet fear itself and it stings my

pride into an unpremeditated courage." And, in a letter to his father, he strikes forth this graphic bit:

"I've owed you a letter for some time, but I've been getting very little leisure. You can't send steel messages to the Kaiser and love-notes to your family in the same breath."

The spirit of the whole book—the spirit which made the novelist's father choose "Carry On" as a title for the volume of his son's letters—is nowhere better shown than in these passages:

There's a man I know of who had a record sheet of crimes. When he was out of action he was always drunk and up for office. To get rid of him they put him into the trench mortars, and within a month he had won his D. C. M.

He came out and went on the spree—this particular spree consisted in stripping a Highland officer of his kilts on a moonlight night. For this he was sentenced to several months in a military prison, but asked to be allowed to serve his sentence in the trenches. He came out from his punishment a King's Sergeant—which means that whatever he did nobody could degrade him. He got this for lifting his trench mortar over the parapet when all the detachment were killed. Carrying it out into a shell hole, he held back the Hun attack and saved the situation.

He got drunk again, and again chose to be returned to the trenches. This time his head was blown off while he was engaged in a special feat of gallantry. What are you to say to such men? Ordinarily they'd be blackguards, but war lifts them into splendor. In the same way you see mild men, timid men, almost girlish men, carrying out duties which in other wars would have won V. C.'s.

I don't think the soul of courage ever dies out of the race any more than the capacity for love. All it means is that the occasion is not present. For myself I try to analyze my emotions; am I simply numb, or do I imitate other people's coolness and shall I fear life again when the war is ended? There is no explanation save the great army phrase "carry on." We "carry on" because, if we don't, we shall let other men down and put their lives in danger. And there's more than that—we all want to live up to the standard that prompted us to come.

Last December Coningsby Dawson's father, mother, and sister crossed the ocean and were with him for a few precious days in London. They made the round of the theatres and the restaurants, while he poured into their ears the never-ending tale of his adventures, the epic of "out there." Then came the parting and, for him, the return to the valleys of death. But he bore back with him a memory to be treasured forever, a memory which he tried to put into words, thus:

"I can't tell you what the respite has meant to me. There have been times when my whole past life seemed a myth and the future an endless prospect of carrying on. Now I can distantly hope that the old days will return.

"When I was in London half my mind was at the front; now that I'm back in the trenches, half my mind is in London. I relive our gay times together; I go to cozy little dinners; I sit with you in the stalls listening to the music; then I tumble off to sleep and dream, and wake up to find the dream a delusion. It's a fine and manly contrast, however, be-

tween the game one plays out here and the fretful trivialities of civilian life."

When the United States showed unmistakable signs of being on the verge of taking a hand in the war, the soldier-novelist wrote:

I read in today's paper that the United States of America threatens to come over and help us. I wish she would. The very thought of the possibility fills me with joy. I've been light-headed all day. It would be so ripping to live among people, when the war is ended, of whom you need not be ashamed. Somewhere deep down in my heart I've felt a sadness, ever since I've been out here, at America's lack of gallantry—it's so easy to find excuses for not climbing to Calvary; sacrifice was always too noble to be sensible. I would like to see the country of our adoption become splendidly irrational even at this eleventh hour in the game; it would redeem her in the world's eyes. She doesn't know what she's losing.

From these carcass-strewn fields of khaki there's a cleansing wind blowing for the nations that have died. Though there was only one Englishman left to carry on the race when this war is victoriously ended, I would give more for the future of England than for the future of America with her ninety millions whose sluggish blood was not stirred by the call of duty.

It's bigness of soul that makes nations great and not population. Money, comfort, limousines, and ragtime are not the requisites of men when heroes are dying. I hate the thought of Fifth Avenue, with its pretty faces, its fashions, its smiling frivolity. America as a great nation will die, as all coward civilizations have died, unless she accepts the stigmata of sacrifice, which a divine opportunity again offers her.

If it were but possible to show those ninety millions one battlefield with its sprawling dead, its pity, its marvelous forgetfulness of self, I think then—no, they wouldn't be afraid. Fear isn't the emotion one feels—they would experience the shame of living when so many have shed their youth freely. This war is a prolonged moment of exultation for most of us—we are redeeming ourselves in our own eyes.

To lay down one's life for one's friend once seemed impossible. All that is altered. We lay down our lives that the future generations may be good and kind, and so we can contemplate oblivion with quiet eyes. Nothing that is noblest that the Greeks taught is unpracticed by the simplest men out here today. They may die childless, but their example will father the imagination of all the coming ages.