

Cobb Irvin Shrewsbury

The Glory of the Coming



Irvin Cobb

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Cobb Irvin S. Irvin Shrewsbury

The Glory of the Coming; What Mine Eyes Have Seen of Americans in Action in This Year of Grace and Allied Endeavor

CHAPTER I. WHEN THE SEA-ASP STINGS

BECAUSE she was camouflaged with streaky marks and mottlings into the likeness of a painted Jezebel of the seas, because she rode high out of the water, and wallowed as she rode, because during all those days of our crossing she hugged up close to our ship, splashing through the foam of our wake as though craving the comfort of our company, we called her things no self-respecting ship should have to bear. But when that night, we stood on the afterdeck of our ship, we running away as fast as our kicking screw would take us, and saw her going down, taking American soldier boys to death with her in alien waters, we drank toasts standing up to the poor old *Tuscania*.

I was one of those who were in at the death of the *Tuscania*. Her sinking was the climax of the most memorable voyage I ever expect to take. Five days have elapsed since she was torpedoed, and even though these words are being cabled across from London to the home side of the ocean, at least three weeks more must elapse before they can see printer's ink. So to some this will seem an old story; but the memory of what happened that night off the Irish coast is going to abide with me while I live. It was one of those big moments in a man's life that stick in a man's brain as long as he has a brain to think with.

Transatlantic journeys these days aren't what they used to be before America went into the war. Ours began to be different even before our ship pulled out from port. It is forbidden me now to tell her name, and anyhow her name doesn't in the least matter, but she was a big ship with a famous skipper, and in peacetimes her sailing would have made some small stir. There would have been crowds of relations and friends at the pier bidding farewell to departing travellers; and steamer baskets and steamer boxes would have been coming aboard in streams. Beforehand there would have been a pleasant and mildly exciting bustle, and as we drew away from the dock and headed out into midstream and down the river for our long hike overseas, the pierhead would have been alive with waving handkerchiefs, and all our decks would have been fringed with voyagers shouting back farewells to those they had left behind them. Instead we slipped away almost as if we had done something wrong. There was no waving of hands and handkerchiefs, no good-byes on the gang-planks, no rush to get back on land when the shore bell sounded. To reach the dock we passed through trochas of barbed-wire entanglements, past sentries standing with fixed bayonets at entryways. When we got inside the pier our people bade us farewell at a guarded gate. None but travellers whose passports read straight were allowed beyond that point. So alone and unescorted each one of us went soberly up the side of the ship, and then sundry hours later our journey began, as the ship, like a big grey ghost, slid away from land, as quietly as might be, into the congenial grey fog which instantly swallowed her up and left her in a little grey world of sea mist that was all her own. After this fashion, then, we started.

As for the first legs of the trip they were much like the first legs of almost any sea trip except that we travelled in a convoy with sundry other ships, with warcraft to guard us on our way. Our ship was quite full of soldiers – officers in the first cabin, and the steerage packed with khakied troopers – ninety per cent of whom had never smelled bilge water before they embarked upon their great adventure overseas. There were fewer civilians than one formerly might have found on a ship bound

for Europe. In these times only those civilians who have urgent business in foreign climes venture to go abroad.

I sat at the purser's table. His table was fairly typical of the ship's personnel. With me there sat, of course, the purser, likewise two Canadian officers, two members of a British Commission returning from America, and an Irish brewer. There were not very many women on our passenger list. Of these women half a dozen or so were professional nurses, and two were pretty Canadian girls bound for England to be married on arrival there to young Canadian officers. There were only three children on board, and they were travelling with their parents in the second class.

Except for a touch of seriousness about the daily lifeboat drill, and except that regimental discipline went forward, with the troops drilling on the open deck spaces when the weather and the sea permitted, there was at first nothing about this voyage to distinguish it from any other midwinter voyage. Strangers got acquainted one with another and swapped views on politics, religion, symptoms and Germans; flirtations started and ripened furiously; concerts were organized and took place, proving to be what concerts at sea usually are. Twice a day the regimental band played, and once a day, up on the bridge, the second officer took the sun, squinting into his sextant with the deep absorption with which in happier times a certain type of tourist was wont to stare through an enlarging device at a certain type of Parisian photograph. At night, though, we were in a darkened ship, a gliding black shape upon black waters, with heavy shades over all the portholes and thick draperies over all the doors, and only dim lights burning in the passageways and cross halls, so that every odd corner on deck or within was as dark as a coal pocket. It took some time to get used to being in the state in which Moses was when the light went out; but then, we had time to get used to it, believe me! Ocean travel is slower these days, for obvious reasons. Personally, I retired from the ship's society during three days of the first week of the trip. I missed only two meals, missing them, I may add, shortly after having eaten them; but at the same time I felt safer in my berth than up on deck – not happier, particularly, but safer. The man who first said that you can't eat your cake and have it too had such cases as mine in mind, I am sure of that. I can't and I don't – at least not when I am taking an ocean voyage. I have been seasick on many waters, and I have never learned to care for the sensation yet.

When I emerged from semiretirement it was to learn that we had reached the so-called danger zone. The escort of warcraft for our transport had been augmented. Under orders the military men wore their life jackets, and during all their waking hours they went about with cork flaps hugging them about their necks fore and aft, so that they rather suggested Chinese malefactors with their heads incased in punishment casques. By request the civilian passengers were expected to carry their life preservers with them wherever they went; but some of them forgot the injunction. I know I did frequently. Also, a good many of them turned in at night with most of their outer clothing on their bodies; but I followed the old Southern custom and took most of mine off before going to bed.

Our captain no longer came to the saloon for his meals. He lived upon the bridge – ate there and, I think, slept there too – what sleeping he did. Standing there all muffled in his oilskins he looked even more of a squatty and unheroic figure than he had in his naval blue presiding at the head of the table; but by repute we knew him for a man who had gone through one torpedoing with great credit to himself and through numbers of narrow escapes, and we valued him accordingly and put our faith in him. It was faith well placed, as shall presently transpire.

I should not say that there was much fear aboard; at least if there was it did not manifest itself in the manner or the voice or the behaviour of a single passenger seen by me; but there was a sort of nagging, persistent sense of uneasiness betraying itself in various small ways. For one thing, all of us made more jokes about submarines, mines and other perils of the deep than was natural. There was something a little forced, artificial, about this gaiety – the laughs came from the lips, but not from points farther south.

We knew by hearsay that the *Tuscania* was a troopship bearing some of our soldiers over to do their share of the job of again making this world a fit place for human beings to live in. There

was something pathetic in the fashion after which she so persistently and constantly strove to stick as closely under our stem as safety and the big waves would permit. It was as though her skipper placed all reliance in our skipper, looking to him to lead his ship out of peril should peril befall. Therefore, we of our little group watched her from our afterdecks, with her sharp nose forever half or wholly buried in the creaming white smother we kicked up behind us.

It was a crisp bright February day when we neared the coasts of the British Empire. At two o'clock in the afternoon we passed, some hundreds of yards to starboard, a round, dark, bobbing object which some observers thought was a floating mine. Others thought it might be the head and shoulders of a human body held upright in a life ring. Whatever it was, our ship gave it a wide berth, sheering off from the object in a sharp swing. Almost at the same moment upon our other bow, at a distance of not more than one hundred yards from the crooked course we were then pursuing, there appeared out through one of the swells a lifeboat, oarless, abandoned, empty, except for what looked like a woman's cloak lying across the thwarts. Rising and falling to the swing of the sea it drifted down alongside of us so that we could look almost straight down into it. We did not stop to investigate but kept going, zigzagging as we went, and that old painted-up copy cat of a *Tuscania* came zigzagging behind us. A good many persons decided to tie on their life preservers.

Winter twilight was drawing on when we sighted land – Northern Ireland it was. The wind was going down with the sun and the sharp crests of the waves were dulling off, and blunt oily rollers began to splash with greasy sounds against our plates. Far away somewhere we saw the revolving light of a lighthouse winking across the face of the waters like a drunken eye. That little beam coming and going gave me a feeling of security. I was one of a party of six who went below to the stateroom of a member of the group for a farewell card game.

Perhaps an hour later, as we sat there each intently engaged upon the favoured indoor American sport of trying to better two pairs, we heard against our side of the ship a queer knocking sound rapidly repeated – a sound that somehow suggested a boy dragging a stick along a picket fence.

"I suppose that's a torpedo rapping for admission," said one of us, looking up from his cards and listening with a cheerful grin on his face.

I think it was not more than five minutes after that when an American officer opened the stateroom door and poked his head in.

"Better come along, you fellows," he said; "but come quietly so as not to give alarm or frighten any of the women. Something has happened. It's the *Tuscania*— she's in trouble!"

Up we got and hurried aft down the decks, each one taking with him his cork jacket and adjusting it over his shoulders as he went. We came to the edge of the promenade deck aft. There were not many persons there, as well as we could tell in the thick darkness through which we felt our way, and not many more came afterward – in all I should say not more than seventy-five.

All the rest were in ignorance of what had occurred – a good many were at dinner. Accounts of the disaster which I have read since my arrival in London said that the torpedo from the U-boat thudded into the vitals of the *Tuscania*, disarranged her engines, and left her in utter darkness for a while until her crew could switch on the auxiliary dynamo. I think this must have been a mistake, for at the moment of our reaching the deck of our ship the *Tuscania* was lighted up all over. Her illumination seemed especially brilliant, but that, I suppose, was largely because we had become accustomed to seeing our fellow transports as dark bulks at night. I should say she was not more than a mile from us, almost due aft and a trifle to the left. But the distance between us visibly increased each passing moment, for we were running away from her as fast as our engines could drive us. We could feel our ship throb under our feet as she picked up speed. It made us feel like cowards. Near at hand a ship was in distress, a ship laden with a precious freightage of American soldier boys, and here were we legging it like a frightened rabbit, weaving in and out on sharp tacks.

We knew, of course, that we were under orders to get safely away if we could in case one of those sea adders, the submarines, should attack our convoy. We knew that guardian destroyers would

even now be hurrying to the rescue, and we knew land was not many miles, away; but all the same, I think I never felt such an object of shame as I felt that first moment when the realisation dawned on me that we were fleeing from a stricken vessel instead of hastening back to give what succour we could.

As I stood there in the darkness, with silent, indistinct shapes all about me, it came upon me with almost the shock of a physical blow that the rows of lights I saw yonder through the murk were all slanting slightly downward toward what would be the bow of the disabled steamer. These oblique lines of light told the story. The *Tuscania* had been struck forward and was settling by the head.

Suddenly a little subdued “Ah! Ah!” burst like a chorus from us all. A red rocket – a rocket as red as blood – sprang up high into the air above those rows of lights. It hung aloft for a moment, then burst into a score of red balls, which fell, dimming out as they descended. After a bit two more rockets followed in rapid succession. I always thought a rocket to be a beautiful thing. Probably this belief is a heritage from that time in my boyhood when first I saw Fourth-of-July fireworks. But never again will a red rocket fired at night be to me anything except a reminder of the most pitiable, the most heart-racking thing I have ever seen – that poor appeal for help from the sinking *Tuscania* flaming against that foreign sky.

There was silence among us as we watched. None of us, I take it, had words within him to express what he felt; so we said nothing at all, but just stared out across the Waters until our eyeballs ached in their sockets. So quiet were we that I jumped when right at my elbow a low, steady voice spoke. Turning my head I could make out that the speaker was one of the younger American officers.

“If what I heard before we sailed is true,” he said, “my brother is in the outfit on that boat yonder. Well, if they get him it will only add a little more interest to the debt I already owe those damned Germans.”

That was all he said, and to it I made no answer, for there was no answer to be made.

Fifteen minutes passed, then twenty, then twenty-five. Now instead of many small lights we could make out only a few faint pin pricks of light against the blackness to mark the spot where the foundering vessel must be. Presently we could distinguish but one speck of light. Alongside this one special gleam a red glow suddenly appeared – not a rocket this time, but a flare, undoubtedly. Together the two lights – the steady white one and the spreading red one – descended and together were extinguished. Without being told we knew, all of us – landsmen and seamen alike – what we had seen. We had seen the last of that poor ship, stung to death by a Hunnish sea-aspid.

Still silent, we went below. Those of us who had not yet dined went and dined. Very solemnly, like men performing a rite, we ordered wine and we drank to the *Tuscania* and her British crew and her living cargo of American soldiers.

Next morning, after a night during which perilous things happened about us that may not be described here and now, we came out of our perils and into safety at an English port, and there it was that we heard what made us ask God to bless that valorous, vigilant little pot-bellied skipper of ours, may he live forever! We were told that the torpedo which pierced the *Tuscania* was meant for us, that the U-boat rising unseen in the twilight fired it at us, and that our captain up on the bridge saw it coming when it was yet some way off, and swinging the ship hard over to one side, dodged the flittering devil-thing by a margin that can be measured literally in inches. The call was a close one. The torpedo, it was said, actually grazed the plates of our vessel – it was that we heard as we sat at cards – and passing aft struck the bow of the *Tuscania* as she swung along not two hundred yards behind us. We heard, too, that twice within the next hour torpedoes were fired at us, and again a fourth one early in the hours of the morning. Each time chance or poor aim or sharp seamanship or a combination of all three saved us. We were lucky. For of the twelve ships in our transport two, including the *Tuscania*, were destroyed and two others, making four in all, were damaged by torpedoes before morning.

Next day, in London, I read that not a man aboard the *Tuscania*, whether sailor or soldier, showed weakness or fright. I read how those Yankee boys, many of them at sea for the first time in their lives, stood in ranks waiting for rescue or for death while the ship listed and yawed and settled

under them; how the British sang “God Save the King,” and the Americans sang to the same good Allied air, “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee;” and how at last, descending over the side, some of them to be drowned but more of them to be saved, those American lads of ours sang what before then had been a meaningless, trivial jingle, but which is destined forevermore, I think, to mean a great deal to Americans. Perry said: “We have met the enemy, and they are ours.” Lawrence said: “Don’t give up the ship!” Farragut said: “Damn the torpedoes, go ahead.” Dewey said: “You may fire, Gridley, when you are ready.” Our history is full of splendid sea slogans, but I think there can never be a more splendid one that we Americans will cherish than the first line, which is also the title of the song now suddenly freighted with a meaning and a message to American hearts, which our boys sang that black February night in the Irish Sea when two hundred of them, first fruits of our national sacrifice in this war, went over the sides of the *Tuscania* to death: “Where do we go from here, boys; where do we go from here?”

CHAPTER II. “ALL AMURIKIN – OUT TO THEM WIRES”

HE was curled up in a moist-mud cozy corner. His curved back fitted into a depression in the clay. His feet rested comfortably in an ankle-deep solution, very puttylike in its consistency, and compounded of the rains of heaven and the alluvials of France. His face was incredibly dirty, and the same might have been said for his hands. He had big buck teeth and sandy hair and a nice round inquisitive blue eye. His rifle, in good order, was balanced across his hunched knees. One end of a cigarette was pasted fast to his lower lip; the other end spilled tiny sparks down the front of his blouse.

Offhand you would figure his age to be halfpast nineteen. Just round the corner from him a machine gun at intervals spoke in stuttering accents. At more frequent intervals from somewhere up or down the line a rifle whanged where an ambitious amateur Yankee sniper tried for a professional and doubtlessly a bored German sniper across the way; or where the German tried back.

The youth in the cozy corner paid small heed. He was supposed to be getting his baptism of fire. In reality he was reading a two-months-old copy of a certain daily paper printed in a certain small city in a certain Middle Western state – to wit, the sovereign state of Ohio. He belonged to a volunteer regiment, and in a larger sense to the Rainbow Division. This was his first day in the front-line trenches and already he was as much at home there as though he had been cradled to the lullaby of those big guns grunting away in the distance. For a fact he was at home – reading home news out of the home paper and, as one might say, not caring a single dern whatsoever.

“Say, Tobe,” he called in the husky half voice which is the prescribed and conventional conversational tone on the forward edges of No Man’s Land; “Tobe, lissen!”

His mate, leaning against the slanted side of the trench ten feet away, blowing little smoke wisps up toward the pale-blue sky above him, half turned his head to answer.

“Well, what?”

“Whatter you know about this? It says here the New York Yanks is liable to buy Ty Cobb off of Detroit. Say, what’ll them Detroits do without old Ty in there bustin’ the fast ones on the nose, huh?”

“With all the money they’ll get for that guy they should worry!”

The emphatic ker-blim of a rifle a hundred yards off furnished a vocal exclamation point to further accent the comment.

The reader shifted himself slightly in his scooped niche and turned over to another page. He was just the average kid private, but to me he was as typical as type can be. I figured him as a somewhat primitive, highly elemental creature, adaptable and simple-minded; appallingly green yet at this present trade, capable though of becoming amazingly competent at it if given experience and a chance; temperamentally gaited to do heroic things without any of the theatricalism of planned heroics – in short and in fine, the incarnated youthful spirit of the youthful land which bore him.

I came upon him with his cigarette and his favourite daily and his mud-boltered feet at the tail end of a trip along the front line of a segment of a sector held by our troops, and before I made his acquaintance sundry things befel. I had been in trenches before, but they were German trenches along the Aisne in the fall of the first year of this war business, and these trenches of our own people were quite different from those of 1914. French minds had devised them, with their queer twists, and windings, which seem so crazy and yet are so sanely ordained; and French hands had dug them out of the chalky soil and shored them up with timbers, but now Americans had taken them over and, in common with all things that Americans take over, they had become as much and as thoroughly American as though they had been Subway diggings in New York City, which indeed they rather resembled; or excavations for the foundations of the new Carnegie Library in Gallipolis. ‘Tis a way

our folks have. It may be a good way or a bad way – since I came over here I think the French neither understand it nor care deeply for it – but all the same it is our way.

At the beginning we quit a wrecked town that was a regimental headquarters. Its present population was all military, French and American. The villagers who had once lived there were gone to the last one of them, and had been gone for years probably. But more than by the shattered stone walls, or by the breached and empty church with its spire shorn away, or by the tiled roofs which were roofs no longer but sieves and colanders, its altered character was set forth and proved by the absence of any manure heaps against the house fronts. In this part of the world communal prosperity is measured, I think, by the size and richness of the manure heap. It is kept alongside the homes and daily it is turned over with spades and tormented with pitchforks, against the time when it is carried forth to be spread upon the tiny farm a mile or so away. The rank ammoniacal smell of the precious fertilizer which keeps the land rich is the surest information to the nose of the approaching traveller that thrifty folk abide in the hamlet he is about entering.

But this town smelled only of dust and decay and the peculiar odour of rough-cast plastering which has been churned by wheels and hoofs and feet into a fine white silt like powdered pumice, coating everything and everybody in sight when the weather is dry, and when the weather is wet turning into a slick and slimy paste underfoot.

We came out of a colonel's billet in a narrowshouldered old two-story house, my companion and I; and crossing the little square we passed through what once upon a time had been the front wall of the principal building in the place. The front wall still stood and the doorway was unscarred, but both were like parts of stage settings, for beyond them was nothing at all save nothingness – messed-about heaps of crumbled masonry and broken shards of tiling. From the inner side one might look through the doorway, as though it had been a frame for a picture, and see a fine scape beyond of marshland and winding road and mounting hills with pine trees growing in isolated groups like the dumpings in a gentleman's park.

In what had been the garden behind the principal house the colonel's automobile was waiting. We climbed into it and rode for upward of a mile along a seamed and rutted highway that wound up and over the abbreviated mountain of which we held one side and the Germans the other. For the preceding three days there had been a faint smell of spring in the air; now there was a taste of it. One might say that spring no longer was coming but had actually come. The rushes which grew in low places were showing green near their roots and the switchy limbs of the pollard willows bore successions of tiny green buds along their lengths. Also many birds were about. There were flocks of big corbie crows in their prim notarial black. Piebald French magpies were flickering along ahead of us, always in pairs, and numbers of a small starlinglike bird, very much like our field lark in look and habit, whose throat is yellowish and tawny without and lined with pure gold within, were singing their mating songs. Bursts of amorous pipings came from every side, and as the male birds mounted in the air their breast feathers shone in the clear soft afternoon sunshine like patches of burnished copper.

Undoubtedly spring was at hand – the spring which elsewhere, in the more favoured parts of this planet, meant reawakening life and fecundity, but which here meant only opportunity for renewed offensives and for more massacres, more suffering, more wastings of life and wealth and of all the manifold gifts of Nature. The constant sound of guns on ahead of us somewhere made one think of a half-dormant giant grunting as he roused. Indeed it was what it seemed – War emerging from his hibernation and waking up to kill again. But little more than a year before it had been their war; now it was our war too, and the realisation of this difference invested the whole thing for us with a deeper meaning. No longer were we onlookers but part proprietors in the grimmest, ghastliest proceeding that ever was since conscious time began.

We whizzed along the road for the better part of a mile, part of the time through dips, the contour of which kept us hidden from spying eyes in the hostile observation pits across the ridge to the eastward, and part of the time upon the backbone of this Vosges foothill. These latter places

were shielded on their dangerous side by screens of marsh grasses woven in huge sheets ten feet high and swinging between tall poles set at six-yard intervals. There were rips and tears in these rude valances to show where chance shots from German guns had registered during the preceding few days of desultory artillery fire.

On the way we passed one full company of French infantry coming out of the front line for rest, and one contingent of our own soldiers. The Frenchmen were hampered, as French foot soldiers on the move always are, by enormous burdens draped upon them, back, flank and front; and under the dirt and dust their faces wore weary drawn lines. Laden like sumpter mules, they went by us at the heavy plodding gait of their kind, which is so different from the swaggering, swinging route step of the Yankee, and so different from the brisk clip at which the Britisher travels, even in heavy-marching order, but which all the same eats up the furlongs mighty fast.

The Americans were grouped on a little green breast of sod. At the peak of the small rounded elevation was a smaller terrace like a nipple, and from this rose one of those stone shrines so common in this corner of Europe – a stone base with a rusted iron cross bearing a figure of the Christ above it. There were a dozen or more of our boys lying or squatted here resting.

We came to a battalion headquarters, which seemed rather a high-sounding name for a collection of thatched dugouts under a bank. Here leaving the car we were turned over to a young intelligence officer, who agreed to pilot us through certain front-line defences, which our people only two days before had taken over from the French. But before we started each of us put on his iron helmet, which, next only to the derby hat of commerce, is the homeliest and the most uncomfortable design ever fashioned for wear in connection with the human head; and each one of us hung upon his breast, like a palmer's packet, his gas mask, inclosed in its square canvas case.

Single file then the three of us proceeded along a footpath that was dry where the sun had reached it and slimy with mud where it had lain in shadow, until we passed under an arbour of withered boughs and found ourselves in the mouth of the communication trench. It was wide enough in some places for two men to pass each other by scrouging, and in other places so narrow that a full-sized man bearing his accoutrements could barely wriggle his way through. Its sides were formed sometimes of shored planking set on end, but more often of withes cunningly wattled together. It is wonderful what a smooth fabric a French peasant can make with no material save bundles of pliant twigs and no tools save his two hands. Countless miles of trenches are lined with this osier work. Some of it has been there for years, but except where a shell strikes it stays put.

In depth the trench ranged from eight feet to less than six. In the deeper places we marched at ease, but in the shallow ones we went forward at a crouch, for if we had stood erect here our heads would have made fair targets for the enemy, who nowhere was more than a mile distant, and who generally was very much closer. Sometimes we trod on “duck boards” as the Americans call them, or “bath mats” in the Britisher's vernacular, laid end to end. A duck board is fabricated by putting down two scantlings parallel and eighteen inches apart and effecting a permanent union between them by means of many cross strips of wood securely nailed on, with narrow spaces between the strips so that the foothold is securer upon these corrugations than it would be on an uninterrupted expanse. It somewhat resembles the runway by which ducks advance from their duck pond up a steep bank; hence one of its names. It looks rather less the other thing for which it is named.

The duck board makes the going easier in miry places but it is a treacherous friend. Where it is not firmly imbedded fore and aft in the mud the far end of it has an unpleasant habit, when you tread with all your weight on the near end, of rising up and grievously smiting you as you pitch forward on your face. Likewise when you are in a hurry it dearly loves to teeter and slip and slosh round. However, to date no substitute for it has been found. Probably enough duck boards are in use on all the Fronts, in trenches and out of them, to make a board walk clear across our own continent. Beyond Ypres, where the British and Belgians are, I saw miles and miles of them the other day.

Here in Eastern France we sometimes footed it along these duck boards, but more often we dragged our feet in mud – sticky, clinging, affectionate yellowish-grey mud – which came up to the latches of our boots and made each rod of progress a succession of violent struggles. It was through this muck, along the narrow twistywise passage, that food and munitions must be carried up to the front lines and the wounded must be carried back. Traversing it, men, as we saw, speedily became mired to the hair roots, and wearied beyond description. Now then, magnify and multiply by ten the conditions as we found them on this day after nearly a week of fair weather and you begin to have a faint and shadowy conception of trench conditions in the height of the rainy season in midwinter, when strong men grow so tired that they drop down and drown in the semiliquid streams.

The duck board is hard on human shins and human patience but it saves life and it saves time, which in war very frequently is more valuable than lives. It was the duck board, as much as the rifle and the big gun, which enabled the Canadians to win at Passchendaele last November. With its aid they laid a wooden pathway to victory across one of the most hideous loblollies in the flooded quagmires of Flanders. Somebody will yet write a tribute to the duck board, which now gets only curses and abuse.

We had come almost to the cross trench, meeting few soldiers on the way, when a sudden commotion overhead made us squat low and crane our necks. Almost above us a boche aëroplane was circling about droning like all the bees in the world. As we looked the antiaircraft guns, concealed all about us, began firing at it. Downy dainty pompons of smoke burst out in the heavens below it and above it and all about it.

As it fled back, seemingly uninjured, out of the danger zone I was reminded of the last time before this when I had seen such a sight from just such a vantage place. But then the scene had been the plateau before Laon in the fall of 1914, and then the sky spy had been a Frenchman and then the guns which chased him away had been German guns and for companion I had a German Staff-officer.

We went on, and round the next turn encountered half a dozen youngsters in khaki, faced with mud stripings, who barely had paused in whatever they were doing to watch the brief aerial bombardment. New as they were to this game they already were accustomed to the sight of air fighting. Half a dozen times a day or oftener merely by turning their faces upward they might see the hostile raider being harried back to its hangar by defending cannon or by French planes or by both at once. Later that same day we were to see a German plane stricken in its flight by a well-placed shot from an American battery. We saw how on the instant, like a duck shot on the wing, it changed from a living, sentient, perfectly controlled mechanism into a dishevelled, wounded thing, and how it went swirling in crazy disorganised spirals down inside its own lines.

For the trip through the cross trenches which marked the forward angle of our defences we were joined by a second chaperon in the person of an infantry captain – a man of German birth and German name, born in Cologne and brought to America as a child, who at the age of forty-three had given up a paying business and left a family to volunteer for this business, and who in all respects was just as good an American as you or I, reader, can ever hope to be. It was his company that held the trenches for the time, and he volunteered to let us see what they were doing.

The physical things he showed us are by now old stories to Americans. Reading descriptions of them would be stale business for people at home who read magazines – the little dirt burrows roofed with withes and leaves, where machine guns' crews squatted behind guns whose muzzles aimed out across the debatable territory; the observation posts, where the lads on duty grumbled at the narrow range of vision provided by the periscopes and much preferred to risk their lives peeping over the parapets; the tiny rifle pits, each harbouring a couple of youngsters; the gun steps, or scarps, on which men squatted to do sniper work and to try for hostile snipers across the way; the niches in the trench sides, where hand grenades – French and British models – lay in handy reach in case of a surprise attack; the stacks of rifle and machine-gun cartridges in their appointed places all along the inner sides of the low dirt parapets; the burrows, like the overgrown nests of bank martins, into which tired

men might crawl to steal a bit of rest; the panels of thickly meshed barbed wire on light but strong metal frames so disposed that they might with instantaneous dispatch be thrust into place to block the way of invading raiders following along behind retreating defenders; the wire snares for the foes' feet, which might be dropped in the narrow footway after the retiring force had passed; and all the rest of the paraphernalia of trench warfare which the last three years and a half have produced.

Anyhow it was not these things that interested us; rather was it the bearing of our men, accustoming themselves to new duties in new surroundings; facing greater responsibilities than any of them perhaps had ever faced before in his days, amid an environment fraught with acute personal peril. And studying them I was prouder than ever of the land that bore them and sundry millions of others like unto them.

We halted at a spot where the trench was broken in somewhat and where the fresh new clods upon the dirt shelf halfway up it were all stained a strange, poisonous green colour. The afternoon before a shell had dropped there, killing one American and wounding four others. It was the fumes of the explosive which had corroded the earth to make it bear so curious a tint. This company then had had its first fatality under fire; its men had undergone the shock of seeing one of their comrades converted into a mangled fragment of a man, but they bore themselves as though they had been veterans.

In but one thing did they betray themselves as green hands, and this was in a common desire to expose themselves unnecessarily. As we went along their captain was constantly chiding them for poking their tin-hatted heads over the top, in the hope of spying out the German sharpshooters who continually shot in their direction from the coverts of a pine thicket, when they might have seen just as well through cunningly devised peepholes in the rifle pits.

"I know you aren't afraid," he said to two especially daring youngsters, "but the man who gets himself killed in this war without a reason for it is not a hero; he's just a plain damned fool, remember that."

Passing the spot where the soft damp loam was harried and the crumbs of it all dyed that diabolical greenish hue, I thought of a tale I had heard only the day before from a young Englishman who, having won his captaincy by two years of hard service, had then promptly secured a transfer to the flying corps, where, as he innocently put it, "there was a chance o' having a bit of real fun," and who now wore the single wing of an observer upon the left breast of his tunic. I had asked him what was the most dramatic thing he personally had witnessed in this war, thinking to hear some tales of air craftsmanship. He considered for a moment with his brow puckered in a conscientious effort to remember, and then he said:

"I think perhaps 'twas something that happened last spring, just before I got out of the infantry into this bally outfit. My company had been in the trenches two days and nights, and had been rather knocked about. Really the place we were in was quite a bit exposed, you know, and after we had had rather an unhappy time of it we got orders to pull out. Just as the order reached us along came a whiz-bang and burst. It killed one of my chaps dead, and half a minute later another shell dropped in the same place and covered him under tons and tons of earth, all except his right hand, which stuck out of the dirt. Quite a decent sort he was too – a good fighter and cheerful and all that sort of thing; very well liked, he was. There was no time to dig him out even if we had been able to carry his body away with us; we had to leave him right there. So as the first man passed by where he was buried he bent over and took the dead hand in his hand and shook it and said 'Goodbye, old one!' like that. All the men followed the example. Each one of us, officers included, shook the dead hand and said goodbye to the dead man; and this was the last we ever saw of him, or of that rotten old trench, either."

As nonchalantly as though he had been a paid postman going through a quiet street a volunteer mail distributor came along putting letters, papers and small mail parcels from the States into soiled eager hands. Each man, taking over what was given him, would promptly hunker down in some convenient cranny to read the news from home; news which was months old already. I saw one, a

broad-faced, pale-haired youth, reading a Slavic paper; and another, a corporal, reading one that was printed in Italian. The other papers I noted were all printed in English.

It was from a begrimed and bespattered youngster who had got a paper printed in English that I heard the news about Ty Cobb; and when you appraised the character of the boy and his comrades a mud-lined hole in the ground in Eastern France, where a machine gun stammered round the corner and the snipers sniped away to the right of him and the left of him, seemed a perfectly natural place for the discussion of great tidings in baseball. If he had undertaken to discourse upon war or Germans I should have felt disappointed in him, because on his part it would not have been natural; and if he was anything at all he was natural.

At the end of perhaps a mile of windings about in torturous going we, following after our guides, turned into a shallower side trench which debouched off the main workings. Going almost upon all fours for about sixty or seventy yards we found ourselves in a blind ending. Here was a tiny ambushade roofed over with sod and camouflaged on its one side with dead herbage, wherein two soldiers crouched. By a husky whisper floating back to us over the shoulder of the captain we learned that this was the most advanced of our listening posts. Having told us this he extended an invitation, which I accepted; and as he flattened back against the earth making himself small I wriggled past him and crawled into place to join its two silent occupants.

One of them nudging me in the side raised a finger and aimed it through a tiny peephole in the screening of dead bough and grasses. I looked where he pointed and this was what I saw:

At the level of my eyes the earth ran away at a gentle slope for a bit and then just as it reached a thicket of scrub pines, possibly two hundred feet away, rose sharply. Directly in front of me was our own tangle of rusted barbed wire. On beyond it, perhaps a hundred and sixty feet distant, where the rise began, was a second line of wire, and that was German wire, as I guessed without being told. In between, the soil was all harrowed and upturned into great cusps as though many swine had been rooting there for mast. A few straggly bushes still adhered to the sides of the shell holes, and the patches of grass upon the tortured sward displayed a greenish tinge where the saps of spring were beginning to rise from the roots.

Not far away and almost directly in front of me one of those yellow-breasted starling birds was trying his song with considerable success.

"How far away are they?" I inquired in the softest possible of whispers of the nearer-most of the hole's tenants.

"Right there in those little trees," he answered. "I ain't never been able to see any of them – they're purty smart about keepin' themselves out of sight – but there's times, 'specially toward night, when we kin hear 'em plain enough talking amongst themselves and movin' round over there. It's quiet as a graveyard now, but for a while this mornin' one of their sharpshooters got busy right over there in front of where you're lookin' now."

Involuntarily I drew my head down into my shoulders. The youth alongside laughed a noiseless laugh.

"Oh, you needn't worry," he said in my ear; "there ain't a chancet for him to see us; we're too well hid. At that, I think he must've suspected that this here lump of dirt was a shelter for our folks because twicet this mornin' he took a shot this way. One of his bullets lodged somewhere in the sods over your head but the other one hit that bush there. See where it cut the little twig off."

I peered where he indicated and made out a ragged stump almost within arm's reach of me, where a willow sprout had been shorn away. The sap was oozing from the top like blood from a fresh wound. My instructor went on:

"But after the second shot he quit. One of our fellers back behind us a piece took a crack at him and either he got him or else the Heinie found things gettin' too warm for him and pulled his freight back into them deep woods further up the hill. So it's been nice and quiet ever since."

The captain wormed into the burrow, filling it until it would hold no more.

“Is this your first close-up peep at No Man’s Land?” he inquired in as small a voice as his vocal cords could make.

Before I could answer the private put in:

“It might a-been No Man’s Land oncet, cap’n, but frum now on it’s goin’ to be all Amurikin clear out to them furtherest wires yonder.”

So that was how and when I found the title for this chapter. Everything considered I think it makes a very good title, too. I only wish I had the power to put as much of the manifest spirit of our soldiers into what I have here written as is compassed in the caption I have borrowed.

What happened thereafter was largely personal so far as it related to my companion and me, but highly interesting from our viewpoint. We had emerged from the front-line trench on our way back. In order to avoid a particularly nasty bit of footing in the nearermost end of the communication work we climbed out of the trench and took a short cut across a stretch of long-abandoned meadowland. We thought we were well out of sight of the Germans, who at that point were probably half a mile away.

A cup of land formed a natural shield from any eyes except eyes in an aëroplane – so we thought – and besides there were no aëroplanes about. Once over the edge of the trench and down into the depression we felt quite safe; anyway the firing that was going on seemed very far away. We slowed up our gait. From dragging our feet through the mire we were dripping wet with sweat, so I hauled off my coat. This necessitated a readjustment of belt and gasmask straps. Accordingly all three of us – the young intelligence officer, my comrade and I – took advantage of the halt to smoke. The two others lit cigarettes but I preferred something stronger.

I was trying to light a practical cigar with a property match – which is a very common performance on the part of my countrymen in this part of the world – when a noise like the end of everything – a nasty, whiplike crash – sounded at the right of us, and simultaneously a German shell struck within a hundred feet of us, right on the rim of the little hollow in which we had stopped, throwing a yellow geyser of earth away up into the air and peppering our feet and legs with bits of gravel.

So then we came on away from there. I chucked away my box of matches, which were French and therefore futile, and I must have mislaid my cigar, which was American and therefore priceless, for I have never seen it since. Anyway I had for the time lost the desire for tobacco. There are times when one cares to smoke and times when one does not care to smoke. As we scuttled for the shelter of the trench four more shells fell in rapid succession and burst within a short distance of where the first one had gone off, and each time we felt the earth shake under our feet and out of the tails of our eyes saw the soil rising in a column to spread out mushroom fashion and descend in pattering showers.

So, using the trench as an avenue, we continued to go away from there; and as we went guns continued to bay behind us. An hour later, back at battalion headquarters, we learned that the enemy dropped seventy shells – five-inch shells – in the area that we had traversed. But unless one of them destroyed the cigar I left behind me it was all clear waste of powder and shrapnel, as I am pleased to be able to report.

That night just after dusk forty-five of our boys, with twice as many Frenchmen, went over the top at the very point we had visited, and next morning, true enough, and for quite a while after that, No Man’s Land was “All Amurikin clear out to them furtherest wires.”

CHAPTER III. HELL'S FIRE FOR THE HUNS

THE surroundings were as French as French could be, but the supper tasted of home. We sat at table, two of us being correspondents and the rest of us staff officers of a regiment of the Rainbow Division; and the orderlies brought us Hamburger steak richly perfumed with onion, and good hot soda biscuit, and canned tomatoes cooked with cracker crumbs and New Orleans molasses, and coffee, and fried potatoes; and to end up with there were genuine old-fashioned doughnuts – “fried holes,” the Far Westerners call them.

The mingled aromas of these rose like familiar incense from strange altars, for the room wherein all of us, stout and willing trenchermen, sat and supped was the chief room of what once upon a time, before the war came along and cracked down upon the land, had been some prosperous burgher's home on the main street of a drowsy village cuddled up in a sweet and fertile valley under the shoulders of the Vosges Mountains.

From a niche in the corner a plaster saint, finished off in glaring Easter-egg colours, regarded us with one of his painted eyes, the other being gone. The stove had been carried away, either by the owner when he fled, away back in 1914, or by the invading Hun before he retreated to his present lines a few miles distant; but a segment of forgotten stovepipe protruded like a waterspout gone dry, from its hole above the mantelpiece. On the plastered wall of battered, broken blue cast, behind the seat where the colonel ruled the board, hung a family portrait of an elderly gentleman with placid features but fierce and indomitable whiskers. The picture was skewed at such an angle the whiskers appeared to be growing out into space sidewise. Generations of feet had worn grooves in the broad boards of the floor, which these times was never free of mud stains, no matter how often the orderlies might rid up the place. So far and so much the setting was French.

But stained trench coats of American workmanship dangled from pegs set in the plastering, each limply suggestive in its bulges and its curves of the shape of the man who wore it through most of his waking hours. The mantelshelf was burdened with gas masks and saucepan hats of pressed steel. A small trestle that was shoved up under one of the two grimed front windows bore a litter of American newspapers and American magazines. As for the doughnuts, they were very crisp and spicy, as good Yankee doughnuts should be. I had finished my second one and was reaching for my third one when, without warning, a very creditable and realistic imitation of the crack o' doom transpired. Seemingly from within fifty yards of the building which sheltered us Gabriel's trumpet sounded forth in an ear-cracking, earth-racking, hair-lifting blare calculated to raise goose flesh on iron statuary. The dishes danced upon the table; the coffee slopped out of the cups; and the stovepipe over the chimneypiece slobbered down a trickle of ancient soot that was, with age, turned brown and caky. Beneath our feet we could feel the old house rocking.

Through the valley and across to the foothill beyond, the obscenity of sound went ringing and screeching, vilely profaning the calm that had descended upon the country with the going-down of the sun.

As its last blasphemous echoes came back to us in a diminishing cadence one of our hosts, a major, leaned forward with a cheerful smile on his face and remarked as he glanced at the dial of his wrist watch: “There she goes – right on the minute!”

Sure enough, there she went. Right and left, before us and behind us, from the north of us and from the south of us, and from the east and the west of us, big guns and small ones, field pieces, howitzers, mortars and light batteries, both French and American but mostly French, joined in, like the wind, the wood and the brass of an orchestra obeying the baton of the leader. The coffee could not stay in the dancing cups at all. The venerable house was beset by an ague which ran up its shaken sides from the foundation stones to the roof rafters, where the loosened tiles clicked together like chattering teeth, and back down again to the foundations.

The thing which we had travelled upward of a hundred miles in one of Uncle Sam's automobiles to witness and afterward to write about was starting. The overture was on; the show would follow. And it was high time we claimed our reserved seats in the front row.

I use the word "show" advisedly, because in the glossary of phrases born out of this war anything in the nature of a thrust or a blow delivered against the enemy is a show. A great offensive on a wide front is a big show; a raid by night into hostile territory is a little show; a feint by infantry, undertaken with intent to deceive the other side at a given point while the real attack is being launched at a second given point, and accompanied by much vain banging of gunpowder and much squibbing-off of rockets and flares and star shells is a "Chinese show" – to quote the cant or trade name; I think the English first used the term, but our fellows have been borrowing ever since the first contingent came over last year.

This particular show to which we had been bidden as special guests was to be a foray by night over the tops preceded by artillery preparation. Now such things as these happen every night or every day somewhere on the Western Front; times are when they happen in different sectors at the rate of half a dozen within the twenty-four hours. In the dispatches each one means a line or so of type; in the field it means a few prisoners, a few fresh graves, a few yards of trench work blasted away, a few brier patches of barbed wire to be repatched; in the minds of most readers of the daily papers it means nothing but the tiresome reiteration of a phrase that is tiresome and staled. But to us it meant something. It was our boys who were going in and going over; and our guns were to be partners in the prior enterprise of blazing the way for them.

No matter how much one may read of the cost of war operations in dollars and in time and in labour, I am sure one does not really begin to appreciate the staggering expenditure of all three that is requisite to accomplish even the smallest of aggressive movements until one has opportunity, as we now had, to see with one's own eyes what necessarily had to be done by way of preliminary.

Take for instance the present case. The raid in hand was to be no great shakes of a raid. Forty-five Americans and three times their number of Frenchmen would participate in it. Within twenty minutes, if all went well – and it did – they would have returned from their excursion into hostile territory, with prisoners perhaps, or else with notes and letters taken from the bodies of dead enemies which might serve to give the Intelligence Department a correct appraisal of the character and numbers of the troops opposing us in this sector. In the vast general scheme of the campaign now about renewing itself it would be no more than an inconsequential pin prick in the foe's side – a thing to be done and mentioned briefly in the dispatches, and then forgotten.

But mark you how great and how costly the artillery accompaniment must be. More than a hundred guns, ranging in calibre from a nine-inch bore down to a three-inch bore, would join in the preparation and in the barrage fire. More than ten thousand rounds of ammunition would be fired, this not taking into account the supplies for the forty-three machine guns and for the batteries of trench mortars which were to cooperate. Many a great battle of our Civil War had been fought out with the expenditure on both sides of one-tenth or one-twentieth part the gross weight of metal that would be directed at the boche beyond the ridge. The cost for munitions alone, excluding every other item of a score of items, might run to a quarter of a million dollars; might conceivably run considerably beyond that figure. And the toil performed and the pains taken beforehand to insure success – wowie!

For days past the French had been bringing up pieces and massing them here for the purpose of this one little stab at the Hun's armoured flank. As we travelled hither we had seen the motor-drawn guns labouring along the wide high roads; had seen the ammunition trucks crawling forward in long lines; had seen at every tiny village behind the Front the gun crews resting in bad streets named for good saints. By the same token, on the following day, which was Sunday, we were to see the same thing repeated, except that then the procession would be headed the other way – going back to repeat the same wearisome proceeding elsewhere.

Days, too, had been spent in planning the raid; in mapping out and plotting out the especial spot chosen for attack; in coordinating all the arms of the service which would be employed; in planning signals for the show and drilling its actors. And now all this preparation requisite and essential to the carrying out of the undertaking had been completed; and all the guns had been planted in their appointed places and craftily hidden; and all the shells had been brought up – thousands of tons of them – and properly bestowed; and the little handful of men who were to have a direct hand in the performance of the main job, for which all the jest would be purely preliminary, had been chosen and sent forward to ordained stations, there to await the word. And so up we got from table and went out across a threshold, which quaked like a living thing as we crossed it, to see the spectacular side of the show.

Inside the house the air had been churned up and down by the detonations. Outside literally it was being rent into fine bits. One had the feeling that the atmosphere was all shredded up fine, so that instead of lying in layers upon the earth it floated in tom and dishevelled strips; one had the feeling that the upper ether must be full of holes and voids and the rushing together of whipped and eddying wind currents. This may sound incoherent, but I find in my vocabulary no better terminology to convey a sense of the impression that possessed me as I stepped forth into the open.

We had known in advance that there were guns in great number disposed about the surrounding terrain. Walking about under military guidance in the afternoon we had seen sundry batteries ensconced under banks, in thickets and behind low natural parapets where the earth ridged up; and had noted how cunningly they had been concealed from aeroplanes scouting above and from the range of field glasses in the German workings on beyond.

But we had no notion until then that there were so many guns near by or that some of them were so close to the village where we had stopped to eat. We must almost have stepped on some of them without once suspecting their presence. The ability of the French so well to hide a group of five big pieces, each with a carriage as large as a two-ton truck and each with a snout projecting two or three yards beyond it, and with a limber projecting out behind it, shows what advances the gentle arts of ambush and camouflage have made since this war began. Seen upon the open road a big cannon painted as it is from muzzle to breach with splotchings of yellows and browns and ochres seems, for its size, the most conspicuous thing in the world. But once bedded down in its nest, with its gullet resting upon the ring back of earth that has been thrown up for it, and a miracle of protective colouration instantaneously is achieved. Its whole fabric seems to melt into and become a part of the soil and the withered herbage and the dirt-coloured sandbags which encompass it abaft, alongside and before. It is the difference between a mottled snake crawling across a brick sidewalk and the same snake coiled and motionless amid dried leaves and boulders in the woods. Nature always has protected her wild creatures thus; it took the greatest of wars for mankind to learn a lesson that is as old as creation is.

Standing there in the square of the wrecked village we could sense that in all manner of previously unsuspected coverts within the immediate vicinity guns were at work – guns which ranged from the French seventy-fives to big nine-inch howitzers. As yet twilight had not sufficiently advanced for us to see the flash of the firing, and of course nowadays there is mighty little smoke to mark the single discharge of a single gun; but we could tell what went on by the testimony of a most vast tumult.

We were ringed about by detonations; by jars which impacted against the earth like blows of a mighty sledge on a yet mightier smithy; by demoniac screechings which tore the tortured welkin into still finer bits; by fierce clangings of metal; by thudding echoes floating back from where the charges had burst; by the more distant voices of certain German guns replying to our 'salvo as our gunners dedicated the dusk to all this unloosened hellishness and offered up to the evening star their sulphurous benedictions. It was Thor, Vulcan, Tubal Cain, Bertha Krupp and the Bethlehem Steel Works all going at full blast together; it was a thousand Walpurgis Nights rolled into one, with Dante's Inferno out-Infernoed on the side. And yet by a curious phenomenon we who stood there with this

hand-made, man-made demonism unleashed and prevalent about us could hear plainly enough what a man five feet away who spoke in a fairly loud voice might be saying.

“You think this is brisk, eh?” asked our friend, the major. “Well, it’s only the starter; the ball has just opened.”

He tucked his thumbs into the girth harnessings of his Sam Browne and spraddled his legs wide apart.

“Wait,” he promised; “just wait until all the guns get into action in twenty minutes or half an hour from now. Then you’ll really hear something. Take it from me, you will. And in the meantime we might go along with these fellows yonder, don’t you think so?”

Through the deepening twilight we followed a party of French infantrymen up a gentle slope to the crest of a little hill behind the shattered town, where the cemetery was. In this light the horizon-blue uniforms took on the colour tone of the uniforms worn by the Confederates in our Civil War, but their painted metal helmets looked like polished turtle shells. They slouched along, as the poilu loves to slouch along when not fully accoutred, their hands in their breeches pockets and their halfreefed putties flapping upon their shanks. We trailed them, and some of our soldiers, officers and enlisted men, trailed us.

Half an hour later I was to witness a curious and yet, I think, a characteristic thing. Most of the American privates grew tired of the spectacle that was spread out before them and slipped away to their billets to go to bed – this, too, in spite of the fact that scarcely one of them had ever witnessed cannonading on so extensive a scale or indeed on any scale before. Nevertheless, the bombardment speedily became to them a commonplace and rather tedious affair.

“Come on, you fellows,” I heard one tall stripling say to a couple of his mates. “Me for the hay. If the Heinies would only slam a few big ones back in this direction there might be some fun, but as it is, there’s nothin’ doin’ round here for me.”

But the Frenchmen, all intent and alert, stayed until the show ended. Yet a thing like this was an old story to them, for they were veterans at the game whereat our men still were the greenest of novices. I suppose there was an element of theatricalism in the sight and in the fury of sound which appealed to the Gallic sense of drama that was in them. Be the cause what it was, the thing occurred just as I am telling it.

We mounted the hill and rounded the stone wall of the burying ground. The village in the hollow below had been quite battered out of its original contours, but strangely enough the cemetery, through the years of intermittent fighting and shell firing that had waged about it, was almost unscathed. It was a populous place, the cemetery was, as we had noted earlier in the day. Originally it had contained only the graves of the inhabitants, but now these were outnumbered twenty to one by mounds covering French soldiers who had fallen in action or had died of wounds or natural causes in this immediate vicinity. The same is true of hundreds of other graveyards in this country; is probably true of most of France’s cemeteries.

I have seen places where the wooden crosses made hedge rows, line behind line for miles on a stretch, and so thick-set were the markers that, viewed from the distance, they conveyed the impression of paling fences.

France has become a land of these wooden crosses and these six-foot mounds. It is part of the toll – a small part of the toll – she has paid for the right of freedom and in the fight to make this world once more a fit place for decent beings to abide in.

On the knoll behind the cemetery we came to a halt. Night was creeping down from the foothills, making the earth black where before it had faded to a common grey; but overhead the sky still showed in the last faint traces of the afterglow, with the blue of an unflawed turquoise against which the stars stood out like crumbs of pure gold. The broken and snagged roof lines of the clumped houses of the town were vanishing; the mountain beyond seemed creeping up nearer and nearer to us. More plainly than before we could mark out the positions of the nearest batteries for now at each discharge of

a gun a darting jab of red flame shot forth. Where all the guns of a battery were being served and fired in rapid succession the blazes ran together like hemstitches, making one think of a fiery needle plying in and out of a breadth of black velvet. Farther away the flashes were blurred into broader and paler flares so that on three sides of us the horizon was circled with constantly rising, constantly dying glows like heat lightning on a summer night.

The points where shells fell and burst were marked for us with red geysers, which uprose straight instead of slanting out at a slightly upward tilted angle, as did the spoutings from the mouths of the guns. As nearly as we might tell the enemy fire was comparatively light. Only we could see upon the far flanks of the little mountain in front of us a distant flickering illumination, which showed that his counter batteries were busy. On every hand white signal rockets rose frequently, and occasionally flares hung burning halfway up the walls of the sky.

Of a sudden all hell broke loose directly behind us. I use the term without desire to be profane and in a conscientious effort to give some notion of a physical occurrence. At any rate it seemed to us that all hell let loose. What really happened was that two guns of a French battery of nine-inch heavies, from their post directly in our rear and not more than an eighth of a mile distant from us, had fired simultaneously, and their shells had travelled directly over our heads, aiming for an unseen objective miles forward.

Then, and every time thereafter that one of the nine-inchers spewed its bellyful of high explosive forth, the sound of it dominated and overmastered all other sounds. First there was the crash – a crash so great that our inadequate tongue yields neither adjective nor noun fitly to comprehend it, the trouble being that the language has not kept step with the developments of artillery in this war. Our dictionary is going to need an overhauling when this job of licking Germany is finished.

Well, first off there was the crash that was like the great granddaddy of all the crashes in the world, making one feel that its vocal force must have folded up the heavens like a scroll. Then, as a part of it, would come the note of the projectile rushing through the ripped ether above us, and this might be likened to a long freight train travelling on an invisible aerial right of way at a speed a thousand times greater than any freight train ever has or ever will attain. Then there would float back a tremendous banshee wail, and finally, just before the roar of the shell's explosion, a whine as though a lost puppy of the size of ten elephants were wandering through the skies, complaining in a homesick key as it went – the whole transaction taking place in an infinitesimal part of the time which has here been required for me to set down my own auricular impressions of it, and incidentally creating an infinitely more vivid impression than possible can be suggested by my lame and inadequate metaphors.

Comparatively, there was a hush in the clamour and clangour succeeding this happening – not that the firing in any way abated, for rather was it augmented now – but only that it seemed so to me; and in the lull, away off on our left, I could for the first time make out the whirring, ripping sound of a machine gun or a row of machine guns.

The major consulted the luminous face of his wrist watch.

“I thought so,” he vouchsafed. “It’s time for the barrage to start and for the boys to go over the top. Now we ought to see some real fireworks that’ll make what has gone on up to now seem puny and trifling and no account.”

Which, all things considered, was an underestimation of what ensued hard on the heels of his announcement. Personally I shall not attempt to describe it; the size of the task leaves me abashed and mortified. But if the reader in the goodness of his heart and abundance of his patience will re-read what already I have written in an effort to tell him what I had heard and had seen and had felt, and will multiply it by five, adding, say, fifty per cent of the sum total for good measure, he will have, I trust, a measure of comprehension of the ensemble. But he must do the work; my founts are dry.

Furthermore, he must imagine the augmented hullabaloo – which should be pronounced hella-baloo – going on for twenty-five minutes at such rate that no longer might one distinguish separate

reports – save only when the devil's fast freight aforementioned passed over our heads – but all were mingled and fused into one composite, continuous, screeching, whining, wailing, splitting chorus.

Twenty-five minutes thus, and then a green rocket went up from near the forward post of command where those directly in charge of the operation watched, and before it had descended in a spatter of emerald sparks which dimmed out and died as they neared the earth the firing from our batteries began to lessen in volume and in rapidity. Within those twenty-five minutes the real object of the operation had taken place. Either the raiders had gone over the top or they had been driven back in; either they had accomplished their design of penetrating the enemy's second line of defences or they had failed. In any event the movement, all carefully timed and all mathematically worked out, was as good as over. To learn better at firsthand exactly what results had been obtained we returned to the village and passed through it and picking our way in the inky darkness went along a road toward the post of command.

The road, though, was deserted, and after a bit we retraced the way back to the building where we had supped and made ourselves comfortable in the room of the colonel of the regiment holding the line at this particular point. An orderly brought us the last of the doughnuts to nibble on, and upon the ancient hearthstone we took turns at cracking French hazelnuts with a hammer while at intervals the building jarred to the thumpings of such guns as continued to fire.

Nearly an hour passed, and then in came the colonel and with him a French liaison officer, both of them with tired lines about their mouths. They had been under a strain, as their looks showed, and they flung themselves down on adjacent cots with little sighs of relief and told us the news. In a way the raid had been a success; in another way it had not. All the men who went over the top had returned again after penetrating up to the German secondary trenches. Several of the Frenchmen had been wounded, not seriously. None of the Americans had anything worse than barbed-wire cuts and bruised shins to show for his experience.

Returning, the raiders reported that our fire had completely obliterated the hostile front trench and had ripped its protecting wire jungle into broken ends. Likewise it had completely abolished such boches as had tarried too long in the enemy's forward pits and posts. Of these unfortunates only dismembered trunks had been found, with one exception. This exception was a body lying in a shell hole, and not badly mangled but completely nude. By some freak the shell which killed the German had stripped him stark naked down to his boots.

But the total of prisoners taken was zero, and likewise it was cipher. Forewarned by the preparatory volleying of the big guns playing on his counter batteries, the wily German, following his recently adopted custom, had, before the barrage began, drawn in his defending forces from the first line, leaving behind only a few, who fell victims to the first few direct hits scored by our side; and therein the raid had failed.

In the next sector on our right, where a daylight raid had been undertaken two hours before ours got under way, the raiders had suffered a few casualties but had brought back two wounded captives; and in another sector, on our left, yet a third raid had produced four prisoners. I saw the unhappy four the following day on their way back to a laager under guard. One of them was a middle-aged, sickly-looking man, and the remaining three were weedy, half-grown, bewildered boys; very different looking, all of them, from the prime sinewy material which formed the great armies I had seen pouring through Belgium in the late summer of 1914.

All four of them, moreover, were wall-eyed with apprehension, and flinchy and altogether most miserable looking. Not even a night of fair treatment and a decent breakfast had served to cure them of a delusion that Americans would take prisoners alive only for the pleasure of putting them to death at leisure afterward. What struck me as even more significant of the change in the personnel of the Kaiser's present army – conceding that these specimens might be accepted as average samples of the mass – was that not one of them wore an Iron Cross on his blouse. From personal observations in the first year of the war I had made up my mind that the decoration of the Iron Cross in the German

Army was like vaccination in our own country, being, as one might say, compulsory. Here, though, was evidence either that the War Lord was running out of metal or that his system had slipped a cog. Likewise it was to develop later that the prisoners I saw wore paper underclothing.

But I am getting ahead of my story. The colonel, lying back on his cot with his head on a canvas pillow and his muddled legs crossed, said at the conclusion of his account:

“Well, we failed to bag any live game, but anyhow our boys behaved splendidly. They went over the top cheering and they came back in singing. You’d never have guessed they were green hands at this game or that this was the first time they had ever crossed No Man’s Land.”

To the truth of a part of what he said I could testify personally, for late that afternoon I had seen the squad marching forward to the spot where they were to line up for the sally later. They had been like schoolboys on a lark. If any one of them was afraid he refused to betray it; if any one of them was nervous at the prospect before him he hid his nervousness splendidly well. Only, from them as they passed us, they radiated a great pride in having been chosen for the job, and a great confidence in its outcome, and a great joy that to them thus early in their soldiering had come the coveted chance to show the stuff that was in them. And while they passed, our friend the major, standing alongside watching them go by, had said with all the fervency of a man uttering a prayer:

“By Jove, aren’t they bully! No officer could ask for finer men than that for his outfit. But they’re leaving oodles of disappointment behind them at that.”

“How’s that?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you how,” he said: “Yesterday when the scheme for this thing was completed we were told that forty-five men out of our regiment were to be allowed to take part in tonight’s doings. That meant fifteen men out of each battalion. So yesterday evening at parade I broke the glad tidings to my battalion and called for volunteers, first warning the men as a matter of routine that the work would be highly dangerous and no man need feel called upon to offer himself. Do you want to know how many men out of that battalion volunteered? Every single solitary last dog-goned one of them, that’s all! They came at me like one man. So to save as much heartburning as possible I left the choice of fifteen out of nearly a thousand to the top sergeants of the companies. And in all your life you never saw fifteen fellows so tickled as the fifteen who were selected, and you never saw nine hundred and odd so downhearted as the lot who failed to get on the list.

“That wasn’t all of it, either,” he went on. “Naturally there were some men who had been off on detail of one sort or another and hadn’t been at parade. When they came last night and found out what had happened in their absence – well, they simply raised merry blue hell, that’s all. They figured somehow they’d been cheated. As a result I may say that my rest was somewhat broken. Every few minutes, all night long, some boy would break into my room, and in the doorway salute and say, in a broken-hearted way: ‘Now look here, major, this ain’t square. I got as much right to go over the top as any feller in this regiment has, and just because I happened to be away this evenin’ here I am chiselled out of my chance to go along. Can’t you please, sir, ask the adjutant or somebody to let me in on this?’

“That substantially was what every one of them said. And when I turned them down some of ‘em went away crying like babies.”

He glanced away across the blue hill. “I guess maybe I did a little crying myself.”

I thought about what the major had said and what the colonel had said and what I myself had seen after I had climbed some shaky stairs to be bedded down for the night on a pallet of blankets upon the floor of a room where several tired-out officers already snored away, oblivious of the reverberations of the shelling from our guns and from the enemy’s, which went on until nearly daybreak.

In the morning I got insight into another phase of the enlisted Yank’s understanding. We came downstairs to breakfast – to a Sunday morning breakfast. For the moment a Sabbath calm hung over the wrecked town and over the country roundabout; all was as peaceful as a Quaker meeting. Red, the colonel’s orderly, stood in the doorway picking his teeth. Red is six feet two inches tall, and

disproportionately narrow. He is a member of a regiment recruited in the Middle West, but he hails from the Panhandle of Texas, and betrays the fact every time he opens his mouth. At the moment of our approach he was addressing an unseen and presumably a sympathetic listener beyond the threshold:

“Me, I’m, plum’ outdone with these here French people,” I heard him drawl. “Here we’ve been camped amongst ‘em fer goin’ on four months and they ain’t learnt English yet. You’d think they’d want to know how to talk to people in a reg’lar honest-to-God language – but no, seein’ seemin’ly not a-tall. I’d be ashamed to be so ignorunt and show it. Course oncet in a while you do run acrost one of ‘em that’s picked up a word here and there; but that’s about all.

“Now frinstance you take that nice-lookin’ little woman with the black eyes and the shiny teeth that runs that there little store in this here last town we stayed a spell in before we come on up here. I never could remember the name of that there town – it was so outlandish soundin’ – but you remember the woman, don’t you? Well, there’s a case in p’int. She was bright enough lookin’ but she was like all the rest – it seemed like she jest couldn’t or jest wouldn’t pick up enough reg’lar words to help her git around. Ef I went in her place and asked her fer sardines she’d know what I meant right off and hand ‘em over, but ef I wanted some cheese she didn’t have no idea whut I was talkin’ about. Don’t it jest beat all!”

CHAPTER IV. ON THE THRESHOLD OF BATTLE

WE left Paris at an early hour of March 25, which was the morning of the fourth day of perhaps the greatest battle in the history of this or any other war, and of the third day of the bombardment of Paris by the long-range steel monster which already had become famous as the latest creation of the Essen workshops.

There were three of us and no more – Raymond Carroll, Martin Green and I. To each of the three the present excursion was in the nature of a reunion. For more than six years we held down adjoining desks in the city room of a New York evening newspaper. Since we parted, Carroll and I to take other berths and Green to bide where he was, this had been the first time we had met on the same assignment.

I counted myself lucky to be in their company, for two better newspaper men never walked in shoe leather. Carroll among reporters is what Elihu Root is among corporation lawyers. There are plenty of men in the journalistic craft who know why certain facts pertinent to the proper telling of a tale in print may not be secured; he, better than almost any man I ever ran across in this business, knows how these facts may be had, regardless of intervening obstacles. In his own peculiar way, which is a calm, quiet, detached way, Green is just as effective. When it comes to figuring where unshirted Hades is going to break loose next and getting first upon the spot he is a regular Nathan Bedford Forrest. His North American sanity, which is his by birth, and his South of Ireland wit, which is his by inheritance, give strength and savour to what he writes once he has assembled the details in that card index of a mind of his.

We left Paris, heading north by east in the direction whence came in dim reverberations the never-ending sound of the big guns firing in the biggest of all big engagements. Through the courtesy of friends who are members of the French Government we bore special passes admitting us to the Soissons area. Later we were to learn that we were the only individuals not actively concerned in military operations who at particularly momentous time had been thus favoured, all other such passes having been cancelled; and by the same lucky token we are, I believe, the only three newspaper men of any nationality whatsoever who may lay claim to having witnessed at first-hand any part of the close-up fighting in the most critical period and at one of the most critical spots along the crest of the culminating German offensive of this present year of grace and gunpowder, 1918.

Indeed, so far as the available information goes, I think we were the only practitioners of the writing trade who actually got to the actual Front in the first week of the push. Whether any of our calling have got there in the succeeding weeks, I doubt. These times the war correspondent, so called, does not often enjoy such opportunities. After the army has dug itself in is another matter; then, within limitations, he may go pretty much where he pleases to go. But when the shove is on he stays behind, safely at the rear with the rest of the camp followers, and compiles his dispatches from the official communications, fattening them out with details out of the accounts of eyewitnesses and occasionally of participants.

For the three of us, though, was to be vouchsafed the chance which comes but once in the modern newspaperman's life, and sometimes not then. By a combination of rare luck and yet more rare luck we not only got to the Front but we got clear through it. As I write these lines I figuratively pat myself on the back at the thought of having seen what I never expected to see when I landed on French soil less than a month ago. At the same time it behooves me to disclaim for the members of our party that any special sagacity on our part figured in the transaction. Good fortune came flitting along and perched on our shoulders, that's all.

If our passes had shared the common fate of those other passes in being annulled, if any one charged with authority had seen fit to halt us, if any one of a half dozen other things had or had not befallen us – we never should have gone where we did go.

Except that we three were the only passengers on the train who did not wear French uniforms, and except that the train ran very slowly, nothing happened on the journey to distinguish it from any other wartime journey on a railroad where always there is to be heard the distant booming of the guns mingling with the clickety-clank of the car wheels, and where always the sight of all manner of military activities is to be viewed from the car windows.

In a deep cut we halted. When we had waited there for perhaps twenty minutes a kindly officer volunteered the information in broken English that the station at Soissons was being shelled and that if we intended to enter the town it behooved us to walk in. So we took up our traps and walked.

Through old trenches where long-abandoned German defences once had run in zigzags across the flanks of the hills we laboured up to the top, to find the road along the crest cumbered and in places almost clogged with marching troops on their way back to rest billets, and with civilians fleeing southward from Soissons or from evacuated villages within the zone of active hostilities. We seemingly were the only civilians going in; all those we met on that three-mile hike were coming out. To me the spectacle was strikingly and pathetically reminiscent of Belgium in mid-August of 1914 – old men trudging stolidly ahead with loads upon their bent backs; women, young and old, dragging carts or pushing shabby baby carriages that were piled high with their meagre belongings; grave-faced children trotting along at their elders' skirts; wearied soldiers falling out of the line to add to their already heavy burdens as they relieved some half-exhausted member of the exodus of an unwieldy pack. Over the lamentable procession hung a fog of gritty chalk particles that had been winnowed up by the plodding feet. Viewed through the cloaking dust the figures drifted past us like the unreal shapes of a dream. I saw one middle-aged sergeant, his whiskers powdered white and his face above the whiskers masked in a sweaty white paste like a circus clown's, who, for all that he was in heavy marching order, had a grimed mite of a baby snuggled up to the breast of his stained tunic, with its little feet dangling in the crisscross of his leather gear and its bobbing head on his shoulder. He carried the baby with one hand and with the other hand he dragged his rifle; and he looked down smiling at the bedraggled little mother who travelled alongside him shoving before her a barrow in which another child sat on a pillow of bed clothes.

I saw two infantrymen slide down a steep embankment to give aid to an old woman who struggled with a bundle almost as large as herself, and then, having accomplished the job, running with their accoutrements slapping against their legs to catch up with their company. I saw scores of sights such as this, and I did not hear one word of complaint uttered, nor did I look into one face that expressed aught save courage and patience. And seeing these things, multiplied over and over again, I said to myself then, as I say to myself now, that I do not believe Almighty God in His infinite mercy, designed that such people as these should ever be conquered.

Only one person spoke to us. A captain, grinning at us as he plodded by at the head of his company, said with a rearward flirt of his thumb over his shoulders: "No good, no good! much boom-boom!"

Much boom-boom was emphatically right. Over the clustered tops of the city the hostile shells were cracking, and frequently to our ears there came along with the smashing notes of the explosives the clatter of tumbling walls and smashing tiles. Drawing nearer we divined that the cannonading was directed mainly at the railroad station, so skirting to the left of the district under fire we made our way through almost deserted side streets to the centre of the town.

Hardly a house or a wall along our route but bore marks of punishment. Some were fallen into heaps of ruins; some merely were pecked-and scarred, with corners bitten out of the walls and chimneys broken into fantastic designs. Indeed we found out later that only one structure in Soissons had escaped damage in the shelling which went on intermittently in the earlier years of the war and which the Germans, with a sort of futile, savage fury, had lately renewed from their lines twelve miles away to the northward.

This sort of thing appears to be a favourite trick with our enemies. A village or a town may be abandoned by all save a few helpless citizens, living, God only knows how, in the litter of their homes; the place may be of absolutely no military value to the Allies; possibly no troop? are quartered there and no batteries or wagon trains are stationed within miles of it; but all the same when the frenzy of their madness descends upon them the Huns will level and loose their batteries upon the spot and make of the hideous hash which it has become a still more hideous hash. It is as though in sheer wantonness they kicked a corpse.

We skirted the sides of the wonderful old cathedral, which since 1914 has stood for the most part in ruins, with its beautiful stained windows – which never can be replaced, since the art of making such glass as this has been lost – lying underfoot in broken splinters of many colours. Just off the main square we secured quarters in a typical French inn of the second class, a small place with a grandiloquent name. Mainly the shops and houses in the neighbourhood were closed and their owners gone away, but the proprietor of the little hotel and his family and his help still abided under their belaboured roof. Plainly their motto was “Business as Usual.”

Their only guests were a few American Red Cross workers, both men and women; a few American officers of the transport service; and a few French officers. But that day at noon, so we were told, the whole staff turned in and cooked and served, free of charge, a plentiful hot meal to two hundred refugees, who staggered in afoot from districts now overrun by the advancing Germans. These poor folk were all departed when we arrived; French camions and American motor trucks had carried them away to temporary asylums beyond the limit of the shelling, and for us there was abundant accommodation – seats at the common dining table, chambers on the second floor, and standing room in the deep wine cellars down below if we cared to occupy them when the bombardment became heavier or when hostile æoplanes circled over to drop down bombs. The members of the ménage, as we learned later, slept regularly down among the casks and wine bottles, because nearly every night for a week past enemy airmen had been circling about doing what hurt they could to the town and its remaining inhabitants.

From the single shattered window of the bedroom to which I was assigned I could look out and down across the narrow roadway upon a smaller house which had caught the full force of a big shell. The thing must have happened within a day or two, for the splintered woodwork and caved-in masonry had not yet begun to wear the weathered, crumbly look that comes to débris after a few weeks of exposure in this rainy climate, and there was a fresh powdering of dust upon the mass of wreckage before the door. Curiously enough the explosive which had reduced the interior of the building to a jumble of ruination left most of the roof rafters intact, and to them still adhered tiles in a sort of ordered pattern, with gaps between the red squares, so that the effect might be likened to a kind of lacy architectural lingerie.

Any moment similar destruction might be visited upon the hotel opposite, but, despite the constant and the imminent danger, the big-bodied, broad-faced proprietor and his trim small wife were seemingly as tranquil as though they lived where the roar of guns was never heard. The man who looks upon the French as an excitable race has only to come here now, to this land, to learn his error and to realise that beneath their surface emotionalism they have splendid reserve forces of resolution and fortitude. By my way of reasoning, it is with these people not merely a case of getting used to a thing – it is something more than that, something deeper than that. It is a pure, clean courage cast in the matrix of a patient heroism which buoys them up to carry on the ordinary undertakings of life amid conditions abnormal and disordered to the point of being almost intolerable when endured for weeks and months and years on end.

Having established ourselves, we set about the task of securing the coveted transportation up to the vicinity of the planes of contact between the Allies and the enemy. The shelling had somewhat abated since our arrival, so we made so bold as to trudge across town to the railroad station, encountering but few persons on the way. In the immediate neighbourhood of the station the evidences

of recent strafing were thicker even than in other parts of the old city. Where an hour before a shell had blown two loitering French soldiers to bits, a shattered stone gateway and a wide hole in the ground and a great smearing of moist red stains upon the upheaved earth spelled the tale of what had happened plainly enough. A withered old man was doing his feeble best to patch together the split and sundered planks of the gate; the bodies, what was left of them, had been removed by a burial squad.

At the railroad terminal there was pressing need for everything that went on wheels, and of a certainty there was nothing in the nature of a self-propelled vehicle available for the use of three men who came bearing no order that would give them the right to commandeer government equipment. So our next hope, and seemingly our last one, lay in the French. At a certain place we found numbers of kindly and sympathetic officers with staff markings on their collars, who professed to be glad to see us, at the same time expressing a polite surprise that a trio of unannounced American newspaper men should have dropped in upon them, seemingly out of the shell-harassed skies above.

But when we suggested we would appreciate the loan of an automobile and with the automobile an officer to escort us up to the battle front they lifted eyebrows, shoulder blades and arms toward heaven, all in the same movement signifying chagrin and regret. What we asked was quite impossible, considering the exigencies and emergencies of the moment. The most formidable engagement that ever had been or perhaps ever would be was in midblast. Every available bit of motive power was required; every available man was required.

Besides, the roads, as doubtless we knew, were blocked with reënforcements hurrying up to support the hard-pressed British north of the Aisne. Any other time, yes. But now – no, and once again, no. We were quite free to stay on in Soissons if we cared for a place temporarily so unhealthy. We might have free access to any of the maps or records on hand. We might visit any of the hospitals or rest camps in the immediate vicinity. But further than that our new friends could not go. They added, by way of advice, that our best course would be to return straightway to Paris and come again when the crisis had passed and the sector to the north had somewhat quieted.

There being nothing else to do, we took a walk to think things over. The walk ended at our stopping place just as the German guns north of us beyond the river resumed their afternoon serenade. More refugees were coming into the town in a long dismal procession from Chauny and Ham and Noyon and scores of smaller places. Some of them had been on the road for twenty-four hours, some for as long as forty-eight hours. They had rested a while in wrecked and empty villages during the preceding night, then had risen at daybreak and resumed their heart-breaking pilgrimage, with no goal in sight and no destination in view, and only knowing that what might lie ahead of them could never by any chance be half so bad as what the Germans were creating behind them.

At the beginning of this war, in Belgium and again in Northern France, not many miles from where we then were, I had seen on the edges of the vortex of battle and destruction many such eddying, aimless streams of human flotsam and jetsam of war; but to one who knew the facts of their case the present plight of these poor wanderers had a special appeal. For this was the second time they had been dispossessed from their small holdings, the second time they had fled in huddles like frightened sheep before the path of the grey invader, the second time all that they owned had been swept away and smashed up and wasted beyond repairing.

Driven out of their homes in the first four weeks of the war, back in 1914, at the time of the great onslaught against Paris, they had been kept away from these homes for more than two years, all during the German occupation of their territory. After the great victory of the Allies over von Hindenburg in the Aisne country they had returned, tramping back in pairs and groups to the sites of their homesteads, filled with the tenacious impulse of the French peasant and the French villager to reroot himself in his native soil; had returned to find that before the Germans retreated beyond the Chemin des Dames they, in accordance with orders from the all-highest command, sawed down the fruit trees in the little orchards and burned the houses that had sheltered them, and tore up the vines and shovelled dung into the drinking wells.

Nevertheless, the repatriates had set to, working like beavers to restore a sorry semblance of the simple frugal communal system under which they and their fathers before them had existed since the Napoleonic wars. And now, just when they were beginning to patch together the broken ends of their lives, when with aid from the French Government and aid from Americans they had cleared and planted their devastated fields and had built new habitations for themselves out of the ruins of the old ones, again the enemy had come down upon them like a ravening wolf on a fold; and again they had run away, deserting all they could not carry in their arms or upon their backs, and knowing full well in the light of past experience that the Germans either would garner the work of their hands or else would make an utter end of it.

At a corner just above the hotel we came upon a mother and her family of nine. She was less than forty years old herself; her husband was a soldier at the Front. She wore wooden sabots on her feet, and upon her body a tattered, sleazy black frock. Her eldest child was fifteen years old, her youngest less than six months. For the ten of them to travel a distance of twelve miles had taken the better part of two days and two nights. The woman had contrived a sling of an old bed sheet, which passed over one of her shoulders and under the other; and in this hammock contrivance she had carried the youngest child against her bosom, with her bodice open at the breast so the baby might suckle while she pushed a crippled perambulator containing the two next youngest bairns. The rest of the brood had walked all the way. They were wearied beyond description; they were incredibly dirty and famishing for want of proper sustenance, but not a single one of the small wretches who was old enough to speak the word failed to murmur "*Merci, merci,*" when the neighbours brought them bowls of hot soup and gave them sups of warm milk and put big slices of bread smeared with jam into their dirty, clawlike little hands.

Having wolfed down the food they squatted, all of them, against a house front to wait for the camion which would take them to a refuge in a Red Cross station a dozen miles away. They had to wait a good while, since all the available wagons were engaged in performing similar merciful offices for earlier arrivals. The children curled up in little heaps like kittens and went to sleep, but the mother sat on a stone doorstep with her babe against her bare flesh, over her heart, to keep it warm, and stared ahead of her with eyes which expressed nothing save a dumb, numbed resignation.

An old priest in a black robe came along and he stopped, being minded, I think, to utter some message of comfort to this wife of a soldier of France, and in her way, I say, as valorous a soldier as her husband could be, did he wear twenty decorations for bravery. But either the priest could find no words to say or the words choked in his throat. Above her drooped head he made with his hand the sign of the cross in the air and went away. And as I stood looking on I did in my heart what any man with blood in his veins would have done had he been there in my stead – I consigned to the uttermost depths of perdition the soul of the Brute of Prussia whose diseased ambition brought to pass this thing and a million things like unto it.

CHAPTER V. SETTING A TRAP FOR OPPORTUNITY

HAD we waited that night for Opportunity to knock at our door I am inclined to think we might be waiting yet. We went out and we set a trap for Opportunity, and we caught her. No matter how or whence, the chance we coveted for a lift to the battle came to us before the night was many hours old. But before the design assumed shape we were to meet as blithe a young Britisher as ever I have seen, in the person of one Captain Pepper, a red-cheeked Yorkshireman in his early twenties, a fit and proper type of the men England has sent out to officer her forces overseas.

One of our Red Cross ambulances, while scouting out toward Noyon that afternoon, picked him up as he trudged up the road alone, with a fresh machine-gun wound through the palm of his right hand and his cap on the back of his head. His wound had been tied up at a casualty-dressing station and he had set out then to walk a distance of twenty-odd kilometres to Soissons, where he was told he might find a hospital to shelter him.

He dined with us, along with the ambulance driver who brought him in; and afterward he insisted on sitting a while with us, though he had been fighting, day and night almost continuously since the beginning of the battle and plainly was far spent from fatigue and lack of sleep. So far as I might judge, though, he did not have a nerve in his body. Gesturing with his swathed hand he told us not what he himself had done – somehow he managed in his self-effacing way to steer away from the personal note in his recital – but mainly about the stupendous tragedy in which he had played his part. Considering him as he sat there on a broken sofa with his long legs outstretched before a wood fire, one could not doubt that it had been a creditable part.

We gathered that in the second day of the fighting, as the English fell back before overwhelming odds but fighting for every inch, he became separated from his company. Next morning he found himself without a command in the heels of the orderly retreat and had offered himself for service to the first superior officer he met. Thereupon he was put in charge of a mixed detachment of two hundred men – gathered up anyhow and anywhere – and with his motley outfit had been told off to hold a strip of woods somewhere south of Chauny. Under him, he said, were stragglers cut off from half a dozen battered line regiments, and along with these, cooks, wagon drivers, engineers, officers' servants and stretcher bearers. In front of the squad, beyond the woods, was a strip of marsh, and this natural barrier gave them an advantage which, plus pluck, enabled them to beat off not one but several oncoming waves of Germans.

"We had machine guns, luckily enough," he said; "and, my word, but we gave the beggars a proper drubbing! We piled them up in heaps along the edges of that bally old bog. Everywhere along the Front – where we were and everywhere else, too, from what I can hear – they have outnumbered us four or five to one, but I'm quite sure we've killed or wounded ten of them for every man of ours that has been laid out since this show started four days ago.

"Well, that's all, except that this morning about ten o'clock I was hit and had to quit and come away, because you see I wouldn't be much use with one hand out of commission and bleeding all over the shop – would I now? I'm sorry to have to leave the chaps – they were a sporting lot; but since I had to stop a bullet I'm glad I've got a nice clean cushy wound. I shall be glad to get a taste of Blighty too; I'm a bit fagged, as you might say."

His head nodded forward on his chest when he got this far, and his limbs relaxed.

He protested, though, against being bundled off to bed, saying he was quite comfortable and that his hand scarcely pained him at all, but the man who had brought him took him away. As for Carroll and Green and me, we slept that night, what sleeping we did, with our clothes on us, ready to rise and hunt the wine cellar if anything of a violently unpleasant nature occurred over our heads. During the hours before daylight there was a spirited spell of banging and crashing somewhere in the town, and not so far away either, if one might judge by the volume of the tumult, which rattled the

empty casement frame alongside my bed and made the ancient house to rock and creak; but when dawn came the gables above us were still intact and we were enjoying our beauty sleep in the calm which succeeded the gust of shelling or of bombing or whatever it was.

CHAPTER VI. THROUGH THE BATTLE'S FRONT DOOR

IMMEDIATELY after breakfast, in accordance with a plan already formulated, we quietly took possession of one of those small American-made cars, the existence of which has been responsible for the addition of an eighth joke to the original seven jokes in the world. We didn't know it then, but for us the real adventure was just starting. There were four of us in the flivver – the driver, a young American in uniform, whose duties were of such a nature that he travelled on a roving commission and need necessarily report to none concerning his daily movements; and for passengers, our own three selves. For warrant to fare abroad we had a small American flag painted on the glass wind shield, one extra tire, and an order authorising us to borrow gasoline – simply these and nothing more. Very unostentatiously we rode out of Soissons, steering a northwesterly course. We might not know exactly where we were going or when we should be back, but we were on our way.

At the same time, be it here said, there was method of a sort in our scheme of things, for we were aiming, as closely as we might, at the point where approximately the main French command jointed on to the right wing of the British, we figuring that at the junction place, where the overlapping and intermingled areas of control met, and more especially in a confused period when one army was falling back and the other bringing up its reserves, we stood a better chance in our credential-less and unaccredited state of wriggling on up from the back lines to the Front than would elsewhere be possible.

We reckoned the prospect after this fashion: If the French find us traversing the forbidden lands they may take it for granted that the British permitted us to pass. If we fall under the eyes of British guardians of the trail they are equally likely to assume that the French let us through. And so it turned out; which I claim is added proof that the standing luck of the American newspaper reporter on a difficult assignment is not to be discounted.

In stock we had one trump card, and only one, and we played it many a time during that somewhat crowded day. All of us were in khaki with tin helmets upon our heads and gas masks swung over our shoulders. The heavy trench coats in which we were bundled prevented betrayal to the casual eye of the fact that none of us wore badges denoting rank, upon our collars or shoulder straps. Outfitted thus we might have been major generals or we might have been second lieutenants of the American Expeditionary Forces. Who, on a cursory scrutiny of us, was to say?

So we decided among ourselves that ours must be a rôle suggestive of great personal importance and urgent business. Did any wayside sentinel, whether British or French, move out upon the crown of the road as though he meant to halt us, one of us, with an authoritative arm, would wave him clear of our path and we would go flitting imperiously by as though the officiousness of underlings roused in us only a passing annoyance. It proved a good trick. It may never work again in this war, but I bear witness that it has worked once.

In the very first leg of this expedition good old Madame Bonneaventure stood our friend. The River Aisne skirts the city of Soissons. At the far side of the bridge, spanning the stream, which bridge we must cross, stood a French noncom, charged, as we knew, with the duty of examining the passes of those outbound. If we disregarded his summons to halt, complications of a painful nature would undoubtedly ensue. But as the car slowed up, all of us with our fingers figuratively crossed, he either recognised the driver as one who passed him often or was impressed by our bogusly impressive mien, or possibly accepted the painted flag on Tin Lizzie's weather-beaten countenance as warrant of our authenticity.

As he waved to us to proceed and then came to a salute, we, returning the salute in due form, were uttering three silent but nonetheless vehement cheers. I think we also shook hands. We were

past the first and by long side the most formidable barrier. The farther we proceeded toward the battle the greater would be our chances of proceeding, it being generally assumed that no one gets very deeply into the district of active hostilities unless he has a proper errand there and has proved it to the satisfaction of the highway warders behind.

Through several villages that were reduced by shell fire to litter heaps and tenanted only by detachments of French soldiers we passed. Next we skirted up the sides of a steep hill and rounded the crest to where, spread out before our eyes, was a glorious panorama of the terrain below and beyond.

We drew in our breaths. Each one of us had seen something of the panoply of warfare in the making, but nothing in my own experience since Belgium in 1914 had equalled this. All the world appeared to have put on cartridge belts and gone to war. As far as the eye could reach, away off yonder to where sky line and earth line met behind the dust screen, cavalry, artillery, infantry, supply trains, munition trains, and all imaginable branches of the portable machinery of an army were in sight and in motion. Their masses hid the earth with a shifting pattern as though a vast blue-grey carpet were magically weaving itself. Overhead, singly, in pairs and in formations, like flights of wild fowl, the scout planes, the observation planes and the battle planes went winging. They were like silver gulls escorting limitless schools of porpoise through placid waters.

Usually there is a seemingly interminable confusion in the vision of a great force upon the forward go. To the lay eye it appears that the whole movement has got itself inextricably snarled. This line travels one course, that line goes in exactly the opposite direction, a third one is bisecting the first two at cross angles. But here one great compelling influence was sending all the units forward along a common current. The heavy vehicles held to the roads which threaded the plain; the infantry took short cuts across lots, as it were; the cavalry traversed the fields and penetrated the occasional thickets; the sky craft trod the alleys of the air – but they all headed toward the same unseen goal. There was no doubt about it – France was hurrying up a most splendid army to reenforce the hard-pressed defenders of French soil, where the Hun pushed against the line of the inward-bending and battered but yet unbroken British battalions.

We coasted down off the heights into the plateau, and now as we came in among them we had opportunity for appraising the temper of those men hurrying on their forward march to the killing pits. Who says France is war wearied or that her sons are tired of fighting? No suggestion was there here of dumb oxen driven to slaughter. Why, these men were like bridegrooms bound for the marriage feast. They sang as they marched or as they rode. Usually what they sang was a snatch of some rollicking chanson, and through the dirt masks they grinned into our faces as we went slithering by.

There were hails and friendly gestures for us. It might be a boy private with a sprig of early spring wild flowers jauntily stuck in his cap who waved at us. It might be a cook balancing himself on the tailboard of a travelling field kitchen who raised a sweaty visage from his steaming soup caldron and made friendly circles in the air with a dripping iron instrument that was too big for a spoon and too small for a spade; or it might be a gunner on a bouncing ammunition truck with enough of potential death and disaster bestowed under his sprawled legs to blow him and, incidentally, us into ten million smithereens if ever it went off.

Kilometre after kilometre we skihooted through the press, and it was a comic thing to see how a plodding regiment would swing over or a battery would bounce and jolt off the fairway into the edges of the ditch at the insistent toot-toot of our penny whistle of a horn to let us by. It made one think of whales making room in a narrow tideway for an impudent black minnow to pass. And always there was the drone of the questing aëroplanes overhead and the thunderous roaring of the guns in front. We overtook one train of supply trucks with the markings of the U. S. A. and manned by dusty lads in the khaki fustian of Yankeeland – evidence that at least one arm of our service would have a hand in the epochal task confronting our allies. All the rest of it was French.

For us there was no halt until we reached Blérencourt. Now this place was a place having a particular interest for us, since it was at Blérencourt that the organisation known as the American Fund

for French Wounded, which is headed by Miss Anne Morgan and which has for its field personnel American women exclusively, had during the past nine months centred its principal activities.

In the outskirts of the town, now evacuated of almost all its civilian residents, stand the massive stone gateways and the dried moat of the magnificent château of Blérencourt, which was destroyed by the peasants in the time of the Terror and never rebuilt. What remains constitutes one of the most picturesque physical reminders of the French Revolution that is to be found in the country to-day. We rode under the arched stone portals – and lo, it was almost as though we had come into the midst of a smart real-estate development somewhere on Long Island within easy communicating distance of New York City.

French francs, provided by the state, and American dollars, donated by the folks back home, had been used under American supervision to construct a model colony upon the exact site of the ancient castle of some vanished noble family of the old régime. There was a model barracks, a model dormitory, a model schoolhouse, two model cottages and an office building that was a model among models – all built of planking, all glistening and smart with fresh paint, all with neat doorsteps in front of them and trim flower plots and vegetable gardens about them. There was a chicken house and a chicken run, dotted with the shapes of plump fowls. There was a storeroom piled high with clothing and food sent over from America to the A. F. F. W. for distribution among destitute natives of the devastated districts, of which this, until a year ago, had been the centre.

These incongruously modern structures snuggled right up under the venerable walls of the battlements. Indeed several of the buildings were cunningly built into the ruins, so that on one side the composite edifice would show a withered stone face, with patches of furze growing in the chinks of the crumbled masonry like moles on the forehead of a withered crone, and on the other would present a view of a smart cottage with a varnished shingle roof and a painted front door which apparently had just arrived from some planing mill in the States. Underneath the floor was a cellar four hundred years old, but the curtains in the window had seemingly been cut and stitched only yesterday. Somehow, though, the blended effect was immensely effective. It made me think of Home-dale-on-the-Sound grafted upon a background of Louis the Grand; and for a fact that was exactly what it was.

This creation, representing as it did nine months of hard work on the part of devoted American women, had been closed only the day before. It stayed in operation until it seemed probable that the German legions might penetrate this far south in their effort to ford the River Oise. The little pupils of the kindergarten had been sent away in trucks, the main dormitory had been turned into a temporary resting place for refugees, and the American ranges in the kitchen had done valiant service in the cooking of hot meals for exhausted women and children tramping in from the north and west. Before the managers and teachers left at dusk of the preceding evening two crippled French soldiers, specially detailed for work here by the government, had been assigned to place vessels of kerosene in each building, with instructions to fire the oil at the first signs of approaching Germans.

The cans of inflammables were still in their places when we arrived and the maimed watchmen, one of them a one-armed man and the other a one-legged, had camped all night on the premises ready on warning to apply the torch and destroy this frontier outpost of American charity and American efficiency. But in the forenoon word was come that the enemy had been brought to bay seven miles away and that he might not break through the British-French line. He did break through, but that is another story. So Mrs. Dike, of New York, and Miss Blagden, of Philadelphia, two of Miss Morgan's assistants, had motored in from below, filled with thanksgiving that the patient work of their hands and their hearts would almost certainly be spared.

While Mrs. Dike, with tears in her eyes, was telling us of the things that had been accomplished here and while the troopers poured in unceasing streams along the main road beyond the gateway, a handful of belated refugees crept in under the weathered armorial bearings on the keystone of the archway, to be fed and cared for and then sent along in the first empty truck that came by going toward Soissons.

In this group of newcomers was an elderly little man in a worn high hat and a long frock coat with facings of white dust upon its shiny seams, who looked as though he might be the mayor of some inconsequential village. He carried two bulging valises and a huge umbrella. With him was his wife, and she had in one hand a cage housing two frightened canaries and under the other arm a fat grey tabby cat which blinked its slitted eyes contentedly.

The most pitiable figure of them all to my way of thinking was an old woman – yes, a very old woman – she must have been all of eighty. Alongside one of the buildings I came upon her sitting in a huddle of her most treasured possessions. She was bent forward, with her gnarled hands folded in the lap of her dress, which was silk and shiny, for naturally when she fled from her home she had put on her back the best that she owned. Under the cope of a queer little old black bonnet with faded purple cloth flowers upon it her scanty hair lay in thin neat folds, as white and as soft as silk floss. Her feet in stiff, new, black shoes showed beneath her broad skirts. Her face, caving in about the mouth where her teeth were gone and all crosshatched with wrinkles, was a sweet, kindly, most gentle old face – the kind of face that we like to think our dead-and-gone grandmothers must have had.

She sat there ever so patiently in the soft sunlight, waiting for the truck which would carry her away to some strange place among stranger folk. When I drew near to her, wishing with all my heart that I knew enough of her tongue to express to her some of the thoughts I was thinking, she looked up at me and smiled a friendly little smile, and then raising her hands in a gesture of resignation dropped them again in her lap. But it was only with her lips that she smiled, for all the time her chin was quivering and her faded old blue eyes were brimming with a sorrow that was past telling in words.

She still sat there as we got into our car and drove off toward the battle. Looking back, the last thing I saw before we rounded the corner of the wall was her small black shape vivid in the sunshine. And I told myself that if I were an artist seeking to put upon canvas an image that would typify and sum up the spirit of embattled France to-day I would not paint a picture of a wounded boy soldier; nor yet one of a winged angel form bearing a naked sword; nor yet one of the full-throated cock of France, crowing his proud defiance. I would paint a picture of that brave little old withered woman, with the lips that smiled and the chin that quivered the while she smiled.

CHAPTER VII. AT THE FRONT OF THE FRONT

WHEN the last preceding chapter of mine ended I had reached a point in the narrative where our little party of four, travelling in our own little tin flivverette, were just leaving Blérincourt, being bound still farther west and aiming, if our abiding luck held out, to reach the front of the Front – which, I may add, we did.

To be exact we were leaving not one Blérincourt but three. First, Blérincourt, the town, with its huddle of villagers' homes, housing at this moment only French troopers and exhausted refugees; second, Blérincourt, the castle, a mouldering relic of a great house, testifying by its massive empty walls and its tottering ruin of a gateway to the fury which laid hold on the peasants of these parts in the days of the Terror; and, third, Blérincourt, the model colony of model cottages, which for us held the most personal interest, since it was here the American women of the American Fund for French Wounded had during the previous nine months centred their activities relating to the repopulating of districts in the Aisne country, now for the second time evacuated and given over again to the savage malice of the boche.

Behind us as we swung into the main highway lay this grouped composition of the wrecked château, the tiny old houses of weathered grey stone and the little frame domiciles, smart and glistening with fresh paint and fresh varnishing. Before us, within a space of time and distance to be spanned by not more than half an hour of steady riding, was somewhere the problematical doorway through which we hoped to pass into the forward lines of that battle which the historians of the future, I dare say, will call merely the Great Battle, knowing their readers require no added phraseology to distinguish it from the lesser engagements of this war – or in fact of any war.

We did not ask our way of any whom we met, either of those going ahead of us or those coming back in counter streams. To begin with, we deemed it inexpedient to halt long enough to give to any person in authority a chance for questioning the validity of our present mission, since, as I already have explained, we carried no passes qualifying us to traverse this area; and besides there was no need to ask. The route was marked for us by signs and sounds without number, plainer than any mileposts could have been: By the columns of Frenchmen hurrying up to reenforce the decimated British who until now, at odds of one to five, had borne the buffets of the tremendous German onslaught; by the never-ending, never-slackening roar of the heavy guns; by the cloud of dust and powder, forming a wall against two sides of the horizon, which mounted upward to mingle its hazes with the hazes of the soft spring afternoon; by the thin trickling lines of light casualty cases, "walking wounded," in the vernacular of the Medical Corps – meaning by that men who, having had first-aid bandages applied to their hurts at forward casualty stations, were tramping rearward to find accommodations for themselves at field hospitals miles away.

At once we were in a maze of traffic to be likened to the conditions commonly prevalent on lower Fifth Avenue in the height of the Christmas-shopping season, but with two distinctions: Here on this chalk-white highroad the movement, nearly all of it, was in one direction; and instead of omnibuses, delivery vans, carriages and private automobiles, this vast caravansary was made up of soldiers afoot, soldiers mounted and soldiers riding; of batteries, horse drawn and motor drawn; of pontoon bridges in segments; of wagon trains, baggage trains, provision trains and munition trains; of field telephone, field telegraph and field wireless outfits upon wheels; of all the transportable impedimenta and all the myriad items of movable machinery pertaining to the largest army that has crossed a corner of France since the days of the first great invasion more than three and a half years before.

There were ambulances past counting; there were big covered camions in numbers sufficient to fit out a thousand circuses; there were horses and donkeys and mules of all the known sizes and colours; there were so many human shapes in uniforms of horizon blue that the eye grew weary and

the brain rebelled at the task of trying, even approximately, to compute estimates of the total strength of the man power here focussed.

Through all this, weaving in and out, our impudent little black bug of a car scuttled along, with its puny horn honking a constant and insolent demand for clear passage. At a faster gait than anything in sight except the cruising *aéroplanes* above, we progressed upon our way, with none to halt us and none to turn us back. Where the dust hung especially thick at a crossroads set in the midst of the wide plain we almost struck three pedestrians who seemingly did not heed our hooted warning or take notice of it until we were right upon them. As they jumped nimbly for the ditch we could see that all these had staff markings at their throats, and that one, the eldest of the three, a stoutish gentleman with a short grizzled beard, wore three stars in a triangle upon his collar. Tin Lizzie had almost achieved the distinction for herself of having run down a major general of France.

We did not stop, though, to offer apologies or explanations. With rare sagacity our driver threw her wide open and darted into the fog, to take temporary shelter behind a huge supply wagon, which vehicle we followed for a while after the fashion of a new-foaled colt trailing its dam.

Proofs began to multiply that we were nearing the zone of live combat. Until now the only British soldiers we had seen were slightly wounded men bound afoot for the rear. All at once we found ourselves passing half a company of khaki-clad Britishers who travelled across a field over a course parallel to the one we were taking and who disappeared in a hazel copse beyond. Rifle firing could be heard somewhere on the far side of the thicket. At a barked command from an officer who clattered up on horseback a battery of those doughty little seventy-fives, which the French cherish so highly, and with such just cause, was leaving the road and taking station in a green meadow where the timid little wild flowers of a mild March showed purple and yellow in the rutted and trampled grass.

With marvellous haste the thing was accomplished almost instantly. The first gun of the five squatted in the field with its nozzle slanting toward the northwest, and behind it its four companions stood, all with their short noses pointing at precisely the same angle, like bird dogs on a back stand. Suddenly they did what well-broken bird dogs never do – they barked, one after the other. Almost before the whining whistle of the shells had died away the gunners were moving their pieces to a point closer up behind a screen of poplars and sending a second yelping salvo of shots toward an unseen target.

We became aware that the component units of the army were now quitting the roadway to take positions in the back lines. Indeed those back lines formed themselves while we watched. One battery after another swung off to the right or to the left and came into alignment, so that soon we rode between double rows of halted guns. With our canes we could have touched the artillerymen piling heaps of projectiles in convenient hollows in the earth close up to the edges of the road. Big covered wains discharged dusty infantrymen, who, pausing only long enough to unbuckle their packs from their shoulders and throw them under the hoods of the wagons, went at a shambling half-trot through the meadow. Cavalrymen, not dismounted, as they had mainly been during these dragging winter months of warfare that was stationary and static, but with their booted feet once more in their stirrups, cantered off, bound presumably for the thin woodlands which rimmed the plateau where the terrain broke away to the banks of the River Oise.

Here again at last was war in the open, as different from battle in the trenches as football is from trap shooting. The action of it was spread out before one's eyes, not masked in mud ambushes. Each instant our eyes beheld some new and stirring picture, standing out by reason of its swift vigour from the vaster panorama of which it was a part. What I had seen of battle formations in the preceding three weeks had made me think mainly of subway diggin's or of construction work for a new railroad or of engineering operations in connection with a dam, say, or a dike. What I saw now most vividly suggested old-time battle pictures by Meissonier or Détaillé. War, for the moment at least, had gone back to the aspect which marked it before both sides dug themselves in to play the game of counterblasting with artillery and nibbling the foe's toes with raids and small forays.

Of another thing we were likewise aware, and the realisation of the fact cheered us mightily. Among the blue uniforms of the French the greenish buff of the British showed in patches of contrasting colour that steadily increased in size and frequency. By rare good luck we had entered the advanced positions at the identical place for which, blindly, we had been seeking – the place where the most westerly sector of the French left wing touched the most easterly sector of the British right wing; and better than that, the place where the French strength hurrying up to reënforce and if need be replace decimated divisions of their allies was joined on to and fused in with the retiring British Army, which, during the preceding three days, had sustained the main force of the German offensive. It was here if anywhere that we could count with the best prospects of success upon boring straight through to the Front, the reason being that the French might assume the British had given us passage and the British might assume the French had let us by.

There were perhaps three more miles of brisk travelling for us, during which I am sure that I saw more than ever I have seen in any three miles that ever I traversed in my life; and at the end of that stretch we could tell that we had well-nigh outrun the forward crest of the French ground swell and had come into the narrower backwash of the British retreat. A retreat of sorts it may have been, but a rout it most assuredly was not. We saw companies reduced to the strength of ten or twelve or twenty men under command of noncommissioned officers or possibly of a single lieutenant. We saw individual privates and we saw privates in squads of two or three or half a dozen men, who in the terrific fighting had become separated from a command, which possibly had been scattered but which it was more likely had been practically wiped out. Such men were not stragglers, nor were they malingerers; they were survivors, atoms flung backward out of the raging inferno which had swallowed up whole regiments and whole brigades.

And we took note that every single man of these broken and decimated detachments was in good humour, though dog tired; and that every single one of them had kept his accoutrements and his rifle; and that every single one of them, whether moving under orders or acting upon his own initiative, was intent upon just two things and two things only – to get back into the maelstrom from which temporarily he had been spewed forth, and pump more lead into the living tidal wave of grey coats. Some that we overtook were singing, and singing lustily too. Than this no man could ask to see a finer spectacle of fortitude, of pluck and of discipline, and I am sure that in his heart each one of us, while having no doubt of the outcome of the fiery test, prayed that our own soldiers, when their time of trial by battle came, might under reverses and under punishment acquit themselves as well as had these British veterans, Yorkshire and Bedfordshire and Canada, who came trudging along behind us, swallowing our dust. What impressed us as most significant of all was that only once that day did we see a scrap of personal equipment that had been cast aside. This was a cartridge belt of English make, with its pouches empty and its tough leather tom almost in two, lying like a broken-backed brown snake in a ditch.

Already from wounded English soldiers and from exhausted English hospital workers whom we had seen back in Soissons we comprehended a measure of appreciation of what these battered fragments of the forces had been called upon to endure during four days and five nights. We knew as surely as though we had stopped to take down the story of each one of the wearied, cheerful, resolute chaps, that they had their fill of killing the enemy and of seeing their mates about them blown to bits by high explosives or mowed down by rifle fire. I recalled what a bedraggled young surgeon, a Highlander by his accent, had said the night before:

“I crave never to pass through this experience again. I have seen so much of death since this battle started that I have in me now contempt not only for death but for life too. I thought last year on the Somme I saw real fighting. Man, it was but child’s play to what I saw the day before yesterday!

“From the casualty dressing post where I was on duty I could see the fighting spread out before me like a cinema show. For our shelter – we were in a concrete dugout – was in the side of a hill with a wide sweep of lowland below and beyond us, and it was here in this valley that the Germans came

at our people. Between jobs in the operating theatre – and God knows we had enough of them – I would slip out for a breath of air, and then I could watch through my glasses what went on.

“In wave after wave the Germans came on, marching close together in numbers incredible. They were like ants; they were like flies; like swarming grasshoppers. At first they tried a frontal attack against our trenches, but even the Germans, driven on as they must have been like cattle to the slaughter, couldn’t stand what they got there. Within two hours they charged three times! Each time they fell back again, and each time they left their dead lying so thickly behind that finally the ground seemed as though it were covered with a grey carpet.

“That happened in the first day of their drive against our part of the line, which was the third line back, the two front lines having already been taken by them. So on the next day, which was the day before yesterday, they worked their way round to the south a bit and tried a flanking advance. Then it was I saw this, just as I’m telling it to you. I saw them caught by our machine-gun fire and piled up, heap on heap, until there was a windrow of them before the British trenches that must have been six feet high.

“They went back, but they came again and again, and they kept on coming. They climbed right over that wall of their own dead – I myself watched them scrambling up among the bodies – and they slid down on the other side and ran right into the wire entanglements, where those of them that were killed hung in the wires like garments drying on a line. They died there in such numbers that they fairly clogged the wires. And still they kept on coming.

“When our line began to bend in, farther away to the west, we got orders to evacuate the station; and the men in the trenches where I had seen the fighting got orders – what were left of them – to fall back too. They were Scotchmen, these laddies, and they were fairly mad with the fighting. They didn’t want to go, and they refused to go. I’m told by reliable witnesses that their officers had almost to use force against them – not to make them keep on fighting but to make them quit fighting.”

He looked into the coals of the wood fire and shivered.

“Man, it’s not war any more; it’s just plain slaughter. Mark my word – there’ll never be another war such as this one has been or another battle such as the one that still goes on yonder. ‘Tis not in flesh and blood to endure its repetition once the hate has been cooled by a taste of peace.”

The men about us for the most part must have taken part as actors in scenes such as the young surgeon had described as an onlooker. But about them there was no sign of reluctance or of surcease. We realised as thoroughly as though we had been eyewitnesses to their conduct that they had carried on like brave men; and without being told we realised, too, that they were made of the stuff which keeps carrying on as long as there is life left in it. They were of the breed of the bulldog, and clean strain, at that.

Frenchmen grew fewer in number along the route we travelled; Britishers became more and more numerous. Where byways crossed the highroad and in wrecked villages the British already had posted military policemen to guide the traffic and point out the proper directions to bodies of men passing through. Those men stood in midroad giving their orders as calmly and as crisply as though they had been bobbies on the Strand. Even this emergency John Bull’s military system did not disintegrate. As long as the organism lasted the organisation would last too. Nowhere was there any suggestion of confusion or conflict of will. I am prone to think that in the years to come the chief outstanding fact about the great spring offensive of 1918 will be not the way the Germans came forward but the way in which the British fell back.

Until now we had seen only British foot soldiers, and once or twice officers in motor cars or on horseback; but soon we came upon a battery of British light artillery. It was jolting across muddy pasture among the stumps of apple trees which the Germans with malignant thoroughness had felled before their big retreat of twelve months before. The place had been an orchard once. Now it was merely so much waste land, dedicated to uselessness by efficiency and kultur. The trees, as we could see, had not been blown down by shell fire or hewn down with axes. They had been neatly and

painstakingly sawed through, clear down to the earth. Some of the butts measured a foot and a half across, and to have bolls of this size, fruit trees in this country must have attained great age.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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