

35.

Major Robert Dickson,

Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Royal Scots and Durham Light Infantry.

1918—May 27.

1918, May 27.—Major Dickson fell upon a Monday, on which day the third battle of the Aisne began, and continued until the 2nd of June. This was the new German thrust for Paris. After a heavy bombardment the enemy delivered a great attack on the Aisne between Soissons and Rheims. The Allies' line was pressed back. The Germans carried Chemin des Dames Ridge. There were lesser attacks between Locre and Voormezele. Long range guns began to bombard Paris. The Germans crossed the Aisne on a front of eighteen miles.

MAJOR ROBERT DICKSON, Distinguished Conduct Medal, Durham Light Infantry, whose remarkable military career was brought to an end by his being killed in action in France on 27th May 1918, was the elder son of Mr James Dickson, Blyth Cottages, Dolphinton. Of all the lads that went from Peeblesshire, perhaps no one found his career more decidedly in the army than did this young man, and his record will bear comparison with some of the best achievements of our Scottish civilian soldiers. It was not his to win the Victoria Cross, but he was the stuff Victoria Crosses are made of—a man of utter fearlessness, outstanding coolness, and proved resource. He was born at Blyth, in Peeblesshire, on the 27th February 1892. A keen Territorial before the war, he was mobilised with his unit, the 1/8th Royal Scots (Territorial), and went to France early in November 1914. He fought continuously there till his lamented death in May 1918, and in those three and a half eventful years he won the Distinguished Conduct Medal and attained the rank of Major. Prior to the war, he spent all his years in and around his home as a farm hand, and latterly in the employment of Misses J. & M. Noble, merchants, Blyth Bridge. He was a keen and successful athlete, being a particularly fine runner. But his hidden greatness it took the war to call forth. From the beginning he threw himself into it with zest; as it proceeded it increasingly called forth his best; in the end it claimed himself— a fate from which he never shrank. His is one of the proud romances of the war. He died at 26.

The Rev. D. C. Wiseman, M.A., in Kirkurd United Free Church, on Sunday evening, 9th June, said:—"This morning Mr and Mrs James Dickson, Blyth, received a telegram, telling them that their son was reported killed in action on 27th May—that darkening message of which the poet has said—

Just a little scrap of paper
 In a yellow envelope—
 And the whole world is a ruin;
 Even Hope.

We had seen so much since August 1914 of that which lay hidden in Robert Dickson that we had come to hope for far greater things still. But God has willed it otherwise. Climbing the ladder of glory and fame, he has fallen—shall we not say upwards? The foe he was out so full-heartedly to fight has broken his body, but, joining hands with many a comrade on the other side, his soul goes marching on. I am not going to say a great deal about him: we all know he was a gallant soldier, and I know he died a death he did not fear. He was a son that any family might well have been proud to own. This district has been proud to call him hers. And this congregation has been honoured that he was a pioneer of its pioneer contingent for the war. I well recall the day in April 1911 when he came and wished to join my congregation. I saw then that there was a thoughtfulness, an independence, and a strength of character in him not often met with in the common ways of men. And from the day he joined this church till the war called him away he was seldom absent from his accustomed pew. I have been in regular and frequent communication with him ever since, and I know, perhaps better than most, how, amid the stress and strain of war, he had grown. I need hardly tell you the *long short* story of his Army career; how, a private in the Peebles Company of the 8th Royal Scots, with utter self-devotion, he won the Distinguished Conduct Medal at Festubert; how he passed over the rungs of the non-commissioned ladder, and then left that ladder behind on being gazetted 2nd Lieutenant with the Durham Light Infantry, just a year ago now; how in that subsequent year of danger he reached the rank of Captain, with a company of his own; how on 23rd March, at the beginning of the great Somme push, he was promoted Major, which promotion was confirmed a month after that date. Rumour has it in a letter which I have from the front that he was acting Lieutenant-Colonel with his Battalion when he died. That may or may not be true. We believe that his inborn soldiership and his arduous military training had made him fit for that. And all the while he was most humble, and all the while most happy.

Who is the happy warrior? Who is he
 That every man in arms should wish to be?

He who, if he be called upon to face
 Some awful moment to which Heaven has joined
 Great issues, good or bad, for human kind,

Is happy as a lover; and attired
 With sudden brightness, like a man inspired;
 And through the heart of conflict, keeps the law
 In calmness made, and sees what he foresaw;
 Or if an unexpected call succeed,
 Come when it will, is equal to the need.

This, I think, is Major Dickson:

This is the happy warrior; this is he
 Whom every man in arms should wish to be.

One thing more I will say. When a comrade was wounded or slain, Robert Dickson, level-headed and big-hearted, was ever the first to think of the mother or friends at home, and to write at once the letter, so kindly phrased, that gently broke the news or cheered the anxious hearts. Not a few such letters have come from him from France. We wait if perchance some similar note from brother officer shall come to tell us how he died." Mr Wiseman thereafter read a most interesting letter he had had from Major Dickson, written nine days before he died, from the sunny slopes on the River Aisne, and which he was comparing to the beautiful Peebles hills.

The following Sunday the Rev. T. D. Miller, M.A., in Kirkurd Parish Church, read the following letter received the previous day by Major Dickson's parents from a chaplain in the 50th Division—"You will have received already the very sad news of the death in action of your most brave son, Major Robert Dickson, of the 7th Durham Light Infantry (Pioneers). The simple facts of the case are as follows:—Major Dickson was with his colonel from the commencement of the German bombardment and attack on 27th May. He was shot through the heart near the Canal Bridge, Maizy (on the Aisne), at about 1 P.M. on the 27th ult., dying almost immediately. I grieve very much indeed to write this to you, for I regard myself as very privileged to have known your son, and he was one of my special friends, one on whom I looked with great affection and admiration. A braver man could not be found anywhere. I was talking yesterday with the Regimental Sergeant-Major, when he emphasised more than I have done your boy's bravery and efficiency as an officer. The men in the Battalion worshipped him, and would have followed him anywhere. I remember speaking with the Colonel of the Battalion, who spoke of Major Dickson as the finest officer he had ever met. Certainly that was and is the opinion of very many I know in the Division who have come into contact with your gallant son. And this high efficiency which he displayed as an officer, and his extraordinary braveness and coolness, had, I know, a sure foundation. He was a remarkably sound fellow all round. His character was strong and robust. He was a man who commanded respect and

affection by reason of what he himself was. He always turned up at the services which I held for Presbyterians and Nonconformists, and his presence was fine to feel. His was a quiet deep sense of religious duty, which I feel sure was the key of his whole life. I believe he was a good soldier of the Lord Jesus Christ, whom he served with a purity and sincerity of life which were outstanding." Mr Miller further said that the brave lad, who was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for helping to capture two hundred of the enemy, and who afterwards received a commission in the Durham Light Infantry, and who was Acting-Major at the time of his death, bore his honours with becoming modesty. When home on furlough a few months ago he was in his father's pew, and looked a soldier every inch. Thereafter Mr Miller expressed the sympathy of all with Major Dickson's relatives in the shadowed home, especially with his bereaved mother in her prolonged weakness.

Lieutenant-Colonel W. A. Birchall, 7th Durham Light Infantry, wrote:—"A finer comrade or a braver soldier I have never met. Besides being my right-hand man, he was a great personal friend, as practically the whole time that he was with this Battalion he and I were always together. I feel his death greatly."