

Letters from France eBook

Letters from France by Charles Bean

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[Illustration: Rough sketch showing some of the German defences of Pozieres and the direction of the Australian attacks between July 22 and September 4, 1916. (From Pozieres to Mouquet Farm is just over a mile.)]

LETTERS FROM FRANCE

CHAPTER I

A PADRE WHO SAID THE RIGHT THING

France, April 8th, 1916.

The sun glared from a Mediterranean sky and from the surface of the Mediterranean sea. The liner heaved easily to a slow swell. In the waist of the ship a densely packed crowd of sunburnt faces upturned towards a speaker who leaned over the rail of the promenade deck above. Beside the speaker was a slight figure with three long rows of ribbons across the left breast. Every man in the Australian Imperial Force is as proud of those ribbons as the leader who wears them so modestly.

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Australian ships had been moving through those waters for days. High over one's head, as one listened to that speaker, there sawed the wireless aerial backwards and forwards across the silver sky. Only yesterday that aerial had intercepted a stammering signal from far, far away over the brim of the world. "S.O.S.," it ran, "S.O.S." There followed half inarticulate fragments of a latitude. That evening about sundown we ran into the shreds of some ocean conversation about boats' crews, and about someone who was still absent—just that broken fragment in the buzz of the wireless conversation which runs around the world. A big Australian transport, we knew, was some twelve hours away from us upon the waters. Could it be about her that these personages of the ocean were calling one to another? Days afterwards we heard that it had not been an Australian or any other transport.

Somewhere in those dazzling seas there was an eye watching for us too, just above the water, and always waiting—waiting—waiting—. It would have been a rich harvest, that crowded deck below one. If the monster struck just there he could not fail to kill many with the mere explosion. But I don't believe a man in the crowd gave it a thought. The strong, tanned, clean-shaven faces under the old slouch hats were all gazing up in rapt attention at the speaker. For he was telling them the right thing.

He was not a regular chaplain—there was no regular padre in that ship, and we were likely to have no church parade until there was discovered amongst the reinforcement officers one little subaltern who was a padre in Tasmania, but who was going to the front as a fighting man. We had heard other padres speak to troops on the eve of their plunging into a great enterprise, when the sermon had made some of us wish that we only had the power and gift to seize that wonderful opportunity as it might be seized, and have done with texts and doctrines and speak to the men as men. Every man there had his ideals—he was giving his life, as like as not, because, however crude the exterior, there was an eye within which saw truly and surely through the mists. And now when they stood on the brink of the last great sacrifice, could he not seize upon those truths—?

But this time we simply stood and wondered. For that slip of a figure in khaki, high up there with one hand on the stanchion and the other tapping the rail, was telling them a thousand times better than any of us could ever have put it to himself exactly the things one would have longed to say.

He told them first, his voice firm with conviction, that God had not populated this world with saints, but with ordinary human men; and that they need not fear that, simply because they might not have been churchgoers or lived what the world calls religious lives, therefore God would desert them in the danger and trials and perhaps the death to which they went. "If I thought that God wished any man to be tortured eternally," he said, "to be tortured for all time and not to have any hope of heaven, then I would go down to Hell cheerfully with a smile on my lips rather than worship such a being. I don't know whether a man may put it beyond the power of God to help him. But I know this,

that whether you are bad or good, or religious or not religious, God is with you all the time trying to help you.

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“And what have we to fear now?” he went on, raising his eyes for a moment from the puckered, interested brown foreheads below him and looking out over the shimmering distant silver of the horizon, as if away over there, over the edge of the world, he could read what the next few months had in store for them. “We know what we have come for, and we know that it is right. We have all read of the things which have happened in Belgium and in France. We know that the Germans invaded a peaceful country and brought these horrors into it, we know how they tore up treaties like so much paper; how they sank the *Lusitania* and showered their bombs on harmless women and children in London and in the villages of England. We came of our own free wills—we came to say that this sort of thing shall not happen in the world so long as we are in it. We know that we are doing right, and I tell you that on this mission on which we have come, so long as every man plays the game and plays it cleanly, he need not fear about his religion—for what else is his religion than that? Play the game and God will be with you—never fear.

“And what if some of us do pass over before this struggle is ended—what is there in that? If it were not for the dear ones whom he leaves behind him, mightn’t a man almost pray for a death like that? The newspapers too often call us heroes, but we know we are not heroes for having come, and we do not want to be called heroes. We should have been less than men if we hadn’t.”

The rapt, unconscious approval in those weather-scarred upturned faces made it quite obvious that they were with him in every word. In those simple sentences this man was speaking the whole soul of Australia. He looked up for a second to the wide sky as clear as his own conscience, and then looked down at them again. “Isn’t it the most wonderful thing that could ever have happened?” he went on. “Didn’t everyone of us as a boy long to go about the world as they did in the days of Drake and Raleigh, and didn’t it seem almost beyond hope that that adventure would ever come to us? And isn’t that the very thing that has happened? And here we are on that great enterprise going out across the world, and with no thought of gain or conquest, but to help to right a great wrong. What else do we wish except to go straight forward at the enemy—with our dear ones far behind us and God above us, and our friends on each side of us and only the enemy in front of us—what more do we wish than that?”

There were tears in many men’s eyes when he finished—and that does not often happen with Australians. But it happened this time—far out there on a distant sea. And that was because he had put his finger, just for one moment, straight on to the heart of his nation.

CHAPTER II

TO THE FRONT

France, April 8th.

So the Australians are in France. A great reception at the port of landing, so we hear. A long, weary train journey in a troop train which never alters its pace, but moves steadily on, halts for meals, jogs on again, waits interminably outside strange junctions. Some days ago it landed the first units, somewhere behind the front.

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We reached France some time after the first units. The excitement of seeing an Australian hat had long since evaporated. A few troops had been left in camp near the port, and we met some of those on leave in the big town. They might have been there since their babyhood for all they or the big town cared.

And there we first heard mentioned the name of a town to which our troops were supposed to have gone. It was quite a different town from the one which we had heard of on board ship. It was snowing up there where our men were, they said.

The train took us through beautiful country not yet touched by the spring of the year. There were magnificent horses in the rich brown fields—great draught horses such as I have never seen in any country yet. But the figure that drove the harrow was always that of an old man or a young boy; or, once or twice, of a woman. There were women digging in the fields everywhere; or trudging back along the roads under great bundles of firewood. The country was almost all cultivated land, one vast farming industry. And they had managed to get through the whole year's work exactly as if the men were there. As far as we could see every field was ploughed, every green crop springing. It is a wonderful performance.

We had not the least idea where we were going until in the end we actually got there. Travelling in France is quite different from travelling in Egypt or England. In Egypt you still exercise your brain as to which train you shall travel by and where you will stay and where you will change. But in France there is no need for you to think out your own journey—it is useless for you to do so. The moment you reach France the big hand of General Headquarters takes hold of you; and from that instant it picks you up and puts you down as if you were a pawn on a chessboard. Whatever the railway station, there is always a big British policeman. The policeman directs you to the Railway Transport Officer and the Railway Transport Officer tells you how long you will stay and when you will leave and where you will go to next. And when you get to the next place there is another policeman who sends you to another Railway Transport Officer; until you finally come to a policeman who directs you from the station and up the street of a little French town, where, standing on the wet cobbles at the corner of the old city square, under dripping stage scenery gables, you find another British policeman who passes you to another policeman at another corner who directs you under the very archway and into the very office which you are intended by General Headquarters to reach.

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And if you go on right up to the very trenches themselves you will find that British policeman all the way; directing the traffic at every country cross-road where there is likely to be a congestion of the great lumbering motor-lorries; standing outside the ruined village church which the long-range guns have knocked to pieces in trying to get at a supply dump or a headquarters; waiting at the fork-roads where you finally have to leave your motor-car and walk only in small parties if you wish to avoid sudden death; on point duty at the ruined farmhouses which it is unhealthy at certain hours of the day to pass. At the corner where you finally turn off the road into the long, deepening communication trench; even at the point where the second line trenches cross the communication trench to the front trenches—in some cases you find that policeman there also, faithfully telling you the way, incidentally with a very close and critical eye upon you at the same time.

He is simply the British policeman doing his famous old job in his famous old way. He is mostly the London policeman, but there are policemen from Burnley, from Manchester, from Glasgow amongst them. And up near the lines you find the policeman from Sydney and Melbourne waving the traffic along with a flag just as he used to do at the corner of Pitt and King Streets. Just as he used to see that the by-laws of the local council were carried out, so he now has to see to the rules and orders made by the local general. It is a thankless job generally; but when they get as far as this most people begin to be a little grateful to the policeman.

Our railway train and the policeman had carried us over endless farmlands, through forests, beside rivers, before we noticed, drawn up along the side of a quarter of a mile of road, an endless procession of big grey motor-lorries. Every one was exactly like the next—a tall grey hood in front and a long grey tarpaulin behind. It was the first sign of the front. Presently a French regiment went by along a country road—not at all unlike our Australian troops in some ways—biggish fellows in grey-blue overcoats, all singing a jolly song. They waved to us in the same light-hearted way Australians have. There were more fair-haired men, among some of the French troops we have seen, than there would be in one of our own battalions.

After this there came great stores at intervals, and timber yards—hour after hour of farmhouses and villages where there was a Tommy in every doorway, Tommies in every barn, a Tommy's khaki jacket showing through every kitchen window; until at last towards evening we reached a country populated by the familiar old pea-soup overcoats and high-necked jackets and slouch hats of Australians.

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There they were, the men whom we had last seen on the Suez Canal—here they were, already, in the orchard alongside of the old lichened, steep-roofed barn—four or five of them squatting round a fire of sticks, one stuffing his pipe and talking, talking, talking all the while. I knew that they were happy there before ever they said it. A track led across a big field—there were two Australians walking along it. A road crossed the railway—two Australians were standing at the open door of the house, and another talking to the kiddies in the street. There was a platoon of them drilling behind a long barn.

A long way ahead of that, still going through an Australian country, we stopped; and a policeman showed us to the station entrance where there was a motor-car which took us and our baggage to the little house where we were billeted. On the green door of the house next to it, behind the pretty garden, was scrawled in chalk, “Mess—five officers.” That was where we were to feed.

[Illustration: “*Talking with the kiddies in the street*”]

It was as we came back from tea that I first noticed a distant sound—ever so familiar—the far-off heavy roar of the big guns at Cape Helles. It was guns firing along the lines away to the east of us.

And as we walked back after dinner that night from the little mess-room, across the garden hedge and over the country beyond, there flashed ever and anon hither and thither a distant halo of light. It was the field guns firing, and the searchlights flashing over a German parapet.

Yesterday for the first time an Anzac unit entered the trenches in France.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST IMPRESSION—A COUNTRY WITH EYES

France, April, 1916.

Rich green meadows. Rows of tall, slender elm trees along the hedges. Low, stunted and pollarded willows lining some distant ditch, with their thick trunks showing notched against a distant blue hill-side like a row of soldiers. Here and there a red roof nestled among the hawthorn under the tall trees just bursting into green. Violets—great bunches of them—in the patches of scrub between the tall trunks and yellow cowslips and white and pink anemones and primroses. You see the flaxen-haired children out in the woods and along the roadside gathering them. A rosy-cheeked woman stands in the doorway of a farm at the cross-roads, and a golden-haired youngster, scarce able to run as yet, totters across the road to her, laughing.

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Only this morning, as we passed that same house, there was the low whine of a shell, and a metallic bang like the sound of a dented kerosene tin when you try to straighten the bend in it. Then another and another and another. We could see the white smoke of the shells floating past behind the spring greenery of a hedgerow only a few fields away. It drifted slowly through the trees and then came another salvo. There were some red roofs near—those of a neighbouring farm—but we could not see whether they were firing at them, or at some sign of moving troops, or at a working party if there were any; and I do not know now. As we came back that way in the afternoon there was more shelling farther along. The woman in the doorway simply turned her head in its direction for a moment, and so did a younger woman who came to the doorway behind her. Then they turned to the baby again.

Through the trees one could see that the farmhouses and cottages farther on had mostly been battered and broken. There was a road running at a little distance, and every roof and wall in it had been shattered. There was a feverish, insane disorder about the little groups of buildings there, all shattered, burnt and gaping, like the tangled nightmare of desolation on the morning after a great city fire. Farther still was open country again, where long communication trenches began to run through the fields—but you could see none of this from where we stood. Only in the distant hedgerows, perhaps, we might have noticed, if we had looked for it, an occasional broken tree trunk—snapped off short or broken down at a sharp angle by shell fire.

Those distant trees would be growing over our firing line—or the German.

It is a more beautiful country than any we saw in Gallipoli, in spite of its waterlogged ditches and the rain which had fallen miserably almost every day since we arrived. There is green grass up to within a few yards of the filthy mud of the front trenches; and not a hinterland of powdered white earth which was all we had at Anzac or at Helles. Here you have hedgerows just bursting into spring, and green grass, which on a fine day fairly tempts you to lie on it if you are far enough away from the lines. The country is flat and you see no sign of the enemy's trenches, or your own—the hedgerows shut them out at half a mile as completely as if they did not exist.

[Illustration: *“An occasional broken tree-trunk—snapped off short, or broken down at A sharp angle, by shell fire”*]

[Illustration: *No man's land* The barrier which stretches from Belgium to the Swiss border and which not the millions of Rockefeller could enable him to cross]

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But you realise, when you have been in that country for a little while, that you have eyes upon you all the time—you are being watched as you have never been watched in your life before. You move along the country road as you would walk along the roads about your own home, until, sooner or later, things happen which make you think suddenly and think hard. You are passing, a dozen of you together instead of the usual two or three, through those green fields by those green hedgerows when there is a sharp whiz and a crash, and a shrapnel shell from a German seventy-seven (their field gun) bursts ten yards behind you. You are standing at a corner studying a map, and you notice that a working party is passing the corner frequently on some duty or another. You were barely aware that there was a house near you.

Twenty-four hours later you hear that that house was levelled to the ground next morning—a shrapnel shell on each side of it to get the range—a high explosive into it to burst it up—and an incendiary shell to burn the rubbish; and one more French family is homeless.

It takes you some time to realise that it was *you* who burnt that house—you and that working party which moved past the cross-roads so often. Somebody must have seen you when the shell burst alongside that hedge. Somebody must have been watching you all the time when you were loitering with your map at that corner. Somebody, at any rate, must have been marking down from the distance everything that happened at those cross-roads. Somebody in the landscape is clearly watching you all the while. And then for the first time you recall that those grey trees in the distance must be behind the German lines; that distant roof and chimney notched against a background of scrub is in German ground; the pretty blue hill against which the willows in the plain show out like a row of railway sleepers is cut off from you by a barrier deeper than the Atlantic—the German trenches; and that from all yonder landscape, which moves behind the screen of nearer trees as you walk, eyes are watching for you all day long; telescopes are glaring at you; brains behind the telescopes are patiently reconstructing, from every movement in our roads or on our fields, the method of our life, studying us as a naturalist watches his ants under a glass case.

Long before you get near the lines, away over the horizon before you, there is floating what looks most like a flat white garden grub—small because of its distance. Look to the south and to the north and you will see at wide intervals others, one after the other until they fade into the distance. Every fine day brings them out as regularly as the worms rise after rain; they sit there all day long in the sky, each one apparently drowsing over his own stretch of country. But they are anything but drowsy. Each one contains his own quick eyes, keen brain, his telescope, his telephone, and heaven knows what instruments. And out on every beautiful fresh morning of spring come the butterflies of modern warfare—two or three of our own planes, low down; and then a white insect very, very high—now hidden behind a cloud, now appearing again across the rift. It is delightful to stand there and watch it all like a play. The bombs, if they drop 'em, are worth risking any day.

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But it isn't the bombs that matter, and it isn't *you* who run the risk. The observer is not there to drop bombs, in most cases, but to watch, watch, watch. A motor standing by the roadside, a body of men about some work, extra traffic along a road—and a red tick goes down on a map; that is all. You go away. But next day, or sometimes much sooner, that red tick comes up for shelling as part of the normal day's routine of some German battery.

So if these letters from France ever seem thin, remember that the war correspondent does not wish to give to the enemy for a penny what he would gladly give a regiment to get. On our way back is a field pock-marked by a hundred ancient shell-holes around a few deserted earthworks. On some bygone afternoon it must have been wild, raging, reeking hell there for half an hour or so. Somebody in this landscape put a red tick once against that long-forgotten corner.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROAD TO LILLE

France, April.

There is a house at a certain corner I passed of late. On it, in big white letters on a blue ground, is written "To Lille." Every township for a hundred miles has that same signpost, showing you the way to the great city of Northern France. But Rockefeller himself with all his motor-cars could not follow its direction to-day. For the city to which it points is six miles behind the German lines. You can get from our lines the edge of some outlying suburb overlapping a distant hill-top.

And that is all that the French people can see of the second city of their State. The distant roofs, the smoke rising from some great centre of human activity nestled in a depression into which you cannot look; you can peer at them all day long through a telescope and wonder why it is they are stoking their chimneys, or what it is that causes the haze to hang deeply on such and such a day over this or that corner—you can study the place as an astronomer studies the faint markings upon the surface of Mars. But to all intents and purposes that country is as much cut off from you as is the farthest star.

For the war in which we are engaged means this—that you may travel from any part of the world with the freedom of this twentieth century and all its conveniences, until you come to the place where we are to-day. But, when you come thus far, there is a line in front of you which no power that has yet been produced in this world, from its creation to the present day—not all the money nor all the invention—not all the parliamentarians nor the philosophers—not all the socialism nor the autocracy, the capital, nor the labour, the brain, nor the physical power in the whole world has yet been able to pass. The German nation, for reasons of its own, has put this line across another people's country

and made a fool of all the progress and civilisation on which we relied so confidently up to a couple of years ago. I suppose it will all grow unbelievable again some day—two hundred years hence they will smile at such talk just as we did two years ago. But it will be as true then as it is to-day—that a nation of officials and philosophers gone mad has been able to place across the world a line which no man can at present move.

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I have seen that line at a fair number of places—since writing these words, many miles away in my billet, working in the brick-floored cottage bedroom by the light of an oil lamp, I have stepped to the door, and there I can see it now, always flickering and flashing like faint summer lightning under the clouds on the horizon. When you come to the very limit—to the farthest point which you or any man on earth can possibly reach by yourself—it is just a strip of green grass from twenty to four hundred yards wide, straggling across France and Belgium from the sea to the Swiss border. I suppose that French and English men have sanctified every part of that narrow ribbon by dying there. But the grass of those old paddocks grows unkempt like a shock head of hair. And it has covered with a kindly mantle most of the terrible relics of the past. A tuft, perhaps thicker than the rest, is all that marks where last year lay a British soldier whose death represented the latest effort of the world to cross the line the Germans laid.

You cannot even know what is going on in the country beyond that line. You have to build up a science for deducing it from little signs, as a naturalist might study the habits of a nest of ants. The Germans are probably much more successful at that than we are.

It is strange to us that there are towns and cities over there only a few miles away from us, and for a hundred miles back from that, of whose life we know nothing except that they have been ravished and ruined by the heavy hand of Prussian militarism. But, for the people who live around us here, it is a tragedy of which I had not the least conception until I actually saw it.

We had a cup of coffee the other day in the house of an old lady whose husband had been called out two years ago, a few days after the war began.

“All my own people are over there, monsieur,” she said, nodding her head towards the lines. “They were all living in the invaded country, and I have not heard of them for eighteen months. I do not know whether they are alive or dead. I only know that they are all ruined. They were farmers, monsieur, comfortably off on a big farm. But consider the fines that the Boches have put upon the country.

“The only thing we know, monsieur, it was from a cousin who was taken prisoner by the Boches. You know we are allowed to write to the prisoners, and they have the privilege to write to people in the invaded country. So my family wrote to my cousin to ask news of my mother, who was a very old woman. And after weeks and weeks the answer came back—‘Mother dead.’

“It was not so terrible that, monsieur, because my mother was old. But then—he who was my dear friend,” she always referred to her husband by this term, “my dear friend used to write to us every day in those times. He was fighting in Alsace, monsieur, and for his bravery he had been promoted upon the field of battle to be an officer. He wrote every single day to me and the children. We were always so united—never a harsh

word between us during all the years we were married—he was always gentle and tender and affectionate—a good husband and father, monsieur, and he sent the letter every day to my brother-in-law, who is a soldier in Paris, and my brother-in-law sent it on to us.

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"There came one day when he wrote to us saying that he was out behind the trenches waiting for an attack which they were to make in two hours' time. He had had his breakfast, and was smoking his pipe quite content. There the letter ended, and for three days no letter came from my dear friend. And then my brother-in-law wrote to his officer, and the answer arrived—this, monsieur," she said, fumbling with shaking fingers in a drawer where all her treasures were, and trying to hide her tears; and handed me a folded piece of paper written on the battlefield.

It was from his captain, and it spoke of the death of as loyal and brave a soldier as ever breathed. He was killed, the letter said, ten yards from the enemy's trenches.

And it is so in every house that you go into in these villages. When the billeting officer goes round to ask what rooms they have, it is continually the same story. "Room, monsieur—yes, there is the room of my son who was killed in Argonne—of my husband who was killed at Verdun. He is killed, and my father and mother they are in the invaded country, and I know nothing of them since the war."

[Illustration: *Along the road to Lille*]

But the road to the invaded country will be opened some day. These people have not a doubt of it. If one thing has struck us more than any other since we came to France, it is the spirit of the French. We came here when the battle at Verdun was at its height; and yet from the hour of landing I have not heard a single French man or woman that was not utterly confident. There is a quiet resolution over this people at present which makes a most impressive contrast to the jabber of the world outside. Whatever may be the case with Paris, these country people of France are one of the freshest and strongest nations on earth.

They are living their ordinary lives right up under the burst of the German shells. Three of them were killed here the other day—three children, playing about one minute at a street corner in front of their own homes before Australian eyes, were lying dead there the next. Yet the people are still there—it is their home, and why should they leave it? An autocracy has no chance against a convinced, united, determined democracy like this. More than anything I have seen it is this surprising quiet resolution of the French which has made one confident beyond a doubt that Frenchmen will pass some day again, by no man's leave except their own, along the road to Lille.

CHAPTER V

THE DIFFERENCES

France, April 25th.

The cottage door is open to the night. The soft air of a beautiful evening following on a glorious day brushes past one into the room. As I stand here the nightingale from a neighbouring garden is piping his long, exquisite, repeated note till the air seems full of it. Far away over the horizon is an incessant flicker like summer lightning, very faint but quite continuous. Under the nightingale's note comes always a dull grumble, throbbing and bumping occasionally, but seldom quite ceasing. Someone is getting it heavily down there—it is not our Australians; I think I know their direction.

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It was just such a glorious day as this one has been, a year ago, when this corps of untried soldiers suddenly rushed into the nightmare of a desperate fight. At this moment of the night the rattle of rifle fire was incessant all round the hills. Men were digging and firing and digging in a dream which had continued since early dawn and had to continue for two more days and nights before there was the first chance of rest. They were old soldiers within twenty-four hours, as their leader told them in an order which was circulated at the time. Only a sprinkling of the men who were there are in the Anzac units to-day. But they are the officers and the N.C.O.'s, and that means a great deal.

We have been here long enough now to discover the differences between this front and the old fighting-line in Gallipoli. The rain has been heavier in March than for thirty-five years, and April until yesterday seemed almost as bad. The trenches are made passable by being floored with a wooden pathway which runs on piles—underneath which is the gutter of water and mud which is the real floor of the trench. Sometimes the water rises in the communication trenches so that the boards float or disappear, and if you happen to step into an interval between them you may quite well sink to your waist in thin clay mud. The actual firing trenches and the dug-outs there are mostly dry by comparison, except where the accumulated task of draining them has been gaining on some regiment which garrisons them, and the rear of the line is a morass of foul-smelling clay.

This difficulty never really reached us in Gallipoli, though we might possibly have found the trenches falling in upon us in the rains of winter if we had stayed. The trenches in France are full of traces of old dug-outs and mouldering sandbags, collapsed through rain in the dim past before the timbering of all works was looked on as a necessity. In Anzac we never had the timber for this, and one doubts if we ever could have had it had we stayed. The soil there was dry and held well, and the trenches were deep and very elaborate to a degree which one has not seen approached in France. There may be some parts here where such trenches are possible, and where they exist; but I have not seen them. It must be remembered that in many places in France there are stretches of line where it is impossible to dig a trench at all in winter, because you meet water as soon as you scratch the surface; and therefore both our line and the German are a breastwork built up instead of a trench dug down. The curious thing is that in the trenches themselves you scarcely realise the difference. Your outlook there is bounded in either case by two muddy walls over which you cannot wisely put your head in the daylight. The place may be a glorious green field, with flowers and birds and little reedy pools, if you are two feet over the parapet. But you see nothing from week-end to week-end except two muddy walls and the damp, dark interior of a small dug-out. You see no more of the country than you would in a city street. Trench life is always a city life.

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[Illustration: *The trenches here have to be built above the ground in breastwork and not dug below it*]

The trench routine is much the same as it was in Gallipoli, except that in no part which I have seen is the tension anything like so great. At Anzac you were hanging on to the edge of a valley by your finger-nails, and had to steal every yard that you could in order to have room to build up a second line, and if possible a third line beyond that. Here both you and the enemy have scores of miles behind you, and two or three hundred yards more or less makes no difference worth mentioning.

For this reason you would almost say that the German line in this country was asleep compared with the line we used to know. A hundred and fifty yards of green grass, with the skeleton that was once some old hay wagon up-ended in the middle of it, and sky-blue water showing through the grass blades in the depressions; a brown mud wall straggling along the other side of the green—more or less parallel to your breastwork, with white sandbags crowning it like an irregular coping; the inevitable stumpy stakes and masses of rusted barbed wire in front. You might watch it for an hour and the only sign of life you would see would be a blue whiff of smoke from some black tin chimney stuck up behind it. If you fire at the chimney probably it will be taken down. The other day, chancing to look into a periscope, I happened for a moment to see the top of a dark object moving along half hidden by the opposing parapet. Some earth was being thrown up over the breastwork just there, and probably the man had to step round the work which was going on. It was the first and only time I have seen a German in his own lines.

The German here really snipes much more with his field gun than with his rifle. He does use his rifle, too, and is a good shot, but slow. A spout of dust on the parapet—and a periscope has been shattered in the observer's hand within a few yards of us. But it is generally the German field gun that does his real sniping for him, shooting at any small body of men behind the lines. Half a dozen are quite enough to make a target, if he sees them.

The Turks used to snipe us at times with their field guns and mountain guns, but generally at certain fixed places—down near the mouth of the Aghyl Dere, for example. The German snipes with them more generally. There is no place that I have visited which can compare for perpetual “unhealthiness” to Anzac Beach, but it is quite possible that such places do exist.

The German gives you the impression of being a keener observer than the Turk. The hills and trees behind his lines are really within view of you over miles of your own country, though you scarcely realise it at first, and they are full of eyes. Also every fine day brings out his balloons like a crop of fat grubs—and also our own. In Gallipoli our ships had the only balloons—the Turks had all the hill-tops.

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The aeroplane here affords so big a part of the hourly spectacle of warfare, and makes so great a difference in the obvious conditions of the fight, that he deserves a letter to himself. But of all the differences, by far the greatest is that our troops here have a beautiful country and a civilised, enlightened population at the back of them, which they are defending against the invading enemy whom they have always hoped to meet. They are amongst a people like their own, living in villages and cottages and paddocks not so different from those of their own childhood. Right up into the very zone of the trenches there are houses still inhabited by their owners. As we were entering a communication trench a few days ago we noticed four or five British soldiers walking across the open from a cottage. The officer with me asked them what they were doing. "We've just been to the inn there," they said.

The people of that house were still living in it, with our trenches wandering through their orchard.

In Gallipoli there were brigade headquarters in the actual fire trenches. From the headquarters of the division or the corps you could reach the line by ten minutes' hard walking, any time. It is a Sabbath day's journey here—indeed, the only possible way of covering the longer distances regularly is by motor-car or motor-cycle, and no one dreams of using any other means. Nearly the whole army, except the troops in the actual firing-line, lives in a country which is populated by its normal inhabitants.

And—wherein lies the greatest change of all—the troops in the trenches themselves can be brought back every few days into more or less normal country, and have always the prospect before them at the end of a few months of a stay in surroundings that are completely free from shell or rifle fire, and within reach of village shops and the normal comforts of civilisation. And throwing the weather and wet trenches and the rest all in, that difference more than makes up for all of them.

"You see, a fellow must look after himself a bit," one of them said to me the other day. "A man didn't take any care how he looked in Gallipoli; but here with these young ladies about, you can't go around like what we used to there."

Through one's mind there flashed well-remembered figures, mostly old slouch hat and sunburnt muscle—the lightest uniform I can recollect was an arrangement of a shirt secured by safety pins. Here they go more carefully dressed than if they were on leave in Melbourne or Sydney.

Yesterday the country was *en fete*, the roads swarming with young and old, and the fields with children picking flowers. The guns were bumping a few miles away—mostly at aeroplanes. I went to the trenches with a friend. Our last sight, as we came away from the region of them, was of a group of French boys and girls and a few elders around a haystack; and half a dozen big Australians, with rolled shirtsleeves, up on the farming machinery helping them to do the work of the year.

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That is *the* difference.

CHAPTER VI

THE GERMANS

France, May.

The night air on every side of us was full of strange sound. It was not loud nor near, but it was there all the time. We could hear it even while we talked and above the sound of our footsteps on the cobbles of the long French highway. Ahead of us, and far on either side, came this continuous distant rattle. It was the sound of innumerable wagons carrying up over endless cobble stones the food and ammunition for another day.

A cart clattered past from the front with the jingle of trace chains and hammer of metal tyres upon stones. So one driver had finished his job for the night. Farther on was a sound of voices and a chink of spades; some way to our left across a field we can make out dark figures—they may be stunted willows along the far hedge, or they may be a working party going up, with their spades and picks over their shoulders, to one of those jobs which in this flat country can only be done by night.

Twenty miles behind the lines, or more, you can see every night along the horizon in front of you a constant low flicker of light—the flares thrown up by both sides over the long ribbon of No Man's Land—the ribbon which straggles without a break from one end of France to the other. We were getting very close to that barrier now—within a couple of miles of it; and the pure white stars of these glorified Roman candles were describing graceful curves behind a fretwork of trees an inch or two above the horizon. Every five or six seconds a rifle cracked somewhere along the line—very different from the ceaseless pecking of Gallipoli. Then a distant German machine-gun started its sprint, stumbled, went on again, tripped again. A second machine-gun farther down the line caught it up, and the two ran along in perfect step for a while. Then a third joined in, like some distant canary answering its mates. The first two stopped and left it trilling along by itself, catching occasionally like a motor-car engine that misfires, until it, too, stuttered into silence. "Some poor devils being killed, I suppose," you think to yourself, "suppose they've seen a patrol out in front of the lines, or a party digging in the open somewhere behind the trenches." You can't help crediting the Germans—at first, when you come to this place as a stranger—with being much more deadly than the Turks both with their machine-guns and their artillery. But you soon learn that it is by no means necessary that anyone is dying when you hear their machine-guns sing a chorus. They may chatter away for a whole night and nobody be in the least the worse for it. Their artillery can throw two or three hundred shells, or even more, into one of its various targets, not once but many times, and only a man or two be wounded; sometimes no one at all. War is alike in that respect all the world over, apparently; which is comforting.

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Presently the road ends and the long sap begins. You plunge into the dark winding alley much as into some old city's ugly by-lane. It is Centennial Avenue. There is room in it to pass another man even when he is carrying a shoulderful of timber. But you must be careful when you do pass him, or one of you will find yourself waist deep in mud. I have said before that you do not walk on the bottom of the trench as you did in Gallipoli, but on a narrow wooden causeway not unlike the bridge on which ducks wander down from the henhouse to the yard—colloquially known as the “duck-boards.” The days have probably passed when a man could be drowned in the mud of a communication trench. But it is always unpleasant to step off the duck-boards in wet weather. Seeing that the enemy may have fixed rifles trained on you at any bend of the trench, it is unwise to carry a light; and in a dark night and an unaccustomed trench you are almost sure to flounder.

A party of men loaded with new duck-boards is blocked ahead of you. As you stand there talking to another wayfarer and waiting for the unknown obstacle to move, a bullet flicks off the parapet a few feet away. It was at least a foot above the man's head and was clearly fired from some rifle laid on the trench during the daytime. Every now and then the parapet on one side becomes dense black against a dazzling white sky, and the trench wall on the other side becomes a glaring white background on which the shadow of your own head and shoulders sail slowly past you in inky black silhouette. The sharp-cut shadow gradually rises up the white trench wall, and all is black again until the enemy throws another flare.

As you talk there comes suddenly over the flats on your left a brilliant yellow flicker and a musical whine: “Whine—bang, whine—bang, whine—bang, whine—bang,” just like that spoken very quickly.

“That's right over the working party in Westminster Abbey,” says the last man in the procession. “Some bally fool lit a pipe, I suppose.”

The man next him reckons it was about Lower George Street that got it that time. “They been registerin' that place all day on an' off,” he says.

There was just that one swift salvo, and nothing more. Presently, when the procession moved on, we came across men who had a shower of earth thrown down their backs by the burst of those shells. Just one isolated salvo in the night on one particular spot. Goodness knows what the Germans saw or thought they saw. No one was hit, nothing was interfered with. But it is a great mistake to think it all foolishness. The most methodical soldier in the world is behind those other sandbags, and he doesn't do things without reason.

Farther on we came through a series of hovels, more like dog kennels than the shelters of men, to the dark parapet where men are always watching, watching, across a hundred yards or so of green pasture, the dark mud parapet on the other side. Here



and there over a dug-out there fidgets a tiny toy aeroplane such as children make, or a miniature windmill. The aeroplane propeller is revolving slowly, tail away from the enemy, clicking and rattling as it turns. "Just-a-perfect-night-for-gas"—that is what the aeroplane propeller is saying.

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Once only in the night there is a clatter opposite—one machine-gun started it, then two together, then forty or fifty rifles. Perhaps they think they saw a patrol. The Turks used to get precisely similar nerve-storms on Russell's Top. Nobody even troubles to remark it. Dawn breaks over the watching figures without one incident to report.

It is after the light has grown and become fixed that you will notice, if you look carefully for it, a thin film of blue smoke floating upwards from behind the sandbags on the other side of No Man's Land. Only a hundred and fifty yards away from you the German cook must be fitting his old browned and burned dixies and kerosene tins over their early morning fire.

We had our early morning coffee, too. And as we walked homewards we found that from a particular point we were looking straight at a distant barn roof which is in German territory. Near it, towards his trenches, ran a road. Of curiosity we turned our telescopes on to that path, and while we watched there strolled along it two figures in grey—grey tunics, grey loose trousers, little grey buttony caps, walking down the path towards us, talking, at their ease. Twenty seconds later along came another pair.

Clearly they had said to themselves, "We must not walk about here except in twos or threes or we shall draw a shell from one of those Verfluchte British whizz-bangs."

And so those Germans strolled—as we did—from their breakfast to their daily work.

CHAPTER VII

THE PLANES

France, May.

Gallipoli had its own special difficulties for aeroplanes. There was no open space on which they could dream of alighting at Anzac; and one machine which had to come down at Suvla was shelled to pieces as soon as it landed. So planes had to live at Imbros, and there were ten miles of sea to be crossed before work began and after it finished, and some planes, which went out and were never heard of, were probably lost in that sea. There were brave flights far over the enemy's country. But, until the very last days at Helles, there was scarcely ever an enemy's plane which put up a successful fight against our own.

In France the enemy is almost as much in the air as we are. He has to be reckoned with all the time, and fierce fighting in the air, either against German machines or in face of German shell-fire such as we scarcely even imagined in watching the air-fighting of Gallipoli, is the daily spectacle of the trenches. We have seen a brave flight by a German low down within rifle-shot. But never anything to compare with the indifference to danger of the British pilots.

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I was in the lines the other day when there sounded close at hand salvo after salvo so fast that I took it for a bombardment. The Germans were firing at one of our aeroplanes. It was flying as low as I ever saw a plane fly in Gallipoli—you could make out quite clearly the rings painted on the planes, which meant a British machine. A sputtering rifle fire broke out from the German trenches opposite—their infantry were firing at him. Then came that salvo again—twelve reports in quick succession—a sheaf of shells whining overhead like so many puppies—burst after burst in the sky, some short, some far past him—you would swear they must have gone through him—one right over him.

The hearts of our men were in their mouths as they watched. He sailed straight through the shrapnel puffs, turned sharply, and steered away. A new salvo broke out over the sky where he should have been. He immediately swerved into it like a footballer making a dodging run, then turned away again. A minute later a third sheaf of shells burst behind him, following him up. “He ought to be safe now,” one thought to oneself, “but my word, they nearly got him—”

And then, as we were congratulating him on having escaped with a whole skin, and breathing more freely at the thought—he turned slowly and came straight up towards those guns again.

The Australians holding the trenches were delighted. “My word, he’s got more guts than what I have,” said one. Sheaf after sheaf of shells burst in the air all about him; but he steered straight up the middle of them till he reached the point he wanted to make, and then wheeled and made his patrol up and down over the trenches. He was flying higher but still low, and the crackle of rifles again broke out from the German lines. He was within the range of the feeblest “Archie” even at his highest. They were literally just so many big shot-guns, firing at a great bird; only this bird came up time and again to be shot at, simply trusting to the chance that they would not hit him.

“The rest may take their luck, but I should be dead sick if they was to get him,” grunted a big Australian as he tugged a pull-through out of his rifle.

Of course they will get him if he does that often—you only need two eyes to know that. The communiques tell of it every week. As you scurry past the hinterland of the lines in your motor-car you will sometimes see two or three aeroplanes flying like great herons overhead. They seem to be in company, keeping station almost, and holding on the same course, all mates together—until you catch the cough of a machine-gun, and realise that they are actually engaged in the deadliest sort of duel which can possibly be fought in these days. In a battle of infantry you are mostly hit by an unaimed shot, or a shot aimed into a mass of men. Even if a man fires at you once, it is probably someone else whom he aims at next time. But in the air the man who shoots at you is coming after you, and intends to go on shooting at you until he kills. The moment when you see

an enemy's plane, and realise that you have to fight it, must be one to set even the strongest nerves tingling.

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Generally the aeroplane with the black crosses on its wings is very high—barely visible. Sometimes, when the other planes are near it, it swoops steeply to earth behind the German lines. Or it may be that, far behind our own lines, you see a plane diving to earth at an angle which makes you wonder whether it is falling or being steered. It straightens out suddenly, and lands a few fields away. By the time you are there, a cluster of khaki is already round it. An English boy steps out of it, flushed and excited, and with intense strain written in his eyes and in every jerk of his head. Out of the seat just behind him they are lifting a man with a terrible wound in his side. In the arms of the seat from which they lift him are two holes as big as a shell would make—but they were not made by a shell. A cluster of bullets from the machine-gun of a German plane at close range has passed in at one side of the seat and out at the other. The rifle which the observer was carrying dropped from his hands out into space, and the pilot saw it fall just before he dived.

The German pilots are sometimes youngsters too—not very unlike our own. Our first sight of active war in France was when the train stopped at a country siding many miles behind the lines, and two British soldiers with fixed bayonets marched a third man—a youngster with a slight fair moustache—over the level crossing in front of us. He wore a grey peaked cap and a short overcoat jacket with a warm collar and tall, tight-fitting boots—very much like those of our own officers; and he walked with a big, swift stride, looking straight ahead of him. Somewhere, far over behind the German lines, they were probably expecting him at that moment. His servant would be getting ready his room. He had left the aerodrome only an hour before, and flown over strange lines which we have never seen, but which had become as familiar as his home to him, with no idea than to be back, as he always was before, within an hour or so. And then something seems to be wrong with the plane—he has to come down in a strange country; and within an hour he is out of the war for good and all. He strides along biting his lip. His comrades will expect him for an hour or so. By dinner-time they will realise that there is another member gone from their mess.

While I am writing these words someone runs in to say that a German aeroplane has been shot down—came down in flames, they say, and tore a great hole in the roadside. There seems to be some such news every day, now it is one of ours, now one of theirs. It is a brave game.

I suppose it needs a sportsman, even if he is a German, to fight in a service like that. The pity of it that he is fighting for such an ugly cause.

CHAPTER VIII

THE COMING STRUGGLE: OUR TASK

[Up to this time the Australians had been in quiet trenches in the green lowlands near Armentieres. From this time the coming struggle began to loom ahead.]

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France, May 23rd.

I sat down to write an article about a log-chopping competition. But the irony of writing such things with other things on one's mind is too much even for a war correspondent. One's pen goes on strike. One impression above all has been brought home in the two months we have spent in France. For some reason, people at home are colossally ignorant of the task now in front of them. We have now seen three theatres of war, and it was the same everywhere. Indeed, in Gallipoli we ourselves were just as ignorant of the state of affairs elsewhere. All the news we had of Salonica came from the English newspapers. We thought, "However difficult things may be here, at any rate the Salonica army is only waiting for a few more men before it cuts the railway to Constantinople." Then somebody came from Salonica, and we found that the army there was comforting itself with exactly the same reflections about us. As for England, everyone who reached us from there arrived with the conviction that we needed only a few more men to push through.

When the attempt to get through from Suvla failed the public turned to Bulgaria, and, on the strength of what they read, many of those on the Peninsula could not help doing the same. Now that we see with our eyes the nature of Britain's task in France, there is only one depressing thing about it, and that is that one doubts if the British people have any more idea of its magnitude than it had of the difficulties of Gallipoli.

The world hears from the British public vague talk of some future offensive. It goes without saying that we hear nothing of any plans here. If there were any, it would be in London that they would first become common knowledge. But if such an offensive ever does happen, have the British people any idea of its difficulties? In this warfare, when you have brought up such artillery as was unbelievable even in the first year of the war, and reduced miles of trenches to powder, and have walked over the line of the works in front of you, a handful of batmen and Headquarters' cooks may still hold up the greatest attack yet delivered, and you may spend the next month dashing your strength away against a barrier of ever-increasing toughness.

If an offensive ever is made, we know it will not be made without good reason for its success. But everything which one has seen points to the conclusion that a vague belief in the success of such an offensive ought not to be the sole mental effort that a great part of the nation makes towards winning the war. And yet, from what I saw lately during a recent visit to Great Britain, I should say that such was the case. "If we fail to break through," the public says, "surely the Russians will manage it, or the French will succeed this time." Wherever we have seen the war there is always this tendency to look elsewhere for success. There is not the slightest doubt we have success in our power.

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The game is in our hands if we will only play it. The talk about our resources and staying power is not all “hot air,” as the Americans say. The resources were there, and it was always known that in the later stages of the war, when Germany and our Allies who entered the war at final strength, had used most of their resources, then those of Britain would become decisive because she had not yet used them. That stage we are reaching now—Britain’s resources measured against those of Germany. We have the advantage in entering it. The danger is that while we squander our wealth without organisation, the German, by bringing all his brains and resolution to bear on the problem, may so eke out his strained resources as to outstay our rich ones.

One sees not the least sign that the British people understand this. I do not know how it is in Australia, but in Britain life runs its normal course. Gigantic sums flow away daily, and the only efforts at economy one hears of are a Daylight Saving Act adopted only because Germany adopted it first; a list of prohibited imports and petty economies, which we mistook when first we read it for an elaborate satire; and a pious hope, in the true voluntary and official British style, that meat would be shunned on two days in the week.

By way of contrast there are dished out for our encouragement reports of all the pains which the Germans are put to to economise food in their country. Potatoes instead of flour, meat twice a week, food strictly regulated by ticket, children taught to count between each mouthful in order to avoid over-eating. We are supposed to draw comfort from this contrast.

It is the most depressing literature we have. The obvious comment is, “Well, there is a nation organised to win a war—that is the sort of nation which the men in the opposite trenches have behind them. A nation which has organised itself for war, and is already organising itself for peace after the war”; and all that we, who are organised neither for war nor peace, have, in answer to a national effort like that, is an ignorant jeer at what is really the most formidable of the dangers threatening us.

If the British Empire took the war as business, were ready to disturb its daily life, alter its daily habits, to throw on the scrap-heap its sacred individualism, and do and live for the national cause, no one doubts but we could win this war so as to avoid an inconclusive peace. Some of us were talking to a middle-aged British merchant. We had left our fellows in France cheerfully facing unaccustomed mud and frosts, cheerfully accepting the chance of being blown into undiscoverable atoms or living horribly maimed in mind or body, cheerfully accepting all this with the set, deliberate purpose of fighting on for a conclusive settlement—one which put out of question for the future the rule of brute force, or tearing up of treaties, or renewal of the present war. We had left those fellows fighting for an ideal they perfectly well realised, and cheerful in the belief that they would attain it.

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The merchant was dressed in black morning coat and black tie, and looked in every way a very respectable merchant. He was full of respectable hopes. But when we spoke of a long war he drew a long face and talked lugubriously of dislocated trade and strain upon capital—doubted how long the industry could stand it, and shook his head.

Whenever one thinks of that worthy man one is overcome with a great anger. What he meant was that if the war went on he might be broken, and that was a calamity which he could not be expected to face. We thought of all those fellows in France—British, Australians, Canadians—cheerfully offering their lives for an ideal at which this worthy citizen shied because it might cost him his fortune. Suppose it did, suppose he had to leave his fine home and end his days in a villa, suppose he had to start as a clerk in someone else's counting-house, what was it beside what these boys were offering? I think of a fair head which I had seen matted in red mud, of young nerves of steel shattered beyond repair, of a wild night at Helles, when I found, stumbling beside me in the first bitterness of realisation, a young officer who a few yards back had been shot through both eyes. And here was this worthy man shaking his head for fear that their ideals might interfere with his business.

As to which, one can only say that, if the British nation, or the Australian nation, because it shirks interference with its normal life, because it is afraid of State enterprise, because of any personal or individual consideration whatever, lets this struggle go by default, and by inconclusive peace, to the people which is organised body and soul in support of the grey tunics behind the opposite parapet, then it is a betrayal of every gallant heart now sleeping under the crosses on Gallipoli, and of every boyish head that has reddened the furrows of France.

There are good reasons for saying that the struggle is now with the British Empire. With your staying power you can win. But in Heaven's name, if you wish to win, if you have in you any of the ideals for which those boys have died, cast your old prejudices to the winds and organise your staying power. Organise! Organise! Organise!

CHAPTER IX

IN A FOREST OF FRANCE

France, May 26th.

It was in "A forest of France," as the programme had it. The road ran down a great aisle with the tall elm trees reaching to the sky, and stretching their long green fingers far above, like the slender pillars of a Gothic cathedral. Down the narrow road below sagged a big motor-bus, painted grey, like a battleship; and, after it, a huge grey motor-lorry; and, in front and behind them, an odd procession of motor-cars of all sizes, bouncing awkwardly from one hollow in the road to another.

Out of the dark interior of the motor-bus, as we passed it, there groped a head with a grey slouch hat. It came slowly round on its long, brown, wrinkled neck until it looked into our car. "Hey, mate," it said, "is this the track to the races?" Then it smiled at the landscape in general and withdrew into the interior like a snail into its shell. In this bus was an Australian Brass Band.

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We drew up where there was a collection of motor-cars, lorries, and odd riding horses along the roadside, exactly as you might see at the picnic races. We struck inland up one of those glades which the French foresters leave at intervals running from side to side of their well-managed forests. The green moss sank like a soft carpet beneath our feet. The little watergutters bubbled beneath the twigs as we trod across them. The cowslips and anemones nodded as our boots brushed them. Hundreds of birds sang in the branches, and the sunlight came down in shafts from the lacework patches of sky far above, and lit up patches of grass, and fallen leaves, and moss-covered tree trunks, on which sat a crowd chiefly of Australians and New Zealanders. As one of the English correspondents said, "It was just such a forest as Shakespeare wrote about." Who would have thought that scene believable two years before?

A contest had been arranged between Australasians and Canadians in France to decide which could fell trees in the quickest time. It began really with the French forest authorities, who insisted on the well-known forest rule that no young trees under one metre twenty in girth must be felled after the middle of May, because if you cut the young tree after the sap begins to rise it will not grow again. The British officer in control of the forest had obtained an extension until the end of May, but he had to get felled by then all the young timber that he wanted before September. He had borrowed some Maoris to help, and he noticed how they cut and the sort of sportsmen they were. He was struck with an idea. A French forest officer was with him. "How long do you think it would take a New Zealander to chop down a tree like that?" asked the Frenchman. "A minute," was the answer. "Unbelievable," exclaimed the Frenchman. A Maori was called up, and the tree was down in forty seconds.

After that a contest was arranged between Maoris and French wood-cutters. Trees had to be cut in the French style, which, it must be admitted, is much neater and more economical, and about five times as laborious. The trees are cut off at ground level, and so straightly that the stump would not trip you if it were in the middle of the road. Each team consisted of six men, and felled twelve small trees, using its own accustomed axes. The Maoris won by four minutes.

It was out of this that the big contest sprang. The Canadians and Australasians challenged one another. This time the teams were to be of three men. Each team was to cut three trees—only service axes to be used; but otherwise each man could cut in any style he wished. The trees averaged about two feet thick—hard wood. The teams started to practise. And the forest officers' problem was solved.

The teams tossed for trees, and tossed for the order in which they were to cut. I believe that when some question arose out of this toss, the Maoris immediately offered to toss again, in order to have no advantage from the result.

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It was interesting to see the difference of style. All three types of colonial woodsmen cut the tree almost breast high, but the Australian seemed to be the only one that took advantage of that understroke, with a hiss through the clenched teeth, which looks so formidable when you watch our timber-getters. It was a Canadian team which started. They cut coolly, and the one whom I watched struck one by his splendid condition. A wiry man, not thick-set, but well built and athletic, who never turned a hair. I think he was perhaps too cool to win. His comrades were not quite so fast as he. They cut the tree with a fairly narrow scarf, the top cut coming down at a steep angle, and the lower cut coming straight in to meet it, so that the upper end of the stump, when the tree falls, is left cut off as straight as a table top. Their first tree crashed in fourteen minutes, the next in fifteen, and then they all three tackled the last and toughest, which fell in twenty-one; fifty minutes altogether when the three times were added.

The next team was Australian. From the first rapid swing one's anxiety was whether they could possibly stand the pace. They tackled the job so much more fiercely than the Canadians. I watched a young Tasmanian, his whole soul in it, brow wrinkled, and sweat pouring from his face. You would have thought that he was cutting almost wildly, till you noticed how every cut went home exactly on top of the cut before. These Australians—they were Western Australians mostly—made a wide scarf, the top cut coming down at an angle, and the lower cut coming up at a similar angle to meet it, making a wide open angle between the two. The odds would, I think, have been taken by most of those who went there as being in favour of the Canadians; and it was a great surprise when the three Australian trees were all down in thirty-one minutes and eight seconds.

The New Zealanders cut third. Their team consisted of Maoris. They did not seem to be cutting with the fire of the Australians. There was not the visible energy; their actions struck one as easier, and one doubted if their great, lithe, brown muscles were carrying them so fast.

Yet the time told the truth. Their three trees were down in twenty-two minutes and forty seconds, and no one else approached them. One Canadian team improved the Canadian time to forty-five minutes twenty-two seconds. The Maoris seemed mostly to cut with a narrower scarf even than the Canadians, both upper and lower cuts sloping downward at a narrow angle. In fairness it must be said that the Maoris had practised about six weeks, the Canadians and Australians about one week.

An Australian won the log-chopping competition; and the Canadians won with the crosscut saw. A New Zealander won the competition for style.

Later the men were mostly sitting watching the Frenchmen, workers in the forest, giving an exhibition cut. Two of a Canadian team were sitting on a log next to me, yarning in the slow, quizzical drawl of the Canadian countryman, when some of their mates sat down beside them. The man next me turned to them, and the next instant they were all

talking French among themselves, talking it as their native tongue. Their officer, a handsome youngster, spoke it too. It was not till that moment that I realised that most of these Canadian woodsmen here were French.

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Meanwhile the exhibition chop went on. The French woodsmen were digging at the roots of their trees with long, ancient axes, more like a cold chisel than a modern axe. “I think I could do as well with a knife and fork,” said one great kindly Australian as he watched with a smile.

But, to my mind, that exhibition was the most impressive of all. For every one of those who took part in it was either an old man or a slip of a slender boy.

CHAPTER X

IDENTIFIED

France, June 28th.

It was about three months ago, more or less. The German observer, crouched up in the platform behind the trunk of a tree, or in a chimney with a loose brick in it—in a part of the world where the country cottages, peeping over the dog-rose hedges, have more broken bricks in them than whole ones—saw down a distant lane several men in strange hats. The telescope wobbled a bit, and in the early light all objects in the landscape took on much the same grey colour.

The observer rubbed his red eyes and peered again. Down the white streak winding across a distant green field were coming a couple more of these same hats. I expect Fritz saw a good number of them in those days. Many of the wearers of those hats had never seen an aeroplane before; much less two aeroplanes, fighting a duel with machine-guns at close range, 10,000 feet over their heads, or being sniped at by a battery of hidden 15-pounder guns, every shot marking itself for the open-mouthed spectators by its little white cotton-wool shell burst.

The German observer spent several hours jotting painful notes into a well-thumbed pocket-book, staring in the intervals through his telescope. Then the tree shook. Something ponderous from below felt its way up the creaking ladder. A red face, like the face of the sun, peered over the platform.

“Anything new, Fritz?” it puffed.

“Ja; those new troops we have noticed yesterday—I think they were Australians.”

So the observer sent it back to his officer, and his officer sent it back to the brigade, and the brigade sent it on to the division. The division was a little sceptical. “That crowd is always making these wild discoveries,” grunted the divisional Intelligence Officer, but he thought it worth while passing it on to the Army Corps, who in their turn sent it to the Army; and so, in due course, it arrived in those awe-inspiring circles where lives the great German military brain.



“So that is where they have turned up,” said a very big man with spectacles—a big man in more ways than one. And a note went down in red ink in a particular page of a huge index, to appear duly printed in the next edition of that portentous volume. Only, after the note, there was a query.

Far away at the front, Fritz told his mates over their evening coffee that the new regiment whose heads they had been noticing over the parapet opposite were Australians.

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“Black swine dogs, one of them nearly had me as I was bringing the mail-bags,” snorted a weedy youth scarcely out of his teens, looking over the top of his coffee pot. “I always said that was a dangerous gap where the communication trench crosses the ditch.”

“You babies should keep your stupid heads down like your elders,” retorted a grizzled reservist as he stuffed tobacco into the green china bowl of a real German pipe.

The talk gradually went along the front line for about the distance of one company’s front on either side, that there had been a relief in the British trenches, and that there were Australians over there. One man had heard the sergeant saying so in the next bay of the trench; it meant exactly as much to them as it would to Australian troops to hear the corps opposite them was Bavarian or Saxon or Hanoverian. They knew the English and the French possessed some of these colonial corps. They had been opposite the Algerians in the Champagne before they came to this part of the line.

“They are ugly swine to meet in the dark,” they thought. “These white and black colonial regiments.”

Fritz lives very much in his dug-out—is very good at keeping his head below the parapet—and he thought very little more about it. His head was much fuller of the arrival of the weekly parcel of butter and cake from his hardworking wife at home, and of the coming days when his battalion would go out of the trenches into billets in the villages, when he might get a pass to go to a picture theatre in Lille—he had kept the old pass because a slight tear of the corner or a snick opposite the date would make it good for use on half a dozen occasions yet. He did not bother his head about what British division was holding the trenches opposite to him.

But that divisional Intelligence Officer did—he worried very much. He wanted to get a certain query removed from an index as soon as possible.

It is always best to get information for nothing. A good way to do this is to make the enemy talk; and you may be able to make him talk back if you send over a particular sort of talk to him. So a message was thrown over into our lines, “Take care”; and “You offal dogs must bleed for France.”

This effort did not fetch any incriminating reply; and so, on a later night, a lantern was flashed over the parapet, “Australian, go home,” it winked. “Go in the morning—you will be dead in the evening; we are good.”

Later again appeared a notice-board, “Advance Australia fair—if you can.”

Indeed, Fritz became quite talkative, and put up a notice-board, “English defeat at sea—seven cruisers sunk, one damaged, eleven other craft sunk. Hip! Hip! Hurrah!”

This did draw at last some of the men in the front line, and they slipped over the parapet a placard giving a British account of the losses in the North Sea fight. The putting up of notices is an irregular proceeding, and this placard had to be withdrawn at once, even before the Germans could properly read it. The result was an immediate message posted on the German trenches, "Once more would you let us see the message?" Still there was no sign from our trenches. So another plaintive request appeared on the German parapet, "We beg of you to show again the table of the fleet."

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But they were Saxons. Clearly they did not believe all that their Prussian brother told them about his naval victory. Another day they hoisted a surreptitious request, "Shoot high—peace will be declared June 15." They evidently had their gossip in the German trenches just as we have it in ours—and as we had it in Sydney and Melbourne—absurd rumours which run all round the line for a week, and which no amount of experience prevents some people from believing.

"After all, these 'furphies' make life worth living in the trenches," as one of our men said to me the other day. All the Germans, in a certain part of the line opposite, now firmly believe that the war is going to end on August 17th.

But this is merely the gossip of the German trenches telegraphed across No Man's Land. I do not know how far the divisional Staff Officer satisfied himself as the result of all his messages, but he did not satisfy the gentleman with the big index.

"There is one way to find out who is there," the Big Man said, "and that is always the same—to go there and bring some of them back."

And so twice in the next three weeks the German artillery fired about £30,000 worth of shells, and a party of picked men stole across the open, and in spite of a certain loss on one occasion they took back a few prisoners. And the query went out of the index.

It would be quite easy to present to the German for a penny the facts which it cost him £60,000 and good men's lives to obtain. When you know this, you can understand why the casualties reported in the papers do not any longer state the units of the men who have suffered them.

CHAPTER XI

THE GREAT BATTLE BEGINS

France, July 1st.

Below me, in the dimple beyond the hill on which I sit, is a small French town. Straight behind the town is the morning sun, only an hour risen. Between the sun and the town, and, therefore, only just to be made out through the haze of sunlight on the mists, are two lines—a nearer and a farther—of gently sloping hill-tops. On those hills is being fought one of the greatest battles in history. It is British troops who are fighting it, and French. The Canadians are in their lines in the salient. The Australians and New Zealanders—it has now been officially stated—are at Armentieres.

A few minutes ago, at half-past six by summer-time, the British bombardment, which has continued heavily for six days, suddenly came in with a crash, as an orchestra might enter on its grand finale. Last night, some of us who were out here watched the

British shells playing up and down the distant skyline, running over it from end to end as a player might run the fingers of one hand lightly over the piano keys. There were three or four flashes every second, here or there in that horizon; night and day for six days that had continued. Within the last few minutes, starting with two or three big heart bangs from a battery near us, the noise suddenly expanded into a constant detonation. It was exactly as though the player began, on an instant, to use all the keys at once.

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We now ought to be able to see, from where we sit with our telescopes, the bursts of our shells on those distant ridges. But I cannot swear that I see a single one. The sound of the bombarding is like the sound of some titanic iron tank which a giant has set rolling rapidly down an endless hill. We can hear the soft whine of scores of shells hurrying all together through the air. Every five minutes or so a certain howitzer, tucked into some hiding-place, vents its periodical growl, and we can hear the huge projectile climbing slowly, up his steep gradient with a hiss like that of water from a fire-hose. There is some other heavy shell which passes us also, somewhere in the middle of his flight. We cannot distinguish the report of the gun, and we do not hear the shell burst; but at regular intervals we can quite distinctly hear the monster making his way leisurely across our front.

We can distinguish in the uproar the occasional distant crash of a heavy shell-burst. But not one burst can I see. The sun upon the mist makes the distant hill crests just a vague blue screen against the sky.

There is one point on those hills where the two lines of trenches ought to be clearly visible to us. With a good glass on a clear day you should be able to distinguish anything as big as a man at that distance—much more a line of men. Within less than an hour, at half-past seven, the infantry will leave our trenches over twenty miles of front and launch a great attack. The country town below us is Albert—behind the centre of the British attack. One can see the tall, battered church tower rising against the mist, with the gilt figure of the Virgin hanging at right angles from the top like the arm of a bracket. On the hills beyond can just be made out the woods of Fricourt behind the German line. They are in the background behind Albert church tower. The white ruins of Fricourt may be the blur in the background south of them. We shall be attacking Fricourt to-day.

The Germans have not a single “sausage” in the air that I can see. The sausage is the very descriptive name for the observation balloon. We have twenty-one of them up, specking the sky as clearly as a bacteriologist’s slide is specked with microbes.

The Germans used to have a whole fleet of them looking down over us. But a week ago our aeroplanes bombed all along the line, and eight of them, more or less, went down in flames within a single afternoon.

7.10 a.m.—Six of our aeroplanes are flying over, very high, in a wedge-shaped flight like that of birds. Single British aeroplanes have been coming and going since the bombardment started. I have not seen any German plane. The distant landscape is becoming fainter. The flashes of our guns can be seen at intervals all over the slopes immediately below us, and their blast is clearly shown by the film of smoke and dust which hurries into the air. The haze makes a complete screen between us and the battle.

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7.15 a.m.—Our fire has become noticeably hotter. Some of us thought it had relaxed slightly after the first ten minutes. I doubt if it really did—probably we were growing accustomed to the sound. There is no doubt about its increase now. We can hear the *crump, crump, crump* of heavy explosives almost incessantly. I fancy our heavy trench mortars must have joined in.

7.20 a.m.—Another sound has suddenly joined in the uproar. It is the rapid detonation of our lighter trench mortars.[1] I have never heard anything like this before—the detonation of these crowds of mortars is as rapid as if it were the rattle of musketry. Indeed, if it were not for the heavy detonation one would put it down for rifle fire. Only eight minutes now, and the infantry goes over the parapet along the whole line.

[1] Note.—What I took for the sound of trench mortars was almost certainly that of the British field guns. These heavy Somme bombardments were then a novelty, and the idea that field guns could be firing like musketry did not enter one's head. What I took for the sound of heavy trench mortars was also, certainly, that of German shells.

7.27 a.m.—The heaviness of the bombardment has slightly decreased. A large number of guns must be altering range on to the German back lines in order to allow our infantry to make their attack. The hills are gradually becoming clearer as the sun gets higher, but the haze will be far too thick for us to see them go over.

7.29 a.m.—One minute to go. I have not seen a single German shell burst yet. They may be firing on our trenches; they are not on our batteries.

7.32 a.m.—Ever so distant, but quite distinctly, under the thunder of the bombardment I can hear the sound of far-off rifle firing.

So they are into it—and there are Germans still left in those trenches.

7.35 a.m.—Through the bombardment I can hear the chatter of a machine-gun. And there is a new thunder added, quite distinguishable from the previous sounds. It is only the last minute or so that one has noticed it—a low, ceaseless pulsation.

It is the drumming of the German artillery upon our charging infantry. Behind that blue screen they must be in the thick of it. God be with our men!

CHAPTER XII

THE BRITISH—FRICOURT AND LA BOISELLE

France, July 3rd.

Yesterday three of us walked out from near the town of Albert to a hill-side within a few hundred yards of Fricourt. And there all day, lying amongst the poppies and cornflowers, we watched the fight of the hour—the struggle around Fricourt Wood and the attack on the village of La Boisselle.

To call these places villages conveys the idea of recognisable streets and houses. I suppose they were villages once, as pretty as the other villages of France; each with its red roofs showing out against its dark, overshadowing woodland. They are no more villages now than a dust-heap. Each is a tumbled heap of broken bricks, like the remains of a Chinese den after it has been pulled down by order of the local council. Through this heap runs a network of German trenches, here and there breaking through some still recognisable fragment of a wall.

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It was by the sight of two or three English soldiers clambering up one of these jagged fragments and peering into whatever lay beyond it, that we knew, as we came in sight of Fricourt, that the village had already been taken. A string of men was winding past the end of the dust-heap into the dark wood behind it, where they became lost to view. Somewhere in the heart of the wood was the *knock-knock* of an occasional rifle. So the fight had gone on thither.

In front of us was a long gentle hill-slope, gridironed with trenches which broke out above the green grass like the wandering burrow of a mole. The last visible trench was in redder soil and ran along the crest of the hill. It passed through or near to several small woods and clumps of trees—the edges of them torn to shreds with shell-fire. They stood up against the skyline. In one of them, clearly visible, was a roadside crucifix.

Our men possessed the whole of that slope right into the trench at the top. We could see occasional figures strolling about the old German trenches—probably from posts established here or there behind the line of battle. All day long odd men wandered up or down some part of the hill-side—a guard with a German prisoner coming down, a messenger or stretcher-bearers going up. Now and then one could even see heads, with our flat steel helmets on them, showing out from the red trench against the skyline. So the fighting could not be severe at the moment on the crest of the hill.

Yet we were clearly not holding the whole of that skyline trench. On its southern or right-hand shoulder the hill ran into Fricourt Wood, which covered all that end of it. At the lower end of the wood, standing out against it, was the dusty yellow ruin which once was Fricourt. Behind that shoulder of the hill was a valley, of which we could see the gentle green slopes stretching away to Mametz and Montauban, both taken the day before, in the first half-day's fighting. The green slopes must have been covered with the relics of that attack. But the kindly grass, the uncut growth of two years, hid them; and the valley, except for a few thin white trench lines, might have been any other smiling summer landscape.

When the wave of our attack swept through that country the Germans in Fricourt village and wood still held on. Another promontory was left jutting out into the wave of our attack in a similar village on our left—La Boisselle, where the main road for Bapaume runs straight out from our lines through the German front. We could see this heap of yellow-brown ruins sticking up beyond the left shoulder of the opposite hill much as Fricourt did on its right. There was a valley between, but it could only be guessed. Boisselle, too, had the remains of a small wood rising behind it. The bark hung from its ragged stumps as the rigging droops from the broken masts of a wreck.

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We were looking another way, watching our troops trying to creep up to the extreme right-hand end of the red trench on the top of the hill. We could see them on the centre of the crest; but here, where the trench ran into the upper end of Fricourt Wood, there was apparently a check. Men were lined up at this point, not in the trench, but lying down on the surface a little on our side of it. From beyond that corner of the wood there broke out occasionally a chatter of machine-gun fire. Evidently the Germans still hung on there. The bursts of machine-gun must have been against small rushes of our men across the open. I believe that one British unit was attacking round this left-hand corner of the wood while another was attacking around its right. The drive through the wood was going forward at the same time. Clearly they were having some effect; for out of the wood there suddenly appeared a number of figures. Someone thought they were our men coming back, until it was noticed that they were unarmed, and held their hands up. They were a party of the enemy who had surrendered, and for the next quarter of an hour we watched them being marched slowly down the hill-side opposite.

Our advance here seemed to be held up by some cause we could not see. German 5.9 shell were falling just on our side of Fricourt village, and in a line from there up the valley behind our attack. It was not a really heavy barrage—big black shell-bursts at intervals on the ground, helped by fairly constant white puffs of shrapnel in the air above them. Just then our attention was attracted in quite another direction: La Boisselle.

It had been fairly obvious for some time that La Boisselle was about to be attacked. While the rest of the landscape before us was only treated to an occasional shell-burst, heavy explosions had been taking place in this clump of ruins. Huge roan-coloured bouquets of brickdust and ashes leaped from time to time into the air and slowly dissolved into a tawny mist which floated slowly beyond the scarred edge of the hill. It must have been a big howitzer shell, or perhaps a very large trench mortar bomb, which was making them. Gradually most of our artillery in the background to the left of us seemed to be converging upon this village. Suddenly, at a little before 4 p.m., there lashed on to the place the shrapnel from three or four batteries of British field guns. They seemed to be fired as fast as they could be served. Shell after shell laid whip strokes across the dry earth as swiftly as a man could ply a lash. One knew perfectly well that our infantry must now be advancing for the attack, and that this hailstorm was to make the garrison, if any were left, keep its heads down. But the shoulder of the hill prevented us from seeing where the infantry was going to issue.

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In the turmoil which covered that corner we scarcely noticed that the nature of the shelling had suddenly changed. Our shell-bursts had gone much farther up the hill—one realised that; and heavy black clouds were spurting into the air below Boisselle, just behind the hill's shoulder. The *crash, crash, crash, crash* of four heavy shells, one following another almost as quickly as you would read the words, focused all one's attention on that point. The fire on it was growing. The Germans were shooting down a valley, almost a funnel, invisible to us. But we could see that the fire was increasing every minute; 4.2's were joining in, and field guns; the lighter guns firing shrapnel, the heavier guns high explosive. The black smoke of German high explosive streamed up the valley like a thundercloud. La Boisselle was entirely hidden by it.

There could be no doubt now where our infantry was to attack. That cauldron was the barrier of shell fire which the German artillery was throwing in front of them.

It seemed no living thing could face it. Our fire had lengthened at about 4 o'clock. The German barrage began almost immediately after. Minute after minute passed without a sign of any troops of ours. Our spirits fell. "It is one of these fearful attacks on small objectives," one thought, "where the enemy knows exactly where you must come out, and is able to converge an impenetrable artillery fire on that one small point. If you attack on a wide front, your artillery is bound to leave some of the enemy's machine-guns unharmed. And when you have to mop up the small points that are left, and attack on a small front, he gets you with his artillery—you get it one way or the other." One took it for granted that the head of this attack had been turned.

Suddenly, out of the mist, came the sound of a few rifle shots. Then bursts of a machine-gun. It could only be the Germans firing on advancing British infantry.

And presently they came out, running just beyond the shoulder of that hill. We could only see their heads at first, tucked down into it as a man bends when he hurries into a hailstorm. Presently the track on which they were advancing—I don't know whether it was originally a road or a trench, but it is a sort of chalky sandhill now^[2]—brought them for a moment rather to our side of the hill into partial shelter. Each section that reached the place crouched down there for a moment. spurts of shrapnel lashed past them whirling the white dust. Black rolling clouds sprang into existence on the earth beside them. Every minute one expected to see one of them obliterate the whole party. But, at the end of a minute or so, someone would pick himself up and run on—and the remainder would follow.

[2] What we thought was a road or sandhill I afterwards found to be the upturned edge of one of the two giant mine craters, south of La Boisselle.

Not all of them. Some there were who did not stir with the rest. Other figures came running up, heads down into it, often standing out black against white bursts of chalk dust. I saw one gallant fellow racing up quite alone, never stopping, running as a man

runs a flat race. But there were an increasing number who never moved. And, though we watched them for an hour, they were still there motionless at the end of it.

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For thirty minutes batches continued to come up. We could see them building up a line a little farther up the hill, where another bank gave cover. Then movement stopped and our heavy shell-bursts in La Boisselle began again. The whole affair was being repeated a step farther forward. The last we saw was the men leaping over the bank and down into the space between them and the village.

This morning we went to the same view point. The firing had gone well beyond Fricourt Wood. They were German shells which were now falling on the smoking site of La Boisselle.

On the white bank there still lay twelve dark figures.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DUG-OUTS OF FRICOURT

France, July 3rd.

Yesterday from the opposite slope of a gentle valley we watched Fricourt village taken. This morning we walked down through the long grass across what two days ago was No Man's Land into the old German defences. The grass has been uncut for two years on these slopes, and that is why there springs from them such a growth of flowers as I have rarely seen. I think it was once a wheat field that we were walking through. It is a garden of poppies, cornflowers, and mustard flower now.

Half-way down the slope we noticed that we were crossing a line which seemed to have been strangely ruled through the wheat field. It was covered with grass, but there was a line of baby apple trees on each side of it. It took one some seconds to realise that it was a road.

We jumped across trench after trench of our own. At the bottom of the valley we stepped over a trench which had a wire entanglement in front of it. It was the old British front line. The space in front of it had been No Man's Land.

Some of our men were still lying where shrapnel or rifle fire had caught them. By them ran another old road up the valley. Beyond the road the railway trucks were still standing as they have stood for two years in what once was Fricourt siding. The foundations of Fricourt village stood up a little beyond, against the dark shades of Fricourt Wood. Immediately before us, in front of this battered white ash heap, were the remains of the rusted wire which had once been the maze in front of the German line.

We found fragments of that wire in the bottom of the trenches themselves; lengths of it were lying among the shattered buildings behind the lines. The British shells and bombs must have tossed it about as you would toss hay with a rake. In the tumbled

ruins behind the lines you simply stepped from one crater into another. Into many of those craters you could have placed a fair-sized room. One big shell, and two unexploded bombs like huge ancient cannon balls, lay there on a shelf covered with rubbish.

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Through this rubbish heap were scattered odd fragments of farming machinery—here an old wagon wheel—there a ploughshare or a portion of a harrow—in another place some old iron press of which I do not know the use. The rest of the village was like a deserted brick-field, or the remains of some ancient mining camp—I do not think there were three fragments of wall over 10 feet high left. And in and out of this debris wandered the German front line. We jumped down into those trenches where some shell had broken them in. They were deep and narrow, such as we had in Gallipoli. Back from them led narrow, deep, winding communication trenches which, curiously enough, in parts where we saw them, seemed to have no supports to their walls such as all the trenches in the wet country farther north must have. Here and there some shell-burst had broken or shaken them in.

As we made our way along the front line we found, every few yards or so, a low, squared, timbered opening below the parapet. A dozen wooden steps led down and forwards into some dark interior far below.

We clambered down into the first of these chambers. It was exactly as its occupants had left it. On the floor amongst some tumbled blankets and odd pieces of clothing, socks for the most part, was scattered a stock of German grenades, each like a grey jampot with a short handle. The blankets had come from a series of bunks which almost filled up the whole dark chamber. These bunks were made roughly of wood, in pairs one over another, packed into every corner of the narrow space with as much ingenuity as the berths in an emigrant ship. There were, I think, six of them in that first chamber. Inlet into the wall, at the end of one set of bunks, was a wooden box doing service for a cupboard. In it were a penny novel, and three or four bottles of a German table water. At least one of these was still full. So the garrison of Fricourt was not as hard put to it for supplies as some of the German prisoners with whom I spoke the day before. They had told me that for three or four days no water could be brought to them up their communication trenches owing to the British bombardment.

I expect that the garrison of Fricourt had been almost entirely in those dug-outs during the bombardment. The chambers seemed to have more than one entrance in some cases, and one suspects they also led into one another underground. A subterranean passage led forward beneath the parapet to a door opening into No Man's Land—you could see the daylight at the end of it.

The fire trench was battered in places out of recognition. But here and there we came across a bay of it which the bombardment had left more or less untouched. There were slings of cartridges still hanging against the wall of the trench. There were the two steel plates through which they had peered out into No Man's Land, the slits in them half covered by the flap so as just to give a man room to peep through them. There was the machine-gun platform, with a long, empty belt still lying on it. There was the periscope standing on its spike, which had been stuck into the trench wall. It looked out straight across No Man's Land, but both mirrors were gone.

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As we picked our way through the brick heaps there came towards us a British soldier with fixed bayonet, and an elderly bareheaded man. The elderly man's hair was cut short, and was grizzly. He had not shaved for three days. He was stout, but his face had a curious grey tinge shot through the natural complexion. His lips were tightly compressed. He looked about him firmly enough, but with that open-eyed gaze of a wild animal which seemed to lack all comprehension. It was the face of a man almost witless. He wore the uniform of a German captain.

He was one of the men who had been through that bombardment.

CHAPTER XIV

THE RAID

France, July 9th.

During the first week of the battle of the Somme the Anzac troops far to the north, near Armentieres, raided the German trenches about a dozen times. Here is a sample of these raids.

We were late. For some reason we had decided to watch this one from the firing-line. We had stayed too long at Brigade Headquarters getting the details of the night's plan. Just as we hurried out of the end of the communication trench into the dark jumble of the low sandbag constructions which formed this part of the firing-line, there came two bangs from the southward as if someone had hit an iron ship's tank with a big drumstick. It was our preparatory bombardment which had begun.

A light showed dimly from one or two crevices in our trenches. We peeped into one. It was very small, and someone was busy in there. The bombardment was not half a minute old, but it was now continuous along the whole horizon behind us. The noise was that of a large orchestra of street boys each heartily banging his kerosene-tin drum. Our shells streamed overhead with an almost continuous swish.

I do not know why, but some curious sense made one keep low in ducking round to a bay of the front trench. The enemy's reply was not due for some minutes yet. There was a sudden lurid red glare with a heavy crash over the parapet to our right—perhaps 150 yards away. "That's not one of their 5.9's, surely?" exclaims a friend.

"One of our trench mortars, I think," says another. As we sit in the narrow trench, with our knees tucked up to our chins, there is no doubt whatever of the advent of a new sheaf of missiles through the air above our heads. We can hear the swish of our own shells, perhaps 100 feet up, and the occasional rustle of some missile passing overhead a good deal higher than that. One knows that this must be one of our howitzer shells making his slow path, perhaps 200 or 300 feet above us, on his way to fall on some

German communication trench, and blow it in. I do not know, but I rather suspect his duty is so to jumble up the walls and banks of that trench as to prevent German supports from reaching their front line without clambering into the open fields where our shrapnel is falling like hail.

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But under those two streams of overhead traffic is a third quite easily distinguishable. It comes with short, descending screams—sheafs of them together.

At the end of each there is a momentary glare over the sandbags, and the bang as of an exploding rocket.

That is German shrapnel, bursting in the air and projecting its pellets in a cone like a shot-gun. A little to the south of us there is a much more formidable crash, always recurring several times in the minute. We always know when that crash is coming by a certain fierce orange glare which lights up the tops of our sandbags immediately before we hear the sound. Three or four times the crash and the glare came together, and a big cloud of stuffy-smelling white smoke drifted low overhead, and bits of mud and earth cascaded down upon us from the sky above; and just for two minutes the sheaf of four shells from some particular field battery, which sent them passing as regularly as a clock about five times a minute overhead, seemed to lower and burst just above us; and one or two odd high-explosive bursts—4.2, I should say—crept in close upon us from the rear, while the parapet gave several ponderous jumps towards us from the other direction. One would swear that it had shifted inwards a good inch, though I do not suppose it had. The dazzling orange flashes and crashes close around us were rather like a bad dream. One could not resist the reflection that often comes over a man when he begins his holiday with a rough sea crossing, “How on earth did I ever imagine that there was advantage to be obtained out of this?”

That was the moment which was chosen by one of the party to go along and see that the men were all right. There was a sentry in the next bay of the trench. All by himself, but “right as rain,” as he puts it. Shrapnel was breaking in showers on the parapet, swishing overhead like driven hail. While the enemy is bursting shell on your parapet he cannot come there himself. Provided that your sentry’s nerves are all right, and that a “crump” does not drop right into his little section of trench, there is not much that can go wrong. And there is nothing much wanting in the nerves of this infantry.

However, something had clearly gone wrong with this attack. It was quite obvious that the enemy somehow or another knew that it was coming off, and where; for he had begun to shoot back within a very few minutes of our opening shot, and he was shooting very hard. Clearly he had noticed some point in our preparations, and he too had prepared. “I will teach these people a lesson this time,” he thought, as he laid his guns on the likely section.

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Right in the midst of all this uproar we heard one of his machine-guns cracking overhead. Then another joined in—we could hear them traversing from flank to front and round to flank again. “Of course, the raiders cannot have got in,” one thought. “Perhaps he has seen them crossing No Man’s Land, and those machine-guns are on to them in the open. Poor beggars! Not much chance for them now”—and one shivered at the thought of them out there, open and defenceless to that hail. As the minutes slipped on towards the hour, and our bombardment slackened, but the enemy’s did not, and no one stirred at all in the trenches, one felt quite sure of it—of course, we had failed this time—well, we ought to expect such failures; we cannot always hope to jump into German trenches exactly whenever we please.

Just then a dark figure crept round the traverse of the buttress of the trench. “Room in here?” he asked.

Two others came after him, bending, and then a fourth. We squeezed along to make room.

“Was you hit?” asked the second man of the first.

“Only a bang on the scalp, and I wouldn’t have got that if it hadn’t been for the prisoner—waiting to get him over.”

“Keep your head down, Mac, you’ll only get hit,” said a third. “Where’s Mr. Franks—you all right, sir?—Mr. Little was hit, wasn’t he?”

So these were the raiders, and they had come through it after all. They were rather distracted. The man next me wiped his forehead, and took a cigarette. He looked disinterestedly up at the shell-bursts, but he talked very little. He looked on the raid as a bit of a failure, clearly.

An hour later we heard all about it. The racket had quietened down. The enemy was contenting himself with throwing a few shrapnel shells far back over communication trenches. We were in a room lighted with candles. In the midst of an interested crowd of half a dozen young officers was a youngster in grey cloth, with a mud be-spattered coat, a swollen face, and two bandaged hands. On the table were a coffee-pot, some cups, and biscuits, and a small heap of loot—gas masks and bayonets, and such stuff from German dug-outs. Most of the crowd was interestedly fingering a grey steel helmet with a heavy steel shield or visor in front of the forehead, evidently meant to be bullet-proof when the wearer looked over the parapet. The prisoner was murmuring something like “Durchgeschossen,” “Durchgeschossen.”

“He says he’s shot through,” said someone, who understood a little German.

“Oh, nonsense,” broke in a youth; “you were shot through the hand, old man, but you were not shot there.” The prisoner was pointing to his ribs.

“Oh, you’ve got a rat,” said the youngster, as the man went on pointing to the same place. But he tore the man’s shirt open quickly. “Yes, you have, sure enough,” he exclaimed, showing the small, neat entry hole of a bullet in the side. “Here, sit down, old man, and take this,” he added tenderly, giving the man a cup of warm coffee, and pressing him to a chair. The whole attitude had changed to one of solicitude.

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It was while the prisoner sat there that we heard about the raid. They clearly considered it something of a failure. They had to get through a ditch full of water to their necks, then some trip-wire, then a knee-deep entanglement, then a ditch full of rusty wire, then some “French” coils of barbed wire, then more wire knee-deep, with trip-wire after that. Moreover, the enemy’s artillery fire was heavy. They simply went on over the parapet into the enemy’s trench for a few minutes and killed with their bombs about a dozen Germans, and brought in as prisoners those who were left wounded. Every man of their own who was wounded they carried carefully back through the tempest in No Man’s Land. The Germans had spent at least as much artillery ammunition as we had, and in spite of all the noise they had done wonderfully little damage. We put a dozen of them out of action till the end of the war—a dozen that our men saw and know of; and they may have put out of action five of ours.

As we took a tired prisoner to the hospital through the grey light of morning, I thought I would give, for a change, an account of a “failure.”

[It was almost immediately after this that the Australians were brought down to the Somme battle. From this time on they left the neighbourhood of green fields and farmhouses and plunged into the brown, ploughed-up nightmare battlefield where the rain of shells has practically never since ceased. They came into the battle in its second stage, exactly three weeks after the British.]

CHAPTER XV

POZIERES

France, July 26th.

I have been watching the units of a certain famous Australian force come out of action. They have fought such a fight that the famous division of British regular troops on their flank sent them a message to say that they were proud to fight by the side of them.

Conditions alter in a battle like this from day to day. But at the time when the British attack upon the second German line in Longueval and Bazentin ended, the farther village of Pozieres was left as the hub of the battle for the time being. This point is the summit of the hill on which the German second line ran. And, probably for that reason, the new line which the Germans had dug across from their second line to their third line—so as to have a line still barring our way when we had broken through their second line—branched off near Pozieres to meet the third line near Flers. The map of the situation at this stage of the battle will show better than a page of description why it was necessary that Pozieres should next be captured.

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There were several days' interval between the failure of the first attack on Pozieres and the night on which the Australians were put at it. The Germans probably had little chance of improving their position in the meanwhile, for the village was kept under a slow bombardment with heavy shells and shrapnel which made movement there dangerous. Our troops could see occasional parties of Germans hurrying through the tattered wood and powdered, tumbled foundations. The garrison lost men steadily, and on about the night of Thursday or Friday, July 20th or 21st, the Second Guard Reserve Division, which had been mainly responsible for holding this part of the line, was relieved; and a fresh division, from the lines in front of Ypres, was put in. The new troops brought in several days' rations with them, and never lacked food or water. It was probably a belated party of these new-comers that our men noticed wandering through the village in daytime.

During the afternoon of Saturday our bombardment of Pozieres became heavier. Most of these ruined villages are marked on this shell-swept country by the trees around them. It is not that they originally stood in a woodland; but when the village is a mere heap of foundations powdered white the only relic of it left standing erect, if you except a battered wall or two, is the shredded trunks and stumps of trees which once made the gardens or orchards or hedges behind the houses. Our troops had three obstacles before them—first a shallow, hastily dug trench in the open in front of the trees around the village; then certain trenches running generally through the trees and hedges and behind a trench railway; thirdly, such lines as existed in the village itself. The village is strung out along a stretch of the Albert-Bapaume road up which the battle has advanced from the first. Just beyond the village, near what remains of the Pozieres Mill on the very top of the hill, is the German second line still (at time of writing) in possession of the Germans. Another line crossing the road in front of the village was then in their hands.

On Saturday afternoon our heavy shells were tearing at regular intervals into the rear of the brickheaps which once were houses, and flinging up branches of trees and great clouds of black earth from the woods. A German letter was found next day dated "In Hell's Trenches." It added: "It is not really a trench, but a little ditch, shattered with shells—not the slightest cover and no protection. We have lost 50 men in two days, and life is unendurable." White puffs of shrapnel from field guns were lathering the place persistently, so that when the German trenches were broken down it was difficult to repair them or move in them.

Our men in their trenches were cleaning rifles, packing away spare kit, yarning there much as they yarned of old over the stockyard fence or the gate of the horse paddock.

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That night, shortly after dark, there broke out the most fearful bombardment I have ever seen. As one walked towards the battlefield, the weirdly shattered woods and battered houses stood out almost all the time against one continuous band of flickering light along the eastern skyline. Most of it was far away to the east of our part of the battlefield—in some French or British sector on the far right. There must have been fierce fire upon Pozieres, too, for the Germans were replying to it, hailing the roads with shrapnel and trying to fill the hollows with gas shell. They must have suspected an attack upon this part of their line as well, and were trying to hamper the reserves from moving into position.

About midnight our field artillery lashed down its shrapnel upon the German front line in the open before the village. A few minutes later this fire lifted and the Australian attack was launched.

The Germans had opened in one part with a machine-gun before that final burst of shrapnel, and they opened again immediately after. But there would have been no possibility of stopping that charge with a fire twenty times as heavy. The difficulty was not to get the men forward, but to hold them. With a complicated night attack to be carried through it was necessary to keep the men well in hand.

The first trench was a wretchedly shallow affair in places. Most of the Germans in it were dead—some of them had been lying there for days. The artillery in the meantime had lifted on to the German trenches farther back. Later they lifted to a farther position yet. The Australian infantry dashed at once from the first position captured, across the intervening space over the tramway and into the trees.

It was here that the first real difficulty arose along parts of the line. Some sections found in front of them the trench which they were looking for—an excellent deep trench which had survived the bombardment. Other sections found no recognisable trench at all, but a maze of shell craters and tumbled rubbish, or a simple ditch reduced to white powder. Parties went on through the trees into the village, searching for the position, and pushed so close to the fringe of their own shell fire that some were wounded by it. However, where they found no trench they started to dig one as best they could. Shortly after the bombardment shifted a little farther, and a third attack came through and swept, in most parts, right up to the position which the troops had been ordered to take up.

As daylight gradually spread over that bleached surface Australians could occasionally be seen walking about in the trees and through the part of the village they had been ordered to take. The position was being rapidly “consolidated.” German snipers in the north-east of the village and across the main road could see them, too. A patrol was sent across the main road to find a sniper. It bombed some dug-outs which it found there, and from one of them

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appeared a white flag, which was waved vigorously. Sixteen prisoners came out, including a regimental doctor. There were several other dug-outs in this part and various scraps of old trenches, probably the site of an old battery. The Germans, now that they had been driven from their main lines, were naturally fighting from the various scraps of isolated fortification which exist behind all positions. During the afternoon two patrols were sent to clear out other snipers from these half-hidden lurking places. But the garrison was sufficiently organised to summon up some sort of reserve, and the patrols had to come back after a short, sharp fight more or less in the open.

After dark, the Australians pushed across the road through the village. By morning the position had been improved, so that nearly the whole village was secure against sudden attack.

An official report would read: "The same progress continued on Tuesday night, and by Wednesday morning the whole of Pozieres was consolidated." That is to say—in the heart of the village itself there was little more actual hand-to-hand fighting. All that happened there was that, from the time when the first day broke and found the Pozieres position practically ours, the enemy turned his guns on to it. Hour after hour—day and night—with increasing intensity as the days went on, he rained heavy shell into the area. It was the sight of the battlefield for miles around—that reeking village. Now he would send them crashing in on a line south of the road—eight heavy shells at a time, minute after minute, followed up by burst upon burst of shrapnel. Now he would place a curtain, straight across this valley or that, till the sky and landscape were blotted out, except for fleeting glimpses seen as through a lift of fog. Gas shell, musty with chloroform; sweet-scented tear shell that made your eyes run with water; high bursting shrapnel with black smoke and a vicious high explosive rattle behind its heavy pellets; ugly green bursts the colour of a fat silkworm; huge black clouds from the high explosive of his 5.9's. Day and night the men worked through it, fighting this horrid machinery far over the horizon as if they were fighting Germans hand-to-hand—building up whatever it battered down; buried, some of them, not once but again and again and again.

What is a barrage against such troops! They went through it as you would go through a summer shower—too proud to bend their heads, many of them, because their mates were looking. I am telling you of things I have seen. As one of the best of their officers said to me, "I have to walk about as if I liked it—what else can you do when your own men teach you to?" The same thought struck me not once but twenty times.

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On Tuesday morning the shelling of the day before rose to a crescendo, and then suddenly slackened. The German was attacking. It was only a few of the infantry who even saw him. The attack came in lines at fairly wide intervals up the reverse slope of the hill behind Pozieres windmill. Before it reached the crest it came under the sudden barrage of our own guns' shrapnel. The German lines swerved away up the hill. The excited infantry on the extreme right could see Germans crawling over, as quickly as they might, from one shell crater to another, grey backs hopping from hole to hole. They blazed away hard; but most of our infantry never got the chance it was thirsting for. The artillery beat back that attack before it was over the crest, and the Germans broke and ran. Again the enemy's artillery was turned on. Pozieres was pounded more furiously than before, until by four in the afternoon it seemed to onlookers scarcely possible that humanity could have endured such an ordeal. The place could be picked out for miles by pillars of red and black dust towering above it like a Broken Hill dust-storm. Then Germans were reported coming on again, as in the morning. Again our artillery descended upon them like a hailstorm, and nothing came of the attack.

During all this time, in spite of the shelling, the troops were slowly working forwards through Pozieres; not backwards. Every day saw fresh ground gained. A great part of the men who were working through it had no more than two or three hours' sleep since Saturday—some of them none at all, only fierce, hard work all the time.

The only relief to this one-sided struggle against machinery was the hand-to-hand fighting that occurred in the two trenches before-mentioned—the second-line German trench behind Pozieres and the similar trench in front of it. The story of it will be told some day—it would almost deserve a book to itself.

CHAPTER XVI

AN ABYSM OF DESOLATION

France, August 1st.

When I went through Boisselle I thought it was the limit that desolation could reach. A wilderness of powdered chalk and broken brick, under which men had burrowed like rats, but with method, so as to make a city underneath the shattered foundations of the village. And then their rat city had been crushed in from above; and through the splintered timbered entrances you peered into a dark interior of dishevelled blankets and scattered clothing. It was only too evident that there had been no time as yet, in the hustle of battle, to search these ghastly, noisome dug-outs for the Germans who had been bombed there. The mine craters in the white chalk of La Boisselle are big enough to hide a large church.



But for sheer desolation it will not compare with Pozieres. On the top of a gently rising hill, over which the Roman road ran as is the way with Roman roads, was a pretty village, with its church, its cemetery under the shady trees; its orchards and picturesque village houses. When the lines crystallised in front of Albert it was some miles behind the German trenches. Our guns put a few shells into it; but six weeks ago it was still a country village, somewhat wrecked but probably used for the headquarters of a German regiment. Then came the British bombardment for a week before the battle of the Somme.

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The bombardment shattered Pozieres. Its buildings were scattered as you would scatter a house of toy bricks. Its trees began to look ragged. By the time Boisselle and Ovilliers were taken, and the front had pushed up to within a quarter or half a mile of Pozieres, a tattered wood was all that marked the spot. Behind the brushwood you could still see in three or four places the remains of a pink wall. Some way to the north-east of the village, near the actual summit of the hill, was a low heap of bleached terracotta. It was the stump of the Pozieres windmill.

Since then Pozieres has had our second bombardment, and a German bombardment which lasted four days, in addition to the normal German barrage across the village which has never really ceased. You can actually see more of the buildings than before. That is to say, you can see any brick or stone that stands. For the brushwood and tattered branches which used to hide the road have gone; and all that remain are charred tree stumps standing like a line of broken posts. The upland around was once cultivated land, and it should be green with the weeds of two years. It is as brown as the veldt. Over the whole face of the country shells have ploughed up the land literally as with a gigantic plough, so that there is more red and brown earth than green. From the distance all the colour is given by these upturned crater edges, and the country is wholly red.

[Illustration: A MAIN STREET OF POZIERES IN A QUIET INTERVAL DURING THE FIGHT]

[Illustration: THE CHURCH, POZIERES]

But even this did not prepare one for the desolation of the place itself. Imagine a gigantic ash heap, a place where dust and rubbish have been cast for years outside some dry, derelict, God-forsaken up-country township. Imagine some broken-down creek bed in the driest of our dry central Australian districts, abandoned for a generation to the goats, in which the hens have been scratching as long as men can remember. Then take away the hens and the goats and all traces of any living or moving thing. You must not even leave a spider. Put here, in evidence of some old tumbled roof, a few roof beams and tiles sticking edgewise from the ground, and the low faded ochre stump of the windmill peeping over the top of the hill, and there you have Pozieres.

I know of nothing approaching that desolation. Perhaps it is that the place is still in the thick of the fight. In most other ruins behind battlefields that I have seen there are the signs of men again—perhaps men who have visited the place like yourself. There is life, anyhow, somewhere in the landscape. In this place there is no sign of life at all. When you stand in Pozieres to-day, and are told that you will find the front trench across another hundred yards of shell-holes, you know that there must be life in the landscape. The dead hill-side a few hundred yards before you must contain both your men and the Germans. But as in most battlefields,

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where the warmest corner is, there is the least sign of movement. Dry shell crater upon shell crater upon shell crater—all bordering one another until some fresh salvo shall fall and assort the old group of craters into a new one, to be reassorted again and again as the days go on. It is the nearest thing to sheer desert that I have seen since certain lonely rides into the old Sahara at the back of Mena Camp two years ago. Every minute or two there is a crash. Part of the desert bumps itself up into huge red or black clouds and subsides again. Those eruptions are the only movement in Pozieres.

That is the country in which our boys are fighting the greatest battle Australians have ever fought. Of the men whom you find there, what can one say? Steadfast until death, just the men that Australians at home know them to be; into the place with a joke, a dry, cynical, Australian joke as often as not; holding fast through anything that man can imagine; stretcher bearers, fatigue parties, messengers, chaplains, doing their job all the time, both new-joined youngsters and old hands, without fuss, but steadily, because it is their work. They are not heroes; they do not want to be thought or spoken of as heroes. They are just ordinary Australians doing their particular work as their country would wish them to do it. And pray God Australians in days to come will be worthy of them!

CHAPTER XVII

POZIERES RIDGE

France, August 14th.

You would scarcely realise it from what the world has heard, but I think that the hardest battle ever fought by Australians was probably the battle of Pozieres Ridge.

There have been four distinct battles fought by the Australian troops on the Somme since they made their first charge from the British trenches near Pozieres. The first was the heavy three days' fight by which they took Pozieres village. The second was the fight in which they tried to rush the German second line along the hill-crest behind Pozieres. The third was the attack in which this second line was broken by them along a front of a mile and a half. The fourth has been the long fight which immediately began along the German second line northwards from the new position, along the ridge towards Mouquet Farm. It has been hard fighting all the way, and what was three weeks ago a German salient into the British line is now a big Australian salient into the German line. But I think that the hardest fight of all was that of the second and third phases—the battle for Pozieres Ridge.

Pozieres village itself was not on the crest of the hill. It was on the British side of it, where the German was naturally hanging on because it was almost the highest point in his position and gave him a view over miles of our territory. On the other hand, the German main second line behind Pozieres was practically on the summit; in some parts farther north it was actually on or just over the summit. It was from two to seven hundred yards beyond the village itself.

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The German line on the hill-crest was attacked as soon as ever the village was properly cleared. The Australians went at it in the night across a wide strip of waste hill-top. The thistles there, and the brown earth churned up in shell craters, and the absolute absence of any kind of movement (simply because it was too dangerous to move), call to one's mind Shakespeare's old stage direction of a "blasted heath." There had been a short artillery preparation; the attack reminded one of our old raids up on the Armentieres front.

I have seen Germans who were in the line in front of that attack. They state that they were not surprised. In the light of their flares they had seen numbers of "Englishmen" advancing over the shoulder of the hill. When the rush came, one German officer told me, he, in his short sector of the line alone, had three machine-guns all hard at work. The attack reached the remnants of the German wire. Some brave men picked a path through the tangle, and, in spite of the cross-fire, managed to reach the German trench. They were very few. We have since discovered men in the craters even beyond the front German trench. The German officer told me that his men had afterwards found an Australian who had been lying in a crater in front of his line for four days. He had been shot through the abdomen and had a broken leg, but he had been brought in by the Germans and was doing well. We also afterwards brought in both Australians and Germans who had been out there for six days, wounded, living on what rations they had with them.

It was a brave attack. On the extreme left it succeeded. But the trenches won by the Victorians there were on the flank, not on the hill-top. The country behind that crest, sloping gradually down to the valley of Courcelette and beyond, where the German field batteries were firing and where the Germans could come and go unseen—all this was so far an unknown land into which no one on the British side had peered since the battle began.

Six days later the Australians went for that position again. They attacked just after dusk. There was enough light to make out the face of the country as if by a dim moonlight. They were the same troops who had made the attack a week before, because there was a determination that they, and they alone, should reach that line. The artillery had been pounding it gradually during the week.

The German troops who were holding that part were about to be relieved. They had suffered from the slow, continual bombardment. There were deep dug-outs in their trenches, where they saved the men as far as possible, but one after another these would be crushed or blocked by a heavy shell. The tired companies had lost in some cases actually half their men by this shell fire, losing them slowly, day by day, as a man might bleed to death. The remainder had their packs made up ready to march out to rest. The young officer of one of the relieving battalions was actually coming into the trenches at the head of his platoon—when there crashed on them a sudden hail of shell

fire. The officer extended his men hurriedly and pushed on. It was about half-past ten by German time, which is half-past nine by ours.

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The first sight that met him, as he reached the support line of German trenches, was two wounded Australians lying in the bottom of it. So the British must be attacking, he thought. He ordered his platoon to advance over the trench and counter-attack. But in the dark and the dust they lost touch and straggled to the north—he saw no more of them. He tumbled on with two men into a shell crater and began to improve it for defence—then they found Australians towering around them in the dark. They surrendered.

It was a most difficult business to get the various parties for our attack into position in the night, and some of the troops behind had to be pushed forward hurriedly. In consequence the officers out in front had to carry on as if theirs were the only troops in the attack, and see the whole fight through without relying upon supports. The way in which junior officers and N.C.O.'s have acted upon their own initiative during some of this fighting has been beyond praise. The attack went through up to time. The supports had to come in parties organised in the dark on the spur of the moment. The Germans had several machine-guns going. But as another German officer told me, "This time they came on too thick. We might have held them in front, but they got in on one side of us; then we heard they were in on the other; then they came from the rear as well—on all four sides. What could we do?"

Almost immediately after the Australians reached the trenches, watchers far behind could see the horizon beyond them lit by five slow illuminations, about ten minutes' interval between each. They were beyond the crest of the hill. I do not know, but I think the German must have been blowing up his field-gun ammunition.

The men in the new trenches may, or may not, have seen this. What they did notice, as soon as the battle cleared and they had time to look into the darkness in front of them, was a succession of brilliant glares from some position just hidden by the slope of the hill. It was the flash of the German guns which were firing at them. It is, as far as I know, the first time in this battle that our men have seen the actual flash of the enemy's guns.

When day broke they found beyond them a wide, flat stretch of hill-top, with a distant hill line beyond. Far down the slope there were Germans moving. And in the distant landscape they saw the German gun teams limber up and hurry away with the field guns which for a fortnight had been firing upon our men.

The Germans have twice afterwards attacked that position. In the early light of the first morning a party of them came tumbling up from some trench against a sector of the captured line. In front of them was an officer, well ahead, firing his automatic pistol as he went, levelling it first at one Australian, then at another, as he saw them in the trenches before him. He was shot, and the attack quickly melted; it never seemed very serious. Two days later, after a long, heavy bombardment, the Germans attacked again—this time about fifteen hundred of them. They penetrated the two trenches at one

point, but our company officers, again acting on their own initiative, charged them straight, on the instant, without hesitation. Every German in that section was captured, and a few Australians, whom they had taken, were released.



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CHAPTER XVIII

THE GREEN COUNTRY

France, August 28th.

For a mile the country had been flayed. The red ribs of it lay open to the sky. The whole flank of the ridge had been torn open—it lies there bleeding, gaping open to the callous skies with scarcely so much as a blade of grass or a thistle to clothe its nakedness—covered with the wreckage of men and of their works as the relics of a shipwreck cover the uneasy sea.

As we dodged over the last undulations of an unused trench, the crest of each crater brought us for an instant into view of something beyond—something green and fresh and brilliant, like new land after a long sea journey. Then we were out of view of it again, for a time; until we came to a point where it seemed good to climb and peep over the low parapet.

It was a peep into paradise. Before us lay a green country. There was a rich verdure on the opposite hills. Beyond them ran a valley filled with the warm haze of summer, out of which the round tree-tops stood dark against the still higher hills beyond. The wheat was ripe upon the far hill slopes. The sun bathed the lap of the land with his midday summer warmth. Along the crest of the distant hills ran the line of tall, regular trees which in this country invariably means a road. A church spire rose from a tree clump on a nearer crest. Some of the foreground was pitted with the ugly red splashes which have become for us, in this horrible area, the normal feature of the countryside. But, beyond it, was the green country spread out like a picture, sleeping under the heat of a summer's sun.

It was the promised land—the country behind the German lines—the valley about Bapaume where the Germans have been for two years undisturbed in French territory, until our troops for the first time peeped over the ridge the other day at the flashes of the very German guns which were firing at them.

Quite close at hand was a wood. The trees were not more than half a mile away, if that. It was a growing wood—with the green still on the branches, very different from the charred posts and tree stumps which are all that now remain of the gardens and orchards of Pozieres. I remember a little over a month ago, when some of us first went up near to Pozieres village—on the day when the bombardment before our first attack was tearing branches from off the trees a hundred yards away—Pozieres had a fairly decent covering then. There was enough dead brushwood and twigs, at any rate, to hide the buildings of the place. A few pink walls could then be half seen behind the branches, or topping the gaps in the scrub.

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Within four days the screen in front of Pozieres had been torn to shreds—had utterly disappeared. The German bombardment ripped off all that the British had left. The buildings now stood up quite naked, such as they were. There was the church—still recognisable by one window; and a scrap of red wall at the north-east end of the village, past which you then had to crawl to reach an isolated run of trench facing the windmill. Both trench and red wall have long since gone to glory. I doubt if you could even trace either of them now. The solitary arched window disappeared early, and a tumbled heap of bricks is all that now marks Pozieres church. One scrap of gridironed roof sticking out from the powdered ground cross-hatches the horizon. There is not so much foliage left as would shelter a cock sparrow.

But here were we, with this desolation behind us, looking out suddenly and at no great distance on quite a respectable wood. It tempted you to step out there and just walk over to it—I never see that country without the feeling that one is quite free to step across there and explore it.

There are men coming up the farther side of the slope—men going about some normal business of the day as our men go about theirs in the places behind their lines.

Those men are Germans; and the village in the trees, the collection of buildings half guessed in the wood, is Courcellette. It has been hidden ground to us for so long that you feel it is almost improper to be overlooking them so constantly; like spending your day prying over into your neighbour's yard. Away in the landscape behind, in some hollow, there humps itself into the air a big geyser of chestnut dust. One has seen German shell burst so often in that fashion, back in our hinterland, that it takes a moment to realise that this shell is not German but British. I cannot see what it is aimed at—some battery, I suppose; or perhaps a much-used road; or some place they suspect to be a headquarters. Clearly, it is not always so safe as it seems to be in the green country behind the German lines.

CHAPTER XIX

TROMMELFEUER

France, August 21st.

The Germans call it *Trommelfeuer*—drum fire. I do not know any better description for the distant sound of it. We hear it every day from some quarter of this wide battlefield. You will be sitting at your tea, the normal spasmodic banging of your own guns sounding in the nearer positions five, ten, perhaps fifteen times in the minute. Suddenly, from over the distant hills, to left or right, there breaks out the roll of a great kettledrum, ever so far away. Someone is playing the tattoo softly and very quickly. If it

is nearer, and especially if it is German, it sounds as if he played it on an iron ship's tank instead.

That is *Trommelfeuer*—what we call intense bombardment. When it is very rapid—like the swift roll of a kettledrum—you take it that it must be the French seventy-fives down South preparing the way for a French assault. But it is often our own guns after all—I doubt if there are many who can really distinguish between the distant sound of them.

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Long afterwards—perhaps in the grey of the next morning—one may see outside of some dug-out, in a muddy wilderness of old trenches and wheel-tracks, guarded by half a dozen Australians with fixed bayonets, a group of dejected men in grey. The cold Scotch mist stands in little beads on the grey cloth—the bayonets shine very cold in the white light before the dawn—the damp, slippery brown earth is too wet for a comfortable seat. But there is always some Australian there who will give them a cigarette; a cheery Melbourne youngster or two step down into the crowd and liven them with friendly chaff; the blue sky begins to show through the mist—the early morning aeroplane hums past on its way to the line, low down, half hidden in the wrack. The big bushman from Gippsland at a neighbouring coffee stall—praise heaven for that institution—gives them a drink of the warm stuff. And I verily believe that at that moment they emerge for the first time out of a frightful dream.

For they are the men who have been through the *Trommelfeuer*.

Strong men arrive from that experience shaking like leaves in the wind. I have seen one of our own youngsters—a boy who had fought a great fight all through the dark hours, and who had refused to come back when he was first ordered to—I have seen him unable to keep still for an instant after the strain, and yet ready to fight on till he dropped; physically almost a wreck, but with his wits as sharp and his spirits as keen as a steel chisel. I have seen other Australians who, after doing glorious work through thirty or forty hours of unimaginable strain, buried and buried and buried again and still working like tigers, have broken down and collapsed, unable to stand or to walk, unable to move an arm except limply, as if it were string; ready to weep like little children.

It is the method which the German invented for his own use. For a year and a half he had a monopoly—British soldiers had to hang on as best they could under the knowledge that the enemy had more guns and more shell than they, and bigger shell at that. But at last the weapon seems to have been turned against him. No doubt his armaments and munitions are growing fast, but ours have for the moment overtaken them. And hell though it is for both sides—something which no soldiers in the world's history ever yet had to endure—it is mostly better for us at present than for the Germans. I have heard men coming out of the thick of it say, "Well, I'm glad I'm not a Hun."

Now, here is what it means. There is no good done by describing the particular horrors of war—God knows those who see them want to forget them as soon as they can. But it is just as well to know what the work in the munition factories means to *your* friends—*your* sons and fathers and brothers at the front.

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The normal shelling of the afternoon—a scattered bombardment all over the landscape, which only brings perhaps half a dozen shells to your immediate neighbourhood once in every ten minutes—has noticeably quickened. The German is obviously turning on more batteries. The light field-gun shrapnel is fairly scattered as before. But 5.9-inch howitzers are being added to it. Except for his small field guns, the German makes little use of guns. His work is almost entirely done with howitzers. He possesses big howitzers—8-inch and larger—as we do. But the backbone of his artillery is the 5.9 howitzer; and after that probably the 4.2.

The shells from both these guns are beginning to fall more thickly. Huge black clouds shoot into the air from various parts of the foreground, and slowly drift away across the hill-top. Suddenly there is a descending shriek, drawn out for a second or more, coming terrifyingly near; a crash far louder than the nearest thunder; a colossal thump to the earth which seems to move the whole world about an inch from its base; a scatter of flying bits and all sorts of under-noises, rustle of a flying wood splinter, whir of fragments, scatter of falling earth. Before it is half finished another shriek exactly similar is coming through it. Another crash—apparently right on the crown of your head, as if the roof beams of the sky had been burst in. You can just hear, through the crash, the shriek of a third and fourth shell as they come tearing down the vault of heaven—*crash*—*crash*. Clouds of dust are floating over you. A swifter shriek and something breaks like a glass bottle in front of the parapet, sending its fragments slithering low overhead. It bursts like a rainstorm, sheet upon sheet, *smash, smash, smash*, with one or two more of the heavier shells punctuating the shower of the lighter ones. The lighter shell is shrapnel from field guns, sent, I dare say, to keep you in the trench while the heavier shell pounds you there. A couple of salvos from each, perhaps twenty or thirty shells in the minute, and the shrieks cease. The dust drifts down the hill. The sky clears. The sun looks in. Five minutes later down comes exactly such another shower.

That is the beginning. As the evening wears on, the salvos become more frequent. All through the night they go on. The next morning the intervals are becoming even less. Occasionally the hurricane reaches such an intensity that there seems no interval at all. There is an easing in the afternoon—which may indicate that the worst is over, or merely that the guns are being cleaned, or the gunners having their tea. Towards dusk it swells in a wave heavier than any that has yet come. All through the second night the inferno lasts. In the grey dawn of the second day it increases in a manner almost unbelievable—the dust of it covers everything; it is quite impossible to see. The earth shakes and quivers with the pounding.

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It is just then that the lighter guns join in with the roll as of a kettledrum—*Trommelfeuer*. The enemy is throwing out his infantry, and his shrapnel is showering on to our lines in order to keep down the heads of our men to the last moment. Suddenly the whole noise eases. The enemy is casting his shrapnel and big shell farther back.

The chances are that most men in those racked lines do not know whether the enemy ever delivers the attack or not. Our artillery breaks the head of it before it crosses No Man's Land. A few figures on the skyline, hopping from crater to crater, indicate what is left of it. As soon as they find rifle fire and machine-guns on them the remnant give it up as hopeless. They thought our men would have run—and they found them still at their post; that is all.

And what of the men who have been out there under that hurricane, night and day, until its duration almost passed memory—amidst sights and sounds indescribable, desperately tried? I was out there once after such a time as that. There they were in their dusty ditch in that blasted, brown Sahara of a country—Sydney boys, country fellows from New South Wales, our old friends just as we knew them, heavy eyed, tired to death as after a long fight with a bush fire or heavy work in drought time—but simply doing their ordinary Australian work in their ordinary Australian way. And that is all they had been doing and all they wished anyone to believe they had been doing.

But what are we going to do for them? The mere noise is enough to break any man's nerves. Every one of those shrieking shells which fell night and day might mean any man's instant death. As he hears each shell coming he knows it. He saw the sights around him—he was buried by earth and dug out by his mates, and he dug them out in turn. What can we do for him? I know only one thing—it is the only alleviation that science knows of. (I am talking now of the most modern and heaviest of battles, and of the thick and centre of it; for no men have ever been through a heavier fight than Pozieres.) We can force some mitigation of all this by one means and one alone—if we can give the Germans worse. The chief anxiety in the mind of the soldier is—have we got the guns and the shells—can we keep ahead of them with guns and our ammunition? That means everything. These men have the nerve to go through these infernos, provided their friends at home do not desert them. If the munition worker could see what I have seen, he would toil as though he were racing against time to save the life of a man.

I saw yesterday a letter picked up on the battlefield—it was from an Australian private. “Dear Mother, sisters, brothers and Auntie Lill,” it said. “As we are about to go into work that must be done, I want to ask you, if anything should happen to me, not to worry. You must think of all the mothers that have lost ones as dear to them. One thing you can say—that you lost one doing his little bit for a good cause.

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"I know you shall feel it if anything does happen to me, but I am willing and prepared to give my life for the cause."

Such lives hang from hour to hour on the work that is done in the British factories.

CHAPTER XX

THE NEW FIGHTING

France, August 20th.

It is a month this morning since Australians plunged into the heart of the most modern of battles. They had been in many sorts of battle before; but they had never been in the brunt of the whole war where the science and ingenuity of war had reached for the moment their highest pitch. One month ago they plunged into the very brunt and apex of it. And they are still fighting there.

People have spoken of this war as the war of trenches. But the latest battles have reached a stage beyond that. The war of trenches is a comfortable out-of-date phase, to be looked upon with regret and perhaps even some longing. The war of to-day is a war of craters and potholes—a war of crannies and nicks and crevices torn out of the earth yesterday, and to be shattered into new shapes to-morrow. It may not seem easy to believe, but we have seen the Germans under heavy bombardment leaving the shelter of their trenches for safety in the open—jumping out and running forward into shell holes—anywhere so long as they got away from the cover which they had built for themselves. The trench which they left is by next day non-existent—even the airmen looking down on it from above in the mists of the grey dawn can scarcely tell where it was. Then some community of ants sets to work and the line begins to show again. Again it is obliterated, until a stage comes when the German decides that it is not worth while digging it out. He has other lines, and he turns his energy on to them.

The result of all this is that areas of ground in the hot corners of battles like that of the Somme and Verdun, and especially disputed hill summits such as the Mort Homme or this Pozieres Ridge, become simply a desert of shell craters.

A few days back, going to a portion of the line which had considerably altered since I was there, I went by a trench which was marked on the map. It was a good trench, but it did not seem to have been greatly used of late, which was rather surprising. "You won't find it quite so good all the way," said a friend who was coming down.

Presently, and quite suddenly, the trench shallowed. The sides which had been clean cut were tumbled in. The fallen earth blocked the passage, and the journey became a switchback over tumbled rubbish and into the trench again. Someone had before been living in the trench, for there were tools in it and bits of soldiers' gear. Here and there a

shattered rifle stuck out of the terra-cotta soil. The trench shallowed still further. There had been little hastily scraped dug-outs in the sides of it. They were more than three parts filled with earth;

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but in them, every now and again, there showed a patch of muddy grey cloth above the debris. It was part of the uniform of a German soldier buried by the shell that killed him. It must have been an old German trench taken by our men some weeks before. It can scarcely have been visited since, for its garrison lay there just as the shells had buried them. Probably it had been found too broken for use and had been almost forgotten.

The trench led on through these relics of battle until even they were lost altogether; and it came out into a region where it was really a puzzle to say what was trench and what was not. Around one stretched a desert of shell craters—hole bordering upon hole so that there was no space at all between them. Each hole was circular like the ring of earth at the mouth of an ants' nest several thousand times magnified, and they stretched away like the waves of the sea. Far to the left was a bare, brown hill-side. In front, and to the right, billows of red shell-holes rose to the sharp-cut, white skyline a hundred yards away.

You feel as a man must feel in a very small boat lost in a very wide ocean. In the trough of a shell-hole your horizon was the edges of the crater on a level with your head. When you wandered over from that shell-hole into the next you came suddenly into view of a wide stretch of country all apparently exactly the same as that through which you were plunging. The green land of France lay behind you in the distance. But the rest of the landscape was an ocean of red craters. In one part of it, just over the near horizon, there protruded the shattered dry stubble of an orchard long since reduced to about thirty bare, black, shattered tree stumps. Nearer were a few short black stakes protruding among the craters—clearly the remains of an ancient wire entanglement. The trench was still traceable ten or twelve paces ahead, and there might be something which looked like the continuation of it a dozen yards farther—a line of ancient parapet appeared to be distinguishable there for a short interval. That was certainly the direction.

It was the parapet sure enough. There, waterlogged in earth, were the remains of a sandbag barricade built across the trench. A few yards on was another similar barrier. They must have been the British and German barricade built across that gap at the end of some fierce bomb fight, already long-forgotten by the lapse of several weeks. What Victoria Crosses, what Iron Crosses were won there, by deeds whose memory deserved to last as long as the race endures, God only knows—one trusts that the great scheme of things provides some record of such a sacrifice.

Here the trench divided. There was no sign of a footprint either way. Shells of various sizes were sprinkling the landscape impartially—about ten or fifteen in the minute; none very close—a black burst on the brown hill—two white shrapnel puffs five hundred yards on one side—a huge brick-red cloud over the skyline—an angry little high-explosive

whizzbang a quarter of a mile down the hill behind. It is so that it goes on all day long in the area where our troops are.

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[Illustration: THE WINDMILL OF POZIERES AND THE SHELL-SHATTERED GROUND AROUND IT]

[Illustration: THE BARELY RECOGNISABLE REMAINS OF A TRENCH]

One picked the likeliest line, and was ploughing along it, when a bullet hissed not far away. It did not seem probable that there were Germans in the landscape. One looked for another cause. Away to one side, against the skyline, one had a momentary glimpse of three or four Australians going along, bent low, making for some advanced position. It must be some stray bullet meant for them. Then another bullet hissed.

So out on that brown hill-side, in some unrecognisable shell-hole trench, the enemy must still have been holding on. It was a case for keeping low where there was cover and making the best speed where there was not; and the end of the journey was soon reached.

Now that is a country in which I, to whom it was a rare adventure, found Australians living, working, moving as if it were their own back yard. In that country it is often difficult, with the best will in the world, to tell a trench when you come to it. One of the problems of the modern battle is that, when men are given a trench to take, it is sometimes impossible to recognise that trench when they arrive at it. The stretch in front of the lines is a sea of red earth, in which you may notice, here or there, the protruding timber of some old German gun position with its wickerwork shell-covers around it—the whole looking like a broken fish basket awash in a muddy estuary. An officer crawled out to some of this jetsam the other day, and, putting up his head from the wreckage, found nothing in the horizon except one solitary figure standing about two hundred yards in front of him; and it was a German.

Imagine the factory hand from Saxony set down to do outpost duty in this sort of wilderness. I spoke the other day to a little tailor or bootmaker, with a neck that you could have put through a napkin ring, a tremendous forehead, and big, startled eyes. “Yes, we were put out there to dig an outpost trench,” he said. “The sergeant gave us a wrong direction, I think. We took two days’ rations and went out hundreds of yards. No one came near us. There was firing on all sides, and we did not know where we were. Our food was finished—we saw men working—we did not know who they were—but they were English, and we were captured.”

CHAPTER XXI

ANGELS’ WORK

France, August 28th.



It had been a wild night. Not a first-rate full-dress attack on a big front, but one of those fierce struggles on a small front which have been so frequent in the stubborn fight northwards, up the Pozieres Ridge towards Mouquet Farm. Along a good part of the line the troops were back in the trenches they had left, or had dug themselves a new trench only slightly in advance of it. At other points they were in the trenches they had gone out for.

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The bombardment, which had been turned on as though somebody held the key to the thunderstorm, and which had crashed and flashed into the hill-side nearly all the night, had gradually died down. The artillery Staff officers on both sides had long since read the last pink signal form, and had given instructions to cover any possible trouble, and had turned into bed. The normal early morning gun was sending its normal shell at intervals ranging up the long valley—*rattle, rattle, rattle*, until the echo died away up the slopes, like that of a vanishing railway train, or the long-drawn bark of a dog. As it died another gun would bark, and another, until for a few seconds the noise dwindled and died altogether, and there was a silence; as if somebody, just for a second or two, had stopped the battle. The German artillery Staff had left its gun barking too—every now and again the little shell came and spat over the hill-side.

The morning broke very pale and white through the mist—as though the earth were tired to death after that wild nightmare. The soft white hand of the fog covered the red land, so that your sight ranged no more than three hundred yards at most, and often not a hundred. We were stumbling over ground smashed in by the last night's fire—red earth new turned. Only a few hundred yards away another fold of the land loomed out of the mist—you could see the crest rising dull grey out of the white vapour in the dip between. That hill-crest was in German territory—not ours. For which good reason we hurried to the shelter of a trench.

It was while we did so that I noticed a little grey procession coming towards us from the ground out beyond the trench in front of the German lines. It came very slowly—the steady, even pace of a funeral. The leader was a man—a weatherbeaten, square-jawed, rugged old bushman—who marched solemnly, holding a stick in front of him, from which hung a flag. Behind him came two men carrying, very tenderly and slowly, a stretcher. By them walked a fourth man with a water-bottle.

They were the stretcher-bearers bringing in from out there some of the wreckage of the night before. We went along the trench farther, and at a later stage we could see men in the mist in ones and twos out in front of the line. A rifle or two from somewhere behind the mist were pecking regularly—sniping from some German outpost; and it seemed not wise to show yourself too freely—the mist was lifting, and you never knew whether the Germans were this side of it or not. But though those bullets pecked constantly at the small parties or at stragglers of the night's attack hopping back from advanced shell-holes, the little procession with the flag passed through unharmed. If the sniper saw it he must have turned his rifle for the moment somewhere else.

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We made our way back, when we went, across a hill-side literally flayed of all its covering. The barrage of the night before, and of other days, had fallen there, and the slope was simply a ploughed field. I could not get rid of that impression at the time, and it is the only one that I have of it still—that we were hurrying up a ploughed countryside along a little, irregular, newly-made footpath. We had come out upon a road and crossed it at one point. After a second or two's thought one recognised that it was a road, because the banks of it ran straight. It had been like coming on the body of a man without his skin—it took you some time to realise that this flayed thing was a road at all.

There was a shrapnel shell regularly spitting across that country. We knew we should have to pass it, and one was naturally anxious to be under cover at the moment. At this time I noticed on our left a little group of figures, faintly seen in the mist, attending to some job in the open. We came in sight of the trench we were making for, and they hailed us asking the way. We told them, and they came slowly across the open towards us. They were standing above the trench intent on some business which needed care when the expected shell whizzed over the hill and burst. I ducked.

The men, standing on the brink above the trench there, did not even turn a head to look at it. Five or six angry pieces hissed by, but they no more heeded them than if it were a schoolboy pelting mud. They were intent on their business and nothing else. They did not ask for a trench to get into, but only to be shown the way. Their burden was carried easier over the open. They were stretcher-bearers.

We started home a good deal later from another part of the line by a short cut. Five minutes after we had set out, the Germans happened to turn their barrage across a patch whither our aged trench seemed certain to lead. There may not have been more than fifteen shells in the minute, but it seemed, looking along that path, more like thirty. They were of all sorts mixed—ugly, black, high-explosive shrapnel bursting with the crash of a big shell; little, spiteful whizzbang field gun tearing into the brown earth; 5.9 shells flinging up fountains of it. We pushed on until the shelter petered out and the shorter shells were already bursting behind us, and the trench was little more than a crater to nip into when you heard them singing towards you—and then we decided to give it up. At one time, as we dodged back, a visitor came singing so straight that we dived headlong into a crater just as you would dive into the sea.

A few minutes later we were back in the comfort of a fair trench, perfectly snug, watching the storm. As we reached that trench and turned into it, two men were clambering up on to the bank to join a party of five others who were standing up there already, in the open. They were stooping down to arrange with others the lifting of something up to them.

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They were stretcher-bearers—Australian stretcher-bearers. The two pair on the bank already had their load, and the others were lifting theirs up thither. They were just setting out to carry their burden overland on a track which led straight to the barrage which had turned us back.

I learned more about Australian stretcher-bearers that morning than I had known since the first week in Gallipoli. I cursed my fate that I was not permitted to have a camera there, to prove to Australians that these things are true. As luck would have it, the next time I saw that same scene the British official photographer was beside me. We saw the smoke of a barrage on the skyline. And coming straight from it were two little parties each headed by a flag.

We hurried to the place—and there it is on record, in the photograph for every man to see some day just as we saw it, the little party coming down the open with the angry shells behind them.

I asked those stretcher-bearers as I looked up at the shell-bursts how the Germans treated them.

“They don’t snipe us so long as we have this flag,” one of them said. “You see, we started it by not firing on theirs when they came out to their wounded. Of course, we can’t help the artillery,” he added, looking over his shoulder at the place from which he had come, where a line of black shell-bursts was fringing the hill. “That’s not meant for us.”

That understanding, if you can maintain it honourably and trust the enemy to do the same, means everything—everything—to the wounded of both sides. The commander who, sitting safely at his table, condemns his wounded and the enemy’s in No Man’s Land to death by slow torture without grounds for suspecting trickery, would incur a responsibility such as few men would face the thought of.

Load after load, day and night, mile upon mile in and out of craters across the open and back again—assuredly the Australian stretcher-bearer has not degenerated since he made his name glorious amongst his fellow soldiers at Gallipoli. Hear them speak of him.

CHAPTER XXII

OUR NEIGHBOUR

France, October 10th.

There are next to us at present some Scotsmen.

Australians and New Zealanders have fought alongside of many good mates in this war. I suppose the 29th Division and the Navy and the Indian Mountain Batteries and Infantry were their outstanding friends in Gallipoli. In France—the artillery of a certain famous regular division. And the Scotsmen.

It is quite remarkable how the Australian seems to forgather with the Scotsman wherever in France he meets him. You will see them sharing each other's canteens at the base, yarning round each other's camp fires at the front. Wherever the pipers are, there will the Australians be gathered together.

I asked an Australian the other day how it was that he and his mates had struck up such a remarkable friendship with some of these Highland regiments now camped near them. "Well, I think it's their sense of humour," he said.

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We looked at him rather hard.

"You see, they can understand our jokes," he said. "They don't seem to take us too serious like."

And I think he had just hit it. The Australian has a habit of pulling his mate's leg, and being on his guard against a leg-pull in return. He has sharpened his conversation against the conversation of his friends from the time he could speak—his uncles are generally to blame for it; they started him on the path of repartee by pulling his legs before those same legs had learnt to walk. As a result he is always sparring in conversation—does not mean to be taken seriously. And the Scotsman, cautious and always on the look-out for a feint, is seldom caught by it. If he is, the chances are he gives it back—with interest.

It is a grim, old, dry variety of humour, and it goes with a wonderful, grim, sturdy nature. Few people here see a Scottish regiment passing without waiting, if they have the time, to watch the last square figure disappear down the road. Many look at the perfect swing of the kilts, and the strong bare knees. For myself I can never take my eyes off their faces. There is a stalwart independence in their strong mouths and foreheads and chins which rivets one's interest. Every face is different from the next. Each man seems to be thinking for himself, and ready to stand up for his own decision against the world. There is a sort of reasoned determination uniting them into a single whole, which, one thinks, must be a very terrible sort of whole to meet in anger.

And it is. The Scotsman is, I think, the most unrelenting fighter that I have come across. The Australian is a most fierce fighter in battle, but he is quite ready to make friends afterwards with his enemy. Once he has taken a German prisoner, he is apt to treat him more liberally than most troops—more so even, I think, than the English soldier—and that is saying a good deal. To the Scotsman, when he escorts his prisoners home, those prisoners are Germans still. He has never forgotten the tremendous losses which Scottish regiments suffered at the beginning of the war. He does not feel kindly towards the men who inflicted them. With the Australian, once the fight is over, the bitterness is left behind. The Scotsman makes prisoners, but he does not make friends.

I shall not forget a talk that I had, some time since, with a Scottish driver who had been very badly wounded during the first winter. He had not been in the Army Service Corps in those days. He was in a certain famous regiment of infantry—joined up in the first weeks of the war as a recruit, and was sent to the front with a draft almost at once—by some process which I do not now understand—to replace heavy casualties. He was with them through that first winter in their miserable, overflowing apology for a trench. It was a shallow ditch with a wretched parapet, and all they could do for weeks on end was to send the men into the trench over the top of the ground at night—they had actually to approach this trench from the front, at times, because the rear was a marsh

—get into it over the parapet, and sit there on the back of the trench until nightfall, sheltered only by the parapet, since the trench was too wet to live in.

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At last there came a dawn when the regiment charged, to cover operations elsewhere. They left their ditch, and half-way across No Man's Land John Henderson—it is not his name, but it will do as well as another—John Henderson was hit. He lay out there for a day and a night. A brave officer bandaged him and passed on to others. John Henderson was brought in at last, delirious, with two bullets in him and a heavy rheumatism. He was invalided out of the service, and as soon as he thought himself well enough he came back and enlisted at another place, under another name, in another corps; he could not face his native village if he remained out of it, and at the same time he could not get into the fight again if the authorities knew he had once been invalided. His dread still was that they might find out. He would not ask for his leave, when it became due, for fear of causing inquiries; he preferred to stick it out at the front.

He was as stern against the German after two years as he was on the day when he enlisted. "It's a funny thing," he said to me, "but Ah was no worrying about anything at all that night, when Ah was lying out there wounded, excepting that they might tak me a prisoner. Ah was kind of deleerious, ye know, but there was always just that thought running through ma head. I just prayed to God that He wad tak ma life."

And, oddly, I found that he was of the same mind still.

That spirit makes great fighting men; and the friendship between the Scot and the Australian persisted into the fighting. A Scottish unit has been alongside of the Australians for a considerable time. I was told that an Australian working party, while digging a forward trench, was sniped continually by a German machine-gunner out in front of his own line in a shell-hole. One or two men were hit. The line on the flank of the working party happened to be held by Scottish troops. An officer from the Australians had to visit the Scottish line in order to make some preparations for a forthcoming attack.

He found the Scotsmen there thirsting for that sniper's blood, impatiently waiting for dark in order to go over the parapet and get him—they could scarcely be held back even then, straining like hounds in the leash.

The sniper was bagged later, and his machine-gun. It was a mixed affair, Scottish and Australian; and I believe there was an argument as to which owned the machine-gun.

CHAPTER XXIII

MOUQUET FARM

France, September 7th.

On the same day on which the British took Guillemont and reached Ginchy and Leuze Wood; on the same day on which the French pushed their line almost to Combles; at

the same time as the British attacked Thiepval from the front, the Australians, for the fifth time, delivered a blow at the wedge which they have all the while been driving into Thiepval from the back, along the ridge whose crest runs northwards from Pozieres past Mouquet Farm.

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It was a heavy punch this time. I cannot tell of all these fierce struggles here—they shall be told in full some day. In the earliest steps towards Mouquet British troops attacked on the Australian flank, and at least once the fighting which they met with was appallingly heavy. Victorians, South Australians, New South Welshmen have each dealt their blow at it. The Australians have been in heavy fighting, almost daily, for six solid weeks; they started with three of the most terrible battles that have ever been fought—few people, even here, realise how heavy that fighting was. Then the tension eased as they struck those first blows northwards. As they neared Mouquet the resistance increased. Each of the last five blows has been stiffer to drive. On each occasion the wedge has been driven a little farther forward. This time the blow was heavier and the wedge went farther.

The attack was made just as a summer night was reddening into dawn. Away to the rear over Guillemont—for the Australians were pushing almost in an opposite direction from the great British attack—the first light of day glowed angrily on the lower edges of the leaden clouds. You could faintly distinguish objects a hundred yards away. Our field guns, from behind the hills, broke suddenly into a tempest of fire, which tore a curtain of dust from the red shell craters carpeting the ridge. A few minutes later the bombardment lengthened, and the line of Queenslanders, Tasmanians and Western Australians rushed for the trenches ahead of them.

On the left, well down the shoulder of the hill towards Thiepval, was the dust-heap of craters and ashes, with odd ends of some shattered timber sticking out of it, which goes by the name of Mouquet Farm. It was a big, important homestead some months ago. To-day it is the wreckage of a log roof, waterlogged in a boundless tawny sea of craters. There is no sign of a trench left in it—the entrances of the dug-outs may be found here and there like rat-holes, about half a dozen of them, behind dishevelled heaps of rubbish. They open into craters now—no doubt each opening has been scratched clear of debris a dozen times. You have to get into some of them by crawling on hands and knees.

The first charge took the Western Australians far beyond the farm. They reached a position two hundred yards farther and started to dig in there. Within an hour or two they had a fairly good trench out amongst the craters well in front of the farm. The farm behind them ought to be solidly ours with such a line in front of it. A separate body of men, some of them Tasmanians, came like a whirlwind on their heels into the farm. The part of the garrison which was lying out in front in a rough line of shell craters found them on top of the craters before they knew that there were British troops anywhere about. They were captured and sent back. The Australians tumbled over the debris into the farm itself.

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The fight that raged for two days on this ridge was not one of those in which the enemy put up his hands as soon as our men came on to him. Far on the top of the hill to the right, and in the maze of trenches between, and in the dug-outs of the farm on the left, he was fighting stiffly over the whole front. In the dim light, as the party which was to take the farm rushed into it, a machine-gun was barking at them from somewhere inside that rubbish yard itself. They could hear the bark obviously very close to them, but it was impossible to say where it came from, whether thirty yards away or fifty. They knew it must be firing from behind one of the heaps of rubbish where the entrances of the dug-outs probably were, firing obliquely and to its rear at the men who rushed past it. They chose the heap which seemed most probable, and fired six rifle grenades all at once into it. There was a clatter and dust; the machine-gun went out like a candle. Later they found it lying smashed at the mouth of a shaft there.

[Illustration: THE TUMBLED HEAP OF BRICKS AND TIMBER WHICH THE WORLD KNOWS AS MOUQUET FARM]

[Illustration: "PAST THE MUD-HEAPS SCRAPED BY THE ROAD GANGS" (See p. 192).]

The Germans fought them from their rat-holes. When a man peered down the dark staircase shaft, he sometimes received a shot from below, sometimes a rifle grenade fired through a hole in a sandbag barricade, which the Germans had made at the bottom of the stair. Occasionally a face would be seen peering up from below—for they refused to come out—and our men would fling down a bomb or fire a couple of shots. But those on the top of the stair always have the advantage. The Germans were bombed and shot out of entrance after entrance, and at last came up through the only exit left to them. Finding Australians swarming through the place, they surrendered; and the whole garrison of Mouquet Farm was accounted for. Those who were not lying dead in the craters and dust-heap were prisoners. Mouquet Farm was ours, and a line of Australian infantry was entrenching itself far ahead of it.

On the ridge the charge had farther to go. It swarmed over one German trench and on to a more distant one. The Germans fought it from their trench. The rush was a long one, and the German had time to find his feet after the bombardment. But the men he was standing up to were the offshoot of a famous Queensland regiment; and, though the German guardsmen showed more fight than any Germans we have met, they had no match for the fire of these boys. The trench is said to have been crowded with German dead and wounded. On the left the German tried at once to bomb his way back into the trench he had lost, and for a time he made some headway. Part of the line was driven out of the trench into the craters on our side of it. But before the bombing party had gone far, the Queenslanders were into the trench again with bomb and bayonet, and the trenches on the right flank of the attack were solidly ours.

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The Queenslanders who reached this trench and took it, found themselves looking out over a wide expanse of country. Miles in front of them, and far away to their flank, there stretched a virgin land. They were upon the crest of the ridge, and the landscape before them was the country behind the German lines. Except for a gentle rise, somewhat farther northward behind Thiepval, they had reached about the highest point upon the northern end of the ridge.

The connecting trenches, between Mouquet Farm and the ridge above and behind it, were attacked by the Tasmanians. The fire was very heavy, and for a moment it looked as if this part of the line, and the Queenslanders immediately next to it, would not be able to get in. Officer after officer was hit. Leading amongst these was a senior captain, an officer old for his rank, but one who was known to almost every man in the force as one of the most striking personalities in Gallipoli. He had two sons in the Australian force, officers practically of his own rank. He was one of the first men on to Anzac Beach; and was the last Australian who left it: Captain Littler.

I had seen him just as he was leaving for the fight, some hours before. He carried no weapon but a walking-stick. "I have never carried anything else into action," he said, "and I am not going to begin now." He was ill with rheumatism and looked it, and the doctor had advised that he ought not to be with his company. But he came back to them that evening for the fight; and one could see that it made a world of difference to them. He was a man whom his own men swore by. Personally, one breathed more easily knowing that he was with them. It would be his last big fight, he told me.

Half-way through that charge, in the thick of the whirl of it, he was seen standing, leaning heavily upon his stick. It was touch and go at the moment whether the trench was won or lost. "Are you hit, sir?" asked several around him. Then they noticed a gash in his leg and the blood running from it—and he seemed to be hit through the chest as well.

"I will reach that trench if the boys do," he said.

"Have no fear of that, sir," was the answer. A sergeant asked him for his stick. Then—with the voice of a big man, like his officer, the sergeant shouted, and waved his stick, and took the men on. In the half-dark his figure was not unlike that of his commander. They made one further rush and were in the trench.

They were utterly isolated in the trench when they reached it. A German machine-gun was cracking away in the same trench to their right, firing between them and the trench they had come from. There was barbed wire in front of it. When they tried to force a way with bombs up the trench to the gun, German bombers in craters behind the trench showered bombs on to them. Then a sergeant crawled out between the wire and the machine-gun—crawled on his stomach right up to the gun and shot the gunner

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with his revolver. "I've killed three of them," he said, as he crawled back. Presently a shell fell on him and shattered him. But our bombers, like the Germans, crept out into craters behind the trench, and bombed the German bombers out of their shelter. That opened the way along the trench, and they found the three machine-gunners, shot as the sergeant had said. The Tasmanians went swiftly along the trench after that, and presently saw a row of good Australian heads in a sap well in front of them. There went up a cheer. Other German guardsmen, who had been lying in craters in front of the trench, and in a scrap of trench beyond, heard the cheering; seeing that there were Australians on both sides of them, they stumbled to their feet and threw up their hands. They were marched off to the rear, and the Tasmanians joined up with the Queenslanders.

So the centre was joined to the right. On the left it was uncertain whether it was joined or not. There was a line of trench to be seen on that side running back towards the German lines. It was merely a more regular line of mud amongst the irregular mud-heaps of the craters; but there were the heads of the men looking out from it—so clearly it was a trench. As the light grew they could make out men leaning on their arms and elbows, looking over the parapet. Every available glass was turned on them, but it was too dark still to see if they were Australians. Two scouts were sent forward, creeping from hole to hole. Both were shot. A machine-gun was turned at once on to the line of heads. They started hopping back down their tumbled sap towards the German rear. Clearly they were Germans. The machine-gun made fast practice as the line of backs showed behind the parapet.

There were Germans, not Australians, in the trenches on the Tasmanians' left—in the same trench as they. The flank there was in the air. There was nothing to do except to barricade the trench and hold the flank as best they could.

And for the next two days they held it, shelled with every sort of gun and trench mortar, although fresh companies of the Prussian Guard Reserve constantly filed in to the gap which existed between this point and Mouquet Farm. Their old leader, who had promised to reach that trench with them, was not there. They found him lying dead within a few yards of it, straight in front of the machine-gun which they had silenced. So Littler had kept his promise—and lost his life. They had a young officer and a few sergeants. All through that day their numbers slowly dwindled. They held the trench all the next night, and in the grey dawn of the second day a sentry, looking over the trench, saw the Germans a little way outside of it. As he pointed them out he fell back shot through the head. They told the Queenslanders, and the Queenslanders came out instantly and bombed from their side, in rear of the Germans. The Queensland officer was shot dead, but the Germans were cleared out or killed.

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That afternoon the Germans attacked that open flank with heavy artillery. For hours shell after shell crashed into the earth around. A heavy battery found the barricade and put its four big shells systematically round it. They reduced the garrison as far as possible, and four or five only were kept by the barricade. They were not all Australians now.

For the end of the Australian work was coming very near. But that occasion deserves a letter to itself.

CHAPTER XXIV

HOW THE AUSTRALIANS WERE RELIEVED

France, September 19th.

It was before the moment at which my last letter ended that the time had come for the first relieving troops to be drafted into the fight.

I shall not forget the first I saw of them. We were at a certain headquarters not a thousand miles from the enemy's barrage. Messages had dribbled through from each part of the attacking line telling exactly where every portion of it had got to; or rather telling where each portion believed it had got to—as far as it could judge by sticking up its collective head from shell craters and broken-down trench walls and staring out over the limitless sea of craters and crabholes which surrounded it. As the only features in the landscape were a ragged tree stump, and what looked like the remains of a broken fish basket over the horizon, all very distant—and a dozen shell-bursts and the bark of an unseen machine-gun, all very close—the determination was apt to be a trifle erratic. Still, the points were marked down, where each handful believed and trusted itself to be. The next business was to fill up certain gaps. An order was dispatched to the supports. They were to send an officer to receive instructions.

He came. He was a man nearing middle age, erect, tough as wire, with lines in his face such as hard fighting and responsibility leave on the face of every soldier.

The representative of authority upon the spot—an Australian who also had faced ugly scenes—explained to him quietly where he wished him to take his men, into such and such a corner, by such and such a route. It meant plunging straight into the thick of the Somme battle, with all its unknown horrors—everyone there knew that. But the new-comer said quietly, “Yes, sir”—and climbed up and out into the light.

It was not an Australian who spoke. That “Yes, sir” came unmistakably from the other side of the Pacific. It was the first of the Canadians upon the Somme battlefield.



An hour or so later an Australian officer, moving along with his men to improve an exposed and isolated trench (a trench which was outflanked already, and enfiladed, and in half a dozen ways unhealthy) into a condition to be held against any attacks at all costs—found, coming across the open towards his exposed flank, a line of stalwart men in kilts. His men were dead tired, the enemy's shell-fire was constant and heavy, grey heads and helmets constantly seen behind a red mud parapet, across a hundred yards of red mud craters, proved that the Prussian Guard Reserve was getting ready to counter-attack him. Every message he sent back to Headquarters finished, "But we will hold this trench."

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And yet here the new men came—a line of them, stumbling from crater into crater, and by one of those unaccountable chances that occur in battles, only two or three of them were hit in crossing over. They dropped into the trench by the side of the Australians. Their bombers went to the left to relieve the men who had been holding the open flank. They brought in with them keen, fresh faces and bodies, and an all-important supply of bombs. It was better than a draught of good wine.

So it was that the first of the Canadians arrived.

Long before the last Australian platoon left that battered line, these first Canadians were almost as tired as they. For thirty-six hours they had piled up the same barricades, garrisoned the same shell-holes, were shattered by the same shells. Twenty-four hours after the Canadians came, the vicious bombardment described in the last letter descended on the flank they both were holding. They were buried together by the heavy shell-bursts. They dug each other out. When the garrison became so thin that whole lengths of trench were without a single unwounded occupant, they helped each others' wounded down to the next length, and built another barricade, and held that.

Finally, when hour after hour passed and the incessant shelling never ceased, the garrison was withdrawn a little farther; and then five of them went back to the barricade which the enemy's artillery had discovered. They sat down in the trench behind it. A German battery was trying for it—putting its four big high-explosive shells regularly round it—salvo after salvo as punctual as clockwork. It was only a matter of time before the thing must go.

So the five sat there—Tasmanians and Canadians—and discussed the rival methods of wheat growing in their respective dominions in order to keep their thoughts away from that inevitable shell.

It came at last, through their shelter—slashed one man across the face, killed two and left two—smashed the barricade into a scrap-heap. Then others were brought to stand by. Shells were falling anything from thirty to forty in the minute. One of the remaining Tasmanian sergeants—a Lewis gunner—came back from an errand, crawling, wounded dangerously through the neck. “I don’t want to go away,” he said. “If I can’t work a Lewis gun, I can sit by another chap and tell him how to.” In the end, when he was sent away, he was seen crawling on two knees and one hand, guiding with the other hand a fellow gunner who had been hit.

That night a big gun, much bigger than the rest, sent its shells roaring down through the sky somewhere near. The men would be waked by the shriek of each shell and then fall asleep and be waked again by the crash of the explosion. And still they held the trench. And still every other message ended—“But we will hold on.”

They had withdrawn a little to where they could hold during the night; but before the grey morning, the moment the bombardment had eased, they crept back again lest the Germans should get there first.

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With the light came a reinforcement of new Canadians—grand fellows in great spirit. And the last Australian was during that morning withdrawn. It was the most welcome sight in all the world to see those troops come in. Not that the tired men would ever admit that it was necessary. As one report from an Australian boy said, “The reinforcement has arrived. Captain X—— may tell you that the Australians are done. Rot!”

Whether they were done or whether they were not, they spoke of those Canadian bombers in a way it would have done Canadian hearts good to hear. Australians and Canadians fought for thirty-six hours in those trenches inextricably mixed, working under each others’ officers. Their wounded helped each other from the front. Their dead lie and will lie through all the centuries hastily buried beside the tumbled trenches and shell-holes where, fighting as mates, they died.

* * * * *

And the men who had hung on to that flank almost within shouting distance of Mouquet for two wild days and nights—they came out of the fight asking, “Can you tell me if we have got Mouquet Farm?”

We had not. The fierce fighting in the broken centre had enabled us to hold all the ground gained upon the crest. But through this same gap the Germans had come back against the farm. They swarmed in upon its garrison, driving in gradually the men who were holding that flank. Under heavy shell-fire the line dwindled and dwindled until the Western Australians, who had won the farm and held it for five hours, numbered barely sufficient to make good their retirement. The officer left in charge there, himself wounded, ordered the remnant to withdraw. And the Germans entered the farm again.

But on the crest the line held. The Prussian Guard Reserve counter-attacked it three times, and on the last occasion the Queenslanders had such deadly shooting against Germans in the open as cheered them in spite of all their fatigue. I saw those Queenslanders marching out two days later with a step which would do credit to a Guards regiment going in.

So ended a fight as hard as Australians have ever fought.

Mouquet Farm was taken a fortnight later in a big combined advance of British and Canadians. The Farm itself held out many hours after the line had passed it, and was finally seized by a pioneer battalion, working behind our lines.

CHAPTER XXV

ON LEAVE TO A NEW ENGLAND

Back in France.

It was after seven weeks of very heavy fighting. Even those whose duty took them rarely up amongst the shells were almost worn out with the prolonged strain. Those who had been fighting their turns up in the powdered trenches came out from time to time tired well nigh to death in body, mind and soul. The battle of the Somme still grumbled night and day behind them. But for those who emerged a certain amount of leave was opened.

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It was like a plunge into forgotten days. War seemed to end at the French quayside. Staff officers, brigadier-generals, captains, privates and lance-corporals—they were all just Englishmen off to their homes. They jostled one another up the gangway—I never heard a rough word in that dense crowd. They lay side by side outside the saloon of the Channel turbine steamer. A corporal with his head half in the doorway, too seasick to know that it was fair in the path of a major-general's boots; a general Staff officer and a French captain with their backs propped against the oak panelling and their ribs against somebody else's baggage; a subaltern of engineers with his head upon their feet; a hundred others packed on the stairs and up to the deck; and a horrible groaning from the direction of the lavatories—it was truly the happiest moment in all their lives.

The crossing passed like a dream—scarcely noticed. Seven weeks of strain can leave you too tired almost to think. A journey in a comfortable railway compartment through prim, hazy English fields, the carriage blue with smoke from the pipes of its inhabitants (a Canadian, three or four Englishmen and a couple of Australians), has gone almost unremembered. As the custom is in England, they were mostly ensconced behind their newspapers, although there is more geniality in an English railway carriage to-day than was usual before the war. But most people in that train, I think, were too tired for conversation.

It was the coming into London that left such an impression as some of us will never forget. Some of us knew London well before the war. It is the one great city in the world where you never saw the least trace of corporate emotion. It divides itself off into districts for the rich and districts for the poor, and districts for all the grades in between the two, which are the separate layers in the big, frowning edifice of British society; they may have had some sort of feeling for their class or their profession—the lawyer proud of his Inns of Court and of the tradition of the London Bar, the doctor proud of London schools of medicine, and the Thames engineer even proud of the work that is turned out upon the Thames. But there was no more common feeling or activity in the people of London than there would be common energy in a heap of sand grains. They would have looked upon it as sheer weakness to exhibit any interest in the doings even of their neighbours.

The battle of the Somme had begun about nine weeks before when this particular train, carrying the daily instalment of men on leave from it, began to wind its way in past the endless back-gardens and yellow brick houses, every one the replica of the next, and the numberless villa chimneys and chimney-pots which fence the southern approaches of the great capital. They are tight, compact little fortresses, those English villas, each jealously defended against its neighbour and the whole world by the sentiment within, even more than by the high brick wall around it. But if they were all rigidly separate from each other, there was one thing that bound them all together just for that moment.

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It happened in every cottage garden, in every street that rattled past underneath the railway bridges, in every slum-yard, from every window, upper and lower. As the leave train passed the people all for the moment dropped whatever they were doing and ran to wave a hand at it. The children in every garden dropped their games and ran to the fence and clambered up to wave these tired men out of sight. The servant at the upper window let her work go and waved; the mother of the family and the girls in the sitting-room downstairs came to the window and waved; the woman washing in the tub in the back-yard straightened herself up and waved; the little grocer out with his wife and the perambulator waved, and the wife waved, and the infant in the perambulator waved; the boys playing pitch-and-toss on the pavement ran towards the railway bridge and waved; the young lady out for a walk with her young man waved—not at all a suppressed welcome, quite the reverse of half-hearted; the young man waved, much more demurely, but still he did wave. The flapper on the lawn threw down her tennis-racket and simply flung kisses; and her two young brothers expressed themselves quite as emphatically in their own manner; the old man at the corner and the grocer-boy from his cart waved. For a quarter of an hour, while that train wound in through the London suburbs, every human being that was near dropped his work and gave it a welcome.

I have seen many great ceremonies in England, and they have left me as cold as ice. There have been big set pieces even in this war, with brass bands and lines of policemen and cheering crowds and long accounts of it afterwards in the newspapers. But I have never seen any demonstration that could compare with this simple spontaneous welcome by the families of London. It was quite unrehearsed and quite unreported. No one had arranged it, and no one was going to write big headlines about it next day. The people in one garden did not even know what the people in the next garden were doing—or want to know. The servant at the upper window did not know that the mistress was at the lower window doing exactly as she was, and vice versa. For the first time in one's experience one had experienced a genuine, whole-hearted, common feeling running through all the English people—every man, woman and child, without distinction, bound in one common interest which, for the time being, was moving the whole nation. And I shall never forget it.

It was the most wonderful welcome—I am not exaggerating when I say that it was one of the most wonderful and most inspiring sights that I have ever seen. I do not know whether the rulers of the country are aware of it. But I do not believe for a moment that this people can go back after the war to the attitude by which each of those families was to all the others only so much prospective monetary gain or loss.

CHAPTER XXVI

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THE NEW ENTRY

France, November 13th.

Last week an Australian force made its attack in quite a different area of the Somme battle.

The sky was blue in patches, with cold white clouds between. The wind drove icily. There had been practically no rain for two days.

We were in a new corner. The New Zealanders had pushed right through to the comparatively green country just here—and so had the British to north and south of it. We were well over the slope of the main ridge, up which the Somme battle raged for the first three months. Pozieres, the highest point, where Australians first peeped over it, lay miles away to our left rear. From the top of the ridge behind you, looking back over your left shoulder, you could just see a few distant broken tree stumps. I think they marked the site of that old nightmare.

We were looking down a long even slope to a long up-slope beyond. The country around us was mostly brown-mud shell-holes. Not like the shell-holes of that blasted hill-top of two months back—I have never seen anything quite like that, though they say that Guillemont, which I have not seen, is as devastated. In this present area there is green grass between the rims of the craters. But not enough green grass to matter. The general colour of the country on the British side is brown—all gradations of it—from thin, sloppy, grey-brown mud, trampled liquid with the feet of men and horses, to dull, putty-like brown mud so thick that, when you get your foot into it, you have a constant problem of getting it out again.

For it is the country over which the fight has passed. As we advance, we advance always on to the area which has been torn with shells—where the villages and the trenches and the surface of the green country have been battered and shattered, first by our guns and then by the German guns, until they have made a hell out of heaven.

And always just ahead of us, a mile or so behind the German lines, there is heaven smiling—you can see it clearly; in this part, up the opposite slope of the wide, open valley. There is the green country on which the Germans are always being driven back, and up which this monstrous engine of war has not yet begun its slow, gruesome climb. There are the beautiful green woods fading to soft autumn brown and yellow—the little red roofs in the trees, an empty village in the foreground—you can see the wet mud shining in its street and the white trickle of water down the centre of the road.

Down our long muddy hill-slope, near where the knuckles of it dip out of sight into the bottom of the valley, one notices a line of heads. In some places they are clear and in others they cannot be seen. But we guess that it is the line ready to go out.

At the top of the opposite up-slope the tower of Bapaume town hall showed up behind the trees. We made out that the hands of the clock were at the hour—but I have heard others say that they were permanently at half-past five, and others a quarter past four—it is one of those matters which become very important on these long dark evenings, and friendships are apt to be broken over it. The clock tower, unfortunately, disappeared finally at eighteen minutes past eleven yesterday morning, so the controversy is never likely to be settled.

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The bombardment broke out suddenly from behind us. We saw the long line of men below clamber on to the surface, a bayonet gleaming here and there, and begin to walk steadily between the shell-holes towards the edge of the hill. From where we were you could not see the enemy's trench in the valley—only the brown mud of crater rims down to the hill's edge. And I think the line could not see it either, in most parts at any rate. They would start from their muddy parapet, and over the wet grass, with one idea above all others in the back of every man's head—when shall we begin to catch sight of the enemy?

It is curious how in this country of shell craters you can look at a trench without realising that it is a trench. A mud-heap parapet is not so different from the mud-heap round a crater's rim, except that it is more regular. Even to discover your own trench is often like finding a bush road. You are told that there is a trench over there and you cannot miss it. But, once you have left your starting-point, it looks as if there were nothing else in the world but a wilderness of shell craters. Then you realise that there is a certain regularity in the irregular mud-heaps some way ahead of you—the top of a muddy steel helmet moves between two earth-heaps on the ground's surface—then another helmet and another; and you have found your bearings. That is clearly the trench they spoke about.

Well, finding the German trench seems to be much the same experience, varied by a multitude of bullets singing past like bees, and with the additional thought ever present to the mind—when will the enemy's barrage burst on you? When it does come, you do not hear it coming—there is too much racket in the air for your ears to catch the shell whistling down as you are accustomed to. There are big black crashes and splashes near by, without warning—scarcely noticed at first. In the charge itself men often do not notice other men hit—we, looking on from far behind, did not notice that. A man may be slipping in a shell-hole, or in the mud, or in some wire—often he gets up again and runs on. It is only afterwards that you realise....

Across the mud space there were suddenly noticed a few grey helmets watching—a long, long distance away. Then the grey helmets moved, and other helmets moved, and bunched themselves up, and hurried about like a disturbed hive, and settled into a line of men firing fast and coolly. That was the German trench.

It was fairly packed already in one part. The rattle of fire grew quickly. The chatter of one machine-gun—then another, and another, were added to it. Our shells were bursting occasionally flat in the face of the Germans—one big bearded fellow—they are close enough for those details to be seen now—takes a low burst of our shrapnel full in his eyes. A high-explosive shell bursts on the parapet, and down go three others. But they are firing calmly through all this.

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Three or four Germans suddenly get up from some hole in No Man's Land, and bolt for their trench like rabbits. Within forty yards of the German parapet the leading men in our line find themselves alone. The line has dwindled to a few scanty groups. These are dropping suddenly—their comrades cannot say whether they are taking cover in shell-holes, or whether they have been hit. The Germans are getting up a machine-gun on the parapet straight opposite. The first two men fall back shot. Two or three others struggle up to it—they are shot too; our men are making desperate shooting to keep down that machine-gun. But the Germans get it up. It cracks overhead. In this part of the line the attack is clearly finished.

One remembers a day, some months back, when a Western Australian battalion, after a heavy bombardment of its trench, found a German line coming up over the crest of the hill about two hundred yards away. The Western Australians stood up well over the parapet, and fired until the remnant of that line sank to the ground within forty or fifty yards of them. That line was a line of the Prussian Guard Reserve. We have had that opportunity three or four times in the Somme battle. This time it was the Germans who had it. The Germans were of the Prussian Foot Guards—and it was Western Australians who were attacking.

In another part, where the South Australians attacked, they found fewer Germans in the trench. They could see the Germans in small groups getting their bombs ready to throw—but they were into the trench before the Germans had time to hold them up. They killed or captured all the German garrison, and destroyed a machine-gun, and set steadily to improve the trench for holding it.

Everything seemed to go well in this part, except that they could get no touch with any other of our troops in the trench. As far as they knew the other portions of the attack had succeeded, as well as theirs. And then things changed suddenly. After an hour a message did come from Australians farther along in the same trench—a message for urgent help. At the same time a similar message came from the other flank as well. A shower of stick-bombs burst with a formidable crash from one side. A line of Germans was seen, coming steadily along in single file against the other end of the trench. A similar shower of crashes descended from that direction. A machine-gun began to crackle down the trench. Our men fought till their bombs, and all the German bombs they could find, were gone. Finally the Germans began to gain on them from both ends, and the attack here, too, was over. They were driven from the trench.

CHAPTER XXVII

A HARD TIME

France, November 28th.

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He is having a hard time. I do not see that there is any reason to make light of it. If you do, you rob him of the credit which, if ever man deserved it, he ought to be getting now—the credit for putting a good face upon it under conditions which, to him, especially at the beginning, were sheer undiluted misery. Some people think that to tell the truth in these matters would hinder recruiting. Well, if it did, it would only mean that the young Australians who stay at home are guilty of greater meanness than one has ever thought. For the Australian here has plunged straight into an existence more like that of a duck in a farmyard drain than to any other condition known or dreamed of in his own sunny land. He is resisting it not only passably but well. And if you want to know the reason—as far as any general reason can be given—the motive, which keeps him trying day after day, is the desire that no man shall say a word against Australia. I don't know if his country is thinking of him—a good part of it must be—but he is thinking of his country all the time. Australia has made her name in the world during this war—the world knows her now. It is these men—not the men who shout at stadiums and race meetings at home, but the simple, willing men who are described in this letter—who are making Australia's name for her—and just at present holding on to it like grim death.

Even the life of a duck in a farmyard drain becomes in a wonderful way supportable when you tackle it as cheerfully as that. It comes to the Australian as a shock, at the first introduction—the Manning River country after the Manning River flood has subsided is, as a New South Welshman suggested, the nearest imitation that he has ever seen. But then there was blue sky and dazzling sun over that; whereas here the whole grey sky seems to drip off his hatbrim and nose and chilled fingers and the shiny oil sheet tied around his neck, and to ooze into his back and his boots. It is all fairly comfortable in the green country from which he starts. There has been a fairly warm billet in the half dark of a big barn, where the morning light comes through in strange shafts and triangles up in the blackness amongst the gaunt roof beams. There was a canteen—which is really an officially managed shop for good, cheap groceries—in an outhouse at the end of the village; there were three or four estaminets and cafes, with cheerful and passably pretty mademoiselles, and good coffee, and very vile wine, labelled temporarily as champagne. There was also—for some who obtained leave—a visit to a neighbouring town.

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The battalion moved off early—its much-prized brass band at its head—and the men who didn't obtain leave at the tail. The battalion is to be carried to the front in the same string of groaning autobuses which brought out its weary predecessors. The buses are a great help immensely valued—but the battalion has to march four miles to them—to warm it, I suppose. The men who did not obtain leave are carrying the iron cooking dixies for those four miles. In the nature of things military, there will be another four miles to march at the other end. The platoon at the tail thoroughly appreciates this. Its philosophy of life is wasted, unfortunately, on four miles of stately, dripping French elm trees which cannot understand, and one richly appreciative Australian subaltern who can.

The battalion was not disappointed. The motor-buses brought it to a most comfortable-looking village—pretty well as good as the one it had left. It climbed out, and straightaway marched to another village five miles distant. The darkness had come down—huge motor-wagons shouldered them off the road into gutters, where they found themselves ankle deep in the mud-heaps scraped by the road gangs. Every second wagon blinded them with its two glaring gig-lamps, and slapped up the mud on to their cheeks. A mule wagon, trotting up behind, splashed it into their back hair, where they found it in dry beads of assorted sizes next morning. It was raining dismally. The head of the column was commenting richly on its surroundings—the platoon at the tail had ceased to comment at all. The last couple were a pair who, I will swear, must have tramped together many a long road over the Old Man Plains towards the evening sun—old felt hats slightly battered; grim, set lips, knees and backs a little bent with the act of carrying; and pack, oil sheet, mess tin rising heavenwards in one mighty hump above their spines. At the gap in a hedge, where the column turned off into a sort of mud lake, stood an officer whose kindly eyes were puckered from the glare of the central Australian sun. You could have told they were Australians at a mile's distance. He looked at them with a queer smile.

"Are you the Scottish Horse?" he asked inquiringly.

"We are the blanky camel corps," was the answer.

That march at both ends of the motor trip was the adjutant's salvation. When the battalion splashed up to its appointed billets, and found them calculated for receiving only half of its number of soldiers awake, he shifted two-thirds of them in; and, as they promptly fell to sleep the moment the column ceased to move, he shifted in the remainder when they were asleep.

When the battalion drew its breath next morning, it was inclined to think that it was enduring the full horror of war; and was preparing to summarise the situation. But before it could draw a second breath it was marched off to—to what I will call a reserve camp. It was not technically a reserve camp, which was farther on; but they knew it was a camp for battalions to rest in—when they have been very good, and it is desired to

give them time to recover their wind. They were rather “bucked” with the idea of this resting-place.

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At midday they arrived there. That is to say, they waded up to a collection of little tents, not unlike bushmen's tents in Australia, and stood knee deep at the entrances, looking into them—speechless. They were not much by way of tents at the best of times. There was nearly as much mud inside as there was outside. But on top of the normal conditions came the fact that the last battalion to occupy those tents must have camped there in dry weather. Since there was not enough headroom upwards it had dug downwards. And, as it had not put a drain round them, the water had come in, and the interior of a fair proportion of these residences consisted of a circular lake, varying in depth from a few inches to a foot and a half.

The battalion could only find one word, when its breath came—and, as the regiment which had made those holes, and the town major to whom they now belonged, were probably of unimpeachable ancestry, I do not think the accusation was justified. But when it realised that, good or bad, this was the place where it was to pass the night, it split itself up, as good Australian battalions have a way of doing.

“Which is the way to our tents, Bill?” asked the rear platoon of one of the band, which had arrived half an hour before.

“I don't know—I'm not the blanky harbour-master,” was the reply. The battalion set to work, like a tribe of beavers, to make a home. It banked up little parapets of mud to prevent water coming in. It dug capacious drains to let the water which was in run out. It scraped the mud out of the interior of its lake dwellings, until it reached more or less dry earth. A fair proportion of the regiment melted out into the landscape, and returned during the rest of the day by ones and twos, carrying odd bits of timber, broken wood, bricks, fag ends of rusty sheet iron, old posts, wire and straw. By nightfall those Australians were, I will not say in comfort, but moderately and passably warm and dry.

It so happened that they stayed in that camp four days. By the time they left it they were looking upon themselves as almost fortunate. There was only one break in its improvement—and that was when a dug-out was discovered. It was a charming underground home, dug by some French battery before the British came—with bunks and a table and stove. The privates who discovered it made a most comfortable home until its fame got abroad, and the regimental headquarters were moved in there. Dug-outs became all the fashion for the moment—everyone set about searching for them. But the supply in any works on the Allied side is, unfortunately, limited—and after half a day's enthusiasm the battalion fell back resignedly on its canvas home.

When it came back some time later to these familiar dwellings, heavy-eyed and heavy-footed, there was no insincerity in the relief with which it regarded them. They were a resting-place then. Another battalion had kept them decently clean, and handed them over drained and dry; for which thoughtfulness, not always met with, they were more grateful than those tired men could have explained.

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For they had been up into the line, and the places behind the line, and out again.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WINTER OF 1916

France, December 20th.

A friend has shown me a letter from Melbourne. Its writer had asked a man—an educated man—if he would give a subscription for the Australian Comforts Fund. “Certainly not,” was the reply. “The men have every comfort in the trenches.”

That is the sort of dense-skinned ignorance which makes one unspeakably angry—the ignorance which, because it has heard of or read a letter from some brave-hearted youngster, making light of hardships for his mother’s sake, therefore flies to the conclusion that everything written and spoken about the horrors of this war is humbug, and what the Army calls “eyewash”—a big conspiracy to deceive the people who are not there.

As a matter of fact, the early winter of 1916 which these men have just been going through will have a chapter to itself in history as long as history lasts. It is to some extent past history now—to what extent I do not suppose anyone on the German side or ours can tell.

I, personally, do not know how the men and their officers can live through that sort of time. Remember that a fair proportion of them were a few months ago adding up figures in the office of an insurance company or a shipping firm—gulping down their midday coffee and roll in a teashop in King or Collins Streets. But take even a Central District farmer or a Newcastle miner—yes, or a Scottish shepherd or an English poacher—take the hardest man you know, and put him to the same test, and it is a question whether the ordeal would not break even his spirit. Put him out of doors into the thick of a dirty European winter; march him ten miles through a bitter cold wind and driving rain, with—on his back—all the clothing, household furniture, utensils and even the only cover which he is allowed to take with him; dribble him in through mud up to his knees—sometimes up to his waist—along miles and miles of country that is nothing but broken tree stumps and endless shell holes—holes into which, if a man were to fall, he might lie for days before he were found, or even might never be found at all. After many hours, trickle him, half dead with dragging his feet at every step out of the putty-like mud, into a shallow, straggling, open ditch not in any way different from a watery drain between two sodden country paddocks, except that there is no grass about it—nothing but brown, slippery mud on floor and trench sides and over the country in all directions as far as eye can see. At the end of it all put him to live there, with what baggage he carried on his back and nothing more; put him in various depths of mud, to stay there all

day in rain, wind, fog, hail, snowstorm—whatever weather comes—and to watch there during the endless winter nights, when the longed-for dawn only means another day and another night out there in the mud ditch, without a shred of cover. And this is what our men have had to go through.

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The longed-for relief comes at last—a change to other shell-battered areas in support or reserve—and the battalion comes back down the long road to the rear, white-faced and dreary-eyed, dragging slowly through the mud without a word. For they have been through a life of which you, or any people past and present who have not been to this war, have not the first beginnings of a conception; something beside which a South Polar expedition is a dance and a picnic. And that is without taking into account the additional fact that night and day, on the Somme where these conditions existed, men live under the unceasing sound of guns. I can hear them as I write—it is the first longed-for gloriously bright day, and therefore there is not an interval of a second in that continuous roar, hour after hour. There is nothing like it anywhere else in the world—there has never yet been anything to approach it except at Verdun.

Life is hard enough in winter in the old-established trenches along more settled parts of the front—there is plenty for the Comforts Fund to do there. Dropping into the best of quiet front trenches straight from his home life the ordinary man would consider himself as undergoing hardships undreamt of. Visiting those trenches straight from the Somme the other day, with their duck-boards and sandbags, and the occasional ping of a sniper's bullet, and the momentary spasm of field guns and trench mortars which appeared in the official summary next day as “artillery and trench mortar activity”—after the Somme, I say, one found oneself looking on it, in the terms of the friend who went with me, as “war de luxe.”

It is unwise to take what one man writes of one place as true of all places or all times, or indeed of anything except what he personally sees and knows at the moment. These conditions which I have described are what I have seen, and are fortunately past history, or I should not be describing them. I personally know that English troops, Scottish troops and Australian troops went through them, and have, in some cases, issued from such trenches and taken similar German trenches in front of them. Our troops are more comfortable than they were, but it is in the nature of war to find yourself plunged into extremes of exertion and hardship without warning; and no man knows when he writes to-day—and I doubt whether anyone of his superiors could tell him—whether he will, at any given date, be in a worse condition or a better one.

What the German is going through on his side of the muddy landscape is described in another chapter. For our grand men—and though to be called a hero is the last thing most Australians desire, the men are never grander than at these times—the Australian Comforts Fund, the Y.M.C.A. and the canteen groceries provide almost all the comfort that ever enters that grim region. In the areas to which those tired men come for a spell, the Comforts Fund is beginning to give them theatres for concert troupes and cinemas. It provides some hundreds of pounds to be spent locally on the most obtainable small luxuries at Christmas, besides such gifts in kind as Christmas brings.

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But, for those who are actually in the front or just behind it, one cup of warm coffee in a jam-tin from a roadside stall has been, in certain times and places, all that can be given; the Fund has given that, and it has been the landmark in the day for many men. In those conditions there was but one occasional solace. A friend of mine found an Australian in the trenches in those days, standing in mud nearly to his waist, shivering in his arms and every body muscle, leaning back against the trench side, fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXIX

AS IN THE WORLD'S DAWN

France, December 20th.

Yesterday morning we were looking across a bare, shallow valley at the opposite knuckle of hill-side, around the foot of which the valley doubled back out of sight. A solitary grey line of broken earth ran like a mole burrow up the bare knuckle and vanished over the top. A line of bare, dead willow stumps marked a few yards of the hollow below. On the skyline, beyond the valley's end, stood out a distant line of ghostly trees—so faint and blue as to be scarcely distinguishable from the sky. There was nothing else in the landscape—absolutely nothing but the bare, blank shape of the land; save for those old ghosts of departed willows—no trees—no grass—no colour—no living or moving or singing or sounding thing.

Only—that morning at dawn had found a number of men tumbling, jumping, running, dodging in and out of the shell-holes across that slope, making towards our lines. The peck of occasional rifles came from some farther part of the grey, featureless hill-side—the report was the only trace of the rifles or of the men firing them. But as the men who were dodging back were Australians the rifles must have been the rifles of Germans, in trenches or shell-holes, somewhere on the face of that waste. Who these Australians were, the men who watched from where we stood did not know. Apparently they were men who had lost their way in the dark and wandered beyond our trenches; as the light grew they had suddenly realised that they were in front of our front line, and not behind it, as they thought, and had come tumbling back over the craters. They all reached the trench safely.

For this battle has now reached such a formless, featureless landscape, that it is a hard thing to tell whether you are looking at your own country or the German country, or the country between the lines. The stretch between the two sides has for the moment widened, the Germans abandoning many of their waterlogged, sodden ditches close in front of our lines, and contenting themselves with fighting a sort of rearguard action there, while they tunnel, bore, dig, burrow like moles into the farther heights where their reserve line runs near Bapaume. The battle has widened out generally over the landscape.

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It is a very great difference from that boiling, bursting nightmare of Pozieres, where the whole struggle tightened down to little more than one narrow hill-top. This battle is now being fought in a sort of dreamland of brown mudholes, which the blue northern mist turns to a dull purple grey. The shape of the land is there, the hills, valleys, lines of willow stumps, ends of broken telegraph poles. But the colour is all gone. It is as though the bed of the ocean had suddenly risen, as though the ocean depths had become valleys and the ocean mudbanks hills, and the whole earth were a creation of slime. It is as though you suddenly looked out upon the birth of the world, before the grass had yet begun to spring and when the germs of primitive life still lay in the slime which covered it; an old, old age before anything moved on the earth or sang in the air, and when the naked bones of the earth lay bare under the naked sky century after century, with no change or movement save when the cloud shadows chased across it, or the storms lashed it, or the evening sunlight glinted from the water trapped in its meaningless hollows. It is to that unremembered chaos that German ideas of life have reduced the world.

Up the hill-side opposite there is running a strange purple-grey streak between two purple-grey banks. There is something mysterious in this flat ribbon, ruled, as if by the hand of man, across that primeval colourless slope. The line of it can be traced distinctly over the hill and out of sight. It takes a moment's thinking to realise that the grey streak was once a road. It is a road which one has read of as the centre of some desultory fighting. I dare say it will appear in its own small way in history. "The battalion next attacked along the Bapaume-Cambrai road"—to give it a name it does not own; and readers will picture the troops in khaki dodging along a hedge, beneath green, leafy elm trees....

Something moved. Yes, as I live, something is moving up that old purple-grey scar across the hill-side. Two figures in pink, untanned leather waistcoats are strolling up the old road, side by side. Their hands are in their trousers pockets, and the only sign of war visible about them is their copper-green hats. A sniper's rifle pecks somewhere in the landscape thereabout, but the two figures do not even turn a head. They are Bill and Jim from South Melbourne let loose upon the antediluvian landscape, strolling up it, yawning. And they gave me much the same shock as if some green and pink animal had suddenly issued from its unsuspected burrow in a field of primeval grey slime and begun crawling over its face to some haunt in the slime elsewhere. Two other distant figures were moving on the far hill-side too. Perhaps it was at them the rifle was pecking; for to our certain knowledge the crest of that hill was German territory.

Men lose their bearings in that sort of country every day. Germans find themselves behind our lines without knowing that they have even passed over their own; and an Australian carrying party has been known to deposit its hot food, in the warm food containers, all ready steaming to be eaten, in German territory. To their great credit be it said that the party got back safely to the Australian trenches—save for one who is missing and three who lie out there, face upwards.... Brave men.

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There is only one time when that unearthly landscape returns to itself again. I suppose men and women lived in those valleys once; French farmers' girls tugged home at dusk up that ghostly roadway slow-footed, reluctant cows; I dare say they even made love—French lads and sweethearts—down some long obliterated path beside those willow stumps where the German patrol sneaks nightly from shell-hole to shell-hole. There comes an afternoon when the sky turns dull yellow-white like an old smoker's beard, and before dusk the snowflakes begin to fall. Far back the cursing drivers are dragging their jibbing horses past half-frozen shell-holes, which they can scarcely see. And out there, where the freezing sentries keep watch over the fringe where civilisation grinds against the German—out there under the tender white mantle, flickering pink and orange under the gun flashes—out there for a few short hours the land which Kultur has defaced comes by its own.

CHAPTER XXX

THE GRASS BANK

France, December 10th.

The connection of Tamar the Hammerhead, who cut the Grass Bank out of the forest, with Timothy Gibbs, of Booligal, in New South Wales, may not be clear at first sight. Tam's beech forest covered two or three green hills in Gaul at the time when Caius Sulpicius, and his working party of the Tenth Legion, were laying down new paving stones on the big road from Amiens over the hill-tops. The wagon carrying the military secretary to the Governor had bumped uncomfortably down that long slope the week before; and as the Tenth Legion was resting, its commanding officer received, two days later, an order to detail another fatigue party. The big trees looked down on a string of private soldiers shouldering big square paving stones from a neighbouring dump, where the wagons stood, and fitting them carefully into the pavement, and—and otherwise enjoying their rest. Caius Sulpicius and his orderly officer stood watching them. The orderly officer leant on his stick. Caius had a piece of bread in one hand and a wedge of cheese in the other. His forearm was black with grubbing amongst the paving stones.

"When the Tenth Legion gets a rest without some old brass helmet helping us to spend it," he said with his mouth full, "I'll begin to think the end of the war is coming."

"Why didn't it strike old Brassribs to make the inhabitants do a job of work occasionally?" he added presently. "Now, in the old general's time—"

Far down on the edge of the forest, across two or three miles of rolling hills, a patch of orange earth, newly turned, caught the orderly officer's eye. One of the inhabitants was doing a job of work there, anyway. Two days ago he had passed that way in a stroll

after parade. A mallet-headed man, his bare arm-muscles orange with mud, was piling up an earthen embankment on the hill-side. A patch of

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the forest had been allowed to him. In two years he had cut out the trees and undergrowth. He was now trying to make his patch of hill-side level. The orange mud bank of his terrace had been the labour of twelve months, and there was a year's work in it yet. He had scarcely hoped to possess even a rood of land, and now he had two acres. He was going to use every inch of it. That was Tamar the Hammerhead's life's work.

The Tenth Legion did get its rest. Caius lay beneath a moss-covered, tilted gravestone—long, long forgotten—not so far from the great road. One of a much later generation of orderly officers, who had scraped part of the inscription clean with his penknife, went back and told the mess at dinner that he had come across the grave of an officer of their own unit, who had died thereabouts in some camp a hundred and fifty years before. He did not mention that, on his stroll, he had scrambled down a steep grass bank which ran curiously across the hill-side. There was green grass above it, and green grass below it; and green grass and patches of ploughland all over the downs. The white frost still hung to the blades, though it was midday. The remnant of a small wood stood from the hill-side. "I must get a fatigue party on to that timber to-morrow," had said the orderly officer to himself.

And so it was that the forest passed away—the general service wagons from the neighbouring Roman camp called there daily for sixty years for fuel cut by generations of fatigue parties. The only trees left, over miles of sloping downs, were the thickets around the villages and one row of walnut trees growing along the top of that steep grass embankment—the one remnant of Hammerhead's old orchard. Years later the tow-haired Franks swept through the country. The walnut trees were cut by a farmer for the uprights in his long barn. His children rolled down the old bank in their games, and in bad baby Latin invited the youngsters of the farm next door to charge up "the Grass Bank" while they defended it. The generations, whose bad Latin gradually became French, still spoke of Hammerhead's old landmark—now situated in a large grass field—as "The Grass Bank."

On the military maps some way behind the arterial system of red lines which stood for the German trenches—exactly as on a German map it stands for ours—was a shaded mark shaped like an elongated pea pod. There was no name to it—but a note in some pigeonhole of the local Intelligence Officer stated that the inhabitants called the place "The Grass Bank." Through it the map showed a lonely little red capillary, wandering by itself for a quarter of an inch, and fading off into nothing again. The stout German colonel of the local artillery group—big guns which barked mostly of nights—having found his forward observation post knocked in by a small field-gun shell, had come back and growled like a bear all dinner-time, most inconsequentially, about the lack of cover from heavy shells in the back areas.

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His real object was to abuse the men at the table with him; but one junior Staff Officer, hankering after promotion, looked round for the best dug-out site; and caused to be burrowed downwards, from the bottom of a steep grassy bank which ran half-way across a neighbouring field, four narrow dark tunnels leading into low square rooms, held up with stout beams, and all connected with each other. Two were lined with rough bunks on wooden frames folding against the wall. Another held a table covered with papers, a telephone switchboard, and four busy clerks. The fourth was panelled carefully with deal, the ceiling neatly gridironed with dark stained wood, a cupboard let into a recess with a looking-glass panel above it, a comfortable bunk with an electric bulb above the pillow and a telephone by the bedside. The group commander slept there undisturbed, even when the British suddenly pushed their front forward, and the Grass Bank began to shake with the thump of 9-inch shells. The junior Staff Officer wonders why he is a junior Staff Officer still.

The great battle climbed like some slow, devouring monster up one green slope, down the next, and up the green slopes beyond, clawing on to green fields, and leaving them behind it a wilderness of pock-marked slime. One of the many small obstacles, which held up its local progress for a while, was some sort of nest of Germans behind a certain bank. Several attacks had been made on it. The Intelligence Officer of an Australian Brigade followed the Intelligence Officer of an Australian Battalion on his stomach, for one night, up to the barbed wire; and gave it as his opinion that the enemy kept his machine-guns in dug-outs at the bottom of the bank. Later, a wild night of driving rain, and flashes, and crashes, and black forms struggling in the mud against the glint of flares on slimy white crater edges, left things still uncertain.

It was there that Tim Gibbs came in—and Booligal. Tradition in New South Wales puts the climate of Hay, Hell, and Booligal in that order. Tim had driven starving, rickety sheep across his native plains when the earth's surface had been powdered to red sand and driven by shrivelling westerlies in travelling sandhills from mirage to summer mirage. Tim was used to hot places. That is why he became a stretcher-bearer for his company in Gallipoli, and transferred to the regimental bombers when they reached France. When they came to a sea of brown mud waves, which some cynic had misnamed the "Grass Bank," it was not Tim who volunteered to take it. He had been in far too many hot corners to retain any of his old hankering after them, and the Grass Bank was hotter than Booligal. He went for the place because his colonel told him to—went cheerfully to do a thing he horribly disliked, without letting anyone guess by word or deed or the least little sign that he disliked it—which, if you think of it, is more heroic by a long chalk.

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It was after dark on a winter's night that he and his men—about sixteen of them—crept out up a slimy trench deep to the knees in sloppy mud; peered at the enemy's wire against the skyline; half crawled, half slid through a gap in it, and disappeared, Tim leading. A white flash—a shower of bombs—red and orange flares breaking like Roman candles in the sky—the chatter of a machine-gun—the enemy's barrage presently shrieking down the vault of heaven. A dozen wounded men came back before dawn. And Tim—Tim lay with his face to the stars, dreaming for ever and ever of red plains and travelling sheep, on the edge of Tamar the Hammerhead's Grass Bank.

Slime Trench—Grass Bank—Gibbs' Corner—you will read of them all in their chapter in the War's History. They were in every map for a month—the newspapers made headings of them—they were household words in London suburbs and Melbourne teashops. A month later the flood of battle swept past them all in a great general attack without so much as pausing to look. Two months—and a string of lorries pushed up a newly made road until a policeman held them up, just as he would in London, to let some cross stream of traffic through. One of the crossing lorries bumped into a hole and impaled itself on a beam that had fallen off the lorry ahead. The two drivers of a lorry far behind climbed up a steep, shell-shattered neighbouring bank, and munched bread and bully beef while the afternoon grew to dusk and gun flashes showed like lightning on the angry low winter clouds ahead.

"What they want to get us stuck in this flaming mud-hole for?" said the driver to the second driver. "The Huns must have had a dug-out down there, Bill," he added, pointing to certain splintered, buried timber at the foot of the bank.

Now there may be no such place as the Grass Bank; and there may have been no Hammerhead nor Tim Gibbs; and he did not come from Booligal. But the story is true to this extent—that it happens all the time upon this battlefield.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN THE MUD OF LE BARQUE

France, December 20th.

By the muddy, shell-pitted roadside of the sunken road in Le Barque, behind the German lines, were found three shapeless forms. The mud dripped from them as they lay, but they were the forms of men. And the German soldiers who saw them, and who buried them, took it that they were men who had not lost their lives from any shell wound; that they had not been killed by the fire of our machine-guns, or by stray bullets. They put down the death of those men to the mud and the mud alone. The sunken road at Le Barque had been mashed with shells and trampled to slime with traffic; some runner from battalion headquarters at night, slipping through the sleet,



some couple of men straggling after the tail of an incoming platoon on a wild night when the English barrage suddenly startled them and caused them to miss the path by a few yards in the blackness, had stumbled unnoticed into a shell-hole. All their company officer knew was that they were missing—and no trace of them was found until three bodies were dragged from a shell crater, when men told stories of men missed there before.

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Now, I do not know if it really was the mud which engulfed alive the three Germans who lay beside the sunken road of Le Barque; but I know that their comrades thought it was. And that is a simple proof that the mud, of which the Germans talk so much, is not all on the British side of the trenches.

Looking from our lines yesterday across a valley one noticed a German trench running up the farther side, the grey mud parapet heaped out, like the earth of one long, continuous grave, on both sides of the trench. Behind that trench, along its whole length, as far as we could see, ran a sinuous thread of light-coloured soil. It was the beaten track by which the Germans had moved up and down their trench. They could not move *in* the trench, so when they wanted to move they had to hop up and move outside of it. If we were sniping by day they could not move at all; and the track had probably been made by Germans moving at night. It hugged the trench in case we started shooting or shelling—when the Germans could at once jump back into the mud again.

The Germans in some parts of the Somme battlefield have been going down with frostbite in great numbers, so great as to put at least one battalion out of action. This is through getting feet wet and frozen in muddy trenches. To reach their front line, last month, in these valleys in front of Bapaume and Le Transloy, has been quite impossible to the Germans unless they went up over the open, or used such trenches as a self-respecting man could scarcely enter. They came up, as would any other soldiers under the same circumstances, across the open land. Even then there were places which a man could scarcely pass. I know a man who, in that same sunken road at Le Barque, pulled two of his comrades by force out of the mud—an everyday matter. They left their boots and socks in the mud behind them.

If a man is wounded in some of those German trenches it takes eight men to get him to the dressing station and five hours to arrive there, and very much longer if there is any fighting in progress. One would not say that any of these difficulties have been more acute amongst the Germans than with the British and Australians—in some ways our men have faced and overcome greater hardships than the Germans. But there is this chief difference—the German is now getting back the shells which for two years he rained upon the British. And he is talking—like a German—about the unfairness of it.

The German Staff claims that German infantry is the best in the world. Certainly it is tough, and thoroughly convinced that it is better than any of its friends. “The Turk is a pretty good fighter,” said a German to me a few days ago, “and the Bulgars fight well. The Austrians are worth little. Every time the Russians drive the Austrians back they have to call us in to repulse the Russians again for them.”

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The German infantryman is tough, but not tougher than ours, and without the dash; his outstanding virtue is his great power of work. But I do not believe from what I have seen that he works one scrap harder than the Australian. He might be supposed to have his heart more in the war than the soldier of any other nation, but he certainly has not. Many German soldiers have told me that there was a universal longing for the war to end—but they seem to wonder at your asking them what they think, or what their people in Germany think—as though it mattered one straw. They tell you, in a detached sort of way, that a great many of their people in Germany are tired of the war. “But they have no influence on these matters,” they say, “nor have the soldiers. We do not meet together—we have nothing to say with it. They would go on with the war all next year even if a million more men are killed—they will bring back all the wounded, and the sick, if necessary.”

The German who used those words seemed to have no quarrel with those who were driving his country, and no pride in them—he did not approve and he did not disapprove. He seemed to accept them as part of the unquestioned, unchangeable laws of his existence; they were there—and what business was it of his to interfere with them?

One can scarcely see a gleam of hope for them in the attitude of their prisoners—a people that cannot rebel. But perhaps it is unfair to judge.

For these men, whom we now see, have been at long, long last through the fire of guns heavier than their own; and through the mud of Le Barque.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE NEW DRAFT

France, December 11th.

A fair-sized shell recently arrived in a certain front trench held by Australians in France. It exploded, and an Australian found himself struggling amongst some debris in No Man's Land. He tried to haul himself clear, but the tumbled rubbish kept him down; and, as often as he was seen to move, bullets whizzed past him from a green slope near by. The green slope ran like a low railway embankment along the other side of the unkempt paddock between the trenches. It was the German front line.

Finally one of his mates, I am told, jumped over to his help and dragged him clear. When he got in he asked to be put into the very next party that should visit the German trenches. He wanted his own back.

He was one of the newest Australians. That is exactly the sort of request that would have been made by the oldest ones.

We have seen the newest Australian draft in France, and the verdict from first to last amongst those who know them is, "They will do." There is always a certain amount of chaff thrown out by the oldest Australians at the latest arrivals. The sort of Australian who used to talk about our "tinpot navy" labelled the Australians who rushed at the chance of adventure the moment the

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recruiting lists were opened “the six bob a day tourists.” Well—the “Tourists” made a name for Australia such as no other Australians can ever have the privilege to make. The next shipment were the “Dinkums”—the men who came over on principle to fight for Australia—the real, fair dinkum^[3] Australians. After them came the “Super-dinkums”—and the next the “War Babies,” and after them the “Chocolate Soldiers,” then the “Hard Thinkers,” who were pictured as thinking very hard before they came. And then the “Neutrals.” “We know they are not against the Allies,” the others said, when came news of the latest drafts still training steadily under peace conditions, “we know they are not against us—we suppose they are just neutral.”

[3] “Dinkum”—Australian for “true.”

There has always been some chaff thrown at the latest arrival—and it is a mistake to think that there was never any feeling behind the chaff. I remember long ago at Anzac when a new draft was moving up past some of the older troops—past men who were thin with disease and overworn with heavy work—there was a cry of “You have come at last, have you?” flung in a tone of which the bitterness was unmistakable. There has always been a feeling, amongst the older troops here, that they have been holding the fort—hanging on for Australia’s name until the others have time to come along and give them a hand. There is a tendency to feel that soldiers who are still at home are getting all the limelight—the parading of streets and praises of the newspapers—and will probably live to reap most of the glory at the end of it all.

If so, there was never a feeling that melted more quickly the moment each new draft arrives and is really tested. The moment it goes into the whirl of a modern battle, and acquits itself through some wild night as every Australian draft always has done in its first fight and always will do, every sign of that old feeling melts as if it had never existed; and the new draft finds itself taken into the heart of the old force on the same terms as the oldest and proudest regiment there. I make no apology for talking of them as “old” regiments. There are regiments in this war, not three years old, which have seen as much terrible fighting as others whose record goes back over hundreds of years. Ages ago, prehistoric ages, the “Dinkums” became a title for men to be intensely proud of. Men who were through the first fortnight at Pozieres need never be ashamed to compare their experiences with those of any soldiers in the world, for it is the literal truth that there has never in history been a harder battle fought. The “Chocolate Soldiers” became veterans in one terrible struggle. The “War Babies” were old soldiers almost before they had cut their teeth. It is one of the pities of the censorship, but a necessary one, that the Australian public cannot know, until the story of this war is fully told at the end of it, the famous Australian battalions which will most assuredly go down to history as household names.

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And if there are not battalions, amongst the newest troops, which will go down to history with some of the very best Australia possesses—then I am a German. They have had a wonderful training of late—a training which can only be compared in thoroughness with that of Mena Camp in Egypt where our first troops trained, and with the full experience of this war to back it. The British authorities are equipping the new Australian drafts generously. The discipline of Australians, once they come to understand their work, has never given the slightest real anxiety to those responsible for them. The newest men have exactly the same straight frank look and speech as has every other batch that I have seen. If there is any difference between them first and last I will be bound that it is beyond the keenest eye to detect it.

Indeed, if there is a difference between one Australian infantry battalion and another, it is, and has always been, a matter of officers. A commander who can make all his subordinates feel that they are pulling in the same boat's crew—that they are all swinging together, not only with their own but with every other battalion and brigade; who can make them look upon themselves as all helping in the one big cause; who can make them regard the difficulty of another battalion merely as a chance for freely and fully assisting it—a commander who can do these things with his officers can make a wonderful force of his Australians. This may sound abstract and vague, but it is real to such an extent that it is the main reason of all differences that exist between Australian units.

Australian units have, like the Scots, a wonderful confidence in each other. They have been proud to fight by the side of grand regiments and divisions; but I fancy they would rather fight beside other Australians or New Zealanders than beside the most famous units in the world. Chaffing apart, that is the feeling of the oldest unit towards the newest.

CHAPTER XXXIII

WHY HE IS NOT "THE ANZAC"

France, November 28th.

"You don't call us the Anzacs, do you?" asked the man with the elbow sling appealingly. "You call us just Australians and New Zealanders, don't you?"

I hesitated for a minute or two racking my brain—it seemed to me that once, some months back, I had used that convenient term in a cabled message.

"Oh, don't for goodness sake say you do it, too," said the owner of the elbow sling pathetically. "Isn't Australians good enough?"

“I’m not sure—once—I may have. Not for a long time, anyway. I sometimes speak of the Anzac troops or the Anzac guns.”

“Oh, that is all right—Anzac troops—there’s no objection to that—we are that,” went on the grammarian with the elbow sling, “but there’s no such thing as an Anzac—the Anzacs—it’s nonsense.”

I remember that day well. It was the day before their first entry on the Somme. The man with the elbow sling had stopped a shrapnel pellet one frosty morning eight months before at Anzac; the man who sat next to him had a Turkish shrapnel shell burst between his shins at Hell Spit. They were some of the oldest hands, back again, and about to plunge with the oldest division into the heaviest battle the division had yet faced.

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It was more than a grammatical objection. You know the way in which it makes you wince, if ever you have lived in Australia or New Zealand or Canada, to hear people talk of “the colonies” or “the colonials.” The people who use the words do not realise that there is anything unpopular in their use, although the objection is really quite universal in the self-governing States, and represents a revolt against an out-of-date point of view which still lingers in some quarters.

In the same way anyone who *is* in touch with them knows that to speak of the feats of “an Anzac” or of “the Anzacs” is unpopular with the men to whom it is applied. You will never hear the men refer to themselves as Anzacs. They call themselves simply Australians or New Zealanders.

It is an interesting mental phase. The reason of it is not that Australians and New Zealanders dislike being clubbed together. Quite the reverse—the Australians are never more satisfied than when they are next to the New Zealanders. The two certainly feel themselves in some respects one and inseparable to a greater extent than any other troops here. They are proud of Anzac as the name of their corps, and as the name of that hill-side in Gallipoli where their graves lie side by side. The reason why they always avoid calling themselves “the Anzacs” is that the term was at one time associated in the Press with so many highly coloured, imaginative, mock heroic stories of individual feats, which they were supposed to have performed, that its use from that time forth was, by a sort of tacit consent, irrevocably damned within the force. The picture which it called up was that of the “Anzac” in London, with his shining gaiters and buttons and generally unauthorised cock’s feathers in his hat, reaping the glory of the acrobatic performances which his battered countrymen, very unlovely with sweat and dust, were credited with achieving in No Man’s Land. This was before the Somme fight, when first these Gallipoli troops came to Europe. The regular British war correspondents were not responsible for it—this nonsense was not written by them; when the day of real trial came they wrote of it conscientiously and brilliantly, and nothing that could be written was too much. But the vogue of the wildest stories of the “Anzacs” was when Australians and New Zealanders were doing little beyond hard work in France, and knew it. The noun “an Anzac” now bears with it, in the force, the suggestion of a man who rather approves of that sort of “swank”; and there are few of them.

The Australian and New Zealander are both intensely, overwhelmingly proud of their nationality; and only good can come of the pride. They are also intensely proud of their two-year-old units—and one of the drawbacks of the necessary rules of censorship is, that battalions of our army, which are famous throughout the force by name, have to be known to you only through vague references. Their character and history, as distinct and strongly marked as those of different men, will only come to be known to Australia when the history of these campaigns comes to be written.

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