FRONT LINES

BOYD CABLE

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FRONT LINES

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E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
NEW YORK

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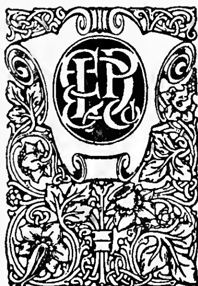
BY BOYD CABLE

AUTHOR OF

"BETWEEN THE LINES," "ACTION FRONT," "GRAPES OF WRATH"



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THESE LINES, WRITTEN AT AND TELLING ABOUT THE FRONT, ARE DEDICATED—WITH THE FERVENT WISH THAT THOSE THERE MAY SOON SEE THE LAST OF IT—TO THE FRONT, BY

THE AUTHOR

FOREWORD

These tales have been written over a period running from the later stages of the Somme to the present time. For the book I have two ambitions—the first, that to my Service readers it may bring a few hours of interest and entertainment, may prove some sort of a picture and a record of what they themselves have been through; the second, that it may strike and impress and stir those people at home who even now clearly require awakening to all that war means.

I know that a great many war workers have been, and still are, bearing cheerfully and willingly the long strain of war work, and I very gladly and thankfully offer my testimony to what I have seen of this good spirit. But it would be idle to deny, since the proofs have been too plain, that many war workers are not doing their best and utmost, are not playing the game as they might do

and ought to do, and it is to these in particular I hope this book may speak.

Surely by now every worker might appreciate the fact that whatever good cause they may have for "war weariness" they are at least infinitely better off than any man in the firing line; surely they can understand how bitter men here feel when they hear and read of all these manifestations of labour "discontent" and "unrest." We know well how dependent we are on the efforts of the workers at home, and there are times when we are forced to the belief that some workers also know it and trade on it for their own benefit, are either woefully ignorant still of what the failure of their fullest effort means to us, or, worse, are indifferent to the sufferings and endurings of their men on active service, are unpatriotic, narrow, selfish enough to put the screw on the nation for their own advantage.

I beg each war worker to remember that every slackening of their efforts, every reduction of output, every day wasted, every stoppage of work, inevitably encourages the enemy, prolongs the war, keeps men chained

to the misery of the trenches, piles up the casualties, continues the loss of life. A strike, or the threat of a strike, may win for the workers their 12½ per cent. increase of pay, the "recognition" of some of their officials, their improved comfort; but every such "victory" is only gained at the expense of the men in the trenches, is paid for in flesh and blood in the firing line.

When men here are suffering as they must suffer, are enduring as they do endure with good heart and courage, it comes as a profound shock and a cruel discouragement to them to read in the papers, or go home and discover, that any people there are apparently indifferent to their fate, are ready to sacrifice them ruthlessly for any trivial personal benefit, refuse to share the pinch of war, must have compensating advantages to level up "the increased cost of living," will even bring a vital war industry to a standstill—it has been done—as a "protest" against the difficulty of obtaining butter or margarine and tea. It may be that one grows one-sided in ideas after more than three

years' soldiering, but can you blame us if we feel contempt for pitiful grumblers and complainers who have a good roof overhead, a warm room and fire, a dry bed, and no real lack of food, if we feel anger against men who have all these things and yet go on strike, knowing that we must pay the penalty? And let me flatly deny the claim which some strikers and agitators still make that in these upheavals and checks on war industry they are "fighting for the rights of their mates in the trenches." Their "mates in the trenches" will be ready and able to, and certainly will, fight for their own rights when the war is won and they can do so without endangering or delaying the winning.

Meantime can any man be fool enough honestly to believe that "mates in the trenches" want anything more urgently than to win the war and get out of it? If there are any such fools let them try to imagine the feelings of the "mate" cowering and shivering over a scanty handful of wet wood or black-smoky dust "coal ration" who hears that coal miners at home threaten a strike;

of the man crouched in a battered trench that is being blasted to bits by German steel shells from steel guns, who learns that our steel-makers are "out" and if their demands were not satisfied would continue to strike indefinitely and hold up the making of the guns and shells which alone can protect us; of the man who is being bombed from the air night after night in his billets and reads that 50,000 aircraft workers are on strike, and that the Front will be poorer as a result by hundreds of the aircraft which might bomb the enemy 'dromes out of action and stop their raiding; the dismay of the man about to go on a long deferred and eagerly waited leave when he is told that all leaves may have to be stopped because a threatened strike of "foot-plate" workers may strand him at his debarkation port. Will it soothe or satisfy a man in any of these cases to be told the strikes are really fights for his rights, especially when you remember he knows that as a result of the strike he may be too dead to have any rights to be fought for?

The best I can wish for this book is that

it may do even one little bit to make plain with what cheerfulness—cheerfulness and even at times almost incredible humour—the Front is sticking it out, with what complete confidence in final victory this year's fight is being begun; and may make yet more plain the need for every man and woman at home to give their last ounce of energy to help win the war speedily and conclusively.

BOYD CABLE.

ON THE WESTERN FRONT,
January 7th, 1918.

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FRONT LINES

I

TRENCH-MADE ART

By the very nature of their job the R.A.M.C. men in the Field Ambulances have at intervals a good deal of spare time on their hands. The personnel has to be kept at a strength which will allow of the smooth and rapid handling of the pouring stream of casualties which floods back from the firing line when a big action is on; and when a period of inactivity comes in front the stream drops to a trickle that doesn't give the field ambulances "enough work to keep themselves warm."

It was in one of these slack periods that Corporal Richard, of the Oughth London Field Ambulance, resumed the pleasurable occupation of his civilian days, to his own great satisfaction and the enormous interest

of his comrades. Richard in pre-war days had been a sculptor, and the chance discovery near the ambulance camp of a stream where a very fair substitute for modelling clay could be had led him to experiments and a series of portrait modellings. He had no lack of models. Every other man in his squad was most willing to be "took," and would sit with most praiseworthy patience for as long as required, and for a time Richard revelled in the luxury of unlimited (and free-of-cost) models and in turning out portraits and caricatures in clay. He worked with such speed, apparent ease, and complete success that before long he had half the men endeavouring to imitate his artistic activities.

Then Richard attempted more serious work, and in the course of time turned out a little figure study over which the more educated and artistic of his friends waxed most enthusiastic, and which he himself, considering it carefully and critically, admitted to be "not bad." On the other hand, it is true that many members of the company regarded the masterpiece with apathy, and in some cases

almost with disapproval. "Seems a pity," said one critic, "that the corp'ril should 'ave wasted all this time over the one job. Spent every minute of 'is spare time, 'e 'as, fiddlin' an' touchin' up at it; could 'ave done a dozen o' them picturs o' us chaps in the time. An', now it is done, 'tain't quarter sich a good joke as that one o' the sergeant-major wi' the bottle nose. Fair scream, that was."

But in due time the corporal went home on leave, and took his study along with him. Later it gained a place in an exhibition of "Trench-made Art" in London, many newspaper paragraphs, and finally a photo in a picture paper and a note stating who the work was by and the conditions under which it was performed.

A good score of the picture papers arrived at the Oughth London from friends at home to men in the unit. That did it. There was an immediate boom in Art in the Oughth London, and sculpture became the popular spare-time hobby of the unit. This was all, as I have said, at a period when spare time was plentiful. The unit was billeted in a village

well behind the firing-line in a peacefully sylvan locality. It was early summer, so that the light lasted long in the evenings, and gave plenty of opportunity to the sculptors to pursue their Art after the day's duties were done.

As a consequence the output of sculpture would have done credit—in quantity if not, perhaps, in quality—to a popular atelier in full swing. The more enterprising attempted to follow the corporal's path in portrait and caricature, and it must be confessed were a good deal more successful in the latter branch. The portraits usually required an explanatory inscription, and although the caricatures required the same in most cases, they only had to be ugly enough, to show a long enough nose, or a big enough mouth, and to be labelled with the name of some fair butt or sufficiently unpopular noncom. to secure a most satisfying and flattering meed of praise.

Less ambitious spirits contented themselves with simpler and more easily recognisable subjects. The cross or crucifix which, as a

rule, marks the cross or forked roads in this part of France had from the first caught the attention and interest of the Londoners, and now, in the new flush of Art, provided immediate inspiration. Almost every man in the new school of sculpture graduated through a course of plain crosses to more fancy ones, and higher up the scale to crucifixes.

But in point of popularity even the cross sank to second place when Private Jimmy Copple, with an originality that amounted almost to genius, turned out a miniature model coffin. The coffin, as a work of art, had points that made it an unrivalled favourite. It was so obviously and unmistakably a coffin that it required no single word of explanation or description; it was simple enough in form to be within the scope of the veriest beginner; it lent itself to embellishment and the finer shades of reproduction in nails and tassels and name-plate; and permitted, without evidence of undue "swank" on the part of the artist, of his signature being appended in the natural and fitting place on the name-plate.

There was a boom in model coffins of all

sizes, and a constantly flickering or raging discussion on details of tassels, cords, handles, and other funereal ornaments. Private Copple again displayed his originality of thought by blacking a specially fine specimen of his handiwork with boot polish, with nails and name-plate (duly inscribed with his own name and regimental number) picked out in the white clay. He was so pleased with this that he posted it home, and, on receiving warm words of praise from his mother in Mile End, and the information that the coffin was installed for ever as a household ornament and an object of interest and admiration to all neighbours, a steady export trade in clay coffins was established from the Oughth London to friends and relatives at home.

The Art School was still flourishing when the unit was moved up from its peaceful and prolonged rest to take a turn up behind the firing-line. The removal from their clay supply might have closed down the artistic activities, but, fortunately, the Oughth had hardly settled in to their new quarters when

it was found that the whole ground was one vast bed of chalk, chalk which was easily obtainable in any shaped and sized lumps and which proved most delightfully easy to manipulate with a jack or pen-knife. The new modelling material, in fact, gave a fillip of novelty to the art, and the coffins and crosses proved, when completed, to have a most desirable quality of solidity and of lasting and retaining their shape and form far better than the similar objects in clay.

Better still, the chalk could be carried about on the person as no clay could, and worked at anywhere in odd moments. Bulging side-pockets became a marked feature of inspection parades, until one day when the C.O. went round, and noticing a craggy projection under the pocket of Private Copple, demanded to know what the private was loading himself with, and told him abruptly to show the contents of his pocket. On Copple producing with difficulty a lump of partially carved chalk, the C.O. stared at it and then at the sheepish face of the private in blank

amazement. "What's this?" he demanded. "What is it?"

"It—it's a elephant, sir," said Copple.

"An elephant," said the C.O. dazedly. "An *elephant?*"

"Yessir—leastways, it will be a elephant when it's finished," said Copple bashfully.

"Elephant—will be——" spluttered the C.O., turning to the officer who accompanied him. "Is the man mad?"

"I think, sir," said the junior, "he is trying to carve an elephant out of a lump of chalk."

"That's it, sir," said Copple, and with a dignified touch of resentment at the "trying," "I *am* carving out a elephant."

The C.O. turned over the block of chalk with four rudimentary legs beginning to sprout from it, and then handed it back. "Take it away," he said. "Fall out, and take the thing away. And when you come on parade next time leave—ah—your elephants in your billet."

Copple fell out, and the inspection proceeded. But now the eye of the C.O. went

straight to each man's pocket, and further lumps of chalk of various sizes were produced one by one. "Another elephant?" said the C.O. to the first one. "No, sir," said the sculptor. "It's a coffin." "A co—coffin," said the C.O. faintly, and, turning to the officer, "A coffin is what he said, eh?" The officer, who knew a good deal of the existing craze, had difficulty in keeping a straight face. "Yes, sir," he said chokily, "a coffin." The C.O. looked hard at the coffin and at its creator, and handed it back. "And you," he said to the next man, tapping with his cane a nobbly pocket. "Mine's a coffin, too, sir," and out came another coffin.

The C.O. stepped back a pace, and let his eye rove down the line. The next man shivered as the eye fell on him, as well he might, because he carried in his pocket a work designed to represent the head of the C.O.—a head of which, by the way, salient features lent themselves readily to caricature. None of these features had been overlooked by the artist, and the identity of the portrait had been further established by the eye-glass

which it wore, and by the exaggerated badges of rank on the shoulder. Up to the inspection and the horrible prospect that the caricature would be confronted by its original, the artist had been delighted with the praise bestowed by the critics on the "likeness." Now, with the eye of the C.O. roaming over his shrinking person and protruding pocket, he cursed despairingly his own skill.

"I think," said the C.O. slowly, "the parade had better dismiss, and when they have unburdened themselves of their—ah—elephants and—ah—coffins—ah—fall in again for inspection."

The portrait sculptor nearly precipitated calamity by his eager move to dismiss without waiting for the word of command. And after this incident sculpings were left out of pockets at parade times, and the caricaturist forswore any attempts on subjects higher than an N.C.O.

The elephant which Private Copple had produced was another upward step in his art. He had tried animal after animal with faint success. The features of even such well-

known animals as cats and cows had a baffling way of fading to such nebulous outlines in his memory as to be utterly unrecognisable when transferred to stone or chalk. A horse, although models in plenty were around, proved to be a more intricate subject than might be imagined, and there were trying difficulties about the proper dimensions and proportions of head, neck, and body. But an elephant had a beautiful simplicity of outline, a solidity of figure that was excellently adapted for modelling, and a recognisability that was proof against the carping doubts and scorn of critics and rival artists. After all, an animal with four legs, a trunk, and a tail is, and must be, an elephant. But there was one great difficulty about the elephant—his tail was a most extraordinarily difficult thing to produce whole and complete in brittle chalk, and there was a distressing casualty list of almost-finished elephants from this weakness.

At first Private Copple made the tail the last finishing touch to his work, but when elephant after elephant had to be scrapped be-

cause the tail broke off in the final carving, he reversed the process, began his work on the tail and trunk—another irritatingly breakable part of an elephant's anatomy—and if these were completed successfully, went on to legs, head, etc. If the trunk or tail broke, he threw away the block and started on a fresh one. He finally improved on this and further reduced the wastage and percentage of loss by beginning his elephant with duplicate ends, with a trunk, that is, at head and stern. If one trunk broke off he turned the remaining portion satisfactorily enough into a tail; if neither broke and the body and legs were completed without accident, he simply whittled one of the trunks down into a tail and rounded off the head at that end into a haunch.

But now such humour as may be in this story must give way for the moment to the tragedy of red war—as humour so often has to do at the front.

Copple was just in the middle of a specially promising elephant when orders came to move. He packed the elephant carefully in

a handkerchief and his pocket and took it with him back to the training area where for a time the Oughth London went through a careful instruction and rehearsing in the part they were to play in the next move of the "Show" then running. He continued to work on his elephant in such spare time as he had, and was so very pleased with it that he clung to it when they went on the march again, although pocket space was precious and ill to spare, and the elephant took up one complete side pocket to itself.

Arrived at their appointed place in the show, Copple continued to carry his elephant, but had little time to work on it because he was busy every moment of the day and many hours of the night on his hard and risky duties. The casualties came back to the Aid Post in a steady stream that swelled at times to an almost overwhelming rush, and every man of the Field Ambulance was kept going at his hardest. The Aid Post was established in a partly wrecked German gun emplacement built of concrete, and because all the ground about them was too ploughed up and cratered

with shell-fire to allow a motor ambulance to approach it, the wounded had to be helped or carried back to the nearest point to which the hard-working engineers had carried the new road, and there were placed on the motors.

Private Copple was busy one morning helping to carry back some of the casualties. A hot "strafe" was on, the way back led through lines and clumped batches of batteries all in hot action, the roar of gun-fire rose long and unbroken and deafeningly, and every now and then through the roar of their reports and the diminishing wails of their departing shells there came the rising shriek and rush of a German shell, the crump and crash of its burst, the whistle and hum of flying splinters. Private Copple and the rest of the R.A.M.C. men didn't like it any more than the casualties, who appeared to dread much more, now that they were wounded, the chance of being hit again, chiefly because it would be such "rotten luck" to get killed now that they had done their share, got their "Blighty," and with decent luck were soon

to be out of it all, and safely and comfortably back in hospital and home.

But, although many times the wounded asked to be laid down in a shell-hole, or allowed to take cover for a moment at the warning shriek of an approaching shell, the ambulance men only gave way to them when, from the noise, they judged the shell was going to fall very perilously close. If they had stopped for every shell the work would have taken too long, and the Aid Post was too cram-full, and too many fresh cases were pouring in, to allow of any delay on the mere account of danger. So there were during the day a good many casualties amongst the ambulance men, and so at the end Private Copple was caught. He had hesitated a moment too long in dropping himself into the cover of the shell crater where he had just lowered the "walking wounded" he was supporting back. The shell whirled down in a crescendo of howling, roaring noise, and, just as Copple flung himself down, burst with an earth-shaking crash a score or so of yards away. Copple felt a tremendous blow on his side.

They had ripped most of the clothes off him and were busy with first field dressings on his wounds when he recovered enough to take any interest in what was going on. The dressers were in a hurry because more shells were falling near; there was one vacant place in a motor ambulance, and its driver was in haste to be off and out of it.

"You're all right," said one of the men, in answer to Copple's faint inquiry. "All light wounds. Lord knows what you were carrying a lump of stone about in your pocket for, but it saved you this trip. Splinter hit it, and smashed it, and most of the wounds are from bits of the stone—luckily for you, because if it hadn't been there a chunk of Boche iron would just about have gone through you."

"Stone?" said Copple faintly. "Strewth! That was my blessed elephant in my bloomin' pocket."

"Elephant?" said the orderly. "In your pocket? An' did it have pink stripes an' a purple tail? Well, never mind about elephants now. You can explain 'em to the

Blighty M.O.[1] Here, up you get." And he helped Copple to the ambulance.

Later on, the humour of the situation struck Private Copple. He worked up a prime witticism which he afterwards played off on the Sister who was dressing his wounds in a London hospital.

"D'you know," he said, chuckling, "I'm the only man in this war that's been wounded by a elephant?"

The Sister stayed her bandaging, and looked at him curiously. "Wounded by a elephant," repeated Copple cheerfully. "Funny to think it's mebbe a bit of 'is trunk made the 'ole in my thigh, an' I got 'is 'ead and 'is 'ind leg in my ribs."

"You mustn't talk nonsense, you know," said the Sister hesitatingly. Certainly, Copple had shown no signs of shell-shock or unbalanced mind before, but——

"We used to carve things out o' chalk stone in my lot," went on Copple, and explained how the shell splinter had been stopped by the elephant in his pocket. The

[1] M. O. Medical Officer

Sister was immensely interested and a good deal amused, and laughed—rather immoderately and in the wrong place, as Copple thought when he described his coffin masterpiece with the name-plate bearing his own name, and the dodge of starting on the elephant with a trunk at each end.

"Well, I've heard a lot of queer things about the front, Copple," she said, busying herself on the last bandage. "But I didn't know they went in for sculpture. 'Ars longa, vitæ brevis.' That's a saying in Latin, and it means exactly, 'Art is long, life is short.' You'd understand it better if I put it another way. It means that it takes a long, long time to make a perfect elephant——"

"It does," said Copple. "But if you begins 'im like I told you, with a trunk each end——"

"There, that'll do," said the Sister, pinning the last bandage. "Now lie down and I'll make you comfortable. A long time to make a perfect elephant; and life is very short——"

"That's true," said Copple. "Especially up Wipers way."

"So, if making elephants gives some people the greatest possible pleasure in life, why not let them make elephants? I'm an artist of sorts myself, or was trying to be before the war, so I speak feelingly for a brother elephant-maker, Copple."

"Artist, was you?" said Copple, with great interest. "That must be a jolly sorter job."

"It is, Copple—or was," said the Sister, finishing the tucking-up. "Much jollier than a starched-smooth uniform and life—and lots in it." And she sighed and made a little grimace at the stained bandages she picked up. "But if you and thousands of other men give up your particular arts and go out to have your short lives cut shorter, the least I can do is to give up mine to try to make them longer."

Copple didn't quite follow all this. "I wish I'd a bit o' chalk stone, Sister," he said; "I'd teach you how to do a elephant with the two trunks."

"And how if a trunk breaks off one's elephant—or life, one can always try to trim it down to quite a useful tail," said the Sister, smiling at him as she turned to go. "You've already taught me something of that, Copple—you and the rest there in the trenches—better than you know."

II

THE SUICIDE CLUB

THE Royal Jocks (Oughth Battalion) had suffered heavily in the fighting on the Somme, and after they had been withdrawn from action to another and quieter part of the line, all ranks heard with satisfaction that they were to be made up to full strength by a big draft from Home. There were the usual wonderings and misgivings as to what sort of a crowd the draft would be, and whether they would be at all within the limits of possibility of licking into something resembling the shape that Royal Jocks ought to be.

"Expect we'll 'ave a tidy job to teach 'em wot's wot," said Private "Shirty" Low, "but we must just pass along all the fatigues they can 'andle, and teach 'em the best we can."

"Let's hope," said his companion, "that they get an advance o' pay to bring with 'em.

We'll be goin' back to billets soon, and we'll be able to introduce 'em proper to the estaminets."

"You boys'll have to treat 'em easy to begin with," said a corporal. "Don't go breakin' their hearts for a start. They'll be pretty sick an' home-sick for a bit, and you don't want to act rough before they begin to feel their feet."

This was felt to be reasonable, and there was a very unanimous opinion that the best way of treating the new arrivals was on the lines of the suggestion about introducing them carefully and fully to the ways of the country, with particular attention to the customs of the estaminets.

"And never forget," said the Corporal in conclusion, "that, good or bad, they're Royal Jocks after all; and it will be up to you fellows to see that they don't get put on by any other crush, and to give 'em a help out if they tumble into any little trouble."

The sentiments of the battalion being fairly well summed up by this typical conversation, it will be understood with what

mixed feelings it was discovered on the actual arrival of the draft that they, the draft, were not in the slightest degree disposed to be treated as new hands, declined utterly to be in any way fathered, declined still more emphatically to handle more than their fair share of fatigues, and most emphatically of all to depend upon the good offices of the old soldiers for their introduction to the ways of the estaminets. The draft, which was far too strong in numbers to be simply absorbed and submerged in the usual way of drafts, showed an inclination to hang together for the first few days, and, as the Battalion soon began somewhat dazedly to realise, actually to look down upon the old soldiers and to treat them with a tinge of condescension.

The open avowal of this feeling came one night in the largest and most popular estaminet in the village to which the Battalion had been withdrawn "on rest."

"Shirty" and some cronies were sitting at a stone-topped table with glasses and a jug of watery beer in front of them. The room was fairly full and there were about as many

of the draft present as there were of the old lot, and practically all the draft were gathered in little groups by themselves and were drinking together. Close to Shirty's table was another with half a dozen of the draft seated about it, and Shirty and his friends noticed with some envy the liberal amount of beer they allowed themselves. One of them spoke to the girl who was moving about amongst the tables with a tray full of jugs. "Here, miss, anither jug o' beer, please," and held out the empty jug. Shirty saw his opportunity, and with an ingratiating smile leaned across and spoke to the girl. "Donnay them encore der bee-are," he said, and then, turning to the other men, "She don't understand much English, y'see. But jus' ask me to pass 'er the word if you wants anything."

A big-framed lad thanked him civilly, but Shirty fancied he saw a flicker of a smile pass round the group. He turned back and spoke to the girl again as she halted at their table and picked up the empty jug. "Ençore si voo play," he said. "Eh les messieurs la

ba——" jerking a thumb back at the other table, but quite unostentatiously, so that the other group might not see, "la ba, voo compree, payay voo toot la bee-are." He winked slyly at his fellows and waited developments complacently, while all smoked their cigarettes gravely and nonchalantly.

The girl brought the two jugs of beer presently and put one on each table. "Combien?" said one of the draft who had not spoken before—a perky little man with a sharp black moustache. He hesitated a moment when the girl told him how much, and then spoke rapidly in fluent French. Shirty at his table listened uneasily to the conversation that followed, and made a show of great indifference in filling up the glasses. The little man turned to him. "There's some mistake here, m' lad," he said. "The girl says you ordered your beer and said we'd pay for it."

Shirty endeavoured to retrieve the lost position. "Well, that's good of you," he said pleasantly. "An' we don't mind if we do 'ave a drink wi' you."

The big man turned round. "Drink wi's when ye're asked," he said calmly. "But that's no' yet," and he turned back to his own table. "Tell her they'll pay their ain, Wattie." Wattie told her, and Shirty's table with some difficulty raised enough to cover the cost of the beer. Shirty felt that he had to impress these new men with a true sense of their position. "My mistake," he said to his companions, but loudly enough for all to hear. "But I might 'ave twigged these raw rookies wouldn't 'ave knowed it was a reg'lar custom in the Army for them to stand a drink to the old hands to pay their footing. An' most likely they haven't the price o' a drink on them, anyway."

"Lauchie," said the big man at the other table, "have ye change o' a ten-franc note? No. Wattie, maybe ye'll ask the lassie to change it, an' tell her to bring anither beer. This is awfu' swipes o' stuff t' be drinkin'. It's nae wonder the men that's been oot here a whilie has droppit awa' to such shauchlin', knock-kneed, weak-like imitations of putty men."

This was too much. Shirty pushed back his chair and rose abruptly. "If you're speakin' about the men o' this battalion," he began fiercely, when a corporal broke in, "That'll do. No rough-housin' here. We don't want the estaminets put out o' bounds." He turned to the other table. "And you keep a civil tongue between your teeth," he said, "or you'll have to be taught better manners, young fella me lad."

"Ay," said the big man easily, "I'll be glad enough t' be learned from them that can learn me. An' aifter the café closes will be a good enough time for a first lesson, if there's anybody minded for't," and he glanced at Shirty.

"Tak him ootside an' gie him a deb on the snoot, Rabbie," said another of the draft, nodding openly at the enraged Shirty.

"Ay, ay, Wullie," said Rabbie gently. "But we'll just bide till the Corporal's no about. We'll no be gettin' his stripes into trouble."

All this was bad enough, but worse was to follow. It was just before closing-time that

a Gunner came in and discovered a friend amongst the many sitting at Rabbie's table. He accepted the pressing invitation to a drink, and had several in quick succession in an endeavour to make an abundant capacity compensate for the inadequate time.

"An' how are you gettin' on?" he asked as they all stood to go. "Shaken down wi' your new chums all right?"

And the whole room, new hands and old alike, heard Rabbie's slow, clear answer:

"We're thinkin' they're an awfu' saft kneel-an'-pray kind o' push. But noo we've jined them we'll sune learn them to be a battalyun. I wish we'd a few more o' the real stuff from the depot wi's, but Lauchie here's the lad tae learn them, and we'll maybe mak a battalyun o' them yet."

The "learning" began that night after the estaminets closed, and there was a liberal allowance of black eyes and swollen features on parade next morning. It transpired that boxing had been rather a feature back at the depot, and the new men fully held their own in the "learning" episodes. But out of the

encounters grew a mutual respect, and before long the old and the new had mixed, and were a battalion instead of "the battalion and the draft."

Only "Shirty" of the whole lot retained any animus against the new, and perhaps even with him it is hardly fair to say it was against the one-time draft, because actually it was against one or two members of it. He had never quite forgiven nor forgotten the taking-down he had had from Rabbie Macgregor and Lauchie McLauchlan, and continued openly or veiledly hostile to them.

Thrice he had fought Rabbie, losing once to him—that was the first time after the estaminet episode—fighting once to an undecided finish (which was when the picket broke in and arrested both), and once with the gloves on at a Battalion Sports, when he had been declared the winner on points—a decision which Rabbie secretly refused to accept, and his friend Lauchie agreed would have been reversed if the fight had been allowed to go to a finish.

Shirty was in the bombing section, or

"Suicide Club," as it was called, and both Rabbie and Lauchie joined the same section, and painfully but very thoroughly acquired the art of hurling Mills' grenades at seen or unseen targets from above ground or out of deep and narrow and movement-cramping trenches.

And after a winter and spring of strenuous training, the battalion came at last to move up and take a part in the new offensive of 1917. This attack had several features about it that pleased and surprised even the veterans of the Somme. For one thing, the artillery fire on our side had a weight and a precision far beyond anything they had experienced, and the attack over the open of No Man's Land was successfully made with a low cost in casualties which simply amazed them all.

Rabbie openly scoffed at the nickname of "Suicide Club" for the Bombing Section. They had lost a couple of men wounded in the first attack, and had spent a merry morning frightening Boche prisoners out of their

dug-outs, or in obstinate cases flinging Mills' grenades down the stairways.

They had waited to help stand off the counter-attack the first night, but never needed to raise their heads or fling a bomb over the edge of the broken parapet, because the counter-attack was wiped out by artillery and rifle fire long before it came within bombing distance.

"You an' yer Suicide Club!" said Rabbie contemptuously to Shirty after this attack had been beaten off. "It's no even what the insurance folks would ca' a hazardous occupation."

"Wait a bit," said Shirty. "We all knows you're a bloomin' Scots-wha-hae hero, but you 'aven't bin in it proper yet. Wait till you 'ave, an' then talk."

The Bombing Section went into it "proper" next day, when the battalion made a little forward move that cost them more casualties to take a trench and a hundred yards of ground than the mile advance of the previous day.

And when they had got the battered trench,

the bombers were sent to clear a communication trench leading out of it and held by the Germans. This trench was more or less broken down, with fallen sides or tumbled heaps of earth and gaping shell craters every here and there along its length. The Germans contested it stoutly, and the bombers had to keep below the level of the ground and strictly to the trench, because above-ground was being swept by a hurricane of rifle and machine-gun fire from both sides. Length by length of the zig-zag trench they pushed their way, their grenades curving up and ahead of them, the German "potato-masher" grenades whirling over and down in on them, exploding with a prodigious noise and smoke but comparatively little damage, and yet cutting down the attackers one by one

Rabbie, Lauchie, and Shirty were all in the trench together, and were still on their feet when they came to the point where the communication trench ran into another, a support trench presumably, running across it. At this point they were supposed to hold on and consolidate. All had gone well accord-

ing to programme with Rabbie and his companions, and they turned into the support trench, cleared a couple of bays to either side of the communication way, pulled down sandbags, and piled earth to make a "block" on either side, and settled down to hold their position and to await orders.

They were not left in peaceful possession for long. A vigorous attack was delivered, first at one barricade and then on the other, and both were beaten off with some difficulty and a number of casualties. The bombers had been reinforced several times to make up their reduced numbers, but no further reinforcements had come to them for some time, and now there were only half a dozen of them and one officer left. The officer sent back a lightly wounded man to say they held their point, but wanted support. The message, as they found afterwards, never got through, because the messenger was killed on the way by a shell splinter.

Another heavy and determined attack of bombers came soon after. For five minutes the Germans showered over their grenades,

and the short section of trench held by the little party of Royal Jocks was shaken to pieces by the force of the explosions, the sandbag "blocks" almost destroyed, several more men hit, and the officer killed. The Jocks returned the shower of bombs with plentiful Mills' grenades, but they were forced back, and almost the last thing the officer did before he was killed was to retire the remnants of the party to the communication trench entrance, build a fresh block, and prepare to hold on there. There were only four men left, and all were more or less lightly wounded with splinters from the German grenades. Just before another attack came they were reinforced by two bayonet men, and one bomber with buckets of Mills'.

"We're all that's left o' C Company's bombers," said one of them. "We were sent up to reinforce, but they're shellin' the trench back there, an' the others was knocked out."

Another savage attack followed, and was beaten off with difficulty and the loss of another couple of men. Since there was no

officer and no N.C.O. there, Shirty, as the oldest soldier, took charge.

"This isn't good enough," he shouted as another shower of grenades began to pitch over and burst with rending explosions in and about the trench. "Why don't they reinforce. I'm goin' to retire if they don't send supports soon."

Now, as a matter of fact, the officer bringing up the last supports had received orders to retire the party if they were hard pressed, because the attacks up the other communication trenches had failed to clear a way, and this one party was in danger of being overwhelmed. But since the little party knew nothing of these orders they were reluctant to retire, and unfortunately there was little prospect of the supports they expected coming.

Their grenades were running short, too, and that decided the point for them. Shirty Low and Rabbie were crouched close up against their barricade, and Lauchie took what cover he could get behind the heaped debris of the broken-down trench wall close

at Rabbie's side. He was squatted in a little niche of the wall and high enough up to allow him to lift his head and peep over the parapet. He ducked his head as several grenades spun over, lifted it, and peered out again.

"Here they come," he shouted. "Lat them hae't. Rabbie, pass me up some o' they bombs."

"Wull I hell," retorted Rabbie, rapidly pulling the pins out, and tossing his grenades over. "Get yer bombs yersel'."

"One of you two must go back and get some Mills'," shouted Shirty. "We'll 'ave to duck back, but we'll need supplies to stand 'em off with. Go on now, one o' you. Look nippy. We've 'ardly any left."

"Go on, Lauchie," said Rabbie. "I've half a dizen left, an' you've nane."

"I will no," said Lauchie indignantly. "Gang yersel'. I'm the senior o' us twa, an' I'm tellin' ye."

"You ma senior," shouted Rab indignantly. "Yer no ma senior. I was sojerin' lang afore ever ye jined up."

"Havers, man. Ye've hardly been off the square five meenutes."

Shirty broke in angrily. "Will you shut yer heads, and get back, one o' you? We'll be done in if they rush us again."

"See here, Rabbie," said Lauchie, "I'll prove yer no ma senior, and then mebbe ye'll dae what yer telled. Here's ma paybook, wi' date o' enlistment. Let's see yours."

And he was actually proceeding to fumble for his paybook, and Rabbie eagerly doing the same, when Shirty again intervened, cursing savagely, and ordering Rabbie back.

"I'm his senior, Shirty, an' he should go," said Rabbie. "Lat him show you his book."

"Book be blistered," yelled Shirty. "Go for them Mills' or I'll have you crimed for refusin' an order."

Rabbie slid down from his place. "I suppose yer in chairge here, Shirty," he said. "But mind this—I'll bring the Mills', but as sure's death I'll hammer the heid aff ye when I get ye back yonder again. Mind that now," and he scrambled off back along the trench.

He carried a couple of empty buckets with

him, and as he went he heard the renewed crash of explosions behind him, and hastened his pace, knowing the desperate straits the two would be in without bombs to beat off the attack. The trench was badly wrecked, and there were many dead of both sides in it, so that for all his haste he found the going desperately slow.

The guns were firing heavily on both sides, but presently above the roar of their fire and the wailing rush of the passing shells Rabbie heard a long booming drone from overhead, glanced up and saw the plunging shape of an aeroplane swooping down and over his head towards the point he had left the others. It was past in a flash and out of sight beyond the trench wall that shut him in. But next instant Rabbie heard the sharp rattle of her machine-gun, a pause, and then another long rattle. Rabbie grunted his satisfaction, and resumed his toilsome clambering over the debris. "That'll gie the Fritzez something tae think about," he murmured, and then pounced joyfully on a full bucket of Mills' grenades lying beside a dead bomber. Many

more grenades were scattered round, and Rabbie hastily filled one of his own buckets and grabbed up a sandbag he found partially filled with German grenades.

He turned to hurry back, hearing as he did so another crackle of overhead machine-gun fire. Next moment the plane swept overhead with a rush, and was gone back towards the lines before Rabbie could well look up. Half-way back to where he had left the others he heard the crash of detonating bombs, and next moment came on Lauchie crouching at a corner of the trench, the blood streaming down his face, his last grenade in his hand, and his fingers on the pin ready to pull it. Rabbie plumped a bucket down beside him, and without words the two began plucking out the pins and hurling the grenades round the corner.

"Where's the ithers?" shouted Rabbie when the shattering roar of their exploding grenades had died down.

"Dead," said Lauchie tersely. "Except Shirty, an' he's sair wounded. I left him

hidin' in a bit broken dug-out half-a-dizen turns o' the trench back."

"Come on," said Rabbie, rising abruptly. "We'll awa' back an' get him.

"He said I was t' retire slow, an' haud them back as well's I could," said Lauchie.

"I'm awa' back for him," said Rabbie. "Ye needna come unless ye like."

He flung a couple of grenades round the corner; Lauchie followed suit, and the instant they heard the boom of the explosions both pushed round and up the next stretch through the eddying smoke and reek, pulling the pins as they ran, and tossing the bombs ahead of them into the next section of trench. And so, in spite of the German bombers' resistance, they bombed their way back to where Shirty had been left. Several times they trod over or past the bodies of men killed by their bombs, once they encountered a wounded officer kneeling with his shoulder against the trench wall and snapping a couple of shots from a magazine pistol at them as they plunged through the smoke. Rabbie stunned him with a straight and hard-flung bomb,

leapt, dragging Lauchie with him, back into cover until the bomb exploded, and then ran forward again. He stooped in passing and picked up the pistol from beside the shattered body. "Might be useful," he said, "an' it's a good sooveneer onyway. I promised a sooveneer tae yon French lassie back in Poppyring."

They found Shirty crouched back and hidden in the mouth of a broken-down dug-out, and helped him out despite his protests. "I was all right there," he said. "You two get back as slow as you can, and keep them back all——"

"See here, Shirty," Rabbie broke in, "yer no in charge o' the pairty now. Yer a casualty an' I'm the senior—I've ma paybook here t' prove it if ye want, so just haud your wheesh an' come on."

He hoisted the wounded man—Shirty's leg was broken and he had many other minor wounds—to his shoulder, and began to move back while Lauchie followed close behind, halting at each corner to cover the retreat with a short bombing encounter.

Half-way back they met a strong support party which had been dispatched immediately after the receipt by the H.Q. signallers of a scribbled note dropped by a low-flying aeroplane. The party promptly blocked the trench, and prepared to hold it strongly until the time came again to advance, and the three bombers were all passed back to make their way to the dressing station.

There Shirty was placed on a stretcher and made ready for the ambulance, and the other two, after their splinter cuts and several slight wounds had been bandaged, prepared to walk back.

"So long, Shirty," said Rabbie. "See ye again when ye come up an' rejine."

"So long, chum," said Shirty, "an' I'm—er—I——" And he stammered some halting phrase of thanks to them for coming back to fetch him out.

"Havers," said Rabbie, "I wisna goin' t' leave ye there tae feenish the war in a Fritz jail. An' yer forgettin' whit I promised ye back there when ye ordered me for they bombs—that I'd hammer yer heid aff when

we came oot. I'll just mind ye o' that when ye jine up again."

"Right-o," said Shirty happily. "I won't let you forget it."

"I wunner," said Rabbie reflectively, lighting a cigarette after Shirty had gone—"I wunner if he'll ever be fit t' jine again. I'd fair like t' hae anither bit scrap wi' him, for I never was richt satisfied wi' yon decesion against me."

"He's like t' be Corporal or Sairgint time he comes oot again," said Lauchie. "Promotion's quick in they Reserve an' Trainin' Brigades at hame."

"If we're no killed we're like t' be Corporals or Sairgints oorselves," said Rabbie. "When we're in action I'm thinkin' promotions are quick enought oot here in the Suicide Club."

III

IN THE WOOD

The attack on the wood had begun soon after dawn, and it was no more than 8 a.m. when the Corporal was dropped badly wounded in the advance line of the attack where it had penetrated about four hundred yards into the wood. But it was well into afternoon before he sufficiently woke to his surroundings to understand where he was or what had happened, and when he did so he found the realisation sufficiently unpleasant. It was plain from several indications—the direction from which the shells bursting in his vicinity were coming, a glimpse of some wounded Germans retiring, the echoing rattle of rifle fire and crash of bombs behind him—that the battalion had been driven back, as half a dozen other battalions had been driven back in the course of the ebb-and-flow fighting through the wood for a couple of weeks past, that he

was lying badly wounded and helpless to defend himself where the Germans could pick him up as a prisoner or finish him off with a saw-backed bayonet as the mood of his discoverers turned. His left leg was broken below the knee, his right shoulder and ribs ached intolerably, a scalp wound six inches long ran across his head from side to side—a wound that, thanks to the steel shrapnel helmet lying dinted in deep across the crown, had not split his head open to the teeth.

He felt, as he put it to himself, "done in," so utterly done in, that for a good hour he was willing to let it go at that, to lie still and wait whatever luck brought him, almost indifferent as to whether it would be another rush that would advance the British line and bring him within reach of his own stretcher-bearers, or his discovery by some of the German soldiers who passed every now and then close to where he lay.

Thirst drove him to fumble for his water-bottle, only to find, when he had twisted it round, that a bullet had punctured it, and that it was dry; and, after fifteen tortured

minutes, thirst drove him to the impossible, and brought him crawling and dragging his broken leg to a dead body and its full bottle. An eager, choking swallow and a long breath-stopping, gurgling draught gave him more life than he had ever thought to feel again, a sudden revulsion of feeling against the thought of waiting helpless there to be picked up and carted to a German prison camp or butchered where he lay, a quick hope and a desperate resolve to attempt to escape such a fate. He had managed to crawl to the water-bottle; he would attempt to crawl at least a little nearer to the fighting lines, to where he would have more chance of coming under the hands of his own men. Without waste of time he took hasty stock of his wounds and set about preparing for his attempt. The broken leg was the most seriously crippling, but with puttees, bayonets, and trenching-tool handles he so splinted and bound it about that he felt he could crawl and drag it behind him. He attempted to bandage his head, but his arm and shoulder were so stiff and painful when he lifted his

hand to his head that he desisted and satisfied himself with a water-soaked pad placed inside a shrapnel helmet. Then he set out to crawl.

It is hard to convey to anyone who has not seen such a place the horrible difficulty of the task the Corporal had set himself. The wood had been shelled for weeks, until almost every tree in it had been smashed and knocked down and lay in a wild tangle of trunks, tops, and branches on the ground. The ground itself was pitted with big and little shell-holes, seamed with deep trenches, littered with whole and broken arms and equipments, German and British grenades and bombs, scattered thick with British and German dead who had lain there for any time from hours to weeks. And into and over it all the shells were still crashing and roaring. The air palpitated to their savage rushing, the ground trembled to the impact of their fall, and without pause or break the deep roll of the drumming gun-fire bellowed and thundered. But through all the chaos men were still fighting, and would continue to fight, and

the Corporal had set his mind doggedly to come somewhere near to where they fought. The penetration of such a jungle might have seemed impossible even to a sound and uninjured man; to one in his plight it appeared mere madness to attempt. And yet to attempt it he was determined, and being without any other idea in his throbbing head but the sole one of overcoming each obstacle as he came to it, had no time to consider the impossibility of the complete task.

Now, two hundred yards is a short distance as measurement goes, but into those two hundred yards through the chaos of wrecked wood the Corporal packed as much suffering, as dragging a passage of time, as many tortures of hope and fear and pain, as would fill an ordinary lifetime. Every yard was a desperate struggle, every fallen tree-trunk, each tangle of fallen branch, was a cruel problem to be solved, a pain-racked and laborious effort to overcome. A score of times he collapsed and lay panting, and resigned himself to abandoning the struggle; and a score of times he roused himself and

fought down numbing pain, and raised himself on trembling arms and knees to crawl again, to wriggle through the wreckage, to hoist himself over some obstacle, to fight his way on for another yard or two.

Every conscious thought was busied only and solely with the problems of his passage that presented themselves one by one, but at the back of his mind some self-working reason or instinct held him to his direction, took heed of what went on around him, guided him in action other than that immediately concerned with his passage. When, for instance, he came to a deep trench cutting across his path, he sat long with his whole mind occupied on the question as to whether he should move to right or left, whether the broken place half a dozen yards off the one way or the more completely broken one a dozen yards the other would be the best to make for, scanning this way down and that way up, a litter of barbed wire here and a barrier of broken branches there; and yet, without even lifting his mind from the problem, he was aware of grey coats moving along

the trench towards him, had sense enough to drop flat and lie huddled and still until the Germans had passed. And that second mind again advised him against crawling down into the trench and making his easier way along it, because it was too probable it would be in use as a passage for Germans, wounded and unwounded.

He turned and moved slowly along the edge of the trench at last, and held to it for some distance, because the parapet raised along its edge held up many of the fallen trees and branches enough to let him creep under them. That advantage was discounted to some extent by the number of dead bodies that lay heaped on or under the parapet and told of the struggles and the fierce fighting that had passed for possession of the trench, but on the whole the dead men were less difficult to pass than the clutching, wrenching fingers of the dead wood. The pains in his head, shoulder, and side had by now dulled down to a dead numbness, but his broken leg never ceased to burn and stab with red-hot needles of agony; and for all the splints encasing it

and despite all the care he took, there was hardly a yard of his passage that was not marked by some wrenching catch on his foot, some jarring shock or grind and grate of the broken bones.

He lost count of time, he lost count of distance, but he kept on crawling. He was utterly indifferent to the turmoil of the guns, to the rush and yell of the near-falling shells, the crash of their bursts, the whirr of the flying splinters. When he had been well and whole these things would have brought his heart to his mouth, would have set him ducking and dodging and shrinking. Now he paid them no fraction of his absorbed attention. But to the distinctive and rising sounds of bursting grenades, to the sharp whip and whistle of rifle bullets about him and through the leaves and twigs, he gave eager attention because they told him he was nearing his goal, was coming at last to somewhere near the fringe of the fighting. His limbs were trembling under him, he was throbbing with pain from head to foot, his head was swimming and his vision was blurred and dim, and

at last he was forced to drop and lie still and fight to recover strength to move, and sense to direct his strength. His mind cleared slowly, and he saw at last that he had come to a slightly clearer part of the wood, to a portion nearer its edge where the trees had thinned a little and where the full force of the shell blast had wrecked and re-wrecked and torn fallen trunks and branches to fragments.

But although his mind had recovered, his body had not. He found he could barely raise himself on his shaking arms—had not the strength to crawl another yard. He tried and tried again, moved no more than bare inches, and had to drop motionless again.

And there he lay and watched a fresh attack launched by the British into the wood, heard and saw the tornado of shell-fire that poured crashing and rending and shattering into the trees, watched the khaki figures swarm forward through the smoke, the spitting flames of the rifles, the spurting fire and smoke of the flung grenades. He still lay on the edge of the broken trench along which he

had crept, and he could just make out that this ran off at an angle away from him and that it was held by the Germans, and formed probably the point of the British attack. He watched the attack with consuming eagerness, hope flaming high as he saw the khaki line press forward, sinking again to leaden depths as it halted or held or swayed back. To him the attack was an affair much more vital than the taking of the trench, the advance by a few score yards of the British line. To him it meant that a successful advance would bring him again within the British lines, its failure leave him still within the German.

Into the trench below him a knot of Germans scrambled scuffling, and he lay huddled there almost within arm's length of them while they hoisted a couple of machine-guns to the edge of the trench and manned the parapet and opened a hail of fire down the length of the struggling British line. Under that streaming fire the line wilted and withered; a fresh torrent of fire smote it, and it crumpled and gave and ebbed back. But

almost immediately another line swarmed up out of the smoke and swept forward, and this time, although the same flank and frontal fire caught and smote it, the line straggled and swayed forward and plunged into and over the German trench.

The Corporal lying there on the trench edge was suddenly aware of a stir amongst the men below him. The edge where he lay half screened in a debris of green stuff and huddled beside a couple of dead Germans was broken down enough to let him see well into the trench, and he understood to the full the meaning of the movements of the Germans in the trench, of their hasty hauling down of the machine-guns, their scrambling retirement crouched and hurrying along the trench back in the direction from which he had come. The trench the British had taken ran out at a right angle from this one where he lay, and the Germans near him were retiring behind the line of trench that had been taken. And that meant he was as good as saved.

A minute later two khaki figures emerged from a torn thicket of tree stumps and

branches a dozen yards beyond the trench where he lay, and ran on across towards the denser wood into which the Germans had retreated. One was an officer, and close on their heels came half a dozen, a dozen, a score of men, all following close and pressing on to the wood and opening out as they went. One came to the edge of the trench where the machine-guns had been, and the Corporal with an effort lifted and waved an arm and shouted hoarsely to him. But even as he did so he realised how futile his shout was, how impossible it was for it to carry even the few yards in the pandemonium of noise that raved about them. But he shouted again, and yet again, and felt bitter disappointment as the man without noticing turned and moved along the trench, peering down into it.

The Corporal had a sudden sense of some-one moving behind him, and twisted round in time to see another khaki figure moving past a dozen paces away and the upper half bodies of half a score more struggling through the thickets beyond. This time he screamed at them, but they too passed, unhearing and

unheeding. The Corporal dropped quivering and trying to tell himself that it was all right, that there would be others following, that some of them must come along the trench, that the stretcher-bearers would be following close.

But for the moment none followed them, and from where they had vanished came a renewed uproar of grenade-bursts and rifle fire beating out and through the uproar of the guns and the screaming, crashing shells. The Corporal saw a couple of wounded come staggering back . . . the tumult of near fighting died down . . . a line of German grey-clad shoulders and bobbing "coal-scuttle" helmets plunged through and beyond the thicket from which the khaki had emerged a few minutes before. And then back into the trench below him scuffled the Germans with their two machine-guns. With a groan the Corporal dropped his face in the dirt and dead leaves and groaned hopelessly. He was "done in," he told himself, "clean done in." He could see no chance of escape. The line had been driven back, and the last ounce of strength to

crawl. . . . He tried once before he would finally admit that last ounce gone, but the effort was too much for his exhausted limbs and pain-wrenched body. He dropped to the ground again.

The rapid clatter of the two machine-guns close to him lifted his head to watch. The main German trench was spouting dust and debris, flying clouds of leaves, flashing white slivers of bark and wood, under the torrent of shells that poured on it once more. The machine-guns below him ceased, and the Corporal concluded that their target had gone for the moment. But that intense bombardment of the trench almost certainly meant the launching of another British attack, and then the machine-guns would find their target struggling again across their sights and under their streaming fire. They had a good "field of fire," too, as the Corporal could see. The British line had to advance for the most part through the waist-high tangle of wrecked wood, but by chance or design a clearer patch of ground was swept close to the German trench, and as the advance

crossed this the two machine-guns on the flank near the Corporal would get in their work, would sweep it in enfilade, would be probably the worst obstacle to the advance. And at that a riot of thoughts swept the Corporal's mind. If he could out those machine-guns . . . if he could out those machine-guns . . . but how? There were plenty of rifles near, and plenty of dead about with cartridges on them . . . but one shot would bring the Germans jumping from their trench on him. . . . Bombs now . . . if he had some Mills' grenades . . . where had he seen. . . .

He steadied himself deliberately and thought back. The whole wood was littered with grenades, spilt and scattered broadcast singly and in heaps—German stick-grenades and Mills'. He remembered crawling past a dead bomber with a bag full of Mills' beside him only a score of yards away. Could he crawl to them and back again? The Germans in the trench might see him; and anyhow—hadn't he tried? And hadn't he found the last ounce of his strength gone?

But he found another last ounce. He half crawled, half dragged himself back and found his bag of grenades, and with the full bag hooked over his shoulder and a grenade clutched ready in his hand felt himself a new man. His strength was gone, but it takes little strength to pull the pin of a grenade, and if any German rushed him now, at least they'd go together.

The machine-guns broke out again, and the Corporal, gasping and straining, struggled foot by foot back towards them. The personal side—the question of his own situation and chances of escape—had left him. He had forgotten himself. His whole mind was centered on the attack, on the effect of those machine-guns' fire, on the taking of the German trench. He struggled past the break in the trench and on until he had shelter behind the low parapet. He wanted some cover. One grenade wasn't enough. He wanted to make sure, and he wouldn't chance a splinter from his own bomb.

The machine-guns were chattering and clattering at top speed, and as he pulled the

pin of his first grenade the Corporal saw another gun being dragged up beside the others. He held his grenade and counted "one-and-two-and-*throw*—" and lobbed the grenade over into the trench under the very feet of the machine-gunners. He hastily pulled another pin and threw the grenade . . . and as a spurt of smoke and dust leaped from the trench before him and the first grenades *crash-crashed,* he went on pulling out the pins and flinging over others as fast as he could pitch. The trench spouted fire and dust and flying dirt and debris, the ground shook beneath him, he was half stunned with the quick-following reports—but the machine-guns had stopped on the first burst.

That was all he remembered. This time the last ounce was really gone, and he was practically unconscious when the stretcher-bearers found him after the trench was taken and the attack had passed on deep into the wood.

And weeks after, lying snug in bed in a London hospital, after a Sister had scolded

him for moving in bed and reaching out for a magazine that had dropped to the floor, and told him how urgent it was that he must not move, and how a fractured leg like his must be treated gently and carefully if he did not wish to be a cripple for life, and so on and so forth, he grinned up cheerfully at her. "Or-right, Sister." he said, "I'll remember. But it's a good job for me I didn't know all that, back there—in the wood."

IV

THE DIVING TANK

His Majesty's land-ship Hotstuff was busy rebunkering and refilling ammunition in a nicely secluded spot under the lee of a cluster of jagged stumps that had once been trees, while her Skipper walked round her and made a careful examination of her skin. She bore, on her blunt bows especially, the marks of many bullet splashes and stars and scars, and on her starboard gun turret a couple of blackened patches of blistered paint where a persistent Hun had tried his ineffectual best to bomb the good ship at close quarters, without any further result than the burnt paint and a series of bullet holes in the bomber.

As the Skipper finished his examination, finding neither crack, dent, nor damage to anything deeper than the paintwork, "All complete" was reported to him, and he and his crew proceeded to dine off bully beef, bis-

cuits, and uncooked prunes. The meal was interrupted by a motor-cyclist, who had to leave his cycle on the roadside and plough on foot through the sticky mud to the Hotstuff's anchorage, with a written message. The Skipper read the message, initialled the envelope as a receipt, and, meditatively chewing on a dry prune, carefully consulted a squared map criss-crossed and wriggled over by a maze of heavy red lines that marked the German trenches, and pricked off a course to where a closer-packed maze of lines was named as a Redoubt.

The Signals dispatch-rider had approached the crew with an enormous curiosity and a deep desire to improve his mind and his knowledge on the subject of "Tanks." But although the copybook maxims have always encouraged the improvement of one's mind, the crew of the Hotstuff preferred to remember another copybook dictum, "Silence is golden," and with the warnings of many months soaked into their very marrows, and with a cautious secrecy that by now had become second, if not first, nature to them, re-

turned answers more baffling in their fullness than the deepest silence would have been.

"Is it true that them things will turn a point-blank bullet?" asked the dispatch-rider.

"Turn them is just the right word, Signals," said the spokesman. "The armour plating doesn't stop 'em, you see. They go through, and then by an *in*-genious arrangement of slanted steel venetian shutters just inside the skin, the bullets are turned, rico up'ard on to another set o' shutters, deflect again out'ards an' away. So every bullet that hits us returns to the shooters, with slightly decreased velocity nat'rally, but sufficient penetratin' power to kill at *con*-siderable range."

Signals stared at him suspiciously, but he was so utterly solemn and there was such an entire absence of a twinkling eye or ghostly smile amongst the biscuit-munchers that he was puzzled.

"An' I hear they can go over almost anythin'—trenches, an' barbed wire, an' shell-holes, an' such-like?" he said interrogatively.

"*Almost* anything," repeated the spokes-

man, with just a shade of indignation in his tone. "She's built to go over anything without any almost about it. Why, this mornin'," he turned to the crew, "what was the name o' that place wi' the twelve-foot solid stone wall round it? You know, about eleven miles behind the German lines."

"Eleven miles?" said the Signaller in accents struggling between doubt and incredulity.

"About that, accordin' to the map," said the other. "That's about our average cruise."

"But—but," objected the Signaller, "how wasn't you cut off—surrounded—er——"

"Cut off," said the Hotstuff cheerfully, "why, of course, we was surrounded, *and* cut off. But what good was that to 'em? You've seen some of us walkin' up an' over their front lines, and them shootin' shells an' rifles an' Maxims at us. But they didn't stop us, did they? So how d'you suppose they stop us comin' back? But about that wall," he went on, having reduced the Signaller to pondering silence. "We tried to butt through it

an' couldn't, so we coupled on the grapplin'-hook bands, an' walked straight up one side an' down the other."

"Yes," put in one of the other Hotstuffs, "an' doin' it the boxful o' tea an' sugar that was up in the front locker fell away when she upended and tumbled down to the other end. Spilt every blessed grain we had. I don't hold wi' that straight-up-and-down manoover myself."

"Oh, well," said the first man, "I don't know as it was worse than when we was bein' towed across the Channel. She makes a rotten bad sea boat, I must confess."

"Towed across?" said the startled Signaller. "You don't mean to say she floats?"

"Why, of course," said the Hotstuff simply. "Though, mind you, we're not designed for long voyages under our own power. The whole hull is a watertight tank—wi' longtitoodinal an' transverse bulkheads, an' we've an adjustable screw propeller. I dunno as I ought to be talkin' about that, though," and he sank his voice and glanced cautiously round at the Skipper folding up

his map. "Don't breathe a word o' it to a soul, or I might get into trouble. It's a little surprise," he concluded hurriedly, as he saw the Skipper rise, "that we're savin' up for the Hun when we gets to the Rhine. He reckons the Rhine is goin' to hold us up, don't he? Wait till he sees the Tanks swim it an' walk up the cliffs on the other side."

The Skipper gave a few quiet orders and the crew vanished, crawling, and one by one, into a little man-hole. The Signaller's informant found time for a last word to him in passing. "I b'lieve we're takin' a turn down across the river an' canal," he said. "If you follow us you'll most likely see us do a practice swim or two."

"Well, I've met some dandy liars in my time," the Signaller murmured to himself, "but that chap's about IT."

But he stayed to watch the Tank get under way, and after watching her performance and course for a few hundred yards he returned to his motor-bike with struggling doubts in his own mind as to how and in which direction he

was likely to be the bigger fool—in believing or in refusing to believe.

The Hotstuff snorted once or twice, shook herself, and rumbled internally; her wheel-bands made a slow revolution or two, churning out a barrowload or so of soft mud, and bit through the loose upper soil into the firmer ground; she jerk-jerked convulsively two or three times, crawled out of the deep wheel-ruts she had dug, turned, nosing a cautious way between the bigger shell craters, and then ploughed off on a straight course towards the road across the sticky mud—mud which the dispatch-rider had utterly failed to negotiate, and which, being impassable to him, he had, out of the knowledge born of long experience, concluded impassable to anything, light or heavy, that ran on wheels. A wide ditch lay between the field and the road, but the Hotstuff steered straight for it and crawled tranquilly across. The dispatch-rider watched the progress across the mud with great interest, whistled softly as he saw the Tank breast the ditch and reach out for the far bank, with her fore-end and nearly half

her length hanging clear out over the water, gasped as the bows dipped and fell downward, her fore-feet clutching at and resting on the further bank, her bows and under-body —the descriptive terms are rather mixed, but then, so is the name and make-up of a Land Ship—hitting the water with a mighty splash. And then, in spite of himself, he broke from wide grins into open laughter as the Hotstuff got a grip of the far bank, pushed with her hind and pulled with her fore legs and dragged herself across. If ever you have seen a fat caterpillar perched on a cabbage leaf's edge, straining and reaching out with its front feet to reach another leaf, touching it, catching hold, and letting go astern, to pull over the gap, you have a very fair idea of what the Hotstuff looked like crossing that ditch.

She wheeled on to the road, and as the dispatch-rider, with mingled awe, amazement, and admiration, watched her lumbering off down it he saw an oil-blackened hand poked out through a gun port and waggled triumphantly back at him. "Damme," he said, "I

believe she *can* swim, or stand on her head, or eat peas off a knife. She looks human-intelligent enough for anything.''

But the Hotstuff on that particular trip was to display little enough intelligence, but instead an almost human perversity, adding nothing to her battle honours but very much to her skipper's and crew's already overcrowded vocabulary of strong language. The engineer showed signs of uneasiness as she trundled down the road, cocking his head to one side and listening with a look of strained attention, stooping his ear to various parts of the engines, squinting along rods, touching his finger-tips to different bearings.

''What's wrong?'' asked the Skipper. ''Isn't she behaving herself?''

The engineer shook his head. ''There's something not exactly right wi' her,'' he said slowly. ''I doubt she's going to give trouble.''

He was right. She gave trouble for one slow mile, more trouble for another half-mile, and then most trouble of all at a spot where the road had degenerated into a sea

of thin, porridgy mud. We will say nothing of the technical trouble, but it took four solid hours to get the Hotstuff under way again. The road where she halted was a main thoroughfare to the firing line, and the locality of her break-down, fortunately for the traffic, was where a horse watering trough stood a hundred yards back from the road, and there was ample room to deflect other vehicles past the Hotstuff obstacle, which lay right in the fair-way. All the four hours a procession of motor-cars and lorries, G.S. waggons, and troops of horses streamed by to right and left of the helpless Hotstuff. The cars squirted jets of liquid mud on her as they splashed past, the lorries flung it in great gouts at her, the waggons plastered her lower body liberally, and the horses going to and from water raised objections to her appearance and spattered a quite astonishing amount of mud over her as high as her roof.

When finally she got her engines running and pulled out of the quagmire, it was too late to attempt to get her up into the action she had been called to, so her bows were

turned back to her anchorage and she plodded off home. And by the luck of war, and his volunteering out of turn for the trip, the same dispatch-rider brought another message to her early next morning in her berth behind the line.

The crew's night had been spent on internal affairs, and, since there had been no time to attempt to remove any of the accumulation of mud that covered every visible inch of her, she looked like a gigantic wet clay antheap.

The dispatch-rider stared at her.

"Looks as if she wanted her face washed," he remarked. "What *has* she been up to? Thought you said she was going swimming. She don't look much as if she'd had a bath lately."

His former glib informant slowly straightened a weary back, checked a tart reply, and instead spoke with an excellent simulation of cheeriness.

"Didn't you come an' watch us yesterday, then?" he said. "Well, you missed a treat—brand-new dodge our Old Man has invented

hisself. When we got 'er in the canal, we closed all ports, elevated our periscope an' new telescopic air-toob, submerged, and sank to the bottom. And she walked four measured miles under water along the bottom o' the canal. That''—and he waved his hand towards the mud-hidden Hotstuff—''is where she got all the mud from.''

And to this day that dispatch-rider doesn't know whether he told a gorgeous truth or a still more gorgeous lie.

V

IN THE MIST

When the Lieutenant turned out of his dug-out in the very small hours, he found with satisfaction that a thin mist was hanging over the ground.

"Can't see much," he said half an hour later, peering out from the front trench. "But so much the better. Means they won't be so likely to see us. So long, old man. Come along, Studd."

The other officer watched the two crawl out and vanish into the misty darkness. At intervals a flare light leaped upward from one side or the other, but it revealed nothing of the ground, showed only a dim radiance in the mist and vanished. Rifles crackled spasmodically up and down the unseen line, and very occasionally a gun boomed a smothered report and a shell *swooshed* over. But, on the whole, the night was quiet, or might be called

so by comparison with other nights, and the quietness lent colour to the belief that the Hun was quietly evacuating his badly battered front line. It was to discover what truth was in the report that the Lieutenant had crawled out with one man to get as near as possible to the enemy trench—or, still better, into or over it.

Fifty yards out the two ran into one of their own listening posts, and the Lieutenant halted a moment and held a whispered talk with the N.C.O. there. It was all quiet in front, he was told, no sound of movement and only a rifle shot or a light thrown at long intervals.

"Might mean anything, or nothing," thought the Lieutenant. "Either a trench full of Boche taking a chance to sleep, or a trench empty except for a 'caretaker' to shoot or chuck up an odd light at intervals."

He whispered as much to his companion and both moved carefully on. The ground was riddled with shell-holes and was soaking wet, and very soon the two were saturated and caked with sticky mud. Skirting the holes and twisting about between them was con-

fusing to any sense of direction, but the two had been well picked for this special work and held fairly straight on their way. No light had shown for a good many minutes, and the Lieutenant fancied that the mist was thickening. He halted and waited a minute, straining his eyes into the mist and his ears to catch any sound. There was nothing apparently to see or hear, and he rose to his knees and moved carefully forward again. As he did so a flare leaped upward with a long hiss and a burst of light glowed out. It faintly illumined the ground and the black shadows of shell-holes about them, and—the Lieutenant with a jump at his heart stilled and stiffened—not six feet away and straight in front, the figure of a man in a long grey coat, his head craned forward and resting on his arms crossed in front of him and twisted in an attitude of listening. Studd, crawling at the Lieutenant's heels, saw at the same moment, as was told by his hand gripped and pressing a warning on the Lieutenant's leg. The light died out, and with infinite caution the Lieutenant slid back level

with Studd and, motioning him to follow, lay flat and hitched himself a foot at a time towards the right to circle round the recumbent German. The man had not been facing full on to them, but lay stretched and looking toward their left, and by a careful circling right the Lieutenant calculated he would clear and creep behind him. A big shell-crater lay in their path, and after a moment's hesitation the Lieutenant slid very quietly down into it. Some morsels of loose earth crumbled under him, rolled down and fell with tiny splashings into the pool at the bottom. To the Lieutenant the noise was most disconcertingly loud and alarming, and cursing himself for a fool not to have thought of the water and the certainty of his loosening earth to fall into it, he crouched motionless, listening for any sound that would tell of the listening German's alarm.

Another light rose, filling the mist with soft white radiance and outlining the edge of the crater above him. It outlined also the dark shape of a figure halted apparently

in the very act of crawling down into the crater from the opposite side. The Lieutenant's first flashing thought was that the German watcher had heard him and was moving to investigate, his second and quick-following was of another German holding still until the light fell. But a third idea came so instantly on the other two that, before the soaring flare dropped, he had time to move sharply, bringing the man's outline more clearly against the light. That look and the shape, beside but clear of the body, of a bent leg, crooked knee upward, confirmed his last suspicion. Studd slid over soundless as a diving otter and down beside him, and the Lieutenant whispered, "See those two on the edge?"

"Both dead, sir," said Studd, and the Lieutenant nodded and heaved a little sigh of relief. "And I think that first was a dead 'un too."

"Yes," whispered the Lieutenant. "Looked natural and listening hard. Remember now, though, he was bareheaded. Dead all right. Come on."

They crept out past the two dead men, and, abating no fraction of their caution, moved noiselessly forward again. They passed many more dead in the next score of yards, dead twisted and contorted to every possible and impossible attitude of unmistakable death and uncannily life-like postures, and came at last to scattered fragments and loose hanging strands of barbed-wire entanglements. Here, according to previous arrangements, Studd—ex-poacher of civilian days and expert scout of the battalion—moved ahead and led the way. Broken strands of wire he lifted with gingerly delicate touch and laid aside. Fixed ones he raised, rolled silently under and held up for the Lieutenant to pass. Taut ones he grasped in one hand, slid the jaws of his wire-nippers over and cut silently between his left-hand fingers, so that the fingers still gripped the severed ends, released the ends carefully, one hand to each, and squirmed through the gap.

There was very little uncut wire, but the stealthy movements took time, and half an hour had passed from first wire to last and

to the moment when the Lieutenant, in imitation of the figure before him, flattened his body close to the muddy ground and lay still and listening. For five long minutes they lay, and then Studd twisted his head and shoulders back. "Nobody," he whispered. "Just wait here a minute, sir." He slipped back past the Lieutenant and almost immediately returned to his side. "I've cut the loose wires away," he said. "Mark this spot and try'n hit it if we have to bolt quick. See—look for this," and he lifted a bayoneted rifle lying beside them, and stabbed the bayonet down into the ground with the rifle butt standing up above the edge of the broken parapet.

"Cross the trench," whispered the Lieutenant, "and along behind it. Safer there. Any sentry looking out forward?"

Studd vanished over the parapet and the Lieutenant squirmed after him. The trench was wide and broken-walled back and front, and both clambered up the other side and began to move along the far edge. In some places the trench narrowed and deepened, in

others it widened and shallowed in tumbled shell-craters, in others again was almost obliterated in heaped and broken earth. The mist had closed down and thickened to a white-grey blanket, and the two moved more freely, standing on their feet and walking stooped and ready to drop at a sound. They went for a considerable distance without seeing a single German.

Studd halted suddenly on the edge of a trench which ran into the one they were following.

"Communication trench," said the Lieutenant softly. "Doesn't seem to be a soul in their front line."

"No, sir," said Studd, but there was a puzzled note in his voice.

"Is this their front line we've been moving along?" said the Lieutenant with sudden suspicion. "Those lights look further off than they ought."

The dim lights certainly seemed to be far out on their left and a little behind them. A couple of rifles cracked faintly, and they heard a bullet sigh and whimper overhead.

Closer and with sharper reports half a dozen rifles *rap-rapped* in answer—but the reports were still well out to their left and behind them.

"Those are German rifles behind us. We've left the front line," said the Lieutenant with sudden conviction. "Struck slanting back. Been following a communication trench. *Damn!*"

Studd without answering dropped suddenly to earth and without hesitation the Lieutenant dropped beside him and flattened down. A long silence, and the question trembling on his lips was broken by a hasty movement from Studd. "Quick, sir—back," he said, and hurriedly wriggled back and into a shallow hole, the Lieutenant close after him.

There was no need of the question now. Plainly both could hear the squelch of feet, the rustle of clothes, the squeak and click of leather and equipment. Slowly, one by one, a line of men filed past their hiding-place, looming grey and shadowy through the mist, stumbling and slipping so close by that to the Lieutenant it seemed that only one down-

ward glance from one passing figure was needed to discover them. Tumultuous thoughts raced. What should he do if they were discovered? Pass one quick word to Studd to lie still, and jump and run, trusting to draw pursuit after himself and give Studd a chance to escape and report? Or call Studd to run with him, and both chance a bolt back the way they came? The thick mist might help them, but the alarm would spread quickly to the front trench. . . . Or should he snatch his revolver—he wished he hadn't put it back in his holster—blaze off all his rounds, yell and make a row, rousing the German trench to fire and disclose the strength holding it? Could he risk movement enough to get his revolver clear? And all the time he was counting the figures that stumbled past—five . . . six . . . seven . . . eight. . . . Thirty-four he counted and then, just as he was going to move, another lagging two. After that and a long pause he held hurried consultation with Studd.

"They're moving up the way we came down," he said. "We're right off the front

line. Must get back. Daren't keep too close to this trench though. D'you think we can strike across and find the front line about where we crossed?"

"Think so, sir," answered Studd. "Must work a bit left-handed."

"Come on then. Keep close together," and they moved off.

In three minutes the Lieutenant stopped with a smothered curse at the jar of wire caught against his shins. "'Ware wire," he said, and both stooped and felt at it. "Nippers," he said. "We must cut through." He pulled his own nippers out and they started to cut a path. "*Tang!*" his nippers swinging free of a cut wire struck against another, and on the sound came a sharp word out of the mist ahead of them and apparently at their very feet a guttural question in unmistakable German. Horrified, the Lieutenant stood stiff frozen for a moment, turned sharp and fumbled a way back, his heart thumping and his nerves tingling in anticipation of another challenge or a sudden shot. But there was no further sound, and pres-

ently he and Studd were clear of the wire and hurrying as silently as they could away from the danger.

They stopped presently, and the Lieutenant crouched and peered about him. "Now where are we?" he said, and then, as he caught the sound of suppressed chuckling from Studd crouched beside him, "What's the joke? I don't see anything specially funny about this job."

"I was thinkin' of that Germ back there, sir," said Studd, and giggled again. "About another two steps an' we'd have fell fair on top of 'im. Bit of a surprise like for 'im, sir."

The Lieutenant grinned a little himself. "Yes," he said, "but no more surprise than I got when he sang out. Now what d'you think is our direction?"

Studd looked round him, and pointed promptly. The Lieutenant disagreed and thought the course lay nearly at right angles to Studd's selection. He had his compass with him and examined it carefully. "This bit of their front line ran roughly north and

south,'' he said. "If we move west it must fetch us back on it. We must have twisted a bit coming out of that wire—but there's west,'' and he pointed again.

"I can't figure it by compass, sir,'' said Studd, "but here's the way I reckon we came.'' He scratched lines on the ground between them with the point of his wire nippers. "Here's our line, and here's theirs—running this way.''

"Yes, north,'' said the Lieutenant.

"But then it bends in towards ours—like this—an' ours bends back.''

"Jove, so it does,'' admitted the Lieutenant, thinking back to the trench map he had studied so carefully before leaving. "And we moved north behind their trench, so might be round the corner; and a line west would just carry us along behind their front line.''

Studd was still busy with his scratchings. "Here's where we came along and turned off the communication trench. That would bring them lights where we saw them—about here. Then we met them Germs and struck off this way, an' ran into that wire, an' then

back—here. So I figure we got to go that way,'' and he pointed again.

''That's about it,'' agreed the Lieutenant. ''But as that's toward the wire and our friend who sang out, we'll hold left a bit to try and dodge him.''

He stood and looked about him. The mist was wreathing and eddying slowly about them, shutting out everything except a tiny patch of wet ground about their feet. There was a distinct whiteness now about the mist, and a faint glow in the whiteness that told of daylight coming, and the Lieutenant moved hurriedly. ''If it comes day and the mist lifts we're done in,'' he said, and moved in the chosen direction. They reached wire again, but watching for it this time avoided striking into it and turned, skirting it towards their left. But the wire bent back and was forcing them left again, or circling back, and the Lieutenant halted in despair. ''We'll have to cut through again and chance it,'' he said. ''We can't risk hanging about any longer.''

''I'll just search along a few yards, sir,

and see if there's an opening," said Studd.

"Both go," said the Lieutenant. "Better keep together."

Within a dozen yards both stopped abruptly and again sank to the ground, the Lieutenant cursing angrily under his breath. Both had caught the sound of voices, and from their lower position could see against the light a line of standing men, apparently right across their path. A spatter of rifle-fire sounded from somewhere out in the mist, and a few bullets whispered high overhead. Then came the distant *thud, thud, thud* of half a dozen guns firing. One shell wailed distantly over, another passed closer with a savage rush, a third burst twenty yards away with a glaring flash that penetrated even the thick fog. The two had a quick glimpse of a line of Germans in long coats ducking their "coal-scuttle" helmets and throwing themselves to ground. They were not more than thirty feet away, and there were at least a score of them. When their eyes recovered from the flash of the shell, the two could see not more than half a dozen

figures standing, could hear talking and laughing remarks, and presently heard scuffling sounds and saw figure after figure emerge from the ground.

"Trench there," whispered Studd, leaning in to the Lieutenant's ear. "They jumped down."

"Yes," breathed the Lieutenant. He was fingering cautiously at the wire beside him. It was staked out, and as far as he could discover there was something like a two-foot clearance between the ground and the bottom strands. It was a chance, and the position was growing so desperate that any chance was worth taking. He touched Studd's elbow and began to wriggle under the wires. Six feet in they found another line stretched too low to crawl under and could see and feel that the patch of low wire extended some feet. "More coming," whispered Studd, and the Lieutenant heard again that sound of squelching steps and moving men. They could still see the grey shadowy figures of the first lot standing in the same place, and now out of the mist emerged

another shadowy group moving down the line and past it. There was a good deal of low-toned calling and talking between the two lots, and the Lieutenant, seizing the chance to work under cover of the noise, began rapidly to nip his way through the wire. It was only because of their low position they could see the Germans against the lighter mist, and he was confident, or at least hoped, that from the reversed position it was unlikely they would be seen. The second party passed out of sight, and now the two could see a stir amongst the first lot, saw them hoist and heave bags and parcels to their shoulders and backs, and begin to move slowly in the opposite direction to that taken by the party passing them.

"Ration party or ammunition carriers," said Studd softly.

"And moving to the front line," said the Lieutenant quickly. In an instant he had a plan made. "We must follow them. They'll guide us to the line. We keep close as we can . . . not lose touch and not be seen. Quick, get through there." He started to nip

rapidly through the wires. The party had moved and the outline of the last man was blurring and fading into the mist. The Lieutenant rose and began to stride over the low wires. A last barrier rose waist high. With an exclamation of anger he fell to work with the nippers again, Studd assisting him. The men had vanished. The Lieutenant thrust through the wires. His coat caught and he wrenched it free, pushed again and caught again. This time the stout fabric of the trench coat held. There was no second to waste. The Lieutenant flung loose the waist-belt, tore himself out of the sleeves and broke clear, leaving the coat hung in the wires. "Freer for running if we have to bolt at the end," he said, and hurried after the vanished line, with Studd at his heels. They caught up with it quickly—almost too quickly, because the Lieutenant nearly overran one laggard who had halted and was stooped or kneeling doing something to his bundle on the ground. The Lieutenant just in time saw him rise and swing the bundle to his shoulder and hurry after the others. Behind him

came the two, close enough to keep his dim outline in sight, stooping low and ready to drop flat if need be, moving as silently as possible, checking and waiting crouched down if they found themselves coming too close on their leader. So they kept him in sight until he caught the others up, followed them again so long that a horrible doubt began to fill the Lieutenant's mind, a fear that they were being led back instead of forward. He would have looked at his compass, but at that moment the dim grey figures before him vanished abruptly one by one.

He halted, listening, and Studd at his elbow whispered "Down into a trench, sir." Both sank to their knees and crawled carefully forward, and in a minute came to the trench and the spot where the man had vanished. "Coming near the front line, I expect," said the Lieutenant, and on the word came the crack of a rifle from the mist ahead. The Lieutenant heaved a sigh of relief. "Keep down," he said. "Work along this trench edge. Sure to lead to the front line."

A new hope flooded him. There was still

the front trench to cross, but the ease with which they had first come over it made him now, turning the prospect over in his mind as he crawled, consider that difficulty with a light heart. His own trench and his friends began to seem very near. Crossing the neutral ground, which at other times would have loomed as a dangerous adventure, was nothing after this hair-raising performance of blundering about inside the German lines. He moved with certainty and confidence, although yet with the greatest caution. Twice they came to a belt of wire running down to the edges of the trench they followed. The Lieutenant, after a brief pause to look and listen, slid down into the trench, passed the wire, climbed out again, always with Studd close behind him. Once they lay flat on the very edge of the trench and watched a German pass along beneath them so close they could have put a hand on his helmet. Once more they crouched in a shell-hole while a dozen men floundered along the trench. And so they came at last to the front line. Foot by foot they wriggled close up to it.

The Lieutenant at first saw no sign of a German, but Studd beside him gripped his arm with a warning pressure, and the Lieutenant lay motionless. Suddenly, what he had taken to be part of the outline of the parapet beyond the trench moved and raised, and he saw the outline of a steel-helmeted head and a pair of broad shoulders. The man turned his head and spoke, and with a shock the Lieutenant heard a murmur of voices in the trench, saw figures stir and move in the mist. Studd wriggled noiselessly closer and, with his lips touching the Lieutenant's ear, whispered "I know where we are. Remember this bit we're on. We crossed to the left of here."

They backed away from the trench a little and worked carefully along it to their left, and presently Studd whispered, "About here, I think." They edged closer in, staring across for sight of the silhouette of the rifle butt above the parapet. The mist had grown thicker again and the parapet showed no more than a faint grey bulk against the lighter grey. The trench appeared to be full

of men—"standing to" the Lieutenant supposed they were—and they moved at the most appalling risk, their lives hanging on their silence and stealth, perhaps on the chance of some man climbing back out of the trench. The Lieutenant was shivering with excitement, his nerves jumping at every movement or sound of a voice from the trench beside them.

Studd grasped his elbow again and pointed to the broken edge of trench where they lay, and the Lieutenant, thinking he recognised the spot they had climbed out on their first crossing, stared hard across to the parapet in search of the rifle butt. He saw it at last. But what lay between it and them? Were there Germans crouching in the trench bottom? But they must risk that, risk everything in a dash across and over the parapet. A puff of wind stirred and set the mist eddying and lifting a moment. They dare wait no longer. If the wind came the mist would go, and with it would go their chance of crossing the No Man's Land. He whispered a moment to Studd, sat up, twisted his

legs round to the edge of the trench, slid his trench dagger from its sheath and settled his fingers to a firm grip on the handle, took a deep breath, and slid over feet foremost into the trench. In two quick strides he was across it and scrambling up the parapet. The trench here was badly broken down and a muddy pool lay in the bottom. Studd caught a foot in something and splashed heavily, and a voice from a yard or two on their left called sharply. The Lieutenant slithering over the parapet heard and cringed from the shot he felt must come. But a voice to their right answered; the Lieutenant slid down, saw Studd scramble over after, heard the voices calling and answering and men splashing in the trench behind them. He rose to his feet and ran, Studd following close. From the parapet behind came the spitting bang of a rifle and the bullet whipped past most uncomfortably close. It would have been safer perhaps to have dropped to shelter in a shell-hole and crawled on after a reasonable wait, but the Lieutenant had had enough of crawling and shell-holes for

one night, and was in a most single-minded hurry to get away as far and as fast as he could from Germans' neighbourhood. He and Studd ran on, and no more shots followed them. The mist was thinning rapidly, and they found their own outposts in the act of withdrawal to the trench. The Lieutenant hurried past them, zigzagged through their own wire, and with a gasp of relief jumped down into the trench. He sat there a few minutes to recover his breath and then started along the line to find Headquarters and make his report.

On his way he met the officer who had watched them leave the trench and was greeted with a laugh. "Hullo, old cock. Some mud! You look as if you'd been crawling a bit. See any Boche?"

"Crawling!" said the Lieutenant. "Any Boche! I've been doing nothing but crawl for a hundred years—except when I was squirming on my face. And I've been falling over Boche, treading on Boche, bumping into Boche, listening to Boche remarks—oh,

ever since I can remember,'' and he laughed, just a trifle hysterically.

''Did you get over their line then? If so, you're just back in time. Mist has clean gone in the last few minutes.'' A sudden thought struck the Lieutenant. He peered long and carefully over the parapet. The last wisps of mist were shredding away and the jumble of torn ground and trenches and wire in the German lines was plainly visible. ''Look,'' said the Lieutenant. ''Three or four hundred yards behind their line—hanging on some wire. That's my coat. . . .''

VI

SEEING RED

THE Mess, having finished reading the letters just brought in, were looking through the home papers. Harvey, who used to be a bank clerk, giggled over a page in *Punch* and passed it round. "Pretty true, too, isn't it?" he said. The page was one of those silly jolly little drawings by Bateman of men with curly legs, and the pictures showed typical scenes from the old life of an average City clerk, trotting to business, playing dominoes, and so on, and the last one of a fellow tearing over the trenches in a charge with a real teeth-gritted, blood-in-his-eye look, and the title of the lot was "It's the Same Man."

Everyone grinned at it and said "Pretty true," or something like that. "It reminds me . . ." said the Australian.

Now this is the Australian's story, which he said he had got from one of the fellows

in the show. For the truth or untruth I give no guarantee, but just tell the tale for what it's worth.

Teddy Silsey was an Australian born and bred, but he could not be called a typical Australian so far as people in the Old Country count him "typical." With them there is a general impression that every real Australian can "ride and shoot," and that men in Australia spend the greater part of their normal existence galloping about the "ranch" after cattle or shooting kangaroos. Teddy Silsey wasn't one of that sort. He was one of the many thousands of the other sort, who have been reared in the cities of Australia, and who all his life had gone to school and business there and led just as humdrum and peaceable a life as any London City clerk of the *Punch* picture.

When the War came, Teddy was thirty years of age, married, and comfortably settled in a little suburban house outside Sydney, and already inclined to be—well, if not fat, at least distinctly stout. He had never killed anything bigger than a fly or met any-

thing more dangerous than a mosquito; and after an unpleasant episode in which his wife had asked him to kill for the Sunday dinner a chicken which the poultry people had stupidly sent up alive, an episode which ended in Teddy staggering indoors with blood-smeared hands and chalky face while a headless fowl flapped round the garden, both Teddy and his wife settled down to a firm belief that he "had a horror of blood," and told their friends and neighbours so with a tinge of complacency in the fact.

Remembering this, it is easy to understand the consternation in Mrs. Teddy's mind when, after the War had been running a year, Teddy announced that he was going to enlist. He was firm about it too. He had thought the whole thing out—house to be shut up, she to go stay with her mother, his separation allowance so much, and so much more in the bank to draw on, and so on. Her remonstrances he met so promptly that one can only suppose them anticipated. His health? Never had a day's sickness, as she knew. His business prospects? The country's pros-

pects were more important, and his Country Wanted Him. His "horror of blood"? Teddy twisted uneasily. "I've a horror of the whole beastly business," he said—"of war and guns and shooting, of being killed, and . . . of leaving you." This was diplomacy of the highest, and the resulting interlude gently slid into an acceptance of the fact of his going.

He went, and—to get along with the War—at last came to France, and with his battalion into the trenches. He had not risen above the rank of private, partly because he lacked any ambition to command, and in larger part because his superiors did not detect any ability in him to handle the rather rough-and-ready crowd who were in his lot. Far from army training and rations doing him physical harm, he throve on them, and even put on flesh. But because he was really a good sort, was always willing to lend any cash he had, take a fatigue for a friend, joke over hardships and laugh at discomforts, he was on excellent terms with his fellows. He shed a good many, if not all, of his suburban

peace ways, was a fairly good shot on the ranges, and even acquired considerable skill and agility at bayonet practice. But he never quite shed his "horror of blood." Even after he had been in action a time or two and had fired many rounds from his rifle, he had a vague hope each time he pulled trigger that his bullet might not kill a man, might at most only wound him enough to put him out of action. The first shell casualty he saw in their own ranks made him literally and actually sick, and even after he had seen many more casualties than he cared to think about he still retained a squeamish feeling at sight of them. And in his battalion's share of The Push, where there was a good deal of close-quarter work and play with bombs and bayonet, he never had urgent need to use his bayonet, and when a party of Germans in a dugout refused to surrender, and persisted instead in firing up the steps at anyone who showed at the top, Teddy stood aside and left the others to do the bombing-out.

It was ridiculous, of course, that a fight-

ing man who was there for the express purpose of killing should feel any qualms about doing it, but there it was.

Then came the day when the Germans made a heavy counter-attack on the positions held by the Australians. The positions were not a complete joined-up defensive line along the outer front. The fighting had been heavy and bitter, and the German trenches which were captured had been so thoroughly pounded by shell fire that they no longer existed as trenches, and the Australians had to be satisfied with the establishment of a line of posts manned as strongly as possible, with plenty of machine-guns.

Teddy's battalion was not in this front fringe when the counter-attack, launched without any warning bombardment, flooded suddenly over the outer defences, surged heavily back, drove in the next lines, and broke and battered them in and down underfoot.

Something like a couple of thousand yards in over our lines that first savage rush brought the Germans, and nearly twoscore

guns were in their hands before they checked and hesitated, and the Australian supports flung themselves in on a desperate counter-attack. The first part of the German programme was an undoubted and alarming success. The posts and strong points along our front were simply overwhelmed, or surrounded and cut off, and went under, making the best finish they could with the bayonet, or in some cases—well, Teddy Silsey and a good many other Australians saw just what happened in these other cases, and are not likely ever to forget it. The German attack—as in many historic cases in this war—appeared to fizzle out in the most amazing fashion after it had come with such speed and sweeping success for so far. Our guns, of course, were hard at work, and were doing the most appalling damage to the dense masses that offered as targets; but that would hardly account for the slackening of the rush, because the guns had waked at the first crash of rifle and bomb reports, and the Germans were under just about as severe a fire for the second half of their rush as they were

at the end of it when they checked. There appeared to be a hesitation about their movements, a confusion in their plans, a doubt as to what they ought to do next, that halted them long enough to lose the great advantage of their momentum. The first hurried counter-attack flung in their face was comparatively feeble, and if they had kept going should easily have been brushed aside. Thirty-odd guns were in their hands; and, most dangerous of all, one other short storm forward would have brought them swamping over a whole solid mass of our field guns—which at the moment were about the only thing left to hold back their attack—and within close rifle and machine-gun range of the fringe of our heavies. But at this critical stage, for no good reason, and against every military reason, they, as so often before, hesitated, and were lost. Another Australian counter-attack, this time much better organised and more solidly built, was launched headlong on their confusion. They gave ground a little in some places, tried to push on in others, halted and strove to se-

cure positions and grip the trenches in others. The Australians, savagely angry at being so caught and losing so much ground, drove in on them, bombing, shooting, and bayoneting; while over the heads of the front-rank fighters the guns poured a furious tempest of shrapnel and high explosive on the masses that sifted and eddied behind. The issue hung in doubt for no more than a bare five minutes. The Germans who had tried to push on were shot and cut down; the parties that held portions of trench were killed or driven out; the waverers were rushed, beaten in, and driven back in confusion on the supports that struggled up through the tornado of shell-fire. Then their whole front crumpled, and collapsed, and gave, and the Australians began to recover their ground almost as quickly as they had lost it.

Now Teddy Silsey, while all this was going on, had been with his company in a position mid-way across the depth of captured ground. He and about forty others, with two officers, had tried to hold the battered remnant of trench they were occupying, and did actually

continue to hold it after the rush of the German front had swept far past them. They were attacked on all sides, shot away their last cartridge, had their machine-guns put out of action by bombs, had about half their number killed, and almost every man of the remainder wounded. They were clearly cut off, with thousands of Germans between them and their supports, could see fresh German forces pressing on past them, could hear the din of fighting receding rapidly farther and farther back. The two officers, both wounded, but able more or less to stand up, conferred hastily, and surrendered.

Of this last act Teddy Silsey was unaware, because a splinter of some sort, striking on his steel helmet, had stunned him and dropped him completely insensible. Two dead men fell across him as he lay, and probably accounted for the Germans at the moment overlooking him as they collected their prisoners.

Teddy wakened to dim consciousness to find a number of Germans busily and confusedly engaged in setting the bit of trench in a state of defence. They trod on him and

the two dead men on top of him a good deal, but Teddy, slowly taking in his situation, and wondering vaguely what his next move should be, did the wisest possible thing under the circumstances—lay still.

A little before this the Australian counter-attack had been sprung, and before Teddy had made up his mind about moving he began to be aware that the battle was flooding back on him. The Germans beside him saw it too, and, without any attempt to defend their position, clambered from the trench and disappeared from Teddy's immediate view. Teddy crawled up and had a look out. It was difficult to see much at first, because there was a good deal of smoke about from our bursting shells, but as the counter-attack pushed on and the Germans went back, the shells followed them, and presently the air cleared enough for Teddy to see glimpses of khaki and to be certain that every German he saw was getting away from the khaki neighbourhood as rapidly as possible. In another minute a couple of Australians, hugging some machine-guns parts,

tumbled into his trench, two or three others arrived panting, and in a moment the machine-gun was in action and streaming fire and bullets into the backs of any parties of Germans that crossed the sights.

One of the new-comers, a sergeant, looked round and saw Teddy squatting on the broken edge of the trench and looking very sick and shaken. "Hullo, mate," said the sergeant, glancing at the patch of coloured cloth on Teddy's shoulder that told his unit. "Was you with the bunch in this hole when Fritz jumped you?" Teddy gulped and nodded. "You stopped one?" said the sergeant. "Where'd it get you?"

"No," said Teddy; "I—I think I'm all right. Got a bit of a bump on the head."

" 'Nother bloke to say 'Go' bless the tin-'at makers' in 'is prayers every night." He turned from Teddy. "Isn't it time we humped this shooter a bit on again, boys?" he said.

"Looks like the Boche was steadyin' up a bit," said a machine-gunner. "An' our line's bumped a bit o' a snag along on the left there.

I think we might spray 'em a little down that way."

They slewed the gun in search of fresh targets, while from a broken trench some score yards from their front a gathering volume of rifle-fire began to pelt and tell of the German resistance stiffening.

"Strewth," growled the sergeant, "this is no bon! If we give 'em time to settle in—— Hullo,"—he broke off, and stared out in front over the trench edge—"wot's that lot? They look like khaki. Prisoners, by cripes!"

Every man peered out anxiously. Two to three hundreds yards away they could see emerging from the broken end of a communication trench a single file of men in khaki without arms in their hands, and with half a dozen rifle- and bayonet-armed Germans guarding them. Teddy, who was watching with the others, exclaimed suddenly. "It's my lot," he said. "That's the captain—him with the red hair; and I recognise Big Mick, and Terry—Terry's wounded—see him limp. That's my mate Terry."

The firing on both sides had slacked for a

moment, and none of the watchers missed one single movement of what followed. It is unpleasant telling, as it was unutterably horrible watching. The prisoners, except the two officers, who were halted above ground, were guided down into a portion of trench into which they disappeared. The guards had also remained above. What followed is best told briefly. The two officers, in full view of the watchers, were shot down as they stood, the rifle muzzles touching their backs. The Germans round the trench edge tossed bombs down on the men penned below. Before the spurting smoke came billowing up out of the trench, Teddy Silsey leaped to his feet with a scream, and flung himself scrambling up the trench wall. But the sergeant, with a gust of bitter oaths, gripped and held him. "Get to it there," he snarled savagely at the men about the gun. "D'you want a better target?" The gun muzzle twitched and steadied and ripped out a stream of bullets. The Germans about the trench lip turned to run, but the storm caught and cut them down—except one or two who

ducked down into the trench on top of their victims. Teddy found them there three minutes after, stayed only long enough to finish them, and ran on with the other Australians who swarmed yelling forward to the attack again. Others had seen the butchery, and those who had not quickly heard of it. Every group of dead Australians discovered as the line surged irresistibly forward was declared, rightly or wrongly, to be another lot of murdered prisoners. The advance went with a fury, with a storming rage that nothing could withstand. The last remnant of organised German defence broke utterly, and the supports coming up found themselves charged into, hustled, mixed up with, and thrown into utter confusion by the mob of fugitives and the line of shooting, bombing, bayoneting Australians that pressed hard on their heels.

The supports tried to make some sort of stand, but they failed, were borne back, bustled, lost direction, tried to charge again, broke and gave, scattering and running, were caught in a ferocious flank fire, reeled and swung wide from it, and found themselves

penned and jammed back against a broad, deep, and high belt of their own barbed wire. Some of them, by quick work and running the gauntlet of that deadly flanking fire, won clear and escaped round the end of the belt. The rest—and there were anything over two thousand of them—were trapped. The Australian line closed in, pouring a storm of rifle fire on them. Some tried to tear a way through, or over, or under the impenetrable thicket of their own wire; others ran wildly up and down looking for an opening, for any escape from those pelting bullets; others again held their hands high and ran towards the crackling rifles shrieking "Kamerad" surrenders that were drowned in the drumming roll of rifle fire; and some few threw themselves down and tried to take cover and fire back into the teeth of the storm that beat upon them. But the Australian line closed in grimly and inexorably, the men shooting and moving forward a pace or two, standing and shooting—shooting—shooting.

. . . Teddy Silsey shot away every round he carried, ceased firing only long enough to

snatch up a fresh supply from a dead man's belt, stood again and shot steadily and with savage intensity into the thinning crowd that struggled and tore at the tangled mass of wire.

And all the time he cursed bitterly and abominably, reviling and pouring oaths of vengeance on the brutes, the utter savages who had murdered his mates in cold blood. To every man who came near him he had only one message—"Kill them out. They killed their prisoners. I saw them do it. Kill the —— ——!" with a shot after each sentence.

And there was a killing. There were other results—the lost ground recaptured and made good; the taken guns retaken, five of them damaged and others with the unexploded destroying charges set and ready for firing; some slight gains made at certain points. But the Australians there will always remember that fight for the big killing, for those murderer Huns pinned against their own wire, for the burning hot barrels of the rifles, for the scattered groups of their own

dead—their murdered-prisoner dead—and for the two thousand-odd German bodies counted where they fell or hung limp in the tangles of their barbed wire.

And next day Teddy Silsey volunteered for the Bombing Company, the Suicide Club, as they call themselves. He wanted close-up work, he explained. With a rifle you could never be sure you got your own man. With a bomb you could see him—— and he detailed what he wanted to see. He appeared to have completely forgotten his "horror of blood."

VII

AN AIR BARRAGE

The Gunnery Officer was an enthusiast on his work—in fact, if you took the Squadron's word for it, he went past that and was an utter crank on machine-guns and everything connected with them. They admitted all the benefits of this enthusiasm, the excellent state in which their guns were always to be found, the fact that in air fighting they probably had fewer stoppages and gun troubles than any other Squadron at the Front; but on the other hand they protested that there was a time and place for everything, and that you could always have too much of a good thing. It was bad enough to have "Guns" himself cranky on the subject, but when he infected the Recording Officer with his craze, it was time to kick. "Guns" usually had some of the mechanism of his pets in his pockets, and he and the R.O. could be seen

in the ante-room fingering these over, gloating over them or discussing some technical points. They had to be made to sit apart at mess because the gun-talk never ceased so long as they were together, and the two at the same table were enough to bring any real game of Bridge or Whist to utter confusion. As one of their partners said, "I never know whether Guns is declaring No Trumps or tracer bullets or Hearts or ring sights. If you ask what the score is, he starts in to reel off the figures of the Squadron's last shooting test; he'll fidget to finish the most exciting rubber you ever met and get away to his beastly armoury to pull the innards out of some inoffensive Lewis. He's hopeless."

Guns and the R.O. between them apparently came to a conclusion that we were chucking the war away because we didn't concentrate enough on machine-gun frightfulness. They'd have washed out the whole artillery probably, Archies included, if they'd been asked, and given every man a machine-gun on his shoulder and a machine-pistol in his hip-pocket. They wasted a morning and

an appalling number of rounds satisfying themselves that machine-guns would cut away barbed-wire entanglements, stealing a roll of wire from some unsuspecting Engineers' dump, erecting a sample entanglement in the quarry, and pelting it with bullets. And they called the C.O. "narrow-minded" when he made a fuss about the number of rounds they'd used, and reminded them barbed wire didn't figure in air fighting. They tramped miles across country, one carrying a Vickers and the other a Lewis, to settle some argument about how far or how fast a man could hump the guns; they invented fakements enough to keep a private branch of the Patents Office working overtime logging them up.

It sounds crazy, but then, as the Squadron protested, they, Guns especially, were crazy, and that's all there was to it.

But with these notions of theirs about the infallibility of machine-guns, and the range of their usefulness, you will understand how their minds leaped to machine-gun tactics when the Hun night-fliers began to come over and bomb around the 'drome. The first night

they came Guns nearly broke his neck by falling into a deep hole in his mad rush to get to the anti-aircraft machine-guns on the 'drome near the sheds, and he alternated between moping and cursing for three days because the Huns had gone before he could get a crack at them. He cheered up a lot when they came the next time and he and the R.O. shot away a few-million rounds, more or less. But as he didn't fetch a feather out of them, and as the Huns dropped their eggs horribly close to the hangars, the two were not properly satisfied, and began to work out all sorts of protective schemes and sit up as long as the moon was shining in hopes of a bit of shooting.

Their hopes were fully satisfied, or anyhow the Squadron's more than were, because the Huns made a regular mark of the 'drome and strafed it night after night. And for all the rounds they shot, neither Guns nor the R.O. ever got a single bird, although they swore more than once that they were positive they had winged one. As none came down on our side of the lines, this claim

was a washout, and the two got quite worried about it and had to stand an unmerciful amount of chaff from the others on the dud shooting.

After a bit they evolved a new plan. Careful investigation and inquiry of different pilots in the Squadron gave them the groundwork for the plan. In answer to questions, some of the pilots said that if they were in the place of the Huns and wanted to find the 'drome in the dark, they would steer for the unusual-shaped clump of wood which lay behind the 'drome. Some said they would follow the canal, others the road, others various guides, but all agreed that the wood was the object the Huns would steer for. This found, all the pilots again agreed it was a simple matter to coast along the edge of the wood, which would show up a black blot on the ground in the moonlight, find the tongue or spur of trees that ran straight out towards the 'drome, and, keeping that line, must fly exactly over the hangars. One or two nights' careful listening to the direction of the approaching and departing Hun engines con-

firmed the belief that the Huns were working on the lines indicated, and after this was sure the plan progressed rapidly.

The two machine-guns on the 'drome were trained and aimed in daylight to shower bullets exactly over the tip of the tongue of wood. A patent gadget invented by Guns allowed the gun-muzzles a certain amount of play up and down, play which careful calculation showed would pour a couple of streams of bullets across the end of the wood up and down a height extending to about a thousand feet, that is, 500 above and 500 below the level at which it was estimated the Huns usually flew on these night raids. It simply meant that as soon as the sound was judged to be near enough the two guns only had to open fire, to keep pouring out bullets to make sure that the Huns had to fly through the stream and "stop one" or more. It was, in fact, a simple air barrage of machine-gun bullets.

With the plan perfected, the two enthusiasts waited quite impatiently for the next strafe. Fortunately the moon was up fairly

early, so that now there was no need to sit up late for the shoot, and the second night after the preparations were complete, to the joy of Guns and the R.O. (and the discomfort of the others), there was a beautiful, still, moonlight night with every inducement for the Huns to come along.

The two ate a hurried dinner with ears cocked for the first note of the warning which would sound when the distant noise of engines was first heard. Sure enough they had just reached the sweets when the signal went, and the two were up and off before the lights could be extinguished. They arrived panting at their stations to find the gun-crews all ready and waiting, made a last hasty examination to see everything was in order, and stood straining their ears for the moment when they reckoned the Huns would be approaching the barrage area, and when they judged the moment had arrived opened a long steady stream of fire. The drone of the first engine grew louder, passed through the barrage, and boomed on over the 'drome without missing a beat. There came the old

familiar "Phe-e-e-w—BANG! . . . e-e-e-ew —BANG!" of a couple of falling bombs, and the first engine droned on and away. Two minutes later another was heard, and Guns and the R.O., no degree disheartened or discouraged by their first failure, let go another stream of lead, keeping the gun-muzzles twitching up and down as rapidly as they could. The second Hun repeated the performance of the first; and a third did likewise. After it was all over Guns and the R.O. held a council and devised fresh and more comprehensive plans, which included the use of some extra guns taken from the machines. For the moment we may leave them, merely mentioning that up to now and even in their newer plans they entirely neglected any consideration of rather an important item in their performance, namely, the ultimate billet of their numerous bullets.

From the point of view of the defence it is an important and unpleasant fact that an air barrage eventually returns to the ground. Guns and the R.O. had been pumping out bullets at a rate of some hundreds per min-

ute each, and all those bullets after missing their target had to arrive somewhere on the earth. The gunners' interest in them passed for the moment as soon as the bullets had failed to hit their mark, and afterwards they came to remember with amazement that ever they could have been so idiotically unconsidering.

Some distance from the 'drome, and in a line beyond the tip of the wood, there stood a number of Nissen huts which housed a Divisional Staff, and the inevitable consequence was that those up-and-down twitching gun-muzzles sprayed showers of lead in gusts across and across the hutments. The General Commanding the Division was in the middle of his dinner with about five staff officers round the table when the first "aeroplane over" warning went on this particular night of the new air barrage. The lights in the Mess hut were not extinguished, because full precautions had been taken some nights before to have the small window-space fully and closely screened against the possibility of leakage of a single ray of light. One or

two remarks were made quite casually about the nasty raiding habits of the Huns, but since no bombs had come near in the earlier raids, and the conclusion was therefore reasonable that the Divisional H.Q. had not been located, nobody there worried much over the matter, and dinner proceeded.

They all heard the drone of the Hun engine, and, because it was a very still night, they heard it rather louder than usual. Someone had just remarked that they seemed to be coming closer to-night, when the further remarks were violently interrupted by a clashing and clattering *B-bang . . . br-r-rip-rap, ba-bang-bang,* the splintering, ripping sound of smashed wood, the crash, clash tinkle of a bottle burst into a thousand fragments on the table under their startled eyes. The barrage bullets had returned to earth.

The group at the table had time for no more than a pause of astonishment, a few exclamations, a hasty pushing back of chairs, when *rip-rap-bang-bang-bang* down came the second spray of bullets from those jerking muzzles over on the 'drome. Now a bullet hitting

any solid object makes a nasty and most disconcerting sort of noise; but when it hits the tin roof of a Nissen hut, tears through it and the wood lining inside, passes out again or comes to rest in the hut, the noises become involved and resemble all sorts of queer sounds from kicking a tea-tray to treading on an empty match-box. The huts were solidly sand-bagged up their outside walls to a height of some feet, but had no overhead cover whatever. The third burst from Guns and the R.O. arrived on the hut at exactly the same moment as the General and his Staff arrived on the floor as close as they could get to the wall and the protecting sandbags. They stayed there for some exciting minutes while Guns shot numerous holes in the roof, splintered the furniture, and shot the dinner piecemeal off the table.

The shooting and the hum of the enemy engine ceased together, and the General and his Staff gathered themselves off the floor and surveyed the wreckage about them. "I just moved in time," said the Brigade-Major, and pointed to a ragged hole in the seat of

his chair. "D'you suppose it was a fluke, or have they got this place spotted?" asked the Captain. "Nasty mess of the roof," said someone else. The General confined himself to less coherent but much more pungent remarks on all Huns in general, and night-raiders in particular. They seated themselves, and the waiter was just beginning to mop up the smashed bottle of red wine, when the distant hum of another engine was heard. This time the barraged ones reached the floor just a shade ahead of the first tearing burst from Guns and the R.O., and again they held their breath and cowered while the bullets clashed and banged on the tin roof, smacked and cracked on the ground outside, beat another noisy banging tattoo across the next-door huts. The group stayed prone rather longer after the ceasing of fire and engine hum, and had little more than risen to their feet when the third outbreak sent them flinging down into cover again.

After another and very much longer pause they very gingerly resumed their places at the table, sitting with chairs turned to posi-

tions which would allow evacuation with the least possible delay. The conversation for the rest of the dinner was conducted in hushed whispers and with six pair of ears on the alert for the first suspicion of the sound of an approaching engine. It was agreed by all that the Hun must have them spotted, and the only matter for surprise was that some of the bombs heard exploding in the distance had not been dropped on them. It was also agreed very unanimously, not to say emphatically, that the first job for a party in the morning was the digging of a solidly constructed dug-out. "Sand-bags on the roof might be good enough for bullets," said the General, "but we've got to allow for bombs next time, and there's nothing for that but a good dug-out."

Someone suggested moving the H.Q., but this was rejected since they were busy at the time, and it would mean a good deal of time lost and work dislocated. The General decided to hang on for a bit and see what turned up.

Next morning dug-outs were started and

thickish weather the next night prevented further raids and allowed satisfactory progress to be made on the shelters. The following night was clear again, but dinner passed without any alarm, and everyone, except the Brigade-Major, who had some urgent work to keep him up, turned in early.

At about 11.30 p.m. the first Hun came over, and at the 'drome the waiting and expectant Guns and R.O. set up their new and improved barrage, with four machine-guns all carefully trained and set to sweep over the same end of the same wood.

The General was awakened by the first tea-tray bang-banging on adjacent tin roofs, and, without pausing to think, rolled out of bed and bumped on to the floor just as a couple of strays from the outside edge of the barrage banged, ripped, and cracked through his roof and walls. He crawled at top pace to the wall, cursing his hardest, groped round in the dark and found a pair of boots and a British Warm, struggled into these, sitting on the cold floor in his pyjamas, while a tornado of bullets hailed and clashed and banged

across the Nissen hut roofs of the camp. He took a quick chance offered by a lull in the firing, flung the door open, and set off at a floundering run for the dug-out. As he doubled along the duckboards he heard the droning roar of an engine coming closer and closer, made a desperate spurt, expecting every moment to hear the ominous whistle and resounding crash of a falling and bursting bomb, reached the dug-out entrance, hurled himself through it, and fell in a heap on top of the Brigade-Major cautiously feeling his way down the dark steps. They reached the bottom in a tumbled heap and with a bump, their language rising in a mingled and turgid flow to the delighted ears of a Staff-Lieutenant, shivering at the top of the stairs in his pyjamas with his breeches under his arm and his tunic thrown round his chilly shoulders. But his grins cut off short, and he, too, hurtled down the steps as a bomb burst a few hundred yards off with a resounding and earth-shaking crash.

Sitting there in the dark for the next hour the General meditated many things, including

the mysterious ways of air Huns who so accurately machine-gunned his camp, and yet dropped nine out of ten of their bombs at various distances up to a full mile away from it.

This mystery led him next day to diverge from his way and ride across the fields to the 'drome to make a few inquiries into the ways of night-fliers. Guns was busy making some adjustments to his barrage guns with renewed determination to bring a Hun down some night. The General saw him, and rode over and asked a few questions, and listened with a growing suspicion darkening his brow to Guns' enthusiastic description of the barrage plan. He cut Guns short with an abrupt question, "Where do your bullets come down?"

Guns paused in bewilderment, and stared vacantly a moment at the empty sky. Somehow now in daylight it seemed so very obvious the bullets must come down; whereas shooting up into the dark it had never occurred. The General pulled his horse round and rode straight over to the Squadron of-

fice. There he found the Major and a map, had the exact position of the barrage guns pointed out to him, and in turn pointed out where the H.Q. camp lay. The R.O., who was working in the outer office, sat shivering at the wrathful remarks that boiled out of the next room and ended with a demand for the presence of the Gunnery Officer. The R.O. himself departed hurriedly to send him, and then took refuge in the hangar farthest removed from the office. A sense of fair play and sharing the blame drove him reluctantly back to the office in time to hear the effective close of the General's remarks.

"Barrage, sir!—barrage! Splashing thousands of bullets all over a country scattered with camps. Are you mad, sir? Air barrage! Go' bless your eyes, man, d'you think you're in London that you must go filling the sky with barrages and bullets and waking me and every other man within miles with your cursed row. Suppose you had shot someone—suppose you *have* shot someone. Blank blank your air barrage. You'd better go back to England, where you'll be in

the fashion with your air barrages and anti-aircraft. Am I to be driven from my bed on a filthy cold night to . . .'' he spluttered explosively and stopped short. If the Division heard the details of his share in the incident, had the chance to picture him racing for the dug-out, sitting shivering in scanty night attire, and add to the picture as they'd certainly do, the joke would easily outlive the war and him. ''That will do, sir,'' he said after a brief pause, ''I'll have a word with your Major and leave him to deal with you.''

Guns came out with his head hanging, to join the pale-cheeked R.O. and escape with him.

Ten minutes after a message came to him that the General wanted him in the C.O.'s office, and Guns groaned and went back to hear his sentence, estimating it at anything between ''shot at dawn'' and cashiered, broke, and sent out of the Service.

Now, what the C.O. had said in those ten minutes nobody ever knew, but Guns found a totally different kind of General awaiting him.

"Come in," he said, and after a pause a twinkle came in his eye as he looked at the dejected, hangdog air of the culprit. "H-m-m! You can thank your C.O. and the excellent character he gives you, sir, for my agreeing to drop this matter. I think you realise your offence and won't repeat it. Zeal and keenness is always commendable; but please temper it with discretion. I am glad to know of any officer keen on his work as I hear you are; but I cannot allow the matter to pass entirely without punishment . . ." (Guns braced himself with a mental "Now for it.") " . . . So I order you to parade at my Headquarters at 7.30 to-night, and have dinner with me." He paused, said, "That'll do, sir," very abruptly, and Guns emerged in a somewhat dazed frame of mind.

He said, after the dinner, that the punishment was much worse than it sounded. "Roasting! I never had such a dose of chaffing in my life. Those red-tabbed blighters . . . and they were all so *infernally* polite with it . . . it was just beastly—all except the General. My Lord, he's a man, a proper

white man, a real brick. And he was as keen to know all about machine-guns as I am myself."

"Well, you taught him something about them—especially about barrages and the result of indirect fire," said the Mess, and, "Are you going to barrage the next Huns?"

But on his next barrage plans, Guns in the first place—the very first and preliminary place—used a map, many diagrams, and endless pages of notebooks in calculations on where his bullets would come down.

VIII

NIGHTMARE

JAKE HARDING from early childhood had suffered from a horribly imaginative mind in the night hours, and had endured untold tortures from dreams and nightmares. One of his most frequent night terrors was to find himself fleeing over a dreary waste, struggling desperately to get along quickly and escape Something, while his feet and legs were clogged with dragging weights, and dreadful demons and bogies and bunyips howled in pursuit. This was an odd dream, because having been born and brought up in the bush he had never seen such a dreary waste as he dreamed of, and had never walked on anything worse than dry, springy turf or good firm road. There was one night he remembered for long years when he had a specially intensified edition of the same nightmare. It was when he was laid up as a child with a broken arm, and a touch of

fever on top of it, and he went through all the usual items of dreary waste, clogged feet trying to run, howling demons in pursuit, and a raging, consuming throat-drying fear. He woke screaming just as he was on the point of being seized and hurled into a yawning furnace filled with flaming red fire, saw a dim light burning by his bedside, felt a cool hand on his brow, heard a soothing voice murmur, "H-sh-sh! There's nothing to be afraid of. You're quite safe here. Go to sleep again."

"I'm glad, Nursie," said Jake, "I'm glad I've waked up; I've had a dreffful dream."

All that is a long way back, but it serves to explain, perhaps, why Long Jake, 6ft. 3 in. in height, thin as a lath, but muscled apparently with whipcord and wire rope, known throughout the regiment as a "hard case," felt a curious and unaccountable jerk back to childhood in his memory as he lay on the edge of a wet shell-hole peering out into the growing grey light. "I've never been up here before," he thought wonderingly, "and I've never seen any bit of front like it. Yet I

seem to know it by heart.'' He knew afterwards, though not then, that it was the ''dreary waste'' of past dreams—a wide spreading welter of flat ground, broken and tumbled and torn and shiny wet, seen dimly through a misty haze, with nothing in sight but a few splintered bare poles of trees.

But Long Jake did not get much time to cudgel his memory. It was almost time for the battalion to ''go over the top,'' although here to be sure there was no top, and the going over merely meant their climbing out of the chain of wet shell-craters they occupied, and advancing across the flat and up the long slope. Both sides were shelling heavily, but the British, as Jake could judge, by far the heavier of the two. The noise was deafening. The thunder of the guns rose roaring and bellowing without an instant's break. Overhead the shells howled and yelled and shrieked and whistled and rumbled in every conceivable tone and accent from the slow, lumbering moan and roll of a passing electric tram to the sharp rush of a great bird's wings. The ground quaked to the roll of the guns like jelly

in a shaken mould; out in front of them the barrage was dropping into regular line, spouting in vivid flame that rent the twisting smoke veil quick instant after instant, flinging fountains of water and mud and smoke into the air.

Jake heard no order given, did not even hear any whistle blown, but was suddenly aware that dim figures were rising out of the shell-holes to either side, and moving slowly forward. He scrambled out of his crater and moved forward in line with the rest. They went close up to the line of our bursting shells, so close that they could see the leaden hail splashing and whipping up the wet ground before them, so close that Jake more than once ducked instinctively at the vicious crack above his head of one of our own shells bursting and flinging its tearing bullets forward and down. But the line pressed on, and Jake kept level with it; and then, just when it seemed that they must come into that belt of leaping, splashing bullets, the barrage lifted forward, dropped again twenty or thirty yards ahead in another

wall of springing smokeclouds and spurting flame.

Jake pushed on. It was terribly heavy going, and he sank ankle deep at every step in the soft, wet ground. It was hard, too, to keep straight on, because the whole surface was pitted and cratered with holes that ran from anything the size of a foot-bath to a chasm big enough to swallow a fair-sized house. Jake skirted the edges of the larger holes, and plunged in and struggled up out of the smaller ones. The going was so heavy, and it was so hard to keep direction, that for a long time he thought of nothing else. Then a man who had been advancing beside him turned to him and yelled something Jake could not hear, and next instant lurched staggering against him. Jake just caught a glimpse of the wild terror in the staring eyes, of the hand clutched about the throat, and the blood spurting and welling out between the clenched fingers, and then the man slid down in a heap at his feet. Jake stooped an instant with wild thoughts racing through his mind. What was he to do for the man? How

did one handle—couldn't stop bleeding by a tourniquet or even a tight bandage—choke the man that way—why'n blazes hadn't the ambulance classes told them how to handle a man with a bullet in his throat? (The answer to that last, perhaps, if Jake had only known, being that usually the man is past handling or helping.)

Then before Jake could attempt anything he knew the man was dead. Jake went on, and now he was conscious of vicious little hisses and whutts and sharp slaps and smacks in the wet ground about him, and knew these for bullets passing or striking close.

The barrage lifted again, this time before they were well up on it, and the line ploughed on in pursuit of it. That was the third lift. Jake tried to recall how many times the pretended barrage had lifted in the practice attacks behind the lines, how many yards there were there from their own marked position to the taped-out lines representing the German positions.

Then through the bellowing of the guns,

the unceasing howl of the shells, the running crashes of their bursts Jake heard a sharp tat-tat-tat, another like an echo joining it, another and another until the whole blended in a hurrying clatter and swift running rattle.

"Machine-guns," he gasped. "Now we're for it," but plunged on doggedly. He could see something dimly grey looming through the smoke haze, with red jets of fire sparkling and spitting from it . . . more spurting jets . . . and still more, both these last lots seen before he could make out the loom of the block-house shelters that covered them. Jake knew where he was now. These were the concrete redoubts, emplacements, "pill-boxes." But they were none of his business. Everyone had been carefully drilled in their own jobs; there were the proper parties told off to deal with the pill-boxes; his business was to push straight on past them, clearing any Germans out of the shell-hole they might be holding, then stop and help dig some sort of linked-up line of holes, and stand by to beat off any counter-attack. So Jake went steadily on, looking sharply about him for

any Germans. A rifle flamed suddenly from a couple of yards ahead of him, and he felt the wind of the bullet by his face, thought for a moment he was blinded by the flash. But as he staggered back a bomber thrust past him and threw straight and hard into the shell-hole where the rifle had flashed. Jake saw a jumping sheet of flame, heard the crash of the bomb, felt the shower of dirt and wet flung from off the crater lip in his face, steadied himself, and plunged off after the hurrying bomber.

The next bit was rather involved, and Jake was never sure exactly what happened. There were some grey figures in front of him, scurrying to and fro confusedly, some with long coats flapping about their ankles, others with only half bodies or shoulders showing above the shell-hole edges. He thought some were holding their hands up; but others—this was too clear to doubt—were shooting rapidly at him and the rest of the line, the red tongues of flame licking out from the rifles straight at them. Jake dived to a shell hole and began firing back, felt somebody slide and

scramble down beside him, turned to find the bomber picking himself up and shaking a blood-dripping left hand. "Come on, Jake," yelled the bomber. "Rush 'em's the game," and went scrambling and floundering out of the hole with Jake close at his heels. There was a minute's wild shooting and bombing, and the rest of the Germans either ran, or fell, or came crouching forward towards them with their empty hands high and waving over their heads.

An officer appeared suddenly from somewhere. "Come along. Push on!" he was shouting. "Bit further before we make a line to hold. Push on," and he led the way forward at a staggering trot. Jake and the others followed.

They reached the wide flattened crest of the slope they were attacking and were pushing on over it when a rapid stutter of machine-gun fire broke out on their left flank, and a stream of bullets came sheeting and whipping along the top of the slope. The line was fairly caught in the bullet-storm, and suffered heavily in the next minute.

There was some shooting from shell holes in front, too, but that was nothing to the galling fire that poured on them from the flank. Jake heard suddenly the long, insistent scream of a whistle, looked round and saw an officer signalling to take cover. He dropped promptly into a shell crater, and, hearing presently the bang of rifles round him, peered out over the edge for a mark to shoot at. Out to his left he caught sight of a sparkle of fire, and heard the rapid clatter of the machine-guns. He could just make out the rounded top of a buried concrete emplacement, and the black slit that marked the embrasure, and began to aim and fire steadily and carefully at it. The emplacement held its fire more now, but every now and then delivered a flickering string of flashes and a venomous *rat-at-at-at*. Jake kept on firing at it, glancing round every little while to be sure that the others were not moving on without him. The noisy banging raps of close-by machine-gunning broke out suddenly, and on Jake looking round from his shell hole he found a gun in action not

more than a dozen yards away; and while he looked another one began to fire steadily from another shell crater fifty or sixty yards farther along. Jake crawled out of his hole, slithered over the rough ground and down into the crater where the nearest machine-gun banged rapidly. A sergeant was with the team, and Jake bawled in his ear, "If you'll keep pottin' at him every time he opens fire, I'll try'n sneak over an' out him with a bomb in the letter-box."

"Please yerself," returned the sergeant. "My job's to keep pumpin' 'em down 'is throat every time 'e opens 'is mouth."

"Watch you don't plug me in mistake when I get there," said Jake, and crawled out of the hole. He ducked hastily into another as he heard the enemy bullets spatter about him, shift and begin to smack and splash about the gun he had just left. That gun ceased fire suddenly, but the one fifty yards farther round kept on furiously. "Got him in the neck, I s'pose," said Jake, "worse luck."

He had a couple of Mills' bombs in his pockets, but added to his stock from a half-

empty bucket he found lying by a dead bomber in a crater. He advanced cautiously, wriggling hurriedly over the dividing ground between craters, keeping down under cover as much as possible, working out and then sidling in towards the red flashes that kept spurting out at intervals from the emplacement. Once it seemed that the enemy gunners had spotted him as he crawled and wriggled from one hole to another, and a gust of bullets came suddenly ripping and whipping about him as he hurled himself forward and plunged head foremost into a crater with his left side tingling and blood trickling from his left arm. He fingered the rent in his tunic and satisfied himself that the side wound was no more than a graze, the arm one a clean perforation which did not appear to have touched the bone. Twice after that he heard the bullets' *swish-ish-ish* sweeping over his head, or dropping to spatter the dirt flying from the edge of a hole he had reached. But he worked steadily on all the same, passed the line of the front and side embrasures, and was pondering his next move,

when a sudden rapid outburst of fire made him lift his head and peer out. A dozen men had appeared suddenly within twenty yards of the emplacement and were making as rapid a dash for it as the ground allowed. The machine-guns were hailing bullets at them as hard as they could fire, and man after man plunged and fell and rolled and squirmed into holes or lay still in the open.

Jake did not wait to see the result of the dash. He was up and out of his cover and running in himself as fast as the wet ground would allow him. He was almost on the emplacement when a gun slewed round and banged a short burst at him. He felt the rush of bullets past his face, a pluck at his sleeve and shoulder strap, a blow on his shrapnel helmet, made a last desperate plunge forward, and scrambled on to the low roof. Hurriedly he pulled a bomb from his pocket and jerked the pin out, when a couple of rifles banged close behind them, a bullet whipped past overhead, and another smacked and ricochetted screaming from the concrete. Jake twisted, saw the head and shoulders of

two men with rifles levelled over a hole, and quick as a flash hurled his bomb. The men ducked, and Jake drew the pin from another bomb and lobbed it carefully over just as the first bomb burst. The other followed, exploding fairly in the hole and evidently deep down since the report was low and muffled. Jake pulled another pin, and was leaning over to locate an embrasure when the gun flamed out from it. Jake released the spring, counted carefully "One and two and three and——" leaned over and slammed the bomb fairly into the slit. He had another bomb out as it burst—well inside by the sound of it—and this time leaned over and deliberately thrust it in through the opening. He had barely snatched his hand out when it went off with a muffled crash. Jake heard screams inside, and then an instant later loud calls behind him. He jerked round to see half a dozen arms waving from the hole where he had flung the first bomb. This, as he found after, was the underground stair down and up again into the emplacement,

and the waving arms were in token of the garrison's surrender

Jake stood on the roof and waved his arm, while keeping a cautious eye on the surrenderers, saw the mud-daubed khaki figures rise from their holes and come scrambling forward, and sat down suddenly, feeling unpleasantly faint and sickish.

His officer's voice recalled him. "Well done, lad, well done. This cursed thing was fairly holding us up till you scuppered it. We've got our objective line now."

Jake staggered to his feet.

"You're wounded," went on the officer. "Get back out of this, and give a message to anyone that'll take it, that we've got our third objective line, and want supports and ammunition quick as possible. Go on, off with you, now."

"Right, sir!" said Jake with an effort, and started off back across the shell-torn ground again.

He felt a bit dizzy still—side hurt a heap—arm getting numb, too—must keep going and get that message through——

A high-explosive shrapnel burst directly overhead, and Jake heard several small pieces whip-down and one heavy bit splash thudding into the ground a yard from his feet. And this was only the first shell of many. The Germans had seen that their ground was lost, and were beginning to barrage it. Jake staggered blindly across the broken ground, in and out and round the craters, over sodden mounds that caught at his feet and crumbled wetly under his tread. Huge clods of wet earth clung to his feet and legs and made every step an effort. The shell fire was growing more and more intense, thundering and crashing and hurling cascades of mud and splinters in every direction, passing overhead in long-drawn howls and moans and yellings, or the short savage screams and rush of the nearer passing. The ground was veiled in smoke and drifting haze, and stretched as far as he could see in a dreary perspective of shiny wet earth and ragged holes. He felt that he'd never cover it, never get clear of these cursed—what were they—shells, bogies, demons

screaming and howling for his life. He plunged into a patch of low-lying ground, sticky swamp that sank him knee deep at every step, that clutched and clung about his feet and held each foot gripped as he dragged it sucking out and swung it forward. He wanted to run—run—run—but his legs were lead—and the bogies were very close—and now there were dead men amongst his feet—horribly mud-bedaubed dead, half-buried in the ooze—and helmets, and scattered packs, and haversacks. A festering stench rose from the slime he waded through. He tried again to run, but could only stagger slowly, dragging one foot clear after the other. Once he trod on something he thought a lump of drier mud, and it squirmed weakly under his foot, and a white face twisted round and up, mouthing feeble curses at him. There were other things, horrible things he turned his eyes from as he tried to hurry past—and red stains on the frothy green scum. He reeled on, stupid and dazed, with the thunderous crashes of a world shattering and dissolving about him, deafened by the demon

screeches and howlings. There were other people with him, some wandering aimlessly, others going direct the one way, meeting still others going the opposite, but all dragging clogged, weighted feet. Some fell and did not rise. Jake knew they had been caught. He saw two men who were carrying something, a stretcher, stop and look up, and lower the stretcher hastily and drop, one flat on his face, the other crouched low and still looking up. A spurt of red flame flung a rolling cloud of black smoke about them, and seconds after a flattened steel helmet whistled down out of the sky and thudded in the mud by Jake. When he came to where they had been there was only a hole with blue and grey reek curling slowly up its black calcined sides. Jake knew the three had been caught, too—as he would be caught, if he didn't hurry. He struggled, panting.

They were still yelling and howling, looking for him. Demons, bogymen—and here was the loudest, and fiercest, the worst of them all—louder and louder to a tremendous chorus of all the noises devils ever made.

He was flinging himself down to escape the demon clutch (thereby probably saving his life, since the great shell burst a bare score yards away) when he heard the thunderous clash of the furnace-doors flung back, caught a searing glimpse of the leaping red flames, and was hurled headlong.

As he fell he tried to scream. He did scream, but—although he knew nothing of the gap, and thought it was on the instant of his falling—it was days later—a queer choking, strangled cry that brought a cool hand on his hot forehead, a quiet voice hushing and soothing him and saying he was "all right now."

He opened his eyes and closed them again with a sigh of relief and content. A low light was burning by his bed, the shadowy figure of a woman bent over him, and between the opening and closing of his eyes, his mind flicked back to full fifteen years.

"I'm glad I waked, Nursie," he said weakly. "I've had a dreffful dream; the very dreffulest I've ever had."

IX

THE GILDED STAFF

A TALE OF THE OLD CONTEMPTIBLES

Broadly speaking, the average regimental officer and man of the fighting units is firmly convinced beyond all argument that a "Staff job" is an absolutely safe and completely *cushy*[1] one, that the Staff-wallah always has the best of food and drink, a good roof over him, and a soft bed to lie on, nothing to do except maybe sign his name to a few papers when he feels so inclined, and perhaps in a casual and comfortable chat after a good dinner decide on a tactical move, a strafe of some sort, issue the orders in a sort of brief "Take Hill 999" or "retire by Dead Cow Corner to Two Tree Trench" style, and leave the regiments concerned to carry on. Briefly, the opinion of the firing line might be summed up in a short Credo:

[1] Cushy—easy.

"I believe the Staff is No Good.

"I believe the Staff has the cushiest of cushy jobs.

"I believe the Staff never hears a bullet whistle or sees a shell burst except through a telescope.

"I believe the Staff exists solely to find soft jobs for the wealthy and useless portion of the aristocracy.

"I believe the Staff does nothing except wear a supercilious manner and red tabs and trimmings.

"I believe the Staff is No Good."

As to the average of correctness in this Credo I say nothing, but I can at least show that these things are not always thus.

The Staff had been having what the General's youthful and irrepressibly cheerful aide-de-camp called "a hectic three days." The Headquarters signallers had been going hard night and day until one of them was driven to remark bitterly as he straightened his bent back from over his instrument and waggled his stiffened fingers that had been

tapping the "buzzer" for hours on end, "I'm developin' a permanent hump on my back like a dog scrapin' a pot, an' if my fingers isn't to be wore off by inches I'll have to get the farrier to put a set of shoes on 'em." But the signallers had some advantages that the Staff hadn't, and one was that they could arrange spells of duty and at least have a certain time off for rest and sleep. The Staff Captain would have given a good deal for that privilege by about the third night. The worst of his job was that he had no time when he could be sure of a clear ten minutes' rest. He had messages brought to him as he devoured scratch meals; he was roused from such short sleeps as he could snatch lying fully dressed on a camp bed, by telephone and telegraph messages, or, still worse, by horrible scrawls badly written in faint pencillings that his weary eyes could barely decipher as he sat up on his bed with a pocket electric glaring on the paper; once he even had to abandon an attempt to shave, wipe the lather from his face, and hustle to impart some information to a waiting Gen-

eral. A very hot fight was raging along that portion of front, and almost every report from the firing line contained many map references which necessitated so many huntings of obscure points on the maps that the mere reading and understanding of a message might take a full five or ten minutes; and in the same way the finding of regiments' positions for the General's information or the sending of orders added ten-fold to the map-hunting.

The third day was about the most "hectic" of all. For the Captain it began before daybreak with a call to the telephone which came just two hours after he had shuffled and shaken together the papers he had been working on without a break through the night, pulled off his boots, blown out his lamp, and dropped with a sigh of relief on his bed in a corner of the room. It was an urgent and personal call, and the first dozen words effectually drove the lingering sleep from the Captain's eyes and brain. "Yes, yes, 'heavily attacked,' I got that; go on . . . no, I don't think I need to refer to the map; I

very nearly know the beastly thing by heart now . . . yes . . . yes . . . Who? . . . killed outright . . . that's bad. . . . Who's in command now then . . . right. The Dee and Don Trenches—wait a minute, which are they? Oh yes, I remember, south from the Pigsty and across to Stink Farm . . . right. I'll pass it on at once and let you know in five minutes . . . just repeat map references so I can make a note . . . yes . . . yes . . . yes . . . right . . . 'Bye."

The urgency of the message, which told of a heavy and partially successful attack on the Divisional Front, wiped out any hope the Captain might have had of a return to his broken sleep. For the next two hours his mind was kept at full stretch reducing to elaborated details the comprehensive commands of the General, locating reserves and supports and Battalion H.Q.s, exchanging long messages with the Artillery, collecting figures of ammunition states, available strengths, casualty returns, collating and sifting them out, reshuffling them and offering them up to the Brigade Major or the Gen-

eral, absorbing or distributing messages from and to concrete personalities or nebulous authorities known widely if vaguely as the D.A.A.G., D.A.Q.M.G., D.A.D.O.S., A.D.M.S., C.D.S., and T., and other strings of jumbled initials.

He washed in the sparing dimensions of a canvas wash-stand, Field Service, x Pattern, deliberately taking off his coat and rolling up his shirt-sleeves, and firmly turning a deaf and soap-filled ear to the orderly who placed a ruled telephone message form on his table and announced it urgent. Afterwards he attended to the message, and talked into the telephone while his servant cleared one side of his table and served plentiful bacon, and eggs of an unknown period. Immediately after this a concentrated bombardment suddenly developed on a ruined château some three or four hundred yards from the H.Q. farm. To the youthful aide-de-camp who had arrived from the outer dampness dripping water from every angle of a streaming mackintosh he remarked wrathfully on the prospect of having to move once again in the

middle of such beastly waterfall weather. The aide stood at the brown-paper patched window, chuckling and watching the shells rewreck the already wrecked château. "Looks as if their spies had sold 'em a pup this time," he said gleefully. "I believe they must have been told we were in that old ruin instead of here. Or they were told this place and mistook it on the map for the château. Rather a lark—what!"

"Confound the larks," said the Captain bitterly, "especially if they come any nearer this way. This place is quite leaky and draughty enough now without it getting any more shrap or splinter holes punched in it."

Here the Captain had a short break from his inside job, leaving another officer to look after that and accompanying the General on horseback to a conference with various Brigadiers, Colonels, and Commanding Officers. The ride was too wet to be pleasant, and at no time could a better pace than a jog trot be made because on the road there was too much horse, foot, and wheeled traffic, and off the road in the swimming fields it

took the horses all their time to keep their feet.

The conference was held under the remaining quarter-roof of a shell-smashed farm, and the Captain listened and made notes in a damp book, afterwards accompanying the General on a ride round to where something could be seen of the position, and back to H.Q. Here, under the General's direction in consultation with the Brigade Major, he elaborated and extended his notes, drafted detailed directions for a number of minor moves next day, and translated them into terms of map-reference language, and a multitude of details of roads to be followed by different units, billeting areas, rationing, and refilling points, and so on.

He made a hasty, tinned lunch, and at the General's request set out to find one of the Battalion Headquarters and there meet some C.O.s and make clear to them certain points of the dispositions arranged. He went in a motor, sped on his way by the cheerful information of the aide that the town through which he must pass had been under "a deuce

of a hot fire'' all day, had its streets full of Jack Johnson holes, and was in a continual state of blowing up, falling down, or being burnt out. ''I was through there this morning,'' said the aide, ''and I tell you it was warmish. Sentry outside on the road wanted to stop me at first; said he'd orders to warn everybody it wasn't safe. Wasn't safe,'' repeated the youth, chuckling, ''Lord, after I'd been through there I'd have given that sentry any sort of a certificate of truthfulness. It was *not* safe.''

The Captain went off with his motor skating from ditch to ditch down the greasy road. The guns were rumbling and banging up in front, and as the car bumped and slithered nearer to the town the Captain could hear the long yelling whistle and the deep rolling crashes of heavy shells falling somewhere in it. He too was stopped at the outskirts by a sentry who held up his hand to the driver, and then came and parleyed with the Captain through the window. The Captain impatiently cut his warning short. There was no other road that would take him near

the point he desired to reach; he must go through the town; he must ride since he could not spare time to walk. He climbed out and mounted beside the driver, with some instinctive and vaguely formed ideas in his mind that if the driver were hit he might have to take the wheel, that the car might be upset and pin him underneath, that he might be able to assist in picking a course through rubbish and shell-holes, to jump out and clear any slight obstruction from in front of the wheels. The car ran on slowly into the town. Decidedly the aide had been right, except that "warmish" was a mild word for the state of affairs. The Germans were flinging shells into the town as if they meant to destroy it utterly. The main street through was littered with bricks and tiles and broken furniture; dead horses were sprawled in it, some limp and new killed with the blood still running from their wounds, others with their four legs sticking out post-stiff in the air; in several places there were broken-down carts, in one place a regular mass of them piled up and locked in a confused tangle of

broken wheels, splintered shafts, cut harness, and smashed woodwork, their contents spilled out anyhow and mixed up inextricably with the wreckage.

There was not much traffic in the main street, and such as was there was evidently, like the Captain himself, only there because no other road offered. There were half a dozen artillery ammunition waggons, a few infantry transport carts, several Army Service Corps vehicles. All of them were moving at a trot, the waggons rumbling and lumbering heavily and noisily over the cobblestones, the drivers stooped forward and peering out anxiously to pick a way between the obstacles in their path. The shells were coming over continuously, moaning and howling and yelling, falling with tearing crashes amongst the houses, blowing them wall from wall, slicing corners off or cutting a complete top or end away, breaking them down in rattling cascades of tiles and bricks, bursting them open and flinging them high and far upwards and outwards in flying fragments. As the car crawled cautiously through

the debris that littered the street, pieces of brick and mortar, whole or broken slates, chips of wood and stone, pattered and rapped constantly down about and on the car; the wheels crunched and ground on splintered glass from the gaping windows. A shell roared down on the street ahead of them, burst thunderously in a vivid sheet of flame and spurting black cloud of smoke, an appalling crash that rolled and reverberated loud and long up and down the narrow street. "Go easy," cautioned the Captain as the black blinding reek came swirling down to meet them, "or you'll run into the hole that fellow made." The driver's face was set and white, and his hands gripped tight on the wheel; the Captain had a sudden compunction that he had brought him, that he had not left the car outside the town and walked through. They edged carefully past the yawning shell-crater with the smoke still clinging and curling up from its edges, and, free of the smoke again, saw a fairly clear stretch ahead of them. The Captain heard the thin but rising whistle of another heavy

shell approaching, and "Open her out," he said quickly, "and let her rip." The driver, he noticed, for all his white face had his nerves well under control, and steadily caught the change of gear on the proper instant, speeded up sharply but quite smoothly. The car swooped down the clear stretch, the roar of the shell growing louder and closer, and just as they reached and crammed the brakes on to take the corner, they heard the shell crash down behind them. The Captain leaned out and looked back, and had a momentary glimpse of a house on the street spouting black smoke, dissolving and cascading down and out across the road in a torrent of bricks and wreckage. In another two minutes they shot out clear of the town. A mile farther on a soldier warned them that the cross-roads were practically impassable, the roadway being broken and churned up by the heavy shells that all afternoon had been and were still at intervals falling upon it. So the Captain left the car and went on a-foot. He was nearly caught at the cross-roads, a shell fragment ripping a huge rent in his

mackintosh just over his ribs. Before he reached the communication trenches too he had a highly uncomfortable minute with light high-explosive shells bursting round him while he crouched low in a muddy shell-crater. He reached the meeting-place at last, and spent an hour talking over plans and movements, and by the time he was ready to start back it was rapidly growing dark. It was completely dark before he found his way back to the road again, stumbling over the shell-holed ground, slipping and floundering through the mud, tripping once and falling heavily over some strands of barbed wire. When he found the car again he was so dirty and draggled and dishevelled and ragged—the barbed wire had taken the cap from his head and dropped it in a mud puddle, and left another tear or two in his mackintosh—so smeared and plastered with mud, that his driver at first failed to recognise him. In the town he found parties of the Sappers filling up the worst of the shell-holes and clearing away the debris that blocked the road where he had seen the house blown down,

while the shells still screamed up and burst clattering over and amongst the houses, and bullets and splinters whistled and sang overhead, clashed and rattled on the causeway.

He slept snatchily through the rest of the journey, waking many times as the car bumped badly, and once, when it dropped heavily into a shell-hole and bounced out again, flinging him bodily upwards until his head and shoulder banged solidly against the roof, taking half a minute to regain his scattered wits and dissipate a wild dream that the car had been fairly hit by a shell.

And when at last he reached H.Q., crawled wearily out of the car, and staggered, half asleep and utterly worn out, into his room, he found there the other officer he had left to handle his work and the youthful aide humped over the table copying out reports.

"Hullo," said the senior, "you're late. I say, you do look tucked up."

The Captain grunted. "Not more'n I feel," he said, blinking at the light. "Thank the Lord my job's over and everything fixed and ready so far's this end goes."

"You've heard, I suppose?" said the other. "No? Baddish news. Our left has cracked and the Germ has a slice of their trenches. It upsets all our plans, and we've got 'em all to make over again."

The Captain stared blankly at him. "All to make . . . that means all to-day's work to begin and go through again. All to-day's work—well, I'm . . ."

The aide had been eyeing the mud-bedaubed figure with water dripping from the torn coat, the sopping cap dangling in the dirty hand, the blue unshaven chin and red-rimmed eyes. He giggled suddenly. "I say, you know what the troops call the Staff?" He spluttered laughter. "The Gilded Staff," he said, pointing at the Captain. "Behold—oh, my aunt—behold the *Gilded Staff*."

X

A RAID

For several days our artillery had been bombarding stretches of the front German trenches and cutting the wire entanglements out in front of them preparatory to a big attack. The point actually selected for the raid was treated exactly the same as a score of other points up and down the line. By day the guns poured a torrent of shrapnel on the barbed wire, tearing it to pieces, uprooting the stakes, cutting wide swathes through it. Because the opposing lines were fairly close together, our shells, in order to burst accurately amongst and close over the wire, had to skim close over our own parapet, and all day long the Forward Officers crouched in the front trench, observing and correcting the fall of their shells that shrieked close over them with an appalling rush of savage sound. And while they busied them-

selves on the wire, the howitzers and heavier guns methodically pounded the front-line trench, the support and communication trenches, and the ground behind them. At night the tempest might slacken at intervals, but it never actually ceased. The guns, carefully laid on "registered" lines and ranges during the day, continued to shoot with absolute accuracy during the darkness—although perhaps "darkness" is a misleading term where the No Man's Land glowed with light and flickered with dancing shadows from the stream of flares that tossed constantly into the air, soaring and floating, sinking and falling in balls of vivid light. If no lights were flung up for a period from the German line, our front line fired Verey pistol lights, swept the opposing trench and wire with gusts of shrapnel and a spattering hail of machine-gun bullets to prevent any attempt on the enemy's part to creep out and repair their shattered defences.

Our bombardment had not been carried out unmolested. The German gunners "crumped" the front and support lines stead-

ily and systematically, searched the ground behind, and sought to silence the destroying guns by careful "counter-battery" work. But all their efforts could not give pause to our artillery, much less silence it, and the bombardment raged on by day and night for miles up and down the line. It was necessary to spread the damage, because only by doing so, only by threatening a score of points, was it possible to mislead the enemy and prevent them calculating where the actual raid was to be made.

The hour chosen for the raid was just about dusk. There was no extra-special preparation immediately before it. The guns continued to pour in their fire, speeding it up a little, perhaps, but no more than they had done a score of times in the past twenty-four hours. The infantry clambered out of their trench and filed out through the narrow openings in their own wire entanglements, with the shells rushing and crashing over them so close that instinctively they crouched low to give them clearance. Out in front, and a hundred yards away, the

ground was hidden and indistinct under the pall of smoke that curled and eddied from the bursting shrapnel, only lit by sharp, quick-vanishing glare after glare as the shells burst. In the trench the infantry had just left, a Forward Officer peered out over the parapet, fingered his trench telephone, glanced at the watch on his wrist, spoke an occasional word to his battery checking the flying seconds, and timing the exact moment to "lift."

Out in front a faint whistle cut across the roar of fire. "They're off," said the Forward Officer into his 'phone, and a moment later a distinct change in the note of sound of the overhead shells told that the fire had lifted, that the shells were passing higher above his head, to fall farther back in the enemy trenches and leave clear the stretch into which the infantry would soon be pushing.

For a minute or two there was no change in the sound of battle. The thunder of the guns continued steadily, a burst of rifle or machine-gun fire crackled spasmodically.

Over the open No Man's Land the infantry pressed rapidly as the broken ground would allow, pressed on in silence, crouching and dodging over and amongst the shell-holes and craters. Four German "crumps" roared down and past, bursting with shattering roars behind them. A group of light "Whizz-bang" shells rushed and smashed overhead, and somewhere out on the flank an enemy machine-gun burst into a rapid stutter of fire, and its bullets sang whistling and whipping about the advancing line. Men gulped in their throats or drew long breaths of apprehension that this was the beginning of discovery of their presence in the open, the first of the storm they knew would quickly follow. But there were no more shells for the moment, and the rattle of machine-gun fire diminished and the bullets piped thinner and more distant as the gun muzzle swept round. The infantry hurried on, thankful for every yard made in safety, knowing that every such yard improved their chance of reaching the opposing trench, of the raid being successfully accomplished.

Now they were half-way across, and still they were undiscovered. But of a sudden a rifle spat fire through the curling smoke; a machine-gun whirred, stopped, broke out again in rapid and prolonged fire. From somewhere close behind the German line a rocket soared high and burst in a shower of sparks. There was a pause while the advancing men hurried on, stumbling forward in silence. Another rocket leaped, and before its sparks broke downward the German guns burst into a deluge of fire. They swept not only the open ground and trenches where the raiders were attacking, but far up and down the line. Rocket after rocket whizzed up, and to right and left the guns answered with a fire barrage on the British front trench and open ground.

But at the attacking point the infantry were almost across when the storm burst, and the shells for the most part struck down harmlessly behind them. The men were into the fragments of broken wire, and the shattered parapet loomed up under their hands a minute after the first shell burst. Up to

this they had advanced in silence, but now they gave tongue and with wild yells leaped at the low parapet, scrambled over and down into the trench. Behind them a few forms twisted and sprawled on the broken ground, but they were no sooner down than running stretcher-bearers pounced on them, lifted and bore them back to the shelter of their own lines. The men with the stretchers paid no more heed to the pattering shrapnel, the rush and crack of the shells, the hiss and whistle of bullets, than if these things had been merely a summer shower of rain.

In the German trench the raiders worked and fought at desperate speed, but smoothly and on what was clearly a settled and rehearsed plan. There were few Germans to be seen and most of these crouched dazed and helpless, with hands over their heads. They were promptly seized, bundled over the parapet, and told by word or gesture to be off. They waited for no second bidding, but ran with heads stooped and hands above their heads straight to the British line, one or two men doubling after them as guards.

Some of the prisoners were struck down by their own guns' shell-fire, and these were just as promptly grabbed by the stretcher-bearers and hurried in under cover. Where any Germans clung to their weapons and attempted to resist the raiders, they were shot down or rushed with the bayonet. Little parties of British sought the communication ways leading back to the support trenches, forced a way down, hurling grenades over as they advanced, halted at suitable spots, and, pulling down sandbags or anything available to block the way, took their stand and beat back with showers of bombs any appearance of a rush to oust them.

Up and down the selected area of front-line trench the raiders spread rapidly. There were several dug-outs under the parapet, and from some of these grey-coated figures crawled with their hands up on the first summons to surrender. These too were bundled over the parapet. If a shot came from the black mouth of the dug-out in answer to the call to surrender, it was promptly bombed. At either end of the area of front line marked

out as the limits of the raid, strong parties made a block and beat off the feeble attacks that were made on them. There was little rifle or bayonet work. Bombs played the principal part, and the trench shook to their rapid re-echoing clashes, flamed and flared to their bursts of fire, while overhead the British shells still rushed and dropped a roaring barrage of fire beyond the raided area.

In five minutes all sign of resistance had been stamped out, except at one of the communication-way entrances and at one end of the blocked front line. At both of these points the counter-attack was growing stronger and more pressing. At the communication trench it was beaten back by sheer weight of bombing, but at the trench end, where heavy shells had smashed in the walls, and so rendered the fighting less confined to a direct attack, the defenders of the point were assailed from the German second line, man after man fell fighting fiercely, and there looked to be a danger of the whole trench being flooded by the counter-attack. The prompt action of a

young officer saved the situation. It had been no plan of the raid to touch the support or second trench, but, ignoring this understanding, the officer gathered a handful of men, climbed from the front trench, and dashed across the open to the second one. His party pelted the counter-attackers massing there with as many bombs as they could fling in a few seconds, turned and scrambled back to the front line, and fell into the scuffle raging there in a vigorous butt-and-bayonet onslaught.

But now it was time to go. The object of the raid had been carried out, and it was risking all for nothing to wait a moment longer. The word was passed, and half the men climbed out and ran for their own line. A minute later the remainder followed them, carrying the last of their wounded. An officer and two or three men left last, after touching off the fuses connected up with charges placed in the first instance in their duly selected places.

A moment later, with a muffled report, a broad sheet of fire flamed upward from the

trench. Three other explosions followed on the heels of the first, and a shower of earth and stones fell rattling about the ground and on the shrapnel-helmets of the retiring raiders, and the earth shuddered under their feet. The German gunners slackened and ceased their fire, probably waiting to hear from the front what this new development meant, or merely checking instinctively at the sight and sound. For a moment the shells ceased to crash over the open ground, the raiders took advantage of the pause, and with a rush were back and over their own parapet again.

Over their heads the British shells still poured shrieking and crashing without pause as they had done throughout.

In military phraseology the raid had been entirely successful, a score of prisoners being taken, a stretch of trench completely destroyed, and few casualties sustained. The raiders themselves summed it up in words more terse but meaning the same—"a good bag, and cheap at the price."

XI

A ROARING TRADE

The "O.C. Dump," a young Second Lieutenant of Artillery, thumped the receiver down disgustedly on the telephone and made a few brief but pungent remarks on railways and all connected therewith.

"What's the trouble, Vickers?" said a voice at the door, and the Lieutenant wheeled to find the Colonel commanding the Ammunition Column and the dump standing just inside.

"I was just going to look for you, sir," said Vickers. "They've cut our line again—put two or three heavy shells into that bit of an embankment a mile or so from here, and blown it to glory evidently."

"I don't suppose the Engineers will take long to repair that," said the Colonel. "They can slap down the metals and sleepers quick enough if the embankment isn't smashed."

"But it is, sir," said Vickers. "I was just talking to Division, and they say the trains won't run in to-night, and that supplies will come up by lorry. And we've some heavy lots due in to-night," he concluded despairingly.

"Let's see," said the Colonel, and for five minutes listened and scribbled figures while Vickers turned over notes and indents and 'phone messages and read them out.

"Yes," said the Colonel reflectively, when they had finished. "It'll be a pretty heavy job. But you can put it through all right, Vickers," he went on cheerfully. "It won't be as bad as that bit you pulled off the first week on the Somme. I'll leave it to you, but I'll be round somewhere if you should want me. When will the first of the lorries come along?"

They talked a few minutes longer, and then the Colonel moved to the door. The "office" was a square shanty built of empty ammunition boxes, with a tarpaulin spread over for a roof. It was furnished with a roughly-built deal table, littered with papers held in

clips, stuck on files, or piled in heaps, seats made of 18-pounder boxes, a truckle-bed and blankets in one corner, a telephone on a shelf beside the table. Light and ventilation were provided by the leaving-out of odd boxes here and there in the building up of the walls, and by a wide doorway without a door to it. The whole thing was light and airy enough, but, because it was one of the hot spells of summer, it was warm enough inside to be uncomfortable. Everything in the place—table, papers, bed, seats—was gritty to the touch and thick with dust.

The two men stood in the doorway a minute, looking out on the depleted stacks of ammunition boxes piled in a long curving row beside the roadway that ran in off the main road, swung round, and out on to it again. A few men were working amongst the boxes, their coats off and their grey shirt sleeves rolled up, and a stream of traffic ran steadily past on the main road.

"Pretty quiet here now," said the Colonel. "But, by the sound of it, things are moving

brisk enough up there. You'll get your turn presently, I expect."

"I expect so, sir," said the Lieutenant; "especially if the yarn is true that we push 'em again at daybreak to-morrow."

"Come over and get your tea before the lorries come in, if you've time," said the Colonel, and moved off.

The Lieutenant stood a moment longer listening to the steady roll and vibrating rumble of the guns up in the line, and then, at a sharp birr-r-r from the telephone, turned sharply into the office.

The lorries began to arrive just after sunset, rumbling up the main road and swinging off in batches as there was room for them in the curved crescent of track that ran through the dump and back to the main road. As quickly as they were brought into position the dump working party jerked off the tail-boards and fell to hauling the boxes of shell out and piling them in neat stacks along a low platform which ran by the edge of the dump track. The dump was a distributing centre mainly for field artillery, so that the

shells were 18-pounder and 4·5 howitzer, in boxes just comfortably large enough for a man to lift and heave about. As the light failed and the darkness crept down, candle lamps began to appear, flitting about amongst the piled boxes, dodging in and out between the lorries, swinging down the track to guide the drivers and show them the way in one by one. Vickers and the Army Service Corps officer in charge of the M.T. lorries stood on a stack of boxes midway round the curve, or moved about amongst the workers directing and hastening the work.

But about an hour after dark there came some hasteners a good deal more urgent and effective than the officers. All afternoon and early evening a number of shells had been coming over and falling somewhere out from the dump, but the faintness of their whistle and sigh, and the dull thump of their burst, told that they were far enough off not to be worth worrying about. But now there came the ominous shriek, rising into a louder but a fuller and deeper note, that told of a shell dropping dangerously near the listeners. As

the shriek rose to a bellowing, vibrating roar, the workers amongst the boxes ducked and ran in to crouch beside or under the lorries, or flatten themselves close up against the piles of ammunition. At the last second, when every man was holding his breath, and it seemed that the shell was on the point of falling fairly on top of them, they heard the deafening roar change and diminish ever so slightly, and next instant the shell fell with an earth-shaking crash just beyond the dump and the main road. Some of the splinters sang and hummed overhead, and the workers were just straightening from their crouched positions and turning to remark to one another, when again there came to them the same rising whistle and shriek of an approaching shell. But this time, before they could duck back, the voice of the "O.C. Dump," magnified grotesquely through a megaphone, bellowed at them, "Gas masks at alert position every man. Sharp now."

A good many of the men had stripped off gas masks and coats, because the masks swinging and bobbing about them were awk-

ward to work in, and the night was close and heavy enough to call for as little hampering clothing as possible in the job of heaving and hauling heavy boxes about.

A word from Vickers to the A.S.C. officer explained his shout. "If one of those shells splashes down on top of that stack of gas-shells of ours, this won't be a healthy locality without a mask on." The men must have understood or remembered the possibility, because, heedless of the roar of the approaching shell, they grabbed hastily for their masks and hitched them close and high on their chests, or ran to where they had hung them with their discarded tunics, and slung them hastily over shoulder, and ready.

The second shell fell short of the dump with another thunderous bang and following shrieks of flying splinters. Close after it came the voice of Vickers through his megaphone shouting at the workers to get a move on, get on with the job. And partly because of his order, and partly, perhaps, because they could see him in the faint light of the lantern he carried standing man-high and

exposed on top of the highest stack of boxes, and so absorbed some of that mysterious confidence which passes from the apparent ease of an officer to his men in time of danger, they fell to work again energetically, hauling out and stacking the boxes. Another half-dozen shells fell at regular intervals, and although all were uncomfortably close, none actually touched the dump. One man, an A.S.C. motor-driver, was wounded by a flying splinter, and was half-led, half-carried out from the dump streaming with blood.

"Ain't you glad, Bill," said another A.S.C. driver, as the group passed his lorry, "that we're in this Army Safety Corps?"[1]

"Not 'arf," said Bill. "There's sich a fat lot o' safety about it. Hark at that. . . . Here she comes again."

This time the shell found its mark. The crash of its fall was blended with and followed by the rending and splintering of wood, a scream and a yell, and a turmoil of shouting voices. The dump officer bent down and

[1] A derisive nickname bestowed by other troops on the A.S.C.

shouted to the A.S.C. officer below him: "In the road . . . amongst your lorries, I fancy. You'd better go'n look to it. I'll keep 'em moving here."

The A.S.C. man went off at the double without a word. He found that the shell had fallen just beside one of the loaded lorries which waited their turn to pull in to the dump, splitting and splintering it to pieces, lifting and hurling it almost clear of the road. Some of the ammunition boxes had been flung off. The officer collected some of his M.T. drivers and a few spare men, emptied the smashed lorry, and picked up the scattered boxes and slung them aboard other lorries; and then, without giving the men time to pause, set them at work heaving and hauling and levering the broken lorry clear of the road, and down a little six-foot sloping bank at the roadside. Another shell came down while they worked, but at their instinctive check the officer sprang to help, shouting at them, and urging them on. "Get to it. Come along. D'you want to be here all night? We have to off-load all this lot

before we pull out. I don't want to wait here having my lorries smashed up, if you do. Come along now—all together." The men laughed a little amongst themselves, and came "all together," and laughed again and gave little ironical cheers as the wrecked lorry slid and swayed and rolled lurching over the bank and clear of the road. The officer was running back to the dump when he heard the officer there bellowing for another six lorries to pull in. He climbed to the step of one as it rolled in, dropped off as it halted, and hurried over to the officer in charge.

"Hark at 'em," said Vickers, as another shell howled over, and burst noisily a hundred yards clear. "They're laying for us all right this trip. Pray the Lord they don't lob one into this pile—the gas-shells especially. That would fairly hang up the job; and there are Heaven knows how many batteries waiting to send in their waggons for the stuff now."

"They got my lorry," said the A.S.C. man. "Wrecked it and killed the driver."

"Hard luck," said Vickers. "Hasn't blocked the road, I hope?"

"No; spilt the shells all over the place, but didn't explode any. We cleared the road."

"Don't forget," said Vickers anxiously, "to tell me if there's any of the load missing. It'll tie me up in my figures abominably if you deliver any short." He broke off to shout at the men below, "Get along there. Move out those empty ones. Come along, another six. Pass the word for another six, there."

The shelling eased off for a couple of hours after that, and by then the last of the lorries had gone, and their place in the road outside and along the dump track had been taken by long lines of ammunition waggons from the batteries and the Divisional Ammunition Column. Every officer or N.C.O. who came in charge of a batch brought in the same imperative orders—to waste no minute, to load up, and to get to the gun line at the earliest possible moment, that action was brisk, and the rounds were wanted urgently. There

was no need to report that action was brisk, because the dump was quite near enough to the line for the steady, unbroken roar of gunfire, to tell its own tale. The sound of the field guns in the advanced positions came beating back in the long, throbbing roll of drum-fire, and closer to the dump, to both sides of it, in front and rear of it, the sharp, ear-splitting reports of the heavies crashed at quick intervals. The dump was the centre of a whirlwind of activity. The ammunition waggons came rumbling and bumping in round the curved track, the drivers steering in their six-horse teams neatly and cleverly, swinging and halting them so that the tail of each waggon was turned partly in to the piled boxes, and the teams edged slanting out across the road. The moment one halted the drivers jumped down from the saddles, the lead driver standing to his horses' heads, the centre and wheel running to help with the work of wrenching open the ammunition boxes and cramming the shells into the pigeon-hole compartments of the waggons. The instant a waggon was filled the drivers

mounted and the team pulled out to make way for another.

The lanterns perched on vantage points on the piles of boxes or swinging to and fro amongst the teams revealed dimly and patchily a scene of apparent confusion, of jerking and swaying shadows, quick glints of light on metal helmets and harness buckles and wheel tyres, the tossing, bobbing heads of animals, the rounded, shadowy bulk of their bodies, the hurriedly moving figures of the men stooping over the boxes, snatching out the gleaming brass and grey steel shells, tossing empty boxes aside, hauling down fresh ones from the pile. Here and there a wet, sweating face or a pair of bared arms caught the light of a lantern, stood out vividly for a moment, and vanished again into the shadowed obscurity, or a pair or two of legs were outlined black against the light, and cast distorted wheeling shadows on the circle of lamp-lit ground. A dim, shifting veil of dust hung over everything, billowing up into thick clouds under the churning hoofs and wheels

as the teams moved in and out, settling slowly and hanging heavily as they halted and stood.

The dim white pile of boxes that were walled round the curve was diminishing rapidly under the strenuous labour of the drivers and working party; the string of teams and waggons in the road outside kept moving up steadily, passing into the dump, loading up, moving out again, and away. Vickers, the officer in charge, was here, there, and everywhere, clambering on the boxes to watch the work, shouting directions and orders, down again, and hurrying into the office shanty to grab the telephone and talk hurriedly into it, turning to consult requisition "chits" for different kinds of shells, making hurried calculations and scribbling figures, out again to push in amongst the workers, and urge them to hurry, hurry, hurry.

Once he ran back to the office to find the Colonel standing there. "Hullo, Vickers," he said cheerfully. "Doing a roaring trade to-night, aren't you?"

"I just am, sir," said Vickers, wiping his

wet forehead. "I'll be out of Beer-Ex [1] presently if they keep on rushing me for it at this rate."

"Noisy brute of a gun that," said the Colonel, as a heavy piece behind them crashed sharply, and the shell roared away overhead in diminishing howls and moans.

"And here's one coming the wrong way," said Vickers hurriedly. "Hope they're not going to start pitching 'em in here again."

But his hopes were disappointed. The German gun or guns commenced another regular bombardment of and round the dump. Shell after shell whooped over, and dropped with heavy rolling c-r-r-umps on the ground, dangerously near to the piled boxes. Then one fell fairly on top of a pile of shells with an appalling crash and rending, splintering clatter, a spouting gush of evil-smelling black smoke, and clouds of blinding dust. The pile hit was flung helter-skelter, the boxes crashing and shattering as they fell and struck heavily on the ground, the loose shells whirl-

[1] Telephone language for Bx—the technical name for certain shells.

ing up and out from the explosion, and thumping and thudding on the other piles or in the dust.

At first sound of the burst, or, in fact, a second or so before it, the dump officer was yelling at the pitch of his voice, over and over again, "Gas masks on—gas masks on"; and before the ripping and splintering crashes had well finished he was running hard to the spot where the shell had fallen. He freed his own mask as he ran, and slipped it over his face, but even before he had pushed into the drifting reek of the burst he had snatched it off, and was turning back, when he found the Colonel on his heels.

"I was afraid of those gas-shells of ours, sir," he said hurriedly. "Pretty near 'em, but they're all right, and nothing's afire, evidently."

"Good enough," said the Colonel quietly. "Better hurry the men at the job again."

"Masks off," shouted Vickers. "All right here. Masks off, and get on with it, men."

The working party and the drivers snatched their masks off, and before the dust

of the explosion had settled were hard at work again. But the shells began to fall with alarming regularity and in dangerous proximity to the dump and road outside. The Colonel moved over to the office, and found Vickers there gripping a notebook, a handful of papers under his arm, and talking into the telephone. He broke off his talk at sight of the Colonel.

"One moment. Here he is now. Hold the wire." He held the receiver out. "Will you speak to Divisional H.Q., sir? They're asking about the shelling here."

The Colonel took the 'phone and spoke quietly into it. Another shell dropped with a rending crash somewhere outside, and Vickers jumped for the door and vanished. The piled boxes of the "office" walls shivered and rocked, and dust rained down on the paper-strewn table. But the Colonel went on talking, telling what the shelling was like and how heavy it was, the number of waggons waiting, and so on.

He was putting the 'phone down as Vickers entered hurriedly and reported, "Just out-

side in the road, sir. Did in a waggon and team and two drivers.''

''We've got to carry on as long as we can, Vickers,'' said the Colonel. ''The stuff is urgently wanted up there, and we'd lose a lot of time to clear the teams out and bring them back.''

''Very good, sir,'' said Vickers, and vanished again.

The shelling continued. Most of the shells fell close to, but clear of, the dump, but another hit a pile of shells, exploding none, but setting a few splintered boxes on fire. The fire, fortunately, was smothered in a moment. Another burst just at the entrance to the curved road through the dump, smashing an ammunition waggon to a wreck of splintered woodwork and twisted iron, blowing two teams to pieces, and killing and wounding half a dozen men. There was a moment's confusion, a swirl of plunging horses, a squealing of braked wheels, a shouting and calling and cursing. But as the smoke and dust cleared the confusion died away, and in five minutes the wrecked waggon and dead

animals were dragged clear, and the work was in full swing again. Vickers, moving amongst the teams, heard two drivers arguing noisily. "What did I tell you?" one was shouting. "What did I tell you? Didn't I say mules would stand shell-fire good as any hosses? Here's my pair never winked an eye."

"Winked a eye?" said the other scornfully. "They tried to do a obstacle race over my waggon. An' they kicked sufferin' Saul outer your centres an' each other. Yer off-lead's near kicked the hin' leg off'n his mate, anyway."

"Kicked?" said the first, and then stopped as his eye caught the red gleam of flowing blood. "Strewth, he's wounded. My bloomin' donkey's casualtied. Whoa, Neddy; stan' till I see what's wrong. You'll get a bloomin' wound stripe to wear for this, Neddy. Whoa, you——"

Vickers, remembering the snatch of talk, was able to tell the Colonel a moment later, "No, sir; the men don't seem rattled a mite; and they're working like good 'uns."

The shelling continued, but so did the work.

The waggons continued to roll in, to fill up, and pull out again; the pile of ammunition boxes to dwindle, the heap of empty boxes to grow. Vickers scurried round, keeping an eye on smooth working, trying at intervals to press some of his stock of gas-shells on any battery that would take them. "I've fair got wind up about them," he confided to one waggon-line officer. "If a shell hits them it will stop the whole blessed dump working. Then where will your guns be for shell?"

The shelling continued, and caught some more casualties. Vickers superintended their removal, wiped his hands on his breeches, and went back to his office and his "returns" and the worry of trying to account for the shells scattered by the enemy shell in his dump. The men worked on doggedly The gun-line wanted shells, and the gun-line would get them—unless or until the dump blew up.

The shelling continued—although, to be sure, it eased off at intervals—until dawn; but by that time the last loaded waggon had departed and the dump was almost empty of

shells. The German gunners were beaten and the dump had won. Presently the German line would feel the weight of the dump's work.

Three hours later, after a final struggle with his "returns," Vickers, dirty and dusty, grimed with smoke and ash, a stubble of beard on his chin and tired rings under his eyes, trudged to the mess dug-out for breakfast and tea—tea, hot tea, especially. He met the Colonel, and recounted briefly the various thousands of assorted shells—high explosive, shrapnel, lyddite, and so on—he had sent up to the gun-line during the night. He also recounted sorrowfully the night's casualties amongst his dump party, and spoke with a little catch in his voice of his dead sergeant, "the best N.C.O. he'd ever known."

"A good night's work well done, Vickers," said the Colonel quietly.

"A roaring trade, sir, as you said," answered Vickers, with a thin smile. "And hark at 'em up there now," and he nodded his head towards the distant gun-line. They stood a moment in the sunshine at the top of

the dug-out steps. Round them the heavies still thundered and crashed and cracked savagely, and from the gun line where the field guns worked the roar of sound came rolling and throbbing fiercely and continuously.

"They'll pay back for what you got last night," said the Colonel, "and some of them wouldn't be able to do it but for your work last night."

The ground under them trembled to the blast of a near-by heavy battery, the air vibrated again to the furious drumming fire that thundered back from the front lines.

"That's some consolation," said Vickers, "for my sergeant. Small profit and quick returns to their shells; the right sort of motto, that, for a roaring trade."

The fire of the gun-line, rising to a fresh spasm of fury, fairly drowned the last of his words. "A proper roaring trade," he repeated loudly, and nodded his head again in the direction of the sound.

XII

HOME

If anybody had told Lieutenant "Lollie" Dutford, Lieutenant and Adjutant of the Stolidshire Buffs, that he would come one day to be glad to get back to the battalion and the front, Lollie would have called that prophet an unqualified idiot. And, yet, he would later have been convicted out of his own mouth.

Lollie was a hardened veteran campaigner, twenty-two years of age, and full two years' trench-age—which means a lot more—and he started to return from his latest leave with a pleasing consciousness of his own knowledge of the ropes, and a comforting belief that he would be able to make his return journey in comparative ease. Certainly, the start from Victoria Station at seven o'clock on a drizzling wet morning, which had necessitated his being up at 5.30 a.m., had not been

pleasant, but even the oldest soldier has to put up with these things, and be assured that no "old soldiering" can dodge them. It annoyed him a good deal to find when they reached Folkestone that the boat would not start until well on in the afternoon, and that he had been dragged out of bed at cock-crow for no other purpose than to loaf disconsolately half a day round a dead-and-alive pleasure resort. He was irritated again when he went to have lunch in a certain hotel, to have the price of his meal demanded from him before he was allowed into the dining-room. "It's not only buying a pig in a poke," as he told his chance table companion, "but it's the beastly insinuation that we're not to be trusted to pay for our lunch after we've had it that I don't like." He also didn't like, and said so very forcibly, the discovery that there is a rule in force which prohibits any officer proceeding overseas from having any intoxicating liquor with his meal, although any other not for overseas that day could have what he liked. "If that's not inviting a fellow to lie and say he is staying this side I

dunno what is,'' said Lollie disgustedly. ''But why should I be induced to tell lies for the sake of a pint of bitter. And if I'm trusted not to lie, why can't I be trusted not to drink too much. However, it's one more of their mysterious ways this side, I s'pose.'' He evaporated a good deal of his remaining good temper over the lunch. ''Not much wonder they want their cash first,'' he said; ''I haven't had enough to feed a hungry sparrow.''

Old-soldier experience took him straight to a good place on the boat, and room to lie down on a cushioned settee before it was filled up, and he spent the passage in making up some of his early morning lost sleep. On arrival at the other side he found that his train was not due to start for up-country until after midnight—''not late enough to be worth going to bed before, and too late to sit up with comfort,'' as he declared. He had a good dinner at the Officers' Club, after rather a long wait for a vacant seat, but after it could find no place to sit down in the crowded smoke-room or reading-rooms. However, he

knew enough to take him round to a popular hotel bar, where he spent a couple of joyful hours meeting a string of old friends passing to or from all parts of "the line," and swapping news and gossip of mutually known places and people up front. Lollie had brought along with him a young fellow he had met in the club. Bullivant was returning from his first leave, and so was rather ignorant of "the ropes," and had begged Lollie to put him wise to any wrinkles he knew for passing the time and smoothing the journey up. " 'Pon my word," Lollie confided to him after the departure of another couple of old friends, "it's almost worth coming back to meet so many pals and chin over old times and places."

"I don't like this fool notion of no whisky allowed," said Bullivant. "Now, you're an old bird; don't you know any place we can get a real drink?"

"Plenty," said Lollie. "If you don't mind paying steep for 'em and meeting a crowd of people and girls I've no use for myself."

"I'm on," replied Bullivant. "Lead me to

it. But don't let's forget that twelve-something train."

They spent half an hour in the "place," where Lollie drank some exceedingly bad champagne, and spent every minute of the time in a joyful reunion with an old school chum he hadn't seen for years. Then he searched Bullivant out and they departed for the hotel to pick up their kits and move to the station. At the hotel the barman told him in confidence that the midnight train was cancelled, and that he'd have to wait till next day. "He's right, of course," Lollie told Bullivant. "He always gets these things right. He has stacks more information about everything than all the Intelligence crowd together. If you want to know where your unit is in the line or when a train arrives or a boat leaves, come along and ask Henri, and be sure you'll get it right—if he knows you well enough; but all the same we must go to the station and get it officially that our train's a wash-out to-night." They went there and got it officially, with the added information that they would go to-morrow night, same time,

but to report to R.T.O. (Railway Transport Officer) at noon. There were no beds at the club ("Never are after about tea-time," Lollie told Bullivant), and, to save tramping in a vain search around hotels, they returned to their barman-information-bureau, and learned from him that all the leading hotels were full up to the last limits of settees, made-up beds, and billiard rooms. Lollie's knowledge saved them further wanderings by taking them direct to another "place," where they obtained a not-too-clean bedroom. "Not as bad as plenty we've slept in up the line," said Lollie philosophically; "only I'd advise you to sleep in your clothes; it leaves so much the less front open to attack."

They reported at the station at noon next day, and were told their train would leave at 1 p.m., and "change at St. Oswear." They rushed to a near hotel and swallowed lunch, hurried back to the train, and sat in it for a solid two hours before it started. It was long after dark when they reached St. Oswear, where they bundled out onto the platform and sought information as to the connection.

They were told it was due in any minute, would depart immediately after arrival, and that anyone who had to catch it must not leave the station. "Same old gag," said Lollie when they had left the R.T.O. "But you don't catch me sitting on a cold platform half the night. I've had some, thanks." For the sum of one franc down and a further franc on completion of engagement he bought the services of a French boy, and led Bullivant to a café just outside. They had a leisurely and excellent dinner there of soup, omelette, and coffee, and then spent another hour in comfortable arm-chairs until their train arrived. Lollie's boy scout reported twice the arrival of trains for up the line, but investigation found these to be the wrong trains, and the two friends returned to their arm-chairs and another coffee. Their right train was also duly reported, and Lollie paid off his scout, and they found themselves seats on board.

"I'm mighty glad I struck you," said Bullivant gratefully. "I'd sure have worn my soul and my feet out tramping this platform

all these hours if you hadn't been running the deal.''

''I'm getting up to all these little dodges,'' said Lollie modestly. ''I know the way things run this side now a heap better'n I do in England.''

But all his knowledge did not save them a horribly uncomfortable night in an overcrowded compartment, and even when Bullivant dropped off at his station two others got in. Lollie reached his station only to be told his Division had moved, that to find them he must go back by train thirty kilometres, change, and proceed to another railhead and inquire there. He was finally dumped off at his railhead in the shivery dawn—''always seems to be an appalling lot of daybreak work about these stunts somehow,'' as he remarked disgustedly—and had a subsequent series of slow-dragging adventures in his final stages of the journey to the battalion by way of a lift from the supply officer's car and a motor lorry to Refilling Point, a sleep there on some hay bales, a further jolty ride on the ration waggons towards the trenches, and

a last tramp up with the ration party. The battalion had just moved in to rather a quiet part of the line, and were occupying the support trenches, and Lollie found the H.Q. mess established in a commodious dug-out, very comfortably furnished.

"Yes, sir," he said, in answer to a question from the C.O., "and I tell you I'm real glad to be home again. I've been kicking round the country like a lost dog for days, and I feel more unwashed and disgruntled than if I'd just come out of a push."

The door-curtain of sacking pushed aside, and the Padre came in. "Ha, Lollie. Glad to have you back again," he said, shaking hands warmly. "Mess has been quite missing you. Sorry for your own sake you're here, of course, but——"

"You needn't be, Padre," said Lollie cheerfully. "I was just saying I'm glad to be back. And 'pon my word it's true. It's quite good to be home here again."

"Home!" said the Padre and the Acting-Adjutant together, and laughed. "I like that."

"Well, it is," said Lollie stoutly. "Anyway, it feels like it to me."

That feeling apparently was driven home in the course of the next hour or two. His servant showed him to his dug-out, which he was to share with the second in command, had a portable bath and a dixie full of boiling water for him, his valise spread on a comfortable stretcher-bed of wire netting on a wooden frame, clean shirt and things laid out, everything down to soap and towel and a packet of his own pet brand of cigarettes ready to his hand. Lollie pounced on the cigarettes. "Like a fool I didn't take enough to last me," he said, lighting up and drawing a long and deep breath and exhaling slowly and luxuriously. "And I couldn't get 'em over the other side for love or money."

While he stripped and got ready for his bath, his servant hovered round shaking out the things he took off and giving him snatches of gossip about the battalion. Lollie saw him eyeing the exceedingly dull buttons on his tunic and laughed. "Rather dirty, aren't they?" he said. "I'm afraid I forgot 'em

most of the time I was over there. And I hate cleaning buttons anyhow; always get more of the polish paste on the tunic than on the buttons."

After his bath and change, Lollie wandered round and had a talk to different officers, to his orderly-room sergeant, and the officers' mess cook, inspected the kitchen arrangements with interest, and discussed current issue of rations and meals. "Glad you're back, sir," said the mess cook. "I did the best I could, but the messing never seems to run just right when you're away. I never can properly remember the different things some of them don't like."

The same compliment to his mess-catering abilities was paid him at dinner that night. "Ha, dinner," said the Padre; "we can look for a return to our good living again now that you're ho—back again, Lollie."

Lollie laughed. "Nearly caught you that time, Padre," he said. "You almost said 'home again,' didn't you?" And the Padre had to confess he nearly did.

They had a very pleasant little dinner, and,

even if the curry was mostly bully beef and the wine was the thin, sharp claret of local purchase, Lollie enjoyed every mouthful and every minute of the meal. Several of the other officers of the battalion dropped in after dinner on one excuse or another, but, as Lollie suspected, mainly to shake hands with him and hear any of the latest from the other side.

"There's a rum ration to-night," said the Second, about ten. "What about a rum punch, Lollie?"

"I tell you this is good," said Lollie contentedly a quarter of an hour later, as they sat sipping the hot rum. "'Pon my word, it's worth going away, if it's only for the pleasure of coming back."

The others laughed at him. "Coming back home, eh?" scoffed the Second.

"Yes, but look here, 'pon my word, it *is* home," said Lollie earnestly. "I tell you it's like going to a foreign country, going to the other side now. There's so many rules and regulations you can't keep up with them. You always seem to want a drink, or meet a

pal you'd like a drink with, just in the no-drink hours. In uniform you can't even get food after some silly hour like nine or ten o'clock. Why, after the theatre one night, when I was with three people in civvies, we went to a restaurant, and I had to sit hungry and watch them eat. They could get food, and I couldn't. And one day a pal didn't turn up that I was lunching at the Emperor's, and I found I couldn't have any of the things I wanted most, because it cost more than 3*s.* 6*d.* I'd set my heart on a dozen natives and a bit of grilled chicken—you know how you do get hankering for certain things after a spell out here—but I had to feed off poached eggs or some idiotic thing like that."

"But isn't there some sense in that rule?" said the Padre. "Isn't the idea to prevent young officers being made to pay more than they can afford?"

Lollie snorted. "Does it prevent it?" he said. "My lunch cost me over fifteen bob rather than under it, what with a bottle of decent Burgundy, and coffee and liqueur, and tip to the waiter, and so on. And, anyhow,

who but an utter ass would go to the Emperor's if he couldn't afford a stiff price for a meal? But it isn't only these rules and things over there that makes it 'coming home' to come back here. In England you're made to feel an outsider. D'you know I had a military police fellow pull me up for not carrying gloves in the first hour of my leave?"

The others murmured sympathy. "What did you say, Lollie?" asked the Acting-Adjutant.

"I made him jump," said Lollie, beaming. "I was standing looking for a taxi, and this fellow came alongside and looked me up and down. 'Your gloves have——,' he was beginning, when I whipped round on him. 'Are you speaking to me?' I snapped. 'Yessir,' he said, stuttering a bit. 'Then what do you mean by not saluting?' I demanded, and sailed into him, and made him stand to attention while I dressed him down and told him I'd a good mind to report him for insolent and insubordinate behaviour. 'And, now,' I finished up, 'there's a brigadier-general just crossing the street, and he's not

carrying gloves. Go'n speak to him about it, and then come back, and I'll give you my card to report me.' He sneaked off—*and* he didn't go after the general."

The others laughed and applauded. "Good stroke." "Rather smart, Lollie." "It is rather sickening."

"But as I was saying," went on Lollie, after another sip at his steaming punch, "it isn't so much these things make a fellow glad to be back here. It's because this side really is getting to feel home-like. You know your way about Boulogne, and all the railways, and where they run to and from, better than you do lines in England. I do, anyhow. You know what's a fair price for things, and what you ought to pay, and you haven't the faintest idea of that in England. You just pay, and be sure you're usually swindled if they know you're from this side. Here you know just the things other people know, and very little more and very little less, and you're interested in much the same things. Over there you have to sit mum while people talk by the hour about sugar cards and Sinn Fein,

and whether there'll be a new Ministry of Coke and Coal, and, if so, who'll get the job; and you hear people grouse, and read letters in the papers, about the unfair amusement tax, and they pray hard for pouring rain so it'll stop the Zepps coming over—not thinking or caring, I suppose, that it will hang up our Push at the same time, or thinking of us in the wet shell-holes—and they get agitated to death because the Minister for Foreign Affairs——" Lollie stopped abruptly and glanced round the table. "Can anybody here tell me who IS the Minister for Foreign Affairs?" he demanded. There was a dead silence for a moment and an uneasy shuffle. Then the Padre cleared his throat and began, slowly, "Ha, I think it is——"

Lollie interrupted. "There you are!" he said triumphantly. "None of you know, and you only think, Padre. Just what I'm saying. We don't know the things they know over there, and, what's more, don't care a rush about 'em."

"There's a good deal in what you say, Lol-

lie," said the C.O. "But, after all, Home's Home to me."

"I know, sir," said the Second. "So it is to me."

But Lollie fairly had the bit between his teeth, although, perhaps, the rum punch was helping. "Well, I find this side gets more and more home to me. Over there you keep reading and hearing about the pacifist danger, and every other day there are strikes and rumours of strikes, either for more money or because of food shortage—makes one wonder what some of 'em would say to our fellows' bob a day or twenty-four hours living on a bully and biscuit iron ration. I tell you at the end of ten days over there you begin to think we've lost the blessed war and that it'd serve some of 'em right if we did. Here we're only interested in real things and real men. There's hardly a man I know in England now—and probably you're the same if you stop to think. And I come back here and drop into a smooth little routine, and people I like, and a job I know, and talk and ways I'm perfectly familiar with and

at home in—that's the only word, at home in."

"Bully beef and bullets and Stand To at dawn," murmured the Acting-Adjutant. "There were two men reported killed in the trench to-night."

"And they might have been killed by a taxi in the Strand if they'd been there," retorted Lollie.

"Remember those billets near Pop?" asked the Acting-Adjutant. "Lovely home that, wasn't it?"

The others burst into laughter. "Had you there, Lollie," chuckled the C.O. "It was a hole, eh?" said the Second, and guffawed again. "D'you remember Madame, and the row she made because my man borrowed her wash-tub for me to bath in," said the Padre. "And the struggle Lollie had to get a cook-house for the mess, and fed us on cold bully mainly," said the C.O., still chuckling.

"Yes, now, but just hold on," said Lollie. "Do any of you recollect anything particular about Blankchester—in England?"

There was silence again. "Didn't we halt

there a night that time we marched from Blank?" said the C.O. hesitatingly. "No, I remember," said the Padre. "We halted and lunched there. Ha, Red Lion Inn, roses over the porch. Pretty place." The Second evidently remembered nothing.

"You're right, sir," said Lollie. "We halted there a night. The Red Lion village I forget the name of, Padre, though I remember the place. Now, let's see if a few other places stir your memories." He went over, slowly and with a pause after each, the names of a number of well-known towns of England and Scotland. The C.O. yawned, and the others looked bored. "What are you getting at, Lollie?" demanded the Acting-Adjutant wearily. Lollie laughed. "Those are 'home' towns," he said, "and they don't interest you a scrap. But I could go through the list of every town in the North of France and Flanders—Ballieul and Poperinghe, and Bethune and Wipers, and Amiens and Armentières and all the rest—and there isn't one that doesn't bring a pleasant little homey thrill to the sound; and not one that hasn't

associations of people or times that you'll remember to your dying day. Even that rotten billet at Pop you remember and can make jokes and laugh over—as you will for the rest of your lives. It's all these things that make me say it's good to be back here—home," and he stood up from the table.

They all chaffed him again, but a little less briskly and with a doubt evidently dawning in their minds.

Lollie went off to his bed presently, and the others soon followed. The Second and the Padre sat on to finish a final pipe. When the Second went along to the dug-out which Lollie was sharing, he went in very quietly, and found the candle burning by Lollie's bed and Lollie fast asleep. He was taking his coat off when Lollie stirred and said something indistinctly. "What's that?" said the Major. "Thought you were asleep."

"It's good, O Lord, but it's good to be home again," said Lollie sleepily, and muttered again. The Major looked closely at him. "Talking in his sleep again," he thought. "Poor lad. Funny notion that

about back home—here,'' and he glanced round the rough earth walls, the truckle bed, the earth floor, and the candle stuck in a bottle. ''Home! Good Lord!''

''. . . So good to be back home,'' Lollie went on . . . ''good to find you here——'' The Major ''tch-tch-ed'' softly between his teeth and stooped to pull his boots off, and the voice went on, evenly again: ''That's the best bit of coming home, all that really makes it home—just being with you again—dearest.'' The Major stood erect abruptly. ''. . . Some day we'll have our own little home . . .'' and this time at the end of the sentence, clear and distinct, came a girl's name . . . ''Maisie.''

With sudden haste the Major jerked off his remaining boot, blew out the light, and tumbled into bed. He caught a last fragment, something about ''another kiss, dear,'' before he could pull the blankets up and muffle them tight about his ears to shut out what he had neither right nor wish to hear. After that he lay thinking long and staring into the darkness. ''So—that's it. Talked brave

enough, too. I was actually believing he meant it, and cursing the old war again, and thinking what a sad pity a fine youngster like that should come to feel a foreign country home. Sad pity, but''—his mind jumped ahead a fortnight to the next Push-to-Be—''I don't know that it's not more of a pity as it is, for her, and—him.''

XIII

BRING UP THE GUNS

When Jack Duncan and Hugh Morrison suddenly had it brought home to them that they ought to join the New Armies, they lost little time in doing so. Since they were chums of long standing in a City office, it went without saying that they decided to join and "go through it" together, but it was much more open to argument what branch of the Service or regiment they should join.

They discussed the question in all its bearings, but being as ignorant of the Army and its ways as the average young Englishman was in the early days of the war, they had little evidence except varied and contradictory hearsay to act upon. Both being about twenty-five they were old enough and business-like enough to consider the matter in a business-like way, and yet both were young enough to be influenced by the flavour of ro-

mance they found in a picture they came across at the time. It was entitled "Bring up the Guns," and it showed a horsed battery in the wild whirl of advancing into action, the horses straining and stretching in front of the bounding guns, the drivers crouched forward or sitting up plying whip and spur, the officers galloping and waving the men on, dust swirling from leaping hoofs and wheels, whip-thongs streaming, heads tossing, reins flying loose, altogether a blood-stirring picture of energy and action, speed and power.

"I've always had a notion," said Duncan reflectively, "that I'd like to have a good whack at riding. One doesn't get much chance of it in city life, and this looks like a good chance."

"And I've heard it said," agreed Morrison, "that a fellow with any education stands about the best chance in artillery work. We might as well plump for something where we can use the bit of brains we've got."

"That applies to the Engineers too, doesn't it?" said Duncan. "And the pottering about

we did for a time with electricity might help there."

"Um-m," Morrison agreed doubtfully, still with an appreciative eye on the picture of the flying guns. "Rather slow work though—digging and telegraph and pontoon and that sort of thing."

"Right-oh," said Duncan with sudden decision. "Let's try for the Artillery."

"Yes. We'll call that settled," said Morrison; and both stood a few minutes looking with a new interest at the picture, already with a dawning sense that they "belonged," that these gallant gunners and leaping teams were "Ours," looking forward with a little quickening of the pulse to the day when they, too, would go whirling into action in like desperate and heart-stirring fashion.

"Come on," said Morrison. "Let's get it over. To the recruiting-office—quick march."

And so came two more gunners into the Royal Regiment.

. . . . .

When the long, the heart-breakingly long period of training and waiting for their guns,

and more training and slow collecting of their horses, and more training was at last over, and the battery sailed for France, Morrison and Duncan were both sergeants and "Numbers One" in charge of their respective guns; and before the battery had been in France three months Morrison had been promoted to Battery Sergeant-Major.

The battery went through the routine of trench warfare and dug its guns into deep pits, and sent its horses miles away back, and sat in the same position for months at a time, had slack spells and busy spells, shelled and was shelled, and at last moved up to play its part in The Push.

Of that part I don't propose to tell more than the one incident—an incident of machine-pattern sameness to the lot of many batteries.

The infantry had gone forward again and the ebb-tide of battle was leaving the battery with many others almost beyond high-water mark of effective range. Preparations were made for an advance. The Battery Commander went forward and reconnoitred the new

position the battery was to move into, everything was packed up and made ready, while the guns still continued to pump out long-range fire. The Battery Commander came in again and explained everything to his officers and gave the necessary detailed orders to the Sergeant-Major, and presently received orders of date and hour to move.

This was in the stages of The Push when rain was the most prominent and uncomfortable feature of the weather. The guns were in pits built over with strong walls and roofing of sandbags and beams which were weather-tight enough, but because the floors of the pits were lower than the surface of the ground, it was only by a constant struggle that the water was held back from draining in and forming a miniature lake in each pit. Round and between the guns was a mere churned-up sea of sticky mud. As soon as the new battery position was selected a party went forward to it to dig and prepare places for the guns. The Battery Commander went off to select a suitable point for observation of his fire, and in the battery the remaining

gunners busied themselves in preparation for the move. The digging party were away all the afternoon, all night, and on through the next day. Their troubles and tribulations don't come into this story, but from all they had to say afterwards they were real and plentiful enough.

Towards dusk a scribbled note came back from the Battery Commander at the new position to the officer left in charge with the guns, and the officer sent the orderly straight on down with it to the Sergeant-Major with a message to send word back for the teams to move up.

"All ready here," said the Battery Commander's note. "Bring up the guns and firing battery waggons as soon as you can. I'll meet you on the way."

The Sergeant-Major glanced through the note and shouted for the Numbers One, the sergeants in charge of each gun. He had already arranged with the officer exactly what was to be done when the order came, and now he merely repeated his orders rapidly to the sergeants and told them to "get on with it."

When the Lieutenant came along five minutes after, muffled to the ears in a wet mackintosh, he found the gunners hard at work.

"I started in to pull the sandbags clear, sir," reported the Sergeant-Major. "Right you are," said the Lieutenant. "Then you'd better put the double detachments on to pull one gun out and then the other. We must man-handle 'em back clear of the trench ready for the teams to hook in when they come along."

For the next hour every man, from the Lieutenant and Sergeant-Major down, sweated and hauled and slid and floundered in slippery mud and water, dragging gun after gun out of its pit and back a half-dozen yards clear. It was quite dark when they were ready, and the teams splashed up and swung round their guns. A fairly heavy bombardment was carrying steadily on along the line, the sky winked and blinked and flamed in distant and near flashes of gun fire, and the air trembled to the vibrating roar and sudden thunder-claps of their discharge, the whine and moan and shriek of the flying

shells. No shells had fallen near the battery position for some little time, but, unfortunately, just after the teams had arrived, a German battery chose to put over a series of five-point-nines unpleasantly close. The drivers sat, motionless blotches of shadow against the flickering sky, while the gunners strained and heaved on wheels and drag-ropes to bring the trails close enough to slip on the hooks. A shell dropped with a crash about fifty yards short of the battery and the pieces flew whining and whistling over the heads of the men and horses. Two more swooped down out of the sky with a rising wail-rush-roar of sound that appeared to be bringing the shells straight down on top of the workers' heads. Some ducked and crouched close to earth, and both shells passed just over and fell in leaping gusts of flame and ground-shaking crashes beyond the teams. Again the fragments hissed and whistled past and lumps of earth and mud fell spattering and splashing and thumping over men and guns and teams. A driver yelped suddenly, the horses in another team

snorted and plunged, and then out of the thick darkness that seemed to shut down after the searing light of the shell-burst flames came sounds of more plunging hoofs, a driver's voice cursing angrily, thrashings and splashings and stamping. "Horse down here . . . bring a light . . . whoa, steady, boy . . . where's that light?"

Three minutes later: "Horse killed, driver wounded in the arm, sir," reported the Sergeant-Major. "Riding leader Number Two gun, and centre driver of its waggon."

"Those spare horses near?" said the Lieutenant quickly. "Right. Call up a pair; put 'em in lead; put the odd driver waggon centre."

Before the change was completed and the dead horse dragged clear, the first gun was reported hooked on and ready to move, and was given the order to "Walk march" and pull out on the wrecked remnant of a road that ran behind the position. Another group of five-nines came over before the others were ready, and still the drivers and teams waited

motionless for the clash that told of the trail-eye dropping on the hook.

"Get to it, gunners," urged the Sergeant-Major, as he saw some of the men instinctively stop and crouch to the yell of the approaching shell. "Time we were out of this."

"Hear, bloomin' hear," drawled one of the shadowy drivers. "An' if you wants to go to bed, Lanky"—to one of the crouching gunners—"just lemme get this gun away fust, an' then you can curl up in that blanky shell-'ole."

There were no more casualties getting out, but one gun stuck in a shell-hole and took the united efforts of the team and as many gunners as could crowd on to the wheels and drag-ropes to get it moving and out on to the road. Then slowly, one by one, with a gunner walking and swinging a lighted lamp at the head of each team, the guns moved off along the pitted road. It was no road really, merely a wheel-rutted track that wound in and out the biggest shell-holes. The smaller ones were ignored, simply because there were too many of them to steer clear of, and into

them the limber and gun wheels dropped bumping, and were hauled out by sheer team and man power.

It took four solid hours to cover less than half a mile of sodden, spongy, pulpy, wet ground, riddled with shell-holes, swimming in greasy mud and water. The ground they covered was peopled thick with all sorts of men who passed or crossed their way singly, in little groups, in large parties—wounded, hobbling wearily or being carried back, parties stumbling and fumbling a way up to some vague point ahead with rations and ammunition on pack animals and pack-men, the remnants of a battalion coming out crusted from head to foot in slimy wet mud, bowed under the weight of their packs and kits and arms; empty ammunition waggons and limbers lurching and bumping back from the gun-line, the horses staggering and slipping, the drivers struggling to hold them on their feet, to guide the wheels clear of the worst holes; a string of pack-mules filing past, their drivers dismounted and leading, and men and mules ploughing anything up to knee

depth in the mud, flat pannier-pouches swinging and jerking on the animals' sides, the brass tops of the 18-pounder shell-cases winking and gleaming faintly in the flickering lights of the gun flashes.

But of all these fellow wayfarers over the battle-field the battery drivers and gunners were hardly conscious. Their whole minds were so concentrated on the effort of holding and guiding and urging on their horses round or over the obstacle of the moment, a deeper and more sticky patch than usual, an extra large hole, a shattered tree stump, a dead horse, the wreck of a broken-down waggon, that they had no thought for anything outside these. The gunners were constantly employed manning the wheels and heaving on them with cracking muscles, hooking on drag-ropes to one gun and hauling it clear of a hole, unhooking and going floundering back to hook on to another and drag it in turn out of its difficulty.

The Battery Commander met them at a bad dip where the track degenerated frankly into a mud bath—and how he found or kept the

track or ever discovered them in that aching wilderness is one of the mysteries of war and the ways of Battery Commanders. It took another two hours, two mud-soaked nightmare hours, to come through that next hundred yards. It was not only that the mud was deep and holding, but the slough was so soft at bottom that the horses had no foothold, could get no grip to haul on, could little more than drag their own weight through, much less pull the guns. The teams were doubled, the double team taking one gun or waggon through, and then going back for the other. The waggons were emptied of their shell and filled again on the other side of the slough; and this you will remember meant the gunners carrying the rounds across a couple at a time, wading and floundering through mud over their knee-boot tops, replacing the shells in the vehicle, and wading back for another couple. In addition to this they had to haul guns and waggons through practically speaking by man-power, because the teams, almost exhausted by the work and with little more than strength to get them-

selves through, gave bare assistance to the pull. The wheels, axle deep in the soft mud, were hauled round spoke by spoke, heaved and yo-hoed forward inches at a time.

When at last all were over, the teams had to be allowed a brief rest—brief because the guns must be in position and under cover before daylight came—and stood dejectedly with hanging ears, heaving flanks, and trembling legs. The gunners dropped prone or squatted almost at the point of exhaustion in the mud. But they struggled up, and the teams strained forward into the breast collars again when the word was given, and the weary procession trailed on at a jerky snail's pace once more.

As they at last approached the new position the gun flashes on the horizon were turning from orange to primrose, and although there was no visible lightening of the eastern sky, the drivers were sensible of a faintly recovering use of their eyes, could see the dim shapes of the riders just ahead of them, the black shadows of the holes, and the wet shine of the mud under their horses' feet.

The hint of dawn set the guns on both sides to work with trebled energy. The new position was one of many others so closely set that the blazing flames from the gun muzzles seemed to run out to right and left in a spouting wall of fire that leaped and vanished, leaped and vanished without ceasing, while the loud ear-splitting claps from the nearer guns merged and ran out to the flanks in a deep drum roll of echoing thunder. The noise was so great and continuous that it drowned even the roar of the German shells passing overhead, the smash and *crump* of their fall and burst.

But the line of flashes sparkling up and down across the front beyond the line of our own guns told a plain enough tale of the German guns' work. The Sergeant-Major, plodding along beside the Battery Commander, grunted an exclamation.

"Boche is getting busy," said the Battery Commander.

"Putting a pretty solid barrage down, isn't he, sir?" said the Sergeant-Major. "Can we get the teams through that?"

"Not much hope," said the Battery Commander, "but, thank Heaven, we don't have to try, if he keeps barraging there. It is beyond our position. There are the gun-pits just off to the left."

But, although the barrage was out in front of the position, there were a good many long-ranged shells coming beyond it to fall spouting fire and smoke and earth-clods on and behind the line of guns. The teams were flogged and lifted and spurred into a last desperate effort, wrenched the guns forward the last hundred yards and halted. Instantly they were unhooked, turned round, and started stumbling wearily back towards the rear; the gunners, reinforced by others scarcely less dead-beat than themselves by their night of digging in heavy wet soil, seized the guns and waggons, flung their last ounce of strength and energy into man-handling them up and into the pits. Two unlucky shells at that moment added heavily to the night's casualty list, one falling beside the retiring teams and knocking out half a dozen horses and two men, another dropping

within a score of yards of the gun-pits, killing three and wounding four gunners. Later, at intervals, two more gunners were wounded by flying splinters from chance shells that continued to drop near the pits as the guns were laboriously dragged through the quagmire into their positions. But none of the casualties, none of the falls and screamings of the high-explosive shells, interrupted or delayed the work, and without rest or pause the men struggled and toiled on until the last gun was safely housed in its pit.

Then the battery cooks served out warm tea, and the men drank greedily, and after, too worn out to be hungry or to eat the biscuit and cheese ration issued, flung themselves down in the pits under and round their guns and slept there in the trampled mud.

The Sergeant-Major was the last to lie down. Only after everyone else had ceased work, and he had visited each gun in turn and satisfied himself that all was correct, and made his report to the Battery Commander,

did he seek his own rest. Then he crawled into one of the pits, and before he slept had a few words with the "Number One" there, his old friend Duncan. The Sergeant-Major, feeling in his pockets for a match to light a cigarette, found the note which the Battery Commander had sent back and which had been passed on to him. He turned his torch-light on it and read it through to Duncan—"Bring up the guns and firing battery waggons . . ." and then chuckled a little. "Bring up the guns. . . . Remember that picture we saw before we joined, Duncan? And we fancied then we'd be bringing 'em up same fashion. And, good Lord, think of to-night."

"Yes," grunted Duncan, "sad slump from our anticipations. There was some fun in that picture style of doing the job—some sort of dash and honour and glory. No honour and glory about 'Bring up the guns' these days. Napoo in it to-night anyway."

The Sergeant-Major, sleepily sucking his damp cigarette, wrapped in his sopping British Warm, curling up in a corner on the wet

cold earth, utterly spent with the night's work, cordially agreed.

Perhaps, and anyhow one hopes, some people will think they were wrong.

XIV

OUR BATTERY'S PRISONER

It was in the very small hours of a misty grey morning that the Lieutenant was relieved at the Forward Observing Position in the extreme front line established after the advance, and set out with his Signaller to return to the Battery. His way took him over the captured ground and the maze of captured trenches and dug-outs more or less destroyed by bombardment, and because there were still a number of German shells coming over the two kept as nearly as possible to a route which led them along or close to the old trenches, and so under or near some sort of cover.

The two were tired after a strenuous day, which had commenced the previous dawn in the Battery O.P.,[1] and finished in the ruined building in the new front line, and a couple

[1] Observation Post.

of hours' sleep in a very cold and wet cellar. The Lieutenant, plodding over the wet ground, went out of his way to walk along a part of trench where his Battery had been wire-cutting, and noted with a natural professional interest and curiosity the nature and extent of the damage done to the old enemy trenches and wire, when his eye suddenly caught the quick movement of a shadowy grey figure, which whisked instantly out of sight somewhere along the trench they were in.

The Lieutenant halted abruptly. "Did you see anyone move?" he asked the Signaller, who, of course, being behind the officer in the trench, had seen nothing, and said so. They pushed along the trench, and, coming to the spot where the figure had vanished, found the opening to a dug-out with a long set of stairs vanishing down into the darkness. Memories stirred in the officer's mind of tales about Germans who had "lain doggo" in ground occupied by us, and had, over a buried wire, kept in touch with their batteries and directed their fire on to our new

positions, and this, with some vague instinct of the chase, prompted the decision he announced to his Signaller that he was "going down to have a look."

"Better be careful, sir," said the Signaller. "You don't know if the gas has cleared out of a deep place like that." This was true, because a good deal of gas had been sent over in the attack of the day before, and the officer began to wonder if he'd be a fool to go down. But, on the other hand, if a German was there he would know there was no gas, and, anyhow, it was a full day since the gas cloud went over. He decided to chance it.

"You want to look out for any Boshies down there, sir," went on the Signaller. "With all these yarns they're fed with, about us killin' prisoners, you never know how they're goin' to take it, and whether they'll kamerad or make a fight for it."

This also was true, and since a man crawling down a steep and narrow stair made a target impossible for anyone shooting up the tunnel to miss, the Lieutenant began to wish himself out of the job. But something,

partly obstinacy, perhaps partly an unwillingness to back down after saying he would go, made him carry on. But before he started he took the precaution to push a sandbag off where it lay on the top step, to roll bumping and flopping down the stairs. If the Boche had any mind to shoot, he argued to himself, he'd almost certainly shoot at the sound, since it was too dark to see. The sandbag bumped down into silence, while the two stood straining their ears for any sound. There was none.

"You wait here," said the Lieutenant, and, with his cocked pistol in his hand, began to creep cautiously down the stairs. The passage was narrow, and so low that he almost filled it, even although he was bent nearly double, and as he went slowly down, the discomforting thought again presented itself with renewed clearness, how impossible it would be for a shot up the steps to miss him, and again he very heartily wished himself well out of the job.

It was a long stair, fully twenty-five to thirty feet underground he reckoned by the

time he reached the foot, but he found himself there and on roughly levelled ground with a good deal of relief. Evidently the Boche did not mean to show fight, at any rate, until he knew he was discovered. The Lieutenant knew no German, but made a try with one word, putting as demanding a tone into it as he could—"Kamerad!" He had his finger on the trigger and his pistol ready for action as he spoke, in case a pot-shot came in the direction of the sound of his voice.

There was a dead, a very dead and creepy silence after his word had echoed and whispered away to stillness. He advanced a step or two, feeling carefully foot after foot, with his left hand outstretched and the pistol in his right still ready. The next thing was to try a light. This would certainly settle it one way or the other, because if anyone was there who meant to shoot, he'd certainly loose off at the light.

The Lieutenant took out his torch and held it out from his body at full arm's length, to give an extra chance of the bullet missing him if it were shot at the light. He took a

long breath, flicked the light on in one quick flashing sweep round, and snapped it out again. There was no shot, no sound, no movement, nothing but that eerie stillness. The light had given him a glimpse of a long chamber vanishing into dimness. He advanced very cautiously a few steps, switched the light on again, and threw the beam quickly round the walls. There was no sign of anyone, but he could see now that the long chamber curved round and out of sight.

He switched the light off, stepped back to the stair foot, and called the Signaller down, hearing the clumping sound of the descending footsteps and the man's voice with a childish relief and sense of companionship. He explained the position, threw the light boldly on, and pushed along to where the room ran round the corner. Here again he found no sign of life, but on exploring right to the end of the room found the apparent explanation of his failure to discover the man he had been so sure of finding down there. The chamber was a long, narrow one, curved almost to an S-shape, and at the far end was

another steep stair leading up to the trench. The man evidently had escaped that way.

The dug-out was a large one, capable of holding, the Lieutenant reckoned, quarters for some thirty to forty men. It was hung all round with greatcoats swinging against the wall, and piled on shelves and hanging from hooks along wall and roof were packs, haversacks, belts, water-bottles, bayonets, and all sorts of equipment. There were dozens of the old leather "pickelhaube" helmets, and at sight of these the Lieutenant remembered an old compact made with the others in Mess that if one of them got a chance to pick up any helmets he should bring them in and divide up.

"I'm going to take half a dozen of those helmets," he said, uncocking his pistol and pushing it into the holster.

"Right, sir," said the Signaller. "I'd like one, too, and we might pick up some good sooveneers here."

"Just as well, now we are here, to see what's worth having," said the Lieutenant.

"I'd rather like to find a decent pair of field-glasses, or a Mauser pistol."

He held the light while the Signaller hauled down kits, shook out packs, and rummaged round. For some queer reason they still spoke in subdued tones and made little noise, and suddenly the Lieutenant's ears caught a sound that made him snap his torch off and stand, as he confesses, with his skin pringling and his hair standing on end.

"Did you hear anything?" he whispered. The Signaller had stiffened to stock stillness at his first instinctive start and the switching off of the light, and after a long pause whispered back, "No, sir; but mebbe you heard a rat."

"Hold your breath and listen," whispered the Lieutenant. "I thought I heard a sort of choky cough."

He heard the indrawn breath and then dead silence, and then again—once more the hair stirred on his scalp—plain and unmistakable, a sound of deep, slow breathing. "Hear it?" he said very softly. "Sound of breathing," and "Yes, believe I do now," answered the

Signaller, after a pause. They stood there in the darkness for a long minute, the Lieutenant in his own heart cursing himself for a fool not to have thoroughly searched the place, to have made sure they would not be trapped.

Especially he was a fool not to have looked behind those great coats which practically lined the walls and hung almost to the floor. There might be a dozen men hidden behind them; there might be a door leading out into another dug-out; there might be rifles or pistols covering them both at that second, fingers pressing on the triggers. He was, to put it bluntly, "scared stiff," as he says himself, but the low voice of the Signaller brought him to the need of some action. "I can't hear it now, sir."

"I'm going to turn the light on again," he said. "Have a quick look round, especially for any men's feet showing under the coats round the wall." He switched his torch on again, ran it round the walls, once, swiftly, and then, seeing no feet under the coats, slowly and deliberately yard by yard.

"I'll swear I heard a man breathe," he said positively, still peering round. "We'll search the place properly."

In one corner near the stair foot lay a heap of clothing of some sort, with a great-coat spread wide over it. It caught the Lieutenant's eye and suspicions. Why should coats be heaped there—smooth—at full length?

Without moving his eyes from the pile, he slid his automatic pistol out again, and slipped off the safety catch. "Keep the light on those coats," he said, softly, and tip-toed over to the pile, the pistol pointed, his finger close and tight on the trigger. His heart was thumping uncomfortably, and his nerves tight as fiddle-strings. He felt sure somehow that here was one man at least; and if he or any others in the dug-out meant fight on discovery, now, at any second, the first shot must come.

He stooped over the coats and thrust the pistol forward. If a man was there, had a rifle or pistol ready pointed even, at least he, the Lieutenant, ought to get off a shot with equal, or a shade greater quickness. With his

left hand he picked up the coat corner, turned it back, and jerked the pistol forward and fairly under the nose of the head his movement had disclosed. "Lie still," he said, not knowing or caring whether the man understood or not, and for long seconds stood staring down on the white face and into the frightened eyes that looked unblinking up at him.

"Kamerad," whispered the man, still as death under the threat of that pistol muzzle and the finger curled about the trigger. "Right," said the Lieutenant. "Kamerad. Now, very gently, hands up," and again, slowly and clearly, "Hands up." The man understood, and the Lieutenant, watching like a hawk for a suspicious movement, for sign of a weapon appearing, waited while the hands came slowly creeping up and out from under the coat. His nerves were still on a raw edge—perhaps because long days of observing in the front lines or with the battery while the guns are going their hardest in a heavy night-and-day bombardment are not conducive to steadiness of nerves—but, satisfied at last that the man meant to play no

tricks, he flung the coat back off him, made him stand with his hands up, and ran his left hand over breast and pockets for feel of any weapon. That done, he stepped back with a sigh of relief. "Phew! I believe I was just about as cold scared as he was," he said. "D'you speak English? No. Well, I suppose you'll never know how close to death you've been the last minute."

"I was a bit jumpy, too, sir," said the Signaller. "You never know, and it doesn't do to take chances wi' these chaps."

"I wasn't," said the Lieutenant. "I believe, if I'd seen a glint of metal as his hands came up, I'd have blown the top of his blessed head off. Pity he can't speak English."

"Mans," said the prisoner, nodding his head towards the other end of the dug-out. "Oder mans."

The Lieutenant whipped round with a startled exclamation. "What, more of 'em. G' Lord! I've had about enough of this. But we'd better make all safe. Come on, Fritz; lead us to 'em. No monkey tricks, now," and he pushed his pistol close to the German's

flinching head. "Oder mans, kamerad, eh? Savvy?"

"Ge-wounded," said the prisoner, making signs to help his meaning. Under his guidance and with the pistol close to his ear all the time, they pulled aside some of the coats and found a man lying in a bunk hidden behind them. His head was tied up in a soaking bandage, the rough pillow was wet with blood, and by all the signs he was pretty badly hit. The Lieutenant needed no more than a glance to see the man was past being dangerous, so, after making the prisoner give him a drink from a water-bottle, they went round the walls, and found it recessed all the way round with empty bunks.

"What a blazing ass I was not to hunt round," said the Lieutenant, puffing another sigh of relief as they finished the jumpy business of pulling aside coat after coat, and never knowing whether the movement of any one of them was going to bring a muzzle-close shot from the blackness behind. "We must get out of this, though. It's growing late,

and the Battery will be wondering and thinking we've got pipped on the way back."

"What about these things, sir?" said the Signaller, pointing to the helmets and equipment they had hauled down.

"Right," said the Lieutenant; "I'm certainly not going without a souvenir of this entertainment. And I don't see why Brother Fritz oughtn't to make himself useful. Here, spread that big ground-sheet——"

So it came about that an hour after a procession tramped back through the lines of the infantry and on to the gun lines—one German, with a huge ground-sheet, gathered at the corners and bulging with souvenirs, slung over his shoulder, the Lieutenant close behind him with an automatic at the ready, and the Signaller, wearing a huge grin, and with a few spare helmets slung to his haversack strap.

"I thought I'd fetch him right along," the Lieutenant explained a little later to the O.C. Battery. "Seeing the Battery's never had a prisoner to its own check, I thought one might please 'em. And, besides, I wanted him to

lug the loot along. I've got full outfits for the mess this time, helmets and rifles and bayonets and all sorts.''

The Battery *were* pleased. The Gunners don't often have the chance to take prisoners, and this one enjoyed all the popularity of a complete novelty. He was taken to the men's dug-out, and fed with a full assignment of rations, from bacon and tea to jam and cheese, while the men in turn cross-questioned him by the aid of an English-French-German phrase-book unearthed by some studious gunner.

And when he departed under escort to be handed over and join the other prisoners, the Battery watched him go with complete regret.

''To tell the truth, sir,'' the Sergeant-Major remarked to the Lieutenant, ''the men would like to have kept him as a sort of Battery Souvenir—kind of a cross between a mascot and a maid-of-all-work. Y'see, it's not often—in fact, I don't know that we're not the first Field Battery in this war to bring in a prisoner wi' arms, kit, and equipment complete.''

''The first battery,'' said the Lieutenant

fervently, "and when I think of that minute down a deep hole in pitch dark, hearing some-one breathe, and not knowing—well, we may be the first battery, and, as far as I'm concerned, we'll jolly well be the last."

XV

OUR TURN

No. II platoon had had a bad mauling in their advance, and when they reached their "final objective line" there were left out of the ninety-odd men who had started, one sergeant, one corporal, and fourteen men. But, with the rest of the line, they at once set to work to consolidate, to dig in, to fill the sandbags each man carried, and to line the lip of a shell crater with them. Every man there knew that a counter-attack on their position was practically a certainty. They had not a great many bombs or very much ammunition left; they had been struggling through a wilderness of sticky mud and shell-churned mire all day, moving for all the world like flies across a half-dry fly-paper; they had been without food since dawn, when they had consumed the bully and biscuit of their iron "ration"; they were plastered with a casing

of chilly mud from head to foot; they were wet to the skin; brain, body, and bone weary.

But they went about the task of consolidating with the greatest vigour they could bring their tired muscles to yield. They worried not at all about the shortage of bombs and ammunition, or lack of food, because they were all by now veterans of the new "planned" warfare, knew that every detail of re-supplying them with all they required had been fully and carefully arranged, that these things were probably even now on the way to them, that reinforcements and working parties would be pushed up to the new line as soon as it was established. So the Sergeant was quite willing to leave all that to work out in its proper sequence, knew that his simple job was to hold the ground they had taken, and, therefore, bent all his mind to that work.

But it suddenly appeared that the ground was not as completely taken as he had supposed. A machine-gun close at hand began to bang out a string of running reports; a stream of bullets hissed and whipped and

smacked the ground about him and his party. A spasmodic crackle of rifle-fire started again farther along the line at the same time. The Sergeant paid no heed to that. He and his men had flung down into cover, and dropped spades and trenching tools and sandbags, and whipped up their rifles to return the fire, at the first sound of the machine-gun.

The Sergeant peered over the edge of the hole he was in, locating a bobbing head or two and the spurting flashes of the gun, and ducked down again. "They're in a shell-hole not more'n twenty, thirty yards away," he said rapidly. "Looks like only a handful. We'll rush 'em out. Here——" and he went on into quick detailed orders for the rushing. Three minutes later he and his men swarmed out of their shelter and went forward at a scrambling run, the bombers flinging a shower of grenades ahead of them, the bayonet men floundering over the rough ground with weapons at the ready, the Sergeant well in the lead.

Their sudden and purposeful rush must have upset the group of Germans, because the

machine-gun fire for a moment became erratic, the muzzle jerked this way and that, the bullets whistled wide, and during that same vital moment no bombs were thrown by the Germans; and when at last they did begin to come spinning out, most of them went too far, and the runners were well over them before they had time to explode. In another moment the Sergeant leaped down fairly on top of the machine-gun, his bayonet thrusting through the gunner as he jumped. He shot a second and bayoneted a third, had his shoulder-strap blown away by a rifle at no more than muzzle distance, his sleeve and his haversack ripped open by a bayonet thrust.

Then his men swarmed down into the wide crater, and in two minutes the fight was over. There were another few seconds of rapid fire at two or three of the Germans who had jumped out and run for their lives, and that finished the immediate performance. The Sergeant looked round, climbed from the hole, and made a hasty examination of the ground about them.

" 'Tisn't as good a crater as we left," he

said, "an' it's 'way out front o' the line the others is digging, so we'd best get back. Get a hold o' that machine-gun an' all the spare ammunition you can lay hands on. We might find it come in useful. Good job we had the way a Fritz gun works shown us once. Come on."

The men hastily collected all the ammunition they could find and were moving back, when one of them, standing on the edge of the hole, remarked: "We got the top o' the ridge all right this time. Look at the open flat down there."

The Sergeant turned and looked, and an exclamation broke from him at sight of the view over the ground beyond the ridge. Up to now that ground had been hidden by a haze of smoke from the bursting shells where our barrage was pounding steadily down. But for a minute the smoke had lifted or blown aside, and the Sergeant found himself looking down the long slope of a valley with gently swelling sides, looking right down on to the plain below the ridge. He scanned the lie of the ground rapidly, and in an instant had

made up his mind. "Hold on there," he ordered abruptly; "we'll dig in here instead. Sling that machine-gun back in here and point her out that way. You, Lees, get 'er into action, and rip out a few rounds just to see you got the hang o' it. Heave those dead Boches out; an', Corporal, you nip back with half a dozen men and fetch along the tools and sandbags we left there. Slippy now."

The Corporal picked his half-dozen men and vanished, and the Sergeant whipped out a message-book and began to scribble a note. Before he had finished the rifle-fire began to rattle down along the line again, and he thrust the book in his pocket, picked up his rifle, and peered out over the edge of the hole. "There they go, Lees," he said suddenly. "Way along there on the left front. Pump it into 'em. Don't waste rounds, though; we may need 'em for our own front in a minute. Come on, Corporal, get down in here. Looks like the start o' a counter-attack, though I don't see any of the blighters on our own front. Here, you two, spade out a cut into the next shell-hole there, so's to link 'em up.

Steady that gun, Lees; don't waste 'em. Get on to your sandbag-fillin', the others, an' make a bit o' a parapet this side."

"We're a long ways out in front of the rest o' the line, ain't we?" said the Corporal.

"Yes, I know," said the Sergeant. "I want to send a message back presently. This is the spot to hold, an' don't you forget it. Just look down—hullo, here's our barrage droppin' again. Well, it blots out the view, but it'll be blottin' out any Germs that try to push us; so hit 'er up, the Gunners. But——" He broke off suddenly, and stared out into the writhing haze of smoke in front of them. "Here they come," he said sharply. "Now, Lees, get to it. Stand by, you bombers. Range three hundred the rest o' you, an' fire steady. Pick your marks. We got no rounds to waste. Now, then——"

The rifles began to bang steadily, then at a rapidly increasing rate as the fire failed to stop the advance, and more dim figures after figures came looming up hazily and emerging from the smoke. The machine-gunner held his fire until he could bring his sights on a

little group, fired in short bursts with a sideways twitch that sprayed the bullets out fanwise as they went. The rifle-fire out to right and left of them, and almost behind them, swelled to a long, rolling beat with the tattoo of machine-guns rapping through it in gusts, the explosions of grenades rising and falling in erratic bursts.

Farther back, the guns were hard at it again, and the shells were screaming and rushing overhead in a ceaseless torrent, the shrapnel to blink a star of flame from the heart of a smoke-cloud springing out in midair, the high explosive crashing down in ponderous bellowings, up-flung vivid splashes of fire and spouting torrents of smoke, flying mud and earth clods. There were German shells, too, shrieking over, and adding their share to the indescribable uproar, crashing down along the line, and spraying out in circles of fragments, the smaller bits whistling and whizzing viciously, the larger hurtling and humming like monster bees.

"Them shells of ours is comin' down a sight too close to us, Sergeant," yelled the

Corporal, glancing up as a shrapnel shell cracked sharply almost overhead and sprayed its bullets, scattering and splashing along the wet ground out in front of them.

"All right—it's shrap," the Sergeant yelled back. "Bullets is pitchin' well forrad."

The Corporal swore and ducked hastily from the *whitt-whitt* of a couple of bullets past their ears. "Them was from behind us," he shouted. "We're too blazin' far out in front o' the line here. Wot's the good——"

"Here," said the Sergeant to a man who staggered back from the rough parapet, right hand clutched on a blood-streaming left shoulder, "whip a field dressin' round that, an' try an' crawl back to them behind us. Find an officer, if you can, an' tell him we're out in front of 'im. An' tell 'im I'm going to hang on to the position we have here till my blanky teeth pull out."

"Wot's the good——" began the Corporal again, ceasing fire to look round at the Sergeant.

"Never mind the good now," said the Ser-

geant shortly, as he recharged his magazine. "You'll see after—if we live long enough." He levelled and aimed his rifle. "An' we won't do that if you stand there"—(he fired a shot and jerked the breech open)—"jawin' instead"—(he slammed the breech-bolt home and laid cheek to stock again)—"o' shootin' "; and he snapped another shot.

On their own immediate front the attack slackened, and died away, but along the line a little the Sergeant's group could see a swarm of men charging in. The Sergeant immediately ordered the machine-gun and every rifle to take the attackers in enfilade. For the next few minutes every man shot as fast as he could load and pull trigger, and the captured machine-gun banged and spat a steady stream of fire. The Sergeant helped until he saw the attack dying out again, its remnants fading into the smoke haze. Then he pulled his book out, and wrote his message: "Am holding crater position with captured machine-gun and eight men of No. 2 Platoon. Good position, allowing enfilade fire on attack, and with command of farther slopes.

Urgently require men, ammunition, and bombs, but will hold out to the finish."

He sent the note back by a couple of wounded men, and set his party about strengthening their position as far as possible. In ten minutes another attack commenced, and the men took up their rifles and resumed their steady fire. But this time the field-grey figures pressed in, despite the pouring fire and the pounding shells, and, although they were held and checked and driven to taking cover in shell-holes on the Sergeant's immediate front, they were within grenade-throwing distance there, and the German "potato-masher" bombs and the British Mills' began to twirl and curve over to and fro, and burst in shattering detonations. Three more of the Sergeant's party were wounded inside as many minutes, but every man who could stand on his feet, well or wounded, rose at the Sergeant's warning yell to meet the rush of about a dozen men who swung aside from a large group that had pressed in past their flank. The rush was met by a few quick shots, but the ammunition for the machine-gun had

run out, and of bombs even there were only a few left. So, in the main, the rush was met with the bayonet—and killed with it. The Sergeant still held his crater, but now he had only two unwounded men left to help him.

The Corporal, nursing a gashed cheek and spitting mouthfuls of blood, shouted at him again, "Y' ain't goin' to try 'n hold on longer, surely. We've near shot the last round away."

"I'll hold it," said the Sergeant grimly, "if I have to do it myself wi' my bare fists."

But he cast anxious looks behind, in hope of a sight of reinforcements, and knew that if they did not come before another rush he and his party were done. His tenacity had its due reward. Help did come—men and ammunition and bombs and a couple of machine-guns —and not three minutes before the launching of another attack. An officer was with the party, and took command, but he was killed inside the first minute, and the Sergeant again took hold.

Again the attack was made all along the line, and again, under the ferocious fire of the

reinforced line, it was beaten back. The line had at the last minute been hinged outward behind the Sergeant, and so joined up with him that it formed a sharpish angle, with the Sergeant's crater at its point. The enfilade fire of this forward-swung portion and the two machine-guns in the crater did a good deal to help cut down the main attack.

When it was well over, and the attack had melted away, the Captain of the Sergeant's Company pushed up into the crater.

"Who's in charge here?" he asked. "You, Sergeant? Your note came back, and we sent you help; but you were taking a long risk out here. Didn't you know you had pushed out beyond your proper point? And why didn't you retire when you found yourself in the air?"

The Sergeant turned and pointed out where the thinning smoke gave a view of the wide open flats of the plain beyond the ridge.

"I got a look o' that, sir," he said, "and I just thought a commanding position like this was worth sticking a lot to hang to."

"Jove! and you were right," said the Cap-

tain, looking gloatingly on the flats, and went on to add other and warmer words of praise.

But it was to his corporal, a little later, that the Sergeant really explained his hanging on to the point.

"Look at it!" he said enthusiastically; "look at the view you get!"

The Corporal viewed dispassionately for a moment the dreary expanse below, the shell-churned morass and mud, wandering rivulets and ditches, shell-wrecked fragments of farms and buildings, the broken, bare-stripped poles of trees.

"Bloomin' great, ain't it?" he mumbled disgustedly, through his bandaged jaws. "Fair beautiful. Makes you think you'd like to come 'ere after the war an' build a 'ouse, an' sit lookin' out on it always—I *don't* think."

"Exactly what I said the second I saw it," said the Sergeant, and chuckled happily. "Only my house 'd be a nice little trench an' a neat little dug-out, an' be for duration o' war. Think o' it, man—just think o' this winter, with us up here along the ridge, an'

Fritz down in his trenches below there, up to the middle in mud. Him cursin' Creation, and strugglin' to pump his trenches out; and us sitting nicely up here in the dry, snipin' down in enfilade along his trench, and pumpin' the water out of our trenches down on to the flat to drown him out.''

The Sergeant chuckled again, slapped his hands together. ''I've been havin' that side of it back in the salient there for best part o' two years, off and on. Fritz has been up top, keepin' his feet dry and watchin' us gettin' shelled an' shot up an' minnie-werfered to glory—squattin' up here, smokin' his pipe an' takin' a pot-shot at us, and watchin' us through his field-glasses, just as he felt like. And now it's our turn. Don't let me hear anybody talk about drivin' the Hun back for miles from here. I don't want him to go back; I want him to sit down there the whole darn winter, freezin' an' drownin' to death ten times a day. Fritz isn't goin' to like that —not any. I am, an' that's why I hung like grim death to this look-out point. This is where we come in; this is *our* turn!''

XVI

ACCORDING TO PLAN

"Ratty" Travers dropped his load with a grunt of satisfaction, squatted down on the ground, and tilting his shrapnel helmet back, mopped a streaming brow. As the line in which he had moved dropped to cover, another line rose out of the ground ahead of them and commenced to push forward. Some distance beyond, a wave of kilted Highlanders pressed on at a steady walk up to within about fifty paces of the string of flickering, jumping white patches that marked the edge of the "artillery barrage."

Ratty Travers and the others of the machine-gun company being in support had a good view of the lines attacking ahead of them.

"Them Jocks is goin' along nicely," said the man who had dropped beside Ratty. Ratty grunted scornfully. "Beautiful," he

said. "An' we're doin' wonderful well ourselves. I never remember gettin' over the No Man's Land so easy, or seein' a trench took so quick an' simple in my life as this one we're in; or seein' a 'tillery barrage move so nice an' even and steady to time."

"You've seed a lot, Ratty," said his companion. "But you ain't seed everything."

"That's true," said Ratty. "I've never seen a lot o' grown men playin' let's-pretend like a lot of school kids. Just look at that fool wi' the big drum, Johnny."

Johnny looked and had to laugh. The man with the big drum was lugging it off at the double away from the kilted line, and strung out to either side of him there raced a scattered line of men armed with sticks and biscuit-tins and empty cans. Ratty and his companions were clothed in full fighting kit and equipment, and bore boxes of very real ammunition. In the "trenches" ahead of them, or moving over the open, were other men similarly equipped; rolling back to them came a clash and clatter, a dull prolonged *boom-boom-boom.* In every detail, so far as

the men were concerned, an attack was in full swing; but there was no yell and crash of falling shells, no piping whistle and sharp crack of bullets, no deafening, shaking thunder of artillery (except that steady *boom-boom*), no shell-scorched strip of battered ground. The warm sun shone on trim green fields, on long twisting lines of flags and tapes strung on sticks, on ranks of perspiring men in khaki with rifles and bombs and machine-guns and ammunition and stretchers and all the other accoutrements of battle. There were no signs of death or wounds, none of the horror of war, because this was merely a "practice attack," a full-dress rehearsal of the real thing, full ten miles behind the front. The trenches were marked out by flags and tapes, the artillery barrage was a line of men hammering biscuit-tins and a big drum, and waving fluttering white flags. The kilts came to a halt fifty paces short of them, and a moment later, the "barrage" sprinted off ahead one or two score yards, halted, and fell to banging and battering tins and drum and waving flags, while the kilts solemnly moved

on after them, to halt again at their measured distance until the next "lift" of the "barrage." It looked sheer child's play, a silly elaborate game; and yet there was no sign of laughter or play about the men taking part in it—except on the part of Ratty Travers. Ratty was openly scornful. "Ready there," said a sergeant rising and pocketing the note-book he had been studying. "We've only five minutes in this trench. And remember you move half-right when you leave here, an' the next line o' flags is the sunk road wi' six machine-gun emplacements along the edge."

Ratty chuckled sardonically. "I 'ope that in the real thing them machine-guns won't 'ave nothing to say to us movin' half-right across their front," he said.

"They've been strafed out wi' the guns," said Johnny simply, "an' the Jocks 'as mopped up any that's left. We was told that yesterday."

"I dare say," retorted Ratty. "An' I hopes the Huns 'ave been careful instructed in the same. It 'ud be a pity if they went an' did anything to spoil all the plans. But they

wouldn't do that. Oh, no, of course not—I *don't* think!"

He had a good deal more to say in the same strain—with especially biting criticism on the "artillery barrage" and the red-faced big drummer who played lead in it—during the rest of the practice and at the end of it when they lay in their "final objective" and rested, smoking and cooling off with the top buttons of tunics undone, while the officers gathered round the C.O. and listened to criticism and made notes in their books.

"I'll admit," he said, "they might plan out the trenches here the same as the ones we're to attack from. It's this rot o' layin' out the Fritz trenches gets me. An' this attack—it's about as like a real attack as my gasper's like a machine-gun. Huh! Wi' one bloke clockin' you on a stop-watch, an' another countin' the paces between the trenches—Boche trenches a mile behind their front line, mind you—an' another whackin' a big drum like a kid in a nursery. An' all this 'Go steady here, this is a sharp rise,' or 'hurry this bit, 'cos most likely it'll be open to enfiladin' machine-gun

fire,' or 'this here's the sunk road wi' six machine-gun emplacements.' Huh! Plunky rot I calls it."

The others heard him in silence or with mild chaffing replies. Ratty was new to this planned-attack game, of course, but since he had been out and taken his whack of the early days, had been wounded, and home, and only lately had come out again, he was entitled to a certain amount of excusing.

Johnny summed it up for them. "We've moved a bit since the Noove Chapelle days, you know," he said. "You didn't have no little lot like this then, did you?" jerking his head at the bristling line of their machine-guns. "An' you didn't have creepin' barrages, an' more shells than you could fire, eh? Used to lose seventy an' eighty per cent. o' the battalion's strength goin' over the bags them days, didn't you? Well, we've changed that a bit, thank Gawd. You'll see the differ presently."

Later on Ratty had to admit a considerable "differ" and a great improvement on old ways. He and his company moved up towards

the front leisurely and certainly, without haste and without confusion, having the orders detailed overnight for the next day's march, finding meals cooked and served regularly, travelling by roads obviously known and "detailed" for them, coming at night to camp or billet places left vacant for them immediately before, finding everything planned and prepared, foreseen and provided for. But, although he admitted all this, he stuck to his belief that beyond the front line this carefully-planned moving must cease abruptly. "It'll be the same plunky old scramble an' scrap, I'll bet," he said. "We'll see then if all the Fritz trenches is just where we've fixed 'em, an' if we runs to a regular time-table and follows the laid-down route an' first-turn-to-the-right-an'-mind-the-step-performance we've been practisin'."

But it was as they approached the fighting zone, and finally when they found themselves installed in a support trench on the morning of the Push that Ratty came to understand the full difference between old battles and this new style. For days on end he heard

such gun-fire as he had never dreamed of, heard it continue without ceasing or slackening day and night. By day he saw the distant German ground veiled in a drifting fog-bank of smoke, saw it by night starred with winking and spurting gusts of flame from our high-explosives. He walked or lay on a ground that quivered and trembled under the unceasing shock of our guns' discharges, covered his eyes at night to shut out the flashing lights that pulsed and throbbed constantly across the sky. On the last march that had brought them into the trenches they had passed through guns and guns and yet again guns, first the huge monsters lurking hidden well back and only a little in advance of the great piles of shells and long roofed sidings crammed with more shells, then farther on past other monsters only less in comparison with those they had seen before, on again past whole batteries of 60-pounders and "six-inch" tucked away in corners of woods or amongst broken houses, and finally up through the field guns packed close in every corner that would more or less hide a battery,

or brazenly lined up in the open. They tramped down the long street of a ruined village—a street that was no more than a cleared strip of cobble-stones bordered down its length on both sides by the piled or scattered heaps of rubble and brick that had once been rows of houses—with a mad chorus of guns roaring and cracking and banging in numberless scores about them, passed over the open behind the trenches to find more guns ranged battery after battery, and all with sheeting walls of flame jumping and flashing along their fronts. They found and settled into their trench with this unbroken roar of fire bellowing in their ears, a roar so loud and long that it seemed impossible to increase it. When their watches told them it was an hour to the moment they had been warned was the "zero hour," the fixed moment of the attack, the sound of the gun-fire swelled suddenly and rose to a pitch of fury that eclipsed all that had gone before. The men crouched in their trench listening in awed silence, and as the zero hour approached Ratty clambered and stood where he could

look over the edge towards the German lines. A sergeant shouted at him angrily to get down, and hadn't he heard the order to keep under cover? Ratty dropped back beside the others. "Lumme," he said disgustedly, "I dunno wot this bloomin' war's comin' to. Orders, orders, orders! You mustn't get plunky well killed nowadays, unless you 'as orders to."

"There they go," said Johnny suddenly, and all strained their ears for the sound of rattling rifle-fire that came faintly through the roll of the guns. "An' here they come," said Ratty quickly, and all crouched low and listened to the rising roar of a heavy shell approaching, the heavy *cr-r-rump* of its fall. A message passed along, "Ready there. Move in five minutes." And at five minutes to the tick, they rose and began to pass along the trench.

"Know where we are, Ratty?" asked Johnny. Ratty looked about him. "How should I know?" he shouted back, "I was never 'ere before."

"You oughter," returned Johnny. "This

is the line we started from back in practice attack—the one that was taped out along by the stream."

"I'm a fat lot better for knowin' it too," said Ratty sarcastically, and trudged on. They passed slowly forward and along branching trenches until they came at last to the front line, from which, after a short rest, they climbed and hoisted their machine-guns out into the open. From here for the first time they could see something of the battle-ground; but could see nothing of the battle except a drifting haze of smoke, and, just disappearing into it, a shadowy line of figures. The thunder of the guns continued, and out in front they could hear now the crackle of rifle fire, the sharp detonations of grenades. There were far fewer shells falling about the old "neutral ground" than Ratty had expected, and even comparatively few bullets piping over and past them. They reached the tumbled wreckage of shell-holes and splintered planks that marked what had been the front German line, clambered through this, and pushed on stumbling and

climbing in and out the shell-holes that riddled the ground. "Where's the Buffs that's supposed to be in front o' us," shouted Ratty, and ducked hastily into a deep shell-hole at the warning screech of an approaching shell. It crashed down somewhere near and a shower of dirt and earth rained down on him. He climbed out. "Should be ahead about a——here's some o' them now wi' prisoners," said Johnny. They had a hurried glimpse of a huddled group of men in grey with their hands well up over their heads, running, stumbling, half falling and recovering, but always keeping their hands hoisted well up. There may have been a full thirty of them, and they were being shepherded back by no more than three or four men with bayonets gleaming on their rifles. They disappeared into the haze, and the machine-gunners dropped down into a shallow twisting depression and pressed on along it. "This is the communication trench that used to be taped out along the edge o' that corn-field in practice attack," said Johnny, when they halted a moment. "Trench?" said

Ratty, glancing along it, "Strewth!" The trench was gone, was no more than a wide shallow depression, a tumbled gutter a foot or two below the level of the ground; and even the gutter in places was lost in a patch of broken earth-heaps and craters. It was best traced by the dead that lay in it, by the litter of steel helmets, rifles, bombs, gas-masks, bayonets, water-bottles, arms and equipment of every kind strewed along it.

By now Ratty had lost all sense of direction or location, but Johnny at his elbow was always able to keep him informed. Ratty at first refused to accept his statements, but was convinced against all argument, and it was always clear from the direct and unhesitating fashion in which they were led that those in command knew where they were and where to go. "We should pass three trees along this trench somewhere soon," Johnny would say, and presently, sure enough, they came to one stump six foot high and two splintered butts just showing above the earth. They reached a wide depression, and Johnny pointed and shouted, "The sunk road," and looking round,

pointed again to some whitish-grey masses broken, overturned, almost buried in the tumbled earth, the remains of concrete machine-gun emplacements which Ratty remembered had been marked somewhere back there on the practice ground by six marked boards. "Six," shouted Johnny, and grinned triumphantly at the doubter.

The last of Ratty's doubts as to the correctness of battle plans, even of the German lines, vanished when they came to a bare stretch of ground which Johnny reminded him was where they had been warned they would most likely come under enfilading machine-gun fire. They halted on the edge of this patch to get their wind, and watched some stretcher-bearers struggling to cross and a party of men digging furiously to make a line of linked-up shell-holes, while the ground about them jumped and splashed under the hailing of bullets.

"Enfiladin' fire," said Ratty. "Should think it was too. Why the 'ell don't they silence the guns doin' it?"

"Supposed to be in a clump o' wood over

there," said Johnny. "And it ain't due to be took for an hour yet."

The word passed along, and they rose and began to cross the open ground amongst the raining bullets. "There's our objective," shouted Johnny as they ran. "That rise—come into action there." Ratty stared aghast at the rise, and at the spouting columns of smoke and dirt that leaped from it under a steady fall of heavy shells. "That," he screeched back, "Gorstrewth. Good-bye us then." But he ran on as well as he could under the weight of the gun on his shoulder. They were both well out to the left of their advancing line and Ratty was instinctively flinching from the direct route into those gusts of flame and smoke. "Keep up," yelled Johnny. "Remember the trench. You'll miss the end of it." Ratty recalled vaguely the line of flags and tape that had wriggled over the practice ground to the last position where they had halted each day and brought their guns into mimic action. He knew he would have slanted to the right to hit the trench end there, so here he also

slanted right and presently stumbled thankfully into the broken trench, and pushed along it up the rise. At the top he found himself looking over a gentle slope, the foot of which was veiled in an eddying mist of smoke. A heavy shell burst with a terrifying crash and sent him reeling from the shock. He sat down with a bump, shaken and for the moment dazed, but came to himself with Johnny's voice bawling in his ear, "Come on, man, come on. Hurt? Quick then—yer gun." He staggered up and towards an officer whom he could see waving frantically at him and opening and shutting his mouth in shouts that were lost in the uproar. He thrust forward and into a shell-hole beside Johnny and the rest of the gun detachment. His sergeant jumped down beside them shouting and pointing out into the smoke wreaths. "See the wood . . . six hundred . . . lay on the ground-line—they're counter-attack——" He stopped abruptly and fell sliding in a tumbled heap down the crater side on top of the gun. The officer ran back mouthing unheard angry shouts at them again. Ratty was getting

angry himself. How could a man get into action with a fellow falling all over his gun like that? They dragged the sergeant's twitching body clear and Ratty felt a pang of regret for his anger. He'd been a good chap, the sergeant. . . . But anger swallowed him again as he dragged his gun clear. It was drenched with blood. "Nice bizness," he said savagely, "if my breech action's clogged up." A loaded belt slipped into place and he brought the gun into action with a savage jerk on the loading lever, looked over his sights, and layed them on the edge of the wood he could just dimly see through the smoke. He could see nothing to fire at—cursed smoke was so thick—but the others were firing hard—must be something there. He pressed his thumbs on the lever and his gun began to spurt a stream of fire and lead, the belt racing and clicking through, the breech clacking smoothly, the handles jarring sharply in his fingers.

The hillock was still under heavy shell-fire. They had been warned in practice attack that there would probably be shell-fire, and here

it was, shrieking, crashing, tearing the wrecked ground to fresh shapes of wreckage, spouting in fountains of black smoke and earth, whistling and hurtling in jagged fragments, hitting solidly and bursting in whirlwinds of flame and smoke. Ratty had no time to think of the shells. He strained his eyes over the sights on the foot of the dimly seen trees, held his gun steady and spitting its jets of flame and lead, until word came to him, somehow or from somewhere to cease firing. The attack had been wiped out, he heard said. He straightened his bent shoulders and discovered with immense surprise that one shoulder hurt, that his jacket was soaked with blood.

"Nothing more than a good Blighty one," said the bearer who tied him up. "Keep you home two-three months mebbe."

"Good enough," said Ratty. "I'll be back in time to see the finish," and lit a cigarette contentedly.

Back in the Aid Post later he heard from one of the Jocks who had been down there in the smoke somewhere between the machine-

guns and the wood, that the front line was already well consolidated. He heard too that the German counter-attack had been cut to pieces, and that the open ground before our new line front was piled with their dead. "You fellies was just late enough wi' your machine-guns," said the Highlander. "In anither three-fower meenits they'd a been right on top o' us."

"Late be blowed," said Ratty. "We was on the right spot exackly at the programme time o' the plan. We'd rehearsed the dash thing an' clocked it too often for me not to be sure o' that. We was there just when we was meant to be, an' that was just when they knew we'd be wanted. Whole plunky attack went like clockwork, far's our bit o' the plans went."

But it was two days later and snug in bed in a London hospital, when he had read the dispatches describing the battle, that he had his last word on "planned attacks."

"Lumme," he said to the next bed, "I likes this dispatch of ole 'Indenburg's. Good mile an' a half we pushed 'em back, an' held all

the ground, an' took 6,000 prisoners; an', says 'Indenburg, 'the British attack was completely repulsed . . . only a few crater positions were abandoned by us according to plan.' "

He dropped the paper and grinned. "According to plan," he said. "That's true enough. But 'e forgot to say it was the same as it always is—accordin' to the plan that was made by 'Aig an' us."

XVII

DOWN IN HUNLAND

It was cold—bitterly, bitingly, fiercely cold. It was also at intervals wet, and misty, and snowy, as the 'plane ran by turns through various clouds; but it was the cold that was uppermost in the minds of pilot and observer as they flew through the darkness. They were on a machine of the night-bombing squadron, and the "Night-Fliers" in winter weather take it more or less as part of the night's work that they are going to be out in cold and otherwise unpleasant weather conditions; but the cold this night was, as the pilot put it in his thoughts, "over the odds."

It was the Night-Fliers' second trip over Hunland. The first trip had been a short one to a near objective, because at the beginning of the night the weather looked too doubtful to risk a long trip. But before they had come back the weather had cleared, and the Squad-

ron Commander, after full deliberation, had decided to chance the long trip and bomb a certain place which he knew it was urgent should be damaged as much and as soon as possible.

All this meant that the Fliers had the shortest possible space of time on the ground between the two trips. Their machines were loaded up with fresh supplies of bombs just as quickly as it could be done, the petrol and oil tanks refilled, expended rounds of ammunition for the machine-guns replaced. Then, one after another, the machines steered out into the darkness across the 'drome ground towards a twinkle of light placed to guide them, wheeled round, gave the engine a preliminary whirl, steadied it down, opened her out again, and one by one at intervals lumbered off at gathering speed, and soared off up into the darkness.

The weather held until the objective was reached, although glances astern showed ominous clouds banking up and darkening the sky behind them. The bombs were loosed and seen to strike in leaping gusts of flame on the

ground below, while searchlights stabbed up into the sky and groped round to find the raiders, and the Hun "Archies" spat sharp tongues of flame up at them. Several times the shells burst near enough to be heard above the roar of the engine; but one after another the Night Fliers "dropped the eggs" and wheeled and drove off for home, the observers leaning over and picking up any visible speck of light or the flickering spurts of a machine-gun's fire and loosing off quick bursts of fire at these targets. But every pilot knew too well the meaning of those banking clouds to the west, and was in too great haste to get back to spend time hunting targets for their machine-guns; and each opened his engine out and drove hard to reach the safety of our own lines before thick weather could catch and bewilder them.

The leaders had escaped fairly lightly—"Atcha" and "Beta" having only a few wides to dodge; but their followers kept catching it hotter and hotter.

The "Osca" was the last machine to arrive at the objective and deliver her bombs

and swing for home, and because she was the last she came in for the fully awakened defence's warmest welcome, and wheeled with searchlights hunting for her, with Archie shells coughing round, with machine-guns spitting fire and their bullets *zizz-izz-ipping* up past her, with "flaming onions" curving up in streaks of angry red fire and falling blazing to earth again. A few of the bullets ripped and rapped viciously through the fabric of her wings, but she suffered no further damage, although the fire was hot enough and close enough to make her pilot and observer breathe sighs of relief as they droned out into the darkness and left all the devilment of fire and lights astern.

The word of the Night-Fliers' raid had evidently gone abroad through the Hun lines however, and as they flew west they could see searchlight after light switching and scything through the dark in search of them. Redmond, or "Reddie," the pilot, was a good deal more concerned over the darkening sky, and the cold that by now was piercing to his bones, than he was over the searchlights or

the chance of running into further Archie fire. He lifted the "Osca" another 500 feet as he flew, and drove on with his eyes on the compass and on the cloud banks ahead in turn.

Flying conditions do not lend themselves to conversation between pilot and observer, but once or twice the two exchanged remarks, very brief and boiled-down remarks, on their position and the chances of reaching the lines before they ran into "the thick." That a thick was coming was painfully clear to both. The sky by now was completely darkened, and the earth below was totally and utterly lost to sight. The pilot had his compass, and his compass only, left to guide him, and he kept a very close and attentive eye on that and his instrument denoting height. Their bombing objective had been a long way behind the German lines, but Reddie and "Walk" Jones, the observer, were already beginning to congratulate themselves on their nearness to the lines and the probability of escaping the storm, when the storm suddenly whirled down upon them.

It came without warning, although warn-

ing would have been of little use, since they could do nothing but continue to push for home. One minute they were flying, in darkness it is true, but still in a clear air; the next they were simply barging blindly through a storm of rain which probably poured straight down to earth, but which to them, flying at some scores of miles per hour, was driving level and with the force of whip cuts full in their faces. Both pilot and observer were blinded. The water cataracting on their goggles cut off all possibility of sight, and Reddie could not even see the compass in front of him or the gleam of light that illuminated it. He held the machine as steady and straight on her course as instinct and a sense of direction would allow him, and after some minutes they passed clear of the rain-storm. Everything was streaming wet—their faces, their goggles, their clothes, and everything they touched in the machine. Reddie mopped the wet off his compass and peered at it a moment, and then with an angry exclamation pushed rudder and joy-stick over and swung round to a direction fairly

opposite to the one they had been travelling. Apparently he had turned completely round in the minutes through the rain—once round at least, and Heaven only knew how many more times.

They flew for a few minutes in comparatively clear weather, and then, quite suddenly, they whirled into a thick mist cloud. At first both Reddie and "Walk" thought it was snow, so cold was the touch of the wet on their faces; but even when they found it was no more than a wet mist cloud they were little better off, because again both were completely blinded so far as seeing how or where they were flying went. Reddie developed a sudden fear that he was holding the machine's nose down, and in a quick revulsion pulled the joy-stick back until he could feel her rear and swoop upwards. He was left with a sense of feeling only to guide him. He could see no faintest feature of the instrument-board in front of him, had to depend entirely on his sense of touch and feel and instinct to know whether the "Osca" was on a

level keel, flying forward, or up or down, or lying right over on either wing tip.

The mist cleared, or they flew clear of it, as suddenly as they had entered it, and Reddie found again that he had lost direction, was flying north instead of west. He brought the 'bus round again and let her drop until the altimeter showed a bare two hundred feet above the ground and peered carefully down for any indication of his whereabouts. He could see nothing—blank nothing, below, or above, or around him. He lifted again to the thousand-foot mark and drove on towards the west. He figured that they ought to be coming somewhere near the lines now, but better be safe than sorry, and he'd get well clear of Hunland before he chanced coming down.

Then the snow shut down on them. If they had been blinded before, they were doubly blind now. It was not only that the whirling flakes of snow shut out any sight in front of or around them; it drove clinging against their faces, their glasses, their bodies, and froze and was packed hard by the wind of their own speed as they flew. And it was cold,

bone- and marrow-piercing cold. Reddie lost all sense of direction again, all sense of whether he was flying forward, or up or down, right side or wrong side up. He even lost any sense of time; and when the scud cleared enough for him to make out the outline of his instruments he could not see the face of his clock, his height or speed recorders, or anything else, until he had scraped the packed snow off them.

But this time, according to the compass, he was flying west and in the right direction. So much he just had time to see when they plunged again into another whirling smother of fine snow. They flew through that for minutes which might have been seconds or hours for all the pilot knew. He could see nothing through his clogged goggles, that blurred up faster than he could wipe them clear; he could hear nothing except, dully, the roar of his engine; he could feel nothing except the grip of the joy-stick, numbly, through his thick gloves. He kept the "Osca" flying level by sheer sense of feel, and at times had all he could do to fight back a wave of panic which

rushed on him with a belief that the machine was side-slipping or falling into a spin that would bring him crashing to earth.

When the snow cleared again and he was able to see his lighted instruments he made haste to brush them clear of snow and peer anxiously at them. He found he was a good thousand feet up and started at once to lift a bit higher for safety's sake. By the compass he was still flying homeward, and by the time—the time—he stared hard at his clock . . . and found it was stopped. But the petrol in his main tank was almost run out, and according to that he ought to be well over the British lines—if he had kept anything like a straight course. He held a brief and shouted conversation with his observer. "Don't know where I am. Lost. Think we're over our lines."

"Shoot a light, eh?" answered the observer, "and try 'n' land. I'm frozen stiff."

They both peered anxiously out round as their Verey light shot out and floated down; but they could see no sign of a flare or an answering light. They fired another signal,

and still had no reply; and then, "I'm going down," yelled the pilot, shutting off his engine and letting the machine glide down in a slow sweeping circle. He could see nothing of the ground when the altimeter showed 500 feet, nor at 300, nor at 200, so opened the throttle and picked up speed again. "Shove her down," yelled the observer. "More snow coming."

Another Verey light, shot straight down overboard, showed a glimpse of a grass field, and Reddie swung gently round, and slid downward again. At the same time he fired a landing light fixed out under his lower wing-tip in readiness for just such an occasion as this, and by its glowing vivid white light made a fairly good landing on rough grass land. He shut the engine off at once, because he had no idea how near he was to the edge of the field or what obstacles they might bump if they taxied far, and the machine came quickly to rest. The two men sat still for a minute breathing a sigh of thankfulness that they were safe to ground, then turned and looked at each other in the dying light

of the flare. Stiffly they stood up, climbed clumsily out of their places, and down on to the wet ground. Another flurry of snow was falling, but now that they were at rest the snow was floating and drifting gently down instead of beating in their faces with hurricane force as it did when they were flying.

Reddie flapped his arms across his chest and stamped his numbed feet. Walk Jones pulled his gloves off and breathed on his stiff fingers. "I'm fair froze," he mumbled. "Wonder where we are, and how far from the 'drome?"

"Lord knows," returned Reddie. "I don't know even where the line is—ahead or astern, right hand or left."

"Snow's clearing again," said Jones. "Perhaps we'll get a bearing then, and I'll go 'n' hunt for a camp or a cottage, or anyone that'll give us a hot drink."

"Wait a bit," said Reddie. "Stand where you are and let's give a yell. Some sentry or someone's bound to hear us. Snow's stopping all right; but, Great Scott! isn't it dark."

Presently they lifted their voices and yelled an "Ahoy" together at the pitch of their lungs. There was no answer, and after a pause they yelled again, still without audible result.

"Oh, curse!" said Jones, shivering. "I'm not going to hang about here yelping like a lost dog. And we might hunt an hour for a cottage. I'm going to get aboard again and loose off a few rounds from my machine-gun into the ground. That will stir somebody up and bring 'em along."

"There's the line," said Reddie suddenly. "Look!" and he pointed to where a faint glow rose and fell, lit and faded, along the horizon. "And the guns," he added, as they saw a sheet of light jump somewhere in the distance and heard the *bump* of the report. Other gun-flashes flickered and beat across the dark sky. "Funny," said Reddie; "I'd have sworn I turned round as we came down, and I thought the lines were dead the other way."

The observer was fumbling about to get his foot in the step. "I thought they were way

out to the right," he said. "But I don't care a curse where they are. I want a camp or a French cottage with coffee on the stove. I'll see if I can't shoot somebody awake."

"Try one more shout first," said Reddie, and they shouted together again.

"Got 'im," said Reddie joyfully, as a faint hail came in response, and Jones took his foot off the step and began to fumble under his coat for a torch. "Here!" yelled Reddie. "This way! Here!"

They heard the answering shouts draw nearer, and then, just as Jones found his torch and was pulling it out from under his coat, Reddie clutched at his arm. "What—what was it——" he gasped. "Did you hear what they called?"

"No, couldn't understand," said Jones in some surprise at the other's agitation. "They're French, I suppose; farm people, most like."

"It was *German,*" said Reddie hurriedly. "There again, hear that? *We've dropped in Hunland.*"

"Hu-Hunland!" stammered Jones; then

desperately, "It can't be. You sure it isn't French—Flemish, perhaps?"

"Flemish—here," said Reddie, dismissing the idea, as Jones admitted he might well do, so far south in the line. "I know little enough German, but I know French well enough; and that's not French. We're done in, Walk."

"Couldn't we bolt for it," said Walk, looking hurriedly round. "It's dark, and we know where the lines are."

"What hope of getting through them?" said Reddie, speaking in quick whispers. "But we've got a better way. We'll make a try. Here, quickly, and quiet as you can—get to the prop and swing it when I'm ready. We'll chance a dash for it."

Both knew the chances against them, knew that in front of the machine might lie a ditch, a tree, a hedge, a score of things that would trip them as they taxied to get speed to rise; they knew too that the Germans were coming closer every moment, that they might be on them before they could get the engine started, that they would probably start shooting at the first sound of her start. All these things

and a dozen others raced through their minds in an instant; but neither hesitated, both moved promptly and swiftly. Reddie clambered up and into his seat; Walk Jones jumped to the propeller, and began to wind it backwards to "suck in" the petrol to the cylinders. "When she starts, jump to the wing-tip and try 'n' swing her round," called Reddie in quick low tones. "It'll check her way. Then you must jump for it, and hang on and climb in as we go. Yell when you're aboard. All ready now."

A shout came out of the darkness—a shout and an obvious question in German. "Contact," said Walk Jones, and swung the propeller his hardest. He heard the whirr of the starter as Reddie twirled it rapidly. "Off," called Jones as he saw the engine was not giving sign of life, and "Off" answered Reddie, cutting off the starting current.

Another shout came, and with it this time what sounded like an imperative command. Reddie cursed his lack of knowledge of German. He could have held them in play a minute if—— "Contact," came Walk's voice

again. "Contact," he answered, and whirled the starter madly again. There was still no movement, no spark of life from the engine. Reddie groaned, and Walk Jones, sweating despite the cold over his exertions on the propeller, wound it back again and swung it forward with all his weight. His thick leather coat hampered him. He tore it off and flung it to the ground, and tried again.

So they tried and failed, tried and failed, time and again, while all the time the shouts were coming louder and from different points, as if a party had split up and was searching the field. A couple of electric torches threw dancing patches of light on the ground, lifted occasionally and flashed round. One was coming straight towards them, and Reddie with set teeth waited the shout of discovery he knew must come presently, and cursed Walk's slowness at the "prop."

Again on the word he whirled the starter, and this time "Whur-r-r-rum," answered the engine, suddenly leaping to life; "Whur-*r*-*r*-ROO-OO-OO-OOM-*ur*-*r*-r-umph," as Reddie

eased and opened the throttle. He heard a babel of shouts and yells, and saw the light-patches come dancing on the run towards them. A sudden recollection of the only two German words he knew came to him. "Ja wohl," he yelled at the pitch of his voice, "Ja wohl"; then in lower hurried tones, "Swing her, Walk; quick, swing her," and opened the engine out again. The running lights stopped for a minute at his yell, and Walk Jones jumped to the wing-tip, shouted "Right!" and hung on while Reddie started to taxi the machine forward. His weight and leverage brought her lumbering round, the roar of engine and propeller rising and sinking as Reddie manipulated the throttle, and Reddie yelling his "Ja wohl," every time the noise died down.

"Get in, Walk; get aboard," he shouted, when the nose was round and pointing back over the short stretch they had taxied on landing, and which he therefore knew was clear running for at least a start. He heard another order screamed in German, and next instant the *bang* of a rifle, not more appar-

ently than a score of yards away. He kept the machine lumbering forward, restraining himself from opening his engine out, waiting in an agony of apprehension for Walk's shout. He felt the machine lurch and sway, and the kicking scramble his observer made to board her, heard next instant his yelling "Right-oh!" and opened the throttle full as another couple of rifles bang-banged.

The rifles had little terror either for him or the observer, because both knew there were bigger and deadlier risks to run in the next few seconds. There were still desperately long odds against their attempt succeeding. In the routine method of starting a machine, chocks are placed in front of the wheels and the engine is given a short full-power run and a longer easier one to warm the engine and be sure all is well; then the chocks are pulled away and she rolls off, gathering speed as she goes, until she has enough for her pilot to lift her into the air. Here, their engine was stone cold, they knew nothing of what lay in front of them, might crash into something before they left the ground, might

rise, and even then catch some house or tree-top, and travelling at the speed they would by then have attained—well, the Lord help them!

Reddie had to chance everything, and yet throw away no shadow of a chance. He opened the throttle wide, felt the machine gather speed, bumping and jolting horribly over the rough field, tried to peer down at the ground to see how fast they moved, could see nothing, utterly black nothing, almost panicked for one heart-stilling instant as he looked ahead again and thought he saw the blacker shadow of something solid in front of him, clenched his teeth and held straight on until he felt by the rush of wind on his face he had way enough, and pulled the joy-stick in to him. With a sigh of relief he felt the jolting change to a smooth swift rush, held his breath, and with a pull on the stick zoomed her up, levelled her out again (should clear anything but a tall tree now), zoomed her up again. He felt a hand thumping on his shoulder, heard Walk's wild exultant yell—"'Ra-a-ay!" and, still lifting her stead-

ily, swung his machine's nose for the jumping lights that marked the trenches.

They landed safe on their own 'drome ground half an hour after. The officer whose duty it was for the night to look after the landing-ground and light the flares in answer to the returning pilots' signals, walked over to them as they came to rest.

"Hullo, you two," he said. "Where th' blazes you been till this time? We'd just about put you down as missing."

Reddie and Walk had stood up in their cock-pits and, without a spoken word, were solemnly shaking hands.

Reddie looked overboard at the officer on the ground. "You may believe it, Johnny, or you may not," he said, "but we've been down into Hunland."

"Down into hell!" said Johnny. "Quit jokin'. What kept you so late?"

"You've said it, Johnny," said Reddie soberly. "Down into hell—and out again."

They shook hands again, solemnly.

XVIII

THE FINAL OBJECTIVE

It was all apt to be desperately confusing—the smoke, the shapeless shell-cratered ground, the deafening unceasing tempest of noise—but out of all this confusion and the turmoil of their attack there were one or two things that remained clear in the mind of Corporal; and after all they were the things that counted. One was that he was in charge for the moment of the remains of the company, that when their last officer was knocked out he, Corporal Ackroyd, had taken the officer's wrist watch and brief instructions to "Carry on—you know what to do"; and the other that they had, just before the officer was casualtied, reached the "pink-line objective."

. . . . .

Without going too closely into the detailed methods of the attack—the normal methods

of this particular period—it is enough to say that three objective lines had been marked up on the maps of the ground to be taken, a pink, a purple, and a "final objective" blue-black line. Between the moment of occupying the pink line and the move to attack the purple there were some twelve minutes allowed to bring supports into position, to pour further destructive artillery fire on the next objective, and so on. Corporal Ackroyd, in common with the rest of the battalion, had been very fully instructed in the map position, and rehearsed over carefully-measured-out ground in practice attack, and knew fairly well the time-table laid down. Before the officer was carried back by the bearers he gave one or two further simple guiding rules. "Send back a runner to report. If nobody comes up to take over in ten minutes, push on to the purple line. It's the sunk road; you can't mistake it. Keep close on the barrage, and you can't go wrong"; and finally, "Take my watch; it's synchronised time."

Ackroyd sent back his runner, and was moving to a position where he could best

keep control of the remains of the company, when there came an interruption.

"Some blighter out there flappin' a white flag, Corporal," reported a look-out, and pointed to where an arm and hand waved from a shell-hole a hundred yards to their front. The Corporal was wary. He had seen too much of the "white-flag trick" to give himself or his men away, but at the same time was keenly sensible of the advantage of getting a bunch of Germans on their immediate front to surrender, rather than have to advance in face of their fire. There was not much time to spare before the laid-down moment for the advance.

He half rose from his cover and waved an answer. Promptly a figure rose from the shell-hole and with hands well over his head came running and stumbling over the rough ground towards him. Three-quarter way over he dropped into another shell-hole, and from there waved again. At another reassuring wave from Ackroyd he rose, ran in and flung himself down into the shell-hole where the Corporal waited. The Corporal

met him with his bayoneted rifle at the ready and his finger on the trigger, and the German rose to his knees shooting both hands up into the air with a quick "Kamerad."

"Right-oh," said Ackroyd. "But where is your chums? Ain't any more coming?"

The German answered in guttural but clear enough English, "Mine comrades sended me, wherefore—because I speak English. They wish to kamerad, to become prisoner if you promise behave them well. You no shoot if they come."

"Right," said Ackroyd with another glance at his watch. "But you'll 'ave to 'urry them up. We're goin' to advance in about seven minutes, and I'll promise nothin' after that. Signal 'em in quick."

"If I to them wave they will come," answered the German. "But mine officer come first and make proper kamerad."

"He'll make a proper bloomin' sieve if he don't come quick," retorted Ackroyd. "The barrage is due to drop in less'n seven minutes. Signal 'im along quick," he repeated impatiently, as he saw the other failed to un-

derstand. The German turned and made signals, and at once another figure came running and crouching to where they waited. "Mine officer," said the first German, "he no speak English, so I interpret."

"Tell 'im," said Ackroyd, "the shellin' will begin again in five or six minutes, an' the line will advance. If he fetches 'is men in quick, they'll be all right, but I'll promise nothing if they're not in before then."

He waited, fidgeting anxiously, while this was interpreted, and the officer returned an answer.

"He say why needs you advance until all his men have surrender?" said the German.

"Why?" exploded Ackroyd. "Why? Does 'e think I'm the bloomin' Commander-in-Chief an' that I'm runnin' this show? Look 'ere"—he paused a moment to find words to put the position clearly and quickly. He saw the urgency of the matter. In another few minutes the barrage would drop, and the line would begin to push on. If by then these Germans had not surrendered, they would conclude that the officer had not made

terms and they would remain in cover and fight—which meant more casualties to their already unusually heavy list. If he could get the surrender completed before the moment for advance, the next strip of ground to the "purple objective line" would be taken quickly, easily, and cheaply.

"Now look 'ere," he said rapidly. "You must fix this quick. This show, this push, advance, attack, is runnin' to a set time-table. Comprenny? At quarter-past—see, quarter-past"—and he thrust out the watch marking eleven minutes past—"the barrage, the shellin', begins, an' we start on for the next objective——"

"Start what?" interjected the interpreter.

"Objective," yelled Ackroyd angrily. "Don't you know what a blazing objective is? The sunk road is our nex' objective line. D'you know the sunk road?"

"Ja, ja, I knows the road," agreed the German. Then the officer interrupted, and the interpreter turned to explain matters to him. "I cannot it explain this objective," he said. "Mine officer what is it asks?"

Ackroyd swore lustily and full-bloodedly, but bit short his oaths. There was no time for spare language now. "See here, tell 'im this quick. A objective is the line we're told to take, an' goes an' takes. The Commander-in-Chief, 'Aig hisself, says where the objective is, an' he marks up a line on the map to show where we goes to an' where we stops. There's a final objective where we finishes each push. D'you savvy that? Every bit o' the move is made at the time laid down in attack orders. You can't alter that, an' I can't, nor nobody else can't. Old 'Aig 'e just draws 'is blue-black line on the map and ses, 'There's your final objective'; an' we just goes an' takes it. Now 'ave you got all that?"

The two Germans spoke rapidly for a moment, but the Corporal interrupted as he noted the rising sound of the gun-fire and the rapidly-increasing rush of our shells overhead. "Here, 'nuff o' this!" he shouted. "There's no time—there's the barrage droppin' again. Call your men in if your goin' to; or push off back an' we'll go 'n fetch 'em ourselves. You must get back the both o'

you. We're movin' on." And he made a significant motion with the bayonet.

As they rose crouching the roar of gun-fire rose to a pitch of greater and more savage intensity; above their heads rushed and shrieked a whirlwind of passing shells; out over the open beyond them the puffing shell-bursts steadied down to a shifting rolling wall of smoke. And out of this smoke wall there came running, first in ones and twos, and then in droves, a crowd of grey-clad figures, all with hands well over their heads, some with jerking and waving dirty white rags.

At the same moment supports came struggling in to our line, and the Corporal made haste to hand over to their officer. The prisoners were being hastily collected for removal to the rear, and our line rising to advance, when the interpreter caught at the Corporal. "Mine officer he say," he shouted, "where is it this fine ol' objective?"

The Corporal was in rather happy mood over the surrender and the prospect of advancing without opposition. "Where is it?" he retorted. "Like 'is bloomin' cheek askin'.

You tell 'im that *'is* final objective is Donington 'All—an' I wish ours was 'alf as pleasant. Ours ain't far this time, but we're off now to take it accordin' to attack orders an' timetable, like we always does. An' we'll do it just the same fashion—'cos 'e knows us an' we knows 'im, an' knows 'e don't ask wot we can't do—when the day comes that good old 'Aig draws 'is blue-black line beyond its back doors an' tells us the final objective is Berlin."

XIX

ARTILLERY PREPARATION

It was the sixth day of the "artillery preparation" for the attack. During the past six days the dispatches on both sides had remarked vaguely that there was "artillery activity," or "intense fire," or "occasional increase to drum fire." These phrases may not convey much to the average dispatch reader, and indeed it is only the Gunners, and especially the Field Batteries in the front gun-line, who understand their meaning to the full.

They had here no picked "battery positions," because they had been pushed up on to captured ground which they themselves in a previous attack had helped churn to a muddy shell-wrecked wilderness, had blasted bare of any semblance of cover or protection. The batteries were simply planted down in a long line in the open, or at best had the guns

sunk a foot or two in shallow pits made by spading out the connecting rims of a group of shell-holes. The gunners, whether serving at the guns or taking their turn of rest, were just as open and exposed as the guns. The gun shields gave a little protection from forward fire of bullets, shrapnel, or splinters, but none from the downward, side, or backward blast of high-explosive shells.

There was no cover or protection for guns or men simply because there had been no time or men to spare for "digging in." The field guns had been pushed up to their present position just as quickly as the soft ground would allow after the last advance, and since then had been kept going night and day, bringing up and stacking piles of shells and still keeping up a heavy fire. The return fire from the Germans was spasmodic, and not to be compared in volume to ours, and yet against ranks and rows of guns in the bare open it could not fail to be damaging, and a good few of the batteries lost guns smashed and many men and officers killed and wounded.

But the guns, and as far as possible the men, were replaced, and the weight of fire kept up. The men worked in shifts, half of them keeping the guns going while the others ate and rested, and slept the sleep of utter exhaustion in shell-holes near the guns, which continued to bang in running bursts of "battery fire," or crash out in ear-splitting and ground-shaking four-gun salvos within a dozen or two yards of the sleepers' heads. The sheer physical labour was cruelly exhausting—the carrying and handling of the shells, the effort to improvise sandbag and broken timber "platforms" under the gun wheels to keep them from sinking in the soft ground, even the mere walking or moving about ankle deep in the sea of sticky mud that surrounded the guns and clung in heavy clogging lumps to feet and legs. But the mental strain must have been even worse in the past six days and nights of constant heavy firing, and of suffering under fire.

Now on this, the sixth and last day of the preparation, the rate of fire along the whole line was worked up to an appalling pitch of

violence. The line of the advanced field positions ran in a narrow and irregular belt, at few points more than a couple of thousand yards from the enemy line; the batteries were so closely placed that the left flank gun of one was bare yards from the right flank gun of the next, and in some groups were ranged in double and triple tiers. Up and down this line for miles the guns poured out shells as hard as they could go. Every now and again the enemy artillery would attempt a reply, and a squall of shells would shriek and whistle and crash down on some part or other of our guns' line, catching a few men here, killing a handful there, smashing or overturning a gun elsewhere—but never stopping or even slacking the tornado of fire poured out by the British line.

Each battery had a set rate of fire to maintain, a fixed number of rounds to place on detailed targets; and badly or lightly mauled or untouched, as might be, each one performed its appointed task. In any battery which had lost many officers and men only a constant tremendous effort kept the guns

going. The men relieved from their turn at the guns crawled to the craters, where they had slung a ground sheet or two for shelter from the rain, or had scooped a shallow niche in the side, ate their bully and biscuit, stretched their cramped muscles, crept into their wet lairs, wrapped themselves in wet blankets or coats, curled up and slept themselves into a fresh set of cramps. They were lucky if they had their spell off in undisturbed sleep; most times they were turned out, once, twice, or thrice, to help unload the pack mules which brought up fresh supplies of shells, and man-handle the rounds up from the nearest points the mules could approach over the welter of muddy ground so pitted and cratered that even a mule could not pass over it.

When their relief finished they crawled out again and took their places on the guns, and carried on. By nightfall every man of them was stiff with tiredness, deafened and numb with the noise and shock of the piece's jarring recoil, weary-eyed and mind-sick with the unceasing twiddling and adjusting of tiny marks to minute scratches and strokes on

shell fuses, sights, and range-drums. The deepening dusk was hardly noticed, because the running bursts of flame and light kept the dusk at bay. And dark night brought no rest, no slackening of the fierce rate of fire, or the labour that maintained it.

The whole gun-line came to be revealed only as a quivering belt of living fire. As a gun fired there flamed out in front of the battery a blinding sheet of light that threw up every detail of men and guns and patch of wet ground in glaring hot light or hard black silhouette. On the instant, the light vanished and darkness clapped down on the tired eyes, to lift and leap again on the following instant from the next gun's spurt of vivid sheeting flame. For solid miles the whole line throbbed and pulsed in the same leaping and vanishing gusts of fire and light; and from either side, from front, and rear, and overhead, came the long and unbroken roaring and crashing and banging and bellowing of the guns' reports, the passing and the burst of the shells.

So it went on all night, and so it went on into the grey hours of the dawn. As the

"zero hour" fixed for the attack approached, the rate of fire worked up and up to a point that appeared to be mere blind ravening fury. But there was nothing blind about it. For all the speed of the work each gun was accurately laid for every round, each fuse was set to its proper tiny mark, each shell roared down on its appointed target. The guns grew hot to the touch, the breeches so hot that oil sluiced into them at intervals hissed and bubbled and smoked like fat in a frying pan, as it touched the metal.

One battery ceased fire for a few minutes to allow some infantry supports to pass through the line and clear of the blast of the guns' fire, and the gunners took the respite thankfully, and listened to the shaking thunder of the other guns, the rumble and wail and roar of the shells that passed streaming over their heads, sounds that up to now had been drowned out in the nearer bang and crash of their own guns.

As the infantry picked their way out between the guns the "Number One" of the nearest detachment exchanged a few shouted

remarks with one of the infantry sergeants.

"Near time to begin," said the sergeant, glancing at his watch. "Busy time goin' to be runnin' this next day or two. You'll be hard at it, too, I s'pose."

"Busy time! beginning!" retorted the artilleryman. "I'm about fed up o' busy times. This battery hasn't been out of the line or out of action for over three months, an' been more or less under fire all that time. We haven't stopped shootin' night or day for a week, and this last 24 hours we been at it full stretch, hammer an' tongs. Beginnin'—Good Lord! I'm that hoarse, I can hardly croak, an' every man here is deaf, dumb, and paralysed. I'm gettin' to hate this job, an' I never want to hear another gun or see another shell in my blanky life."

The infantryman laughed, and hitched his rifle up to move. "I s'pose so," he said. "An' I shouldn't wonder if them Fritzes in the line you've been strafin' are feelin' same way as you about guns an' shells—only more so."

"That's so," agreed the Number One, and

turned to the fuse-setters, urging them hoarsely to get a stack of rounds ready for the barrage. "We're just goin' to begin," he said, "an' if this blanky gun don't hump herself in the next hour or two . . ."

XX

STRETCHER-BEARERS

LIEUTENANT DREW was wounded within four or five hundred yards of the line from which his battalion started to attack. He caught three bullets in as many seconds—one in the arm, one in the shoulder, and one in the side—and went down under them as if he had been pole-axed. The shock stunned him for a little, and he came to hazily to find a couple of the battalion stretcher-bearers trying to lift him from the soft mud in which he was half sunk.

Drew was rather annoyed with them for wanting to disturb him. He was quite comfortable, he told them, and all he wanted was to be left alone there. The bearers refused to listen to this, and insisted in the first place in slicing away some of his clothing—which still further annoyed Drew because the weather was too cold to dispense with clothes

—and putting some sort of first field dressing on the wounds.

"D'you think he can walk, Bill?" one asked the other. "No," said Bill. "I fancy he's got one packet through the lung, an' if he walks he'll wash out. It's a carryin' job."

"Come on, then," said the first. "Sooner we start the sooner we're there."

Quite disregarding Drew's confused grumbles, they lifted and laid him on a stretcher and started to carry him back to the aid post.

If that last sentence conveys to you any picture of two men lifting a stretcher nicely and smoothly and walking off at a gentle and even walk, you must alter the picture in all its details. The ground where the lieutenant had fallen, the ground for many acres round him, was a half-liquefied mass of mud churned up into lumps and hummocks pitted and cratered with shell-holes intersected with rivulets and pools of water. When Drew was lifted on to the stretcher, it sank until the mud oozed out and up from either side and began to slop in over the edges. When the bearers had

lifted him on, they moved each to his own end, and they moved one step at a time, floundering and splashing and dragging one foot clear after the other. When they took hold of the stretcher ends and lifted, both staggered to keep their balance on the slippery foothold; and to move forward each had to steady himself on one foot, wrench the other up out of the mud, plunge it forward and into the mud again, grope a minute for secure footing, balance, and proceed to repeat the performance with the other foot. The stretcher lurched and jolted and swayed side to side, backward and forward. The movement at first gave Drew severe stabs of pain, but after a little the pain dulled down into a steady throbbing ache.

The bearers had some 400 or 500 yards to go over the ground covered by the advance. After this they would find certain sketchy forms of duck-board walks—if the German shells had not wiped them out—and, farther back, still better and easier methods of progress to the aid post. But first there was this shell-ploughed wilderness to cross. Drew

remembered vaguely what a struggle it had been to him to advance that distance on his own feet, and carrying nothing but his own weight and his equipment. It was little wonder the bearers found the same journey a desperate effort with his weight sagging and jolting between them and pressing them down in the mud.

In the first five yards the leading bearer slipped, failed to recover his balance, and fell, letting his end down with a jolt and a splash. He rose smothered in a fresh coat of wet mud, full of mingled curses on the mud and apologies to the wounded man. Drew slid off into a half-faint. He woke again slowly, as the bearers worked through a particularly soft patch. The mud was nearly thigh deep, and they were forced to take a step forward, half-lift, half-drag the stretcher on, lay it down while they struggled on another foot or two, turn and haul their load after them. It took them a full hour to move a fair 60 paces.

The work was not performed, either, without distractions other than the mud and its

circumventing, and the trouble of picking the best course. An attack was in full progress, and streams of shells were screaming and howling overhead, with odd ones hurtling down and bursting on the ground they were traversing, flinging up gigantic geysers of spouting mud, clods of earth, and black smoke, erupting a whirlwind of shrieking splinters and fragments. Several times the bearers laid the stretcher down and crouched low in the mud from the warning roar of an approaching shell, waited the muffled crash of its burst, the passing of the flying fragments. From the nearer explosions a shower of dirt and clods rained down about them, splashing and thudding on the wet ground; from the farther ones an occasional piece of metal would drop whistling or droning angrily and "whutt" into the mud. Then the bearers lifted their burden and resumed their struggling advance. Fortunately the waves of attacking infantry had passed beyond them, and most of the German guns were busy flogging the front lines and trying to hold or destroy them; but there were still

shells enough being flung back on the ground they had to cover to make matters unpleasantly risky. To add to the risk there was a constant whistle and whine of passing bullets, and every now and then a regular shower of them whipping and smacking into the mud about them, bullets not aimed at them, but probably just the chance showers aimed a little too high to catch the advancing attack, passing over and coming to earth a few hundred yards back.

The little party was not alone, although the ground was strangely empty and deserted to what it had been when the attack went over. There were odd wounded men, walking wounded struggling back alone, others more seriously hurt toiling through the mud with the assistance of a supporting arm, others lying waiting their turn to be carried in, placed for the time being in such cover as could be found, the cover usually of a deep shell-crater with soft, wet sides, and a deep pool at the bottom. There were odd bunches of men moving up, men carrying bombs, or ammunition, or supplies of some sort for the

firing line, all ploughing slowly and heavily through the sticky mud.

Drew lost all count of time. He seemed to have been on that stretcher, to have been swaying and swinging, bumping down and heaving up, for half a life-time—no, more, for all his life, because he had no thought for, no interest in anything that had happened in the world before this stretcher period, still less any interest in what might happen after it ended—if ever it did end. Several times he sank into stupor or semi-unconsciousness, through which he was still dimly sensible only of the motions of the stretcher, without any connected thought as to what they meant or how they were caused. Once he awoke from this state to find himself laid on the ground, one of his bearers lying in a huddled heap, the other stooping over him, lifting and hauling at him. Everything faded out again, and in the next conscious period he was moving on jerkily once more, this time with two men in the lead with a stretcher-arm apiece, and one man at the rear end. His

first stretcher-bearer they left there, flat and still, sinking gradually in the soft ooze.

Again everything faded, and this time he only recovered as he was being lifted out of the stretcher and packed on a flat sideless truck affair with four upright corner posts. Somewhere near, a battery of field guns was banging out a running series of ear-splitting reports—and it was raining softly again—and he was sitting instead of lying. He groped painfully for understanding of it all.

"Where am I?" he asked faintly.

"You're all right now, sir," someone answered him. "You'll have to sit up a bit, 'cos we've a lot o' men an' not much room. But you're on the light railway, an' the truck'll run you the half-mile to the Post in a matter o' minutes."

"What time is it?" asked Drew. "How's the show going?"

"It's near two o'clock, sir. An' we hear all the objectives is taken."

"Near two," said Drew, and as the truck moved off, "Near two," he kept repeating and struggling to understand what had hap-

pened to time—had started at six . . . and it was "near two" . . . "near two" . . . two o'clock, that was. He couldn't piece it together, and he gave it up at last and devoted himself to fitting words and music to the rhythm of the grinding, murmuring truck wheels. Six o'clock . . . two o'clock.

It was little wonder he was puzzled. The attack had started at six. But it had taken the stretcher-bearers five hours to carry him some 400 yards.

XXI

THE CONQUERORS

THE public room (which in England would be the Public Bar) of the "Cheval Blanc" estaminet, or "Chevvle Blank" as its present-day customers know it, had filled very early in the evening. Those members of the Labour Company who packed the main room had just returned to the blessings of comparative peace after a very unpleasant spell in the line which had culminated in a last few days—and the very last day especially—on a particularly nasty "job o' work." Making a corduroy road of planks across an apparently bottomless pit of mud in a pouring rain and biting cold wind cannot be pleasant work at any time. When you stir in to the dish of trouble a succession of five-point-nine high-explosive shells howling up out of the rain and crashing thunderously down on or about the taped-out line of road, it is about as near

the limit of unpleasantness as a Labour Company cares to come. The job was rushed, five-nines being a more drastic driver than the hardest hustling foreman, but the German gunners evidently had the old road nicely ranged and had correctly estimated the chance of its being reconstructed, with the result that their shells pounded down with a horrible persistency which might have stopped anything short of the persistency of the Company and the urgency of the road being put through. The men at work there, stripped to open-throated and bare-armed shirts, and yet running rivers of sweat for all their stripping, drove the work at top speed on this last day in a frantic endeavour to complete before dark. They knew nothing of the tactical situation, nothing of what it might mean to the success or failure of "the Push" if the road were not ready to carry the guns and ammunition waggons by that nightfall, knew only that "Roarin' Bill, The Terrible Turk," had pledged the Company to finish that night, and that "Roarin' Bill" must not be let down. It must be explained here that "Roarin'

Bill'' was the Captain in command of the Company, and although the men perhaps hardly knew it themselves, or ever stopped to reason it out, the simple and obvious reason for their reluctance to let him down was merely because they knew that under no circumstances on earth would he let them, the Company, down. His nick-name was a private jest of the Company's, since he had the voice and manners of a sucking dove. But for all that his orders, his bare word, or even a hint from him, went farther than any man's, and this in about as rough and tough a Company as a Captain could well have to handle. "Bill" had said they must finish before dark, walked up and down the plank road himself watching and directing the work, and never as much as looked—that they knew of—at the watch on his wrist to figure whether they'd make out or not. "Th' Terrible Turk 'as spoke; wot 'e 'as said, 'e blanky well 'as said," Sergeant Buck remarked once as the Captain passed down the road, "an' all the shells as Gerry ever pitched ain't goin' to alter it. Come on, get at it;

that blighter's a mile over." The gang, who had paused a moment in their labour to crouch and look up as a shell roared over, "got at it," slung the log into place, and had the long spike nails that held the transverse planks to "the ribbon" or binding edge log half hammered home before the shell had burst in a cataract of mud and smoke three hundred yards beyond. The shells weren't always beyond. Man after man was sent hobbling, or carried groaning, back over the road he had helped to build; man after man, until there were six in a row, was lifted to a patch of slightly drier mud near the roadside and left there—because the road needed every hand more than did the dead who were past needing anything.

The job was hard driven at the end, and with all the hard driving was barely done to time. About 4 o'clock an artillery subaltern rode over the planks to where the gang worked at the road-end, his horse slithering and picking its way fearfully over the muddy wet planks.

"Can't we come through yet?" he asked,

and the Captain himself told him no, he was afraid not, because it would interrupt his work.

"But hang it all," said the Gunner officer, "there's a couple of miles of guns and waggons waiting back there at the Control. If they're not through before dark——"

"They won't be," said the Captain mildly, "not till my time to finish, and that's 5 o'clock. You needn't look at your watch," he went on, "I know it's not five yet, because I told my men they must finish by five—and they're not finished yet." He said the last words very quietly, but very distinctly, and those of the gang who heard passed it round the rest as an excellent jest which had completed the " 'tillery bloke's" discomfiture. But the Captain's jest had a double edge. "Start along at five," he had called to the retiring Gunner, "and she'll be ready for you. This Company puts its work through on time, always." And the Company did, cramming a good two hours' work into the bare one to make good the boast; picking and spading tremendously at the shell-torn earth to level

a way for the planks, filling in deep and shallow holes, carrying or dragging or rolling double burdens of logs and planks, flinging them into place, spiking them together with a rapid fusillade of click-clanking hammer-blows. They ceased to take cover or even to stop and crouch from the warning yells of approaching shells; they flung off the gas-masks, hooked at the "Alert" high on their chests, to give freer play to their arms; they wallowed in mud and slime, and cursed and laughed in turn at it, and the road, and the job, and the Army, and the war. But they finished to time, and actually at 5 o'clock they drove the last spikes while the first teams were scrabbling over the last dozen loose planks.

Then the Company wearily gathered up its picks and shovels and dogs and sleds, and its dead, and trudged back single-file along the edge of the road up which the streaming traffic was already pouring to plunge off the end and plough its way to its appointed places.

And now in the "Cheval Blanc" as many

of the Company as could find room were crowded, sitting or standing contentedly in a "fug" you could cut with a spade, drinking very weak beer and smoking very strong tobacco, gossiping over the past days, thanking their stars they were behind in rest for a spell.

The door opened and admitted a gust of cold air; and the cheerful babel of voices, shuffling feet, and clinking glasses, died in a silence that spread curiously, inwards circle by circle from the door, as three men came in and the Company realised them. The Captain was one, and the other two were—amazing and unusual vision there, for all that it was so familiar in old days at home—normal, decently dressed in tweeds and serge, cloth-capped, ordinary "civilians," obviously British, and of working class.

The Captain halted and waved them forward. "These two gentlemen," he said to the Company, "are—ah—on a tour of the Front. They will—ah—introduce themselves to you. Corporal, please see them back to

my Mess when they are ready to come," and he went out.

The two new-comers were slightly ill at ease and felt a little out of place, although they tried hard to carry it off, and nodded to the nearest men and dropped a "How goes it?" and "Hullo, mates" here and there as they moved slowly through the throng that opened to admit them. Then one of them laughed, still with a slightly embarrassed air, and squared his shoulders, and spoke up loud enough for the room to hear.

The room heard—in a disconcerting silence—while he explained that they were two of a "deputation" of working men brought out to "see the conditions" at the Front, and go back and tell their mates in the shops what they saw.

"It's a pity," said the Corporal gently when he finished, "you 'adn't come to us a day earlier. 'Twoulda bin some condition you'da seen."

"Wot d'jer want to see?" asked another. "This . . . ain't front ezackly." "Listen!" cried another, "ain't that a shell comin' over?

Take cover!" And the room tittered, the nearest shell being a good five miles away.

"Want to see everything," said the deputy. "We're going in the trenches to-morrow, but bein' here to-night we asked your Cap'n where we'd meet some o' the boys, an' he brought us here."

"Wot trenches—wot part?" he was asked, and when, innocently enough, he named a part that for years has had the reputation of a Quaker Sunday School for peacefulness, a smile flickered round. The deputy saw the smile. He felt uneasy; things weren't going right; there wasn't the eager welcome, the anxious questions after labour conditions and so on he had expected. So he lifted his voice again and talked. He was a good talker, which perhaps was the reason he was a chosen deputy. But he didn't hold the room. Some listened, others resumed their own chat, others went on with the business of the evening, the drinking of thin beer. When he had finished the other man spoke, with even less success. There is some excuse for this. You cannot quite expect men who have been

working like niggers under the filthiest possible conditions of wet and mud, weather and squalor, have been living and working, sleeping and eating, with sudden and violent death at their very elbows, to come straight out of their own inferno and be in any way deeply interested in abstract conditions of Labour at Home, or to be greatly sympathetic to the tea-and-butter shortage troubles of men who are earning good money, working in comfortable shops, and living in their own homes. The men were much more interested in affairs in France.

"Wot's the idea anyway?" asked one man. "Wot's the good o' this tour business?"

"We've come to see the facks," said a deputy. "See 'em for ourselves, and go back home to tell 'em in the shops what you chaps is doing."

"Wish they'd let some of us swap places wi' them in the shops," was the answer. "I'd tell 'em something, an' they'd learn a bit too, doin' my job here."

"The workers, Labour, wants to know," went on the deputy, ignoring this. "Some

says finish the war, and some says get on with it, and——"

"Which are you doing?" came in swift reply, and "How many is on this deputation job?"

"There's three hundred a week coming out," said the deputy with a touch of pride, "and——"

"Three hundred!" said a loud voice at the back of the room. "Blimey, that's boat an' train room for three 'undred a week the less o' us to go on leaf."

The talk drifted off amongst the men themselves again, but the deputation caught snatches of it. "Same ol' game as ol' Blank did . . . we'll see their names in the papers makin' speeches when they're home . . . wearin' a tin 'at an' a gas-mask an' bein' warned to keep their 'eads down cos this is the front line—at Vale-o'-tears. Oh Lord!" . . . "Square the Quarter-bloke an' take the shrap helmet home as a souvenier to hang over the mantel——" (Here a listening deputy blushed faintly and hastily renounced a long-cherished secret idea.) "Will this

trip entitle 'em to a war medal?" "Lord 'elp the one of 'em I meets wearing a medal that they gets for a week where they're goin', an' that I've took years to earn, where we come from."

The deputy began a long speech, worked himself up into a warmth befitting the subject, begged his hearers to "hold together," not to forget they were workers before they were soldiers ("an' will be after—with a vote apiece," struck in a voice), and finally wound up with a triumphant period about "Union is Strength" and "Labor omnia vincit—Labour Conquers All," which last he repeated several times and with emphasis.

Then the Corporal answered him, and after the first sentence or two the room stilled and the Company held its breath to listen, breaking at times into a running murmur of applause. The Corporal spoke well. He had the gift; still better he had the subject; and, best of all, he had an audience that understood and could not be shocked by blunt truths. He told the deputation some details of the work they had been doing and the con-

ditions under which it was done; what the shell-fire was like, *and* what some of the casualties were like; the hours of their labour and the hours of their rest; how they had made their road with the shells smashing in at times as fast as it could be made; how a waggon of timber, six-horse team, and driver had been hit fair by a five-nine on the road, and how the wreckage (and nothing else that they could help) had been used to begin fill in the hole; what their daily pay was and what their rations were, especially on nights when a shell wrecked the ration-carrying party; and, finally, their total of killed and wounded in the one day, yesterday.

"Union is strength," he finished up. "But does their union at home help our strength here? What strength do we get when a strike wins and you get more pay—at 'ome, an' we're left short o' the shells or airyplanes that might save us gettin' shelled an' air-bombed in the ruddy trenches. Labour Conquers All! Does it? Tell that to a five-nine H.E. droppin' on you. Ask Black Harry an'

Joe Hullish an' the rest o' them we buried yesterday, if Labour Conquers All."

The deputation had no answer, gave up the argument, and presently withdrew.

But actually, if they had seen it, and if Labour could see it, they were entirely right, and the Corporal himself unwittingly had proved it. Union *is* strength—if it be the union of the workshops and the Front; Labour does conquer all—if Labour, Back and Front, pull together. There was no need to ask the question of Black Harry and Joe Hullish and the rest, because they themselves were the answer, lying in their shallow graves that shook and trembled about them to the roar and rumble of the traffic, the guns and limbers and ammunition waggons pouring up the road which they had helped to make. They were dead; but the road was through. Labour *had* won; they were, are, and—if their mates, Back and Front, so decree—will be The Conquerors.

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