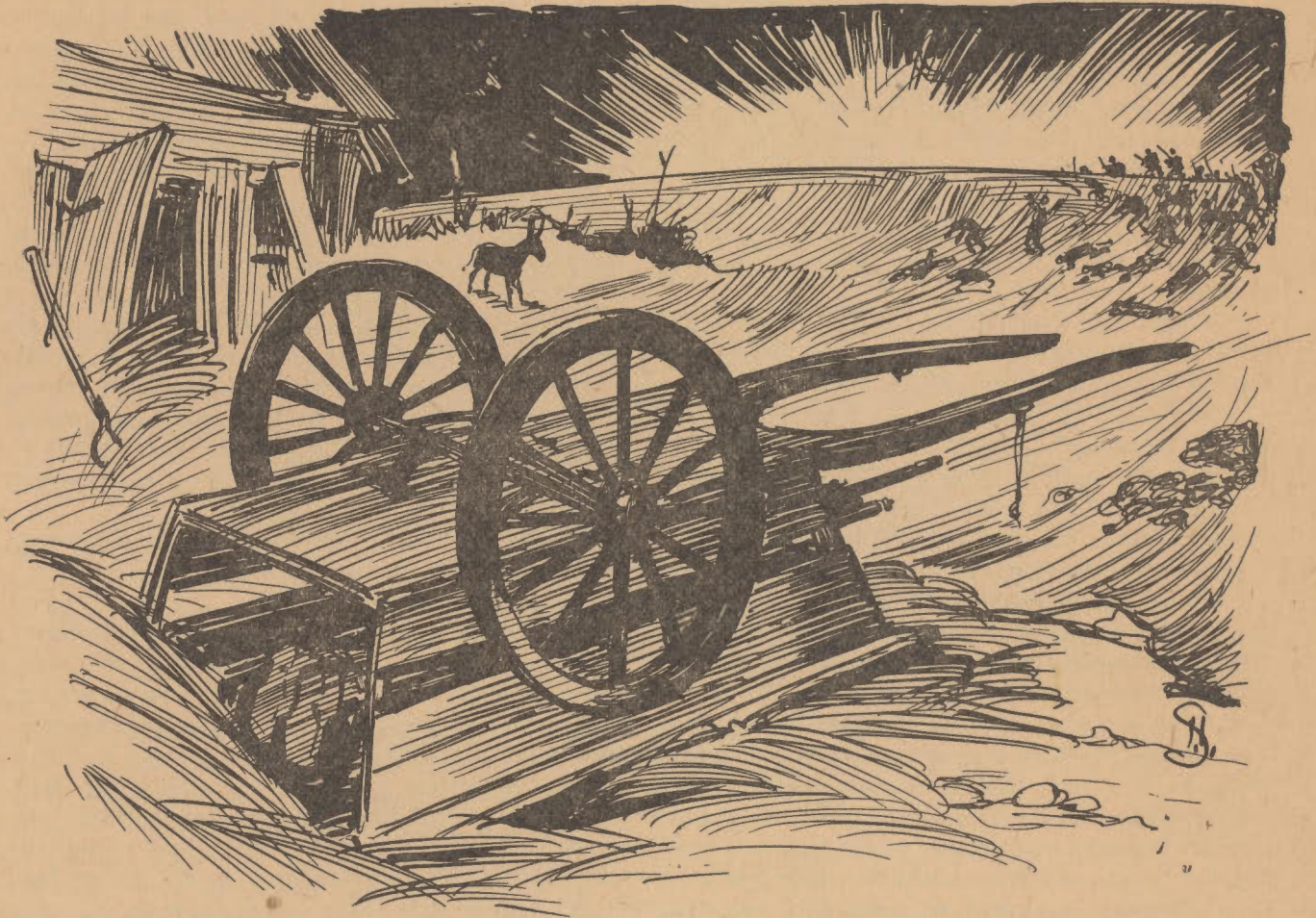


# MAXIM GUN McCUISH

By THOMAS H. RADDALL

A V. C. awaited confirmation of the story of Sergeant McCuish. But he played a lone hand in closing the gap between Pilkem and Langemarck. Only he and the German dead knew the whole story.



THERE WAS a sound of laughter under the spreading maples and chestnuts; children playing hopscotch and sheep-in-the-pen; women, mostly in the thirties, conversing in happy cliques, and men playing baseball under the hot sun as though it were ten years ago, and their waistlines several belt-holes smaller. The Umpty Umph Battalion Memory Club was in the throes of the annual reunion.

I am always very grateful for my friend Foster's invitations to these affairs. To be sure, the Battalion accepts me with the condescension due an outsider and a navy man to boot, but they have seen much of me in the peace years and my presence in a reminiscent group no longer impels a chilly silence. A great distinction, you understand, for they recall things between themselves that the most persuasive of Gentiles could not wring from them, and there is more of the true story of the war told at Legion smokers than you could read from history books in a month of Sundays. For my own part I spent the

four bitter years with the drifter patrol and my memories are confined to grey seas and skies and a constant resigned expectancy of a quick hoist into Eternity. None of the fire and blood and mud and glory. That's why I like to be at hand when the Umpty Umph asks itself to "'member when".

They had fallen in that morning on the Common, a scant hundred of them—the Battalion has scattered far and wide in the peace years—and the Colonel, a little greyer, a little more stoop in his tall figure, but with vocal powers undiminished, had bellowed, "From the right, numbah!" in the old stentorian tone. They had marched to Dock Street where the wives and kiddies awaited them, and embarked on the wheezy old paddlewheeler for the picnic delights of McNare's Island. Ball teams had been quickly organized and the Privates had defeated the N. C. O.'s to the merry tune of 31-20—a wild game as you see—and were now tussling with the Officers. A former bomber was on the mound for the Privates,



and the Major, who had waxed exceeding fat since the march to the Rhine, was swinging the bat fiercely.

Suddenly, miraculously, the Major connected with the ball and drove out a terrific foul just outside the line. The base umpire, a short, thickset man with flowing Kitchener mustaches, went to earth with more speed than dignity as the ball sizzled over him. Instantly the grandstand struck up a half-forgotten song which enquired, with some persistence, if anyone knew where the sergeant-major was and answered itself with a thunderous chorus of "Down in the deep dugooooooooout." The song degenerated into a roar of laughter and joyful yells and there were shouts of "Maxim! Maxim! Good ol' Maxim!"

"That," said Foster to me, "is Maxim McCuish, the Unsung Hero of Ypres." The Unsung Hero picked himself up and dusted himself off.

"McCuish," I pondered, "is a good old Cape Breton name and Maxim's a poor handle for it. Should be Roderick or Donald. And why Unsung?"

"Sit down," said Foster, "and you shall hear how Douglas Fraser McCuish earned the title of Maxim-Gun and won the Battle of Ypres besides."

We sat, the Lieutenant, the Adjutant, Foster and myself, on a grassy slope where there was a view of that preposterous ball game, and produced briars with common impulse.

"Douglas Fraser McCuish," began Foster, "enlisted during the Boer War and went to South Africa with the R. C. R., and that was the start of his military career. After some months of chasing Cronje about the veldt he got in the way of a stray Mauser bullet, and that was darn near the finish of it. Anyway, he went home a wounded hero (they were all heroes in South Africa, God forgive 'em. Look at old Colonel Stellenbosch) and people hung on his every word. And he told them two things. First, that the Boers made very bad beer. Second, and equally important, that the only way to win a war in South Africa or anywhere else was to sit on a hilltop with a Maxim and knock the stuffing out of the other fellow when he came along. "Look at Colenso," he would say. "Look at Modder River. And Magersfontein."

It became an obsession with him, He bought contour maps of his home country and spent most of his time hunting up theoretical machine-gun locations. He studied ballistics and velocities and trajectories and angles of fire. He hung a great portrait of Sir Hiram Maxim in his parlor and I'll wager he knew as much about the gun as the old chap himself. And he spent the next ten years inflicting all this upon the militia clubs who were not interested in the least. Then came the War. McCuish hustled into khaki via the nearest recruiting office and presently found himself at Valcartier scraping potatoes, which galled

him very much. So he filled with heartfelt gratitude when the Colonel discovered him and made him sergeant of the machine-gun section of the Umpty Umpt. There were no machine-guns, it is true, for they were as scarce in those early days as a quartermaster's chances in Heaven, and the fire-eating McCuish had to sit down and twiddle his thumbs, and hope that the French landscape was well off for hills. In this condition he passed the long winter at Salisbury Plain. When the guns arrived, shortly before the division sailed for St. Nazaire, they proved to be Colts, which McCuish declared to be an outrage and an offense in the eyes of God. It was about this time that irreverent privates in his section began to refer to him as Maxim-Gun McCuish.

In the fullness of time the division moved up to the Salient and took over that fateful line of ditches that ran from Langemarck to Gravenstafel in the tag-end of the winter of '14-'15. It was a melancholy country, even then, which was two years before it became the Sahara of mud of the Passchendaele days—

"Bellevue Spur," whispered the Lieutenant, passing his hand across his eyes. "Vienna Cot," muttered the Adjutant.

"—And the most doleful thing in all that doleful landscape was the face of Maxim-Gun McCuish. Where were the bold hills and kopjes of South Africa? A little to the southward two armies had wrestled for months over a hill sixty metres high, and McCuish declared there were anthills on the veldt bigger than that. There were almost continual mists rising out of the steaming marshland and the field of fire was very limited. The machine-gun lieutenant, furthermore, decreed that there should be more joy in a gunner's heart over one tumbledown barn in a turnip field than over all the hills in the universe, and where there were no ruined *fermes* he set them to digging emplacements in the foul mud of nights. All of which was iron in the soul of Maxim-Gun McCuish.

Then came that April morning when Duke Albrecht Maria of Wurtemberg let loose his gas at the French Colonials, entrenched on our left between Langemarck and Dixmude. A thousand Turcos dropped choking to the ground, and the rest beat it, leaving their gassed and wounded, and guns to the enemy. In a flash the Germans were across the Yser and our Third Brigade hung in the air like a sock on a line, which was precisely what Wurtemberg wanted. So he opened up with every gun he had and poured thirty thousand men out of the Forest of Houthulst into a grand drive along the Poelcappelle-Ypres road. In an hour the whole front was chaos, eight thousand Canucks against two German army corps, and the muddy little Hennebeck running red from Zonnebeke to the Yser.

Almost the first crump that landed among the



Umpty Umph blew No. 2 gun to smithereens, and we pulled Maxim McCuish out of a heap of torn bodies and loaded him on a stretcher for the rear, uniform in rags and blood from head to foot. And that's the official part of the his story. The rest is his own and you can take it or leave it.

When he came to, he says, he was bumping along the road to Wieltje in a field ambulance. He felt himself carefully all over and found that barring a cut on his hip and a general shake-up there wasn't a thing wrong with him, and he leaped to the ground with a mighty spring unnoticed in the general uproar. Wieltje was on fire and seething with the backwash of the battle, and there were rows of hastily dropped dead men in the erstwhile trim front gardens of the houses next the road. McCuish sat on a heap of rubble to sort himself out. Now Wieltje is on the Poelcappelle-Ypres road, which formed the Canadian main line of communication and the sole hope of escape from the trap at St. Julien. There's a lane called the Admiral's Road running into Wieltje across country from the Yser, and scattered parties of Turcos were wandering along this lane throwing away their equipment and shouting "Allemand! Allemand!" and pointing northward. "Ho!" said McCuish incredulous, "Those niggers still runnin' away?" The transport man beside him nodded wearily. "Yeah. They been comin' in that way all day."

"And what," demanded McCuish, "is to stop Fritz from walkin' in here on top of 'em?"

"Not a thing," said the transport man dispassionately. "The Langemarck road and the Pilkem road is wide open, and this here Ameerl Shemang cuts across both of 'em." "Where," puzzled McCuish, "are the reserves?"

"You oughta know," declared the transport man, "they went up front long ago. The Belgians is movin' down along the Yser and they's an English brigade on the road from Bailleul, but Fritz'll be in Wipers ahead of 'em."

"Then," said Maxim-Gun McCuish, "we got to do something."

The transport man made a despairing motion of his hands. "You go lay down," he advised, "you've had a bellyful of war by the look of you. What kin two men do against an army? Or two hundred for that matter." And he moved away. McCuish set out along the Admiral's road to see what he could see.

Out of the litter along the now deserted lane he picked a Turco rifle and pack, and with these he pushed ahead boldly, leaving the uproar of the St. Julien battle at his right flank rear. He reasoned shrewdly enough that the Turcos had fled from their own shadows most of the way and that there were not more than a few German scouts as yet in the pie-

wedge between the Poelcappelle road and the Yser. About half a mile along the lane he came upon a mitrailleuse in the ditch with the legs of the tripod pointing drunkenly to the sky and a litter of filled cartridge belts all about, where the Turco crew had dropped them. He fell upon it like a wolf on the fold. A machine gun! An inferior weapon, to be sure, looking very naked without the fat water jacket of a Maxim: and it had a pistol grip too, which McCuish considered effeminate. With a Maxim, now, you had two good brass handles to grip while you shoved your thumbs down on the firing buttons, which gave you a steady touch and was comforting to the nerves, like the knobs on a dentist's chair. But McCuish thanked the Gaelic gods and cast about for a place to set it up. There he struck a snag. The countryside hadn't so much as a pimple, and there were folds in the ground that cut off the field of fire. There was one solution—to go forward, which on the face of it meant staggering along the rutty lane under that three legged octopus of a mitrailleuse, with a first-class chance of ambush by the first German patrol. But McCuish was a man of resource.

A farm stood by the road. One of those dreary Flemish *fermes* whose straggling buildings enclose a rough courtyard, with the everpresent heap of manure for a centrepiece. A shell had exploded in the main dwelling and scattered red tiles all over the yard, and the owner lay dead on his own doorstep. McCuish found a half-starved donkey in the barn, which he fed and watered and then hitched to a deep Flanders cart. He laid the gun and cartridge belts with a rusty axe in the bottom of the cart, covered them with his tunic, and shovelled the thing full of *fumier*. He rummaged the house for a pair of nondescript trousers and a jacket, for which he swapped his ragged khakis; he appropriated the dead man's cap and clogs, and in a very short time he was trundling along the road to Pilkem looking for a hill.

Now there is, he says, not far from the inn of the Quatre Chemins, a dip in the land forming a saucer perhaps a mile across, which is drained by a stagnant little *beek*. It is nearly bare of cover and the roads which cross it are not masked by those monotonous rows of poplars you see everywhere else. The Langemarck-Ypres road crosses one side of the saucer and the Pilkem-Ypres road the other. In the saucer bottom is a knoll which rises gently, but firmly, over the surrounding marsh, like a sergeant-major over a church parade, and the French surveyors—romantic souls—have called it LeTeton de la Vierge. When McCuish rumbled over the rim of the saucer he knew he had come into his own.

As he turned off the main track toward the Teton there came a loud shout which caused him to pull up the donkey with a jerk. Two German soldiers



and an officer stepped from some bushes beside the road and came up to the cart.

"*Ou est-ce-que vous allez?*" said the officer, trying to remember his schoolbooks and making a bad job of it.

McCuish, whose French is the *patois* of Acadie, held his tongue.

The officer repeated his question, yelling louder, as stupid men will.

McCuish shook his head and looked blank.

"*Dites! Dites!*" snapped the officer, and shoved his pistol under Maxim's nose. The time had come to say something. It was a ticklish situation.

"Abitibi," said McCuish, taking a chance. "Abitibi winnipegosis madawaska."

"*Comment?*" puzzled the officer.

"Algoma," declared McCuish, warming to his work. "Chicoutimi kamouraska manitoulin athabasca wapiti moosjaw nottawasaga"—with eloquent gestures as much as to say, "Please mister soldier, I'm only a poor farmer driving a load of manure down to my field yonder, and I wish you'd take your war somewhere else."

It fazed the German somewhat, but he still had hopes.

"*Anglais?*" he asked brightly, waving the pistol toward the distant spires of Ypres. "*Soldats Anglais?*"

McCuish shook his head slowly. "Restigouche," he spluttered, running desperately short of geography. "uh-uh-Shubenacadie. Pontiac."

A light dawned upon the officer. "*Flemische,*" he said, and spat in the road.

"*Flemische,*" echoed the soldiers, nodding to each other.

There was an awkward pause, during which his life hung in the balance. They had moved around to windward to avoid the reek of his cargo, and had he been heading toward the British lines there's no doubt they'd have shot him off the wagon box and passed on. The principle that a dead Belgian was a good Belgian had been well established by that time. But he was heading the other way, doubtless into the arms of some Flemish-speaking scouts farther back, so they waved him to go on.

"Muskoka," said McCuish gratefully, and rumbled away over the saucer to his hill. The Germans moved on toward Ypres.

His first idea was to turn the ruined *grange* on the Teton into a small fort, but second thought told him that his chief hope lay in concealment, with the tottering barn for a draw. He dumped his odoriferous freight and turned the donkey loose in a hedged field at the foot of the knoll. He then turned the wagon bottom up, removing the tailboard so he could get underneath with his gun and supplies. He hacked a slit along each side and the front of the

cart, lined it inside with bricks as high as the firing slots, and his cover was complete. The Turco knapsack provided a meal of sorts, and night fell, lit by the glare of the St. Julien battle to the east, the Yser fighting to the northwest, and the dull glow of burning Ypres to the south.

At six o'clock in the morning he was awakened by the uproar of the Canadian counter-attack at St. Julien where our badly involved left was trying to extricate itself. It was the morning of the busiest day of his life. About nine o'clock a field-grey patrol wandered over the rim of the saucer from the northward. When they were well down the slope he let them have it: one short burst of fire and a heap of *feld-grau* sprawled motionless in the Langemarck road. It was absurdly simple. From then on he was busy. Parties of Germans appeared on both roads to Ypres and he had to fire and shift his gun and change belts in one-two-three order. Then the Germans abandoned the roads and tried approaching through the fields, not realising that the moment they crossed the rim they showed up like a picket fence on the skyline. The process continued all morning. A group of figures would appear over the rim, there would be a "Tut-tut-tut," from the Teton and away they would scuttle—those who could run—back over the rim again. Like a peppery old lady shooing hens out of a dooryard. It was monotonous. Where were the field-grey masses rushing blindly to destruction, of which he had heard? The German army was disgustingly cautious, and this did not please McCuish. Their tactics in the afternoon pleased him still less. There was a flutter of signal flags on the horizon and no more figures came over the rim. There was a long and deadly silence finally broken by the sound of a malign woodpecker on the east slope, and bullets began to thwack and ping among the bricks of the shattered barn. It was some time before he located the gun. The crew had evidently worked down the slope while McCuish was strafing the signallers and it was only a chance gleam of sunshine on their gunbarrel that betrayed them. A vicious burst from the mitrailleuse and the woodpecker died abruptly. The infantry appeared no more.

Night came down, dank and chill, without another shot from the rim. And with it, his greatest danger, for they could rush him in the dark with ease. So he wound a cartridge belt about his waist, hoisted the gun across his shoulders and made his way in the darkness to a position he had selected on the west slope. There under cover of some friendly bushes and the dark he would be safe until morning.

The Germans didn't waste any time getting under way, for he'd hardly settled in his cover when a number of men passed down the slope near enough for him to hear the clink of equipment. The logical



procedure for the German commander, of course, was to hang on to the rim and send a force to flush the saucer from one side to the other, and McCuish concluded that the men who passed him had been detailed for the purpose. But judging from the way the subsequent firing broke out and the position of the bodies when daylight came the Germans must have closed in from three sides at once. The northern force missed its way in the murk—diverted by a drainage ditch probably—and blundered into the eastern force which was cautiously feeling its way down the slope. Somebody dropped a rifle which exploded with a flash and a bang, and in a moment they were blazing away at each other with nervous abandon. The troops below McCuish joined in with vigor, firing at the flashes on the other slopes, and before long the whole saucer resembled a firefly festival. McCuish always speaks of this part of the business with a certain irritation. He could not fire his gun on account of the telltale flash and so it had no place in his scheme of things.

*C'est magnifique mais ce n'est pas la guerre.* And he was, besides, consumed with an unholy fear that the donkey might be shot. After half an hour of fireworks there was much blowing of whistles and a bugle, and the party below McCuish passed up the slope bearing something which groaned and uttered guttural curses. The enemy had abandoned the attempt. Now it is characteristic of Maxim-Gun McCuish that when he crept back to his wagon in the black dark that comes before dawn his first thought was for the safety of his transport. He found that noble animal all present and correct, though there were two dead Germans in a corner of the pasture. Any other man or animal would have been half dead with fright, but the donkey was as calm as McCuish himself. That, McCuish says, is the supreme advantage of being an ass.

He squatted under that foul wagon all the next day, not knowing that the Canadians had successfully escaped from the St. Julien trap, that the Germans were falling back across the Yser before the victorious Belgians, and that British supports were pouring through Ypres in a khaki flood. His friends on the saucer rim had withdrawn toward St. Julien in the early morning, which was just as well, for he was dog-tired and couldn't keep his eyes open. Late in the afternoon he awoke with a start to behold the north slope alive with field-grey, swarming over the rim from the direction of the Yser battle. The German army at last!

He seized his gun with a mighty grip and pressed the trigger in a blaze of triumph. Nothing happened. He tugged at the belt and jiggled the breech. Nothing happened. He wrestled and thumped and swore for a full half hour at the unfamiliar mechanism of the French gun. No use. The gun was jammed be-

yond his skill. In wrathful silence he watched a regiment of Bavarians form up on the east slope and march away on the road to Langemarck. More came. Straggling bunches of infantry, a few Uhlans (no mistaking those inverted golf-trophy helmets!) and finally a field battery flogged its way over the crest and halted within easy rifle shot on the Pilkem road. Wurtemberg was breaking off the Yser battle and swinging these hard-driven troops southward for a belated dash upon the blind side of Ypres. But those still grey figures along the roads and in the fields bothered them, that was obvious. They'd been marching and fighting for three days and nights, their bellies were empty, and here was concrete evidence that the north side of Ypres was anything but blind. They withdrew in some haste toward Pilkem, while McCuish sat in a blue fury under his stinking cover beside the useless gun. The Battle of Teton de la Vierge was over.

Gradually it dawned upon him that this was so. He hitched up his cart and hurled the mitrailleuse with many imprecations into the murky waters of the *beek*, while the donkey looked on in stupid wonder; and he risked his life for the next three hours driving across the saucer in the wake of the retreating enemy, gathering up evidence to support a story which he knew would need a lot. And so it was that he rattled over the cobbles into Ypres at nine o'clock of a Sunday morning, to be promptly arrested by a zealous Ak Pip Emma for (a) driving an unauthorized vehicle to the detriment of Military traffic, and (b) absence from his unit. McCuish protested, he uttered words, he stamped his clogs for emphasis, but his captor was not to be moved. He had a long row of ribbons on his chest that went 'way back to the Tirah Campaign, and a long life in the army had not sweetened him. To the bastille went McCuish, uttering maledictions that didn't help him any with the A. P. M., while the donkey followed the familiar trail of happier days into the Grande Place. What happened there is not quite certain. From what McCuish, in the sweet bye-and-bye, was able to gather, a platoon of English troops swung into the Place past the donkey. A cockney sergeant said sadly, "This moke and cart 'minds me o' my little barrer in the Covent Gawden o'mornin's," and the eyes of the platoon went idly to the moke and cart. Someone yelped "'elmets!" and there was a rush that a profane lieutenant could not stem. Fifty haversacks yawned wide, fifty helmets disappeared therein, and when the platoon swung out of the Place the cart was as bare as a bath parade. And with those fifty knapsacks bobbing jauntily along the red road to the front went McCuish's hope of glory.

His demands for a habeas corpus gathered an interested group about the clink and finally attracted



the attention of our own Colonel, passing that way with an important and superior English General.

"You will release this man," said the Colonel in that crisp way of his, "he's one of my machine gunners, though how he's here and alive is more than I can guess." "I can explain," said McCuish eagerly, and he explained. "Any proof of all this?" queried the Colonel, putting him down at once as just another case of shell shock.

"There!" declared McCuish, pointing dramatically to the donkey and cart just wandering into sight around a corner. "Helmets! A wagon load!" There was a tense silence while an orderly led the unwilling donkey up to them, and McCuish's face was a sight as he gazed into that empty cart. The officers shook their heads and looked away.

"And yet," mused the General aloud, "what stopped 'em on the Pilkem road?" He was, as I say, an Important and Superior General. His men knew him as Button-stick Joe from his reverence for the little details of discipline. But romance was not dead in his heart. The thing appealed to him.

"Prussian Guards! Uhlans, b'gad!" said he in a fascinated voice. "If you could prove this, my man, you deserve a V. C."

"Nobody," mourned McCuish with a doleful logic, "ever won the V. C. sittin' under a manure wagon out of sight of his officers."

(The Colonel didn't miss the reproach in this.)

"And all," marvelled the General, "with one Maxim!"

McCuish cast his last chance to the four winds.

"Maxim, hell!" he shouted in a loud screech, "it was a frog gun!"

"Fella," he seized the sacred red-tabbed lapels of Button-stick Joe and shook him gently but earnestly. "Fella, if I'd 'a had a Maxim, I'd 'a cleaned up a whole ruddy German army!"

THERE WAS a commotion on the ball field, the game evidently over, and the umpire shouting that the Privates had won by some impossible score which I do not remember now. The ladies were hoisting the flaps of the big marquee and beckoning. Someone was attempting the mess call on a kid's bugle with indifferent success.

Foster tapped the dottle from his pipe. "Let's eat," he said.

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