

"HE PLAYED THE GAME"

George Whitehead

IT was a beautiful evening early in June last that, as I sat in the office at Peter Street finishing up some details of the day, there was announced "An officer to see you, Sir—Major P. C. Stanley." The major was in a reminiscent mood, and immediately started in to say that for long he had felt he owed it to the memory of the boy and to Dr. Barnardo's Homes to come in person and to say "that if there ever was a true-hearted and plucky fellow, Pte. George Whitehead was one."

Major Stanley then proceeded to tell the following story, and there was something of a sob in his voice as he spoke of the lad who had thought enough of his officer to risk his own life.

"Pte. Whitehead was detailed to my company in the 75th Battalion in August, 1916, and for some four or five months had been acting for me in the capacity of a company runner. As a soldier the boy was brave and fearless; and when under fire, or in any position of danger, his coolness was remarkable and inspiring. His good nature under all circumstances, and his unflinching cheerfulness under all conditions, were a source of inspiration and courage to all his comrades. He was never known to complain of his lot; his physical energy never seemed to wane, and it would almost seem as though he was exempt from fatigue. To him the 'carrying on' with the war was simply part of his daily work, and the more strenuous the job, or the more glaring the discomforts, the broader would grow his smile. On the line of march he would cheerfully volunteer to carry the pack of a weary and sore-footed comrade, and I have seen him stride along with his own plus two

other rifles on his shoulder. He was never known to sleep while his company commander was awake, and, during the long hours of night, when his officer would call 'Runner!' his voice would be the first to respond, even though he was not the next in line, and in spite of the fact that three other men detailed for the same duty sat in the corner of the H.Q. dugout beside him.

"It was on Vimy Ridge, at 5.30 in the morning. Our Battalion had advanced to a raid on the enemy trenches in four waves, the first of which was formed by my own company. Of our party in the immediate centre of the line, the company sergeant-major, Pte. Whitehead, four other men and myself were successful in breaking through the enemy wire. The opposition had been determined. In spite of the hail of bullets and shells in their faces, our company had dauntlessly pressed on. It seemed as though only the bayonet could silence the Prussian machine gunners. From the flanks and from the front bullets and shells had come thickly, machine gun and rifle had simply poured lead on our fast-thinning line as we ploughed our way through the sticky, clinging mud of 'No Man's Land.'

"Our men had fallen thick and fast as they came up against the German wire entanglements, and with the exception of our small party, those who remained were too utterly exhausted to break through. We had reached our objective and were just about to jump into the enemy trench when the sergeant-major fell, reducing our numbers to six. The Hun had fought desperately, but our supporting artillery had not been without effect, for the smashed trenches for

which we had striven were filled with dying and dead.

"As our party jumped in the enemy survivors jumped out and ran some twenty or thirty yards to the rear, and from that position they threw bombs in on top of us. Taking what shelter we could, we retaliated as effectively as our exhausted condition would allow, but soon four of our number fell, leaving Pte. Whitehead and myself. Seeing that our case was hopeless and that it would be madness to remain, I roared at Whitehead to 'get out,' and succeeded in making my voice heard through the din. After throwing a parting bomb at the enemy, we both turned and scrambled up the parapet, and as we ploughed our way back together through the wire I was unfortunate enough to become entangled in the barbs. The more I struggled the worse my position became.

"By this time the enemy had rushed forward, had again occupied the trench we had just vacated, and were throwing bombs, which were, fortunately, passing over our heads, as the range was close. There I hung helpless as a child, the perspiration stood out on me in beads, and for a few seconds I thought my time had come. The enemy had only to come some twenty or twenty-five yards to pick me out; but I afterwards learned that one of my remaining machine gun crews and a few riflemen still lying outside the wire had held them back.

"Suddenly I felt myself being jerked forward. My companion, George Whitehead, seeing my dilemma, had returned and, fastening his hands on my collar, had dragged me free, tearing my tunic and breeches in ribbons in doing it. Once clear of the wire, we jumped for the shelter of a shell hole. From there we threw our last remaining bomb, and while there, a bullet from the flank caught my

companion in the left breast, scoring him across the chest, while one from the front caught myself in the right thigh. Weak and exhausted, we lay there for some little time, and finally we commenced to crawl back across the 350 yards of 'No Man's Land,' making our way from one shell hole to another. Around us our few surviving comrades also straggled back, our supporting artillery and machine gun companies covering the withdrawal of our stricken remnant, and finally, after a seemingly endless trip, we fell exhausted into the friendly shelter of our own front line.

"George, in his exhaustion, had been compelled to discard his rifle, but he carried back with him a flag which was to have played an important part in the operation, and to which I had ordered him to hold on at all costs, previous to leaving our jumping-off trench.

"Private Whitehead, brave, unselfish boy, had not paused to weigh the chances; he counted his life as nothing, and had risked himself to save his officer, perhaps from death, but certainly from being a prisoner in the enemy's hands. My report was successful in gaining for him a well-deserved decoration; but he did not live long to enjoy it, for, some few months later, he fell, one of the bravest, truest soldiers who had passed through the rolls of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

"And, to-day, Pte. Whitehead sleeps beneath the sod in France; but a cleaner soul, a braver spirit, or a more splendid specimen of manhood never passed to meet his Maker."

George was killed in action three months later, on the 8th of June, 1917, and his old officer and I sat in Toronto on the second anniversary of the day he laid down his life for his country, determined to keep his memory green.