

THE BIG PUSH.

II.

AT FRICOURT AND MAMETZ.

JULY 14TH, 1916.

“Show a leg there, boys! It’s after 6.30, and breakfast is up.”

The voice of the Orderly Officer was cheerful if his raps on the walls of our little tents were peremptory and commanding.

In the manner of worms we slid and wriggled out of our “bivvies” and, having scrambled to our feet, stood blinking in the bright morning sunshine.

A little later the battalion, in column of route, was moving towards the firing-line.

The roar of the guns, from being dull and distance-muffled, became sharp and distinct. A squat, fat, green-painted monster, standing in the middle of a farmyard, barked as we passed by.

“ We’re gettin’ into it now !” said Corporal Popple, in tones of immense satisfaction, then sang with gusto—

“ Come on along with me an’ have a jubilee,
In ma old Picardy home.”

An excited ejaculation passed rapidly along the ranks—“ German prisoners !”

The rear of the long column swung inwards with a serpent-like motion: men were side-stepping and craning their necks to see ahead on the white, dusty roadway.

The prisoners trailed past us—perhaps three hundred of them, dust-grimed, dejected, and surly of aspect, and escorted by a score or so of Tommies whose smiles out-beamed the sun. A little farther on we passed another band of prisoners, then, beside a tent that served as a Casualty Clearing Station, we saw a crowd of Germans, bandaged of head or limb, awaiting their turn for medical treatment. Our fellows hailed all these parties with good-humoured chaff and badinage, but few acknowledged the greetings by so much as a smile. They preserved a stubborn silence and feigned a total lack of interest in us.

The effect of these successive encounters on the spirits of our men was remarkable. The

very air seemed stimulant with a sense of victory. A strange exultation possessed everyone, an irrepressible and irresponsible gaiety and light-heartedness, an eagerness to be up and doing in the thick of the fight—an eagerness, he it said, uncommon enough with long-trying and war-weary “sweds.”

We strode forward with a step as buoyant and chatter as merry as though we had been going home on leave.

And now the land immediately ahead and on either side was ripped and scarred by a series of white chalky lines that zig-zagged and criss-crossed like the lines of a puzzle. We were into the world of trenches again, yet lo! we walked upon the surface of the earth without fear. The wonder of it acted like wine in our veins.

“By hokey! it’s been some Push right enough,” said one: and there was something of awe in his tones.

“Look over there! That’s the front line now,” said another—and pointed towards the farther distance, where in the upper air tiny shrapnel clouds were seen to form like toy balloons and, expanding and drifting, grow fainter and fainter until they faded into nothingness. And the sudden spurts of debris that shot up high and dark, like infernal fountains, against

the horizon, we knew for the bursting of heavy shells.

We came upon a squad of French soldiers at work on the road, repairing the damage done to it by shells. Others were filling up an old communication trench that ran by the roadside and might constitute a danger to traffic if allowed to remain open.

“Gosh! Look at these Frenchies filling up the trenches—preparing for peace already!” said Jimmy M—. “They seem to be quite sure that old Fritz isn’t coming back.—Cheeroh, chaps! I can see us all swankin’ along the *Unter den Linden* before the month’s out.”

And he fell to singing cheerfully—

“Apray la guerre feenee . . .
Anglay soldatt departee Angleterre.”

When we had reached the crumbled white ditch that had formerly been the British first line of defence we moved off the roadway and, having halted, piled arms and “fell out.”

All day long, under the blue tent of the Summer sky, we lay on a barren strip of ground, rumpled and uneven, hashed and torn by the shells that had deluged it—the debris of which, jagged splinters of steel and iron and empty

shell cases, still littered it. Such grass as still remained in isolated patches was yellow in death: even the rich blood that had freely flowed there had failed to revive it.

For, until a fortnight before, this had been No Man's Land—the narrow barrier interposed between the warring nations. For nearly two years a curse had lain upon this land: nor man nor beast walked there by day or night. The peril of death was upon it.—Yet now we idled away the long hours in peace and security on that once unhallowed spot: we ate our dinner with the relish of hungry men: we made merry, impelled by our sense of victory: individually we mused and marvelled over the story of this place. We were thrilled by the wonder of the thing.

Before us and on either side, crowning ridges and traversing the hollows, stretched the interminable white streaks that showed where the former enemy fortifications had been—fortifications deemed by their holders to be impregnable, but now blown and battered out of all semblance to even the crudest trench.

At regular intervals in the upper air, and extending in a curving line along the whole front were British observation balloons. From our point of vantage we could count sixteen of them.

And sailing to and fro along and above the battle front, crossing and recrossing the enemy lines, undeterred by the shrapnel puffs that in rapid succession appeared as from nowhere all about them, were swarms of British æroplanes. But of aircraft of any sort had the Germans none to be seen.

On every side guns were bellowing their passionless rage, with the ceaseless effect of the rolling of drums. Within a few score yards of us two batteries of heavy artillery belched forth flames of baleful green, poisoned with sickening fumes the air we breathed, and deafened us with their shattering roar.

Yet was their noise as music in our ears—the prelude to the mighty song of victory. All that we saw filled us with wonder and delight, for it was so much more than we had expected to see. We had heard and read that the Germans had been driven out of their lines of defence, but we had not fully realised the bigness of this thing until we saw the evidences of it with our own eyes. Many times we had heard the story of that first wonderful advance on July 1st, but now, being on the very spot where it had happened, and so soon afterwards that the very ground might yet have borne the foot-prints of those who had taken part in it, we

visualised the entire scene, reconstructed imaginatively the events of that morning.

So!—It was here that our fellows had suddenly leaped from their trenches and, in a long, thin line, had moved forward across this barren strip of land. Quietly, steadily, almost leisurely: at an even walking pace. The air was vibrant with the hiss of bullets and the scream and burst of shells. Shrapnel rained down upon them: and all around little jets of loose earth were kicking upwards from the ground. Still they moved forward as coolly and calmly as if on pleasure bent. In some places four or five men walked close together, and again in the middle of a wide gap one man jogged on alone—stumbling now into an unnoticed shell hole, then trotting for a few paces to maintain his place in the line. There a man paused a moment to relight his cigarette which had gone out. The line grew thin: a man dropped here—another there—then three or four together: but the others went on. There were gaps of ten—twenty—thirty yards: still the line did not waver. Steadily forward:—and a second line was now advancing behind the first—and a third behind that. And then, when the German trenches were only a stone's throw away, the first rank broke into a

sudden, fierce rush, and a hoarse shout drifted thinly down the wind. . . .

The historic stroll across No Man's Land was over, and Kitchener's men were at death grips with the enemy. . . .

The imaginative vision of that thing—so mighty in its consequences—on the very scene of its happening, the profound significance of all that we saw and heard around, filled us with a wild exhilaration, a sort of fighting ecstasy. Like wine to us was this reassuring evidence of victory, and there was an irresistible urge in the blood that pounded through our veins.

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On the summit of a ridge, some two or three hundred yards distant, was a system of trenches that had suffered less from the bombardment of our guns than others in the vicinity. A few of us made a tour of exploration there.

It was a strange sensation one had in walking about these desolate trenches, so dilapidated and containing so many relics of the men who had been their tenants for so long a time. A sensation as of walking the streets of a city of the dead.

At the crossways German signboards still stood to direct the wayfarer, and above the entrances to the dug-outs were other boards of

designation. On the door-jambs and other wood-work were pencilled drawings and inscriptions—just such expressions of whimsy as we had often recorded in an idle moment in our own trenches. A muddied German greatcoat lay on the firing-step, with a half-dozen broken and crumpled cigarettes in a pocket: stuffed between two sandbags in the parapet was a Bavarian newspaper, a small local print, dated June 24th: in a niche in the parados was a soot-blackened mess-tin supported on two bricks above a handful of grey ashes: and there was a profusion of scraps of equipment and clothing and empty beer bottles.

In trench warfare one comes to regard one's foes as impersonal—forgets that they are men very much like ourselves, having pretty much the same sensations and feelings, living amid conditions similar to our own, suffering the same discomforts and hardships, alternately cheered and disheartened by the same sort of happenings. One has the feeling of being opposed to a colossal machine rather than men of flesh and blood—which is not surprising when one considers that sometimes for months on end one may be in and out the trenches with monotonous regularity and yet never see a German. But walking thus through their old trenches one was brought

into a closer human sympathy with the Germans than ever before:—by that I mean that one realised them as men like ourselves, living or having lived in the trenches a life like unto that we knew.

From the trench, long, steep flights of steps, broad as the staircase in a country mansion, dropped down to the level of the dug-outs. Gingerly we crept down some of these, for the air was inexpressibly musty, and became worse as one descended.

Strange and awful were the scenes that the shifting light of an electric torch revealed to us in these underground shelters, for, through lack of opportunity on the part of our men, many had not been cleared, and so remained as they had been on the day when the Germans were thrust out of their trenches.

The dead still lay sprawling or huddled on the floor as they had fallen. In one dark dungeon were four or five corpses in a jumbled, untidy heap: in a corner a still form was outstretched upon an iron bedstead, one arm dangling over the edge: and at a table sat a man, bending far forward, his head drooped, his arms outstretched in front of him. When the electric beam first shot out there was a sudden scurrying and squeaking of rats. . . .

The stench might have rotted the earthen walls that hid these horrors from the day. . . .

In the golden sunlight again we gulped down deep draughts of fresh air.

Said one as we walked back towards the battalion, "In Germany to-day there are wives and mothers filled with anxiety because their men have been posted as 'Missing,' and they'll go on hoping and hoping for reassuring news. . . . And—these are the 'Missing!'"

War!

In the early evening the battalion was again formed up, and the order was given to march.

Our way led through the complex maze of the former German trenches, and we took in every detail with absorbed and wondering eyes. For us the place seemed peopled with the ghosts of our foes: so vividly could we picture them in their life behind the lines. There was a piquancy, droll and delightful, in the sensation of being where they had so little expected us ever to be.

As we went further, evidences of the ferocity of the struggle became more remarkable. In the newspapers we had read a few days previously that "the village of Fricourt is now in our hands." When we came to Fricourt we

remembered and laughed over the naïveté of the phrase, for Fricourt was but a name and a rubbish dump—an extensive litter of smashed bricks and crumbled mortar: not one stone had been left standing on another.

All the surrounding country was pitted as with a gigantic species of smallpox: or like a sea that has been churned into a mass of seething whirlpools and then suddenly petrified. Of grass or other living growth there was none: the shattered earth stretched bare and bleached under the august eye of the sun: there seemed no inch of it that had been left untouched by the devastating artillery fire. Such trees as still stood were white and gleaming skeletons—clean stripped of leaf and twig and bark. In one place a few dozens of these gaunt spectres of trees were thinly clustered together, the pitiable monument of a dead and vanished wood.

At the ruins of Mametz village motor ambulances were gathered in great numbers, and in front of improvised dressing stations were groups of wounded men. Now that they were out of danger and setting out on the primrose path that leads to Blighty a marked cheerfulness was in their demeanour, and they shouted to us that it had been another great day: the cavalry had been in action, we had cleared the Germans

from High Wood, and we had taken many hundreds of prisoners.

Thereafter we passed numerous batches of these prisoners being herded down from the line by small parties of British soldiers, and there was a constant stream of our own wounded, some painfully walking alone or assisted by a comrade, others on stretchers whose bearers were often Germans under the armed surveillance of a Tommy.

The road ran at the foot of a long ridge which rose immediately on our right, and to the left was a level space stretching across to the dark bulk, white-scarred, of Mametz Wood. Over this space guns were scattered in prodigal profusion — battery upon battery standing unscreened in the open, in the positions they had but newly taken up. And all vomiting forth flame and noise without cessation.

The air shivered with the tumult of cannon. From the other side of the ridge came the muffled drum-roll of several batteries of French ·75's. Overhead great shells shrieked on their passage from the guns in the rear. The darkness of the wood was split by sudden flashes.

Now a silence fell upon our men ; the tongues that had wagged so freely hitherto were still. The intensity of the bombardment now in

progress awed and appalled us, and on every hand were evidences of the stern nature of the conflict which we were about to enter. The roadside was strewn with corpses: at intervals of every few yards they lay awaiting burial. Some doubtless had died on their way to the dressing station, and had been deposited there by the stretcher-bearers that these last might return at once to the service of the living. Others had been killed by shells at the spot where they now lay. The grey uniform of the German lay side by side with the khaki of the Britisher. . . .

A dead horse and its rider lay in the middle of the road in a wide pool of blood. Wherever one looked were dead horses. . . .

And still the wounded streamed by in silent procession.

A halt was called—the last prior to our going into action. We established ourselves in a series of newly dug man-holes (like shallow graves) that stretched in a line between the road and the wood.

Darkness fell. But in every direction it was riven by yellow flashes of light: and the air was thunderous with the incessant roaring of guns and bursting of shells. The forward horizon was aflame as far as eye could see: at points innumerable and ever changing there were

volcanic bursts of savage flame in ceaseless succession: all up and down the long battle front the glare in the sky flickered and danced, was here vivid and there faint, but was unbroken. And in this warmly luminous upper air a myriad star-shells winked in and out, soared and drifted and fell, like so many green rush-lights.

The spectacle was as magnificent as, to the imaginative eye, it was full of terror. Fascinated we lay in the strangely troubled dark and watched this fantastic demoniac revel of light, the roar of the guns still surging through the air in a shattering devil's tattoo.

Then the order was given to fall in, and we went forward into action.