

BOYD CABLE

GRAPES OF
WRATH

Boyd Cable

Grapes of wrath

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Grapes of wrath

BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fatal lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.*

*I have seen Him in the watch fires of a hundred circling camps;
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps:
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps:
His day is marching on.*

*I have read a fiery gospel, writ in burnished rows of steel:
“As ye deal with My contemners, so with you My grace shall deal”;
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with His heel!
Since God is marching on!*

*He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat,
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat;
Oh! be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.*

*In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born, across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me;
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.*

*He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave;
He is wisdom to the mighty, He is succor to the brave;
So the world shall be His footstool and the soul of time His slave:
Our God is marching on.*

Julia Ward Howe.

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

It is possible that this book may be taken for an actual account of the Somme battle, but I warn readers that although it is in the bulk based on the fighting there and is no doubt colored by the fact that the greater part of it was written in the Somme area or between visits to it, I make no claim for it as history or as an historical account. My ambition was the much lesser one of describing as well as I could what a Big Push is like from the point of view of an ordinary average infantry private, of showing how much he sees and knows and suffers in a great battle, of giving a glimpse perhaps of the spirit that animates the New Armies, the endurance that has made them more than a match for the Germans, the acceptance of appalling and impossible horrors as the work-a-day business and routine of battle, the discipline and training that has fused such a mixture of material into tempered fighting metal.

For the tale itself, I have tried to put into words merely the sort of story that might and could be told by thousands of our men to-day. I hope, in fact, I have so "told the tale" that such men as I have written of may be able to put this book in your hands and say: "This chapter just describes our crossing the open," or "That is how we were shelled," or "I felt the same about my Blighty one."

It may be that before this book is complete in print another, a greater, a longer and bloodier, and a last battle may be begun, and I wish this book may indicate the kind of men who will be fighting it, the stout hearts they will bring to the fight, the manner of faith and assurance they will feel in Victory, complete and final to the gaining of such Peace terms as we may demand.

The Author.

In the Field

20th January, 1917.

CHAPTER I

TOWARDS THE PUSH

The rank and file of the 5/6 Service Battalion of the Stonewalls knew that “there was another push on,” and that they were moving up somewhere into the push; but beyond that and the usual crop of wild and loose-running rumors they knew nothing. Some of the men had it on the most exact and positive authority that they were for the front line and “first over the parapet”; others on equally positive grounds knew that they were to be in reserve and not in the attack at all; that they were to be in support and follow the first line; that there was to be nothing more than an artillery demonstration and no infantry attack at all; that the French were taking over our line for the attack; that we were taking over the French line. The worst of it was that there were so many tales nobody could believe any of them, but, strangely enough, that did not lessen the eager interest with which each in turn was heard and discussed, or prevent each in turn securing a number of supporters and believers.

But all the rumors appeared to be agreed that up to now the push had not begun, so far as the infantry were concerned, and also that, as Larry Arundel put it, “judging by the row the guns are making it’s going to be some push when it does come.”

The Stonewalls had been marching up towards the front by easy stages for three days past, and each day as they marched, and, in fact, each hour of this last day, the uproar of artillery fire had grown steadily greater and greater, until now the air trembled to the violent concussions of the guns, the shriek and rumble of the shells, and occasionally to the more thrilling and heart-shaking shriek of an enemy shell, and the crash of its burst in our lines.

It was almost sunset when the Stonewalls swung off the road and halted in and about a little orchard. The lines of an encampment – which was intended for no more than a night’s bivouac – were laid out, and the men unbuckled their straps, laid off their packs, and sank thankfully to easeful positions of rest on the long grass, waiting until the traveling cooks, which on their journey along the road had been preparing the evening meal, were brought up and discharged of their savory contents. But before the meal was served there came an unpleasant interruption, which boded ill for the safety of the night’s camp. A heavy shell rushed overhead, dropped in the field about four hundred yards beyond the camp, burst with a crash and a gush of evil black smoke, a flying torrent of splinters and up-flung earth.

While the men were still watching the slow dispersal of the shell smoke, and passing comments upon how near to them was the line it had taken, another and another shell whooped over them in a prolonged line on the fields beyond. “We seem,” said Larry Arundel, “to have chosen a mighty unhealthy position for to-night’s rest.”

“If the C.O. has any sense,” retorted his mate, Billy Simson, “he’ll up and off it somewheres out to the flank. We’re in the direct line of those crumps, and if one drops short, it is going to knock the stuffin’ out of a whole heap of us.”

While they were talking an artillery subaltern was seen crossing the road and hurrying towards them. “Where is your C.O.?” he asked, when he came to the nearest group.

“Over in the orchard, sir,” said Billy Simson. “I’ll show you if you like.”

The officer accepted his pilotage, urging him to hurry, and the two hastened to the orchard, and to a broken-down building in the corner of it, where the officers of the battalion were installing a more or less open-air mess.

Billy Simson lingered long enough to hear the Subaltern introduce himself as from a battery in a position across the road amongst some farm buildings, and to say that his Major had sent him over to warn the infantry that the field they were occupying was in a direct line “regularly strafed” by a heavy German battery every few hours.

“My Major said I was to tell you,” went on the Subaltern, “that there are one or two old barns and outbuildings on the farm where we have the battery, and that you might find some sort of shelter for a good few of your men in them; and that we can find room to give you and some of the officers a place to shake down for the night.”

Simson heard no more than this, but he soon had evidence that the invitation had been accepted. The battalion was warned to “stand by” for a move across the road, and the Colonel and Adjutant, with the Sergeant-Major and a couple of Sergeants, left the orchard and disappeared among the farm buildings, in the company of the gunner Subaltern.

Billy Simson repeated to his particular chums the conversation he had overheard; and the resulting high expectations of a move from the unhealthy locality under the German guns’ line of fire, and of a roof over their heads for the night, were presently fulfilled by an order for the battalion to move company by company. “C” Company presently found itself installed in a commodious barn, with ventilation plentifully provided by a huge hole, obviously broken out by a shell burst, in the one corner, and a roof with tiles liberally smashed and perforated by shrapnel fire. But on the whole the men were well content with the change, partly perhaps because being come of a long generation of house-dwellers they had never become accustomed to the real pleasure of sleeping in the open air, and partly because of that curious and instinctive and wholly misplaced confidence inspired by four walls and a roof as a protection against shell fire.

Somewhere outside and very close to them a field battery was in action, and for a whole hour before darkness fell the air pulsed and the crazy buildings about them shook to an unceasing thump and bang from the firing guns, while the intervals were filled with the slightly more distant but equally constant thud and boom of other batteries’ fire.

While they were waiting for the evening meal to be served some of the men wandered out and took up a position where they could view closely the guns and gunners at their work. The guns were planted at intervals along a high hedge; the muzzles poked through the leafy screen, and a shelter of leaves and boughs was rigged over each, so as to screen the battery from air observation.

Billy Simson and his three particular chums were amongst the interested spectators. The four men, who were drawn from classes that in pre-war days would have made any idea of friendship or even intercourse most unlikely, if not impossible, had, after a fashion so common in our democratic New Armies, become fast friends and intimates.

Larry Arundel, aged twenty, was a man of good family, who in civilian days had occupied a seat in his father’s office in London, with the certain prospect before him of a partnership in the firm. Billy Simson was a year or two older, had been educated in a provincial board school, and from the age of fourteen had served successively as errand boy and counter hand in a little suburban “emporium.” The third man, Ben Sneath, age unknown, but probably somewhere about twenty-one to twenty-five, was frankly of the “lower orders”; had picked up a living from the time he was able to walk, in the thousand and one ways that a London street boy finds to his hand. On the roll of “C” Company he was Private Sneath, B, but to the whole of the company – and, in fact, to the whole of the battalion – he was known briefly, but descriptively, as “Pug.” Jefferson Lee, the fourth of the quartette, was an unusual and somewhat singular figure in a British battalion, because, always openly proud of his birthplace, he was seldom called by anything but it – “Kentucky,” or “Kentuck.” His speech, even in the wild jumble of accents and dialects common throughout a mixed battalion, was striking and noticeable for its peculiar softness and slurring intonations, its smooth gentleness, its quiet, drawling level. Being an American, born of many generations of Americans, with no single tie or known relation outside America, he was, in his stained khaki and his place in the fighting ranks of a British regiment, a personal violation of the neutrality of the United States. But the reasons that had brought him from Kentucky to England, with the clear and expressed purpose of enlisting for the war, were very simply explained by him.

“Some of us,” he said gently, “never really agreed with the sinking of liners and the murder of women and children. Some of us were a trifle ashamed to be standing out of this squabble, and when the President told the world that we were ‘too proud to fight,’ I just simply had to prove that it was a statement which did not agree with the traditions of an old Kentucky family. So I came over and enlisted in your army.”

The attitude of the four men now as they watched the gunners at work was almost characteristic of each. Larry, who had relatives or friends in most branches of the Service, was able to tell the others something of the methods of modern artillery, and delivered almost a lecturette upon the subject. Billy Simson was frankly bored by this side of the subject, but intensely interested in the noise and the spectacular blinding flash that appeared to leap forth in a twenty-foot wall of flame on the discharge of each gun. Pug found a subject for mirth and quick, bantering jests in the attitudes of the gunners and their movements about the gun, and the stentorian shoutings through a megaphone of the Sergeant-Major from the entrance to a dug-out in the rear of the guns. Lee sat down, leisurely rolled and lit a cigarette, watched the proceedings with interest, and made only a very occasional soft drawled reply to the remarks of the others.

“Do you mean to tell me,” said Pug incredulously, breaking in on Arundel’s lecture, “that them fellows is shootin’ off all them shells without ever seein’ what they’re firin’ at? If that is true, I calls it bloomin’ waste.”

“They do not see their target,” said Arundel, “but they are hitting it every time. You see they aim at something else, and they’re told how much to the right or left of it to shoot, and the range they are to shoot at – it is a bit too complicated to explain properly, but it gets the target all right.”

“Wot’s the bloke with the tin trumpet whisperin’ about?” asked Pug. “Looks to me as if he was goin’ to be a casualty with a broke blood-vessel.”

“Passing orders and corrections of fire to the guns,” explained Arundel. “There’s a telephone wire from that dug-out up to somewhere in front, where somebody can see the shells falling, and ’phone back to tell them whether they are over or short, right or left.”

“It’s pretty near as good as a Brock’s benefit night,” said Billy Simson; “but I’d want cotton wool plugs in my ears, if I was takin’ up lodgin’s in this street.”

The light was beginning to fade by now, but the guns continued to fire in swift rotation, from one end of the battery to the other. They could hear the sharp orders, “One, fire; Two, fire; Three, fire,” could see the gunner on his seat beside each piece jerk back the lever. Instantly the gun flamed a sheet of vivid fire, the piece recoiled violently to the rear between the gunners seated to each side of it, and as the breech moved smoothly back to its position, the hand of one gunner swooped rapidly in after it, grabbed the handle and wrenched open the breech, flinging out the shining brass cartridge case, to fall with a clash and jangle on to the trail of the gun and the other empty cases lying round it. The instant the breech was back in place, another man shot in a fresh shell, the breech swung shut with a sharp, metallic clang, the layer, with his eye pressed close to his sight, juggled for a moment with his hands on shiny brass wheels, lifted one hand to drop it again on the lever, shouted “Ready,” and sat waiting the order to fire. The motions and the action at one gun were exactly and in detail the motions of all. From end to end of the line the flaming wall leaped in turn from each muzzle, the piece jarred backwards, the empty brass case jerked out and fell tinkling; and before it ceased to roll another shell was in place, the breech clanged home, and the gun was ready again.

Billy Simson spoke to a gunner who was moving past them towards the billets.

“What are you fellows shooting at?” he asked.

“Wire cutting,” said the gunner briefly. “We’ve been at it now without stopping this past four days,” and he moved on and left them.

“Wire cutting,” said Arundel, “sweeping away the barbed wire entanglements in front of the Boche trench. That’s clearing the track we’re going to take to-morrow or the next day.”

“I hopes they makes a clean job of it,” said Pug; “and I hopes they sweep away some of them blasted machine guns at the same time.”

“Amen, to that,” said Kentucky.

CHAPTER II

THE OVERTURE OF THE GUNS

All that night the men, packed close in their blankets, slept as best they could, but continually were awakened by the roaring six-gun salvos from the battery beside them.

One of the gunners had explained that they were likely to hear a good deal of shooting during the night, “the notion being to bust off six shells every now and again with the guns laid on the wire we were shooting at in daylight. If any Boche crawls out to repair the wire in the dark, he never knows the minute he’s going to get it in the neck from a string of shells.”

“And how does it work?” asked the interested Arundel.

“First rate,” answered the gunner. “Them that’s up at the O.P.¹ says that when they have looked out each morning there hasn’t been a sign or a symptom of new wire going up, and, of course, there’s less chance than ever of repairing in daytime. A blue-bottle fly – let alone a Boche – couldn’t crawl out where we’re wire-cutting without getting filled as full of holes as a second-hand sieve.”

The salvos kept the barnful of men awake for the first hour or two. The intervals of firing were purposely irregular, and varied from anything between three to fifteen minutes. The infantry, with a curious but common indifference to the future as compared to the present, were inclined to grumble at this noisy interruption of their slumbers, until Arundel explained to some of them the full purpose and meaning of the firing.

“Seein’ as that’s ’ow it is,” said Pug, “I don’t mind ’ow noisy they are; if their bite is anything like as good as their bark, it’s all helpin’ to keep a clear track on the road we’ve got to take presently.”

“Those gunners,” said Kentucky, “talked about this shooting match having kept on for four days and nights continuous, but they didn’t know, or they wouldn’t say, if it was over yet, or likely to be finished soon.”

“The wust of this blinkin’ show,” said Billy Simson, “is that nobody seems to know nothin’, and the same people seem to care just about the same amount about anythin’.”

“Come off it,” said Pug; “here’s one that cares a lump. The sooner we gets on to the straff and gets our bit done and us out again the better I’ll be pleased. From what the Quarter-bloke says, we’re goin’ to be kep’ on the bully and biscuit ration until we comes out of action; so roll on with comin’ out of action, and a decent dinner of fresh meat and potatoes and bread again.”

“There’s a tidy few,” said Billy, “that won’t be lookin’ for no beef or bread when they comes out of action.”

“Go on,” said Pug; “*that’s* it; let’s be cheerful. We’ll all be killed in the first charge; and the attack will be beat back; and the Germans will break our line and be at Calais next week, and bombarding London the week after. Go on; see if you can think up some more cheerfuls.”

“Pug is kind of right,” said Kentucky; “but at the same time so is Billy. It’s a fair bet that some of us four will stop one. If that should be my luck, I’d like one of you,” he glanced at Arundel as he spoke, “to write a line to my folks in old Kentucky, just easing them down and saying I went out quite easy and cheerful.”

Pug snorted disdainfully. “Seems to me,” he said, “the bloke that expec’s it is fair askin’ for it. I’m not askin’ nobody to write off no last dyin’ speeches for me, even if I ’ad anybody to say ’em to, which I ’aven’t.”

“Anyhow, Kentucky,” said Arundel, “I’ll write down your address, if you will take my people’s. What about you, Billy?”

¹ Observation Post.

Billy shuffled a little uneasily. "There's a girl," he said, "one girl partikler, that might like to 'ear, and there's maybe two or three others that I'd like to tell about it. You'll know the sort of thing to say. I'll give you the names, and you might tell 'em" – he hesitated a moment – "I know, 'the last word he spoke was Rose – or Gladys, or Mary,' sendin' the Rose one to Rose, and so on, of course."

Arundel grinned, and Pug guffawed openly. "What a lark," he laughed, "if Larry mixes 'em up and tells Rose the last word you says was 'Gladys,' and tells Gladys that you faded away murmurin' 'Good-by, Rose.'"

"I don't see anythin' to laugh at," said Billy huffily. "Rose is the partikler one, so you might put in a bit extra in hers, but it will please the others a whole heap. They don't know each other, so they will never know I sent the other messages, and I'll bet that each of 'em will cart that letter round to show it to all her pals, and they'll cry their eyes out, and have a real enjoyable time over it."

Arundel laughed now. "Queer notions your girls have of enjoyment, Billy," he said.

"I know 'em," insisted Billy; "and I'm right about it. I knew a girl once that was goin' to be married to a chum o' mine, and he ups and dies, and the girl 'ad to take the tru-sox back to the emporium and swop it for mournin'; and the amount of fussin' and cryin'-over that girl got was somethin' amazin', and I bet she wouldn't have missed it for half a dozen 'usbands; and, besides, she got another 'usband easy enough about two months after." He concluded triumphantly, and looked round as if challenging contradiction.

Outside, the battery crashed again, and the crazy building shook about them to the sound. A curious silence followed the salvo, because by some chance the ranked batteries, strung out to either side of them, had chosen the same interval between their firing. Most of the men in the barn had by this time sunk to sleep, but at the silence they stirred uneasily, and many of them woke and raised themselves on their elbows, or sat up to inquire sleepily "What was wrong now?" or "What was the matter?" With the adaptability under which men live in the fire zone, and without which, in fact, they could hardly live and keep their senses, they had in the space of an hour or two become so accustomed to the noise of the cannonade that its cessation had more power to wake them than its noisiest outbursts; and when, after the silence had lasted a few brief minutes, the batteries began to speak again, they turned over or lay down and slid off into heedless sleep.

Somewhere about midnight there was another awakening, and this time from a different cause – a difference that is only in the note and nature of the constant clamor of fire. Throughout the night the guns had practically the say to themselves, bombs and rifles and machine guns alike being beaten down into silence; but at midnight something – some alarm, real or fancied – woke the rifles to a burst of frenzied activity. The first few stuttering reports swelled quickly to a long drum-like roll. The machine guns caught up the chorus, and rang through it in racketing and clattering bursts of fire. The noise grew with the minutes, and spread and spread, until it seemed that the whole lines were engaged for miles in a desperate conflict.

Arundel, awakened by the clamor, sat up. "Is anybody awake?" he asked in low tones, and instantly a dozen voices around him answered.

"Is it the attack, do you suppose?" asked one, and a mild argument arose on the question, some declaring that they – the Stonewalls – would not be left to sleep there in quietness if our line were commencing the push; others maintaining that secrecy was necessary as to the hour planned, because otherwise the Boches would be sure to know it, and be ready for the attack.

"Maybe," some one ventured the opinion, "it's them that's attacking us." But this wild theorist was promptly laughed out of court, it being the settled conviction apparently of his fellows that the Boche would not dare to attack when he knew from the long bombardment that our lines must be heavily held.

As the argument proceeded, Arundel felt a touch on his elbow, heard the soft, drawling voice of Kentucky at his ear.

"I'm going to take a little pasear outside, and just see and hear anything I can of the proceedings."

"Right," said Arundel promptly. "I'm with you; I'm not a bit sleepy, and we might find out something of what it all means."

The two slipped on their boots, moved quietly to the door, and stepped outside.

They walked round the end of the barn to where they could obtain a view clear of the building and out towards the front, and stood there some minutes in silence, watching and listening. A gentle rise in the ground and the low crest of a hill hid the trenches on both sides from their view, and along this crest line showed a constant quivering, pulsing flame of pale yellow light, clear and vivid along its lower edge, and showing up in hard, black silhouette every detail of the skyline, every broken tree stump, every ragged fragment of a building's wall, every bush and heap of earth. Above the crest the light faded and vignettted off softly into the darkness of the night, a darkness that every now and then was wiped out to the height of half the sky by a blinding flash of light, that winked and vanished and winked again and again, as the guns on both sides blazed and flung their shells unseeing but unerring to their mark.

Larry and Kentucky heard a call in the battery near them, the quick rush of running feet, a succession of sharp, shouted orders. The next instant, with a crash that made them jump, the six guns of the battery spoke with one single and instantaneous voice. In the momentary gush of flame from the muzzles, and of yellow light, that blotted out all other lights, the two men saw in one quick glimpse the hedge, the leafy screens above the guns, the guns themselves, and the gunners grouped about them. Out to their right, a moment after the darkness had flashed down again over the battery, a neighboring group of guns gave tongue in a rapid succession of evenly spaced reports. This other battery itself was hidden from the two watchers, but because of its nearness, the flashes from it also flung a blinding radiance upward into the night, revealing the outlines of every roof and building, hedge and tree, that stood against the sky.

Their own battery, in answer to a hoarse bellowing from the megaphone of "Section Fire – 5 seconds," commenced to pound out a stream of shells from gun after gun. Away to right and left of them the other batteries woke and added their din to the infernal chorus. The shells from other and farther back batteries were rushing and screaming overhead, and dying away in thin wailings and whistlings in the distance.

Another and different note struck in, rising this time from a shrill scream to a louder and louder and more savage roar, and ending with an earth shaking crash and the shriek of flying splinters. A shell had burst a bare hundred yards from where the two stood, hurling some of its fragments over and past them to rap with savage emphasis on the stone and brick of the farm building.

Larry and Kentucky ducked hastily, and ran crouching to the corner of their barn, as another shrill whistle and rush warned them of the approaching shell. This time it burst farther off, and although the two waited a full fifteen minutes, no other shell came near, though along the crest of the sky-line they could see quick flashing burst after burst and thick, billowing clouds of smoke rising and drifting blackly against the background of light beyond the slope.

The tornado of shell fire beat the rifles down again to silence after some minutes. The rolling rifle fire and clatter of machine guns died away gradually, to no more than an occasional splutter, and then to single shots. After that the artillery slowed down to a normal rate of fire, a steady succession of bangs and thuds and rumblings, that, after the roaring tempest of noise of the past few minutes, were no more than comparative quiet.

"I'm glad we came out," said Larry; "it was quite a decent little show for a bit."

Kentucky peered at him curiously. "Did it strike you," he said, "the number of guns there were loosing off in that little show, and that most of those the other side are going to be doing their darnedest to spoil *our* little show, when it comes the time for us to be over the parapet?"

“I suppose that’s so,” admitted Larry; “but then, you see, our guns will be doing the same by them, so the game ought to be even so far as that goes.”

“The game!” repeated Kentucky reflectively. “I notice quite a few of you boys talk of it as ‘a game,’ or ‘the game’; I wonder why?”

“I don’t know,” said Larry, “except that – oh, well – just because it is a game, a beastly enough one, I’ll admit, but still a game that the best side is going to win.”

“The best side – ” said Kentucky, “meaning, I suppose, you – us?”

“Why, of course,” said Larry, with utter and unquestioning confidence.

CHAPTER III

THE EDGE OF BATTLE

The men were awakened early next morning, and turned out, to find a gray, misty dawn. One might have supposed that in the mist it would have been impossible for the gunners to observe and direct any fire, but for all that the artillery on both sides were fairly heavily engaged, and the bangings and thumpings and rumblings rolled away to right and left, until they died down in the distance into the dull, muffled booming of a heavy surf beating on a long beach.

The Stonewalls breakfasted hastily on biscuits, cheese, jam, and tea, were formed up, and moved on to the road. They marched slowly up this in the direction of the front, and presently found the mist clearing away and then dispersing rapidly under the rays of the rising sun. It seemed as if the first beams of sunrise were a signal to the artillery, for the gunfire speeded up and up, until it beat in one long reverberating roar on the trembling air. The firing was not all from our side either; although for the moment none of the enemy shells dropped very close to the Stonewalls, there were enough of them sufficiently close to be unpleasantly startling, and to send their fragments whistling and whining over their hastily ducking heads.

About seven o'clock a new note began to run through the bellowing of the guns – the sharp, more staccato sound of the rifles and machine guns, the distinctive bang of bombs and hand-grenades. The rifle fire, hesitant and spasmodic at first, swelled suddenly to a loud, deep, drumming roll, hung there for several minutes, pitched upward again to a still louder tone, then sank and died away, until it was drowned out in the redoubled clamor of the guns.

The Stonewalls were halted and moved into the side of the road, and squatted lining the ditches and banks, listening to the uproar, discussing and speculating upon its meaning.

"Sounded like an attack, sure thing," said Kentucky, "but whether our side is pushing or being pushed I have not a notion."

"Probably ours," said Larry; "the yarn was going that we were to attack this morning, although some said it was for tomorrow."

"Anyway," said Pug, "if our lot 'as gone over they've either got it in the neck, and 'ad to 'ook it back again, or else they're over the No-Man's-Land, and into the fust line."

"That's what," said Billy Simson. "And 'ark at the bombs and 'and-grenades bustin' off nineteen to the dozen. That means we're bombin' our way along the trenches and chuckin' 'em down into the dugouts."

It was true that the distinctive sound of the bursting bombs had risen again to a renewed activity, and from somewhere further up or down the line the rifle fire commenced again, and rose to one long, continuous full-bodied roar. The sound spread and beat down in rolling waves nearer and nearer, ran outward again on both flanks, continued loud and unceasing.

The Stonewalls were formed up and moved on again, and presently came upon, and marched into, the ruined fragments of a village, with shattered and tumble-down houses lining the sides of the road. They began to notice a new and significant sound, the thin whistling and piping of bullets passing high over their heads, the smack and crack of an occasional one catching some upper portion of the ruined houses past which they marched. Here, too, they began to meet the first of the backwash of battle, the limping figures of men with white bandages about their heads, arms, and bodies; the still forms at full length on the sagging, reddened stretchers. At one of the houses in the village a Red Cross flag hung limp over a broken archway, and through this the procession passed in an ever quickening stream.

The village street rose to the crest of a gentle slope, and when the Stonewalls topped the rise, and began to move down the long gentle decline on the other side, they seemed to step from the

outer courts into the inner chambers of war. Men hung about the broken fragments of the buildings; ammunition carts were drawn up in angles and corners of the remaining walls; a couple of ambulances jolted slowly and carefully up the hill towards them; the road was pitted and cratered with shell holes; the trees, that lined both sides of it, trailed broken branches and jagged ends of smashed off trunks, bore huge white scars and patches, and strewed the road with showers of leaves and twigs. The houses of the village, too, on this side of the slope, had been reduced to utter ruin. Only here and there were two-or three-sided portions of a house still standing; the rest were no more than heaped and tangled rubbish-heaps of stone and brick, broken beams and woodwork, shattered pieces of furniture, and litter of red tiles.

By now the bullets were singing and whisking overhead, crackling with vicious emphasis against the trees and walls. And now, suddenly and without the slightest warning, four shells rushed and crashed down upon the road amongst the ruined buildings. The men who had been hanging about in the street vanished hastily into such cover as they could find, and the Stonewalls, tramping steadily down the shell-smashed, rubbish-strewn street, flinched and ducked hastily to the quick rush and crash of another string of shells. An order was passed back, and the column divided into two, half taking one side of the road, and half the other; the rear halting and lying down, while the front moved off by platoons, with some fifty to a hundred yards between each.

A German battery was evidently making a target of this portion of the road, for the shells continued to pound up and down its length. After the sharp burst of one quartette fairly between the ranks of a marching platoon, there was a call for stretchers, and the regimental stretcher-bearers came up at the double, busied themselves for a few minutes about some crumpled forms, lifted them, and moved off along the road back to the Red Cross flag of the dressing station. The shell-swept stretch of road was growing uncomfortably dangerous, and it was with a good deal of relief that the Stonewalls saw their leading platoon turn aside and disappear into the entrance of a communication trench.

"This 'ere," said Pug, with a sigh of satisfaction, "is a blinkin' sight more like the thing; and why them lazy beggars of a Staff 'aven't 'ad this communication trench took back a bit further beats me."

"It sure is a comfortable feeling," agreed Kentucky, "to hear those bullets whistling along upstairs, and we safe down below ground level."

The communication trench was very narrow and twisted, and wormed its way for an interminable distance towards the still constant rattle of rifle fire and banging grenades. The men had not the slightest idea what had happened, or what was happening. Some of them had asked questions of the stretcher bearers or of the wounded back in the village, but these it appeared had come from the support trenches and from the firing-line before the uproar of rifle fire had indicated the commencement of an attack by one side or the other. The long, straight, single-file line of Stonewalls moved slowly and with frequent checks and halts for over an hour; then they were halted and kept waiting for a good thirty minutes, some chafing at their inaction, others perfectly content to sit there in the safety of the deep trench. A few men tried to raise themselves and climb the straight sided walls of the trench to the level ground, but the long grass growing there still hid their view, and the few who would have climbed right out on to the level were sharply reprimanded and ordered back by the officers and N.C.O.s; so the line sat or stood leaning against the walls, listening to the unintelligible sounds of the conflict, trying to glean some meaning and understanding of the action's progress from them.

The section of trench where Larry and his friends were waiting was suddenly overcast by a shadow, and the startled men, glancing hastily upward, saw to their astonishment a couple of Highlanders standing over and looking down upon them. One had a red, wet bandage about his head, the other his hose top slit down and dangling about his ankle, and a white bandage wound round the calf of his leg. The two stood for a minute looking down upon the men crouching and squatting in their shelter, on men too astonished for the moment to speak or do aught save gape upwards at the two above them. Somehow, after their relief at escaping from the open into the shelter of the trench,

after the doubts and misgivings with which some of them had ventured to raise themselves and peer out above ground level, the angry orders given to them to get back and not expose themselves, after having, in fact, felt themselves for an hour past to be separate only from a sudden and violent death by the depth of their shelter trench, it took their breath away to see two men walking about and standing with apparent unconcern upon a bullet swept level, completely without protection, indifferent to that fact. But they recovered quickly from their amazement.

"Holloa, Jock," Pug called up to them, "what's the latest news in the dispatches? 'Ave we commenced the attack?"

"Commenced? Aye, and gey near finished, as far as we're concerned."

There was a quick chorus of questions to this. "How far had we gone?" "Was the first line taken?" "Was the attack pushing on?" "Had the casualties been heavy?" and a score of other questions.

The two Highlanders bobbed down hastily, as a heavy shell fell with a rolling *cr-r-r-ump* within a hundred yards of them.

"We've got the first line where we attacked," said one of them after a moment, "and we're pushing on to the second. They say that we have taken the second and third lines down there on the right, but the Huns are counter-attacking, and have got a bit of the third line back. I'm no' sure what's happened on the left, but I'm hearin' the attack was held, and pretty near wiped out. I only ken that our lot is tryin' to bomb up there to the left, and no' makin' much progress."

His companion rose and stepped across the narrow trench.

"Come on, Andy," he said, "we'll awa' back to the dressin' station, and the first train to the North. This is no' just a health resort to be bidin' in. Good luck to you, lads."

"Good luck, so long," chorused the trench after them, and the two vanished from sight.

There was a buzz of excited talk after they had gone – talk that lasted until word was passed back along the trench and the line rose and commenced to stumble onward again.

"I suppose," said Larry, "they'll be moving us up in support. I hope we get out of this beastly trench soon, and see something of what's going on."

Billy Simson grunted. "Maybe we'll see plenty, and maybe a bit too much, when we get out of here," he said, "and it is decently safe down here anyhow."

Pug snorted. "Safe?" he echoed; "no safer than it is above there, by the look of them two Jocks. They don't seem to be worritin' much about it being safe. I believe we would be all right to climb up out of this sewer and walk like bloomin' two-legged humans above ground, instead of crawling along 'ere like rats in a 'Ampton Court maze of drains."

But, whether they liked it or not, the Stonewalls were condemned to spend most of that day in their drains. They moved out at last, it is true, from the communication trench into one of the support trenches, and from this they could catch an occasional narrow glimpse of the battlefield. They were little the wiser for that, partly because the view gave only a restricted vision of a maze of twisting lines of parapets, of which they could tell no difference between British and German; of tangles of rusty barbed wire; and, beyond these things, of a drifting haze of smoke, of puffing white bursts of cotton wool-like smoke from shrapnel, and of the high explosives spouting gushes of heavy black smoke, that leaped from the ground and rose in tall columns with slow-spreading tops. They could not even tell which of these shells were friends' and which were foes', or whether they were falling in the British or the German lines.

Pug was frankly disgusted with the whole performance.

"The people at 'ome," he complained, "will see a blinkin' sight more of this show in the picture papers and the kinema shows than me what's 'ere in the middle of it."

"Don't you fret, Pug," said Larry; "we'll see all we're looking for presently. Those regiments up front must have had a pretty hot strafing, and they're certain to push us up from the supports into the firing-line."

“I don’t see what you’ve got to grumble about,” put in Billy Simson; “we’re snug and comfortable enough here, and personally I’m not in any hurry to be trottin’ out over the open, with the German Army shootin’ at me.”

“I admit I’m not in any hurry to get plugged myself,” drawled Kentucky, “but I’ve got quite a big mite of sympathy for Pug’s feelings. I’m sure getting some impatient myself.”

“Anyway,” said Pug, “it’s about time we ’ad some grub; who’s feelin’ like a chunk of bully and a pavin’-stone?”

The others suddenly woke to the fact that they also were hungry. Bully beef and biscuits were produced, and the four sat and ate their meal, and lit cigarettes, and smoked contentedly after it, with the roar of battle ringing in their ears, with the shells rumbling and moaning overhead, and the bullets piping and hissing and singing past above their trench.

After their meal, in the close, stagnant air of the trench they began to feel drowsy, and presently they settled themselves in the most comfortable positions possible, and dozed off to sleep. They slept for a good half hour, heedless of all the turmoil about them, and they were roused by a word passed down along the trench.

They rose, and shook the packs into place on their shoulders, tightened and settled the straps about them, patted their ammunition pouches, felt the bayonets slip freely in their scabbards, tried the bolts and action of their rifles, and then stood waiting with a curious thrill, that was made up of expectation, of excitement, of fear, perhaps – they hardly knew what. For the word passed along had been to get ready, that the battalion was moving up into the firing-line.

CHAPTER IV

ACROSS THE OPEN

The order came at last to move, and the men began to work their way along the support trench to the communication trenches which led up into the forward lines.

Up to now the battalion, singularly enough considering the amount of shelling that was going on, had escaped with comparatively few casualties, but they were not to escape much longer. As their line trickled slowly down the communication trench, Pug had no more than remarked on how cheaply they had got off so far, when a six-or eight-inch high-explosive shell dropped with a rolling *crump*, that set the ground quivering, close to the communication trench. The men began to mend their pace, and to hurry past the danger zone, for they knew well that where one shell fell there was almost a certainty of others falling. A second and a third shell pitched close to the other side of the trench, but the fourth crashed fairly and squarely into the trench itself, blowing out a portion of the walls, killing and wounding a number of men, and shaking down a torrent of loose earth which half choked and filled that portion of the trench. The communication ways, and, indeed, all trenches, are constructed on a principle of curves and zig-zags, designed expressly to localize the effect of a shell bursting in any one portion. Practically every man in this particular section of trench was either killed or wounded, but the rest of the line did not suffer. But the German gunners, having found their target, and having presumably observed their direct hit upon it, had their direction and range exactly, and they proceeded to pound that portion of the trench to pieces, and to make it a matter of desperate hazard for any man to cross the zone covered by their fire. The zone, of course, had to be crossed, the only other alternative being to climb out of the trench and run across the open until the further shelter was reached. There was a still greater hazard attached to this, for the open ground in this locality – as the officers knew – was visible to the German lines, and would expose the men, immediately upon their showing above ground, to a certain sweeping torrent of shrapnel, of machine-gun and rifle fire. So the portion of the battalion which was making its way down that communication trench was set to run the gauntlet of the smashed-in trench, and the shells which continued to arrive – fortunately – with almost methodical punctuality.

The procedure adopted was for the end of the line to halt just short of the fire zone, to wait there, crouched low in the bottom of the trench, until a shell had burst, then to rise and run, scrambling and climbing over the fallen débris, into the comparative safety of the unbroken trench beyond, until the officer who was conducting the timing arrangements thought another shell was due to arrive, and halted the end of the line to wait until the next burst came, after which the same performance was repeated.

Larry and his three chums, treading close on one another's heels, advanced and halted alternately, as the leading portion of the line rushed across or stayed. They came presently to a turn of the trench, where an officer stopped them and bade them lie down, keep as close as they could, and be ready to jump and run when the next shell burst and he gave the word. The four waited through long seconds, their ears straining for the sound of the approaching shell, their eyes set upon the officer.

"Here she comes," said Billy Simson, flattening himself still closer to the trench bottom.

They all heard that thin but ominously rising screech, and each instinctively shrank and tried absurdly to make himself smaller than his size.

"Just a-going to begin," said Larry, with a somewhat forced attempt at lightness of tone.

"Don't you wish you was a bloomin' periwinkle," said Pug, "with a bullet-proof shell?"

There was no time for more. The screech had risen to a rushing bellow, and the next instant the shell dropped with a tumultuous crash, and the air was darkened with a cloud of evil-smelling black smoke, thick, choking, and blinding dust. The four were dazed and shaken with the shock, half-

stunned with the thunderclap of noise, and stupefied with the nearness of their escape. But the next instant they were aroused to hear the voice of the officer beside them, calling and shouting to them to get up, to go on, to hurry across.

“Get on!” repeated Pug, scrambling to his knees and feet. “My oath, get on. I wouldn’t stop ’ere if I ’ad an invitation to tea with the King ’imself.”

“Come, you fellows!” said Larry, and ran with his shoulders stooped, and closely followed by the other three, along a short, unbroken portion of the trench, out into where it was broken down and choked to half its height with the débris of fallen earth and stones. Over this the four clambered and scuffled hastily, to find the trench beyond it wrecked out of semblance to a trench, a tossed and tumbled shallow gutter, with sides fallen in or blown completely out, with huge craters pitting the ground to either side of it, with the black reek and thick dust still curling and writhing and slowly drifting clear from the last explosion. And in that broken welter were the fragments of more than earth or stone; a half-buried patch of khaki, a broken rifle, a protruding boot, were significant of the other and more dreadful fragments buried there.

Larry and the other three did not, to be sure, waste time upon their crossing, but, rapidly as they thought they were moving, they still managed to accelerate their pace as their ears caught the warning sound of another approaching shell, and within a few seconds of hearing its first sound, and the moment when it burst, they had rushed across the remaining portion of the fire-zone, had flung themselves down the sides of the last earth heap, leaped to their feet, and dashed breathlessly into the next unbroken portion of the communication trench. They did not attempt to halt there, but ran on panting and blowing heavily, their packs and haversacks scrubbing one side or the other of the trench, their heads stooped, and their shoulders rounded like men expecting a heavy blow upon their backs. This shell did not pitch into the broken ground where the others had blasted the trench out of any recognizable shape. It burst overhead with a sharp, ear-splitting crack, a puff of thick, yellowish-white smoke, a hail of bullets and flying splinters.

The four men instinctively had half-thrown themselves, half-fallen in the bottom of the trench. It was well they did so, for certainly not all of them could have escaped the huge piece of metal which had been the head of the shell, and which spun down the portion of trench they were in, with a viciously ugly whirr, to bury itself a couple of feet above the footway in the wall, where the trench twisted sharply. It struck close to Pug, so close indeed that when it hit the wall, and then by its own force, breaking down the earth, fell with it into the trench bottom, Pug was able to stretch out his hand and touch it. He gave a sharp yelp of pain and surprise as he did so, whipped his hand in again, and under his armpit.

“Strike me!” he exclaimed, with comical surprise, “the bloomin’ thing is red ’ot.”

“Come on!” gasped Billy Simson, struggling to his feet again. “This whole blankey corner’s too red ’ot for my likin’.”

They rose, and pushed hastily on down the winding trench. After that, although they themselves had no especially close shaves, the rest of the line suffered rather severely, for the German gun or guns that had been bombarding the one section of trench now spread their fire and began to pitch high explosives up and down along its whole length. The four had to traverse another short section that had been swept by a low-bursting shrapnel, and after they had passed it, Larry found his knees shaking, and his face wet with cold perspiration.

“Kentuck!” he gulped, “I’m afraid – I’m sorry – I think I’m going to be beastly sick!”

Kentucky, immediately behind him, urged him on.

“Get along, Larry!” he said; “you can’t stop here! You’ll block the whole line!”

But the line for the moment was blocked. That shell-burst had left few alive in the section of trench, but the two or three it had not killed outright had been dragged clear, and down the trench a little way. Now the men who had taken them out had stopped and laid them down and were shouting vainly – and rather wildly – for stretcher-bearers, and endeavoring – some of the more cool-headed

amongst them – to fumble out first field-dressings and apply them to the worst of the many wounds. They halted there, busy, and heedless for the moment of anything else, for a full ten minutes, while the trench behind them filled with men pressing on, shouting angrily, and unknowing the cause of the block, to “Move on there!” to “Get out of the way!”

The end of the line next to the wounded men was forced to try and push forward; the trench was narrow, barely wide enough at its floor-level to accommodate the figures stretched out in it and the men who stooped or knelt over them fumbling at them, rolling and tying the field-dressing bandages upon them; but the men made shift somehow to pass them, striding and straddling over their huddled bodies, squeezing past the men who tried to dress the wounds. These still struggled to complete their task, quite absorbed in it, straightening themselves and flattening their bodies against the trench wall to allow a man to scrape past, stooping again about their work.

“Who has got a spare field-dressing?” or “Give us your field-dressing,” was all they took time to say to the men of the passing line, until a wrathful voice above suddenly interrupted them.

One of the officers, fretting at the delay and the slow progress down the trench, had climbed out and run, risking the shells and bullets along the level, to find the cause of the check. He shouted angrily at the men below him:

“Wounded? What’s that got to do with it? That’s no reason you should block the whole company going forward. Where do you think you’re in – a communication trench or a field-dressing-station or a base hospital? Pick those men up – two of you to each man – and carry them along until you can find a place to lay them where you won’t choke the whole trench; or carry them right on out of the communication trench.”

The wounded men were picked up somehow or anyhow by knees and shoulders, and carried and shuffled and bumped along the winding trench, until they emerged into the old British front-line firing trench.

Along this the Stonewalls now spread and took up their positions as supports for the lines that had gone ahead, and were now over somewhere amongst the German first-line trenches. From here they could look out over the couple of hundred yards’ width of what had been the neutral ground, at the old German front-line trench. Beyond its parapet they could see little or nothing but a drifting haze of smoke, but in the open ground between the trenches they could see many figures moving about, and many more lying in still and huddled heaps of khaki. The moving men were for the most part stretcher-bearers, and the Stonewalls were struck with what appeared to them the curious lack of haste and indifference to danger that showed in their movements. During many months, and in many visits to the trenches and spells in the forward fire trench, they had come to regard the neutral ground in daylight as a place whereon no man could walk, or show himself, and live; more than that, they had been taught by strongly worded precept and bitter experience that only to raise a head above the shelter of the parapet, to look for more than seconds at a time over neutral ground, was an invitation to sudden death. It struck them then as a most extraordinary thing that now men should be able to walk about out there, to carry a stretcher in, to hoist it, climbing and balancing themselves and their burden carefully on the parapet, clear and exposed to any chance or aimed bullet.

Kentucky watched some of these groups for a time and then laughed quietly.

“Well!” he drawled, “I’ve been kind of scared stiff for days past at the thought of having to bolt across this open ground, and here I come and find a bunch of fellows promenading around as cool and unconcerned as if there weren’t a bullet within a mile of them.”

“I was thinkin’ just the same thing,” agreed Pug, who was beside him, and looking with interest and curiosity over the open ground; “but if there ain’t many bullets buzzin’ about ’ere now you can bet there was not long ago. There’s a pretty big crowd of ours still lying na-poo-ed out there.”

But the ground was still far from being as safe as for the moment it appeared. The German artillery and the machine-gunners were evidently too busily occupied upon the more strenuous work of checking the advance, or did not think it worth while wasting ammunition upon the small and

scattered targets presented by the stretcher-bearers. But when a regiment which prolonged the line to the left of the Stonewalls climbed from the trench, and began to advance by companies in open order across the neutral ground, it was a different story.

An exclamation from Pug and a soft whistle from Kentucky brought Larry to the parapet beside them, and the three watched in fascinated excitement the attempt of the other regiment to cross the open, the quick storm of shells and bullets that began to sweep down upon them the moment they showed themselves clear of the parapet. They could see plainly the running figures, could see them stumble and fall, and lie still, or turn to crawl back to cover; could see shell after shell burst above the line, or drop crashing upon it; could see even the hail of bullets that drummed down in little jumping spurts of dust about the feet of the runners.

A good many more of the Stonewalls were watching the advance, and apparently the line of their heads, showing over the parapet, caught the attention of some German machine-gunners. The heads ducked down hastily as a stream of bullets commenced to batter and rap against the parapet, sweeping it up and down, down and up its length.

"Doesn't seem quite as safe as we fancied," said Kentucky.

"I don't think!" said Pug.

"Anyway," said Larry, "it's our turn next!"

He was right, for a few minutes later their officer pushed along and told them to "Stand by," to be ready to climb out when the whistle blew, and to run like blazes for the other side.

"We'll run all right," said Pug to the others, "if them jokers lets us," and he jerked his head upwards to the sound of another pelting sweep of bullets driving along the face of the parapet above them.

Before the whistle blew as the signal for them to leave the trench, an order was passed along that they were to go company by company, A being first, B second, and C third. A couple of minutes later A Company, out on the right of the battalion, swarmed suddenly over the parapet and, spreading out to open order as they went, commenced to jog steadily across the flat ground. Immediately machine-gun fire at an extreme range began to patter bullets down amongst the advancing men, and before they were quarter-way across the "Fizz-Bang" shells also began to smash down along the line, or to burst over it. There were a number of casualties, but the line held on steadily. Some of the men of the remaining companies were looking out on the advance, but the officers ordered them to keep down, and under cover.

In C Company a lieutenant moved along the line, ordering the men down, and repeating the same sentences over and over again as he passed along.

"Keep down until you get the word; when we start across, remember that, if a man is hit, no one is to stop to pick him up; a stretcher-bearer will see to him."

"That's all right!" said Larry to the others, when the officer had passed after repeating his set sentences, "but I vote we four keep together, and give each other a hand, if we can."

"Ear, 'ear!" said Pug. "Any'ow, if any of us stops one, but isn't a complete wash-out, the others can lug 'im into any shell 'ole that's 'andy, and leave 'im there."

"We'll call that a bargain," said Kentucky briefly. They sat fidgeting for a few seconds longer, hearing the rush and crash of the falling shells, the whistle and smack of the bullets on the open ground beyond them.

"I'm going to have a peep," said Larry suddenly, "just to see how 'A' is getting on."

He stood on the fire step, with his head stooped cautiously below the level of the parapet; then, raising it sharply, took one long, sweeping glance, and dropped down again beside his fellows.

"They're nearly over," he said. "There's a lot of smoke about, and I can't see very clear, but the line doesn't look as if it had been very badly knocked about."

"There goes 'B,'" said Billy Simson, as they heard the shrill trill of a whistle. "Our turn next!"

“That open ground is not such a healthy resort as we thought it a few minutes ago,” said Larry. “Personally, I sha’n’t be sorry when we’re across it.”

He spoke in what he strove to make an easy and natural voice, but somehow he felt that it was so strained and unnatural that the others would surely notice it. He felt horribly ashamed of that touch of faintness and sickness back in the communication trench, and began to wonder nervously whether the others would think he was a coward, andfunking it; still worse, began to wonder whether actually they would be right in so thinking. He began to have serious doubts of the matter himself, but, if he had known it, the others were feeling probably quite as uncomfortable as himself, except possibly Pug, who had long since resigned himself to the comforting fatalism that if his name were written on the bullet it would find him. If not, he was safe.

None of the four looked to see how “B” Company progressed. They were all beginning to feel that they would have to take plenty of chances when it came their turn to climb the parapet, and that it was folly to take an extra risk by exposing themselves for a moment before they need.

A shout came from the traverse next to them.

“Get ready, ‘C’ Company; pass the word!”

The four stood up, and Larry lifted his voice, and shouted on to the next traverse.

“Get ready, ‘C’; pass the word!”

“Don’t linger none on the parapet, boys,” said Kentucky. “They’ve probably got their machine gun trained on it.”

The next instant they heard the blast of a whistle, and a shout rang along the line.

“Come on, ‘C’; over with you!”

The four leaped over the parapet, scrambling and scuffling up its broken sides.

Near the top Pug exclaimed suddenly, grasped wildly at nothing, collapsed and rolled backward into the trench. The other three half-halted, and looked round.

“Come on,” said Kentucky; “he’s safest where he is, whether he’s hurt much or little.”

The three picked their way together out through the remains of the old barbed-wire entanglements, and began to run across.

“Open out! Open out!” the officers were shouting, and a little reluctantly, for the close elbow-touching proximity to each other gave a comforting sense of helpfulness and confidence, they swerved a yard or two apart, and ran on steadily. The bare two hundred yards seemed to stretch to a journey without end; the few minutes they took in crossing spun out like long hours.

Several times the three dropped on their faces, as they heard the warning rush of a shell. Once they half-fell, were half-thrown down by the force of an explosion within twenty yards of them. They rose untouched, by some miracle, and, gasping incoherent inquiries to one another, went on again. Over and over again fragments from the shells bursting above the line rattled down upon the ground amongst their feet. At least two or three times a shell bursting on the ground spattered them with dust and crumbs of earth; the whole way across they were accompanied by the drumming bullets that flicked and spurted little clouds of dust from the ground about them, and all the time they were in the open they were fearfully conscious of the medley of whining and singing and hissing and zipping sounds of the passing bullets. They knew nothing of how the rest of the line was faring. They were too taken up with their own part, were too engrossed in picking a way over the broken shell-cratered ground, past the still khaki forms that lay dotted and sprawled the whole way across.

There was such a constant hail and stream of bullets, such a succession of rushing shells, of crashing explosions, such a wild chaos of sounds and blinding smoke and choking reek, that the whole thing was like a dreadful nightmare; but the three came at last, and unharmed, to the chopped and torn-up fragments of the old German wired defenses, tore through them somehow or anyhow, leaped and fell over the smashed-in parapet, and dropped panting and exhausted in the wrecked remains of the German trench. It was some minutes before they took thought and breath, but then it was evident that the minds of all ran in the same groove.

“I wonder,” said Larry, “if Pug was badly hit?”

“I’ve no idea,” said Kentucky. “He went down before I could turn for a glimpse of him.”

“I don’t suppose it matters much,” said Billy Simson gloomily. “He’s no worse off than the rest of us are likely to be before we’re out of this. Seems to me, by the row that’s goin’ on over there, this show is gettin’ hotter instead of slackin’ off.”

CHAPTER V ON CAPTURED GROUND

"I wonder what the next move is?" said Larry. "I don't fancy they will leave us waiting here much longer."

"Don't you suppose," asked Kentucky, "we'll wait here until the other companies get across?"

"Lord knows," said Larry; "and, come to think of it, Kentuck, has it struck you how beastly little we do know about anything? We've pushed their line in a bit, evidently, but how far we've not an idea. We don't know even if their first line is captured on a front of half a mile, or half a hundred miles; we don't know what casualties we've got in our own battalion, or even in our own company, much less whether they have been heavy or light in the whole attack."

"That's so," said Kentucky; "although I confess none of these things is worrying me much. I'm much more concerned about poor old Pug being knocked out than I'd be about our losing fifty per cent. of half a dozen regiments."

Billy Simson had taken the cork from his water-bottle, and, after shaking it lightly, reluctantly replaced the cork, and swore violently.

"I've hardly a mouthful left," he said. "I'm as dry as a bone now, and the Lord only knows when we'll get a chance of filling our water-bottles again."

"Here you are," said Larry; "you can have a mouthful of mine; I've hardly touched it yet."

Orders came down presently to close in to the right, and in obedience the three picked up their rifles and crept along the trench. It was not a pleasant journey. The trench had been very badly knocked about by the British bombardment; its sides were broken in, half or wholly filling the trench; in parts it was obliterated and lost in a jumble of shell craters; ground or trench was littered with burst sandbags, splintered planks and broken fascines, and every now and again the three had to step over or past bodies of dead men lying huddled alone or in groups of anything up to half a dozen. There were a few khaki forms amongst these dead, but most were in the German gray, and most had been killed very obviously and horribly by shell or bomb or grenade.

"They don't seem to have had many men holding this front line," remarked Larry, "or a good few must have bolted or surrendered. Doesn't seem as if the little lot here could have done much to hold the trench."

"Few men and a lot of machine guns, as usual, I expect," said Kentucky. "And if this is all the trench held they claimed a good bunch of ours for every one of theirs, if you judge by the crowd of our lot lying out there in the open."

The three were curiously unmoved by the sight of these dead – and dead, be it noted, who have been killed by shell fire or bomb explosions might as a rule be expected to be a sight upsetting to the strongest nerves. They were all slightly and somewhat casually interested in noting the mode and manner of death of the different men, and the suspicion of professional jealousy evinced by a remark of Billy Simson's was no doubt more or less felt by all, and all were a little disappointed that there was not more evidence of the bayonet having done its share. "The bloomin' guns seem to have mopped most o' this lot," said Billy. "An' them fellers that charged didn't find many to get their own back on." They were all interested, too, in the amount of damage done by the shells to the trench, in the methods of trench construction, in the positions and state of the dug-outs. And yet all these interests were to a great extent of quite a secondary nature, and the main theme of their thoughts was the bullets whistling over them, the rush and crump and crash of the shells still falling out on the open, the singing and whirring of their splinters above the trench. They moved with heads stooped and bodies half-crouched, they hurried over the earth heaps that blocked the trench, and in crossings where they

were more exposed, halted and crouched still lower under cover when the louder and rising roar of a shell's approach gave warning that it was falling near.

When they had moved up enough to be in close touch with the rest of the company and halted there, they found themselves in a portion of trench with a dug-out entrance in it. The entrance was almost closed by a fall of earth, brought down apparently by a bursting shell, and when they arrived they found some of the other men of the company busy clearing the entrance. "Might be some sooveniers down 'ere," one of the men explained. "An', any'ow, we'd be better down below an' safer out o' reach o' any shell that flops in while we're 'ere," said another.

"Suppose there's some bloomin' 'Uns still there, lyin' doggo," suggested Billy Simson. "They might plunk a shot at yer when you goes down."

"Shouldn't think that's likely," said Larry. "They would know that if they did they'd get wiped out pretty quick after."

"I dunno," said one of the men. "They say their officers an' their noospapers 'as 'em stuffed so full o' fairy tales about us killing all prisoners that they thinks they're goin' to get done in anyhow, an' might as well make a last kick for it. I vote we chuck a couple o' bombs down first, just to make sure."

Everybody appeared to think this a most natural precaution to take, and a proposal in no way cruel or brutal; although, on the other hand, when Larry, with some feeling that it was an unsporting arrangement, suggested that they call down first and give any German there a chance to surrender, everybody quite willingly accepted the suggestion. So work was stopped, and all waited and listened while Larry stuck his head into the dark opening and shouted with as inquiring a note as he could put into his voice the only intelligible German he knew, "Hi, Allemands, kamerad?" There was no answer, and he withdrew his head. "I don't hear anything," he said; "but perhaps they wouldn't understand what I meant. I'll just try them again in French and English." He poked his head in again, and shouted down first in French and then in English, asking if there was anybody there, and did they surrender. He wound up with a repetition of his inquiring, "Kamerad, eh? kamerad?" but this time withdrew his head hurriedly, as an unmistakable answer came up to him, a muffled, faraway sounding "Kamerad." "There's some of them there, after all," he said, excitedly, "and they're shouting 'Kamerad,' so I suppose they want to surrender all right. Let's clear away enough of this to get them out. We'll make 'em come one at a time with their hands well up."

There was great excitement in the trench, and this rather increased when a man pushed round the traverse from the next section with the news that some Germans had been found in another dugout there. "They're singin' out that they want to kamerad," he said; "but we can't persuade 'em to come out, an' nobody is very keen on goin' down the 'ole after 'em. We've passed the word along for an officer to come an' see what 'e can do with 'em."

"Let's hurry up and get our gang out," said Larry enthusiastically, "before the officer comes"; and the men set to work with a will to clear the dugout entrance. "It's rather a score for the Stonewalls to bring in a bunch of prisoners," said one of the men. "We ought to search all these dugouts. If there's some in a couple of these holes it's a fair bet that there's more in the others. Wonder how they haven't been found by the lot that took the trench?"

"Didn't have time to look through all the dugouts, I suppose," said Larry. "And these chaps would lie low, thinking the trench might be retaken. I think that hole is about big enough for them to crawl out. Listen! They're shouting 'Kamerad' again. Can't you hear 'em?"

He looked down the dark stairway of the entrance and shouted "Kamerad" again, and listened for the reply. "I wonder if the door is blocked further down," he said. "I can hear them shout, but the sound seems to be blocked as if there was something between us and them still. Listen again."

This time they all heard a faint shout, "Kamerad. Hier kom. Kamerad."

"Hier kom – that means come here, I fancy," said Larry. "But why don't they hier kom to us? Perhaps it is that they're buried in somehow and want us to get them out. Look here, I'm going to crawl down these steps and find out what's up."

He proceeded to creep cautiously down the low and narrow passage of the stair, when suddenly he saw at the stair foot the wandering flash of an electric torch and heard voices calling plainly in English to “Come out, Bochie. Kamerad.”

The truth flashed on Larry, and he turned and scuttled back up the stair gurgling laughter. “It’s some of our own lot down there,” he chuckled to the others. “This dug-out must have another entrance in the next traverse, and we and the fellows round there have been shouting down the two entrances at each other. Hold on now and listen and hear them scatter.” He leaned in at the entrance again, and shouted loudly. “As you won’t come out and surrender, Boche, we’re going to throw some bombs down on you.” He picked up a heavy stone from the trench bottom and flung it down the steps. There was a moment of petrified silence, then a yell and a scuffling rush of footsteps from the darkness below, while Larry and the others sat and rocked with laughter above. They pushed round the traverse just as a couple of badly scared and wholly amazed Stonewalls scrambled up from the dug-out, and commenced a voluble explanation that “the blighters is chuckin’ bombs, ... told us in English, good plain English, too, they was goin’ to ’cos we wouldn’t surrender.”

Just then an officer pushed his way along to them, and the joke was explained with great glee by Larry and the men from the other part of the trench. Every one thought it a huge joke, and laughed and cracked jests, and chuckled over the episode. Kentucky listened to them with some wonder. He had thought that in the past months of peace and war he had come to know and understand these comrades of his fairly well. And yet here was a new side in their many-sided characters that once more amazed him. A couple of dead Germans sprawled in the bottom of the trench a yard or two from them; their own dead lay crowded thick on the flat above; the bullets and shells continued to moan and howl overhead, to rush and crash down close by, the bullets to pipe and whistle and hiss past and over; while only a few hundred yards away the enemy still fought desperately to hold their lines against our attacks, and all the din of battle rolled and reverberated unceasingly. And yet the men in that trench laughed and joked. They knew not the moment when one of those shells falling so close outside might smash into the trench amongst them, knew that all of those there would presently be deep in the heart of the battle and slaughter that raged so close to them, knew for a certainty that some of them would never come out of it; and yet – they laughed. Is it any wonder that Kentucky was amazed?

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