

BOYD CABLE

FRONT LINES

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FOREWORD

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

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

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

I beg each war worker to remember that every slackening of their efforts, every reduction of output, every day wasted, every stoppage of work, inevitably encourages the enemy, prolongs the war, keeps men chained to the misery of the trenches, piles up the casualties, continues the loss of life. A strike, or the threat of a strike, may win for the workers their 12½ per cent. increase of pay, the “recognition” of some of their officials, their improved comfort; but every such “victory” is only gained at the expense of the men in the trenches, is paid for in flesh and blood in the firing line.

When men here are suffering as they must suffer, are enduring as they do endure with good heart and courage, it comes as a profound shock and a cruel discouragement to them to read in the papers, or go home and discover, that any people there are apparently indifferent to their fate, are ready to sacrifice them ruthlessly for any trivial personal benefit, refuse to share the pinch of war, must have compensating advantages to level up “the increased cost of living,” will even bring a vital war industry to a standstill – it has been done – as a “protest” against the difficulty of obtaining butter or margarine and tea. It may be that one grows one-sided in ideas after more than three years’ soldiering, but can you blame us if we feel contempt for pitiful grumblers and complainers who have a good roof overhead, a warm room and fire, a dry bed, and no real lack of food, if we feel anger against men who have all these things and yet go on strike, knowing that we must pay the penalty? And let me flatly deny the claim which some strikers and agitators still make that in these upheavals and checks on war industry they are “fighting for the rights of their mates in the trenches.” Their “mates in the trenches” will be ready and able to, and certainly will, fight for their own rights when the war is won and they can do so without endangering or delaying the winning.

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

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

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

Boyd Cable.

*On the Western Front,
January 7th, 1918.*

I TRENCH-MADE ART

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

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

Then Richard attempted more serious work, and in the course of time turned out a little figure study over which the more educated and artistic of his friends waxed most enthusiastic, and which he himself, considering it carefully and critically, admitted to be "not bad." On the other hand, it is true that many members of the company regarded the masterpiece with apathy, and in some cases almost with disapproval. "Seems a pity," said one critic, "that the corp'ril should 'ave wasted all this time over the one job. Spent every minute of 'is spare time, 'e 'as, fiddlin' an' touchin' up at it; could 'ave done a dozen o' them picturs o' us chaps in the time. An', now it is done, 'tain't quarter sich a good joke as that one o' the sergeant-major wi' the bottle nose. Fair scream, that was."

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

A good score of the picture papers arrived at the Oughth London from friends at home to men in the unit. That did it. There was an immediate boom in Art in the Oughth London, and sculpture became the popular spare-time hobby of the unit. This was all, as I have said, at a period when spare time was plentiful. The unit was billeted in a village well behind the firing-line in a peacefully sylvan locality. It was early summer, so that the light lasted long in the evenings, and gave plenty of opportunity to the sculptors to pursue their Art after the day's duties were done.

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

Less ambitious spirits contented themselves with simpler and more easily recognisable subjects. The cross or crucifix which, as a rule, marks the cross or forked roads in this part of France had from the first caught the attention and interest of the Londoners, and now, in the new flush of Art,

provided immediate inspiration. Almost every man in the new school of sculpture graduated through a course of plain crosses to more fancy ones, and higher up the scale to crucifixes.

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

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

The Art School was still flourishing when the unit was moved up from its peaceful and prolonged rest to take a turn up behind the firing-line. The removal from their clay supply might have closed down the artistic activities, but, fortunately, the Oughth had hardly settled in to their new quarters when it was found that the whole ground was one vast bed of chalk, chalk which was easily obtainable in any shaped and sized lumps and which proved most delightfully easy to manipulate with a jack or pen-knife. The new modelling material, in fact, gave a fillip of novelty to the art, and the coffins and crosses proved, when completed, to have a most desirable quality of solidity and of lasting and retaining their shape and form far better than the similar objects in clay.

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

“It – it’s a elephant, sir,” said Cople.

“An elephant,” said the C.O. dazedly. “An *elephant*?”

“Yessir – leastways, it will be a elephant when it’s finished,” said Cople bashfully.

“Elephant – will be – ” spluttered the C.O., turning to the officer who accompanied him. “Is the man mad?”

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

“That’s it, sir,” said Cople, and with a dignified touch of resentment at the “trying,” “I *am* carving out a elephant.”

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

Cople fell out, and the inspection proceeded. But now the eye of the C.O. went straight to each man’s pocket, and further lumps of chalk of various sizes were produced one by one. “Another elephant?” said the C.O. to the first one. “No, sir,” said the sculptor. “It’s a coffin.” “A co – coffin,” said the C.O. faintly, and, turning to the officer, “A coffin is what he said, eh?” The officer, who knew a good deal of the existing craze, had difficulty in keeping a straight face. “Yes, sir,” he said

chokily, “a coffin.” The C.O. looked hard at the coffin and at its creator, and handed it back. “And you,” he said to the next man, tapping with his cane a nobbly pocket. “Mine’s a coffin, too, sir,” and out came another coffin.

The C.O. stepped back a pace, and let his eye rove down the line. The next man shivered as the eye fell on him, as well he might, because he carried in his pocket a work designed to represent the head of the C.O. – a head of which, by the way, salient features lent themselves readily to caricature. None of these features had been overlooked by the artist, and the identity of the portrait had been further established by the eye-glass which it wore, and by the exaggerated badges of rank on the shoulder. Up to the inspection and the horrible prospect that the caricature would be confronted by its original, the artist had been delighted with the praise bestowed by the critics on the “likeness.” Now, with the eye of the C.O. roaming over his shrinking person and protruding pocket, he cursed despairingly his own skill.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arrived at their appointed place in the show, Cople continued to carry his elephant, but had little time to work on it because he was busy every moment of the day and many hours of the night

on his hard and risky duties. The casualties came back to the Aid Post in a steady stream that swelled at times to an almost overwhelming rush, and every man of the Field Ambulance was kept going at his hardest. The Aid Post was established in a partly wrecked German gun emplacement built of concrete, and because all the ground about them was too ploughed up and cratered with shell-fire to allow a motor ambulance to approach it, the wounded had to be helped or carried back to the nearest point to which the hard-working engineers had carried the new road, and there were placed on the motors.

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

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

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

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

“Stone?” said Cople faintly. “Strewth! That was my blessed elephant in my bloomin’ pocket.”

“Elephant?” said the orderly. “In your pocket? An’ did it have pink stripes an’ a purple tail? Well, never mind about elephants now. You can explain ’em to the Blighty M.O.¹ Here, up you get.” And he helped Cople to the ambulance.

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

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

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

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

¹ M.O. Medical Officer

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

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

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

“It does,” said Copple. “But if you begins ‘im like I told you, with a trunk each end – ”

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

“That’s true,” said Copple. “Especially up Wipers way.”

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

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

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

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

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

II THE SUICIDE CLUB

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

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

“Let’s hope,” said his companion, “that they get an advance o’ pay to bring with ’em. We’ll be goin’ back to billets soon, and we’ll be able to introduce ’em proper to the estaminets.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

A big-framed lad thanked him civilly, but Shirty fancied he saw a flicker of a smile pass round the group. He turned back and spoke to the girl again as she halted at their table and picked up the empty jug. “Encore si voo play,” he said. “Eh les messieurs la ba – ” jerking a thumb back at the other table, but quite unostentatiously, so that the other group might not see, “la ba, voo compree,

payay voo toot la bee-are.” He winked slyly at his fellows and waited developments complacently, while all smoked their cigarettes gravely and nonchalantly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All this was bad enough, but worse was to follow. It was just before closing-time that a Gunner came in and discovered a friend amongst the many sitting at Rabbie’s table. He accepted the pressing invitation to a drink, and had several in quick succession in an endeavour to make an abundant capacity compensate for the inadequate time.

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

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

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

The “learning” began that night after the estaminets closed, and there was a liberal allowance of black eyes and swollen features on parade next morning. It transpired that boxing had been rather a feature back at the depot, and the new men fully held their own in the “learning” episodes. But out of the encounters grew a mutual respect, and before long the old and the new had mixed, and were a battalion instead of “the battalion and the draft.”

Only “Shirty” of the whole lot retained any animus against the new, and perhaps even with him it is hardly fair to say it was against the one-time draft, because actually it was against one or two

members of it. He had never quite forgiven nor forgotten the taking-down he had had from Rabbie Macgregor and Lauchie McLauchlan, and continued openly or veiledly hostile to them.

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

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

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

Rabbie openly scoffed at the nickname of “Suicide Club” for the Bombing Section. They had lost a couple of men wounded in the first attack, and had spent a merry morning frightening Boche prisoners out of their dug-outs, or in obstinate cases flinging Mills’ grenades down the stairways.

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

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

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

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

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

Rabbie, Lauchie, and Shirty were all in the trench together, and were still on their feet when they came to the point where the communication trench ran into another, a support trench presumably, running across it. At this point they were supposed to hold on and consolidate. All had gone well according to programme with Rabbie and his companions, and they turned into the support trench, cleared a couple of bays to either side of the communication way, pulled down sandbags, and piled earth to make a “block” on either side, and settled down to hold their position and to await orders.

They were not left in peaceful possession for long. A vigorous attack was delivered, first at one barricade and then on the other, and both were beaten off with some difficulty and a number of casualties. The bombers had been reinforced several times to make up their reduced numbers, but no further reinforcements had come to them for some time, and now there were only half a dozen of them and one officer left. The officer sent back a lightly wounded man to say they held their point, but

wanted support. The message, as they found afterwards, never got through, because the messenger was killed on the way by a shell splinter.

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

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

Another savage attack followed, and was beaten off with difficulty and the loss of another couple of men. Since there was no officer and no N.C.O. there, Shirty, as the oldest soldier, took charge.

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

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

Their grenades were running short, too, and that decided the point for them. Shirty Low and Rabbie were crouched close up against their barricade, and Lauchie took what cover he could get behind the heaped debris of the broken-down trench wall close at Rabbie’s side. He was squatted in a little niche of the wall and high enough up to allow him to lift his head and peep over the parapet. He ducked his head as several grenades spun over, lifted it, and peered out again.

“Here they come,” he shouted. “Lat them hae’t. Rabbie, pass me up some o’ they bombs.”

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

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

“Go on, Lauchie,” said Rabbie. “I’ve half a dizen left, an’ you’ve nane.”

“I will no,” said Lauchie indignantly. “Gang yersel’. I’m the senior o’ us twa, an’ I’m tellin’ ye.”

“You ma senior,” shouted Rab indignantly. “Yer no ma senior. I was sojerin’ lang afore ever ye jined up.”

“Havers, man, Ye’ve hardly been off the square five meenutes.”

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

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

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

“I’m his senior, Shirty, an’ he should go,” said Rabbie. “Lat him show you his book.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Dead," said Lauchie tersely. "Except Shirty, an' he's sair wounded. I left him hidin' in a bit broken dug-out half-a-dizen turns o' the trench back."

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

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

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

He flung a couple of grenades round the corner; Lauchie followed suit, and the instant they heard the boom of the explosions both pushed round and up the next stretch through the eddying smoke and reek, pulling the pins as they ran, and tossing the bombs ahead of them into the next section of trench. And so, in spite of the German bombers' resistance, they bombed their way back to where Shirty had been left. Several times they trod over or past the bodies of men killed by their bombs, once they encountered a wounded officer kneeling with his shoulder against the trench wall and snapping a couple of shots from a magazine pistol at them as they plunged through the smoke. Rabbie stunned him with a straight and hard-flung bomb, leapt, dragging Lauchie with him, back into cover until the bomb exploded, and then ran forward again. He stooped in passing and picked up the pistol from beside the shattered body. "Might be useful," he said, "an' it's a good sooveneer onyway. I promised a sooveneer tae yon French lassie back in Poppyring."

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

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

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

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

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

“So long, Shirty,” said Rabbie. “See ye again when ye come up an’ rejine.”

“So long, chum,” said Shirty, “an’ I’m – er – I – ”. And he stammered some halting phrase of thanks to them for coming back to fetch him out.

“Havers,” said Rabbie, “I wisna goin’ t’ leave ye there tae feenish the war in a Fritz jail. An’ yer forgettin’ whit I promised ye back there when ye ordered me for they bombs – that I’d hammer yer heid aff when we came oot. I’ll just mind ye o’ that when ye jine up again.”

“Right-o,” said Shirty happily. “I won’t let you forget it.”

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

“He’s like t’ be Corporal or Saigint time he comes oot again,” said Lauchie. “Promotion’s quick in they Reserve an’ Trainin’ Brigades at hame.”

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

III IN THE WOOD

The attack on the wood had begun soon after dawn, and it was no more than 8 a.m. when the Corporal was dropped badly wounded in the advance line of the attack where it had penetrated about four hundred yards into the wood. But it was well into afternoon before he sufficiently woke to his surroundings to understand where he was or what had happened, and when he did so he found the realisation sufficiently unpleasant. It was plain from several indications – the direction from which the shells bursting in his vicinity were coming, a glimpse of some wounded Germans retiring, the echoing rattle of rifle fire and crash of bombs behind him – that the battalion had been driven back, as half a dozen other battalions had been driven back in the course of the ebb-and-flow fighting through the wood for a couple of weeks past, that he was lying badly wounded and helpless to defend himself where the Germans could pick him up as a prisoner or finish him off with a saw-backed bayonet as the mood of his discoverers turned. His left leg was broken below the knee, his right shoulder and ribs ached intolerably, a scalp wound six inches long ran across his head from side to side – a wound that, thanks to the steel shrapnel helmet lying dented in deep across the crown, had not split his head open to the teeth.

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

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

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

to one in his plight it appeared mere madness to attempt. And yet to attempt it he was determined, and being without any other idea in his throbbing head but the sole one of overcoming each obstacle as he came to it, had no time to consider the impossibility of the complete task.

Now, two hundred yards is a short distance as measurement goes, but into those two hundred yards through the chaos of wrecked wood the Corporal packed as much suffering, as dragging a passage of time, as many tortures of hope and fear and pain, as would fill an ordinary lifetime. Every yard was a desperate struggle, every fallen tree-trunk, each tangle of fallen branch, was a cruel problem to be solved, a pain-racked and laborious effort to overcome. A score of times he collapsed and lay panting, and resigned himself to abandoning the struggle; and a score of times he roused himself and fought down numbing pain, and raised himself on trembling arms and knees to crawl again, to wriggle through the wreckage, to hoist himself over some obstacle, to fight his way on for another yard or two.

Every conscious thought was busied only and solely with the problems of his passage that presented themselves one by one, but at the back of his mind some self-working reason or instinct held him to his direction, took heed of what went on around him, guided him in action other than that immediately concerned with his passage. When, for instance, he came to a deep trench cutting across his path, he sat long with his whole mind occupied on the question as to whether he should move to right or left, whether the broken place half a dozen yards off the one way or the more completely broken one a dozen yards the other would be the best to make for, scanning this way down and that way up, a litter of barbed wire here and a barrier of broken branches there; and yet, without even lifting his mind from the problem, he was aware of grey coats moving along the trench towards him, had sense enough to drop flat and lie huddled and still until the Germans had passed. And that second mind again advised him against crawling down into the trench and making his easier way along it, because it was too probable it would be in use as a passage for Germans, wounded and unwounded.

He turned and moved slowly along the edge of the trench at last, and held to it for some distance, because the parapet raised along its edge held up many of the fallen trees and branches enough to let him creep under them. That advantage was discounted to some extent by the number of dead bodies that lay heaped on or under the parapet and told of the struggles and the fierce fighting that had passed for possession of the trench, but on the whole the dead men were less difficult to pass than the clutching, wrenching fingers of the dead wood. The pains in his head, shoulder, and side had by now dulled down to a dead numbness, but his broken leg never ceased to burn and stab with red-hot needles of agony; and for all the splints encasing it and despite all the care he took, there was hardly a yard of his passage that was not marked by some wrenching catch on his foot, some jarring shock or grind and grate of the broken bones.

He lost count of time, he lost count of distance, but he kept on crawling. He was utterly indifferent to the turmoil of the guns, to the rush and yell of the near-falling shells, the crash of their bursts, the whirr of the flying splinters. When he had been well and whole these things would have brought his heart to his mouth, would have set him ducking and dodging and shrinking. Now he paid them no fraction of his absorbed attention. But to the distinctive and rising sounds of bursting grenades, to the sharp whip and whistle of rifle bullets about him and through the leaves and twigs, he gave eager attention because they told him he was nearing his goal, was coming at last to somewhere near the fringe of the fighting. His limbs were trembling under him, he was throbbing with pain from head to foot, his head was swimming and his vision was blurred and dim, and at last he was forced to drop and lie still and fight to recover strength to move, and sense to direct his strength. His mind cleared slowly, and he saw at last that he had come to a slightly clearer part of the wood, to a portion nearer its edge where the trees had thinned a little and where the full force of the shell blast had wrecked and re-wrecked and torn fallen trunks and branches to fragments.

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

And there he lay and watched a fresh attack launched by the British into the wood, heard and saw the tornado of shell-fire that poured crashing and rending and shattering into the trees, watched the khaki figures swarm forward through the smoke, the spitting flames of the rifles, the spurting fire and smoke of the flung grenades. He still lay on the edge of the broken trench along which he had crept, and he could just make out that this ran off at an angle away from him and that it was held by the Germans, and formed probably the point of the British attack. He watched the attack with consuming eagerness, hope flaming high as he saw the khaki line press forward, sinking again to leaden depths as it halted or held or swayed back. To him the attack was an affair much more vital than the taking of the trench, the advance by a few score yards of the British line. To him it meant that a successful advance would bring him again within the British lines, its failure leave him still within the German.

Into the trench below him a knot of Germans scrambled scuffling, and he lay huddled there almost within arm's length of them while they hoisted a couple of machine-guns to the edge of the trench and manned the parapet and opened a hail of fire down the length of the struggling British line. Under that streaming fire the line wilted and withered; a fresh torrent of fire smote it, and it crumpled and gave and ebbed back. But almost immediately another line swarmed up out of the smoke and swept forward, and this time, although the same flank and frontal fire caught and smote it, the line straggled and swayed forward and plunged into and over the German trench.

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

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

The Corporal had a sudden sense of someone moving behind him, and twisted round in time to see another khaki figure moving past a dozen paces away and the upper half bodies of half a score more struggling through the thickets beyond. This time he screamed at them, but they too passed, unhearing and unheeding. The Corporal dropped quivering and trying to tell himself that it was all right, that there would be others following, that some of them must come along the trench, that the stretcher-bearers would be following close.

But for the moment none followed them, and from where they had vanished came a renewed uproar of grenade-bursts and rifle fire beating out and through the uproar of the guns and the screaming, crashing shells. The Corporal saw a couple of wounded come staggering back ... the tumult of near fighting died down ... a line of German grey-clad shoulders and bobbing "coal-scuttle" helmets plunged through and beyond the thicket from which the khaki had emerged a few minutes before. And then back into the trench below him scuffled the Germans with their two machine-guns.

With a groan the Corporal dropped his face in the dirt and dead leaves and groaned hopelessly. He was “done in,” he told himself, “clean done in.” He could see no chance of escape. The line had been driven back, and the last ounce of strength to crawl... He tried once before he would finally admit that last ounce gone, but the effort was too much for his exhausted limbs and pain-wrenched body. He dropped to the ground again.

The rapid clatter of the two machine-guns close to him lifted his head to watch. The main German trench was spouting dust and debris, flying clouds of leaves, flashing white slivers of bark and wood, under the torrent of shells that poured on it once more. The machine-guns below him ceased, and the Corporal concluded that their target had gone for the moment. But that intense bombardment of the trench almost certainly meant the launching of another British attack, and then the machine-guns would find their target struggling again across their sights and under their streaming fire. They had a good “field of fire,” too, as the Corporal could see. The British line had to advance for the most part through the waist-high tangle of wrecked wood, but by chance or design a clearer patch of ground was swept close to the German trench, and as the advance crossed this the two machine-guns on the flank near the Corporal would get in their work, would sweep it in enfilade, would be probably the worst obstacle to the advance. And at that a riot of thoughts swept the Corporal’s mind. If he could out those machine-guns ... if he could out those machine-guns ... but how? There were plenty of rifles near, and plenty of dead about with cartridges on them ... but one shot would bring the Germans jumping from their trench on him... Bombs now ... if he had some Mills’ grenades ... where had he seen...

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

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

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

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

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

And weeks after, lying snug in bed in a London hospital, after a Sister had scolded him for moving in bed and reaching out for a magazine that had dropped to the floor, and told him how urgent it was that he must not move, and how a fractured leg like his must be treated gently and

carefully if he did not wish to be a cripple for life, and so on and so forth, he grinned up cheerfully at her. “Or-right, Sister.” he said, “I’ll remember. But it’s a good job for me I didn’t know all that, back there – in the wood.”

IV THE DIVING TANK

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

As the Skipper finished his examination, finding neither crack, dent, nor damage to anything deeper than the paintwork, "All complete" was reported to him, and he and his crew proceeded to dine off bully beef, biscuits, and uncooked prunes. The meal was interrupted by a motor-cyclist, who had to leave his cycle on the roadside and plough on foot through the sticky mud to the Hotstuff's anchorage, with a written message. The Skipper read the message, initialled the envelope as a receipt, and, meditatively chewing on a dry prune, carefully consulted a squared map criss-crossed and wriggled over by a maze of heavy red lines that marked the German trenches, and pricked off a course to where a closer-packed maze of lines was named as a Redoubt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

silence. “We tried to butt through it an’ couldn’t, so we coupled on the grapplin’-hook bands, an’ walked straight up one side an’ down the other.”

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

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

“Towed across?” said the startled Signaller. “You don’t mean to say she floats?”

“Why, of course,” said the Hotstuff simply. “Though, mind you, we’re not designed for long voyages under our own power. The whole hull is a watertight tank – wi’ longitoodinal an’ transverse bulkheads, an’ we’ve an adjustable screw propeller. I dunno as I ought to be talkin’ about that, though,” and he sank his voice and glanced cautiously round at the Skipper folding up his map. “Don’t breathe a word o’ it to a soul, or I might get into trouble. It’s a little surprise,” he concluded hurriedly, as he saw the Skipper rise, “that we’re savin’ up for the Hun when we gets to the Rhine. He reckons the Rhine is goin’ to hold us up, don’t he? Wait till he sees the Tanks swim it an’ walk up the cliffs on the other side.”

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

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

But he stayed to watch the Tank get under way, and after watching her performance and course for a few hundred yards he returned to his motor-bike with struggling doubts in his own mind as to how and in which direction he was likely to be the bigger fool – in believing or in refusing to believe.

The Hotstuff snorted once or twice, shook herself, and rumbled internally; her wheel-bands made a slow revolution or two, churning out a barrowload or so of soft mud, and bit through the loose upper soil into the firmer ground; she jerk-jerked convulsively two or three times, crawled out of the deep wheel-ruts she had dug, turned, nosing a cautious way between the bigger shell craters, and then ploughed off on a straight course towards the road across the sticky mud – mud which the dispatch-rider had utterly failed to negotiate, and which, being impassable to him, he had, out of the knowledge born of long experience, concluded impassable to anything, light or heavy, that ran on wheels. A wide ditch lay between the field and the road, but the Hotstuff steered straight for it and crawled tranquilly across. The dispatch-rider watched the progress across the mud with great interest, whistled softly as he saw the Tank breast the ditch and reach out for the far bank, with her fore-end and nearly half her length hanging clear out over the water, gasped as the bows dipped and fell downward, her fore-feet clutching at and resting on the further bank, her bows and under-body – the descriptive terms are rather mixed, but then, so is the name and make-up of a Land Ship – hitting the water with a mighty splash. And then, in spite of himself, he broke from wide grins into open laughter as the Hotstuff got a grip of the far bank, pushed with her hind and pulled with her fore legs and dragged herself across. If ever you have seen a fat caterpillar perched on a cabbage leaf’s edge, straining and reaching out with its front feet to reach another leaf, touching it, catching hold, and letting go astern, to pull over the gap, you have a very fair idea of what the Hotstuff looked like crossing that ditch.

She wheeled on to the road, and as the dispatch-rider, with mingled awe, amazement, and admiration, watched her lumbering off down it he saw an oil-blackened hand poked out through a gun port and waggled triumphantly back at him. “Damme,” he said, “I believe she *can* swim, or stand on her head, or eat peas off a knife. She looks human-intelligent enough for anything.”

But the Hotstuff on that particular trip was to display little enough intelligence, but instead an almost human perversity, adding nothing to her battle honours but very much to her skipper’s and

crew's already overcrowded vocabulary of strong language. The engineer showed signs of uneasiness as she trundled down the road, cocking his head to one side and listening with a look of strained attention, stooping his ear to various parts of the engines, squinting along rods, touching his fingertips to different bearings.

“What’s wrong?” asked the Skipper. “Isn’t she behaving herself?”

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

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

When finally she got her engines running and pulled out of the quagmire, it was too late to attempt to get her up into the action she had been called to, so her bows were turned back to her anchorage and she plodded off home. And by the luck of war, and his volunteering out of turn for the trip, the same dispatch-rider brought another message to her early next morning in her berth behind the line.

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

The dispatch-rider stared at her.

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

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

“Didn’t you come an’ watch us yesterday, then?” he said. “Well, you missed a treat – brand-new dodge our Old Man has invented hisself. When we got ’er in the canal, we closed all ports, elevated our periscope an’ new telescopic air-toob, submerged, and sank to the bottom. And she walked four measured miles under water along the bottom o’ the canal. That” – and he waved his hand towards the mud-hidden Hotstuff – “is where she got all the mud from.”

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

V IN THE MIST

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

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

The other officer watched the two crawl out and vanish into the misty darkness. At intervals a flare light leaped upward from one side or the other, but it revealed nothing of the ground, showed only a dim radiance in the mist and vanished. Rifles crackled spasmodically up and down the unseen line, and very occasionally a gun boomed a smothered report and a shell *swooshed* over. But, on the whole, the night was quiet, or might be called so by comparison with other nights, and the quietness lent colour to the belief that the Hun was quietly evacuating his badly battered front line. It was to discover what truth was in the report that the Lieutenant had crawled out with one man to get as near as possible to the enemy trench – or, still better, into or over it.

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

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

He whispered as much to his companion and both moved carefully on. The ground was riddled with shell-holes and was soaking wet, and very soon the two were saturated and caked with sticky mud. Skirting the holes and twisting about between them was confusing to any sense of direction, but the two had been well picked for this special work and held fairly straight on their way. No light had shown for a good many minutes, and the Lieutenant fancied that the mist was thickening. He halted and waited a minute, straining his eyes into the mist and his ears to catch any sound. There was nothing apparently to see or hear, and he rose to his knees and moved carefully forward again. As he did so a flare leaped upward with a long hiss and a burst of light glowed out. It faintly illumined the ground and the black shadows of shell-holes about them, and – the Lieutenant with a jump at his heart stilled and stiffened – not six feet away and straight in front, the figure of a man in a long grey coat, his head craned forward and resting on his arms crossed in front of him and twisted in an attitude of listening. Studd, crawling at the Lieutenant’s heels, saw at the same moment, as was told by his hand gripped and pressing a warning on the Lieutenant’s leg. The light died out, and with infinite caution the Lieutenant slid back level with Studd and, motioning him to follow, lay flat and hitched himself a foot at a time towards the right to circle round the recumbent German. The man had not been facing full on to them, but lay stretched and looking toward their left, and by a careful circling right the Lieutenant calculated he would clear and creep behind him. A big shell-crater lay in their path, and after a moment’s hesitation the Lieutenant slid very quietly down into it. Some morsels of loose earth crumbled under him, rolled down and fell with tiny splashings into the pool at the bottom. To the Lieutenant the noise was most disconcertingly loud and alarming, and cursing himself for a fool not to have thought of the water and the certainty of his loosening earth to fall into it, he crouched motionless, listening for any sound that would tell of the listening German’s alarm.

Another light rose, filling the mist with soft white radiance and outlining the edge of the crater above him. It outlined also the dark shape of a figure halted apparently in the very act of crawling down into the crater from the opposite side. The Lieutenant’s first flashing thought was that the German watcher had heard him and was moving to investigate, his second and quick-following was

of another German holding still until the light fell. But a third idea came so instantly on the other two that, before the soaring flare dropped, he had time to move sharply, bringing the man's outline more clearly against the light. That look and the shape, beside but clear of the body, of a bent leg, crooked knee upward, confirmed his last suspicion. Studd slid over soundless as a diving otter and down beside him, and the Lieutenant whispered, "See those two on the edge?"

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

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

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

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

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

Studd vanished over the parapet and the Lieutenant squirmed after him. The trench was wide and broken-walled back and front, and both clambered up the other side and began to move along the far edge. In some places the trench narrowed and deepened, in others it widened and shallowed in tumbled shell-craters, in others again was almost obliterated in heaped and broken earth. The mist had closed down and thickened to a white-grey blanket, and the two moved more freely, standing on their feet and walking stooped and ready to drop at a sound. They went for a considerable distance without seeing a single German.

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

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

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

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

The dim lights certainly seemed to be far out on their left and a little behind them. A couple of rifles cracked faintly, and they heard a bullet sigh and whimper overhead. Closer and with sharper reports half a dozen rifles *rap-rapped* in answer – but the reports were still well out to their left and behind them.

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

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

There was no need of the question now. Plainly both could hear the squelch of feet, the rustle of clothes, the squeak and click of leather and equipment. Slowly, one by one, a line of men filed past their hiding-place, looming grey and shadowy through the mist, stumbling and slipping so close by that to the Lieutenant it seemed that only one downward glance from one passing figure was needed to discover them. Tumultuous thoughts raced. What should he do if they were discovered? Pass one quick word to Studd to lie still, and jump and run, trusting to draw pursuit after himself and give Studd a chance to escape and report? Or call Studd to run with him, and both chance a bolt back the way they came? The thick mist might help them, but the alarm would spread quickly to the front trench... Or should he snatch his revolver – he wished he hadn’t put it back in his holster – blaze off all his rounds, yell and make a row, rousing the German trench to fire and disclose the strength holding it? Could he risk movement enough to get his revolver clear? And all the time he was counting the figures that stumbled past – five ... six ... seven ... eight... Thirty-four he counted and then, just as he was going to move, another lagging two. After that and a long pause he held hurried consultation with Studd.

“They’re moving up the way we came down,” he said. “We’re right off the front line. Must get back. Daren’t keep too close to this trench though. D’you think we can strike across and find the front line about where we crossed?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Studd looked round him, and pointed promptly. The Lieutenant disagreed and thought the course lay nearly at right angles to Studd’s selection. He had his compass with him and examined it carefully. “This bit of their front line ran roughly north and south,” he said. “If we move west it must fetch us back on it. We must have twisted a bit coming out of that wire – but there’s west,” and he pointed again.

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

“Yes, north,” said the Lieutenant.

“But then it bends in towards ours – like this – an’ ours bends back.”

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

Studd was still busy with his scratchings. “Here’s where we came along and turned off the communication trench. That would bring them lights where we saw them – about here. Then we met them Germs and struck off this way, an’ ran into that wire, an’ then back – here. So I figure we got to go that way,” and he pointed again.

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

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

“I’ll just search along a few yards, sir, and see if there’s an opening,” said Studd.

“Both go,” said the Lieutenant. “Better keep together.”

Within a dozen yards both stopped abruptly and again sank to the ground, the Lieutenant cursing angrily under his breath. Both had caught the sound of voices, and from their lower position could see against the light a line of standing men, apparently right across their path. A spatter of rifle-fire sounded from somewhere out in the mist, and a few bullets whispered high overhead. Then came the distant *thud*

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