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**Norman Ten Hundred A Record of
the 1st (Service) Bn. Royal
Guernsey Light Infantry**

A. Stanley Blicq

Imprint

This book is part of the TREDITION CLASSICS series.

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This modest work is dedicated to:

Mrs. P. EREAUX,

**in appreciation of her genial personality,
strong moral courage and unhesitating
adherence to duty as she conceived it.**

And also to:

GEORGE W. CLARKE, Esq.,

**in memory of those Great Days when
we marched the Long Trail together;
shared the same sorrows, the same mirth;
— and now the same memories, far away,
indistinct; laughter merged with the
tears.**

**A. STANLEY BLICQ.
Guernsey, 1920.**

NORMAN TEN HUNDRED.

**A BATTALION OF THE OLDEST AND SMALLEST
DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD.**

Guernsey — named Sarnia by the Romans — one of the Channel Isles from out the sun swathed romance of whose shores rallied a fierce band of Norman warriors to the aid of their Duke, William of Normandy; afterwards the Conqueror, at Hastings, 1066. In reward for their valour William granted the Isles the independence they maintain

to this day. From Guernsey something approaching 7,000 men have gone out into the Great Undertaking. The Norman Ten Hundred is the 1st Royal Guernsey Light Infantry offered by the States of Guernsey for active participation side by side with the Mother Country's troops in any of the fighting areas. The narrative is authentic.

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TEN HUNDRED

By
A. Stanley Blicq

I SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER, 1917

Fed up! Every man of the Ten Hundred was fed up. Thirty-six hours cooped in cattle trucks, thirty or forty in a truck and inhaling an atmosphere that would have disgusted a pig—enough to feed anyone up.

The Belgian frontier was crossed at sunset and the fringe of war's devastation penetrated. Little interest or casual comment was aroused, although a reputable thirsty one remarked that he thought Jerry might have spared the village pub.

The long line of dirty trucks stopped with an abrupt jerk and noisy jarring of impact. Then it came! Grumbles ceased as if by common consent. There was something [Pg 2] indefinable but pregnant, and in tense silence ears were strained intently. Was it only the rumble of a distant cart on hard cobbles or ...? Faintly over the damp air came a long, insistent murmur. Hearts beat faster.... Guns!

Northward and then West the train panted up a slight grade, made a wide curve and then abruptly shut off steam. Long white tapering lights sprang up from nowhere, wavered and hesitated over the sky; caught in their glare a silvery bird and followed it across the night. Without warning an anti-aircraft gun launched with a deafening roar its whining shell heavenwards. Boom! In the sudden uproar Le Page fell off the train, jerking his tin of bully beef into Clarke's shaving water. The Jerry airman circled higher, dived again—and dropped his bomb, missing the train by hundreds of yards. He had spotted the smoke belching from the engine. Again he spiralled higher, slipped the converging net of searchlights and escaped ... ;... ugh! The Ten Hundred breathed a sigh of relief.

Disembarkation from a train at a point a few miles in the rear of the Front Line always tends to put the wind up you. The mental survey of a thousand men en bloc conveys immediately to the mind

what an obvious and unmistakable target a battalion forms. Eyes apprehensively search the sky for the danger that each one knows lurks somewhere up there in that black pall, the darker by contrast with the brilliant spearheads of light searching to and fro.

And of course in such windy moments the order to march off is delayed. Then when you ARE well on your way you wish you were not, for there is an unutterable weariness in those marches to bivouacs amid dead silence from end to end of the ranks; only ever present on the ear that unceasing booming of heavies or the nearer and unpleasant kr-ru-up of a not-far-distant German shell. Worn, sadly worn, beneath the staggering weight of packs on aching shoulders, where chafed skin smarts under the straps, head bent forward and downwards, one cared little for direction. Onward, always onward, feet burning with heavy going in clogging Belgian mud.... Sleep, one [Pg 3] longs to lie down there and then to sleep, anyhow, anywhere!

Bivouacs are under the best of circumstances mere makeshifts. "Stoke Camp" – CAMP! The irony of it – was on a par with the average. Here and there a scattered tent, here and there a sheet or two of oilcloth, and everywhere an abundance of water.

Still it was a haven of rest. Men filed tiredly by in Companies, sorted themselves out, and cast down packs; boots were jerked off anyhow, rifles stacked. Each man wrapped around him that old and trusty friend – his overcoat, heads rested on the hard packs ... doze and dream....

Three headquarters scouts are turned out for guard!

Two hours swinging up and down, then four hours sleep: and then ... the mind of the overworn first sentry sickens. Again and again over the muddy uneven strip, watching fascinated the weird, mad shadows cast in gaunt trees from a perpetual red glow eastwards. From amid the bivouacs a lad cries fitfully in his uneasy sleep; a hardy few can be seen by the glow of cigarettes sitting beneath a solitary tarpaulin.

From the distance something high in the heavens hummed softly the while here and there far-off searchlights twinkled, one after another picking up the trail until the whole sky was ablaze with

wavering shafts of light. The murmuring grew to a roar, accompanied by a deafening din of an Archie (anti-aircraft) barrage and the unceasing rattle of machine guns.

The enemy 'plane became visible, its sinister cross plainly discernible, and dived. The sentry heard something sizzle down and—a mighty flash lit up the woods: the whole earth trembled violently beneath a fierce concussion. The roar echoed and re-echoed, was followed by a continuous shower of litter tearing or trickling down through the trees. Unnerving cries rose from a score or more stampeding horses in the adjacent camp; but the subtler human ear caught on the damp night breezes a sound that froze the blood ... pitiful low sobs of men dying from the hot flying shrapnel. [Pg 4]

The Guernseys slept on as if nothing had happened. Therein lies the strange psychological mystery of the human mind.... The bomb failed to disturb; but a solitary shot from the sentry would have roused half the Battalion and sent them seeking half-consciously for their rifles.

In the morning the news spread rapidly. In it they found occasion to accentuate a grousing born of the damp, uncheering vista around them.

"Bombed in the train, bombed first night up 'ere," said Ginger, "grub late, no water to wash in; no baccy, no matches—only a blasted ole rifle wot's gone too rusty to clean."

Washing WAS a complex problem, involving choice between half-a-mile's walk to a doubtful pool or a canteen full (about a pint and a half) of water obtained from a muddy puddle in the roadway. The latter method requiring a minimum of physical exertion was by far the more popular and each tin of valued water underwent utilisation to its very extreme limits, i.e., until reduced to something approaching a soup.

There are always days when the Ten Hundred arouse within themselves by their own exertions a shy, deep pride of their Regiment. It is a characteristic happy knack of the boys to give their very best during parades before the G.O.C., and that was undoubtedly a strong factor in building up the Battalion's fame at Bourne Park.

They visibly and agreeably impressed the G.O.C., 29th Division, at their initial appearance before him. Whether the Guernsey's exceptional steadiness solicits approval, or if the rapid rhythmical movements in handling arms—quicker than is customary with other regiments—pleases the Official Eye cannot be accurately gauged. It is a concrete certainty, however, that the unit composes an efficient, compact body comparing very favourably with its contemporaries.

Fritz carried on his genial bombing expeditions night and day over the surrounding district, thereby giving birth to defensive measures in the form of an excavation inside each tent two feet in depth. Outside a wall of similar height was constructed around the tent or bivouac—few have the luxury of a tent. A degree of protection from [Pg 5] flying shrapnel is thereby obtained, unless, of course, Fritz registers a direct hit.

Miniature dug-out were cut down into the wet soil by the more enterprising, but proved ghastly failures, even in the dry hours ... if anything out there could be termed "dry." I doubt it, excepting the thirst of a few reputables. Twenty-four hours' rain gave the most ambitious dug-out an opportunity to demonstrate its exceptional capability of receiving and RETAINING water. The scene presented in the morning was unique.

A steel helmet sailed majestically behind an empty tin of bully, in turn twirling by a pair of sunken boots. Clinging desperately to a few wet sandbags, four marooned muddy individuals glared ferociously at the interested onlookers and developed fearful vocal powers of emphasis that shocked the genial enquirers who came in dozens to discover if: "A rain-drop or two had trickled in."

The peculiarity of being bombed is such that a sense of personal security takes a long while to outlive the insistent curiosity that compels one to stare fascinated at the death above. An up-stretched neck and straddle-legged attitude predominated—so did neck-ache.

White, during a raid, threw a stone upon Tubby's hat, causing the latter to drop his mess-tin of dinner in hasty fright ... but the sight of the stew sliding gracefully down White's blankets delighted the onlookers and made "honours easy."

The Ten Hundred, of course, attempted to bring a Jerry down. Sergeant Russel nightly pointed the muzzle of his Lewis-gun in the air and pulled the trigger, in the hope perhaps that Fritz might inadvertently sail into the track of his bullets. Unfortunately firing at so perpendicular an angle caused the lead to fall into the adjacent infantry lines and they—they returned the compliment, although neither Battalion inflicted any "Blighty's" on the other.

Two Companies had to go up the line on a hazardous task. The twist of the coin gave the honour to A. and D. And yet how forcible a factor was that coin in deciding the unfathomable wherefore of existence. It was thrown in the air; fell, wavered on edge, flattened out. And implicitly, [Pg 6] blindly obeying the indict conveyed from its face this or that man passed from active, living phenomenon in the evolution of the cosmic process to mere insensible matter.

Life, then, is chance, luck; to which no guiding factors, laws, or binding principles can be adduced.

Before marching off from the bemuddled "parade" ground we were fed up. Constant rain had rendered an always muddy surface into a slimy quagmire, in which every step forward was a conscious effort. There was little singing in either Companies (A. and D.), during the short march to the train conveying the party to near a shell-infested area where the said party would partake of its outdoor picnic. "Party"—the ironical humour of it!

Each lad was tired, wet, and hungry. Tempers easily ruffled. "Wot the 'ell do yer think year bumpin' into?" shouted Biffer at an unfortunate who had side-slipped into him.

"Bumpin' into?" the other grunted, "nothing much by the look of it." They glared at one another like fighting cats ... the contretemps fizzled out; both were too tired to argue.

Disembarkation during the night in a blinding storm of rain that had materially increased to a torrential downpour materially helped to damp spirits already none too high. Bumping wildly into this figure or that, slipping full-length into inches of water and thereby saturating what little dry clothing that had remained so, they peered vainly into the all absorbing blanket of night for the tents, bivouacs or shelters that were not there. We have all had our minds

permeated with a strong fear of Hell.... After that night many will thank their stars that this abode of ill-omen is HOT and therefore apparently DRY.

Each man was told to do the best for himself with a ground sheet. To derive shelter in such a storm with a few feet of oilcloth, no props, no light, is a task to which sweeping back the Atlantic with a toothbrush is simple in comparison.

But they were up against it ... grumbles ceased. Someone by an extraordinary stroke of luck stumbled upon an R.E. dump from which sundry articles essential to the [Pg 7] construction of shelters could be filched. Filched must be emphasised, for therein lay the ulterior reason for transformation from "fed-upity" to a genial anticipation of forthcoming trouble. The C.R.E. in the morning would raise Hell when he discovered half his dump appropriated and scattered by the Guernseys over a wide area. The O.C.'s of A and D Companies would be hauled over the coals.... There was the nucleus of the farce. The men pinched and the officers stood the racket. The very thought sent the whole ranks chuckling and up soared the high spirit barometer. There was, too, in these repeated silent visits to the dump a possibility of discovery that appealed to that venturesome spirit so characteristically a trait of the Ten Hundred. They chuckled gleefully at each nefarious trip, almost wished some interfering N.C.O. would appear from an R.E. depôt and originate by his unpleasantries something of a rough house.

Shelters through which streams trickled were run up and the floors tiled with a queer assortment of tins, empty cartridge cases and odd bits of wood. Drenched to the very skin, shivering and sneezing with cold, they gave no heed to the rain tattooing on their faces or to the enemy shells. Within the rickety shelters damp figures, huddled together for warmth, closed tired eyes and in utter weariness of limbs fell into a fitful sleep.

Snatches of song, bursts of laughter, echoed here and there in the night. Laughter! What on earth was there to laugh at? The wretched improvised shelters on and into which rain crept, lashed earthwards by a howling wind? The cold, chilly feet, clinging clothes and wet skin? Or is there anything refreshingly humorous in the knowledge that Death groped about in the night for his own ... found them? Is

there a mirth-provoking element in the ten to one chance that YOU may not see the morrow?

All honour to you, Normans! From Valhalla, in his high seat with the Anses, Rollo of old looked down on you with pride.

Langemarck, grim, windswept and desolate.

A few short weeks before it had by the flowing of British blood, by our own Division, been wrenched from the German grasp. There is everywhere about it an awesome sacredness. [Pg 8] One hesitates to treat lightly over the soil that belongs to those whose eyes were closed in the taking, and whose warrior forms lie at rest beneath the pathetic white crosses dotted over the gruesome waste. Those sad little emblems of Supreme Sacrifice: "To the memory of a British Soldier." Simple but magnificent! A farewell to some unknown—to some mother's son.

The first shell that scatters you in all direction, secretly feeling yourself doubtfully all over, abruptly disperses any sentimentality that may cling to the mind. The two Companies found it so when they marched still further up the line and commenced work on two different sectors, shelled—but comparatively lightly—for the first day or two.

The first line over-attacked in the mud, swept over Poelcapelle and advanced on Passchendaele, pausing while the mobile artillery moved up to support over roads that were daily filled in and rebuilt by fatigue parties similar to the Guernseys. The German Headquarters concentrated their guns upon the immediate British rear, with the intention of hampering and impeding the movements of reinforcements and artillery.

The Guernseys got the cream of it. Ground was churned up for yards and bodies buried weeks before were blown from their resting places, grinning white and hideous at the sky. Work on the roads was one perpetually interrupted operation, men ducking every few minutes to the whine of a shell. Life was an unknown quantity—no man could gauge what moments were still left him. Streams of wounded ran, hobbled or limped painfully away from that sector of Hell. Artillery galloped steaming horses through, sighing with relief upon attaining the other end.

There comes a time after his first baptism of fire, after his first view of the shattered mutilated remnants of a shell-stricken body, that the infantryman turns towards where invisible German guns from comparative safety belch forth death, and shakes his impotent fist at this enemy. He picks himself up, white and shaken, from where the concussion has thrown him, and amid the cries of the dying, "Curse you," he sobs, "if ever the chance comes — —!" [Pg 9]

A battery of R.F.A. within a few hundred yards of the road opened salvoes lasting throughout every morning until the ears throbbed with each successive roar and the earth trembled violently beneath the 6-in.'s concussion. Jerry airmen endeavouring to spot the gun-positions swooped down unheard, pumping lead in heavy showers from machine-guns upon the Guernseys and scattering them broadcast.

Pike stopped a "Blighty" with his foot, and Pleton, a shrapnel bullet whistling clean through his chest, fell limply forward. Gas commenced, coming over in shells ... in response to the alarm, respirators were donned with an alacrity phenomenal in its hasty adjustment. De La Mare discovered one of the eye-pieces missing. Holding his nose with one hand, he spluttered: "Wa', wi' I do?" and instantly clapped his hand over his mouth, jumping from one foot to another in apprehensive uncertainty. From within every helmet choking bursts of laughter sounded muffled on the air. The unfortunate lad held his breath until black in the face, gasped in a frenzied intake of air, and gingerly felt himself. Ultimately instructed to change into the P.H. helmet, he did so nervously, succeeded, and sat down, inhaling deep breaths of relief.

"All Clear" was sounded, but from the moment he removed his mask and for days afterwards he was the recipient of sly solicitations from a chuckling platoon.

"I wonder why 'e was pullin' on 'is nose?" Le Page innocently inquired; "ain't it long enough?"

"Dunno," Ginger replied; "p'raps 'e 'as chronic catarrh!"

Day followed day, bringing little change in the task. Casualties were not exceptionally heavy, but the strenuous work and perpetual stress of the nerves told on them. For there is no more nerve-

shattering task than to have to submit without active retaliation day after day to harassing shell-fire. It is during this early initiating into a general expectation of possible death that the young warrior has to conquer the psychological instinct impressed with fear upon his imagination from childhood that LIFE is his most valued asset, and must be safeguarded before all things. And now [Pg 10] his conception is revolutionised. He must accept death as a daily possibility.

It is patent that dusk found them weary and worn, plodding and wading silently "homewards," shovel on shoulder, across four or five kilos of desolate mud; falling and tripping over stagnant bodies, masses of tangled wire, bricks and jagged wood-work everywhere impeding progress. And yet a consciousness of good work done reacted on their spirits. They reflected contentedly of the meal awaiting, of their pipes, their sleep.

The inscrutable ways of Chance—Destiny, call it what you will—brought about the greatest catastrophe that had so far obtained in the Guernsey ranks. Major Davey moved his party over an area—at about 11 in the morning of a warm, sunny Sunday—coming in for a spell of shelling extraordinary in intensity. A labour unit retired because of the exigencies of the precarious situation. Inflexible, the Normans carried on, then—s-i-iz-z ... kr-rupp!

The leading platoon caught it in their very midst, a ghastly heap of mangled flesh and shattered limbs were scattered to right and left. Two unhappy lads were blown to unrecognisable fragments. No words can convey the heart-rending cries of those whose bodies cringe and writhe from the hell-hot agony of searing shrapnel. There is an unmistakable appeal for pity that stirs the depth of feeling until a wild frenzy to right matters sends Berserk passion to the brain. Oh, you German gunners in your serene safety, if ever my chance comes ...!

Thus the first of the Ten Hundred went over the Great Divide.

An order to retire was quietly obeyed. They marched back, some shaken, some bleeding from minor wounds: bearing the stretcher cases and dead with them. Some gazed eastwards, faces transfigured with impotent rage, a few white faced boys stared hypnotised before them; but the remainder, heads erect, looked grimly ahead ... they would not forget!

A day or so later the Normans came out. Cookie, black and grimy from head to foot – the only condition in [Pg 11] which he really felt at home – prepared the removal of his cookers.

"I didn't 'alf 'ave the wind up," he confided me afterwards, "about that there last dinner; becos, you see, a Jerry shell wot burst close chucked a great chunk of mud into one of them cockers. Wot was I to do? Couldn't throw away the grub ... didn't 'ave no more, so I just stirred it all up. Anyhow," reflectively, "it made it thicker, and they sez it was 'tray bun."

And so they came away with out farewell glance across that tragic countryside, lonely and desolate as if God-forsaken in its very devastation. The eye took in the reflected light in a myriad pools, the white crosses, sinister wire treking right away to where a few solitary tree stumps stood up madly against the skyline. They thought with a pang of those who slept the long last sleep in the clinging wet soil, whose footsteps would no longer ring on the hard road in rythmic chorus with the old Ten Hundred, whose voices would ne'er again swell the Battalion's marching rallies....

Following a brief rest the 29th Division trained, from Poperinghe southwards. The same weary cooping in cattle-trucks, same monotonous crawl. And yet during a halt at Hazebrucke arose one of those moments that live long in memory, when patriotism rises high in the breast. The station was crowded with soldiers and civilians as the Guernseys' train drew up in the cool, dusky evening light. Someone played a cornet: "The long, long trail." From end to end of the train the Ten Hundred caught it up and sang low in their soft southern accent. A hush fell on the chattering onlookers, they turned and stared. The harmony enveloped them, stirred them ... and we, ah, how the blood stirs even now. But the memory saddens – for the voices of many are for ever still. [Pg 12]

II

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER, 1917 HENDECOURT

The mad rattle of strife in Belgium had throbbled on the ear-drums incessantly day and night, but on the frontage beyond Hen-