

ARTHUR ADCOCK

IN THE FIRING
LINE

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Arthur St. John Adcock In The Firing Line / Stories of the War By Land and Sea

I The Baptism of Fire

*“E’en now their vanguard gathers,
E’en now we face the fray.”*

Kipling. —Hymn before Action.

The War Correspondent has become old-fashioned before he has had time to grow old; he was made by telegraphy, and wireless has unmade him. The swift transmission of news from the front might gratify us who are waiting anxiously at home, but such news can be caught in the air now, or secretly and as swiftly retransmitted so as to gratify our enemies even more by keeping them well-informed of our strength and intentions and putting them on their guard. Therefore our armies have rightly gone forth on this the greatest war the world has ever seen as they went to the Crusades, with no Press reporter in their ranks, and when the historian sits down, some peaceful day in the future, to write his prose epic of the Titanic struggle that is now raging over Europe he will have no records of the actual fighting except such as he can gather from the necessarily terse official reports, the published stories of refugees and wounded soldiers that have been picked up by enterprising newspaper men hovering alertly in the rear of the forces, and from the private letters written to their friends by the fighting men themselves.

These letters compensate largely for the ampler, more expert accounts the war correspondent is not allowed to send us. They may tell little of strategic movements or of the full tide and progress of an engagement till you read them in conjunction with the official reports, but in their vivid, spontaneous revelations of what the man in battle has seen and felt, in the intensity of their human interest they have a unique value beyond anything to be found in more professional military or journalistic documents. They so unconsciously express the personality and spirit of their writers; the very homeliness of their language adds wonderfully and unintentionally to their effectiveness; there is rarely any note of boastfulness even in a moment of triumph; they record the most splendid heroisms casually, sometimes even flippantly, as if it were merely natural to see such things happening about them, or to be doing such things themselves. If they tell of hardships it is to laugh at them; again and again there are little bursts of affection and admiration for their officers and comrades – they are the most potent of recruiting literature, these letters, for a mere reading of them thrills the stay-at-home with pride that these good fellows are his countrymen and with a sort of angry shame that his age or his safe civilian responsibilities keep him from being out there taking his stand beside them.

The courage, the cheerfulness, the dauntless spirit of them is the more striking when you remember that the vast majority of our soldiers have never been in battle until now. Russia has many veterans from her war with Japan; France has a few who fought the Prussian enemy in 1870; we have some from the Boer war; but fully three parts of our troops, like all the heroic Belgians, have had their baptism of fire in the present gigantic conflict. And it is curiously interesting to read in several of the letters the frank confession of their writers’ feelings when they came face to face for the first time with the menace of death in action. One such note, published in various papers, was

from Alfred Bishop, a sailor who took part in the famous North Sea engagement of August last. His ship's mascot is a black cat, and:

“Our dear little black kitten sat under our foremost gun,” he writes, “during the whole battle, and was not frightened at all, only when we first started firing. But afterwards she sat and licked herself... Before we started fighting we were all very nervous, but after we joined in we were all happy and most of us laughing till it was finished. Then we all sobbed and cried. Even if I never come back don't think I died a painful death. Everything yesterday was quick as lightning.”

A wounded English gunner telling of how he went into action near Mons owns to the same touch of nervousness in the first few minutes:

“What does it feel like to be under fire? Well, the first shot makes you a bit shaky. It's a surprise packet. You have to wait and keep on moving till you get a chance.” But as soon as the chance came, his shakiness went, and his one desire in hospital was “to get back to the front as soon as the doctor says I'm fit to man a gun. I don't want to stop here.”

“I have received my baptism of fire,” writes a young Frenchman at the front to his parents in Paris. “I heard the bullets whistling at my ears, and saw my poor comrades fall around me. The first minutes are dreadful. They are the worst. You feel wild. You hesitate; you don't know what to do. Then, after a time, you feel quite at your ease in this atmosphere of lead.”

“I am in the field hospital now, with a nice little hole in my left shoulder, through which a bullet of one of the War Lord's military subjects has passed,” writes a wounded Frenchman to a friend in London. “My shoulder feels much as if some playful joker has touched it with a lighted cigar... It is strange, but in the face of death and destruction I catch myself trying to make out where the shell has fallen, as if I were an interested spectator at a rifle competition. And I was not the only one. I saw many curious faces around me, bearing expressions full of interest, just as if the owners of the respective faces formed the auditorium of a highly fascinating theatrical performance, without having anything to do with the play itself. The impression crossed my mind in one-thousandth part of a second, and was followed by numerous others, altogether alien from the most serious things which were happening and going to happen. The human mind is a curious and complicated thing. Now that we were shooting at the enemy, and often afterwards in the midst of a fierce battle, I heard some remark made or some funny expression used which proved that the speaker's thoughts were far from realising the terrible facts around him. It has nothing to do with heartlessness or anything like that. I don't know yet what it is. Perhaps I shall have an opportunity to philosophise on it later on.”

There is a curious comment in a letter from Sergeant Major MacDermott, who writes during the great retreat from Mons, when everybody had become inured to the atmosphere of the battlefield.

“We're wonderfully cheerful, and happy as bare-legged urchins scampering over the fields,” he says, and adds, “It is the quantity not the quality of the German shells that are having effect on us, and it's not so much the actual damage to life as the hellish nerve-racking noise that counts for so much. Townsmen who are used to the noise of the streets can stand it a lot better than the countrymen, and I think you will find that by far the fittest are those regiments recruited in the big cities. A London lad near me says it is no worse than the roar of motor-buses in the City on a busy day.”

But the most graphic and minutely detailed picture of the psychic experiences of a soldier plunged for the first time into the pandemonium of a modern battle is given in the *Retch* by a wounded Russian artillery officer writing from a St. Petersburg hospital.

“I cannot say where we fought, for we are forbidden to divulge that, but I will tell you my own experiences,” he says. “In times of peace one has no conception of what a battle really means. When war was declared our brigade was despatched to the theatre of operations. I went with delight, and so did the others. When we reached our destination we were told that the battle would begin in the morning.

“At daybreak positions were assigned to us, and the commander of the brigade handed us a plan of the action of our artillery. From that moment horror possessed our souls. It was not anxiety for

ourselves or fear of the enemy, but a feeling of awe in the face of something unknown. At six o'clock we opened fire at a mark which we could not distinguish, but which we understood to be the enemy.

“Towards midday we were informed that the German cavalry was attempting to envelop our right wing, and were ordered in that direction. Having occupied our new position we waited. Suddenly we see the enemy coming, and at the same time he opens fire on us. We turn our guns upon him, and I give the order to fire. I myself feel that I am in a kind of nightmare. Our battery officers begin to melt away. I see that the Germans are developing their attack. First one regiment appears, and then another. I direct the guns and pour a volley of projectiles right into the thick of the first regiment. Then a second volley, and a third. I see how they fall among the men, and can even discern the severed limbs of the dead flying into the air after the explosion.

“One of the enemy's regiments is annihilated. Then a second one. All this time I am pouring missiles in among them. But now the nervous feeling has left me. My soul is filled with hate, and I continue to shoot at the enemy without the least feeling of pity.

“Yet still the enemy is advancing, rushing forward and lying down in turns. I do not understand his tactics, but what are they to me? It is enough for me that I am occupying a favourable position and mowing him down like a strong man with a scythe in a clover field.

“During the first night after the battle I could not sleep a wink. All the time my mind was filled with pictures of the battlefield. I saw German regiments approaching, and myself firing right into the thick of them. Heads, arms, legs, and whole bodies of men were being flung high into the air. It was a dreadful vision.

“I was in four battles. When the second began I went into it like an automaton. Only your muscles are taxed. All the rest of your being seems paralyzed. So complete is the suspension of the sensory processes that I never felt my wound. All I remember is that a feeling of giddiness came over me, and my head began to swim. Then I swooned to the ground, and was picked up by the Medical Corps and carried to the rear.”

II

The Four Days' Battle Near Mons

“And turning to his men,
Quoth our brave Henry then,
Though they be one to ten,
Be not amazed.”

Michael Drayton.

Most of us are old enough to remember how, when we entered upon the South African Campaign (as when we started the Crimean and other of our wars) the nation was divided against itself; passionate, bitter controversies were waged between anti-Boer and pro-Boer – between those who considered the war an unjust and those who considered it a just one. This time there has been nothing of that. Sir Edward Grey's resolute efforts for peace proving futile, as soon as Germany tore up her obligations of honour, that “scrap of paper,” and began to pour her huge, boastedly irresistible armies into Belgium, we took up the gauge she so insolently flung to us, and the one feeling from end to end of the Empire was of devout thankfulness that our Government had so instantly done the only right and honourable thing; all political parties, all classes flung their differences behind them unhesitatingly and stood four-square at once against the common enemy. They were heartened by a sense of relief, even, that the swaggering German peril which had been darkly menacing us for years had materialised and was upon us at last, that we were coming to grips with it and should have the chance of ending it once and for ever.

But immediately after our declaration of war on August 4th, a strange secrecy and silence fell like an impenetrable mask over all our military movements. In our cities and towns we were troubled with business disorganisations, but that mystery, that waiting in suspense, troubled us far more. News came that the fighting continued furiously on the Belgian frontier; that it was beginning on the fringes of Alsace; that the Russians were advancing victoriously on East Prussia; and still though our own army was mobilised and we were eagerly starting to raise a new and a larger one, we rightly learned no more, perhaps less, than the enemy could of what our Expeditionary Force was doing or where it was. Last time we were at war we had seen regiment after regiment go off with bands playing and with cheering multitudes lining the roads as they passed; this time we had no glimpse of their going; did not know when they went, or so much as whether they were gone. One day rumour landed them safely in France or Belgium; the next it assured us that they were not yet ready to embark; and the next it had rushed them, as by magic, right across Belgium and credited them with standing shoulder to shoulder in the fighting line with the magnificent defenders of Liège. But the glory of that defence, as we were soon to find out, belongs to Belgium alone; the Germans had hacked their way through and were nearing Mons before our men were able to get far enough north to come in touch with them. Not that they had lost any time on the road. It took a fortnight to mobilise and equip them; they sailed from Southampton on August 17th, and four days later were at Mons and under fire. This much and more you may gather from a diary-letter that was published in the *Western Daily Press*:

Letter 1. – From Sapper George Bryant, Royal Engineers, to his father, Mr. J. J. Bryant, of Fishponds:

Aug. 17. – Sailed from Southampton, on *Manchester Engineer*, 4.45 a.m.

Aug. 18. – Landed Rouen, 6.20 a.m. Proceeded to rest camp at the Racecourse, Rouen.

Aug. 19. – Left camp 9 p.m., and entrained to Aulnoye.

Aug. 20. – Marched to Fiezines.

Aug. 21. – Marched to Mons, and proceeded to the canal, to obstacle the bridges and prepare for blowing up. Barricaded the main streets. Saw German cavalry, and was under fire.

Aug. 22. – Severe fighting and terrible. Went to blow up bridges with Lieut. Day, who was shot at my side through the nose. Unable to destroy bridges owing to such heavy firing of the Germans. Sight heart-breaking. Women and children driven from their homes by point of bayonet, and marched through streets in front of Germans, who fired behind them and through their armpits. Therefore, our fellows were unable to fire back. They rolled up in thousands, about 100 to our one. Went from here to dig trenches for infantry retreating. Was soon under fire, and had to retreat, and infantry took our position, and were completely wiped out (Middlesex).

Aug. 23. – Severe fighting and bombarding of a town, shells bursting around us. Retreated, and dug trenches for infantry, but soon had fire about us, and retreated again and marched to take up position for next day, which was to be a rest, us having had but very little.

Aug. 24. – Were unable to rest. Germans pressed us hotly, and fired continually. One of their aeroplanes followed our route, and was fired at. One of our lieutenants chased it, and eventually succeeded in shooting the aviator through the head, and he came to earth. Three aeroplanes were captured this day. We had no close fighting, and marched away to take up a position for next day's fighting, which was a hard day's work.

Aug. 25. – We tried to destroy an orchard, but drew the Germans' artillery fire, which was hot and bursting around us. We continued our work until almost too late, and had to retire to infantry lines, and had it hot in doing so. I was stood next to General Shaw's aide-camp who was badly wounded, but was not touched myself. We dug trenches for infantry, and then marched to join the 2nd Division, but fire was too hot to enable us to do our work. Germans were surrounded by us to the letter "C," and we were waiting for the French to come up on our right flank, but they did not arrive. On returning from the 2nd Division two shells, one after another, burst in front of us, first destroying a house; the second, I received my wound in left leg, being the only fellow hit out of 180. Was placed on tool cart, and taken to Field Hospital, but rest there was short, owing to Germans firing on hospital. Orderlies ran off and left us three to take our chance. Germans blew up church and hospital in same village, and were firing on ours when I was helped out by the other two fellows, and on to a cart, which overtook the ambulance, which I was put on, and travelled all night to St. Quentin and was entrained there at 9.30 a.m. Aug. 26.

Aug. 26. – Travelled all day, reaching Rouen, Aug. 27, and was taken to Field Hospital on Racecourse.

We shall have to wait some time yet for full and coherent accounts of the fierce fighting at Mons, but from the soldiers' letters and the stories of the wounded one gets illuminating glimpses of that terrific four-days' battle.

**Letter 2. – From Driver W. Moore, Royal Field Artillery,
to the superintendent of the “Cornwall” training ship, of
which Driver Moore is an “old boy” still under twenty:**

It was Sunday night when we saw the enemy. We were ready for action, but were lying down to have a rest, when orders came to stand at our posts. It was about four a.m. on Monday when we started to fire; we were at it all day till six p.m., when we started to advance. Then the bugle sounded the charge, and the cavalry and infantry charged like madmen at the enemy; then the enemy fell back about forty miles, so we held them at bay till Wednesday, when the enemy was reinforced. Then they came on to Mons, and by that time we had every man, woman, and child out of the town.

We were situated on a hill in a cornfield and could see all over the country. It was about three p.m., and we started to let them have a welcome by blowing up two of their batteries in about five minutes; then the infantry let go, and then the battle was in full swing.

In the middle of the battle a driver got wounded and asked to see the colours before he died, and he was told by an officer that the guns were his colours. He replied, “Tell the drivers to keep their eyes on their guns, because if we lose our guns we lose our colours.”

Just then the infantry had to retire, and the gunners had to leave their guns, but the drivers were so proud of their guns that they went and got them out, and we retired to St. Quentin. We had a roll-call, and only ten were left out of my battery. This was the battle in which poor Winchester (another old *Cornwall* boy) lost his life in trying to get the guns away.

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Letter 3. – From Private G. Moody, to his parents at Beckenham:

I was at Mons in the trenches in the firing line for twenty-four hours, and my regiment was ordered to help the French on the right. Poor old A Company was left to occupy the trenches and to hold them: whatever might happen, they were not to leave them. There were about 250 of us, and the Germans came on, and as fast as we knocked them over more took their places.

Well, out of 250 men only eighty were left, and we had to surrender. They took away everything, and we were lined up to be shot, so as to be no trouble to them. Then the cavalry of the French made a charge, and the Germans were cut down like grass. We got away, and wandered about all night, never knowing if we were walking into our chaps or the Germans. After walking about some time we commenced falling down through drinking water that had been poisoned, and then we were put into some motor-wagons and taken to Amiens.

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Letter 4. – From a Lincolnshire Sergeant to his brother:

It came unexpectedly. The first inkling we had was just after reveille, when our cavalry pickets fell back and reported the presence of the enemy in strength on our front and slightly to the left. In a few minutes we were all at our posts without the slightest confusion, and as we lay down in the trenches our artillery opened fire. It was a fine sight to see the shells speeding through the air to pay

our respects to Kaiser Bill and his men. Soon the Germans returned the compliment; but they were a long time in finding anything approaching the range, and they didn't know of shelters – a trick we learned from the Boers, I believe. After about half an hour of this work their infantry came into view along our front. They were in solid square blocks standing out sharply against the skyline, and we couldn't help hitting them. We lay in our trenches with not a sound or sign to tell them of what was before them. They crept nearer and nearer, and then our officers gave the word. Under the storm of bullets they seemed to stagger like drunken men, after which they made a run for us shouting some outlandish cry that we could not make out. Half way across the open another volley tore through their ranks, and by this time our artillery began dropping shells around them. Then an officer gave an order, and they broke into open formation, rushing like mad things towards the trenches on our left. Some of our men continued the volley firing, but a few of the crack shots were told off to indulge in independent firing for the benefit of the Germans. That is another trick taught us by Brother Boer, and our Germans did not like it at all. They fell back in confusion and then lay down wherever cover was available.

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Letter 5. – From Private Levy, Royal Munster Fusiliers:

We were sent up to the firing line to try and save a battery. When we got there we found that they were nearly all killed or wounded. Our Irish lads opened fire on the dirty Germans, and you should have seen them fall. It was like a game of skittles. But as soon as you knocked them down up came another thousand or so. We could not make out where they came from. So, all of a sudden, our officers gave us the order to charge. We fixed bayonets and went like fire through them. You should have seen them run!

We had two companies of ours there against about 3,000 of theirs, and I tell you it was warm. I was not sorry when night-time came, but that was not all. You see, we had no horses to get those guns away, and our chaps would not leave them.

We dragged them ourselves to a place of safety. As the firing line was at full swing we had with us an officer of the Hussars. I think he was next to me, and he had his hand nearly blown off by one of the German shells. So I and two more fellows picked him up and took him to a place of safety, where he got his wound cared for. I heard afterwards that he had been sent home, poor fellow.

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Letter 6. – From Sergeant A. J. Smith, 1st Lincolnshire Regiment:

We smashed up the Kaiser's famous regiment – the Imperial Guards – and incidentally they gave us a shaking. They caught me napping. I got wounded on Sunday night, but I stuck it until Thursday. I could then go no further, so they put me in the ambulance and sent me home. It was just as safe in the firing line as in the improvised hospital, as when our force moved the Germans closed up and shelled the hospitals and burned the villages to the ground.

We started on Sunday, and were fighting and marching until Thursday. Troops were falling asleep on the roadside until the shells started dropping, then we were very much awake.

I feel proud to belong to the British Army for the way in which they bore themselves in front of the other nations. No greater tribute could be paid us than what a German officer, who was captured, said. He said it was inferno to stand up against the British Army.

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Letter 7. – From Private J. R. Tait, of the 2nd Essex Regiment:

We were near Mons when we had the order to entrench. It was just dawn when we were half-way down our trenches, and we were on our knees when the Germans opened a murderous fire with their guns and machine guns. We opened a rapid fire with our Maxims and rifles; we let them have it properly, but no sooner did we have one lot down than up came another lot, and they sent their cavalry to charge us, but we were there with our bayonets, and we emptied our magazines on them. Their men and horses were in a confused heap. There were a lot of wounded horses we had to shoot to end their misery. We had several charges with their infantry, too. We find they don't like the bayonets. Their rifle shooting is rotten; I don't believe they could hit a haystack at 100 yards. We find their Field Artillery very good; we don't like their shrapnel; but I noticed that some did not burst; if one shell that came over me had burst I should have been blown to atoms; I thanked the Lord it did not. I also heard our men singing that famous song: "Get out and get under." I know that for an hour in our trench it would make anyone keep under, what with their shells and machine guns. Many poor fellows went to their death like heroes.

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Letter 8. – From an Oldham Private to his wife at Waterhead:

We have had a terrible time, and were in action for three days and nights. On Wednesday the officers said that Spion Kop was heaven to the fighting we had on that day. It is God help our poor fellows who get wounded in the legs or body and could not get off the battlefield, as when we retired the curs advanced and shot and bayoneted them as they tried to crawl away. They are rotten shots with the rifles. If they stood on Blackpool sands I don't believe they could hit the sea, but they are very good with the shrapnel guns, and nearly all our wounded have been hit with shrapnel bullets. Each shrapnel shell contains about 200 bullets which scatter all around, so just think what damage one shell can do when it drops among a troop of soldiers.

On the Tuesday our regiment went to the top of a hill which had a big flat top. An outpost of a Scotch regiment reported to us on our way up that all was clear, and we thought the enemy were about five miles away. We formed up in close formation – about 1,200 strong. Our commanding officer told us to pull our packs off, and start entrenching, but this was the last order he will ever give, for the enemy opened fire at us with five Maxim guns from a wood only 400 yards in front of us. They mowed us down like straw, and we could get no cover at all. Those who were left had to roll off the hill into the roadway – a long straight road – but we got it worse there. They had two shrapnel guns at the top of the road, and they did fearful execution to us and the Lancashire Fusiliers, who were also in the roadway. Any man who got out of that hell-hole should shake hands with himself.

This all happened before six o'clock in the morning. I have only seen about sixty of our regiment since. Our Maxim gun officer tried to fix his gun up during their murderous fire, but he got half his face blown away. We retired in splendid order about 300 yards, and then lined a ridge. Up to then

we hardly fired a shot. They had nearly wiped three regiments out up to then, but our turn came. We gave them lead as fast as we could pull the triggers, and I think we put three Germans out to every one of our men accounted for. Bear in mind, they were about 250,000 strong to our 50,000. We got three Germans, and they said their officers told them that we were Russians and that England had not sent any men to fight.

They made us retire about five miles, and then we got the master of them, because our guns came up and covered the ground with dead Germans. The German gunners are good shots, but ours are a lot better. After we had shelled them a bit we got them on the run, and we drove them back to three miles behind where the battle started. We did give it them. I will say this, none of our soldiers touched any wounded Germans, though it took us all our time to keep our bayonets out of their ribs after seeing what they did with our wounded. But, thank God, we governed our tempers and left them alone.

I said we got the Germans on the run. And they can run! I picked up a few trophies and put them in my pack, but I got it blown off my back almost, so I had to discard it. I got one in the ribs, and then a horse got shot and fell on top of me, putting my shoulder out again and crushing my ribs. Otherwise I am fit to tackle a few more Germans, and I hope I shall soon be back again at the front to get a bit of my own back.

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Letter 9. – From a private of the 1st Lincolns to friends at Barton-on-Humber:

Just a line to tell you I have returned from the front, and I can tell you we have had a very trying time of it. I must also say I am very lucky to be here. We were fighting from Sunday, 23rd, to Wednesday evening, on nothing to eat or drink – only the drop of water in our bottles which we carried. No one knows – only those that have seen us could credit such a sight, and if I live for years may I never see such a sight again. I can tell you it is not very nice to see your chum next to you with half his head blown off. The horrible sights I shall never forget. There seemed nothing else only certain death staring us in the face all the time. I cannot tell you all on paper. We must, however, look on the bright side, for it is no good doing any other. There are thousands of these Germans and they simply throw themselves at us. It is no joke fighting seven or eight to one. I can tell you we have lessened them a little, but there are millions more yet to finish.

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Letter 10. – From one of the 9th Lancers to friends at Alfreton:

I was at the great battle of Mons, and got a few shots in me. Once I was holding my officer's horse and my own, when, all of a sudden, a German shell came over and burst. Both horses were killed. I got away with my left hand split and three fingers blown in pieces. I am recovering rather quickly. I shall probably have to lose one or two of my fingers. I had two bullets taken from my body on Tuesday, and I can tell you I am in pain. I think I am one of the luckiest men in the world to escape as I did. War is a terrible thing. It is a lot different to what most of us expected. Women and children leaving their homes with their belongings – then all of a sudden their houses would be in ashes, blown to the ground. I shall be glad to get well again. Then I can go and help again to fight

the brutal Germans. The people in France and Belgium were so kind and good to our soldiers. They gave everything they possibly could do.

I have not heard from Jack (his brother, also at the front). I do so hope he will come back.

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Letter 11. – From a wounded Gordon Highlander to his father, Mr. Alexander Buchan, of Monymusk:

We had a pretty stiff day of it last Sunday. The battalion went into small trenches in front of a wood a few miles to the right of Mons, and the Germans had the range to a yard. I was on the right edge of the wood with the machine guns, and there wasn't half some joy.

The shells were bursting all over the place. It was a bit of a funny sensation for a start, but you soon got used to it. You would hear it coming singing through the air over your head; then it would give a mighty big bang and you would see a great flash, and there would be a shower of lumps of iron and rusty nails all around your ears. They kept on doing that all Sunday; sometimes three or four at the same time, but none of them hit me. I was too fly for them.

Their artillery is pretty good, but the infantry are no good at all. They advance in close column, and you simply can't help hitting them. I opened fire on them with the machine gun and you could see them go over in heaps, but it didn't make any difference. For every man that fell ten took his place. That is their strong point. They have an unlimited supply of men.

They think they can beat any army in the world simply by hurling great masses of troops against them, but they are finding out their mistake now that they are put up against British troops. The reason for the British retreat is this – all up through France are great lines of entrenchments and fortresses, and as they have not enough men to defeat the Germans in open battle, they are simply retiring from position to position – holding the Germans for a few days and then retiring to the next one. All this is just to gain time. Our losses are pretty severe, but they are nothing to the Germans, whose losses are ten to every one of ours.

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Letter 12. – From Private J. Willis, of the Gordon Highlanders:

You mustn't run away with the notion that we stand shivering or cowering under shell fire, for we don't. We just go about our business in the usual way. If it's potting at the Germans that is to the fore we keep at it as though nothing were happening, and if we're just having a wee bit chat among ourselves we keep at it all the same.

Last week when I got this wound in my leg it was because I got excited in an argument with wee Georgie Ferriss, of our company, about Queen's Park Rangers and their chances this season. One of my chums was hit when he stood up to light a cigarette while the Germans were blazing away at us.

Keep your eyes wide open and you will have a big surprise sooner than you think. We're all right, and the Germans will find that out sooner than you at home.

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Letter 13. – From Private G. Kay, of the 2nd Royal Scots, to his employer, a milkman, at Richmond:

You will be surprised to hear I am home from Belgium in hospital with a slight wound in my heel from shrapnel. I had a narrow escape in Wednesday's battle at or near Mons, as I was with the transport, and it was surrounded twice.

The last time I made holes in the stable wall, and had a good position for popping them off – and I did, too; but somehow they got to know where we were, and shelled us for three hours. Off went the roof, and off went the roof of other buildings around us. At last a shell exploded and set fire to our cooking apparatus and our stables. We had twenty-two fine horses, and all the transport in this stable yard. We hung on for orders to remove the horses. None came. At last a shell like a thunderbolt struck the wall, and down came half the stables, and as luck would have it, as we retired – only about six of us – my brother-in-law, the chap you were going to start when we were called up, went to the right and I went to the left. Just then a shell burst high and struck several down in the yard – it was then I got hit – smashed the butt of my rifle, and sent me silly for five minutes. Then I heard a major say, "For yourselves, boys." I looked for my brother-in-law, but he was not to be seen, and I have not heard of him since. During all this time the fire was spreading rapidly. I was told to go back and cut the horses loose. I did so, and some of them got out, but others were burnt to death.

Then God answered my prayer, and I had strength to run through a line of rifle fire over barbed wire covered by a hedge, and managed to get out of rifle range, three hundred yards or four hundred yards away, and then I fell for want of water. I just had about two teaspoonfuls in my bottle, and then I went on struggling my way through hedges to a railway line.

When I got through I saw an awful sight – a man of the Royal Irish with six wounds from shrapnel. He asked me for water, but I had none. I managed to carry him about half a mile, and then found water. I stuck to him though he was heavy and I was feeling weak and tired. I had to carry him through a field of turnips, and half way I slipped and both fell. I then had a look back and could see the fire mountains high.

I then saw one of my own regiment, and called to him to stay with this man while I went for a shutter or a door, which I got, and with the help of two Frenchmen soon got him to a house and dressed him. We were being shelled again from the other end of the village then. We were about fifteen strong, as some slightly wounded came up and some not wounded. We got him away, and then met a company of Cameron Highlanders, and handed him over to them.

I think I marched nearly sixty-three miles, nearly all on one foot, and at last I got a horse and made my way to Mons, where I was put in the train for Havre.

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Letter 14. – From Sergeant Taylor, of the R.H.A.:

Our first brush with the enemy was on August 21st, about thirty miles from Mons, but Mons, my goodness, it was just like Brock's benefit at Belle Vue, and you would have thought it was hailing. Of course, we were returning the compliment. The Germans always found the range, which proved they had good maps, yet in their anxiety they tried to fire too many shells, the consequence being that

a lot of them were harmless, and they did not give themselves time to properly fuse them. Only on one day – from the 21st to my leaving – did we miss an action. In General French's report you will, no doubt, see where the 5th Brigade accounted for two of the German cavalry regiments, of which only six troopers were taken prisoners; the rest bit the dust. One of these regiments was the Lancers, of which the late Queen was honorary colonel.

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Letter 15. – From Private J. Atkinson, of the Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment, to his wife at Leeds:

Talk about a time! I would not like to go through the same again for love or money.

It is not war. It is murder. The Germans are murdering our wounded as fast as they come across them. I gave myself up for done a week last Sunday night, as we were in the thick of the fight at Mons. Our regiment started fighting with 1,009 and finished with 106 and three officers. That made 109, as we just lost 900. It was cruel. At one place we were at there were six streets of the town where all the women were left widows, and were all wearing the widows' weeds. The French regiment that fought there was made up in the town and they got wiped out.

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Letter 16. – From Private Robert Robertson, of the Argylls, to his parents at Musselburgh:

The poor Argylls got pretty well hit, but never wavered a yard for all their losses. The Scots Greys are doing great work at the front – in fact they were the means of putting ten thousand Germans to their fate on Sunday morning. I will never forget that day, as our regiment left a town on the French frontier on Saturday morning at 3 o'clock and marched till 3 a.m. on Sunday into a Belgian town. I was about to have an hour in bed, at least a lie down in a shop, when I was wakened to go on guard at the General's headquarters, and while I was on guard a Captain of the crack French cavalry came in with the official report of the ten thousand Germans killed. The Scots Greys, early that morning, had decoyed the Germans right in front of the machine guns of the French, and they just mowed them down. There was no escape for them, poor devils, but they deserve it the way they go on. You would be sorry for the poor Belgian women having to leave their homes with young children clinging to them. One sad case we came across on the roadside was a woman just out of bed two days after giving birth to a child. The child was torn from her breast, and her breast cut off that the infant was sucking. Then the Germans bayoneted the child before the mother's eyes. We did the best we could for her, but she died about six hours after telling us her hardships.

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Letter 17. – From Private Whitaker, of the Coldstream Guards:

You thought it was a big crowd that streamed out of the Crystal Palace when we went to see the Cup Final. Well, outside Compiègne it was just as if that crowd came at us. You couldn't miss them. Our bullets ploughed into them, but still they came for us. I was well entrenched, and my rifle got so hot I could hardly hold it. I was wondering if I should have enough bullets, when a pal shouted, "Up, Guards, and at 'em!" The next second he was rolled over with a nasty knock on the shoulder. He jumped up and hissed, "Let me get at them!" His language was a bit stronger than that.

When we really did get the order to get at them we made no mistake, I can tell you. They cringed at the bayonet, but those on our left wing tried to get round us, and after racing as hard as we could for quite five hundred yards we cut up nearly every man who did not run away.

You have read of the charge of the Light Brigade. It was nowt to our cavalry chaps. I saw two of our fellows who were unhorsed stand back to back and slash away with their swords, bringing down nine or ten of the panic-stricken devils. Then they got hold of the stirrup-straps of a horse without a rider, and got out of the *melée*. This kind of thing was going on all day.

In the afternoon I thought we should all get bowled over, as they came for us again in their big numbers. Where they came from, goodness knows; but as we could not stop them with bullets they had another taste of the bayonet. My captain, a fine fellow, was near to me, and as he fetched them down he shouted, "Give them socks, my lads!" How many were killed and wounded I don't know; but the field was covered with them.

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Letter 18. – From a private in the Coldstream Guards to his mother:

First of all I sailed from Southampton on August 12th on a cattle boat called the *Cawdor Castle*. We sailed at 9.30 at night, and after a passage of 14½ hours landed at Le Havre, on the coast of France. We went into camp there, and then left on August 14th, getting into a train, not third class carriages, but cattle trucks. We were on the train eighteen and a half hours, and I was a bit stiff when I got out at a place called Wassigny. Then we marched through pouring rain to a village, where we slept in some barns. The next day being Sunday, August 16th, we got on the march to a place called Grooges, a distance of about nine miles. We stayed there till Thursday.

Then we started to march to get into Belgium. We got there on Sunday, the 23rd, just outside Mons. We dug trenches, from which we had to retire, and then we got into a position, and there I saw the big battle, but could not do anything, because we were with the artillery. We retreated into France, being shelled all the way, and on the Tuesday, the 25th, we marched into Landrecies. We arrived there about one o'clock and were thinking ourselves lucky. We considered we were going to have two days' rest, but about five o'clock the alarm was raised. The Germans got to the front of us and were trying to get in the town. So we fixed our bayonets, doubled up the road, and the fight started. The German artillery shelled us, and some poor chaps got hit badly. The chap next to me got shot, and I tried to pull him out of the road, so that I could get down in his place, as there was not room for us all in the firing line. We had to lay down behind and wait our chance. I had got on my knees, and just got hold of his leg, when something hit my rifle and knocked it out of my hand, and

almost at the same time a bullet went right through my arm. It knocked me over, and I must have bumped my head, for I do not remember any more till I felt someone shaking me. It was the doctor – a brave man, for he came right up amongst the firing to tend the wounded. He bandaged my arm up, and I had to get to hospital, a mile and a half away, as best I could.

The beasts of Germans shelled the building all night long without hitting it. We moved next morning, and by easy stages left for England. I am going on fine; shall soon be back and at it again I expect. Keep up your spirits, won't you? I believe it was only your prayers at home that guarded me that Tuesday night, simply awful it was.

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Letter 19. – From a wounded English Officer, in a Belgian hospital, to his mother:

I do not know if this letter will ever get to you or not, but I am writing on the chance that it will. A lot has happened since I last wrote to you. We marched straight up to Belgium from France, and the first day we arrived my company was put on outposts for the night. During the night we dug a few trenches, etc., so did not get much sleep. The next day the Germans arrived, and I will try and describe the fight. We were only advanced troops of a few hundred holding the line of a canal. The enemy arrived about 50,000 strong. We held them in check all day and killed hundreds of them, and still they came. Finally, of course, we retired on our main body. I will now explain the part I played. We were guarding a railway bridge over a canal. My company held a semicircle from the railway to the canal. I was nearest the railway. A Scottish regiment completed the semicircle on the right of the railway to the canal. The railway was on a high embankment running up to the bridge, so that the Scottish regiment was out of sight of us. We held the Germans all day, killing hundreds, when about five p.m. the order to retire was eventually given. It never reached us, and we were left all alone. The Germans therefore got right up to the canal on our right, hidden by the railway embankment, and crossed the railway. Our people had blown up the bridge before their departure. We found ourselves between two fires, and I realized we had about 2,000 Germans and a canal between myself and my friends.

We decided to sell our lives dearly. I ordered my men to fix bayonets and charge, which the gallant fellows did splendidly, but we got shot down like nine-pins. As I was loading my revolver after giving the order to fix bayonets I was hit in the right wrist. I dropped my revolver, my hand was too weak to draw my sword. This afterwards saved my life. I had not got far when I got a bullet through the calf of my right leg and another in my right knee, which brought me down. The rest of my men got driven round into the trench on our left. The officer there charged the Germans and was killed himself, and nearly all the men were either killed or wounded. I did not see this part of the business, but from all accounts the gallant men charged with the greatest bravery. Those who could walk the Germans took away as prisoners. I have since discovered from civilians that around the bridge 5,000 Germans were found dead and about 60 English. These 60 must have been nearly all my company, who were so unfortunately left behind.

As regards myself, when I lay upon the ground I found my coat sleeve full of blood, and my wrist spurting blood, so I knew an artery of some sort must have been cut. The Germans had a shot at me when I was on the ground to finish me off; that shot hit my sword, which I wore on my side, and broke in half just below the hilt; this turned the bullet off and saved my life. I afterwards found that two shots had gone through my field glasses, which I wore on my belt, and another had gone through my coat pocket, breaking my pipe and putting a hole through a small collapsible tin cup, which must have turned the bullet off me. We lay out there all night for twenty-four hours. I had fainted away from loss of blood, and when I lost my senses I thought I should never see anything again. Luckily I had fallen on my wounded arm, and the arm being slightly twisted I think the weight of my body

stopped the flow of blood and saved me. At any rate, the next day civilians picked up ten of us who were still alive, and took us to a Franciscan convent, where we have been splendidly looked after. All this happened on August 23rd, it is now September 3rd. I am ever so much better, and can walk about a bit now, and in a few days will be quite healed up. It is quite a small hole in my wrist, and it is nearly healed, and my leg is much better; the bullets escaped the bones, so that in a week I shall be quite all right. Unfortunately the Germans are at present in possession of this district, so that I am more or less a prisoner here. But I hope the English will be here in a week, when I shall be ready to rejoin them.

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Letter 20. – From W. Hawkins, of the 3rd Coldstream Guards:

I have a nasty little hole through my right arm, but I am one of the lucky ones. My word, it was hot for us. On the Tuesday night when I got my little lot, what I saw put me in mind of a farmer's machine cutting grass, as the Germans fell just like it. We only lost nine poor fellows, and the German losses amounted to 1,500 and 2,000. So you can guess what it was like. As they were shot down others took their place, as there were thousands of them. The best friend is your rifle with the bayonet. But I soon had mine blown to pieces. How it happened I don't know... I got a bullet through the top of my hat. I will bring my hat home and show you. I felt it go through, but it never as much as bruised my head. I had then no rifle, so I was obliged to keep down my head. The bullets were whirling over me by the hundred. I stopped until they got a bit slower, and then I got up and was trying to pull a fellow away that had been shot through the head when I managed to receive a bullet through my arm. When I looked in the direction of the enemy I could see them coming by the thousand. Off I went. I bet I should easily have won the mile that night. I got into the hospital at Landricca amid shot and shell, which were flying by as fast as you like. I got my arm done, and was put to bed. All that night the enemy were trying to blow up the hospital, where they had to turn out the lights so that the Germans could not get the correct range. Then we were taken away in R.A.M.C. vans to Guise, where we slept on the station platform after a nice supper which the French provided.

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Letter 21. – From Sergeant Griffiths, of the Welsh Regiment, to his parents at Swansea:

The fighting at Mons was terrible, and it was here that our 4th and 5th Divisions got badly knocked, but fought well. Our artillery played havoc with them. About 10 o'clock on Monday we were suddenly ordered to quit, and quick, too, and no wonder. They were ten to one. Then began that retreat which will go down in history as one of the greatest and most glorious retirements ever done. Our boys were cursing because our backs were towards them; but when the British did turn, my word, what a game! The 3rd Coldstreams should be named "3rd Cold Steels," and no error. Their bayonet charge was a beauty.

Among numerous other such letters that have been published up and down the country is this in which a corporal of the North Lancashire Regiment gives a graphic little picture of his experiences to the *Manchester City News*:

When we got near Mons the Germans were nearer than we expected. They must have been waiting for us. We had little time to make entrenchments, and had to do the digging lying on our

stomachs. Only about 300 of the 1,000 I was with got properly entrenched. The Germans shelled us heavily, and I got a splinter in the leg. It is nearly right now, and I hope soon to go back again. We lost fairly heavily, nearly all from artillery fire. Altogether I was fighting for seventy-two hours before I was hit. The German forces appeared to be never-ending. They were round about us like a swarm of bees, and as fast as one man fell, it seemed, there were dozens to take his place.

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