

THE BIG PUSH.

III.

IN ACTION.

JULY 14TH-15TH, 1916.

High Wood was in our hands! The Germans had been cleared from it that day!

So we had been informed. And now the leading platoon was marching in single file along the outskirts of the wood, the others following at discreet intervals. Ever and anon an enemy shell came screeching into the wood, and the roar of its explosion was accompanied by the sharp sounds of the rending and splitting of trees, and of the crashing of their fall.

In silence for the most part the men trudged along in the darkness that was disturbed by the flicker of light from the distant bursting shells, but every little while came a questioning whisper, "I wonder where old Fritz is? Where's the front line? No sign of it here."

Then—suddenly—without warning—the darkness of the wood was broken by a score of tongues of flame: and the noise of the artillery and shell-bursts was drowned in the splitting roar of rifles and machine guns fired at close range. And the air was full of flying, hissing bullets.

For an instant our fellows stood paralysed. One fell and lay moaning: another dropped to his knees, then pitched forward and lay dumb and still. A voice, hoarse with some kind of passion, rang out, "Get down, men, get down!" And all threw themselves on the ground, crouching low as they might, and waited in blind wonderment for what seemed an endless time, while they sought by a sort of instinctive prayer to gain mastery over the fear that was in their hearts. And ever the streaming bullets swished over and about them with the sound of a scythe swung fiercely among hay: and ever a moan came from out the darkness at some new point—or a mad, stabbing cry—or a sobbing gasp that told a life was finished.

"Dig yourself in and don't expose yourself!"

The order passed from lip to lip, and entrenching tools were got out. With feverish quickness the men began to dig, though daring hardly to raise their bodies from the ground. A few carried proper spades and, on their knees

and crouching low, threw up the earth with a passionate energy. Each man knew that he was digging for dear life, and breathed more freely when he had scraped away enough of the earth's surface to afford him some protection from the perpetually menacing bullets.

The battalion stretched now across and through the narrow wood: some platoons being in the open on the left of it, others in the wood itself, and others on the right. All were digging themselves in with that tireless impetuosity occasioned only by pressing danger. It was, however, the company on the right of the wood, that which had first advanced, which sustained the heaviest casualties during the night: at other parts of our line there was almost complete freedom from enemy annoyance, and the men there had no idea that their pals, only a short distance off, were paying so heavy a toll. But in that harassed company, all through the hours of dreadful darkness, man after man, officer after officer, continued to fall. The task of the stretcher-bearers in conveying the wounded to the rear was as dangerous and difficult an one as may be conceived, but quietly and unflinchingly they "carried on," and some there were who paid their debt to Duty with their lives.

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The infinite weariness of that night! Time seemed to have been suspended: the moments dropped slowly and fitfully: the minutes dragged out into interminable hours. And still the sniper's bullet stirred the air with the sound of a twanging, tautened wire: or a sudden storm of bullets would sweep overhead, with awful menace in its rush: and still the tale of dead and wounded grew.

All longed for the coming of the day, though they knew it might bring with it other and worse horrors. But the dread of the dark was on them—this darkness shot with dancing light, and thick with death and pain.

The officers moved about, encouraging and cheering the men with brave words, and themselves exhibiting a marvellous calmness of demeanour and contempt of danger. And ever and again the Commanding Officer would appear at each part of the line, walking upright and fearless, and in his voice was always that note of confidence and of comradely sympathy that never failed to put fresh heart into our fellows when they were in a tight corner. Everything was all right if only the Colonel were with them: he'd never let them down: he knew the game of soldiering through and through, and he knew and understood his men: he made them feel

that he was one of themselves—and always he did his utmost and best for them. A rare chap, the Colonel! So the boys thought and reasoned.

Once the C.O. started to move forward from our line towards the hidden Germans. Our men called to him not to go farther, as the danger was great. He paused for a moment.—“It’s all right, boys,” he said kindly. “I’ve got to go forward a little way—it’s to help you. I’ll come back.” Then he strode on, two other officers and his faithful batman following close on his heels.

And yet again he stood sadly regarding two still forms that lay at his feet.—“Poor boys!” he said in a tone of infinite pity: “poor boys!”—and turned away.

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In rear of High Wood, and near to Mametz Wood, was a place where the road passed between two ridges, and along this valley the wounded had to travel to reach the principal dressing stations. (The Battalion dressing station was in a shell hole just behind our trenches, and there the Battalion Medical Officer, Captain J. P. Charles, R.A.M.C., wet with blood and sweat, was working with an energy and intensity almost superhuman in his attendance on the wounded—and this despite the fact that he

himself was badly wounded in the leg very early in the action. For more than twelve hours he was too busy saving lives to bother about his own hurt: and he "carried on" grimly until he himself, in a state of physical collapse, but vigorously protesting his ability to "carry on" still further, was carried out on a stretcher—and so to hospital.)

But to return to Death Valley,—as this place became known to our men: and that night did it merit its dread name. Out of the darkness, from every side, came thin cries of anguish and lamentation, and low pitiful moanings, and voices of men raised in passionate appeal for help or in a weary plaint for water to drink: and now and again a shriek of direst agony rent the air, breaking off as suddenly as it had begun.

Many of the wounded, from a dozen different regiments, with a mad eagerness to get away from the horrors of High Wood and its environs, had dragged themselves hither and had then collapsed, unable to go farther. Now they lay in the darkness, overcome by weakness and pain, awaiting the succour that seemed so long in coming, the cries of the other unfortunates increasing the tension of their already overwrought nerves. Others stumbled along in the dark seeking the sanctuary of the farther dressing

stations;—some with an immense relief in their minds, a surging gladness in their hearts, that they were going to be “out of it” for a time:—some staggering blindly, aimlessly, forward, dazed and distraught with pain and weakness.

Moving about in the darkness, guided by the cries and groans, were other men eager and alert to help their wounded comrades: dressing their wounds, quenching their intolerable thirst, guiding and supporting and carrying them towards the Field Ambulances.

At long and weary last the eastern sky was shot with pearly grey: then the curtain of darkness slowly lifted and light came flooding over the land.

The Glasgows crouched low in their shallow ditch and wondered what was to happen now. A feeling was abroad that they would have to go “up and over” and clear the wood at the point of the bayonet, and all hoped that it might be so. Action was what they wanted—the chance to do something. At one part of our line our fellows saw Germans moving about in the farther recesses of the wood, and for an hour or two our snipers—who naturally comprised every man who could see a target—put in some really successful work: as did also the Lewis Guns.

And then—soon after nine o'clock in the morning, and when somehow they were not expecting it, for their thoughts were on a breakfast of bully and biscuit—the order came to go “up and over.” They were to clear the wood and go on to a certain point beyond it.

For a quarter of an hour our artillery rained shells on the corner of the wood that held the Germans, and on the enemy's supports. And our men jested among themselves. The tension was over: they were going to get their own back now: they had stormed a Boche stronghold before, and had come out “laughing:” this might be a sterner job, but the Glasgows could do it if anyone could. . . . There was discussion arising from surmise as to the disposal of the remainder of the Brigade and Division, as to which battalions would be acting in concert, and then—

“Up!—over you go, men!”

And they were on the surface of the ground and running forward.

A withering blast of machine gun fire met them almost at once, and many stumbled and fell ere they had gone more than a few yards. But the others trotted on—throwing themselves down full length at intervals to regain breath and secure cover, and by a vigorous rapid fire

to cover the advance of another section of the line.

The difficulties of those within the wood were tremendous: the undergrowth was so thick that progress was almost an impossibility.

A terrific fire of shrapnel was now playing as well upon the advancing line: in ones and twos and threes the men were falling.

On the left flank a Subaltern—the only officer left of his company—rallied his men and urged them on: then he too suddenly pitched forward and lay still. Immediately a young Sergeant jumped forward and took his place at the head of the line—such a thin, scattered line—and shouted, “Come on, you fellows: keep in line—close up—go easy in front. . . . Down!” They lay panting for a few moments, thankful if they had the protection of a clump of grass or a cluster of nettles.—“For-ward!” shouted the little Sergeant and jumped to his feet. He took two paces forward, then spun sharply round on his heels and fell headlong as a bullet crashed through his brain. And a Lance-Jack leapt forward and put himself at the head of the company.

The farthest advanced had gone barely two hundred yards, and only a few were left, widely scattered. Many were isolated and were crawling

on hands and knees and dodging from shell hole to shell hole for essential cover: yet always advancing. But now they saw their effort was vain: their fighting strength was spent, they were a mere handful and leaderless: the one duty that remained was to retire whence they had come.

As best they might they started to crawl back to their trenches: yet there were some who were unable to do that because they occupied positions particularly exposed, and they were constrained to remain there in the open, hiding in such shell holes as they might, for many long and anxious hours.

The remnant of the battalion, on reaching their former trenches, and being reinforced by the men of another unit, again took up the task of "holding the line." As the long hours of the day wore on, stragglers—those who had been cut off—continued to arrive, and each brought a tale of other pals lying wounded and dead "out yonder." It was impossible to reach them and bring them back then, although many volunteered to make the attempt. When night fell, a party was sent out to bring back such of the wounded as were at all accessible: and lives were saved thus—and others were lost in the work of salvation.

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Early on the morning of Sunday, 16th July, the battalion was relieved and marched back to a place close to Mametz Wood. The men straggled down, weary and spiritless, a ghastly pallor showing through the tan of their faces, with wide, nervous, sleepless eyes and drooping bodies. And their minds were gloomy with the thought of those pals who had gone and with the horror of the whole situation: and they spake few words among themselves.

The Glasgows had been hard hit! How hard was only realised when in the course of the day a roll-call was taken, and it was found that of those who had marched up to High Wood with so brave a step less than two days before, barely a fourth were now present to answer to their names.

The C.O. surveyed the handful of men that was left to him, and in his eyes was the light of a great pity and sorrow. And, in the midst of their own woes, the men felt it in their hearts to be sorry for him, for they knew—none better—how great had been his pride in his battalion. Talking to a Brigade Officer he was heard to say in reference to those who had fallen—"Six hundred of the best soldiers that ever wore the King's uniform:" then, with a sudden note of bitterness, "I wish to God the honour had been mine to go West with them!"

But in his speech with the men there was always the note of confidence and encouragement:—"It's the fortune of war, men! We've had a stroke of bad luck, but we mustn't complain: our turn will come again. And there's no blame attached to you—you've done nobly. Everybody is proud of the Glasgows." So he told a little group of men with whom he stopped to speak, and a few days later he expressed himself in similar terms to the assembled battalion.*

A day or two the battalion remained in the precincts of Mametz Wood, and while there the casualty list received fresh additions; but reinforcements of officers and men arrived, and again the Glasgows, almost at full strength, moved into the forefront of the battle line.

* Lieut.-Col. John Collier Stormonth-Darling, D.S.O., who was in command of the Glasgow Highlanders at the time of which I write, was himself killed in action about three months later—on November 1st, 1916. It were almost impossible to convey the measure of the sense of loss experienced by the Glasgows at his death. No battalion commander was ever more beloved of his men: their admiration for him as a gallant soldier and courteous gentleman amounted to veneration. His first thought was ever for the welfare and comfort of his troops, and in his endeavours to ensure those he spared himself not at all. His manner of life was Spartan in its simplicity, and when the battalion was in circumstances particularly dangerous or nerve-racking or arduous, he was ever at hand, sharing the lot of his troops, and encouraging them with those words of comradely sympathy and cheer that won for him the affection of every man in his unit. At all times his soldierly bearing was an example and an inspiration to his men: and these regarded him not merely as their revered leader and commander, but as one of their best personal friends.

A battalion may be shattered, but it cannot die : its greatness, its very life, resides only in the spirit that imbues it. As the traditions of a regiment become richer, so does its efficiency increase : the greater its death-roll, the more abundant the life that it possesses. For the dead still fight in the ranks : their spirit has entered into and made strong the souls of those who wield the rifles to-day.

The Glasgows nobly died.

Nobly the Glasgows carry on.

