

# Trench Episodes A. D. 1936

## A Short Story

By Bertram Chambers

ABOVE the eastern horizon the sun shines dully; a copper disc suspended in a thin grey haze. A mist that envelopes everything to a height of thirty or more feet...

An inter-city road breaks the desolation of the countryside. It glistens in the haze, its wide asphalt surface damp with a liquid other than rain or man spilled water. Every hundred feet or so its continuity is broken by shell craters; occasionally a titanic crater obliterates its entire width and some hundreds of feet of length—the unforgettable brand of a 5,000 pound "demolition" bomb.

From either side trenches rise out of the haze to meet in one of the colossal craters; the scene of a direct hit by a "demo". In the mist-filled hole, fifty feet deep, a small gang of engineers are working laboriously on a runway in an attempt to link together the severed trench. They toil slowly, painfully, like divers on an ocean bed. One straightens up, looks at his mate through the goggles of his mask and says: "Those bloody Germans knew a few things about war, but I'll bet my bloody life they never dreamed of one like this!"

His mate laughs ghoulishly in the grotesque mask that envelopes his head and face. "The jerries were muckers, but they 'ad some idee of plying the bleedin' gime." The other shakes his head in an attempt to dislodge the sweat that is fogging his eyes. The sweat he daren't open his mask to reach. Silently they bend their backs again...

On the lip of the crater where it faces the center of the road a soldier stands, staring steadily into the fixed eyepiece of a periscope. On the top the revolving eye swings slowly back and forth, sending invisible ultraviolet rays through the gas-haze to the enemy lines. There, too, an ultra-periscope gropes with unseen rays...

A queer creature of rubber and leather; of metal and glass is this modern soldier; a fantastic statue in the coppery dawn. Not one particle of his flesh is exposed to the air. A leather uniform—treated to withstand corrosive poison gas—cloaks him from feet to head. It is air, gas and vapor tight. A mask, weirdly strange in the mist, covers his face. A strip of tough, unbreakable glass enables him to survey a ghastly world. Below the glass a flexible metal pipe runs from the mask to a flat metal box strapped to his shoulders—his oxygen-air apparatus. Strangest of all is the device that enables him to speak audibly, a stubby metal tube projecting from the mask like a pig's nose...

The necessity of his diver-like armor is made plain by the bodies beyond the crater. There, lying in grotesque, pain-distorted huddles are the men whose armor is punctured and torn. Men who gaze skyward with glaring, pain distended eyes; victims of the greyish haze and its invisible groping fingers...

TWO HUNDRED feet down in concrete dug-outs secretly made a year before the declaration of war, the remnants of the first contingents loiter around polishing rifles; nicking the little crosses on the soft nosed bullets that converts them into dum-dums; sleeping like logs with unspeakable weariness...

A gong strikes...once...twice. The signal that the armored gas-proof doofs are about to open. The soldier at the door reaches for a valve; the Sss-sss-sss of the antidotal gas fills the room. The gas that drenches the world above in a fog of death leaks in spite of all precautions in minute, but deadly quantities into the underground barracks...

A heavy door slides into a wall; a column of masked, gas-proof uniformed replacements file in. The door slides home. The air becomes slightly "close" as the antidotal gas "kills" the poison gas adhering to the uniforms of the newcomers.

An officer barks an order. The line stands easy, then begins to strip off the protective uniforms...

An old hand, veteran of the first world war, glances at the replacements. "Hell!" he exclaims disgustedly. "A bunch o' bloody kids. Why in hell don't they send us some men?"

"Can't send us wot they 'aven't got, matey," replies his buddy and lowers his haggard face to the rifle he is polishing.

The new recruits look around with boyish curiosity. Some look "tough" but the majority show sallow faces with downy hair where the older men show grizzled beards...

The officer in command looks fixedly at his new "men". Cradle babies, not one over eighteen, the majority far less he decides, and swears viciously under his breath...The cities of course are charnel houses under the incessant rains of gas bombs; these kids are the pick of the remnants left...He swears again, audibly...

FLING through a gas-proof door a battalion takes their places in the trench. They wait. Presently comes the signal that all stations are manned. Another wait;

a stirring along the lines. Expectancy. A whistle...

They climb over the top clumsily; retarded by the all-enveloping gas-proof uniform. They disappear onto the gas-haze in a ragged line...

The surprise attack fails. A titanic monster of metal rushes out of the fog, stands clear for an instant, vanishes...The enemy has launched a surprise attack with land-battleships...The line stumbles on in quick declination...

The speeding tanks, making their way across the broken ground at a thirty mile clip, throw terror into the line of recruits. They loom out of the gas-haze with devastating suddenness; their ultra-modern machine guns—cooled by liquid air—spitting a solid wall of lead at a speed of 5,000 rounds per minute...

A recruit falters stands stock still in the slowing, vanishing line, then turns and runs, boy-courage gone. He passes an officer who, in one awful moment, sees his distended eyes in his ghost white face; hears him scream "Mother! Mother!" and stumbles on. The officer brings his gun up, mouthing: "God, Oh God!" The boy lurches horribly as the heavy service bullet drills through his back. He sags face down into the ground. "Mother." The word spews from his mouth in a torrent of blood.

The officer turns and runs forward to meet the tanks. Must not let them retreat...Advance...Advance...His mind is a riot, his guts a sickening cauldron...A tank looms up. He fires furtively at the metal belly as a yard-wide tread grinds him, a pulp of flesh and blood and bone, into the ground...

A recruit staggers, turns half-around. His face vanishes as a tank gunner gives him a burst at point blank range. He stands upright, swaying slightly, then goes down under the churning treads.

Another stands still in sudden dizziness; his uniform is punctured. The sweatish taste of an acid gas is on his lips. Terror stricken he gropes with his fingers for the break. The dizziness increases...he falls, twisting convulsively to the ground...As the taste on his lips communicates to his tongue, he rolls slowly around in a last desperate attempt to discover the infinitesimal, deadly break. His tongue begins to swell in his mouth; his eyes to stare glassily as his convulsive movements slow up under stiffening muscles...And now his eyes are the swollen eyes of the prawn-fish, pain distorted...His clawing hands cease to obey the confusion of thoughts that swamp his searing brain...And now his tongue is no longer an organ of his body...It is a stick of wood, swelling to the full limits of his mouth...It spills over his teeth; juts out between his distorted lips, dripping saliva...It commences to go down his throat...rigid, like a piece of wood...A piece of wood...

In the gas-haze the huge tanks grind into the ground the dead and the living...

The Roman slave holder had his "labor troubles". The slave uprising led by Spartacus in 70 A. D. proves that. The Southern U. S. plantation owner, master over many negro chattels, many centuries later had "labor troubles" also. The Fugitive Slave Act bears proof of this. The medieval baron, lord over many serfs, also had his "labor troubles". Wat Tyler's Rebellion, the Peasant Wars in Germany, testify how bloody these "labor troubles" became. Today a pick up of any capitalist newspaper will show the modern capitalist and his "labor troubles".

There is one essential difference between the labor troubles of chattel slavery, of feudalism and wage slavery or capitalism. Today the slave struggles for a chance to work, for employment. Then the slave would revolt to flee from employment. Today, police are called to club unemployed into starving idleness; then soldiers were called to keep the slaves at work. Then, stringent laws providing for terrible punishments like crucifixion, hanging, quartering, mutilating and flogging were meted out to any slave or serf fleeing his work. Now terrible punishments like jail terms and police beatings are handed out to any worker having the audacity to demand work.

In a few words, and this illustrates the superiority of the capitalist mode of production—for the master class—over any other: formerly the master sought the slave, now the slave seeks the master. He stands in line, he spits in his own face by offering to work for less food than his fellow worker; occasionally now he demonstrates and then the papers scream. Once in a great while he revolts—all for a chance to slave.

### "Services No Longer Required"

Essentially there are two sorts of unemployment, the unemployment of the blue hounds the parasites, who while unemploy-

## "Services No Longer Required"

ed waste millions in degenerate orgies. For this class of leeches useful employment is a terrible nightmare. Then there is the unemployment of the wage slave—a terrible nightmare that haunts the mind of the worker. As he sees the job-line lengthen, however worn out and sped up he may be, he will manage an extra burst of energy so that he may not be the next one told that his "services are no longer required".

There are many millions of this type whose "services are no longer required". He goes from shop to shop offering his labor power, but the market is glutted with this material. As he walks he begins to think, a dangerous sign for the capitalists. Perchance a "Red", an "agitator", may give him some literature and he discovers:

Capitalism uses a new and much more efficient method than the cat-o'-nine-tails to make the workers slave. That is hunger. We are told that we are free and the bosses are free. He is free to offer us terms of any kind—we are free to starve unless we accept these terms.

As we work, we create profits, such huge profits that even in their wildest extravagances the bosses cannot spend them. So there proves to be no more market for that commodity we are hired to produce; no more profits can be gotten so the free boss lays off the free worker to freely starve in the midst of a land of full warehouses which the worker filled.

### Over-Production—Yet Poverty for Masses

The workers starve because they have grown too much, they wear rags because they wove too much; they live in hovels because they erected too many homes; they freeze because they have mined too much coal. This is the paradox of capitalism.

Capitalism, greedily demanding more and more profits, puts faster machines into the shops which produce goods and profits at a faster and faster rate. More workers are thrown on the streets.

### What of the worker thrown out of work?

Some of our suave, moral uplifters may take a look at this: during periods of unemployment, there is an increase of prostitution, murders and suicides. Our clergymen of every denomination rail at the morals of the people and point at the mounting crime wave, but of course do not dare to examine the economic cause or the capitalist system.

During periods of unemployment, disease and death rate increase. Among workers these are always high, but during hard times they rise to terrible levels. Fed on adulterated foods, shoddy clothed, poorly housed, the workers become more vulnerable than ever to disease.

Child labor increases as children are forced to leave school and provide for the family. While old workers leave the factory at one door, their own children enter at another—at lower wages. We have the case at present of unemployment generally and child labor specifically mounting at the same time.

During periods of unemployment the wages of those at work are slashed by the boss. The answer to any resistance is: "there are plenty outside who want your job."

These are but a few of the effects of unemployment upon the workers. Every worker must ask himself: What is to blame? Communists Have Unemployment Solution

The skilled worker says: the machine; the adult: the youth; men: women; white:

the Negro; the native: the foreigner; the deluded Republican workers says its the Democratic administration; the Democratic worker says its the Republican administration.

None of these are true. The youth, the women, the Negro, the foreigner, the Republican and Democrat all suffer from unemployment. While one group blames another, the boss has a hearty laugh as he sees the divided and thereby powerless workers quarreling among themselves.

The socialists have no cure for unemployment as socialist governments have proven in Europe: witness England, Germany, etc.

Only by overthrowing the system of capitalism will unemployment be done away with. The society of Communism alone can eliminate the terror of unemployment. Capitalism will be replaced by employment and plenty for all. To help bring this about all workers should join the Communist League of America (Opposition) and help fight for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of Communism. —C. CURTISS

### MISERY WAGES FOR S.C. BAG WORKERS

CHARLESTON, S. C.—Ten hours a day in a dust-filled factory nets \$4 to \$5 a week for 400 to 500 negroes at the Charleston Bagging Co. Most of them are children. When they leave the factory at night, their hair, eyelashes, and faces are covered with the brown dust of the mill.

WASHINGTON—Man-hour productivity in all important manufacturing industries showed notable increases from 1914 to 1927, ranging from 24% to 82% for 9 industries. For the auto industry the increase was 178%, and for the rubber tire industry it was 292%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.