

**THE CHALLENGE OF THE DEAD: A VISION
OF THE WAR AND THE LIFE OF THE
COMMON SOLDIER IN FRANCE, SEEN
TWO YEARS AFTERWARDS BETWEEN
AUGUST AND NOVEMBER, 1920**

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STEPHEN GRAHAM

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Stephen Graham

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THE sun shines and a strong wind lifts the waves toward the land; the blue sea, in happy commotion, throws armfuls of white spray across the long stone breakwater which is called Zeebruges Mole. The white stone way goes two miles out to sea, and is swept by a marine healthiness. Upon it at intervals stand the German guns with the ends of their barrels burst out like thistle-heads. They point o'er the sea; they have their armoured shelter on the inner side of which on the level with the gunner's eye stand inscribed in neat German *schrift* the distances to all places of importance within gunshot—greenish-yellow camouflaged German guns with something of the tiger in their expression. On the lee side of the Mole cling the giant sheds of hydroplanes—as it were, hooked to the side of the great stone wall. In the quieter water on this side of the Mole one sees jutting out of the fairway the tops of vessels sunk there in 1918, and near by is a tablet marking the spot where the landing-party of the *Vindictive* made its daring raid upon the foe.

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Zeebruges! A party of school-children in "croc" are being escorted along the way by nuns; the Smiths of Surbiton have scrawled their names on the guns. There is a half-way house on the Mole now where one drinks beer and buys a picture postcard, or at the base of the Mole and looking outward toward England, one may dine alfresco at a Grand Palace Hotel. But what of that! The whole is sun-drowned and wind-swept and bare and open with a spaciousness and grandeur which are ample for the soul. The breeze which blows from England slackens nothing ere it reaches those fields where the wild flowers and the rushes bloom.

The mind goes back to 1914 and that great October when Antwerp fell but Ypres was held—when the last transports rolled alongside this glorious Mole bearing the Seventh Division, soon to be called, in faith, immortal, because half its number was destroyed before the war was very old.

October fifth they sailed away
Upon the salt sea's raging spray
And landed safe in Bruges bay
Upon their way to Ypres.

They stepped up from the boats, new, ruddy, well equipped, intact—they rolled forward, with drums beating, o'er the Belgian land. Now all who ever will arrive in Zeebruges from o'er the sea will arrive after the Seventh Division. The

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war-pilgrim, paying his due of honour to those who came that day, cannot follow very far on their road unless he die also. If he chooses to follow any one soldier, will he not very likely come soon to the road's end and a grey wooden cross where his soldier's destiny dipped into eternity?

Follow, then, the many who ran in the great torch race of the war, where the spent runner handed the torch from his hand to another, who in turn ran with it blazing till he fell, thus from Zeebruges to Ypres; from Ypres, flaming, to Neuve Chapelle; from Neuve Chapelle, flaming, to Loos; then aflame to the defence of the Salient; then a long blaze to the sevenfold altar of the Somme . . . man to man, unit to unit, period to period, till the November when the race was won.

Was it not characteristic of the old war that the "Contemptibles" of the Seventh, landing at Zeebruges, should at once be marched thirty miles in the wrong direction and then brought back by train. Antwerp was the beacon; Antwerp was not yet taken; the Naval Brigade was trying to save it. It was to fall, Zeebruges was to fall, Ostende itself was to fall—all very rapidly. When the boys got to Bruges it was rumoured that the Germans had had a set-back; when they got to Ostende they heard that Antwerp had been taken. When they got back to Bruges terror had seized the city. When they got to Ghent they took the

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Antwerp road—and then they came back, to Ypres.

The cobbled way to Bruges is not marked by destruction. The trees give shade, the houses stand, the fields are ploughed. Alice in an estaminet says she learned French from the French prisoners kept there—her bar used to be crowded with them. The Belfry of Bruges stands against the sky ahead—as if lifted out of the plain up to heaven itself.

You cross a canal which looks like a moat, and are in Bruges itself, a perfectly whole, undamaged, serene and peaceful city. Trams, shops, carts pulled by dogs, rows of estaminets, old gateways, old churches, and then the Grande Place. The broad market-place is empty, but one sits facing the great tower and listens to the ever-repeating chimes of the bells—silver in the evening hour. It is—no, it is impossible—yes, it is “The Rosary” which is being played by the bells. “*I . . . strive . . . to kiss the Cross,*” yells the steeple, and then goes plaintive and trickles tunefully away.

“Well, here I am and here I remain,” says an old man sitting behind me with a coffee-glass which he has long since drained. “Till England becomes sane, I stay here.”

“The cost of living is just as high in Peebles as in London,” says a woman sitting opposite him.

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“Mad everywhere,” says the man. “What I’d like is a flat somewhere near Lancaster Gate, so as I could go out into Kensington Gardens and sit under the trees and smoke.”

There was a pause.

Then the woman from Peebles ventured in a thin, small voice :

“I think that Peter Pan statue in Kensington is so sweet. It was put up in the night, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was ; and isn’t Kensington a delightful place?” says the old man.

They gloated in silence over Kensington. The bells of the Belfry began selections from *Faust*. *Is there a war on?* men used to ask facetiously. “There never was any war,” says Bruges. The sound of the boots has long since died away, the *boots, boots, boots, boots, marching up and down again*, away, away—this city was not delivered unto the Angel of Death.

It’s a shady highway that goes eastward to Ostende. At the village of St. Andrews there is a first war memorial to Belgian soldiers who gave their lives in the war ; and then you come to the open ground at Varsennaere where the 20th Brigade did outpost duty, the first resting-ground for many a man, if rest he could, on his first night on the terrain of war—Varsennaere, a mean red-brick village with estaminets and small shops. Next day ’twas Steine and then Ostende.