THE BIG PUSH.

I.

EN ROUTE.

JULY 7-14, 1916.

At the Front rumours fly around as thickly as shells, and ninety-nine out of every hundred prove to be "duds." Heaven knows where they all originate—though the cooks and officers' servants and signallers usually have a fair idea too.

And, of course, when, having just retired into rest billets after a long and particularly trying spell in the trenches, the order came to "stand-by and be ready to move at an hour's notice," with instructions to the Transport Section to prepare for entrainment, the usual rumours—all from highly authoritative sources—took their excited course.

We were going to Salonika, also to Mesopotamia, also to India; we were going back to the Lines of Communication: Verdun had fallen,

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and we were being hurried to the assistance of the French there: and we were being sent as "chief pushers" in the Big Push in Picardy.

When, one sultry July afternoon, the battalion set off from Bethune in column of route, we could still only take our individual choice of the prevailing rumours with regard to our ultimate destination.

We marched until a late hour that evening, and were billeted for the night in the outbuildings of various widely scattered farmhouses; and about midnight of the following day, after a further march, we entrained at the town of Lillers.

There was no chance of obtaining any sleep during the railway journey, for we travelled in covered horse trucks — forty men with full equipment in each: and this was only made possible by the greater number remaining upstanding. We tried to forget our discomfort in song. With the coming of dawn we were able to note the names of the railway stations we passed and, after consulting newspaper maps, we realised that we were going to the Somme. Then was the talk faster and more excited: a spirit of elation and eagerness, a shining zest, were apparent in all: the spirit of The Big Push.

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It was early morning when we disentrained and, lining the side of a quiet country road, partook of a somewhat light and sketchy breakfast. And—although we did not then know it—we were to march for a long and painfully tiring day without again tasting food.

. . . .

Never had the Glasgows presented a braver, finer spectacle than they did on that sunny morning of July. Nearly twelve hundred men of Scotland's best—in the prime of physical condition — at the highest point of military efficiency—in their bearing the confidence of men tested and not found wanting, the just pride of honours lately won . . . cheerily and jauntily they marched to the urging skirl of the pipes. There were none but blithe hearts in all that long procession.

The district was new to us and, being whole and untouched by War's devastating fingers, it looked infinitely good to our war-weary eyes. We were refreshed and gladdened by the vision we beheld.

For it was a fair and pleasant land, this that we journeyed through—a land that laughed under the caresses of the sun—a land of green and gold, of billowing uplands and sweetly odorous valleys, of little singing rivers. The

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fields were yellow with ripe corn, splashed here and there with the barbaric crimson splendour of clustered poppies and the ethereal blue of cornflowers. The charm of the trees was over the landscape: here, a dark copse: there, a few isolated trees growing beside a white-walled, red-roofed farm, or studding a green pasture: yonder a row of poplars marching statelily against the horizon.

The reception accorded to us in the villages through which we passed was akin to that given to the original Expeditionary Force during its first weeks in France. For few British troops had preceded us on that route, and many of the people had never before seen kilted soldiers.

Women, old men, and children, they ran to meet us when the shrilling of the pipes had heralded our approach, and, walking and running by our sides, accompanied us to the farther end of the village, and sometimes far beyond. Their talk was voluble and excited, their handshaking continuous and fervent. We were so big, they told us, so very big—bigger than the English soldiers, bigger than the French, bigger—oh yes! —much bigger than the Allemands . . . who were being soundly beaten now: yesterday three thousand of the dogs were taken prisoners: and the war would be over in a month. The

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Ecossais so very big would not need to fight much more.

Sometimes the villagers brought us bottles of wine and beer, and these we drained to the last drop without ever slackening our pace.

In the end the villagers stood to watch us march by—the women waving handkerchiefs in farewell, the men politely bowing and doffing their hats, the children in their final frenzy of handshaking buffeted by the moving ranks: all reiterating their friendly cries of "*Au revoir: bonne chance, Ecossais!*" So we saw them standing in the roadway until the cloud of dust that travelled in our wake blotted them out.

Kilometre after kilometre we marched—through the hottest hours of the middle day—and our feet and backs ached under the weight of all we carried, our faces were dabbled and streaked with dust and perspiration, our clothes and equipment were grey as the roadway itself, and in our mouths was only dust to chew.

Heavens! how hot the sun was! and how weary we became!

Then in the afternoon we came to the city of Amiens, and the pipers blew as though their lungs were yet filled with the caller air of the Scottish hills, and brave and defiant was the boom of the big drum, and roguish and enticing

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the roll of its little brothers. Oh, the magic there is, the allurement, in the sound of the little drums! Up went every head, braced was every back, and jaunty was the step with which we swung through the city streets. And we had smiles and badinage a-plenty to exchange with the onlookers—especially if they were feminine, and fair of form and feature. Our tiredness was forgotten, and the admiring spectators never suspected the presence of it.

Afternoon wore on to evening, and there were no longer any villagers or city folks before whom we could assume an air of bravado and gaiety. We were painfully weary, and each step was an effort of the will. Other troops immediately preceded us on this road, and we passed their stragglers, in ones and twos and threes, limping along with awkward, cheerless gait. And by the roadside lay others in the extremest stages of exhaustion—lying just as they had fallen, with all the semblance of men dead.

> "Boots—boots—boots—boots—movin' up and down
>   again,
> And there's no discharge in the war."

Walking had become a purely mechanical exercise—our limbs controlled, as it seemed, by

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some power outwith us. Our brains were numb and dazed with fatigue and the maddening, persistent pain that was our every step. Blindly, dumbly, helplessly, we staggered on. No man spoke a word to his neighbour, or looked to left or right, or even smoked. Save for the broken shuffle of our feet on the grey road we moved in utter silence.

The sleepless journey of the previous night and the long abstinence from food were having their effect.

Our halts became more frequent and of longer duration—until we marched only for fifteen minutes and then rested as many. The Commanding Officer walked up and down the ranks —he had long since dismounted from his charger, and was trudging along on foot even as were his men—scanning intently the faces and bearing of all, that he might know to sound a halt ere endurance had reached its limit. We lay with limbs relaxed and eyes closed in a stupor of exhaustion—not even troubling to shake off our knapsacks or unbuckle equipment—until the whistle sounded the "Fall in."

On again!—with drooping heads and lustreless eyes and bent backs—"crawling on our knees and elbows," as we ourselves expressed it later.

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"God! I'm done!" said one man—took two or three staggering steps to the side of the road, and collapsed: and lay as still as stone. His companions neither spoke nor ventured a backward glance—lest the effort should exhaust all their remaining energy too.

Yet only a bare half-dozen fell out ere we reached our destination for the night: the rest stuck it gamely to the end.

And it *was* a game finish!

Our last halt was on the outskirts of a village—which we mainly discerned as a faint and multitudinous glimmering of lights through the gathering darkness. The Commanding Officer passed along the information that this village was to be our halting-place for the night. In infinite weariness we dragged ourselves to the beginning of the street, and then——

Then the pipes suddenly set the heavens and the earth dancing to the strains of "Highland Laddie"—the regimental march of the Glasgows. And almost at once the street became filled with British soldiers, who shouted greetings and questions to us in a manner more demonstrative and good-natured than Tommies are wont to assume to newcomers in France, where a habitual indifference—or seeming indifference—settles on all. But we were to learn that this new joviality,

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this light-hearted spirit of hail-fellow-well-met, was the manner of the Somme in those great days of July.

And at the skirl of the pipes, and before the eyes of those critical spectators, every man braced himself, his step assumed as much of jauntiness as he could put into it, and he had a laugh and a jesting answer ready on his lips for every outsider who spoke to him.

The query that dogs the Glasgows wherever they go (because of the uniform they wear), "Hi, are you the Black Watch?" was met by the cheerfully defiant rejoinder, "Not on your life! We're the Glasgow Highlanders—9th H.L.I."

It was as though the men had been revived and strengthened by a draught of potent wine — so remarkable was the change in their demeanour. But it was something more heartening than wine that put the boldness into their step—it was the sense of the tradition and honour of their regiment: the feeling that on no account must they present other than a brave, proud front to the world—that the one unpardonable offence would be to "let the battalion down."

Oh, it was well done! It was fine! It made one's heart beat fast and the eyes grow moist in a sudden access of overwhelming pride. For,

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as in a flash, was revealed something of that elusive, splendid thing that is the Spirit of the British Army.

In sheds and lofts and outhouses of divers kinds, and in the lee of walls — a sky all wonderful with stars as sole overhead covering —the battalion took its rest that night: and if our couches were hard and our sleeping chambers cold and draughty, we were hardly aware of it.

. . . .

Followed a day of rest, and two further days of marching. And now we were into the battle zone again—into a land deflowered by War.

On every hand were signs of The Curse. Roads cut up and rendered impassable for all ordinary traffic: derelict farms: fertile fields churned into a wilderness of mud by the multitudinous feet of armies: villages half-depopulated —sudden, unplanned gaps in the rows of houses —craters in the village street, littered with a debris of crumbled stones and mortar that had but lately been houses—shattered roofs and walls, and gaping window sockets. And everywhere in possession, that hydra-headed, care-defying blade, Private Thomas Atkins.

For two nights we bivouaced in a field only a few kilometres distant from the fighting line. Our knapsacks—containing greatcoats and all

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our belongings save "cleaning kit," *i.e.*, towel, soap, razor, etc.—had been left in one of the villages through which we had passed, and now our sole protection from rain and cold was the waterproof ground-sheet that each man carried. By fastening two or three of these together, and with the aid of some boughs to serve as supports, little tents were fashioned—just big enough to hold two or three men in a lying posture and huddled closely together for warmth. Line after line of these low tents (or "bivvies," as the men call them) sprang into being, until the field presented somewhat of the appearance of a settled camp.

Although so near to the scene of hostilities we were really fairly safe, for between our place of encampment and the German lines rose several sharply defined ridges which effectually prevented enemy observation—especially as, by reason of the vigilance and alertness and daring of our own aircraft, the enemy was unable to use his æroplanes or balloons for that purpose. He was a very short-sighted enemy indeed.

The last evening being cold, innumerable small fires of brushwood and twigs were lit all over the field, and around these the men sprawled in attitudes of ease. And while some sang and were merry, others gave themselves to talk of

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the yesterdays and to-morrows, or were silent in presence of the surge of memoried or hoped-for things that they saw limned in the red heart of the fire.

The spectacle of that gloomy field with its twinkling fires—the figures of the men moving about in dark silhouette against the soft and varied radiances—lives in the memory. For many—so sadly many—of those good fellows were destined not to outlive the morrow.

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