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# THE BATTLES IN FLANDERS

FROM YPRES TO NEUVE CHAPELLE

BY

EDMUND DANE

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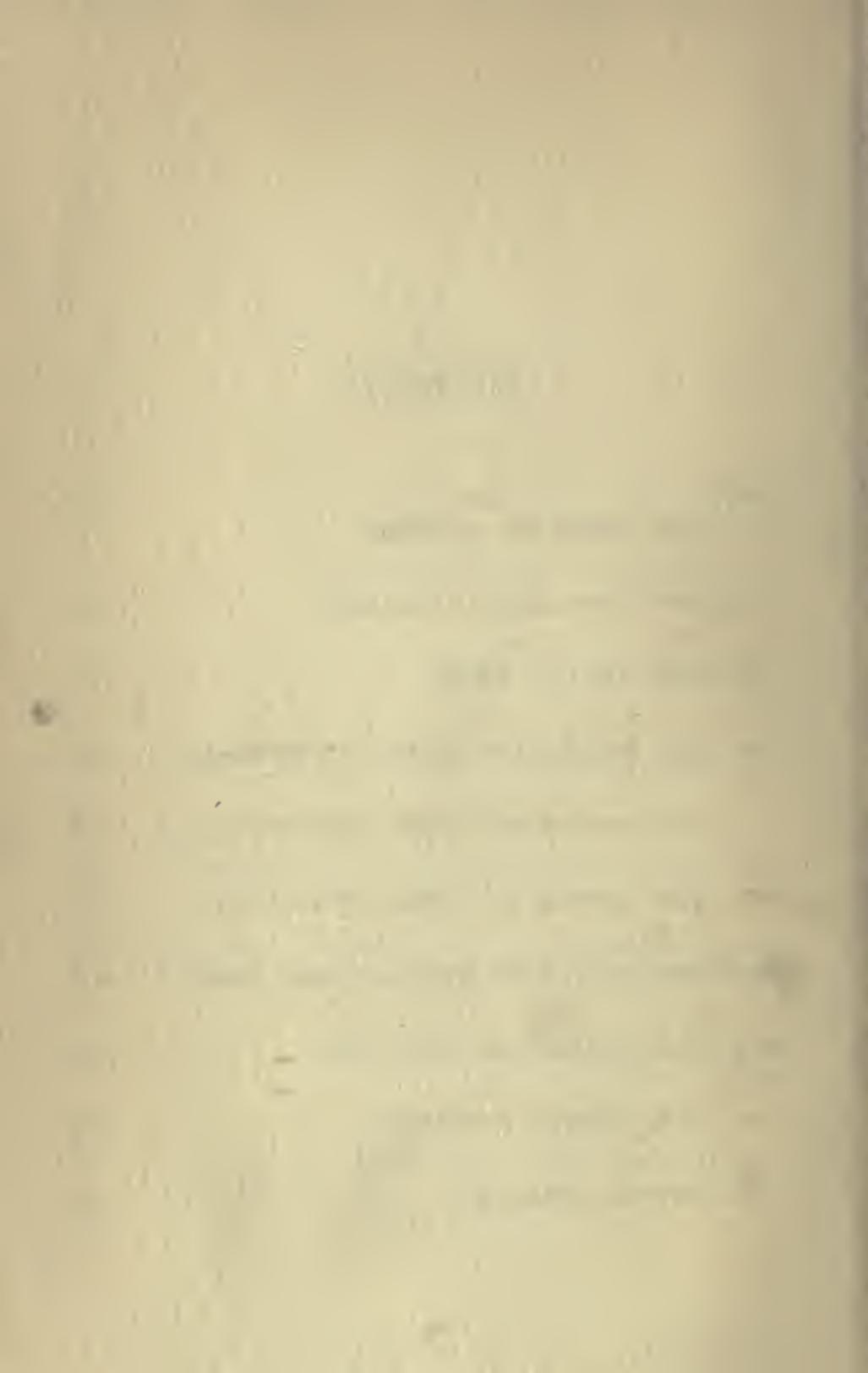
## PREFATORY NOTE

EVER since the middle of November last there has been on the West front in the present war what many have called and considered a "deadlock." In the account which follows of that part of the campaign represented by the battles in Flanders the true character of the great and brilliant military scheme by means of which, and against apparently impossible odds, the Allied commanders succeeded in reducing the main fighting forces of Germany to impotence, and in defeating the purposes of the invasion, will, I hope, become clear. The success or failure of that scheme depended upon the issue of the Battle of Ypres. Not only was that great battle the most prolonged, furious, and destructive clash of arms yet known, but upon it also, for reasons which in fact disclose the real history of this struggle, hung the issue of the War as a whole. No accident merely of a despot's desires caused the fury and the terror of Ypres. It was the big bid of Prussian Militarism for supremacy. Equally in the terrible and ghastly defeat it there sustained Prussian Militarism faced its doom.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE CRISIS OF OCTOBER

AT the beginning of October there had arisen in the Western campaign a crisis with which it needed the utmost skill and resource of the Allied generals to grapple.

Both the nature of this crisis, and the necessity of reticence concerning it at the time, ought to be made clear if we are to appreciate either the momentous character of the Battle of Ypres, or the profound effect which that glorious feat of the Allied arms has had upon the fortunes of this War.

Into France at the beginning of the War the Germans threw their mighty Expeditionary Force of twenty-eight army corps, disposed into eight armies acting in co-operation. With the circumstances under which that line of armies, in part held on the French fortified frontier, was compelled to turn from Paris to the valley of the Marne and was there defeated, I have dealt in "The Battle of the Rivers." For the reasons there set out the original objective, the seizure of Paris, was seen by

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the Germans when the army of General von Kluck reached Creil, to have become impossible until the French fortified frontier was in their hands. Their armies were directed upon the Marne with that aim. In the manœuvre they exposed the vulnerable point of their line, its right flank, to the powerful onset, which General Joffre, who had foreseen the situation, at once launched against it.

Defeated on the Marne, the Germans lost the military initiative—the power to decide upon their movements and to compel the enemy to conform to them. To the soldier the initiative is the practical embodiment of military superiority. It is the first great step to victory. In every war the struggle has been to seize and to hold it. More than in any war has that been the motive in this. Campaigning with armies, not only vast in point of numbers, but dependent upon a huge, varied, and costly machinery of destruction, transport, and supply, has made victory more than ever hang upon this power to direct their complex organisation to the desired end.

All that the initiative implies. It can therefore be no matter of surprise that Germany's long preparations were without exception designed to seize the initiative at the outset, and to hold it if possible. In that event the whole force of the German Empire would with the least wastage and in the shortest possible time be applied to the accomplishment of its Government's political aims. From the Great Main Headquarters Staff

down to the strategical railways, the depots, the arsenals, and the military workshops, the German military system was planned to combine swiftness with complete co-operation, and provided the German commanders discovered the ability properly to control and direct the machine, not merely the seizure of the initiative, but the retention of it seemed assured. In that case, however long and bitter the conflict, the outcome could never have been in doubt. Applied, in accordance with the plans of the German Staff, first on the West, and then on the East, the initiative, seized at the beginning and held to the end, must have given the armies of Germany the victory.

The Battle of the Marne was of vital importance in two respects. In depriving the Germans of the initiative, it snatched from them the chief advantage of their preparations. From that time their organisation had to be adapted not to fulfil their own designs but to meet the designs of their opponents. The difficulties in detail consequent upon this change need not be exaggerated. They were great. From the German point of view the whole problem of carrying on the war was altered, and for the worse.

Again, the defeat on the Marne brought the Germans face to face with a contingency which most of all they had hoped to avoid. Their plans had been drawn on the assumption of being able to employ practically their total active force,

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first on the West front and then on the East. They had never calculated on the necessity of having to divide that force, and to employ one half of it on the West, and the other half of it on the East *at the same time*.

With the defeat of the Marne, however, that necessity came into view. It meant, unless by some means the necessity could while time yet allowed be overcome, elimination of the condition mainly essential to success in the war—unity of the active force of the Empire.

These two changes, loss of the initiative, and necessity for a division of forces, were changes which the Germans had, if they could, at all costs to wipe out, and it is but stating truly and without exaggeration the problem which during the later weeks of September confronted the German Staff, to say that it was the problem of bringing the last man and the last gun then available to bear on the West for the purpose of regaining the lost power of the offensive. If such a strength could be brought to bear in time, then the initiative might be restored, division of force avoided, and the probable course of the war shifted once more on to its original lines.

It was because considerations such as these lay at the back of it, that the Germans, quite contrary to their traditions and training, went to the almost incredible labour of constructing across France from the Aisne ridge to Lorraine, that phenomenal line of more than 150 miles of

deliberate fortifications and entrenchments. The risk involved in the Marne operations had, we now know, not been unforeseen. Nor were the consequences of failure, if it proved a grave failure, miscalculated. Indeed, the very precautions taken to prepare this line from the Aisne to Lorraine prove that they were not. That line, and that line alone, offered the probability of restoring the lost advantages, and of parrying the effects of the disaster.

Enabling the Germans to hold their front and to bar the advance of the Allies with the minimum of force, that line at the same time was to have aided them—and this was its chief design—to throw the largest possible masses westward from their flank, pivoting on Noyon. By that movement they might cut the main Allied armies off from Paris.

The scheme had the merit at once of boldness and of simplicity. For success it depended on bringing their fresh masses forward with the utmost rapidity. To that end the German military machine was worked to its fullest capacity. Thus began the new and enormous movement of Landwehr army corps into France.

In part the German scheme was frustrated by the attack carried out by the British army in the Battle of the Aisne, and in part by the delays due to the very magnitude of the preparations. Unless attempted on a great scale a scheme of this character had better not be attempted at all.

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Since the success or failure of Germany in the war plainly hung upon it, the effort *had* to be on a great scale. Of Germany's corps of Landwehr, by far the greater number were embodied during these weeks of September. It may seem to the uninitiated a simple matter to call up, embody, and make ready for the field a million and a half of men, or thereabouts. But even with a military mechanism like that of the German Empire, it is a complicated business. That all this was done in fact in rather less than three weeks is nothing short of marvellous.

Because it was done, however, was the reason of the crisis at the beginning of October.

Within the same later weeks of September General Joffre had been able to throw against the German flank from Noyon to the Somme the powerful French army commanded by General Castleneau. He was thus in a position to forestall the German design. On the other side German army corps had by extraordinary forced marches arrived from Belgium just in time to ward off the thrust of this French army against Laon, a thrust which would have crippled the whole German defence and a thrust which the battle of the Aisne was fought to assist. The fighting from Noyon to the Somme was deadly. On the German side losses were not regarded. The purpose of these troops was, cost what it might, to hold the ground until the main reinforcements came up. They suffered appalling losses. Nevertheless,

though at a heavy sacrifice of life, the immediate objective, that of preventing a French advance along the valley of the Oise, was accomplished. The German resistance was undoubtedly very brave. To begin with, thanks alike to the superiority of their artillery, and to the *élan* of their recent victory, the French advanced with some rapidity. The Germans were driven out of Compiègne. Their hastily thrown-up trenches were found filled with dead, many slain by the terrible concussion of the French high explosive shells. As the French advanced these trenches were filled in.

Meanwhile, packed into every available train and by every available railway, the masses of the new German formations were being rushed westward. Immediately they detrained they were hurried into the fighting line. In the face of these increasing numbers the French advance along the valley of the Oise was held.

From the defensive the Germans passed at once to the counter-offensive. In great strength they launched an attack from Noyon and towards Roye. The front swayed. In the end, however, the French line from the Oise to the Somme remained firm.

It must then have been seen that the German outflanking scheme, thus anticipated, had become, on the lines first laid down, impracticable. The result was the great attack on Rheims.

It is clear now that when the attack was decided

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upon, the Germans believed the army of General Castleneau to consist not of fresh troops, but of the reserve of the main French army. Acting upon that belief they concluded that a vigorous assault upon Rheims ought to be successful. If successful the assault would accomplish all that the outflanking scheme promised. In any event it would prevent the French from massing further forces to the north of the Somme. With the German reinforcements still coming forward, the outflanking scheme could be tried again at the point where the French line at that time ended.

The attack upon Rheims failed because the German hypothesis upon which the attack had been founded was in fact false. The army of General Castleneau *did* consist of fresh troops, and *not* of the reserves of the main French army.

After the attack upon Rheims came the attempted German turning movement north of the Somme through Albert. Here, however, the Germans found themselves unexpectedly confronted by yet two other French armies under the command of Generals D'Armade and Maudhuy. Their great plan for re-seizing the initiative consequently still hung fire. General Joffre had been at work to good purpose. The result was to extend the fighting front from the Oise to the great northern coalfield.

All this while the Russian pressure on the East front had been growing and that prospective but

fatal division of German forces was threatening to become more inevitable.

All this while, too, in order eventually to avoid that division more German reinforcements were pouring west.

As it stood at the beginning of October the position was thus: at Antwerp there was the Belgian army; at Ghent, under the command of Sir Henry Rawlinson there was the 7th British division of infantry, and the 3rd brigade of cavalry; there were some, though not many, British troops at Dunkerque; there were a few French troops at Bethune. Practically, however, between Ghent and the terminus of the French front west of Lens there were no Allied forces. Here was a gap of nearly 60 miles. If through that gap the Germans could push their way in strength, they could

(1) Separate the Belgian army and the British troops in Belgium from the rest of the Allied armies;

(2) Reach the coast and cut the most direct communications with England;

(3) Pursue their outflanking scheme by turning the right of the French line.

For the Germans the necessity for carrying out that scheme had day by day become more urgent. The opportunity at last seemed to lie to their hand. They proceeded to seize it.

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Now let us turn to the other side. If General Joffre could close this gap and extend his line directly northwards to the coast, he would

(1) Save a considerable slice of territory and coast from German occupation ;

(2) Keep open the most direct communication with England ;

(3) Both defeat the German outflanking scheme, and himself outflank the enemy ;

(4) Impose on the Germans the necessity, arising from such a position, of constant counter attacks, and so waste their strength ;

(5) Hold them ineffective on the West whatever might happen on the East ;

(6) Compel them to meet Russian pressure on the East out of their further reserves, and thus ensure at once the division of their forces, their more rapid exhaustion, and the victory of the Allies in the war.

Such were broadly the issues which at the beginning of October last hung in the balance. Every appearance seemed to favour the German chances. General Joffre was then raising yet another (the tenth) French army. Even, however, at the utmost speed it could not be organised and equipped under a further fortnight. The Germans, however, had on their side begun their movement. Through the wide gap between

# The Crisis of October 19

Ghent and Bethune they were already pouring a great mass of cavalry, screening the oncoming of their main masses. They had launched their final assault upon Antwerp. It looked as if for them the moment had arrived.

## CHAPTER II

### HOW THE CRISIS WAS MET

GENERAL JOFFRE is a great man. So much is known now to all the world. But this war was not a month old before every military man was aware that the head of the French Staff, a galaxy of brilliant men, was a star of the first magnitude.

The greatness of Joffre as a general lies not so much in his simplicity, about which many stories are told, nor yet in his strength of character, his incorruptible honesty, or his unshakable fortitude. It lies in the force of his intellect which, joined to his character, makes his judgment unerring. He is marked off because he foresees, and foresees truly. It has been stated that his plans for the Battle of the Marne were drawn up and completed on August 27. Quite possibly they were. The movement which then substituted the Sixth French Army, that of General D'Armade, for the British on the extreme left of the Allied line, argues a clearly settled purpose and plan.

All the movements just stated in the briefest outline were parts of a settled purpose and plan. Is it likely that, the situation being what it was at the beginning of October, General Joffre was at a loss to meet it? He was not at a loss. At least he was not at a loss for ideas. The difficulty was the means.

Three French armies were already fastened on the flank of the German position. To fill the gap between Bethune and the coast it was essential to find three others, and at once. He had only one.

Time here was everything. Ever since the Germans had grasped the necessity of re-seizing the initiative at all costs, it had been a race against time. Their military railways and their organisation, carefully elaborated through years to meet just such a contingency as this, was pitted against the resources of a great military genius. It was the brain of one man against a system.

And the man won and the system lost.

To any ordinary mind it might have appeared that the situation of the Allies in that first week of October was well-nigh hopeless. To a great mind, however, difficulty is the measure of opportunity. General Joffre visited Sir John French at the British head-quarters. The result of that interview is stated by Sir John French in his dispatch of November 20 :

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Early in October a study of the general situation strongly impressed me with the necessity of bringing the greatest possible force to bear in support of the northern flank of the Allies, in order effectively to outflank the enemy and compel him to evacuate his positions.

At the same time the position on the Aisne, as described in the concluding paragraphs of my last despatch, appeared to me to warrant a withdrawal of the British Forces from the positions they then held.

The enemy had been weakened by continual abortive and futile attacks, while the fortification of the position had been much improved.

I represented these views to General Joffre, who fully agreed.

Arrangements for withdrawal and relief having been made by the French General Staff, the operation commenced on October 3, and the 2nd Cavalry Division, under General Gough, marched for Compiègne en route for the new theatre.

The Army Corps followed in succession at intervals of a few days, and the move was completed on October 19, when the First Corps, under Sir Douglas Haig, completed its detrainment at St. Omer.

That this delicate operation was carried out so successfully is in great measure due to the excellent feeling which exists between the French and British Armies; and I am deeply indebted to the Commander-in-Chief and the French General Staff for their cordial and most effective co-operation.

In a word, the British Commander-in-Chief, seizing the nature of the difficulty, knowing its causes, and realising how much turned upon it, stepped forthwith into the breach. With Sir John French, as with General Joffre, to decide

was to act. "Early in October" the decision was taken. On October 3 began the carrying of it out. What difference in time is there between "early in October" and October 3? No difference.

Thus while the Germans still imagined themselves opposed on the Aisne ridge to those British troops who, dug into their almost invisible entrenchments, had for nearly a month successfully withstood the repeated and furious attacks of the flower of the Prussian Army twice or more than twice as numerous as themselves, the British had silently ebbed away. Their places were taken by French troops of the reserve, and the Germans remained no wiser for the change. And the British travelled through Paris, and by roundabout routes, as it seemed to them, through north-west France, and very few remained wiser for their journey. Nor after long successive hours in crowded railway carriages followed by detrainment at a place altogether strange did any but a very few of the British even know where they were going to or for what purpose. All they knew was that they were going somewhere to meet the Germans.

No move in the campaign was more unexpected or more daring than this. It affords but one more proof of how false is the assumption that the element of surprise has been banished from modern war.

The secrecy of it was only less remarkable

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than its boldness. With an Intelligence Service supposed to be second to none, the German Staff were left without even a suspicion of it until it had been accomplished.

The importance of the move was that it made General Joffre's scheme for the military envelopment of the Germans immediately feasible. There was now but one more thing to do, and that was to withdraw the Belgian army from Antwerp in order that they should complete the Allied line.

That it is true involved the evacuation of Antwerp. Quite apart from the fact that the Belgian Army, reduced by the casualties and the hardships of their heroic campaign, were no longer sufficient in numbers properly to garrison that great fortress, their withdrawal served a purpose more valuable even than its defence. Many no doubt are much more readily impressed by the evacuation for the time of a great fortified city than by what they consider a mere military scheme, the value of which is a matter of opinion. In this instance, however, the carrying out of the scheme meant the assurance of victory in the war. The evacuation of Antwerp was advisable on the principle that the greater comprehends the less.

After the transfer of the British forces from the Aisne, and the removal on October 8 and 9 of the Belgian troops from Antwerp to the Yser, there were on the German flank from Noyon to

the sea six Allied armies. Taking them in the order of position from south to north they were : the army of General Castleneau ; the army of General D'Armade ; the army of General D'Urbal ; the army of Sir J. French ; the army of General Maudhuy ; and the army of King Albert.

Let it be remembered that in addition to the twenty-eight army corps of the German Expeditionary force as at first constituted, there were at this time either in or on their way to France twenty-one Reserve and Volunteer Corps, making the enormous total of forty-nine. That, independently of casualties and wastage, gives, on the German war footing, an aggregate of 2,940,000 of all arms. Undoubtedly the casualties and wastage had even up to this time been very heavy. It is reasonable and moderate to put it roundly at nearly 900,000 men, two-thirds of those losses being casualties in battle. Even that, however, left approximately 2,000,000 combatants. Besides, the casualties and wastages had been largely made good by fresh drafts.

When we bear in mind the vital consequence to Germany of the plan for re-seizing the initiative which the German Staff were endeavouring to carry out, there is nothing in the least surprising in their hurrying into France reinforcements and drafts of such magnitude.

The position in brief was that the total German

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force in France had been brought up to at least a million men above the immense, and as it was supposed crushing, strength of the initial Expeditionary Force, and that, too, despite the losses incurred.

Many of the facts relating to this war are so wholly without parallel that not a few people, unaware of the true vastness and menace of the military system of modern Germany, find it hard to give them credence. As nearly as possible, however, the figures of the forces sent from Germany into Belgium and France will be found to be these :

Original Expeditionary Force (25			
Active and 3 Reserve Corps)			1,680,000
Fresh drafts to supply losses (ap-			
proximately)	-	-	450,000
Additional Reserve Corps	-	-	1,260,000
			<hr/>
Total	-	-	3,390,000

The problem of dealing with such a force, and of dealing with it when the total strength that could on the side of the Allies then be put into the field against it was in round figures a million less, is a problem quite unlike anything in war since in 1814 Napoleon fought the memorable

campaign which preceded his abdication and exile to Elba.<sup>1</sup>

Nobody will venture to say that, having such a superiority in numbers at their command, and occupying besides a strongly fortified line of front, enabling them further to economise their strength in one direction while they threw it with greater weight in another, the Germans were not fully warranted in thinking that the success of their scheme was assured, and that if it was assured, the French having shot their bolt in the Battle of the Marne, and shot it in vain, there was an end to all intents of the struggle on the West.

How was General Joffre to grapple with this vast enigma? By meeting the Germans on traditional lines of tactics? It was impossible.

<sup>1</sup> This statement is based on the following facts which at this date (the beginning of October) summarises the then immediately prospective situation as regards numbers:—

Total German forces sent into or about to be sent	
into France and Belgium . . . . .	3,390,000
<i>Less</i> casualties and wastage approximately . . . . .	900,000
	2,490,000
Net German forces . . . . .	
Allies:—	
Nine French armies, reinforced to	
full strength . . . . .	1,080,000
10th French army (in formation) . . . . .	120,000
British (including forces at Ghent) . . . . .	145,000
Belgians . . . . .	40,000
	1,385,000
	1,105,000

The disparity of course was afterwards redressed. It took, as it proved, some twenty days before all the additional German forces could be sent West, and on the other hand the embodiment of French Reservists was proceeding at the same time, but the possibility, not to say the probability, that the Germans would get in first, constituted the crisis.

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Besides, in the face of modern arms traditional tactics are out of date. They survive only in popular tradition, and in the criticism based upon it.

The only way on the Allied side at once to secure and eventually and fully to reap the advantages won at the Battle of the Marne was to complete and to solidify the military envelopment which would render the whole of this gigantic force of invaders for all the purposes of the invasion impotent. It was plain, too, that the immediate purpose of the Germans was now to straighten out their front across France. If the reader looks at a map he will see that the fortified line held by the enemy from the Argonne to the Aisne, would, if continued to the north-west, touch the French coast near to Havre. With such a straightened front not only would the Germans have the Channel ports in their possession, but they would be free either to advance, if they had the power, or to retreat if they chose. What is more, they would then be able to advance or to retreat as a whole. In such a position it is clear their advance would have enormously greater momentum, and their retreat be an operation of far greater safety. Moreover, their front would be shorter, and in consequence stronger.

When, therefore, I speak of General Joffre's scheme of military envelopment, I mean by it the difference, and it is a vast difference, between

the position of the Germans were their front straightened out and their position in an angle. Placed in an angle their armies were for all the purposes of their campaign paralysed, and except to counter-attack, which after all is no more than a defensive tactic, they could do nothing. Besides, in such a situation counter-attack is a necessity. It is an axiom confirmed by all experience that troops in such a situation cannot maintain their position merely by a passive defence.

If from this situation there was for the Germans but one outlet, that of wheeling round their flank until it came into line with the rest of their front, it followed that their pressure would inevitably be greatest on the extremity of the radius, that is on the part of it nearest the coast, and it was manifest that no effort possible would be spared by them to apply that pressure before the line of the Allies here could be formed, or at all events before it could be made firm.

To the British army therefore in this scheme was assigned a post which was at once a post of honour and of danger. Strangely enough some of the greatest and most striking facts in this war appear to have been overlooked. Among them is the fact that this military envelopment, or outflankment, meant to the Germans, if they could not prevent it, both the ruin of their hopes of victory in France, and the certain loss of the war. Clearly then it was to be expected that

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every ounce of strength and of energy they could command would be put into the struggle.

We can well understand, though the public, perhaps happily, remained in ignorance for the time, the anxiety that prevailed, except it would seem at the head-quarters of the French Staff. There the characteristic calm does not appear to have been disturbed. Following his custom, the French commander-in-chief went usually to bed at nine o'clock, and rose at 5.30, save when duty took him, as it did take him at times, to places in the fighting line. He gave his instructions, knowing that if carried out, as they would be if possible, the result would be right. A mighty worker and the very personification of the commanding quality of decision, he never swerved by a hair's breath from his plan, foreseeing all its consequences and judging justly of its effects.

He judged justly of its effects because he relied upon essentials. On the one hand the Germans had a huge superiority in numbers. They had also at this time a superiority in heavy guns. On the other hand the Allies held the superior position. Further, they had a decisive superiority in field guns; not a numerical superiority, but one based on the greater power and accuracy of the "75" gun as compared with the German converted "77" gun. In 1899 just after the German Government had completed rearmament of its artillery with the "77," the French brought

out the "75," the first really practicable quick-firing field gun until then known. This invention revolutionised modern gunnery. To meet it the Germans were forced to "convert" their "77" into a quick-firer. Their gun, however, remained distinctly inferior and out-classed. Neither in muzzle energy, muzzle velocity, nor consequently in range was it any match for the French weapon. Leading the way as they always have done in artillery improvements, the French had evolved, besides, a novel system of "fire discipline," for using this gun scientifically and with the maximum of effect. That system had already justified itself by striking results. In no small degree it was the "75" gun which had crushed the German resistance on the Marne. In no small degree, too, it was the "75" which had ruined the German attack upon Rheims. The "75" had withered the attempted turning movements from Noyon, and north of the Somme with the breath of death. Clearly, apart altogether from its strategical conception, sound and great at once as that conception was, General Joffre's plan of military envelopment was inspired by the aim of giving the widest effect to this superiority in gun-power. Here again is one of the facts of the war which has not been estimated at its right value, and has misled many critics of the Western "deadlock."

Now the German Higher Command well knew that in field artillery they were out-classed. The "75" has a muzzle energy of 333 foot-tons as

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compared with the 241.7 foot-tons of the German "77." The French artillerists also had solved the problem of the "universal shell," that is of a projectile combining the effects of a high explosive shell with those of a shrapnel shell. With the Germans this problem was still in the stage of experiment. In order to off-set such marked disadvantages the German Government had gone in largely for heavy howitzers. When the war broke out they had undoubtedly a superiority in that class of weapon. The French scheme of rearmament with howitzers had only begun. This was perhaps one reason for the German precipitancy. Upon their superiority in heavy howitzers they now largely relied for their second contemplated "drive."

Artillery, however, is not the final word. Nor was this placing of the British Force on the northern wing of the German armies in any sense an accidental choice of location. It was certain that the German attack, initiated with their heavy cannon, would be driven home, if it could be driven home, by assaults in mass formation from their infantry. The necessity then was for a force which could be relied upon in any event to stop such rushes. That force was pre-eminently the British army. The British army were a body of expert riflemen. They were more. They, and they alone, were armed with a rifle capable of firing 15 rounds "rapid." Delivered by troops who can keep cool under the experience,

15 rounds "rapid" will stop the densest rush ever organised. The British army had shown themselves able to do it. They formed the element of the Allied forces which in a case like this could, if it were humanly possible, save the situation.

It will be seen, therefore, that the scheme of the Allied generals though it seemed to lack spectacular magnificence, was business, and was in every sense and emphatically *war*.

## CHAPTER III

### THE EVE OF YPRES

THE plan of the Allied commanders, at once original and bold, was decided upon at that conference at the British head-quarters on the Aisne. From the first in this war the French Intelligence Service has shown itself excellent. The French Head-quarters Staff has not only been well and reliably informed of the enemy's preparations and movements, but promptly informed. In this instance the prospective movements were a matter of almost certain inference. Given the motives of the German Government, and the military principles favoured by the German Staff, both quite well known, and what they would do and how they would try to do it, was a conclusion that a general much less sagacious than Joffre might safely draw. The exact extent and character, however, of the German preparations, and the degree to which those preparations had been advanced was definite information of a valuable kind.

It is apposite here to note its effect. On September 9 the Belgians made a sortie in force from Antwerp, and on the following day recaptured Malines and Termonde. In consequence of this part of the German reinforcements, three army corps, which were on the march from Liège and had already reached the French frontier, had to be recalled. That army became engaged in the first attack upon Antwerp. The object, their diversion, had been gained. When, after discovering that an attack upon Antwerp was hopeless without heavy siege guns, they finally reached the front in France, the purpose for which they had been dispatched, that of attempting to outflank the Allies to the west of Noyon, had become impracticable.

We know now that the German Government had determined to avenge this disappointment by the capture of Antwerp. That, however, for the reasons already stated was fully expected. The siege employed another German army from September 25 to October 9. True, the Germans had the satisfaction of occupying the city, and of such political effects and impressions as that occupation produced. On the other hand there can be no sort of doubt that had those troops, thrown through the gap which then existed between Ghent and Bethune, seized Calais, and been able hold to the line from the coast to Bethune, the military effect would have been twenty times more serious. Instead of doing

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that the German Government swallowed the bait of Antwerp, only to discover when too late, and when they had let the critical days pass, that the hook was the British army at Ypres, which during a month's furious fighting in the effort to retrieve their error cost the Germans over 300,000 casualties, and what was worse, the wreckage of their Western campaign.

Before entering on a description of the operations which, in fact, during the later weeks of October and the first two weeks of November decided the future course of the war, it is advisable to have in mind a clear picture of the terrain of this mighty and memorable conflict.

If the reader looks at a map of France he will see that from the outlet of the Somme, the coast of the English Channel takes a sudden bend to the north, and that not far from Calais it swerves sharply round again to the east. If from near the mouth of the Somme we draw a line running north-east, that line, roughly parallel to the line of the coast from the point at which the shore bends round near Calais, will mark approximately the boundary of a difference in the height of the country above sea level. South-east of this line the country is considerably higher. North-west of it the country is as a whole low-lying and flat. In fact the line may be called an inland coast divided from the sea by a stretch of flats having an average breadth of some twenty-five miles.

The eastern area of these flats is the Pas de Calais ; the western area Flanders.

This inland coast line, geographically the northern edge of the plateau whose central and highest part is the chalk downs of Champagne, presents numerous sinuosities. Its course, that is to say, is a succession of capes and bays. In far-off times when in fact it was the sea coast, it must have presented a contour not unlike that of the present coast of Devonshire.

Formed of alluvial deposits and reclaimed little by little, the flats lying between this inland coast-line and the sea are a very fertile tract. They gradually became the seat of a numerous population ; and then, owing alike to proximity to the sea and to the number of the navigable waterways, the earliest and most important seat of industry and commerce on the Continent of Europe. The ancient capital of this country, the centre of its trade and the seat of its government when it formed an independent Dukedom, was Ypres. In the eighteenth century was made the discovery that underlying or contiguous to this area was one of the largest of the European coalfields. That discovery changed large parts of the flats by degrees into modern industrial districts.

The point to be kept in mind for present purposes is that geographically Flanders is one area, though now situated politically partly in France and partly in Belgium. Its two chief centres of

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population and industry are Ghent and Lille, both seats of the cotton trade, for like Lancashire in England, this Lancashire of the Continent is engaged mainly in the textile industry and in coal-mining. Lille is close to and in fact situated in one of the larger bays of the inland coastline already spoken of.

Nearly midway between Lille and the coast at Dunkirk there is a feature it is important to notice. The otherwise uniform flatness of the country is here broken by a range of low hills shaped like a crescent moon. This range of hills lies to the south of Ypres. From Kleine Zillebeke on the east to the Mont de Cats on the west the ridge is not more than ten miles in length. Ypres is situated within the crescent.

The feature is important to notice because of the streams which here take their rise. From the higher level of inland country there flow north-east the Scheldt, and north-west the Somme, and the lower courses of those rivers mark what may be called the natural outer boundaries of this flat area. From the hills south of Ypres again rise the Aa, the Yser, and the Lys. The first two flow outward towards the coast; the Lys bending first round to the south and then to the east, falls into the Scheldt at Ghent.

From Dunkirk eastward the country is protected against inroads of the sea by dykes. This part of it is below sea level. At Nieuport, the

outlet of the Yser, there are locks which permit the outflow of the river at low tide, but bar the inflow of the sea at high tide. For a thousand years Flanders, owing to its natural fertility, has been the scene of a developed agriculture. Characteristic of it are the great substantial old farm-houses usually built round a square courtyard, places marked by the proverbial Flemish cleanliness and by the equally proverbial Flemish plenty. Practically every acre of the country was under cultivation. The only exceptions were the woods situated round the old châteaux and country houses, evidences of the general wealth. In addition to these there existed one or two not very extensive tracts of ancient forest.

Round Ypres, more especially to the east and north, these woods and pleasaunces formed an almost continuous ring. In the fourteenth century Ypres was a great industrial city with something like 200,000 inhabitants. During the struggles against first Spanish and then Austrian domination, and in the destructive wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it steadily lost its importance. The population dwindled. At the outbreak of the present war the number of inhabitants was not more than 20,000. The old city offered nevertheless many evidences of its former consequence and wealth. There was the monumental and famous Cloth Hall, one of the finest Gothic buildings in

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Europe. Erected by Baldwin, Count of Flanders, and adorned with statues of the forty-four Counts, it had a façade 462 feet in length, noble alike in design and in proportions. A conspicuous feature of the building was its central and massive square tower. In the Middle Ages Ypres was a fortress. From the top of the tower the view extended on every side over a wide extent of country. The sea and the coastline to the north, and the higher land across the Lys to the south came equally within the prospect. Conversely from outside Ypres the tower formed a notable landmark, seen rising above the horizon many miles away.

In old days the Cloth Hall was a great mart where, to merchants from every part of Europe, Flemish manufacturers displayed their fabrics, the then unrivalled wonders of the loom. In modern times, trade having departed save for an almost local industry in lace and linen, the Cloth Hall had become a museum and gallery of art. Under the public-spirited and careful government of the present Royal Family of Belgium, the building, one of the cherished monuments of the country, was in 1860 lovingly restored.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mr. N. E. Monckton Jones, formerly tutor in Modern History in the University of Liverpool, in a letter to the *Observer*, thus describes the impression made by the first sight of the building: "Turning perforce with the street at right angles, we passed into a narrower, more winding, one with more old gabled houses, and here and there a fine sculptured moulding or portal. Then of a sudden we were at the Place, and the Cloth Hall in all its full glory before

Besides the Cloth Hall, however, and the fine cathedral dedicated to St. Martin, the former importance of Ypres was shown in its wide and elegant streets, bordered by antique Flemish mansions, abodes of an old world tranquillity, and with interiors like pictures. The most pleasantly situated perhaps of all the Flemish cities, Ypres was a favourite place of residence, an urban cameo set amid woods and hills of broad and sweeping yet softened outline, round about it a ring of peaceful villages, and the private seats of old-time and settled wealth.

If this was the ancient capital of Flanders, the scene on the farther side of the crescent of hills across the valley of the Lys presented the most striking of contrasts. In that direction the background of the picture was a forest of tall chimneys—the great city of Lille overhung by its cloud of smoke. The foreground was an apparent tangle of railways, roads, canals, brickworks, industrial villages, mills, dyeworks, machine

us. It was not the size of the building nor its richness that halted us so abruptly and made us all eyes for the moment. It was, I think, the arresting dignity of it, a dignity built up of fine and simple lines and the mellow contentment of age. Many buildings in other towns were statelier, more ornate, more imposing, but from the pointed arcade below to the long line of the great roof the Hall told of a fine sense of proportion, of reserve. Its builders did not aim at out-doing other men, but they knew what they needed, and would have it seemly, and by sheer reiteration of a simple plan well conceived they made homely simplicity glorious. The Cloth Hall expressed the self-respect of burghers who had won their rights two centuries before Magna Carta."

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shops, the multitudinous aspects in short of industry as it exists to-day, superposed upon the ancient Flemish features of the countryside—its spacious farms, its sluggish rivers, and its everlasting flatness.

For with the growth of commerce the rivers had been linked up with a network of canals, and over these, with joints represented by scores of bridges, had been spun a webwork of railways branching in all directions into sidings. Lille itself is but the centre of half a hundred industrial villages and smaller towns, the heart of a huge ganglion of commerce and manufacture.

Farther south we come to the coalfield. Of the discovery of the coalfield all this modern activity is the outcome. There the industry changes in character. Cotton mills give place to ironworks and blast furnaces. The face of the country is dotted with great mounds of "spoil." Its general aspect is grimier. In all directions it is cut up by narrow, badly-paved and ruddy lanes, tracks leading mostly from the pits and works to the villages of the pitmen and ironworkers. To the tangle of canals and railways and railway sidings there is added this third tangle of foot and cart tracks, made for the most part at haphazard and as convenience directed. Through this maze of ways and byways the only guiding lines are the usually straight and excellent French main roads which sweep across the country from town to town with an imperial

disregard of local obstacles. The plan and purpose of the main roads is largely military, and has come down from the days of the Roman occupation.

Such in brief are the main features of the country. As will be seen in the following pages, their bearing upon the operations of the war is of the first importance

## CHAPTER IV

### THE BATTLE OF YPRES—FIRST PHASE

THE main body of the British forces arrived in French Flanders on October 11. It will be recalled that in his dispatch Sir John French states that the movement from the Aisne began on October 3. Why, it may be asked, were eight days taken to complete this transfer if it was so urgent?<sup>1</sup>

Well, in the first place the withdrawal of the British forces from the Aisne had to be carried out in detail. To have effected the withdrawal in mass would at once have aroused the observation and

<sup>1</sup> In the French official review of the first six months of the war it is stated that: "Field-Marshal Sir John French had, as early as the end of September, expressed the wish to see his Army resume its initial place on the left of the Allied armies. He explained this wish on the ground of the greater facility of which his communications would have the advantage in this new position, and also of the impending arrival of reinforcements from Great Britain and from India, which would be able to deploy more easily on that terrain.

"In spite of the difficulties which such a removal involved owing to the intensive use of the railways by our own units, General Joffre decided, at the beginning of October, to meet the Marshal's wishes, and to have the British Army removed from the Aisne."

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suspicion of the enemy. Next the forces thus withdrawn in detail, and in detail replaced by French troops, had to be massed at a convenient place secure from hostile intelligence hunters. Finally this main body of the British army had to be sent forward to the new line of front as a whole. Thus it was that the 2nd Army Corps, under the command of General Sir H. Smith-Dorrien, detrained at Bethune on the same day, October 11, that the 3rd Army Corps under the command of General Pulteney detrained at St. Omer. These towns are some twenty miles apart. Coincidentally with the detraining of the infantry and the guns, the 2nd and 3rd Divisions of the British cavalry advanced under the command of General Allenby and occupied the little town of Aire, which lies nearly half-way between them. By this move a front was formed from near Lens, where the French line ended across the country north-westward to the coast. The gap, so far as outflanking the Allied forces was concerned, was closed.

In the latter part of September, as a prelude to their scheme, the Germans had occupied Lille. An occupying force which they had left there on their advance towards Paris had been driven out by the British. They now detached for the seizure of the city the 19th Active Corps and the 7th Reserve Corps. In the face of this overwhelming strength the British troops in Lille, part only of a division from Dunkirk, had no

alternative but to retire. It was a bitter day for the inhabitants of Lille which witnessed the departure of these defenders, welcomed only a little while before with every demonstration of public joy.

Besides these two German army corps who, based on Lille, began at once to drive westward towards Boulogne, a powerful mobile column, consisting of four divisions of cavalry, supported by horse artillery and three brigades of Jaegers, crossed the Lys, and passing to the south of Ypres, made a dash through Bailleul for Hazebrouck, covering at once the flank of the main advance from a possible attack from Dunkirk, and carrying out a turning movement against such French forces as were then supposed to be holding Bethune. These German troops, the two army corps and the flying column, though mustering in all more than 150,000 men, were only the vanguard of the mass intended to be thrown forward. It is clear that their expectation was that of attack from Dunkirk on the one side and from Bethune on the other. The flying column advanced to Hazebrouck, and the cavalry occupied the Forest of Nieppe to the south of that town without opposition.

Meanwhile the Belgian army, which had evacuated Antwerp two days before on October 9, was on its way westward along the coast covered by the British troops under the command of General Sir Henry Rawlinson. All the prob-

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abilities appeared to be that both the Belgian army and these British troops would be cut off.

We may judge then of the surprise of these German forces when, along the line of the Aa, they came suddenly up against this massive wall of the British army supposed to be on the Aisne. Sir John French, however, had not transferred his army to Northern France in order to stand on the defensive. The wall of British troops was in rapid movement. On this same day, October 11, the British cavalry dashed across the Aa, swept the German horse through and out of the Forest of Nieppe, and drove them as far as the Mont des Cats. There the Germans attempted, at the end of a flight of some fourteen miles, to make a stand. In the attack upon the Forest of Nieppe the British cavalry of the 6th Division had carried out to the north a movement which threatened the German force from the rear. When this was discovered the German retreat became a flight. Reaching the Mont des Cats their horses were blown, but they were compelled to defend that position if possible because the Jaegers, evacuating Hazebrouck under cover of their cavalry, had thrown themselves into Meteren and Bailleul. This cavalry fight, in which on both sides more than 20,000 men took part, though relatively, perhaps, but one of the minor episodes of the war, was, in fact, of its kind colossal. It was a clash of sabre against sabre, man to man. In numbers

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the Germans had an advantage of about three to two, and that advantage ought to have been decisive, but apart from the fact that their mounts hard ridden across country, were winded, the superiority of the British was so marked that they had not hesitated earlier in the campaign, and with success, to attack the German horse when the enemy had a proportion of two to one. In cavalry fighting skill, spirit and cohesion count for more than numbers.

The defeat of the German cavalry in this action was decisive. It was not that they did not fight with bravery. They did. Broken in one charge they were rallied by their officers for another. Some four times in succession in the battle among the hills they attempted to recover.

While the British cavalry were carrying out their brilliant drive, the 3rd Army Corps advanced east from St. Omer to Hazebrouck. In the meantime also the 2nd Corps had taken up a line of positions along the canal from Bethune to Aire. Next day (October 12) the 2nd Corps moved forward to Merville, a little town south-east of the Forest of Nieppe.

The plan of the British operations may be briefly stated. Taking Givenchy, a village two miles west of La Bassee, as the pivoting point, it was intended to swing the line round until it reached the Lys. In this movement the British front would swing through a quarter circle, that is, from north-west to north-east. The British

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cavalry would be on the outer, or left wing ; the inner, or right wing, at Givenchy would be hinged on to the French positions. In this way the country between the Lys and the sea would be cleared of the enemy, and the Allies envelopment carried from Givenchy past Lille, so that that important place could no longer be used by the Germans as a base for overrunning the country to the coast.

There was a further aim. This was to seize, if possible, the railway junction at Menin, ten miles north of Lille. The move would both embarrass the German occupation of Lille, and hamper the enemy in any attempt to throw troops in force over the Lys.

On the other hand, the immediate purpose of the Germans is equally clear. Not strong enough, as they judged, to risk a pitched battle ; their right wing exposed by the defeat of their cavalry ; and the probability owing to this unexpected appearance of the British army now being that the Belgians from Antwerp and the British troops from Ghent would get through, they determined to obstruct the British movement by guerilla tactics, and until their main forces came up to defend in detachments the numerous and almost contiguous villages of the country, taking advantage of its network of canals and railways, and of its tangle of roads and cross roads. It is difficult to imagine what is in military language called a "close" country more difficult to operate

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in than this, one of the most densely populated areas of the world. The German scheme was to treat the civilian inhabitants with ruthlessness, wasting and plundering as they retired.

Manifestly, the success of the British movement would depend upon its energy. The Germans were fighting to gain time. Not stopping, therefore, at Merville, the 2nd Corps fought forward directly towards Lille by way of Laventie, in the valley of the Lys. Laventie, about ten miles west of Lille, is the centre of a dense semi-urban industrial district. Concurrently the 3rd Corps advanced eastward from Hazebrouck towards Bailleul. Seven miles to the south-west of Ypres, that place lies on the southern slope of the crescent of hills already referred to. Some scattered advance posts of the enemy were met with in intermediate villages, and were driven in. The Germans had taken up a position along the ridge from Berthen, between the Mont des Cats and Mont Noir on the north through St. Jans Cappel and Bailleul, and on the main road to Armentières. About two miles in advance of this line they held in force the villages of Fletre and Meteren, which they had fortified and barricaded.

The British attack began at daybreak on October 13. It was a day of rain and fog, one of those fogs which, in autumn, cover these flats with an almost impenetrable mist. Such conditions rendered movement over the low-lying sodden

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country slow. On the other hand, as against the British troops moving to the attack the conditions put the German guns out of action, and, what was not less material, they concealed the movements of the Allied cavalry. For by this time the French horse, under the command of General Conneau had arrived, and the plan of battle was that the French cavalry should assault and turn the left of the German position at Nieppe, on the main road from Bailleul to Armentières, thus cutting off the enemy from Lille, while the British cavalry attacked Berthen. In the meantime, the main assault would be delivered by the infantry against Bailleul, the centre of the hostile position.

Throughout the 13th the fighting raged round Fletre and Meteren. Both places were taken. Meteren was stormed in an onset which at nightfall drove the Germans who were holding it in a ragged rout to Bailleul. General Pulteney decided at once to follow up this advantage. An advance on Bailleul was immediately begun. All this while the cavalry on both wings had been active. At daybreak on October 14 the British horse broke into Berthen, and despite a bitter resistance drove the Germans out, and began to roll up their flank on that side. The French cavalry had got astride of the Armentières road. Realising that their whole force was in danger of being rounded up, the Germans took the chance offered by darkness, intensified by heavy rain, to beat

a precipitate retreat. When the British infantry reached Bailleul, they found the town evacuated.

These operations opened up the way to Lys, and the 3rd Corps advanced on October 15 to the line of that river extending from Armentières to near Laventie. They thus came into line with the 2nd Corps, which, driving the Germans off the main road from La Bassee to Estaires, an important road junction on the Lys two miles above Saily, had pushed on to Fournes. At that place, four miles east of Neuve Chapelle, and not more than seven from the centre of Lille, they cut the German communications between Lille and La Bassee.

Thus, at the end of four days, the British were both at Armentières and at Fournes, within seven miles of Lille, and formed with Laventie as the base of it, a front of almost a right angle, the apex pointing westward. At the same time the cavalry had received orders to continue their drive from Berthen across the country and down the valley of the Lys towards Menin.<sup>1</sup> In those

<sup>1</sup> On reaching Warneton, on the Lys, ten miles above Menin, the cavalry found the place strongly held by the Germans, who at the entrance to the town had constructed a high barricade loopholed at the bottom so that men could fire through it from a lying position. This formidable obstacle was encountered by a squadron of our cavalry. Nothing daunted, they obtained help from the artillery, who man-handled a gun into position and blew the barricade to pieces, scattering the defenders. They then advanced some three-quarters of a mile into the centre of the town, where they found themselves in a large "place." They had hardly reached the farther end when one of the buildings

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four days the Germans had been driven back some twenty miles. Decidedly the surprise provided for them by the British army had been anything but agreeable.

In these four days the British line had been pivoted round from St. Omer to Armentières. However looked at, the feat alike in its swiftness and its energy is remarkable. The numbers engaged on each side, roundly some 150,000 men, had been about equal. Reinforced on the way from the Aisne by fresh drafts from England, the British army had the support of that French cavalry which in combination with our own had rendered such brilliant service at the Battle of the Marne. The German troops were among the best of the enemy's forces, and the operations had shown that, even with the defensive advantages offered by this exceptionally "close" country, they were; on a footing of equality in numbers, no match for the Allies.<sup>1</sup>

suddenly appeared to leap skywards in a sheet of flame, a shower of star shells at the same time making the place as light as day and enabling the enemy—who were ensconced in the surrounding houses—to pour in a devastating fire from rifles and machine guns.

Our cavalry managed to extricate themselves from this trap with a loss of only one officer—the squadron leader—wounded and nine men killed and wounded; but, determining that none of their number should fall into the enemy's hands, a party of volunteers went back and, taking off their boots in order to make no noise on the pavement, re-entered the inferno they had just left, and succeeded in carrying off their wounded comrades.

<sup>1</sup> " On the 15th the 3rd Division fought splendidly, crossing the dykes with which this country is intersected with planks,

As the Belgians had during the opening weeks of the campaign followed out a system of tactics admirably and skilfully adapted to the populous and settled character of the terrain over which the fighting then took place, so the Germans now attempted to resort to similar tactics. They tried to contest the ground foot by foot. They endeavoured to turn every farmhouse into a

and driving the enemy from one entrenched position to another in loopholed villages, till at night they pushed the Germans off the Estaires-La Bassée road, and establishing themselves on the line Pont de Ham-Croix Barbée."—*Dispatch of Sir John French of November 20, 1914.*

An episode of the fighting is thus described in an officer's letter published in the *Daily Telegraph*: "The enemy are no match for us in this kind of fighting, and we enjoyed thoroughly the work of hunting up the Germans, whom we shot down like rabbits. When we reached the outskirts of the wood we came under a terrible artillery fire from the enemy's guns, which were only 800 yards away. I withdrew my men under the cover of a ditch.

"I took eight men and again moved to the outskirts of the wood, where I found a perfectly flat turnip field stretching away towards the enemy. About 300 yards out I saw a line of our infantry lying flat on the ground, and made my way towards them. No sooner did we leave the cover of the wood when the enemy's guns opened up on us.

"It seemed impossible that my little party could escape. Three were almost immediately hit, but we others kept on and reached the line lying in the open. Half a platoon were extended at five paces. To my horror I found all were dead or wounded except about three, who were keeping perfectly still. I found the Subaltern Lieutenant B—— on one knee, with one hand resting on the ground just in the attitude of a runner who is waiting the signal for the start of a race. He was stone dead. A shrapnel bullet had pierced his head.

"The man next him, who was badly wounded in the thigh, told me they were ordered to support the firing line, which was 200 yards ahead, and had only advanced 300 yards from the wood when the entire line was struck down as if by lightning."

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stronghold; to barricade with the debris of buildings every road; they threw garrisons into every works; they loopholed the houses of and placed hidden machine guns in every village; they gathered for a rally behind every canal. The country was swept by fire and devastation.

None of these efforts availed. Nor are the reasons why they did not avail far to seek. Such tactics were wholly at variance with modern German military training. The training aimed at a crushing movement in masses; the tactics to be successful, demanded alertness and initiative. So sudden a change in method and so complete a break with tradition meant, at any rate, that the mass of these German forces were but indifferent practitioners; they might know much of the abstract science but they knew little of the practical art of war. In one thing only were they thorough. They made up for their defects in practical military skill by their energy in plunder and destruction.<sup>1</sup>

They were opposed besides in the British army to troops with whom alertness and initiative were valued as among the highest of military qualities.

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ludwig Tasker, of the R.A.M.C., from the rear of the British line at this date wrote: "Some of the villages are nothing but masses of ruins. We are covering ground passed over by the Germans. They have not left a cupboard or a drawer alone. We respect all property, and when we go where the Germans have been we tidy the things up so that the place looks very much better by the time the people return. Day after day the same thing goes on here—fighting, fighting, fighting, collecting the wounded, and burying the dead."

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Those troops also were expert riflemen. Though standing on the defence under such conditions the Germans ought, like the Belgians at the outset of the war, to have inflicted far heavier losses than they themselves sustained, in fact, owing to the sweeping energy of the attack, their losses were out of all proportion the heavier. Through the defeat at Meteren and the drive of the Allied cavalry towards the Lys, their right flank had been turned, and the result was that they had been "bunched up" by the British in the tangled industrial district to the west of Lille.

Bodies of them still held out at Aubers and at Herlies, two contiguous villages to the south-east of Laventie, but both those places were on October 16 attacked by the troops of the British 2nd Army Corps. This fighting went on amid streets obstructed by barricades, followed by hand to hand combats in the houses. The Germans had now brought up a mass of fresh forces, including their 14th Army Corps, additional battalions of jägers, and four divisions of cavalry. Notwithstanding these reinforcements both Aubers and Herlies were on October 17 carried by storm. In the assault upon Herlies the Lincolns and the Royal Fusiliers, under the command of Brigadier-General Shaw, displayed an undaunted gallantry.

On October 16 the Belgian army from Antwerp reached the Yser, and the British troops covering

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their retreat had arrived to the east of Ypres. Next day four divisions of the French cavalry drove out of the Forest of Hoethuist, north of Ypres, a German force which attempted to cut in between the Belgians and the British. Concurrently, the British line west of Lille was extended down the valley of the Lys as far as Le Ghier opposite to Freninghein, and the army fought forward through three miles of suburbs from Laventie to Bois Grenier and Radinghem, the latter place not more than five miles from the centre of the city.

Such broadly was the situation. The German attempt to overrun western Flanders had not failed merely ; it had collapsed.

## CHAPTER V

### THE BATTLE OF YPRES—SECOND PHASE

IT is true that no line of demarcation divides the operations which resulted in the advance of the British army from St. Omer to Lille, and the operations which followed. Technically they are all one, for the fighting was continuous. At the same time it is advisable for the sake of clearness to consider those operations rather in the nature of a prelude, and the main Battle of Ypres as extending from October 17 to November 15, when the defeat of the Germans was complete.

On October 17 the Allied forces were: the Belgians, who occupied the line of the Yser from Nieuport to Dixmude; two divisions of French territorials, the 87th and the 89th, who had also arrived on October 16 and were at Vlamertynghe and Poperinghe; the French cavalry, who held the ten miles of country between Dixmude and Ypres; the British troops under the command of General Rawlinson, who held a line to the

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east of Ypres extending from Poelcappel through Gheluveld to Zandvoorde; the British cavalry under the command of General Allenby, who had pushed down to the valley of the Lys towards Werwick, three miles above Menin; and finally, the main body of the British force, the 3rd and the 2nd Army Corps, holding a line to the west of Lille from Le Ghier to Herlies, and from there south-west, through the village of Violaines, just outside La Bassee, to Givenchy.

We may anticipate here by saying that on October 19 the detrainment of the 1st British Army Corps, under the command of General Sir Douglas Haig was completed at St. Omer; that on the same date the 10th French Army, under the command of General Maudhuy, reached the line between Ypres and Dixmude; and that on October 20 the first of the Indian troops, the Lahore Division, also arrived at the front.

There were now three armies, the Belgians, the French, and the British, the latter consisting, with the Indians, of four Corps. The 10th French army included a division of Marines from Brest, and a Corps of Moroccans and Senegalese. This was the force, equivalent, with the two bodies of British and French cavalry, to some 320,000 men, on which fell during the ensuing four weeks, the weight of an attack by eighteen German army corps mustering in the aggregate nearly 1,080,000 of all arms.

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These German forces included :

The troops of General von Deimling liberated by the evacuation of Antwerp, among them a division of Marines ;

The army of the Duke of Wurtemberg, comprising the 22nd, the 23rd, part of the 24th, the 26th, and the 27th Reserve (Landwehr) Corps ;

The army of General von Fabeck, consisting of four Corps and one division ;

The army of the Crown Prince of Bavaria, comprising the Prussian Guards, the 4th, 7th, 13th, 14th and 19th Corps ; the 18th Reserve Corps ; and the 1st Bavarian Reserve Corps.<sup>1</sup>

The gathering together of this vast mass of combatants does not appear to have been completed until October 23 or 24. Such delay as occurred; though in fact the massing was carried out at remarkable speed, sprang not from the embodiment of fresh formations, nor from any difficulty in sending them westward from Germany. In order to make up this force which was intended to be another spear head, the

<sup>1</sup> Some of these German army corps were not complete. A French Army Bulletin issued in November last stated that north of the Lys, on October 30, the Germans had fourteen army corps and four corps of cavalry.

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Germans had creamed the whole of their fighting front in the West. Having before them the example of the transfer of the British army from the Aisnè, they had taken a leaf out of the book of the Allies. All save the best of their Reserve Corps had been distributed along their front. These new levies released the more reliable and seasoned men alike of the Active army and of the Landwehr, and the importance of the Battle of Ypres is, apart from other consequences, that it broke or destroyed the best of the remaining troops of Germany.

To begin with; the weight of the German counter-offensive was thrown, not against Ypres, but against the British positions to the west of Lille. Their objective was to secure La Bassee, the little mining town on the northern edge of the coalfield, some eight miles to the south-west of Lille. This point it is now clear they intended to make the immediate pivot on which to swing round their northern front. As the British positions at this time stood, communication between Lille and La Bassee by the main road was cut. There is another point it is insistent to notice. La Bassee lies at the end of one of the promontories of the inland "coastline." It was already held by the Germans and the spur had been strongly entrenched.

Yet another reason dictated the plan. One of the evident objects of the British operations was to push down the Lys and seize the crossing

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and railway junction at Menin. That would not only have gravely embarrassed the German occupation of Lille, but would equally have embarrassed a development of their attack between the Lys and the coast.

Menin, of course, could only be seized and held before the main mass of the German forces came up. Accordingly, Sir John French on October 17 directed Sir Henry Rawlinson to move from his position east of Ypres and attack the place. The distance from the British line then at Gheluvelt to Menin was not more than five miles. No doubt the move would have left the country to the east of Ypres for the time being open. The importance, however, of occupying Menin appeared fully to justify the taking of such a risk. Sir Henry Rawlinson moved forward to the attack, but it was not pressed. Concerning this matter Sir John French says in his dispatch :

Instructions for a vigorous attempt to establish the British Forces east of the Lys were given on the night of the 17th to the Second, Third, and Cavalry Corps.

I considered, however, that the possession of Menin constituted a very important point of passage, and would much facilitate the advance of the rest of the Army. So I directed the General Officer Commanding the Fourth Corps to advance the 7th Division upon Menin, and endeavour to seize that crossing on the morning of the 18th.

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The left of the 7th Division was to be supported by the 3rd Cavalry Brigade, and further north by the French Cavalry in the neighbourhood of Roulers.

Sir Henry Rawlinson represented to me that large hostile forces were advancing upon him from the east and north-east, and that his left flank was severely threatened.

I was aware of the threats from that direction, but hoped that at this particular time there was no greater force coming from the north-east than could be held off by the combined efforts of the French and British cavalry and the Territorial troops supporting them until the passage at Menin could be seized and the First Corps brought up in support.

Sir Henry Rawlinson probably exercised a wise judgment in not committing his troops to this attack in their somewhat weakened condition; but the result was that the enemy's continued possession of the passage at Menin certainly facilitated his rapid reinforcement of his troops and thus rendered any further advance impracticable.

On the morning of October 20 the 7th Division and 3rd Cavalry Division had retired to their old position extending from Zandvoorde through Kruseik and Gheluvelt to Zonnebeke.

Proving abortive, this effort must have served to some extent at all events to disclose to the enemy the British general's intentions, and must in consequence have been of material assistance in deciding upon his dispositions. In justice to Sir Henry Rawlinson it is necessary to

point out that his position was by no means an easy one to maintain. As Sir John French states :

A very difficult task was allotted to Sir Henry Rawlinson and his command. Owing to the importance of keeping possession of all the ground towards the north which we already held, it was necessary for him to operate on a very wide front, and, until the arrival of the First Corps in the northern theatre—which I expected about the 20th—I had no troops available with which to support or reinforce him.

Although on this extended front he had eventually to encounter very superior forces, his troops, both Cavalry and Infantry, fought with the utmost gallantry, and rendered very signal service.

The army of the Crown Prince of Bavaria was at this time opposed to the British between the line of the Lys and Lille, and it was along the ten miles between La Bassee and Freninghein, amid a mass of almost continuous industrial villages, that the clash of the great battle began. Outnumbered by nearly three to one, the British troops were subjected to an incessant series of desperate assaults. It was clear that the rapid success of the British operations during the preceding week, as well as the collapse of the German projects, had stung the enemy to fury. The attacks began against Herlies and Aubers, villages north of the La Bassee spur, and themselves built along the tops or straggling down the slopes of

## The Battle of Ypres—Second Phase 65

two minor promontories. Beaten off with heavy loss to the enemy, these attacks were, regardless of the punishment received, renewed both by day and by night. The villages were reduced by the German artillery to ruins. Amid these ruins, however, and in the trenches cut for the defence, the British troops held out. In repulsing one of these attacks the Royal Irish, with magnificent dash, and burning to give the enemy a real taste of their quality, fought across the spur to Le Pilly, driving the Germans before them like as though their advance was that of a column of irresistible demons. In Le Pilly they entrenched themselves. They had gone so far forward, however, in the impetus of the pursuit that they were cut off from communication with the rest of the British force. They fought until their last cartridge was used up. For more than thirty hours they held out, surrounded by masses of Germans on all sides. Sheer famine at the finish compelled them, and their gallant commander, Major Daniell, to surrender.

Instead of diminishing, the German attacks increased in violence. Every successive repulse seemed only to add to the rage of their commanders. For four days and nights these onsets followed one upon another. To describe these but a little while before peaceful suburbs of Lille, now cut and blown into wreckage and swept by the fire and hurricane of war, as a hell is to put it mildly. The days and nights were days

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and nights of dismal darkness and rain. Foiled in the effort by a frontal attack to drive the British once more across the Lys, the Germans, now supported by the arrival of additional masses, developed their assault to the east and north of Ypres. On October 20 they captured Le Gheir, but were on the same day driven out of the place again with heavy loss. This important crossing of the Lys is the most direct route from Lille to Ypres.

In view of the heavy attack which by this time had been launched towards the flank position of the 3rd Army Corps at Le Gheir, the British cavalry were dismounted and put into the fighting line to fill the gap of some four miles still existing between Le Gheir and Zandvoorde to the south of Ypres. Throwing aside the sabre for the rifle and bayonet and the spade, the cavalry promptly dug themselves in, and proved as valiant in the trenches as they had time and again shown themselves in the saddle. They were a thin line of less than one man to the yard. Thin as it was, however, it turned out to be a line of steel.

On October 20 the 1st British Army Corps reached Ypres from St. Omer. They had covered the intervening twenty-five miles in one long day's tramp. It had been intended to send them in co-operation with the French cavalry forward to Thourout, and possibly on to Bruges. This scheme had to be abandoned.

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On October 22 the battle became general from La Bassee to Dixmude. Following upon a terrific bombardment, a powerful column of the enemy, debouching from La Bassee, attempted in mass formation to rush the trenches held by the Wiltshires and the Manchester Regiment at Violaines. The attack never got home. The mass of the enemy, something like 6,000 strong, thrown into confusion by the deadly fire from the trenches, broke and fled. They were rallied and reformed from supports. A second time the assault was launched. It met with no better fortune.

In the meantime an attack in enormous force had been hurled against the positions held by the 3rd British Army Corps. This attack, one of the bloodiest episodes of the battle, also failed. The Germans, nevertheless, had got across the Lys at Warneton and at Comines, two miles farther down stream, and, forming behind the railway, which here runs on an embankment along the valley to the north of the river, advanced in overwhelming force upon Messines and Houthem. Though offering a desperate resistance, the British cavalry were forced to retire as far as Hollebeke and Wytscheate. Part of the Indian troops, the 7th Division, sent to their support, delivered a brilliant flank attack on the Germans from Wulverghem. The Germans held the ground they had gained, but their onset was paralysed.

The British front had now been dented in.

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In consequence it became necessary to reform it. The line was withdrawn. From Givenchy the positions extended to the high road running from Violaines through Neuve Chapelle to Armentières, and then through Armentières across the Lys to Wytscheate. This is, in fact, the main road from La Bassee to Ypres.

Disposed along a line from Bixschoote through Langemaark on the north of Ypres, the troops of the British 1st Army Corps were attacked by the whole strength of the army of General von Fabeck. The resistance opposed to these enormous odds was heroic. Time and again the attacks made in mass formation were beaten back. Upon the Prussian commanders the frightful losses suffered by their troops, who fell not man by man, but by ranks and companies, appeared to make no impression. A combined infantry and artillery attack drove the French cavalry across the Ypres and Nieuport canal. The British line had then to be retired. Under heavy fire the Cameron Highlanders dug themselves in at Pilkem on the canal two miles to the north of Ypres. At the end of a day of awful carnage the Germans at this point made a last desperate effort. They got at length up to the line of the trenches, hastily made to meet the exigencies of the moment. It came to the bayonet, with this comparative handful of British heroes against a mass of foes maddened by their losses. The Highlanders fought like lions. At the cold steel the

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Germans were no match for them. Nothing but their dauntless courage and their military superiority saved them from being totally wiped out. Out of that terrible fray the remnant of them retired, bloodstained and with bloodstained arms, but fierce and unconquerable, opposing a sullen front still to the enemy who, having at a fearful price won the position, had been too punished to follow up the advantage.

These trenches at Pilkem, it is interesting to note, were the nearest point at which during any part of the battle the Germans approached to Ypres. The enemy, however, did not enjoy his dearly-bought advantage long. At daybreak an attack upon the Germans was made by the Queens, the Northhamptons, and the King's Own Rifles. The enemy had occupied the night clearing the trenches of the dead, mostly their own dead, with which they were choked. For so prompt a counter-attack they were evidently not prepared. In the cold grey of this October dawn they suddenly saw these lines of khaki detach themselves from the mist. It was like a bad dream, but it turned in a flash into a fiery reality. The British infantry were into them with the bayonet. Led by General Bulfin, who had proved on the Aisne that he was the man for a tight corner, the British brigade were out to retake those trenches. Of British bayonet work these German troops had already seen enough. There was a scene, as they endeavoured

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to rally, of mad rage and confusion ; the shouts and curses of their officers mingling with the roar of conflict, and the clash of steel on steel in the savage work of thrust and parry. German reinforcements were hurried up. The line of fighting men, their own troops in retreat, the British pressing on the rear, met the reinforcements as they advanced. With this fresh mass to deal with, the British troops in turn were forced backwards. They fought with a bulldog tenacity, and once more the Germans gave way. By the end of the day, despite repeated attacks upon them, the British were masters of the position.

Even now the weight of such a battle as this was severe, and yet it was to go on for another twenty-six days. On October 22 General Joffre visited the British Head-quarters. The result was the arrival on this, the 23rd of October, of the 9th French Army Corps. This reinforcement was sorely needed. On the east of Ypres the line was drawn perilously thin. From Zandvoorde round to Peolcappel it was held only by the 7th Division of infantry under Major-General Capper, and by the 3rd Cavalry Division, commanded by Major-General Byng. The cavalry, like the rest of the British mounted force, had gone into the trenches, or, rather, into hastily-made lines of fire-cover. Somewhat remarkably, the Germans had not been quick to discover the relative weakness of this part of the front. So

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far they had thrown the weight and fury of their attack against the north and south. Their mistake undoubtedly arose from the bold tactics adopted by the British Commander-in-Chief. On the east of Ypres he had kept up a show of counter-attack. The 7th Division had, on the 21st, made a bound forward to Passchendaele, on the way to Roulers. This, following upon the movement towards Menin, had evidently led the enemy to suppose that here was the strongest part of the British line. In plain language, the enemy had been most successfully "bluffed." As a consequence, the Germans opposite the 7th Division remained on the defensive, and there was gained a respite, if a bitter and incessant bombardment can so be called, of nearly two days. The interval was beyond estimate valuable. It enabled the 9th French Army Corps to take up part of the vastly too extended position held by these British forces, who had been spaced out over some six miles of country at the rate of considerably less than one man to the yard—a single line without reserves of any kind.

Following upon their arduous march from Ghent, during which, covering the retreat of the Belgian army, they had fought a rearguard action for the greater part of the way, the 7th Division had, since October 17, been almost incessantly engaged. Even the toughest of British troops—and these were among the toughest toughs in the army—would feel the worse for wear after

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such an experience. It had indeed approached "the limit"—as the limit was understood before the Battle of Ypres.

Picture the situation. These British and French troops in their hastily made trenches had not only masses of the enemy in front of them—masses thrown forward in dense columns of attack, which at all hazards they had to break—but the roar of battle in their rear, and from minute to minute they could not tell how the fortune of battle in their rear was going. They could only hope that their comrades, too, were "sticking it." Overhead was the almost incessant flight and ear-splitting explosions of shells, an indescribable din. To right and left flared the burning ruins of houses and villages. An acrid smoke rolled over the awful scene, darkening the grey sky with its lowering pall. In this pallid light and amid the contending thunders of the cannon, a monstrous chorus from hundreds of iron throats, the grey-green ranks of the enemy would suddenly swarm out of their trenches, and their savage yells mingling with their volleys, would try to dash across the intervening space, 200, sometimes not more than 100 yards. To reach the British trenches was a matter not of minutes; it was a matter of seconds. How were such rushes to be stopped? The only way was for these British infantrymen to sit tight and give them fifteen rounds "rapid"—fifteen rounds in less than as many seconds,

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rounds in which every bullet found its billet. The hostile mass came on trampling over its dying and its dead, but it was ragged and it grew more ragged with every one of those successive blasts of death. Then it became a mere torn remnant, then it wavered. Its fury was gone; its courage was gone; the driving power of its ruthless officers was gone; the fear of disciplinary punishment was gone; all were swallowed up in the instinctive love of life. A lightning rush back to cover to avoid that devastating hail of lead swept every protester off his feet. From first to last such an episode would be measured in time by minutes. Into those minutes, however, seemed crowded an eternity of experience. In circumstances like these the sole thought of the soldier is his individual duty. He feels with an absorbing intensity that the issue depends upon him doing it even to the death. In that feeling lies the glorious "joy of battle."

All round Ypres was ringed with these contending fires. The heaviest pressure of the German attack, however, was still on the sector of the front between Armentières and La Bassee. It was plainly hoped that if success attended this onset, the retirement of the whole of the British, French and Belgian forces to the north of it must follow, and strategically that must have been the result, for if the 2nd British Army Corps had given way, neither Ypres nor the line of

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the Yser could have been held. In the accounts which have been given hitherto of the battle, attention has mostly been directed to its later stages when the attack developed against Ypres from the east, but the vital combat which went far to secure the eventual victory was the death grapple between the 2nd Army Corps and the masses of Prince Ruprecht's Army thrown against them west of Lille. These troops of the 2nd British Army Corps had been fighting almost day and night since October 11, that is up to this time for twelve days, and it had been impossible to afford them any relief.

Along this sector of the front the 2nd and 3rd Corps of the British Army were opposed to eight corps of Germans. That immense superiority in numbers enabled the enemy to keep up an unbroken succession of assaults by a system of reliefs. Costly in life to the enemy though such tactics were, he was evidently convinced that under this strain the British must inevitably break. The fighting raged through this now desolated area of ruined houses and wrecked roads. Roofless, with great gaps torn in their walls by shells, the smashed remains of furniture mixed up with fallen and broken beams, splintered doors, and battered stairways, often the scenes of bitter hand-to-hand duels, the houses bordering the streets littered and obstructed by window-shutters shot-riddled and blown off their hinges, piles and fragments of bricks, slates and

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glass, the shapeless remains of chimneys and other flotsam of ruin. In face of the hostile pressure the British line had had to be drawn back on to the lower ground of the valley. This withdrawal, however, had tightened up and strengthened it, and the whole position was without question saved through General Smith-Dorrien making that necessary and prudent move in the right time.<sup>1</sup>

How the Devons at a decisive point of the line covered this retirement and beat off a furious German attack is told by one of the officers of the corps. He says:

On the night of October 22, we advanced a bit and dug ourselves more or less in by dawn, and soon after light we saw great masses of German infantry emerge from woods and hedges some 1,000 yards to our front, and advance to attack us. We opened fire on them, and killed dozens.

<sup>1</sup> The German attack against the Lincolns in the village of Herlies and the retirement of that corps is described in a letter from Corporal E. Clark to Major Haggard, Chairman of the Veterans' Club. Corporal Clark says: ". . . We found ourselves surrounded in the shape of a horseshoe, the enemy firing at us from all angles. We just got the order to retire when a shell struck the trench in front, a piece catching me on the nose and burying me, but I managed to crawl out nearly blind, and started to retire under a murderous rifle fire. No one could realise what it was like unless actually there. Men were crawling about like ants trying to reach safety, but it was only luck for those that did. I managed to get to a wood, where I found a number of wounded, and waited until the firing cooled down, when we chanced it over the river, getting there as best we could, the Germans shelling the bridge the whole time, also a railway cutting, in which we got for shelter."

This was answered by the Germans with a tremendous shell fire from their heavy guns. The Devons were perfectly wonderful; not a man left his trench. All day long the battle raged, and you never saw such an inferno. By night the place was a mass of fire, smoke, dead, and dying. All night they attacked us. Sometimes they got right up to our trenches, only to be hurled back by the Devons' bayonets. Dawn broke on the 24th with the same struggle still going on, and it continued all day and night, and all through the 25th. We never slept a wink, and by night we were absolutely done. No humans could have done more.

The men were perfectly splendid, and repulsed every attack, with great loss to the enemy. We were relieved at 1 a.m. on October 26, and as we marched back a mile into billets all the troops cheered us frantically. General Smith-Dorrien sent a wire congratulating us on our splendid fight. We heard officially from Divisional Head-quarters that there were 1,000 dead Germans in front of our trenches. The whole place was littered with their dead.

On October 24 the Indian troops under the command of General Watkis were sent to Lacon, three miles in the rear of the front, as a reserve. In the evening of that day, a day like those preceding it of dismal rain, the Germans made an exceptional effort. With the advantage of the bad and failing light, which it was probably hoped would confuse the British rifle fire, a thing they had now learned to dread, they delivered

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a massed assault in enormous force. The attack was made simultaneously by three columns directed one against the trenches held by the Wiltshires above Givenchy; the second against the trenches held by the Royal West Kents; and the third against the position of the Gordons at the farther end of the line near Fauquissart. The first two attacks failed completely. The third had a temporary success. The Gordons, with odds which no skill with the rifle could overcome, were driven from their trenches. This was undoubtedly the chief point of the German onset. While the struggle was going on the Middlesex regiment had been ordered up to support. They arrived nearly as soon as the Germans had seized the position. Darkness had now come on. Shaken by their heavy losses, the Germans were not prepared for this practically instantaneous counter-attack. They did not know what was behind it. The Middlesex regiment appeared to spring at them out of the ground. Though elated at their victory they were exhausted. For aught they could tell other forces were at the back of these. The fight was fierce but brief. The end of it saw the enemy flying back into the night to escape the deadly bayonets wielded with what seemed almost superhuman energy. The attack added another blank to Prince Ruprecht's record.

In the meantime persistent attacks had been kept up on the position of the 3rd Corps along

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the railway from Laventie to Armentières, as well as on the line held by the Cavalry Corps along the hills from Wytscheate to Zandvoorde. It was the evident intention of the Germans to seize this ridge as dominating the British position in Ypres. Along this sector they were massed in great strength. Shortened, however, as it now was the front held. The struggle round the village of Hollebeke was to the last degree desperate. The line, however, of the Indian troops along the high road from Armentières to Wytscheate still menaced this German attack in flank, and materially helped the Cavalry Corps to hold its ground.

In view of this failure of the onslaught from the south, the enemy on October 25 renewed his attack in strength against the line of the 1st British Army Corps to the north of Ypres, and combined it with yet another onset south of Ypres against the trenches held by the Cavalry Corps. It was deemed prudent to reinforce part of the line here from the Reserve of French Territorials. Those of the cavalry whom they replaced were withdrawn and concentrated at Zillebeke to the north of the Zandvoorde ridge.

Apparently the losses and the confusion arising from the defeat of the great assault of the evening before (October 24) made it impossible for the Germans to renew their efforts on this day (October 25) against the front from Armentières to La Bassee. Their only success in the fighting

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of the 25th was the capture of the trenches held by the Leicestershire Regiment whom they had managed to overwhelm.

We now come to a lull in the battle. It had gone on along the southern sector of the front since October 17, and along the whole front since October 22. During the last three days more especially the Germans had exerted their total strength. They had incurred a terrible sacrifice of life, and so far the only result, a miserable result for such a price, had been the slight retirement of the British line to the west of Lille, and a foothold across the Lys to the south of Ypres.

It is not surprising therefore that for the time being they ceased their attacks while they moved up additional forces. These were not merely to repair losses but to add to the mass and momentum of the onset. None of the objects sought by this battle had been gained, nor did any one of them appear to any nearer of attainment.

The position from the German side is reflected in the army order which on October 26 Prince Ruprecht issued to his troops. Copies of it were afterwards found on dead German officers of his army. "You have been fighting," he told them, "under very difficult conditions. It is our business now not to let the struggle with our most detested enemy drag on longer. The decisive blow has still to be struck."

The Kaiser at this time came to Courtrai and

Thielt to supervise the massing of his legions, and went round their billets and cantonments making a succession of speeches. Everything was done to fortify their determination, and heighten their ardour. A general army order was issued reminding them that "the thrust against Ypres" was of decisive importance. On October 29 the mighty mass of a front extending from Lille to the coast was judged to have been refitted and in every respect ready for the final and irresistible blow.

On his side Sir John French had made use of the interval to reform and tighten his line. The comparatively weak spot to the east of Ypres was stiffened, and if this lull was necessary to the enemy it proved of equal advantage to the Allies, and opposed to the enemy's intended final blow a new set of difficulties.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE BATTLE OF YPRES—THE CRISIS

THE critical phase of the great battle began on October 29. Its feature is that not only was the mass of the German force now at its maximum, but that the weight of the attack shifted from the part of the British front between La Bassee and Armentières to the centre of the British line to the south and east of Ypres. It is this phase which has been commonly called the Battle of Ypres. Except, however, as a phase, it is in no sense distinguished from the earlier fighting.

On the third day (October 31) the struggle to the east and south of Ypres reached its crisis. From that date, notwithstanding that efforts and desperate efforts continued to be made by the enemy, his defeat was in truth assured. He had shot his bolt, and shot it in vain.

To the strategical reasons which induced the Germans to throw the chief force of their attack in the first place against the right of the British line to the west of Lille, reference has already

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been made, and those reasons are sufficiently clear. The reasons which induced the Germans to shift it to the south and south-east of Ypres are not so obvious. Indeed, the only acceptable explanation is that their severe defeat on October 24 caused such discouragement that the plan of forcing the right of the British position was given up as impracticable.

In order to reach Ypres from the south it was necessary to win the ridge, while to reach Ypres from the east it was necessary to penetrate the almost continuous belt of woods. These woods presented an obstacle which made the organisation of the huge mass attacks, in favour with the reigning school of German tacticians, almost out of the question. Sir John French as we have seen took advantage of these features of the country skilfully to economise his force, and at the same time to conceal that fact and mislead the enemy. The Germans it is evident had by October 26 found out their mistake. They discovered that west of Lille they had been running their heads against a stone wall, and deceived by the aspects and features of the country, had been neglecting what they now considered had been a comparatively easy entrance.

When they changed their plans, however, they made yet another mistake—that of thinking or rather of presuming that the British dispositions would remain unaltered.

Through the woods to the east of Ypres there

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is one great main road. Beginning at Menin—that town is just on the Belgian side of the French frontier—this broad, well-paved highway runs nearly straight as an avenue into Ypres.<sup>1</sup> The distance is ten miles. From Ypres the great road is continued towards the coast until at Furnes it joins on to the great road which runs along the coast from Ostend through Nieuport, Dunkirk, and Gravelines to Calais.

The importance of Menin lay in the fact that not only do several lines of railway branch out from that place southwards into France, including the railways to Lille, which is not more than ten miles away, but that it was the starting-point of this great road. Ypres again is the starting-point of a converging great road to Dunkirk. It may be remarked generally that the great main roads of Flanders run across the country from inland to the sea, and not along the country parallel with the sea. There are certain nodal points in this road system. In West Flanders, Ypres is the chief of those points. If we study the disposition of the Allied forces at this time with reference to the lines of communication, it will be seen both that they barred access to Ypres, and that west of Lille they were astride of, and therefore rendered useless to the enemy, the main line of railway from Lille to Calais. On that

<sup>1</sup> There is only one slight bend in this road, that at the hamlet of Hooge, a mile and a half out of Ypres, but this bend proved, as will be seen, of considerable tactical importance.

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line Bailleul, Hazebrouck, and St. Omer are alike situated. The German advance, checked and thrown back by the unexpected appearance of the British from the Aisne, was an advance intended both to master the main line of railway, and the road system.

For a distance of some three miles the avenue from Menin to Ypres runs through the belt of woods. Six miles from Menin and four from Ypres it passes through the village of Gheluvelt, cresting there the ridge of hills. A mile to the east of Gheluvelt, and five miles from Menin, a road branches off the main avenue to Werwick on the Lys, and, on the opposite side of the avenue here there is a cross road of no great consequence, save that it serpentines northward through the belt of woodland until it joins the main road from Ypres to Bruges. Trivial, therefore, as a public way, this cross-road was of considerable military value, since it gave access to some five miles or more of the woods.

It may be added that just by these cross-roads, east of Gheluvelt, there is a small outer ridge or rise called the hill of Kruyseik, after the village of that name lying in the hollow, and that over the main crest at Gheluvelt, and between that point and Ypres there is another rise or ridge. Behind this, on the side towards Ypres, lies the village of Zillebeke. Across the hills, again, to the south of Ypres and between that city and the

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Lys, there are two somewhat zigzag minor roads. The first of these passes through the village of Zandvoorde, and the second through the village of Hollebeke. Then further west we come to the main road running due south from Ypres to Armentières. Along this road, some two and a half miles out of Ypres, is St. Eloi, and two miles farther on Wytscheate.

These topographical details may appear minute, but they have to be understood because they show that, to get into Ypres from the south and south-east, the Germans had as lines of attack these four routes : the main avenue from Menin ; the road through Zandvoorde ; the road through Hollebeke ; and the road through Wytscheate and St. Eloi ; and it will be found that in fact their attacks were made along those lines.

Shrewdly foreseeing such a development of the battle, Sir John French, on October 27, unified the immediate command of the troops on his eastern front by adding them to the 1st Army Corps. They were redistributed in order to meet the probable weight of the coming assault which was almost certainly to be looked for along the main avenue from Menin. The line, in fact, was tightened up.

The 7th Division was disposed along a line some two miles in length from Zandvoorde to the Menin avenue, and held the Hill of Kruyseik.

The 1st Division continued the line from this point northwards and along the outer or eastern

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fringe of the belt of woods to near the village of Reytel.

The 2nd Division continued the line, also along the outer fringe of the woods, to Zonnebeke.

Altogether these troops, some 50,000 strong, occupied a front of about six miles. It was an exceptionally strong position, affording among other things first-rate shelter for the guns. Bearing in mind, however, that they were preparing to meet an assault from nearly ten times their own number, supported by an enormously superior strength in artillery, no precaution could be neglected.

The dispositions just outlined were made only just in time. At daybreak, on October 29, the attack began. The three divisions, all of them seasoned veterans, had hardly dug themselves in when a terrific bombardment opened. Since their trenches were practically invisible, this bombardment proved more noisy than harmful. It was the prelude to the advance along the Menin road of an enormous German column. Flank and supporting columns advanced at the same time along the road to Zandvoorde, and the minor roads north of the main avenue to Reytel and Zonnebeke. The attack was pressed along almost the whole front with the greatest determination. Its principal object was to secure the Kruyseik Hill, and with it the road junction east of Gheluveld. By weight of numbers, and despite heavy losses—the terms used with regard

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to German losses in this battle may appear to be exaggeration, but in fact they are not—the enemy succeeded in capturing the Kruseik Hill. That was about two in the afternoon, after a struggle lasting nearly eight hours.

With the capture of the hill, they were able to assault the British line north of the Menin road in flank, and at this point they broke it. Elsewhere, however, along the front their onset had been disastrous. When close to the British lines they wavered under the almost unbroken fire from the trenches, General Sir Douglas Haig gave the order for a general counter-attack. Looking only for a "passive resistance," the Germans were taken wholly by surprise. They tried to rally, but in vain. The shock threw their columns into confusion, and their whole front gave way. In the impetus the British troops rushed and retook the Kruseik Hill by storm. In the captured trenches across the main road to the north of it a body of the enemy, though raked by fire in front and in flank, held out until nightfall, when nearly the whole of them had been killed or wounded. The trenches were recovered, and the survivors taken prisoners.

Beaten in the attempt to advance from Menin, the enemy the same night renewed the battle in an endeavour to retake Le Gheir on the Lys and to break the front at that point. The attack proved a total failure, though the British position was here astride of the river, and consequently

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from the tactical standpoint weak. At midnight a huge column of 12,000 men was hurled against the trenches held at Croix Marechal by the Middlesex Regiment. They came on with the greatest determination. Part of the trenches fell into their hands. The Middlesex, however, with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders who had been hurried forward to their support, began a counter-attack. This fight, one of the bitterest episodes of the battle, went on through the night. The scene lighted up luridly and fitfully by star shell and flares, by the flashing volleys of the rifles, and by the explosions from minute to minute of shrapnel, was at once weird and awful. The Germans were raked by a destructive fire from both flanks. As fast, however, as they fell others rushed into the trench line from their rear. So for nearly four hours the slaughter and the combat went on. At any price the enemy appeared resolved to hold this advantage. But towards daybreak the British infantry, having steadily closed in, rushed forward. The line of trenches, now choked with German dying and dead, was recaptured at the point of the bayonet. Fighting to the last gasp, not more than forty uninjured Germans were taken prisoners. The rout of the great column was driven back upon the hostile lines beyond the railway.

While this struggle to the death was taking place at Croix Marechal, the enemy was gathering his forces for another onslaught of unparalleled

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magnitude. It began at dawn on October 30, and was an effort to fight across the hills by way of Zandvoorde and Hollebeke. In this there were employed five German army corps, aggregating nearly 300,000 men. Opposed to them along this line were the British troops of the 7th Division and the Cavalry Division, less than a tenth of their number. The advance along the Menin road and through the woods having turned out to be too difficult, the Germans were now at last trying this way. Once more the onset was supported by a mighty bombardment, and once more the bombardment did comparatively little damage. What told was the weight of numbers. The attack came forward in two enormous masses. That thrown against Zandvoorde comprised three army corps, the 13th and 15th Prussians, and the 2nd Bavarians. That thrown against Hollebeke comprised two corps. A special Army Order had been issued telling the troops that the Kaiser considered the success of this attack to be of vital importance to the issue of the war, and, indeed, for the reasons already shown, it was. Of course and conversely its failure affected the issue of the war not less vitally.

Forward and up the southern slopes of the ridge these masses, fortified by the Imperial order, swarmed in numbers that appeared to be countless, for to the eye even 100,000 men looks a multitude innumerable. The British gunners,

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pushing their guns forward daringly for greater effect, lashed them with a storm of shrapnel; the thin line in the British trenches shot them until the rifles were red hot. They went down not in hundreds, but in thousands. Still they came on, crushing under their boots dead and dying indifferently. It was the supreme manifestation of the Will to Power; the climax of the War-lord's method of making war. Such numbers could not be finished in the time. When those in front wavered under the swishing lash of leaden death, those behind pushed them on. They surged onwards like the waves of a rising tide. Doubtless this sounds mere imagination. It is, however, but the feeblest reflection of the truth. There was nothing for it except, while time yet allowed, for the 3rd Cavalry Division, who were holding the trenches on the ridge east of Zandvoorde, to decamp, and to decamp in a hurry. Likely enough, the Germans were astonished to discover the comparatively contemptible handful who had offered such a daring defence. The woods just to the rear of the British trenches aided the escape of these heroes. Relatively their casualties had been few. With the nimbleness of Redskins they disappeared among the tree trunks as the grey-green flood of the enemy, seeing their retreat, surged forward in a last rush and with a roar of triumph, sending after them a hail of in the main futile bullets. Through the woods of the mile of intervening

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valley to the Kleine Zillebeke ridge, the British raced from one cover to another, keeping up a lively fire from every point from which the enemy on the main ridge were in view. This seems to have given the impression that the little valley was crowded with skirmishers, a gentry for whom the Germans had by now imbibed a wholesome respect. They halted accordingly on the Zandvoorde ridge to reform.

This pause was fatal, and it is not too much to say that at that moment the issue of the battle lay upon the knees of the gods. The pause enabled Sir Douglas Haig to re-establish his line. The fateful moment had passed, and the grey-faced Emperor waiting anxiously in Courtrai for the news that was to make him master of Europe was little conscious that the scale of fate had gone down against him.

Yet it had. The British line was re-formed from Gheluveld along the Kleine Zillebeke ridge to the Ypres and Lille canal at the point where alongside the Ypres and Lille railway it enters the deep cutting in which both canal and railway are carried across the main ridge of hills. The strength of this position lay in the fact that behind it was an area of woodland nearly two miles in depth. Along the bottom of the valley or depression separating these woods from those on the opposite slope lay a space of cleared land. This afforded a good field of fire. On the other hand, the woods

on the opposite slope made it impossible to organise an attack in the immense mass in which the Germans had swarmed over the cleared top of the ridge they now held.

The position now taken up by the British troops was, therefore, strong, and had been chosen with a good judgment and a practical eye. Besides that, the line was stiffened. It was intended to hold this position "at all costs." In the front trenches were the troops of the 1st Division and the 4th Brigade. The 2nd Brigade formed an immediately supporting line. A battalion was placed in the woods as a reserve.

The Germans, however, did not forthwith press their advance, but contented themselves, for the time being, with making good their position on the main ridge. This, as already pointed out, was a fatal mistake. To render the British line more secure, and to strengthen its weak point—that nearest the canal—three infantry battalions and a cavalry brigade were transferred from the 9th French Army Corps.

We now come to the concurrent German attack against Hollebeke. The British trenches at Hollebeke were held by the 2nd Cavalry Division; those on the right to the south-west and towards Messines by the 1st Cavalry Division. This comparative handful of men had had to be spaced out over four miles of country. They were but a single line, less than a man, on the average, to every two yards, and yet they had to face the

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onset of two army corps of the best troops of Germany!

Since the front towards Hollebeke was too narrow for the employment of such a mass of the enemy with effect, and since, too, this attack was in fact a turning movement destined to assist the chief thrust through Zandvoorde, the onset here forked, one tremendous column pressing north towards Hollebeke and the other west towards Wytscate.

It might well be supposed that with their weight of numbers the Germans would have walked, or rather have romped, over the barrier. Instead of that the cavalry of the 2nd Division held on to their trenches, defeating assault after assault from daybreak until afternoon. They were at last, spent with the conflict, forced to give way. Meanwhile Sir John French had reached the front. At a glance he took in the crisis of the position. Two regiments of the 3rd Cavalry Division were rushed along the line to the 2nd Division's support. Two battalions of the 7th Indian Division were also held to meet the emergency. At the same time the London Scottish Territorials and four battalions of the 2nd British Army Corps were ordered forward to Neuve Eglise for the like purpose. During the lull in the battle already referred to, from October 27 to October 29, Sir John French had placed the Indian Army Corps in the positions on the right of his line to the west of Lille, then occupied

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by his 2nd Army Corps. The latter were exhausted by fourteen days of continuous hard fighting. They were now available as a general reserve. The value and the necessity of this precaution is too manifest to need emphasis.

Re-formed as the line now was a little beyond Hollebeke, it continued the front across the ridge from the Ypres and Lille canal to near Messines. This section of the front was important for two reasons. In the first place it barred the Germans off the main road from Lille to Ypres. In the second place it prevented the enemy from turning the position of the troops commanded by Sir Douglas Haig by cutting their communications with Ypres. That, of course, formed one of the objectives of this attack. Another was to obtain the command both of the main road and of the Ypres and Lille railway. At Hollebeke and even now just beyond it the British were astride the railway line.

With objects like these in view it is easy to infer that the onset was pressed with all the vigour at the enemy's command. He had on this section alone nearly 500 guns. These, both supporting and in the intervals between his massed infantry attacks, poured upon the trenches and behind them in order to keep reinforcements at bay, constant squalls of shrapnel. Because less than 5,000 men were here resisting more than 100,000, and continued to resist them all that day and all through the succeeding night, and

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all through the next day and all through the following night also, and because at the end of that, in truth, indescribable time, though the storm of the hostile guns never ceased, and infantry attack after infantry attack drove forward, only to melt into bloody confusion and wreck before the terrible power of the magazine rifle handled by resolute and veteran soldiers, it must not be supposed that the energy and the ferocity of the enemy were less than both had often before proved to be. The Germans had never fought with greater determination. Their defeat arose from the attempt to ride rough-shod over this apparently feeble line of defence by sheer weight of numbers. The British fought not merely with skill, but with the skill of masters. The Germans, confident in their seemingly crushing strength, fought without patience, and with the clumsiness of amateurs. They aimed at a speedy and a showy triumph. In spite of all their military apparatus and machinery, and of their precision in drill, they fought, in fact, like a mob, and like a mob in such circumstances their losses were frightful. Not only the defects of their military system—its exaltation of the machine, and its depression of the man—were here exposed, but the still worse and superimposed defects of their latest ideas of tactics. Ignoring the realities as distinguished from the mere appearances of modern war, these ideas were the ideas of fantasy. To train men as an

army, to employ them in battle as a mob, and, as a result, to look for victory, is of all notions the nearest akin to dementia.

A conflict with these odds, and with this outcome has never before occurred in modern war. Nothing like it, indeed, has occurred in war since Leonidas and his Spartans defended the Pass of Thermopylæ. This fight was the Thermopylæ of modern times. It is no fanciful comparison. There was the same heroic devotion and military brilliance on the one side; there was the same use of a vast army as a mob on the other. In spirit and in method the military systems of ancient Persia and of modern Prussia are by no means as far apart as the distance in time might lead us to suppose. The story of these heroes of the British cavalry ought to be remembered as long as in any part of the world there is a man of British stock who cherishes a love for the islands of his origin, and can thrill to the splendours of their story.

Of the onset made by the Bavarian Army Corps against Wytscheate a correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* contributed an admirable record. This witness states :

The perilous stroke smote the British line just south of Ypres, and, as luck would have it, was adequately lit up by a silver moonlight. The dense masses of Bavarian infantry sprang up with one accord. Their pale uniforms and bayonets were lit up by the ghostly light, and formed a

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strange and terrifying picture, for the attacking line stretched far, and was supported by numerous small columns in reserve. The sight of this concerted advance in the night was highly picturesque and impressive, but it failed to shake the nerves of our stalwart cavalry.

Exposing their flank to sheets of fire from the neighbourhood of Ypres, the Bavarians pressed bravely forward, but all the while the steady rattle of the defenders' rifles from the trenches swept one rank away after the other. As fast as the German soldiers fell fresh groups pressed into the gap, and forced the line onward, but the toll of death shattered the constancy and corporate existence of an army corps.

At one point or more our line was pierced by the surging mass of the assailants, and a partial retirement took place for a mile or more in the dark. But the enemy's strength was sapped, and a comparatively weak counter-attack made in the grey of the morning by fragments of regiments and fragments of squadrons, collected hastily by the firmness of surviving officers, and backed by some infantry supports hastily thrust forward, was successful in recovering the greater part of the lost ground. As reinforcements arrived on the scene next day, and as our artillery concentrated its bombardment on the spot, the whole position was restored, and the attack of an army corps was definitely foiled by about one-fifth of its numbers.

October 31 was the crisis of the battle. During the night of October 30 the German flood, lashing

in vain against the trenches held by the cavalry across the ridge, swirled in ponderous weight against those held by the 11th Division Infantry at St. Yves, near the point where the British front crossed the Lys. The front here broke under the pressure. The breach, however, was only momentary. With a heroism beyond praise, Major Prowse instantly led the Somersets in a counter-attack. That intrepid corps, despite the enemy's ferociously tenacious resistance, drove him out. It was a bayonet fight, and a bayonet fight at its worst. The sturdy west countrymen, however, proved more than a match for any Prussians. They swept into the combat with the smash of a sledge-hammer added to the keenness of a high-speed tool, and wrought havoc. Against such a spirit and prowess numbers were unavailing.

All through that night, while the thunder of the conflict was heard and its flare seen fifty miles away, the enemy smashed at this section of the front. But it was a front of iron. Weighing his words, Sir John French says in his dispatch :

I am anxious to bring to special notice the excellent work done throughout this battle by the Third Corps under General Pulteney's command. Their position in the right central part of my line was of the utmost importance to the general success of the operations. Besides the very undue length of front which the Corps was called upon to cover (some twelve or thirteen miles), the position

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presented many weak spots, and was also astride of the River Lys, the right bank of which from Frelinghein downwards was strongly held by the enemy.

It was impossible to provide adequate reserves, and the constant work in the trenches tried the endurance of officers and men to the utmost. That the Corps was invariably successful in repulsing the constant attacks, sometimes in great strength, made against them by day and by night is due entirely to the skilful manner in which the Corps was disposed by its commander, who has told me of the able assistance he has received throughout from his Staff, and the ability and resource displayed by Divisional, Brigade, and Regimental leaders in using the ground and the means of defence at their disposal to the very best advantage.

The courage, tenacity, endurance, and cheerfulness of the men in such unparalleled circumstances are beyond all praise.

So far, then, we have this result: that neither the attack through Zandvoorde, the turning movement against Hollebeke and Wytscheate, nor the supporting attack against St. Yves had achieved its object.

Stopped in their advance through Zandvoorde, alike by the strength of the Allied position on the Kleine Zillebeke ridge, and by the reinforcement of the line, which, after this experience made them judge a frontal assault totally impracticable, the Germans determined to turn

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this barrier by reverting, on October 31, to their first scheme of an advance along the main avenue from Menin. This, indeed, was in this direction the only practicable way through the woodland belt.

When, at daybreak, their intention became evident, General Moussy, in command of the reinforcement sent the previous day from the 9th French Army Corps, tried to anticipate it by a counter-attack. He pushed forward to the south-east of Gheluvelt. There, however, in face of the great strength of the enemy he was brought to a standstill. Along the great road from Menin the Germans advanced in a mass of enormous depth, which was in truth a human battering ram. By this means they meant to smash through into Ypres despite any resistance that could be offered, and despite any losses. The battle developed at this point as a struggle at very short range. It swayed now this way and now that, as attack was followed by counter-attack. At length the pent-up mass of the enemy broke through, and swept along the road. The line of the 1st Division of Infantry at Gheluvelt was broken. Gheluvelt was taken by the Germans; the flank of the 7th Division along the Kleine Zillebeke range was exposed; the Royal Scots Fusiliers, remaining in their trenches, were surrounded. The way open through Gheluvelt and the main road, the enemy rushed up a great force of guns and began shelling the British positions in enfilade

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right and left. Concurrently an attack was begun from Zandvoordé along the main road leading across the intervening valley, and through the woods past Kleine Zillebeke. The 7th Division were driven back through the woods towards Ypres. It looked this time as though the German thrust had gone home. The situation was assuredly critical. Sir John French earlier in the day had come to Hooge, on the Menin road. There, when the troops fell back, he found himself in the thick of the fighting. But he had taken his measures. Advancing along the Menin road the Germans exposed the flank of their huge column. This was their vulnerable point. The British general at once threw upon it all the force he had within striking distance to the north of the avenue. The 1st and part of the 2nd Division of the 1st Army Corps, some 27,000 men, were swung against the German flank in a mighty counter-attack. The manœuvre turned the tide of battle. It was one of those bold flashes of resource which mark off great commanders from mediocre commanders. The enemy's advance was immediately arrested. Thereupon the retiring British troops rallied. Thus held in front and attacked in flank, the German masses, crowded together in a space too small for their numbers, were destroyed wholesale. Their resistance, though fierce, was brief. The onset broke them. Into and through the woods south

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of the Menin road they fell back, confused and routed, upon Zandvoorde. Gheluvelt was retaken. Here, to cover the retreat, a large body of the enemy attempted, behind hastily thrown up barricades, to hold out. The gunners of the 42nd Brigade R.F.A. blew the barricades to pieces. Then the Worcestershires rushed the village with the bayonet.

The result of this signal success was that the front was restored nearly to the line it had occupied at the beginning of the day. Many of the enemy still remained in the woods. The 6th Cavalry Brigade was given the work of hunting them out. "They advanced," says Sir John French, "with much dash, partly mounted and partly dismounted; and surprising the enemy, succeeded in killing large numbers and materially helped to restore the line."

If the chance of victory passed from the German arms with their fatal hesitancy on the preceding day, this crushing defeat of their main attack made efforts to retrieve their fortunes hopeless. The attacks against Hollebeke and round Messines continued all through this day, and as already said, through the following night. They were wasted. The hammering went on too against the front down to Givenchy. Though by one of their battering-ram assaults the enemy had driven the Indian troops out of and to the west of Neuve Chapelle, the hope of piercing the front was not realised. The Indians, probably

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thought an easy proposition by comparison, turned out also to be stuff too tough to be broken. The Gurkhas and the famous Corps of Sappers and Miners were brilliant, and justly won the honourable mention given them in the Commander-in-Chief's dispatches.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE BATTLE OF YPRES—FINAL PHASE

IN its final phase the great battle lasted for another eleven days. Holding now the main ridge of hills from Zandvoorde to near Wytscheate on the Ypres-Lille road, a distance of five miles, and in possession of the village of Hollebeke, or rather of its site, the Germans appear to have decided that the effective direction for their attack was through Wytscheate and the sector of the Allied front following the Lille road from near Wytscheate through the village of Messines to Armentières. And this decision on their part was without question strategically sound. Could they have carried it out, they would not only have compelled the British forces to fall back from the west of Lille, but to evacuate Ypres. They would have won the battle. Moreover the victory must have been decisive, for on the north it would have cut off an important part of the British and French forces, together with the Belgians, from the remainder of the Allied line, and on the south it

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would have turned the flank of that line. The mistake, a fatal mistake, lay in not having made this the real objective from the first, and in wasting force and incurring defeat, with its inevitable demoralisation, in attempts to break through into Ypres across the belt of woods on the east and the south-east.

There the only lines along which attacks in great strength could be thrown were roads running into Ypres like spokes into the hub of a wheel, but the farther in any one of these attacking columns moved, the more were its flanks exposed. The precaution against flank attack, advance in echelon, was made by the character of this woodland belt out of the question. We have seen that, appreciating these capabilities of defence, the British Commander-in-Chief had crushed a gigantic onset. It is manifest now that the Germans had believed that by weight of numbers they could prevail over the difficulties, and the chances those difficulties gave of holding this sector with a comparatively small force, but that had merely involved them in enormous losses, a risk inseparable from their tactics.

Having now realised their mistake, they attempted to throw an immense wedge of troops against the two miles of British line between Wytscheate and Messines. Here again, however, they found themselves anticipated. The front was no longer held merely by a single rank of cavalry. The bemuddled, dirty, unshaven

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ragged, and almost unrecognisable yet victorious survivors of that band of heroes had been relieved. Part of the 16th French Army Corps, General Conneau's cavalry, a division of the Indian Army Corps, and a part of the British 2nd Army Corps were on or behind it. Sir John French was taking no unnecessary risks. To these troops, some 50,000 in all, therefore, he added as a reserve units of the Territorials recently arrived from England. It was certain that they would have to meet German forces four if not five times as numerous, and it was certain that those German troops would fight to the last gasp.

The Germans lost no time. Their attack against Wytscheate and Messines was made concurrently before daybreak. They had taken advantage of the darkness to carry out mass movements which could not be sighted from aeroplanes. The onset was both heavy and sudden, and it formed probably the greatest night operation on record. Darkness, it was now held, afforded the best protection against British rifle power. As this was an attack which had to succeed at all costs, the enemy took the heavy punishment inflicted by a furious resistance. A proportion of these German troops were lads of 17 and even younger. They had been used to fill up the gaps left by casualties, and mingled with the older men drove forward on the order of their officers and faced death at the muzzles of British rifles and the massed guns of the British

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Horse Artillery by hundreds. Both Wytscheate and Messines fell into the enemy's hands. At the same time with the evident object of arresting the movement of reserves assaults were made along the British line to the south of Messines past Armentières and along the valley of the Lys. This part of the attack was, of course, no more than strategical. For the purpose it was useless. Round both Wytscheate and Messines the enemy found himself confronted by quite unexpected forces. He could make no further advance from either. So costly indeed had been his attack upon Wytscheate, that the French infantry, launched upon a counter-attack with the aid of a British cavalry force, cleared him out of the place at the point of the bayonet.

It was during the fighting on this day, a Sunday, that there occurred the episode which earned for the London Scottish Territorials the special acknowledgment of the Commander-in-chief. Transported in motor omnibuses from the base at Boulogne to Ypres, where, on arrival, they were quartered for the night in the Hôtel de Ville, they had been sent forward in the first instance to Neuve Eglise, and then to Messines to support the front line. This was during the crisis of the German attack on October 31. The battalion fought its way forward from Messines to a position east of the Ypres-Lille main road. There, under heavy fire, it dug itself in, and for five hours repulsed a series of determined assaults.

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Resolved at any price to be rid of these fellows in kilts who had thrown themselves right athwart the line of advance upon Messines, the Germans, at two o'clock in the morning of November 1, renewed the onset with a crushing superiority of numbers. While the battalion was resisting the attack in front, another force of the enemy developed an attack in flank. Others, getting between the first and second British lines of trenches opened an assault from the rear. These set on fire an adjacent house. The flare from this building lit up the combat and the bayonet charges in which the companies of the reserve dashed into and defeated the Germans who had got round the position. By their gallantry the reserve prevented the battalion from being surrounded.

Unable to carry the position by assault, the Germans now tried to wipe out the battalion by an enfilade fire from machine guns. This had now at length made retirement imperative. The corps had to cut its way out with the bayonet. Inevitably the losses were heavy. The striking fact, however, is that the first unit of the Territorial Force which had taken part in battle had saved itself in a situation and in a manner which would have done honour to the most famous and veteran regiment in the Service. Indeed there are few episodes in British military annals more dramatic or more brilliant. Naturally this episode, apart from its immediate military

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effect, attracted great attention because it afforded a proof of the quality of the Territorial Force, a proof which that Force has since amply upheld.

The effect of the delay opposed to the German advance by this unlooked for and obstinate resistance was serious. Without question it upset their plans and prevented the attacks upon Wytscheate and Messines from being, as they had been designed to be, simultaneous. The result was both that the attack upon Wytscheate failed to stay, and that the attack upon Messines effected nothing more than the occupation of the ruins of that village. That trifling outcome needless to say was not the German aim.

The upshot of the German operations for this day proved for all practical purposes negative. On November 2 the effort to break through was renewed. Wytscheate was once more attacked and carried. This time the place was set on fire, and as night fell at the end of the short dim November day the burning ruins cast round a mighty glare, lighting up the fierce and repeated bayonet charges with which time and again the French infantry threw back the efforts of the enemy to make headway.

Meanwhile, finding that strong forces of the Allies had been ranged against them, the Germans to the south of Messines tried to open up a road for their columns with an artillery fire of great intensity. On the other side the British and

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French ranged a powerful force of guns in a wide arc, and concentrating the fire of these towards one comparatively limited fire-zone on the German front, moved that fire-swept area up and down the hostile line. The effect may be compared to playing the point of a ray of sunlight focussed through a burning glass. In face of such a fire no advance could be along this section attempted. The Germans had to retire their troops out of range to save them from annihilation.

And this in effect was the defeat of their scheme. Next day (November 3) the attack was towards Hollebeke, in combination with another attempt to debouch from Wytscheate. The diversion was tantamount to a confession of failure.

In face of it Sir John French knew that he had definitely won the battle. His first step was to issue an Army Order thanking the troops. Every word of this historic document is justified. It ran :

I have made many calls upon you, and the answers you have made to them have covered you, your regiments, and the Army to which you belong with honour and glory.

Your fighting qualities, courage, and endurance have been subjected to the most trying and severe tests, and you have proved yourselves worthy descendants of the British soldiers of the past who have built up the magnificent traditions of the regiments to which you belong.

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You have not only maintained those traditions but you have materially added to their lustre.

It is impossible for me to find words in which to express my appreciation of the splendid services you have performed.<sup>1</sup>

But though in truth decided, the battle was not yet over. The Germans refused to accept defeat. They now adopted different tactics. These were a tremendous bombardment of the British lines alternating with repeated attacks. The latter were not as before directed against one or two decisive points of the front, but distributed all round and included the part of the front to the north of Ypres. There four hostile army corps were employed. The attacks were not only made with smaller masses and more numerous, but they were delivered both by day and by night and almost without cessation. It was, in fact, a tactic of wearing down. This went on for six days and nights without cessation. The struggle was marked by many remarkable episodes due to the fact that the Germans, conscious of defeat,

<sup>1</sup> To the 2nd British Army Corps Sir John French issued on the same date a special Army Order in these terms: "The Field Officer Commanding-in-Chief has watched with the deepest admiration and solicitude the splendid stand made by the soldiers of the King in their successful effort to maintain the forward position which they have won by their gallantry and steadfastness.

"He believes that no other army in the world would show such tenacity, especially under the tremendous artillery fire directed against it.

"Its courage and endurance are beyond all praise. It is an honour to belong to such an Army."

now fought with redoubled bitterness and with much of the spirit of bravado and revenge.

One instance of this was the extraordinary attempt to carry a French trench by a charge of cavalry. This, of course, was no better than suicide. "Every horse," says "Eye Witness," in recording the affair, "was killed, but those riders who were not hit continued the charge on foot. The last survivors were slain on the very parapet of the trench."

At another point, where the bodies of a company of Germans enfiladed by machine-gun fire lay as they had fallen in a regular row, a second body of the enemy advanced at nightfall, and along the line of corpses dug themselves in.

By dint of these attacks, and while the British troops were strengthening their line, turning their hasty pre-cover into trenches of systematic make, with zigzag communication ways, and supports trenches and "dugouts" in the rear, the Germans in many places advanced their positions so close that the occupants of the trench on one side were within earshot of those on the other. It became the enemy's practice to bring up heavy artillery in the night, to shell a British position, and while the troops were sitting tight under the bombardment to "dig in" close by.

This closeness of the opposing entrenched positions in many places led to repeated night raids; a form of activity in which more especially the Indian troops proved adepts. An Indian

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night raid, which recovered a line of trenches the enemy had taken, is thus described by those who witnessed it :

In the afternoon it began to rain heavily, and the rain continued to fall as the night darkened. British troops in the trenches, knowing of the massing of the enemy, were keenly on the alert amidst the most depressing circumstances, and none were allowed the comfort of a sleep.

But, all unknown to them, behind a thin line of trees some short distance to the rear, there silently gathered together many hundreds of figures, which, by reason of their lithe, gliding movements and their practical invisibility might have passed for a mysterious aggregation of spirits from some other sphere. Not a word was uttered, and such orders as were issued seemed to pass down the long lines as the wind whispers through the grass.

Shortly afterwards a score of these grey figures detached themselves from the larger body and stealthily, like Red Indians on the trail in an enemy's country, moved up to and beyond the advanced line of the British trenches. Down these, under the breath, was passed the word, "The Indians are going out," and the already alert Tommies craned their heads forward into the misty night to watch events.

The score of ghostly figures suddenly disappeared from their view, and, python-like, crawled noiselessly to the first German trench. Here were the German look-out men.

What happened there exactly is not known. There was no shout or sudden cry, but in a few

minutes the British soldiers saw one of the score reappear like an apparition and go back to his comrades in the rear. Then the hundreds waiting there filed past the trenches just as silently as had the advanced party before them, and also disappeared in the direction of the German lines.

For five minutes there was perfect quiet. Then came a few shots, followed by a wild splutter of musketry, intermingled with cries and groans.

Three or four light-balls were thrown in the air, and by their means the British troops could see, some 600 yards to their front, a mass of wild and struggling men, the gleam of steel, and the whirling rush of the rifle-butt. It was the Pathans at their deadly work. For ten minutes they hacked and slew amongst the half-awake and wholly-bewildered Germans, who had laid down in serried ranks to await the order for the night assault on the British trenches.

The score of Pathans who had gone out in advance had silently slain the German pickets, and the main body had thus been enabled to get right amidst the sleeping foe unchallenged. The slaughter was terrible, and only ended when the Germans, thoroughly aroused to their peril, bolted and ran. Then their swarthy assailants, glutted with their night's work, came back briskly, but just as silently, to their original post.

The threatened German attack had been turned into a bloody defeat. For hours afterwards the furious Germans poured a hail of shrapnel and shell into our trenches, in the hope of obtaining some revenge for their terrible punishment.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Account sent by Mr. Hodson, Correspondent of the Central News, and published in the *Daily Telegraph*. The trenches taken were filled in.

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Besides this a variety of ruses were resorted to. Men dressed in French or British uniforms stole singly through the British lines to cut field telephone wires. Others employed themselves as eavesdroppers. Germans dressed in imitation uniforms of the British staff more than once appeared and tried to give false orders.<sup>1</sup>

On the main ridge to the south-east of Ypres, the Germans massed a number of batteries with which they tried to rake the British lines. The ridge, however, was an exposed position, and both the French and British guns were concentrated upon it with marked effect. Describing this "Eye Witness" states :

The south two villages (Kortewilde and Kostelhoe) which the enemy had captured and their line on the ridge close by were heavily bombarded by the British and French artillery. From the high ground to the west the effect of this cannonade could be seen to some extent, though the villages under fire were partially obscured from view by the smoke of the bursting shells, and resembled the craters of volcanoes belching fire and fumes. At one place the gaunt wreck of the old church

<sup>1</sup> "Eye Witness," writing under date November 13, 1914, says: "One remarkable and absolutely authentic case occurred. A man dressed in a uniform which resembled that of a British Staff officer suddenly appeared near our trenches and walked along the line, asking if many casualties had been suffered, and stating that the situation was serious and that a general retirement had been ordered. A similar visit was reported by several men in different trenches, and orders were issued that this strange officer was to be detained if again seen. Unluckily he did not make another appearance."

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tower and the blackened remains of a few houses round it would emerge for a moment only to be again blotted out in the pall of smoke. The long straggling villages, when they became temporarily visible, seemed to melt away and assume odd and fantastic shapes as the houses crumbled and the blocks of masonry were thrown hither and thither by the blasting effect of lyddite and melinite.

There can be no doubt the change in tactics was due in part to the fact that owing to the shock of defeat a continuance of the mass attacks had become for the time impracticable. Of the feeling, at any rate, on the part of some of the enemy the following extract from a German soldier's diary picked up on the battlefield throws a certain light :

2ND NOVEMBER.—Before noon sent out in a regular storm of bullets by order of the major. These gentlemen, the officers, send their men forward in the most ridiculous way. They themselves remain far behind safely under cover. Our leadership is really scandalous. Enormous losses on our side, partly from the fire of our own people, for our leaders neither know where the enemy lies nor where our own troops are, so that we are often fired on by our own men. It is a marvel to me that we have got on as far as we have done. Our captain fell, also all our section leaders and a large number of our men.

Moreover, no purpose was served by this advance, for we remained the rest of the day under cover and could go neither forward nor back, nor even shoot.

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It is simply ridiculous, this leadership. If only I had known it before! My opinion of the German officers has changed. An adjutant shouted to us from a trench far to the rear to cut down a hedge which was in front of us. Bullets were whistling round from in front and from behind. The gentleman himself, of course, remained behind.

Still in the trenches. Shells and shrapnel burst without ceasing. In the evening a cup of rice and one-third of an apple per man. Let us hope peace will soon come. Such a war is really too awful. The English shoot like mad. If no reinforcements come up, especially heavy artillery, we shall have a poor look-out.

The first day I went quietly into the fight with an indifference which astonished me. To-day, for the first time in advancing, when my comrades right and left fell, felt rather nervous, but lost that feeling again soon. One becomes horribly indifferent. Picked up a piece of bread by chance. Thank God! at least something to eat.

There are about 70,000 English who must be attacked from all four sides and destroyed. They defend themselves, however, obstinately.<sup>1</sup>

As the effect of this week of day and night wearing down work, it was apparently on November 10, judged that the British were ripe for the enemy's last effort — the attack of the Prussian Guard. This, preceded by the most intensive artillery fire the Germans had yet achieved, began on November 11 soon after daybreak. They had clearly, in regard to the

<sup>1</sup> Given in the British official narrative.

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massing of their guns, taken a leaf out of the book of the French and British artillerists, and they tried against the entrenched positions north and south of the Menin-road, the effect which had been successfully used against them at Messines. The way having thus been, as it was supposed, opened up, 1st and 4th Brigades of the Prussian Guard rolled forward.

The line of attack lay diagonally across part of the British front, and on it was turned the united fury of field guns, machine guns and rifles. It has been affirmed by all who saw the onset that the Guard stood against this terrible hail like rock. The grey-green mass, at the outset some 20,000 strong, moved forward in close formation, and almost as though on parade. As one man fell another stepped into his place. Their losses were enormous, but the mass kept its formation and its momentum. At three places despite the desperate resistance of the British they broke the line, and penetrated into the woods. There, however, the British reserves, brought up for the counter-attack, fell upon them. In a bayonet fight with a brigade of Irishmen, the Guards met not only their equals, but their superiors. Those who held together were driven back, enfiladed by the fire of machine guns. The rest broke into scattered bodies; these when rounded up fought to the last where they stood. Only a miserable remnant of this mass of brave men reached the lines of the enemy.

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That was the supreme effort and the end. On the farther side of Belgium beyond the sight of the beaten army flared the monstrous pyres of paraffin-soaked timber in which, tied together, four by four, and standing upright, the bodies of the unfortunate German slain were burned by tens of thousands. Such was the aftermath of this mighty tragedy.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE BATTLE ON THE YSER

As we have seen, the gigantic Battle of Ypres presented four phases.

During the first phase, from October 11 to October 17, the British Army, pivoting upon Givenchy, drove the Germans from Hazebrouck to Lille.

During the second phase, from October 18 to October 24, the Germans, resuming the offensive, hurled the weight of their attack against the sector of the British front to the west of Lille. The British positions had meanwhile been extended round Ypres to the south and east, and the line of the Allies formed as far as the coast.

The third phase was marked by the effort of the enemy, now enormously reinforced, to break through into Ypres from the south-east, aided by a turning movement from the south. The fighting during the three days, October 29 to October 31, formed the crisis of the battle. It has been stated in the French Army Bulletin summarising the operations from October 21 to November 15,

that the Emperor of Germany, who had at this time taken up his head-quarters at Courtrai, "announced that he wanted to be in Ypres by November 1, and every preparation had been made for the proclamation on that day of the annexation of Belgium."

In the fourth and final phase of the battle the Germans tried to pierce the Allied line between Ypres and the Lys through Wytscheate and Messines. That defeated, the great mass assault was made against Ypres from the east by the Prussian Guard on November 11.

While German infantry attacks continued to be made until November 15, they were no more than the sullen efforts of a baffled but still bitter foe. The stress of the fighting lasted from October 11 to November 11, that is exactly one month. For a second time in this Western campaign there had been in a great pitched battle, a trial of strength, and for a second time the forces of Germany had, as on the Marne, gone down.

It is important to keep these phases of the Battle of Ypres in mind. They throw light on the battle which was concurrently, from October 17 to October 31, being fought on the Yser.

From its source in the hills west of Ypres to the sea the whole course of the Yser does not exceed 20 miles. It is a stream, however, of a quite exceptional character. Running through a tract of country for the most part below sea level,

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it is more like two streams flowing in the same direction, and connected by winding cross channels. On a smaller scale the like effect may be seen in the channels on stretches of flat shore at ebb tide. The Yser was of course nothing more originally than a network of such channels running through the mud flats, and though all this part of the Lowlands was more than a thousand years ago finally reclaimed from the sea, the waters continued to flow along the ancient beds. They have been connected besides by canals. In the Middle Ages when Ypres was a great centre of trade, and one of the most populous cities of Europe, these canals were busy arteries of commerce. The country between Ypres and the coast, one of the most fertile tracts in the world, was at the outbreak of this War full of quaint and picturesque memorials of its former importance. In modern days, and more especially under the wise and beneficial rule of the present Royal House of Belgium, it was a picture of peaceful and settled wealth.

On the Yser half-way between Ypres and the sea was the old town of Dixmude, with a church and a *hôtel de ville* which were masterpieces of Gothic architecture. Towards the coast, where the line of sand dunes has in part covered the ancient dykes, the river takes a sharp bend to west. A tract about two miles wide and three miles long is thus enclosed on the east between the river channels on the one side and the sea on

the other. This was occupied by the little sea-side residential places, Lombartzyde and Westende. Nieuport lay on the west bank of the river a mile or more inland. The Yser here becomes one channel, deep enough to be navigated by shipping of moderate draught. It was crossed at Nieuport by five bridges. Between them lay the series of locks dividing the tidal part of the Yser from the inland reaches. The locks were those used to regulate the river overflow at low tide while keeping out the sea when the tide was at flood.

There are two points of some importance on the west bank of the Yser between Dixmude and Nieuport—the villages of Pervyse and Ramscappel. Both are on the main road connecting the two towns. Five miles farther to the west lies the town of Furnes, already mentioned as the meeting place of the great road from Ypres with that running along the coast from Ostend through Nieuport and on to Dunkirk and Calais. The great roads, and indeed most of the main roads and canals in this part of Flanders are carried along embankments. Before the war these were mostly bordered with trees, affording in winter shelter from the cold winds which sweep over the country from the North Sea, and welcome shade in summer. It was a land of deep repose, and for nearly 100 years and until the coming of the Goth, nothing save the mellow chime floating distantly from some tall and noble spire reared in

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far off days by pious hands, had broken in upon its dreaming.

General Joffre issued the first orders directed towards his great scheme of military envelopment on September 11. This promptitude was essential. When in the first phase of the battle of Ypres the British drove the Germans back upon Lille, the strategical effect was to tear in the German front a gap from Lille to beyond Thourout, a distance of nearly thirty miles. The Germans had to mass their forces at Lille in order to keep their hold on that place.

Through the gap thus made the French pushed forward four divisions of cavalry, two divisions of their Territorial troops, and a division of marines, 6,000 strong. Already, however, on October 15, the Germans had, north of the gap towards the coast, two army corps, and these were in the course of the next two or three days reinforced by two others. The objective of these troops was to seize Nieuport and the crossing of the Yser.

The Belgian Army reached Nieuport from Antwerp on October 16. That army was, however, not immediately fit for further service. In these circumstances the line of the Yser from Nieuport to Dixmude was held by the French cavalry and marines, while the 1st division of British infantry was thrown forward to Bixschoot, with the 2nd division in support. Later along the Yser and round Ypres, where after November 20

they relieved the British, the French forces on this part of the front were brought up to five army corps. At this date in mid October, however, all that could be opposed to the German mass aggregating 240,000 men detailed to seize the crossings of the Yser, were these French cavalry, one division of marines, and two divisions of British infantry, not 45,000 in all.

The first German thrust against Nieuport was made on October 17, and it must inevitably have succeeded had it not been that the enemy came within range of and were enfiladed by the fire of a British flotilla. This equivalent to a destructive attack in flank wrecked the attempt. The shells of the warships raked the German lines as far inland as Dixmude.

The Germans realised that at Nieuport, in face of the guns of the British ships, they could not succeed. They made ready, in consequence, to throw their attack against Dixmude. For that purpose they waited until their whole force could come up. Their first attempt had been made with two army corps only. The respite enabled the Belgian army to be refitted. Both sides meanwhile proceeded to dig themselves in. In this region the water level is not more than two feet below the surface. No sooner were the trenches cut than the water oozed in. These conditions were aggravated by days and nights of heavy and almost incessant rain. A dense mist overhung the country. The nights, too, were

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now becoming bitterly cold. On the side of the Germans the numbers were large enough to afford reliefs. They were not large enough on the side of the Allies. The Belgians passed days and nights in the trenches under these conditions without respite. It was an effort of endurance that has never been paralleled. But for their unconquerable spirit these heroic men could not have come through such an ordeal. They were defending, however, the last few square miles of their country and they were defending that last bit of territory from foes whose pitiless cruelty they had seen in butchery and outrage. Behind them they had the memory of a happy freedom. Before them lay only the prospect of submitting for ever to the odious tyranny which had laid some of the fairest towns and districts of Belgium in ruins. In that mudded and warworn army there was a fire no hardship could subdue.

On October 21 opened the great German drive. It was directed alike and at once to the seizure of Ramscappel so as to compel the Belgians to evacuate Nieuport; against Dixmude; and farther south against the British positions at Bixschoot. The latter point was as far as natural conditions were concerned the easiest crossing of the three. There is here only one channel of the Yser with a line of canal on either side of it. The three attacks were made simultaneously because they brought into play the vast German superiority in numbers.

The enemy had massed along this front a great weight of guns, including the heavy pieces used in the attack on Antwerp, and his plan was to draw west of the Yser an impenetrable curtain of fire while he constructed pontoon bridges. There were difficulties. First the river channels were in flood. Secondly they were commanded by the French and Belgian guns. Thirdly and along their length they were under the cross fire from the warships. This acute spasm of the battle, lasting without a moment's respite for three days and two nights, was therefore in one of its main features a gigantic artillery duel.

Pontoon bridges constructed by the Germans were destroyed by the French gunners or by the shells from the warships time and again. More than once the bridges were struck and wrecked when they were crowded with troops and these miserable men, thrown in a struggling mass into the water, were drowned by hundreds. Time after time the Germans endeavoured to bridge the river, or rather the network of rivers before the effort at length succeeded.

Then from Ramscappel the Belgians were forced to retire. Once across the river with a considerable force of infantry, cavalry, and guns, the Germans seized Pervyse, and pushed forward to Furnes with such speed that the small Belgian reserve force there, surprised by them, had to quit hastily. A surprise, however, was also in store for the Germans. A division of French

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Algerian troops, who had been sent forward by forced marches to reinforce the Belgian resistance, were already close at hand. They reached Furnes shortly after the German advance force had established themselves there. The attack was as impetuous as it was unexpected. The Turcos cleared the Germans out of the place at the point of the bayonet. Enemy reinforcements, however, hurried up. In turn the Germans tried to carry the town by storm. The struggle went on from street to street and from house to house. Again and again the Germans were driven out. Again and again they rallied and renewed the fight. As night came on the French commander called upon his men for a supreme effort. It was victorious. Broken by this onslaught, the Germans were not only chased out of Furnes but pursued to Ramscappel and driven out of that village as well. Behind them their bridges over the Yser had in the meantime again been destroyed. Mr. A. Beaumont, special correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, who reached Furnes the following day, has recorded that :

The roads from Ramscappel to Pervyse, and from Pervyse to Dixmude were lined with the enemy's dead. Many of the fugitives tried to escape by the fields and canals, and their bodies are still found in great numbers. As in many other places in the north, quite a number of these Germans are very young, apparently under eighteen, or else more than fifty years of age.

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King Albert of Belgium desired in person to honour the French troops who had helped to reconquer the village (Ramscappel), and an impressive ceremony was held a few days later. The King passed in review the survivors of the gallant companies of Turcos and Chasseurs in the little square. They were assembled at eight o'clock in the morning, and drawn up in a square in the presence of a French general. The King arrived in a motor-car and alighted at once. Three buglers, who had gone through it all, sounded the call, and the commander of the troops moved forward to salute them. The King likewise raised his hand in a long and silent salute. Then, accompanied by the General in command he passed down the lines, after which the troops in turn defiled in his presence. The buglers did their best, but their shrill notes were not in accord; yet tears came to the eyes of many spectators of this scene, and not the least moved among them was the King himself. The General then rode forward, and in a loud voice said: "The King desires me to transmit to you his hearty congratulations for your splendid conduct at Ramscappel; this is an honour of which your commander is justly proud."

Of the attack on Dixmude an account was sent by a German who took part in it to *Vorwärts*. He relates:

We lay for four whole days without anything to eat or drink. Day and night the earth trembled with the reports of the guns. No sleep was possible. Behind us lay a field of roots. Creeping down

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the bank in order not to be seen by the enemy, we managed to get some of them. We sucked up the night dew on the grass in order to slake our thirst. After four days we had to give up the position in order to attack the enemy from another side.

Next day it began to rain, and we stood up to the knees in water, and replied to the fire of the enemy until the evening came. All was quiet for a time. But the cannons continued their work. We watched by turns while the others sat in the water, and, leaning against the trenches, tried to sleep. A terrible picture faced us. Dixmude was in flames, and the whole sky was blood-red. The enemy's shells exploded with such a report that we thought our ears would burst, and the light was so strong that you could read a paper by it. Dealing death and destruction, the shower of lead sped through the night air over our heads. In the morning the sun rose a fiery red.

It was the death signal for many of us, for Dixmude had to be stormed. At two o'clock we received an order for the attack. We left our firing places, and at once came under fire. By short rushes we approached the strongly held trenches of the enemy. Air and earth shook with the reports of the guns, for the enemy were firing from at least twenty batteries. Many of us were torn in pieces. Amidst it all, the rifles and the machine guns made their peculiar noise. It was a veritable field of death. Right and left of me comrades fell. We reached a small ditch and blazed away, and there a bullet hit my rifle, glanced off, and went through the head of the man next to me.

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At last we came within 200 metres of the enemy's position. Their fire grew fiercer, but our rage was the greater. Then the enemy received reinforcements, and brought up three machine guns, which they trained on us. The top of my helmet was shot away, and the bullets pierced my spade.

Next came shells such as we had never seen before. The sand spurted up as high as a house. One shell made a hole at least two yards deep in the ground. The black smoke rendered it almost impossible to see anything. These were the shells of the British Fleet which had taken part in the battle. In the middle of a field near us eight horses were suddenly torn into shreds by one. What was that? It was a bugle signal, "Fix bayonets." In a minute we rushed forward another 100 yards. Then we took a breathing-space. What was that? I could neither see nor hear, for I was hurled back three yards with my head against a tree. For a moment I lost consciousness, and when I came to I knew that I had not been hit. I rushed forward to join my comrades. I will not tell you anything about the bayonet charge, for it was a slaughter. Twice we were driven back, but at the third attack we won. When you heard about the victory did you not cry "Hurrah"? But we thought upon the terrible sacrifices that had been made, for many lay dead. I was hit in the pursuit of the enemy, but I need not describe what it looked like in the enemy's trenches. The men lay one over another.

At Bixchoot the Germans succeeded in capturing part of the British trenches held by the 1st

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Division. These, however, were wrested from the enemy in a brilliantly executed counter-attack. To the troops for this service the Brigadier-General in command issued a special order of congratulation. This document gives a clear summary of the operation :

The 2nd Infantry Brigade (less 2nd Battalion Sussex Regiment left at Beesinghe) was allotted the task of reinforcing the 1st Infantry Brigade, and re-taking the trenches along the Bixsencote-Lange-march road, which had been occupied by the enemy.

In spite of the stubborn resistance offered by the German troops, the object of the engagement was accomplished, but not without many casualties in the Brigade.

By nightfall the trenches previously captured by the Germans had been re-occupied, about 500 prisoners captured, and fully 1,500 German dead were lying out in front of our trenches.

The Brigadier-General congratulates the 1st L.N. Lancashire Regiment, Northamptonshire Regiment, and the 2nd King's Royal Rifle Corps, but desires specially to commend the fine soldier-like spirit of the 1st L.N. Lancashire Regiment, which, advancing steadily under heavy shell and rifle fire, aided by its machine guns, was enabled to form up within a comparatively short distance of the enemy's trenches.

Fixing bayonets, the battalion then charged, carried the trenches and occupied them, and to them must be allotted the majority of the prisoners captured.

The Brigadier-General congratulates himself on having in his brigade a battalion, which, after marching the whole of the previous night without rest or food, was able to maintain its splendid record in the past, by the determination and self-sacrifice displayed in the action.

The Brigadier-General has received special telegrams of congratulations from both the General officer Commanding-in-chief 1st Corps, and from the General officer commanding 1st Division, and he hopes that in the next engagement in which the brigade takes part the high reputation which the brigade already holds, may be further added to.

In truth the immediate impetus of the German onset had exhausted itself in the violent and costly efforts put forth. After an interval of not more than six hours Dixmude was retaken, and the Belgians, advancing from Nieupoort, took and entrenched themselves in Lombartzyde. Despite its frightful cost in life, the second attempt to get across the Yser had tragically failed.

After reorganising the Germans began the third great attempt on October 9. This was even more determined and more wasteful of life than the second. Again it was persisted in for three days. The scenes were a repetition of those of the week before, if anything, they were still more terrible, for the resistance was as unflinching as the attack was bitter. On the evidence of men who had taken part in the battle, Mr. Frederick de Bathe, special correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, wrote :

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The Germans tried nineteen times to cross the Yser at one point; on each occasion they were repulsed by the Belgian and French troops, which were massed upon the opposite bank.

It is said that the enemy lost whole regiments. A wounded German officer who was taken prisoner affirms that of his regiment, which went into action 2,000 strong, only eighty were left unscathed. While claiming that the Belgian and French had suffered big losses, he admitted that these were nothing in comparison to those sustained by the Germans. He added that it was not a battle, it was butchery! A peasant, who came through the German lines, reports that the enemy have no time to bury their dead singly, but are obliged to have them carried away in three-wheeled farm carts by the country people in loads of twenty to twenty-five, and removed to the rear of their positions for burial.

The cross-fire from the British Fleet prevented the Germans from advancing along the coast, obliging them to throw pontoon bridges over the Yser. The pontoons sank time after time with their human burden, shattered by the shells of the Allies. It is no exaggeration to state that the Germans on the Yser alone up to date have lost 75,000 men killed and wounded, and this does not include the prisoners, who have been numerous. Over 8,000 of the enemy's wounded who were being brought to Bruges and Courtrai, via Thourout, were abandoned on Sunday last, and were obliged to make the ten-hour journey on foot.

The churches of Thourout and in the neighbourhood, as well as all the farms which are still standing, are crammed with wounded. Hundreds of German

wounded are streaming in day and night throughout the region behind the enemy's lines. In certain places close to the Yser between Nieuport and Dixmude the ground is literally covered with corpses of men and horses. The shrapnel from the British Fleet has caused more than three-parts of the slaughter in this particular direction. The scene is indescribable.

Three times the Germans fought their way over through the cross fire of the Allied guns, ashore and afloat, and three times they were thrown back. The enemy's expenditure of ammunition was as prodigal as his expenditure of men.

Then began a systematic destruction which has had no parallel in modern war. The Germans set themselves to batter the country into ruins, they bombarded and wrecked not only Nieuport, Dixmude, and Ypres, but every village and hamlet within range of their guns. Of this, after having seen its effect, Mr. E. Ashmead-Bartlett said :

This part of Belgium, perfectly flat, is studded with picturesque old Flemish homes. Almost every village of any size possesses buildings of historic or architectural interest. The old church of Dixmude was one of the finest buildings of its kind in the countryside, and so also was the Hôtel de Ville. What remains of these buildings would not be worth the while to cart away as old bricks.

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As a machine of pure destruction the Kaiser's army is unique. I doubt whether any other army in the history of the world has had the knack of laying waste a whole country so completely. They wipe out everything.

These towns and villages play no part in the defence of the Yser. They are merely shell-traps, where no general would think of placing his men.

As a revenge on an innocent civil population, who thus lose their hearths and homes, and are now refugees all over France, Holland, and England, the plan succeeds admirably. On the other hand, the defence is materially aided, because the fire is taken off the troops in the trenches and on the long trains making their way to the front with food, ammunition, and supplies of all kinds. I do not believe the line of the Yser could have been held had the Germans scientifically supported their infantry attacks with this tremendous volume of shell fire, with which they have laid low Dixmude, Pervyse, Nieupoort, and fifty other smaller towns and villages.

The crowning act, however, of this "revenge," deliberately indulged in that the attention of the world might be drawn off the crushing disasters suffered by German arms, was the ruin of Ypres. That act of vandalism was not, it is necessary to remember, done during the battle or for any military purpose. It was begun after the battle, and when the issue, and with it the future history of Europe, had been for ever changed. Of what that ruin was there has been drawn by Mr. Luigi Barzini a picture of enduring reality. He was

one of three civilians who visited Ypres while this bombardment was going on. His description appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* of December 2, 1914.

At a turn of the road, the town appeared in the distance—two mutilated campaniles, a ruin of massive towers, and the ancient belfry, with its vague bluish carvings. In the dull, declining day, the trees at the edge of the plain seemed like a dark mist. They formed, as it were, a sombre border of cloud on the horizon, and above the network of branches rose the remains of the bombarded town, pale and sinister, with something unreal and death-like in their mutilated aspect—phantasms of a massacred glory.

At short intervals the air was shaken by the bombardment, and, urged by the wind, two clouds of white smoke fled between the trees and vanished amidst their branches. Two flashes of livid light burst on high, and for an instant the top of the towers disappeared in a cloud. The destructive fury of the German guns still continued to strike the heart of Ypres. The road had been converted into a desert.

We had left behind us towns and villages crowded with troops, immense parks of carts and motor-lorries scattered over the meadows, extensive encampments at the edges of the road, in which the innumerable piles of arms seemed like black sheaves crowned with points, the general quarters of divisions and brigades denoted by standards. Then, having passed Vlamertynghe, about three miles from Ypres, we came upon the sinister solitude of a modern battle.

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There was no other voice, no other sound, than the boom of cannon and the crash of shell. But the flashes of the explosions seemed to render all the more evident, more profound, and more significant the terrible silence of the town and the fields. It was the silence of resignation, fear, and agony. The sound of our footsteps upon the muddy pavement of the suburb echoed amidst the little houses—the first houses of Ypres.

Not one building remained intact. The hurricanes of steel had battered and penetrated them all.

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At one side of the street three wounded men were waiting for succour, having remained where they had fallen a few minutes before. They were poor inhabitants who had possibly been compelled by the need of obtaining food to come forth from some cellar. They did not call for assistance; they did not say a word, they did not even complain. Pale, stunned, suffering, and mute, they merely looked. The danger seemed to impose silence; there is an unconscious desire not to be heard, not to be discovered by the invisible and monstrous will to massacre which is in the air. Under the bombardment one had the vague impression of being searched for by death.

There were three of us, and we walked in Indian file along the wall towards the famous Grande Place, which only a few days ago afforded one of the most precious and complete visions of the arts of the world.

The route was not always easy. We had to avoid the holes which had been dug by the projectiles, to clamber over heaps of ruins, extricate

ourselves from the labyrinths of innumerable fallen telephone wires, and every time we heard the voice of a shell we stopped immediately and irresistibly. We ceased to move with a strange and involuntary suddenness, like the automatic figures of the Three Kings in a Flemish clock when the last stroke of the hour sounds. Then, when an explosion had taken place, our mechanism was again set in motion, and we proceeded.

A little forest of red crosses arose on the edge of the road in a glade; they marked a group of fresh graves in which lay inhabitants who had come out of their places of refuge only to meet with death. In the tragic silence any noise seemed to be enormously exaggerated.

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Long vistas of ruins were open at every side street—demolished walls, beams fallen from roofs or stretching across between one house and another, and broken doors. The stricken houses had launched their walls against the opposite buildings, and remained open, empty, unrecognisable.

Having thus traversed the Rue d'Elverdinghe, which seemed as if it would never end, we entered the famous square, and for an indefinable time remained there at the corner, nailed as it were to the ground, stupefied and moved, full of admiration and grief and reverence, incapable of expressing our feelings, overcome by the grandeur and the sadness of that which we saw, intimidated by something that was both prodigious and sacred.

We seemed to be disturbing the solemn mystery of an august end.

[ The life of seven centuries, which was still palpitating yesterday, was being extinguished in a solitude of horror in the pallid twilight of a winter day.

Gigantic and solemn above the mournful crowd of crumbling houses towered the monumental piles—torn, battered, devastated, but erect and still proud. Undermined by the blows of the shells, showing long cracks, breached and broken, the noble stone walls of the Halles, the Hôtel de Ville, and the Cathedral of St. Martin remained standing, indescribable in death, still stretching towards the sky their proud towers without bells and without pinnacles, hollowed at their bases as though by blows of a monstrous axe.

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We pointed to things with vague gestures, without being able to find words, and forgetting even to bend our backs when we heard the lamenting voice of the shells. None of us had ever seen Ypres, and together with the discouragement, caused by the vision of irreparable ruin, there was created in us the marvel of a revelation.

For the love and devotion of innumerable generations there had kept intact on the earth a wonderful corner of the twelfth century, and we, arriving in front of this marvel, whilst it was dissolving, surprised the dream at a moment when it was vanishing for ever.

All the rest of the world was plunged in the barbarism of the Middle Ages when the Flemish peace had Ypres for its centre. It was the wealthy and serious merchants of Ypres who created the Halles, the market of the world, the capital of

business, the incomparable seat of commerce, the parliament of rulers and of people. Dante had not then been born, and already the Halles of Ypres were a century old.

The love of Ypres gave to the Halles and to the old Grande Place a perennial youth. Ypres adored these eloquent and austere witnesses to her past, which told the story of her ancient power. She protected, defended them, never permitted the weight of centuries to do them any injury. Oppressed by famine and pestilence, the people of Ypres rebelled, sacked, and burned; but the Halles remained. The people of Ghent arrived in arms, their Allies the English arrived; they besieged Ypres, entered and laid waste; but the Halles remained. The Iconoclasts sacked the town, but the Halles remained. The Duke of Alba's troops arrived and persecuted Ypres—then fallen into decay—but the Halles remained. Alexander Farnese conquered the town and abandoned it to the excesses of his soldiery; but the Halles remained. Four times in one century the French took Ypres, but the Halles remained. They remained because the most brutal troops were conquered by their age and their potent grace. There was no passion, no ferocity that could resist such imposing severity and harmony. A respectful circle was formed, and the torch and the sword were lowered before that splendour of the past.

But the butcher of ancient glories has come; the blind Teutonic cataclysm has fallen upon unarmed and tranquil Ypres, and the portentous life is now extinct. There remains nothing but the gigantic ruins, isolated walls, the corpses of

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monuments which preserve a sublime expression of disdainful power.

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The bells have fallen. The last hour they chimed was seven in the morning of Sunday, November 22.

At a quarter past seven the belfry received its first mortal wound.

But the first night, according to ancient usage, from the tumult of the august tower there descended upon Ypres—not yet completely deserted—the notes of the horn of the night watchman, who hour by hour sent to the four cardinal points the announcement that all was well!

All around the gabled houses are abandoned in their last agony. They are those pointed houses, dwellings of a distant epoch, which give an ineffable impression of familiar calm and patriarchal life, buildings with faces inexpressibly benevolent, paternal, sweet and grave. Through the broken windows our gaze penetrates into corners which recall certain interiors of Flemish art.

In these interiors, until yesterday, close to the windows, with their little leaded panes, the placid ladies of Ypres wove in traditional calm their arabesques of lace. Their agile and sapient fingers produced white, flowery patterns that were as light as foam. For Ghent had taken from Ypres the industry of its linens, England that of its cloths, Paris that of its damasks, but no country had had the power, the placidity, the patience, and the taste to imitate its lace. Here the old industry lived, modest and silent.

The mediæval city slept its great sleep amidst the tumult of the outside world as if the Kasteelgracht and the Majoorgracht, the wide canals which encircle it and were its gates, were enchanted and had isolated it from swift innovations.

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In the war between Germany and the Halles of Ypres, in the war between Germany and the Library of Louvain, between Germany and the cathedral of Rheims, it is not possible to remain neutral.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE WINTER CAMPAIGN

THE first purpose of the Allies' scheme of military envelopment was to arrest and eventually to break the German offensive. Even after their losses in the battle of Ypres and the concurrent Battle on the Yser, the Germans still had on the West a superiority in numbers. The shock of those defeats was bitter. That is sufficiently proved by the proclamation which soon afterwards the Emperor of Germany issued to his troops. A cruel hour, he told them, had struck for them and for the Fatherland. He exhorted them to meet it with a greater determination. For a time Germany became a land of mourning. The German newspapers of this date, the later part of November, appeared day by day with pages of private obituary advertisements. The dream of conquest, except as regarded Belgium, was shattered, and it was realised that even to keep that country as a reward of what were called the sacrifices made, Germany would have to face a struggle to the death with Powers whose united superiority was now only too manifest.

That mood, however, soon passed, and feeling, directed at the outset of the war against Russia, was with a redoubled intensity excited against England. The reasons are not far to seek. Extraordinary efforts had become necessary, not only on the East to repair the disaster of the Battle of the Vistula, and to furnish General von Hindenburg with the forces for his great "drive" towards Warsaw, but to make good the wastage on the West.

It is a recognised axiom among military men that for such a scheme as the Germans had in view in France, the lowest superiority in numbers necessary is a proportion of four to three. Even that assumes equal training and equipment, and equal skill in leadership. The last factor, skill in leadership, which is in war the most difficult to estimate beforehand, is, at the same time, as this struggle has proved, tremendously important. In regard to it the odds were heavily against the Germans. The Battle of Ypres, it has become evident, was on their part a series of bad mistakes—mistakes which were not seen until too late. After the defeat at Reims Count von Moltke was removed from his place as Chief of the Staff and Baron von Falkenheyn appointed. The strategical scheme of Baron von Falkenheyn was sound and bold enough if Antwerp had not got into the way of it, and if, too, the tactical blunders of Ypres had not ruined its execution.

Besides defects in leadership, the Germans had

to face the striking comparative deficiency of their field artillery, and the fact that their gunnery had not turned out so practically sound as that of the French. It followed that to resume the offensive they must have a superiority of even more than four to three. They had begun with a superiority of two to one. Yet through the unexpected skill in their opponents' leadership they had been foiled and had had their initiative wrested from them. In view, however, of the demands of the campaign on the East, this necessary weight of numbers they could not on the West supply. One resource was to make it up by an appeal to the spirit of the army. That took the form of an unusually liberal distribution of rewards for individual valour.

The Battle of Ypres had at one and the same time brought the second German plan of a Western offensive to the ground, and ensured the accomplishment of General Joffre's envelopment scheme. There was nothing now before the German Staff, therefore, but to attack that envelopment scheme while it remained, as they thought, still in its inceptive stages. If we turn to the day-to-day record of the operations as disclosed in the official reports we shall at once see that there was on the part of the enemy a series of attempted wedging movements. They tried by wedging to break the Allied front simultaneously at Roye and at Arras. This, had it been successful, would have forced out the section of the Allied

front lying between those points, and have broken up the Allied position. The movement was not successful. Another movement of this kind was tried between La Bassee on the one side and the Yser on the other. This time the Germans did get a foothold on the west side of the Yser. They were driven out of it, however, by the Belgians cutting the dykes and flooding the country all along the lower course of the river. When the flood burst upon them large numbers of the enemy caught in their entrenchment diggings were drowned.<sup>1</sup> Many of their guns could not

<sup>1</sup> A correspondent of the *Paris Gaulois*, describing the annihilation of a brigade (nearly 9,000) Wurtembergers by the floods on November 4, wrote:

“ At midday, the Wurtembergers, in formidable numbers, had succeeded, under the protection of their artillery, in crossing the Yser on planks.

“ After a week’s fighting the river was choked with sunken boats, trunks of trees, bodies of men, and carcasses of horses. It was over a veritable bridge of corpses that the enemy passed.

“ Meanwhile the Allied troops had taken up a position a little in the rear, some regiments remaining in position to cover this movement. Massed on the left bank of the Yser, the enemy’s infantry prepared to attack. Some caps skilfully arranged over empty trenches drew the German artillery, which wasted its shells on the decoy. Then the Wurtembergers advanced, and were astonished to find, instead of bodies of the enemy, nothing but a few caps. Just then a loud rumbling noise was heard in a westerly direction. The noise gradually became clearer, resembling the rush of the tide. Suddenly a flood of seething water burst upon the astonished Germans. Trees and corpses were carried on the current, which swept everything before it. Cries of rage and terror came from the German lines. It was too late. Down came the torrent, and in a few moments the enemy’s trenches were filled. The terrified herd of Wurtembergers fled to the high ground, to get clear of the inundation, but from the

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be recovered. A third of these wedging attempts was made between La Bassee and Arras. Though they led to desperate fighting, these efforts proved barren of result.

Let us turn to the side of the Allies. For them the first necessity was to solidify their front. If they could do that they would :

(1) Hold these German armies so that they would be able neither to advance nor to retreat whatever might be the developments of the war on the East front. That meant that the Germans must fight with divided forces, and feed the struggle on the East out of their last reserves.

(2) Bring into fullest play the Allies' superiority in field guns, and by imposing on the enemy the necessity of constant counter-attacks, eliminate in the end his advantage in numbers. The effects of this elimination would be that his power in any event of resuming the offensive would progressively disappear, and that, as the process proceeded, the advantage in numbers would pass to the Allied side, and eventually make an Allied offensive both practicable and successful.

heights the Allied artillery poured volleys of shrapnel into them. The enemy was taken between water and fire. Those who escaped drowning succumbed to our bullets or shells. A few came to our lines, thus evading death by captivity. This was the end of the Wurtemberg brigade."

Now it is quite certain on the events which have since taken place that the German Headquarters Staff clearly recognised these possibilities. Not only is that shown by the heavy losses they incurred in the wedging battles, which lasted from the middle of November to early part of February, but in the adoption of tactics, designed, as their relative strength in numbers fell, to economise their force. In short, not being able to change the features of the situation, they made a virtue of necessity by trying as far as they could to convert their front into an impregnable barrier of defence, and concurrently doing their utmost to increase the Allies' losses.

Evidently both these means were calculated to delay the accomplishment of the Allied scheme. If at the same time there could be set on foot in the Allied countries the legend, not that the Germans had failed in their great invasion project, as they had, but that they were successfully withstanding an attempt of the Allied forces to push them back, then public opinion in the Allied countries might grow tired of the struggle, and at the finish withdraw from it, leaving Belgium in German hands. The Government of Germany well knew that in England more especially, where the misconception of military operations was profound, operations would be estimated on the, for the immediate purposes of this campaign, entirely false basis of a move-

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ment of the front from place to place. The object of the Allied commanders, and the conditions of a successful Allied advance would, in all probability, be alike misunderstood. Experience has shown that these calculations were only too well founded. The nearer the Allied scheme approached to accomplishment, the more energetic became the efforts to propagate the notion that it was a failure.

The German plan of defence, which may be dealt with first, had then, apart from political calculations, two main features. The first was the fortification along their front of advantageous points in such a manner that they could be permanently held. The second was an elaboration of the tactics of trench warfare.

From Ypres southwards to the spur of Notre Dame de Lorette near Arras the German front followed approximately the "inland coastline" already spoken of, and the only break in it geographically of any consequence was the valley of the Lys, the flat stretch lying between the hills south of Ypres and the spur at Aubers south-west of Lille.

On the promontories of this "coastline" the enemy proceeded to fortify themselves. They did the same at other points along their front and notably on the ridge across Champagne, and on the hills to the south-east of Verdun, as well as on the eastern spurs of the Vosges. Simultaneously in the trench warfare they revived

grenade throwing, and the use of the trench mortar, expedients which had disappeared from military operations for 200 years. These devices were accompanied by systematic sniping. As skill with the rifle is not a strong point with the German army, a prismatic telescopic sight was invented. This reduced sniping practically to a mechanical trick. If the object fired at was centred on the prism a hit became a certainty—wind permitting. Sapping and mining were also persistently carried on, and the front became for mile after mile a monstrous network of pits, barbed-wire entanglements, electric alarm traps, and obstacles of every sort. In short, what the Germans lacked in comprehensive military skill they made up in laborious detail.

If now we glance at the activity of the Allies, we find that the hardest part of their work was that of solidifying their line in order in the first place to make it invulnerable against German counter-attacks. Those counter-attacks were, as we have seen, to begin with heavy. In support of them the advantage which the enemy then had in howitzers was utilised to the full. During the first weeks of the winter campaign the Allied troops had to hold trenches for the most part hastily made in the stress of battle, and hold them both against this prodigal bombardment with heavy German shells, and through bitter conditions of wet and cold. To reach their trenches along the flooded area in Flanders

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men had in some places to cross stretches of country on planks, the targets in coming and going for the enemy's shrapnel. The weather, too, was sometimes so severe that the water in the men's drinking bottles turned to ice. The trenches were frozen puddles.

Writing at this time the French "Eye Witness" said :

From the sea to the Lys the operations to the north of the Lys have become terribly difficult. The liquid and cold mud from which the men suffered invaded the breeches of the guns, so that they could no longer fire, and they had to fight with the butt-end of their rifles and with their fists. Our soldiers, according to the expression of one of their leaders, have become blocks of mud. The attempt has been successful to provide for them when they leave the trenches a proper bath and a complete change of linen, which they appreciate very much. Their unalterable good humour enables them to endure with the best possible grace the rough life which is imposed upon them.

A vivid impression of Flanders at this time (the end of November) has been recorded by Alice and Claude Askew, who as members of Dr. Hector Munro's Red Cross Ambulance Corps went to the front to distribute woollen comforters, cigarettes, coffee and chocolates :

Up at Furnes the cold was terrible. The picturesque old town has been shelled twice, but as yet

no great damage has been done, and the doctors and nurses working up at the Field Hospital—once a college—are hoping that their hospital may be spared, for this hospital, with its hundred beds and capable band of workers, is doing splendid service.

The patients are so cheerful. Those who are well enough smoke—how the soldier loves his “fag” and how lightly they take their injuries.

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Mr. Secker was operating in the theatre—a patient had just been brought in from the trenches and immediate operation was necessary. A few oil lamps supplied the only illumination; the room was in complete shadow save round the operating table. Outside the wind howled and moaned, and firing could be heard in the distance. We felt very close to the naked heart of war.

The drive back to Dunkirk a few hours later was a strange drive. The road has been broken and battered by the passing of countless military wagons, trodden down by marching feet, it has become a furrow, the plough of war has been over it. On either side gaunt trees lift up gaunt boughs; their branches look like skeleton fingers pointing to the sky, and they look like grim sentinels; the water is half frozen in the dykes.

The whole thing seems unreal—the torn road—those blurred lines of men—the distant gun fire. The effect is that of a dream. We have seen the grim and terrible side of war—the bleeding side.

The moon—a pale sickle moon—shines out of the dun sky—the cold becomes more intense every moment—more freezing.

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By continuous labour, however, the entrenchment system developed bit by bit into a vast underground military town. The fire trenches were connected by zigzag communication ways with supports trenches in the rear. From the latter opened the "dug-outs" which were the dwelling places of the men on trench duty. Made and furnished out of the wreckage of towns and villages, some of the "dug-outs" had doors and windows. Here and there the appointments of these underground quarters included desks and long-case clocks. Trench pumps were installed, and the troops provided with sheepskin coats. Entrenchment kitchens, too, were fitted up. The work of improvement went on in fact without a pause.

By day, where fighting was not in progress, these mazes of trenches seemed unutterable desolations of deserted silence. No sign of movement betrayed the thousands who were in them. At night, however, they were scenes of incessant activity. It was by night that entanglements were laid and defences strengthened. At night took place the changes and reliefs. From their billets in the cellars or lower stories of a ruined farm, the smashed windows barricaded with planks and sandbags, or from quarters in some deserted village or abandoned works, the reliefs moved across a country totally without lights, felt their way along lanes and roads pitted into craters by shells ; navigated on

planks and temporary bridges, ditches, streams, and canals ; or crept under the shelter of partly demolished walls, until the rear communication ways into the trenches were reached. In this manner nearly all movements close to the firing line was made.

Acknowledgment too high can never be paid to the devotion and valour of the men who, through the weeks of an unusually dreary and bitter winter, both withstood the fury of the German attacks, and patiently day by day and night by night, solidified the barrier which was to consummate the enemy's ruin. Dangerous though it was the work may well have appeared unheroic. To some interpreters of public opinion at home it did appear unheroic. The soldiers' devotion, however, is a devotion to duty. This was, in his dispatch of November 20, well expressed by the British " Eye Witness."

It is difficult to do justice amid comfortable surroundings to the fortitude of those who day and night support the rigour of life in the trenches. It is true that everything is done for them which foresight and experience can suggest. It is true that by universal admission the rations are unlimited in amount and excellent in quality. But no attention and care can make trench life in winter anything but an extreme test of soldierly fortitude.

It is a small thing that it is dangerous, for danger is the condition of a soldier's life ; but it is monotonous, it is damp, it is insanitary, it is intolerably

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cold, and it is a strain upon the nerves. This war, more than any other, is one of unrecorded heroisms.

Not only the British army, however, but the French and the Belgian armies had unshaken confidence in their leaders, and with good reason. In time the entrenched front became completely organised, a system of settled communications linked up by telephone wires in every direction. The French trenches formed a seemingly endless labyrinth. In Flanders along the Yser rats, driven out of their usual haunts and starving in the desolated country, took up their abode with the men in the dug-outs, and became domesticated and friendly.

To many whose ideas of war remained based on the marches and counter-marches of earlier campaigns it was puzzling to see armies of hitherto unheard of magnitude thus fortifying themselves against each other. Taken together the combatants numbered millions. Their diggings stretched over more than 500 miles of country. A vast amount of labour is needed to complete a modern entrenched post, yet such posts were to be counted along these lines not by thousands but by tens of thousands.

It has been stated that in face of the hugely multiplied power of modern firearms, and of the destructiveness of modern high explosives as used now in war, there is no alternative save for the fighting hosts of the present day to dig

themselves in, and thus to remain locked in a deadly embrace. The explanation is crude. Like the astonishment called forth by this spectacle because it was unprecedented, the idea that all this represented merely a "dead-lock" sprang from failure to grasp the realities of this gigantic struggle.

At the back of every operation of war there is a strategic purpose. In this instance, so far from there being no strategy in the so-called impasse, it was wholly dictated by strategy. So far from there being no manœuvres in it, it was nothing else, from the beginning, but a mighty series of manœuvres. They were modern manœuvres, not ancient, but that is all.

To every student of this campaign with a knowledge of military affairs, the strategy on both sides which brought about this situation has been clear. Let it be remembered that entrenchment economises force. The proposition presented to General Joffre was that of arresting and breaking the offensive of an enemy not only superior in numbers, but with traditions which led him to cling to and cherish the offensive as his chief instrument of victory. General Joffre therefore knew that the Germans would struggle to regain the offensive until their power to do so became too exhausted to keep up the effort. He knew further that in the position in which he had succeeded in placing them they must make that effort at a disadvantage, and that

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that advantage must grow rather than diminish. For these reasons it was that the labour of entrenching was undertaken by the Allied troops. No part of that labour was thrown away.

In enclosing the Germans in an entrenched front he so economised his force that it became, though less in number, equal to that of the enemy in power. The simple proof of that is that the Germans were unable to break the barrier. They did their utmost to break it. Their success or their failure in the war depended upon being able to break it. They sacrificed at Ypres, on the Yser, and in later battles more than half a million of men in the endeavour to break it. It remained firm against every assault.

Nor was the loss of life the only loss. These battles has led to a vast, and as it proved, wasteful expenditure of ammunition. Since the barrier could not be broken, the question now was how to render the envelopment scheme abortive by inflicting on the Allies losses which would delay or make impossible the offensive on the part of the Allies to which the scheme was designed to lead. Expedients to that end had to be devised more effective than the fire of heavy howitzers. They must also be less costly expedients. Thus hand grenades and trench mortars reappeared, and mechanical sniping. The reserve of shells with which Germany had begun the war was used up. Such munitions had to be employed more sparingly. Besides, owing to the scarcity

of copper resulting from the British naval blockade, both the cost and the difficulty of manufacturing shells had immensely increased.

The German ordinary grenade was nothing more than the small iron bomb which had been used during the campaigns in Flanders in the seventeenth century. It was now filled with a charge of guncotton, and hurled into the hostile trenches by hand. Another variety had attached to the globe a short iron stump. This enabled the grenade to be stuck on to the muzzle of a rifle, and fired into the opposing trenches when the distance was too great to allow of the use of hand bombs. The trench mortar fired in the same way an iron globular bomb about a foot in diameter. The bomb was stuck on to the muzzle of the mortar by a short iron stump projecting from it, and filled with a heavy charge of nitro-glycerine, was fired at a high angle, so that it might fall right into a hostile trench and by the tremendous force of the explosion wreck it.

These projectiles, grenades and mortar bombs, were now turned out of the German arsenals in huge quantities. They were both much cheaper than shells, always a primary consideration in German warfare, and the mortar bombs required no copper driving bands.

In addition to these expedients mines were resorted to. Several blind saps—tunnels slightly below the surface—driven towards a hostile line

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of trench would be connected by a cross tunnel, and in this just in front of the trench the mines would be laid. At the moment chosen for attack they would be exploded from the German position by electricity, and a rush made to occupy the craters so formed. Yet another ruse was to drive an open sap—a narrow zigzag cutting—to a point commanding a hostile trench, and there instal a machine gun. For daring in these operations military distinctions were freely bestowed, and it is not surprising that in carrying them out many of the enemy displayed an audacious cunning.

When, however, we consider that the British and Belgians alike were much more expert riflemen, and that all three Allies as time went on steadily emphasised their ascendancy in artillery, the failure of these efforts of German perseverance to make up for the German want of military genius, was, it is not difficult to see, inevitable. The British troops improvised hand grenades out of army jam or beef tins. In grenade throwing they speedily became expert. Every German device was countered and improved upon. Parties engaged in mining met each other underground, and fought it out hand to hand. To diminish the losses arising from rifle and artillery fire, the larger German operations in this stage of the campaign were their night attacks. In these night battles the country before plunged in total darkness would suddenly present the

spectacle of flights of star shells and flares, mingled with the play of searchlights, and the lurid flash of guns and rifles.

Attack and counter-attack, varied in every interval of clearer weather by artillery duels, went on during week after week. The lines round Ypres and to the west of Lille, more especially about La Basse, remained among the main scenes of German activity.

Round Ypres the shot-torn and shell-ploughed woods became those melancholy and unapproachable "zones of the dead" where the German slain lay unburied, and many of the wounded had been left miserably to perish.

Frequent allusion has been made (the British "Eye Witness" wrote on November 20) to the losses of the enemy. Round Ypres we are continually finding fresh evidence of the slaughter inflicted. On November 15 one of our battalions, upon advancing discovered a German trench manned by seventeen corpses, while there were forty-nine more in a house close by. Next day a patrol discovered sixty dead in front of one trench, and fifty opposite another. In fact, all the farms and cottages to our front are charnel houses. The significance of such small numbers lies only in the fact that they represent the killed in a very small area.

According to prisoners the German attempts to take Ypres have proved costly. One man stated that there were only fifteen survivors out of his platoon which went into action fifty strong;

another reported that of 250 men who advanced with him only nineteen returned.

It is believed that one Bavarian regiment, 3,000 strong, which left Bavaria for the front on October 19, had only 1,200 men left before the attack made along the Menin-Ypres road on November 14, when it again suffered severely. The plight of some of the units of the new formations is even worse. One regiment of reserve corps having but 600 men out of 3,000.

If the period since the beginning of the war is considered the numbers are greater. For instance of the 15th Corps one regiment has lost sixty officers and 2,560 men, and another has lost 3,000 men. These figures include casualties of every kind—killed, wounded, and missing.

By dint of persistence the Germans succeeded in establishing on the west bank of the Yser a bridgehead at a point known as the Ferryman's Hut. They lost it, however, on November 27.

The action (says the French official account) was particularly brilliant. Several German trenches were carried in succession.

The operation was one of the most arduous and difficult tasks which our troops have accomplished. The object was to drive from the left bank of the Yser the Germans who had succeeded in establishing themselves there for a length of over a mile.

The difficulty in the attack lay in the fact that the canal was bordered by marshes which could not be crossed, and the only way of approach was along the bank and on a very narrow front. Moreover, the right bank, where the enemy had taken

up his position, dominated the left bank, which was exposed to a machine-gun fire. The assault on the Ferryman's hut was delivered by a detachment of 100 volunteers from the African battalions.

Our men fought knee deep in the water in a downpour of rain. The Germans displayed the greatest courage, and our men had to kill one officer and fifteen men who refused to surrender.

In the ferryman's hut itself, which had been turned into a little fort, there were fifty-three lying dead, two of whom were officers. They had been killed by our 8.6 shells. Close by was the wreckage of their searchlight and their machine guns.

Across the Yser the Germans had tried to push their outposts westward as far as possible. Mr. A. Beaumont, special correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, gathered the story of one of these expeditions which reached a ruined village :

Amid the ruins the church alone was standing, though the belfry was demolished. A score of Germans on outpost duty had taken shelter in the church for the night. They found the sexton, an old man of more than seventy, and mercilessly flogged him because he would not or could not tell them where the enemy was.

He crept out into the fields, found a French company concealed in some trenches, and told them his story. There was an instant rush of picked men into the village, the church was surrounded. The Germans taken by surprise hid in the choir, but to light up the place the old sexton found a bundle of straw, to which he set

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fire. As he held it up the Germans were slain on the spot.

The efforts of the Germans were directed not only towards gaining a crossing over the Yser, but to driving the British out of the valley of the Lys. This it has already been noted was geographically a weak point in their front. Down the valley of the Lys, besides, lay the railway junctions of Menin and Courtrai, vital to the maintenance of their positions alike between the Lys and the sea, and from Lille to Arras. South of Ypres they had at length succeeded by sapping and mining in getting possession of the Kleine Zillebeke ridge, though they had been unable to capture it in the battle. At the same time they tried to push the British line westward from Lille. Repeated and desperate attacks were made on the British posts at Cuinchy and Givenchy. Cuinchy they captured. Later, however, the place was retaken, and with it a large depôt of German bombs and hand grenades. On January 25 the enemy, advancing from La Bassee in two powerful columns, made a furious effort to take Givenchy. Five assaults were delivered against that place. The first attack was in the nature of a surprise.

Unexpectedly in the cold and misty dawn the mass, brought up with secrecy during the night, surged from the German trenches. The British trenches were not more than 100 yards away.

Across this space, ankle deep in mud, the attackers ploughed their way despite severe losses. The British trenches were taken, though not without a stiff fight. The resistance enabled the British supports to be called out. Charging into Givenchy village the Germans found themselves confronted at the end of the main street by these additional troops. The fire lasted only seconds. Without further ado the British dashed in with the bayonet. The clash was desperate. It was a melee of man to man. Not only bayonets were used. Many Germans were knocked out by British soldiers' fists. The remnant who could not get out of the village in time sought refuge in the houses. They were hunted out. One man broke into a house where eight Germans had sheltered themselves, bayoneted four, and made prisoners of the others.

With the defeat of this attack the British regained the trenches lost. The later attacks of the enemy never got home. A determined struggle was all this while being waged to the south of La Bassee in the area of the brickfields. At one point the Germans broke through the British line. Early in the afternoon, however, a combined French and British counter-attack drove them back. Here, too, there was hand to hand fighting.

From October onwards La Bassee remained one of the hottest corners in the war. Perched on an inland promontory which had been elaborately

fortified, the German front here formed a salient. It was an important part of their plan to pierce the Allied front at this point. To carry out that plan they made repeated attacks in great force. That these attacks failed was due to the remarkable fighting qualities of the troops opposed to them. About this struggle, of vital importance in its bearing on the campaign, many stories have been told. The two following, both authentic, illustrate the spirit which inspired our men, British and Indians alike :

In one trench which had become in the course of the fighting more or less isolated, forty of our men continued to hold firm until every one of them was either killed or wounded. Eventually there were only three left capable of firing, and these three continued to hold the enemy at bay. In the meantime word had been brought to those in rear that their ammunition was nearly exhausted, and seven men, the strongest available, were selected to bring up as much ammunition as they could carry. These latter found the three wounded survivors still standing amid the bodies of their dead and disabled comrades and still firing steadily. The support, slender as it was, came in the nick of time, for at that moment the Germans launched another assault, which, like the previous ones, was beaten off, and the position saved.

A very striking instance of resource and presence of mind was shown by a private (Indian) since been promoted from the ranks in recognition of his services. He and another were instructed

to creep out of the trench they were defending in order to make observations of a German trench 200 yards away. They advanced, creeping in the dark, with about forty yards laterally between them. When they had covered half the distance a brilliant German searchlight was suddenly flung over the space which divided the two trenches. The flood of light left one of the two fully exposed, while just avoiding with its outer rim his companion.

Concealment was useless for the man so exposed, and he was quick-witted enough to realise that no ordinary resource would save his life. He at once rose to his feet, and, in view of the British trench, advanced, salaaming to the German trench. Its occupants, taken aback by so unusual an advance, ceased fire. He still advanced, and, approaching quite close to the trench, was allowed after some dumb show to enter. A dialogue followed. The Germans, anxious to define his status, mentioned several Indian nationalities. He shook his head until the word Mussulman was mentioned. Then he nodded vigorously. A moment later his questioners mentioned the British. He drew his hand across his throat with a lively gesture of disgust. The Germans, encouraged by this indication, gave him some rations and a blanket.

He spent the night with them. Next morning, by the use of his fingers, he indicated to a superior officer who had been sent for to deal with so novel a case, that there were twenty-five other Mussulmen in his trench, whom, if released, he could certainly bring in. The Germans, completely deceived, gave him a final cup of coffee, and set him on this promising errand. He rejoined his

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friends, who had long since given him up, with a report of far more than local interest.

These acts of valour are but typical of a thousand like them. By such devotion to the soldier's ideal—his duty—by a courage, a morale, and a disciplined fortitude which have never been surpassed in any armies at any time, the first and essential part, the foundation, of the Allied generals' scheme, the most brilliant and daring stroke of strategy till then attempted in war, was accomplished. The Germans were held as in a vice.

## CHAPTER X

### NEUVE CHAPELLE

ALL through the winter campaign the enemy had been incessantly trying to sap and mine forward, and not only at La Bassee but right across the valley of the Lys to the hills south of Ypres.

He was anxious to make this gap secure. It was the key of his position along the line from Noyon to the sea.

The construction of the Allies' entrenchment barrier was but the first stage of their great plan. At once after that barrier had been made the second stage was entered upon. The second stage was that of drawing one by one the enemy's teeth in the shape of the carefully fortified promontories and ridges, selected by him with an eye to their defensive possibilities. As in the entrenchment stage this was gone about methodically. Neither time was lost, ammunition wasted, nor lives thrown away.

Guns were massed against the position picked out for assault. They were massed without being seen. The present day gunner does not trust

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to the eye. He uses his gun with mathematical precision. This system the French artillerists had reduced to an exact science. At a given time these guns opened at the same instant, and on a preconcerted plan swept the position with a squall of fire. In this tornado everything, entanglements and obstructions, were cut to pieces; trenches crumbled; concrete redoubts were split into ruins. Amid the hurricane of lead nothing could live. Having swept the position the guns drew a curtain of fire behind it while the infantry advanced to the attack.

More than once it happened that the French infantry charged up to and captured trenches after this treatment without losing a man. None were left to oppose them. In fact, however, no assaults were made until the "lie" of the enemy's trenches and defences was thoroughly known.

The first German "tooth" drawn under this system was their fortification on the spur at Vermelles, four miles to the south of La Bassee. That was on December 7. After that fangs were one by one extracted all round the hostile front.<sup>1</sup>

One of these fangs was the German position on the spur at La Bassee. Along the south side of this spur early in February the Irish Guards and the Coldstreams turned the enemy out of his defences

<sup>1</sup> Other examples are the Spur at Notre Dame de Lorette near Arras; the ridge north of Beausejour in Champagne; the Crete de Combres at Les Eparges on the Meuse; the Bois de Pietre on the Moselle; and Hartmannsweilerkopf in Alsace.

among the brick stacks there, and made the position useless to him save for purposes of defence.

Affairs having reached this stage the plan of assault was decided upon by Sir John French on February 19. It was to be carried out by the British First Army, under the command of Gen. Sir Douglas Haig, with the support of a large force of heavy artillery, a division of cavalry and some infantry of the general reserve.

The attack was to be directed against Neuve Chapelle. Holding attacks, that is practically feints, were to be made at the same time by the Second Army against La Bassee from the south and by the 4th Army Corps and the Indian Army Corps to the north.

The German position at La Bassee formed a buttress of the line which they had been striving to draw across the valley of the Lys. Their line from La Bassee across the flats of the valley as far as the hills south of Ypres had become a maze of diggings and entanglements, and was deemed to be impregnable. It was important to break this barrier. For five months at enormous cost the enemy had fought to build it up and to maintain it.

The village of Neuve Chapelle lay about half way between the spur of La Bassee on the south and the Lys on the north. The distance between the promontory on the one side and the river on the other is some eight miles. Neuve Chapelle was on the flat. From La Bassee round behind

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Neuve Chapelle the "inland coastline" curves, forming a bay completed near the villages of Fournes and Aubers by another promontory known as the Haut Pommeau. The distance from La Bassee to Fournes as the crow flies is five miles. Beyond Fournes again the "inland coastline" bends round sharply, and describes a much greater bay in which is situated the city of Lille. Eastward of Neuve Chapelle on the slope of the higher land is the Bois de Biez, and this with the hamlet of Pietre it was one of the British objectives to seize.

With these places in British hands the German hold on both Lille and La Bassee would be rendered precarious.

Now let us look, in its general aspects, at the British tactical plan.

A massed force of guns, including batteries of heavy howitzers, was at a given time (7.30 a.m. on the morning of March 10) to open on the German line of trenches, extending across the flat country and half-a-mile or so to the west and in front of Neuve Chapelle. Behind these trenches ran the main road from La Bassee to Armentières. For thirty-five minutes the guns were to keep up their squall of fire. By that time it was calculated the German trenches would be knocked to pieces; the entanglements and obstacles cut through; and the defending troops either killed, wounded, or demoralised. At the end of the thirty-five minutes the infantry of the First Army were to rush the position. Meanwhile, the artillery was

to alter the range and sweep with a like squall of fire Neuve Chapelle and the German second line of defences to the north and south of the village. Then the infantry were to advance to this second line. In turn the artillery were now to sweep the area beyond the village, and to throw a curtain of fire along the slopes of the higher land. While this was being done the infantry were again to advance from Neuve Chapelle on to the slopes more particularly towards the Bois de Biez and Pietre, while the guns further extended their range.

It will be seen that the infantry rushes had to take place between the artillery squalls. The latter had of necessity to be regulated by time table. It was an application on a large scale of the tactics carried out in Champagne and round Arras, Roye, and at Les Esparges.

Both the massing of the guns and that of the troops intended for this operation was carried out alike with secrecy and success. The batteries during several days preceding the battle had taken up their allotted positions without the Germans becoming aware of it. From the German lines the guns of course were out of sight. The troops had been massed in the first instance at points in the rear. From these they marched during the night before the battle to the British line of trenches. It is remarkable that the movement of these hosts remained undetected. Amid the unrelieved darkness of the ruined country

they set out along the shell-pitted roads, regiment after regiment, brigade following brigade. They moved as silently as possible, as silently as only British troops can when silence is called for. At ten o'clock on the evening of March 9 this march began. Through devastated and deserted villages passed the subdued tramp of these legions, men from every part of the British Isles, regiments famous for valour on many a field.

Behind the British lines the corps halted along the roadsides. After their march they were served with hot coffee. They extended for mile after mile—Highlanders and Riflemen; Territorials and Indians; a magnificent army, and in immediate command of it one of the ablest and most resolute of British generals.

Still, apparently, the Germans suspected nothing. No outward sign of alertness was to be observed along their line. The souging of the bleak night wind of March alone broke the silence. Then one by one the regiments moved by single files through the communication ways down into the trenches till these were filled with men. From the enemy's front there was yet no alarm, though their trenches were at many points less than 100 yards away.

Towards morning there comes out of the darkness a dull boom. A pause and then another. After a further pause a third. The guns are registering the range.

And now the faint light of dawn begins to break

and the white wall of sandbags which marks the German front can be dimly made out, with here and there dark patches where the bags used are blue. Thousands of eyes watch it for evidence of movement. There is none.

From a prisoner afterwards taken it was learned that a German captain, hearing what he thought were unusual sounds, and seeing the British trenches opposite crowded, telephoned the alarm to the artillery. According to this story he was told there were no orders to open fire, and advised to mind his own business.

So at last day broke, and the hands of watches approached 7.30. With the inevitableness of fate the minutes sped. The signal time was reached.

The guns—hundreds of guns—spoke at the same instant in an overpowering crash of intensified thunder. The earth shook as though smitten. The German line appeared as if swept by an earthquake. It became a line of ceaseless explosions. Shells crashed upon it from minute to minute in thousands; the guns went at it at top speed. The wall of sandbags was tumbled and breached in all directions. Amid the spurting fires and the acrid smoke the bodies, or fragments of the bodies of men were hurled into the air. Some of these ghastly fragments were even blown into the British trenches. Back to the British trenches also wafted the sickly fumes of lyddite and cresolite. Shells whistled past only a few feet above the heads of the British infantry. The

storm of shrapnel chopped the enemy's entanglements to pieces. The high explosives left his trenches shapeless. His laboriously made fortifications had been literally blasted out of being.

From behind a ragged wrack in the sky where aeroplanes were sailing, the sun came out, making still darker the cloud of smoke and dust hanging like a black pall over the German entrenchments. Where the sunlight touched them the British trenches flashed into rows of gleaming bayonets.

For the allotted thirty-five minutes the rain of fire went on. It paused as it had begun, on the instant. The momentary silence was as stunning as the uproar. It was the signal. The whistles blew for the charge.

The British infantry told off for the attack swarmed out of their trenches. There were five brigades of them : in the first line on the right to the south of Neuve Chapelle, the Garhwalis of the Meerut division of the Indian Army Corps ; in the centre opposite Neuve Chapelle, the 25th ; on the left to the north of Neuve Chapelle, the 23rd ; in the second line the 22nd and the 21st.

The leading regiments of the 25th, the Lincolns and the Berkshires, cleared the space to the enemy's trenches with a rush. The German entanglements here had been chopped by the shells into mere litter. To reach the wreckage of the wall of sandbags was a matter of seconds. The enemy's trenches proved to be full of dead and dying. Such survivors as there were,

paralysed with fright, surrendered. Then the two battalions swung one to the right, the other to the left and swept in both directions along the line. Against the Lincolns a remnant of the Germans still showed fight. The Lincolns went into them with the bayonet. Though desperate while it lasted, the struggle was brief. The men left alive surrendered. Against the Berkshires two German officers fought a machine gun, and continued to fight it until bayoneted.

In the track of the Lincolns and Berkshires came the Royal Irish Rifles and the Rifle Brigade. While the Berkshires and Lincolns were rounding up the prisoners, the Royal Irish and the Rifle Brigade moved forward towards Neuve Chapelle.

On the right the Garhwalis had equally rushed the German front. There, too, it had been a hand to hand finish, but soon over.

On the left, however, it was not the same story—not by any means the same story. The 23rd Brigade was made up of the Scottish Rifles, the 2nd Middlesex, the Devons and the West Yorkshires. Against the part of the German line they were told off to attack the guns had not done the work thoroughly. The enemy's mass of entanglements here followed a dip in the ground, and the shells had mostly missed.

Let it here be said that an accident of this kind is always liable to happen. It does not of necessity imply remissness on the part of the gunners, and involve blame. Difficulties like

this will crop up in carrying out the best scheme of tactics. Indeed no great battle has ever yet been fought in which the unexpected has not been encountered, and had on the instant to be provided for.

At the same time, in a scheme of attack of this kind it is, apart from accidents, the underlying assumption on which the whole is reared that every part of the area under fire shall in the first instance be equally and fully swept. If that be not done then the infantry have imposed upon them a task which no men ought to be asked to face, and which deliberately they would never be asked to face. That was the position in which the Scottish Rifles and the 2nd Middlesex, two battalions who are among the flower of the army, found themselves. Rushing forward, they in a flash saw before them in this hollow the German entanglements standing almost intact. The work in front of them was the impossible.

Imagine the tragedy of it. They were swept by the fire of machine guns, by rifle volleys discharged from second to second, and showers of shrapnel. To go back would have thrown the whole plan of assault into confusion. It might mean the loss of the battle.

On the other hand, it was impossible to re-range the British batteries. The guns were now thundering out their rafale upon Neuve Chapelle and the German second line. In Neuve

Chapelle and along that line were the enemy's local reserves. These or part of these, if there were any break in the rain of fire, would charge forward to reinforce their first line. They were there for the purpose.

Part of the Scottish Rifles got through. The entanglements in front of them had been wrecked. They reached the section of the German trenches which was their objective and overpowered the defenders. The other part was held up by the barbed wire. Then began a frantic struggle to smash through the webwork with the butts of rifles, to stamp it down, or to crawl through it. The effort was in vain. The bomb-throwers of the company dashed round in the track of their comrades who had already reached and captured the adjacent German trench. Through this trench they reached that still held and daringly bombed the Germans out of it. Meanwhile the others, forced to lie down, were sprayed both by the machine guns and by the enemy's shrapnel. A subaltern and 150 men were all who later answered to the roll-call.

The 2nd Middlesex fared no better. The instant they surged into the open two machine guns, one at each end of the section of the German trench they were to take opened upon them. Under this fire they had to clear a space of more than 120 yards. It was strewn as they raced forward with their dead and wounded. To them also the startling truth was revealed that the

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enemy's entanglements were still almost undamaged. Like the Scottish they tried to stamp and tear their way through. The effort was speedily seen to be a waste of life. They lay down amid the hail of bullets. A second time, and then a third they tried to break through. A message, however, had been got through to the guns. Relaid on to the German trench the artillery this time cut the entanglements through and the position, aided by a bombing party, was carried.

Such was the attack upon the German first line. But for this disaster to part of the 23rd Brigade, the casualties in this phase of the battle would have been comparatively slight.

The 25th and the Garhwalis completed their work before the time allotted for the fire squall against the village and the enemy's second line had expired. When this tornado began Neuve Chapelle was, although damaged, still standing. When the shell storm ceased, it had, save for the broken walls of the church, totally disappeared. This fair-sized place, which formerly had had some 3,000 inhabitants, was now pounded into shapeless ruins. The shells had fallen as elsewhere upon the cemetery. Tombstones had been blown about in all directions; graves torn open; coffins ploughed up and scattered in splinters together with the bones they had enclosed. In the churchyard had been posted a German detachment intended to defend that

approach to the village by rifle and machine-gun fire from behind the gravestones. Most of these men lay among their gruesome surroundings dead or wounded. The whole village and its immediate neighbourhood was wrapped in smoke and dust.

Into this the moment that the guns had ceased the Rifle Brigade dashed. The German defence had been smashed. Some of the enemy continued to snipe from behind bits of wall, broken tombstones, or the wrecks of carts. Among the ruins of a few outlying houses which had escaped complete destruction others put up a fight with machine guns and potted at the British from window spaces. They were speedily disposed of. The rest, bewildered by the blast, were collected from the cellars and dug-outs in which they had sought refuge, coming up with their hands above their heads.<sup>1</sup> From the opposite direction the village had been stormed by the 3rd Gurkhas of the Indian Brigade. On the way they had

<sup>1</sup> The correspondent who sent to the London News Agency a picturesque story of the battle (published in the *Daily Telegraph* of April 19, 1915), says: "Many strange incidents were observed. In one cellar a portly German was found dancing about in an agony of fear, screaming in a high-pitched voice in English: 'Mercy! mercy! I am married!' 'Your missus won't thank us for sending you home!' retorted one of the men who took him prisoner, and his life was spared. A Rifle Brigade subaltern, falling over a sandbag into a German trench, came upon two officers, hardly more than boys, their hands above their heads. Their faces were ashen grey; they were trembling. One said gravely in good English: 'Don't shoot! I am from London also!' They, too, were mercifully used."

got in with their kukris among a German detachment who attempted with machine guns to defend a group of houses by the cross roads at the south end of the place. The two corps, Riflemen and Gurkhas, old comrades in former fights, and each now equally dirty and blood-bespattered, cheered each other with enthusiasm.

The artillery tornado against Neuve Chapelle and its environs had been timed to last for half an hour. It began at 8.5 a.m.; it ended at 8.35 a.m. At the same instant the infantry advance against this second German line had swung out with a sledge-hammer energy. Within twenty-five minutes the village of Neuve Chapelle was in the British hands.

Thus in the centre this second wave of the onset had been crushingly successful. It was not immediately successful on the flanks. On the left flank, since the 23rd Brigade had been held up on the German first line, the troops of the 25th, who had captured the village, had to face north in order to enfilade the enemy still holding out against the 23rd. It was through this pressure as well as through the redirection of the guns, that these Germans still on that part of the first line were about eleven o'clock in the morning dislodged.

Meanwhile, through the gap in the enemy's first line which had been cleared by the 25th Brigade, the Devons, part of the 23rd, had come on, and attacked on the German second line of

defence, an orchard, triangular in shape and bounded along each face by a road, which the Germans had fortified. This, one of the strong points of the German second line, the Devons carried by storm. Later, when the Middlesex got through, they occupied the position.

Both the village of Neuve Chapelle and its environs over a considerable area north and south presented a network of German diggings, and before any further advance could be made it was essential that the whole of these should be in our hands. It was supposed that this area had been completely and thoroughly searched by the shell fire. Unfortunately, as in the instance of the fire directed against the German first line, that proved not to be the case. Just to the south of Neuve Chapelle there is a junction of roads. The main road which runs almost straight as a ruler from La Bassee to Estaires, meets at this point the main road to Armentières. The two highways join at a rather acute angle, and in that angle there was a group of houses. This position the Germans had elaborately strengthened. Among the British troops it had earned the name of "Port Arthur." Remarkably enough some 200 yards of the German trenches at this place had been missed or practically missed by the fire storm. The attack here was assigned to the 22nd Brigade (British) and the 21st Brigade (Indian). The corps who faced the almost untouched length of German trench were the 59th

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Garhwalis, one of the finest battalions of the Indian Army. They met with the same experience as the Scottish Rifles, a frightful fire of machine guns, added to repeated rifle volleys. Some of these dauntless and wiry warriors managed to tear or wriggle through the entanglements and went into the Germans with the bayonet. They were overborne by numbers, but fought to the last man.

While this was going on the Leicesters, the entanglements in front of them having been cut, had on the right of the Indian troops carried the opposing German position, though under a cross fire from the enemy still holding out against the Garhwalis. They wheeled round to left and bombed the Germans out. Meanwhile the Seaforth Highlanders had been brought up for an attack upon the enemy from the opposite flank, and this was supported by a frontal attack from the 3rd (Territorial) Battalion of the London Regiment. The charge of the "terriers" formed one of the brilliant episodes of the battle. "Port Arthur" was at last finished, and the whole mass of German reserves who had for months inhabited this maze of diggings and fortifications, supposed to be impregnable, were either killed, wounded, prisoners, or on the run.

So much were the survivors on the run in fact, that the British troops were able to form up for the third swing in the advance without any opposition worth speaking about. Indeed, Sir

John French states in his dispatch that the 21st Brigade formed up in the open without a shot being fired at them.

It was now about 1.30 in the afternoon. The part of the British line which needed to be strengthened for the further work in hand was the right wing. The 23rd Brigade needed to be reinforced, and in view of the more extended front which had to be covered as the advance proceeded, more troops were necessary. Not only was the front to be covered wider, but the further work on hand would probably turn out the stiffest. This work was an advance towards the slopes on the east and the seizure of decisive positions there.

Concurrently with the British infantry attack on the German second line the artillery had been searching this ground and the slopes, and although the Germans had been rushing up reinforcements and these were beginning to appear in the woods the curtain of fire made it out of the question for them to move farther forward.

Obviously it was all-important that the British line should be reformed and reinforced for the further advance before enemy reinforcements could be massed.

The 4th Army Corps and the Indian Army Corps had therefore been ordered up in the forenoon. There was a delay in their arrival. Apparently it arose from bad roads. Whatever the exact cause the delay meant that recovering

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from their initial demoralisation, the Germans had organised several strong points of opposition. One of these points was a bridge on the little river Les Layes, which runs across the flats from just outside Neuve Chapelle to Armentières, where it falls into the Lys. At this bridge the 25th Brigade found themselves held up. The approaches were a nest of machine guns. The third stage of the British advance did not begin until 3.30 in the afternoon. Two good hours had been lost.

Not merely were the 25th Brigade held up, but the Indian troops of the Reserve, advancing towards the Bois de Biez, found themselves enfiladed by the fire of this German position. The Gurkhas indeed reached the wood, and entered it. They were under a cross fire, however, from front and flank, and in the end had to retreat. In the direction also of the Pietre road the 21st Brigade met with greatly superior opposition, and like the 25th could not get forward. This was the situation at nightfall. The British troops dug themselves in along this new line.

At daybreak on March 11 the battle was renewed with an attempt by the Germans to shell the British from their new positions. During the night the enemy had brought up strong reinforcements and posted them in the woods and on the plateau. Their positions were energetically bombarded. Two German regiments in the Bois de Biez suffered heavily.

The enemy launched a counter-attack. Their columns were broken by the British fire. In pursuit of these beaten forces the British attack was renewed by the 4th Army Corps and the Indian Corps. The Germans, however, had also on their side established a new line. It was found necessary to deal with this as with the others, by a squall of artillery fire. But meantime the weather had changed. Rain and mist made accurate observation and reliable ranging out of the question.

That night further German reinforcements arrived. They were Saxons and Bavarians, mainly from Tourcoing. Before dawn on March 12 the German artillery opened upon Neuve Chapelle. Then in the dim light of breaking day two immense grey columns of German infantry were seen coming out of the woods towards Neuve Chapelle, one on the north-east, the other on the south-east. What is more they came on in mass formation. The British trenches, needless to say, had as usual been made as nearly as possible invisible. In that uncertain light the line even at quite a short distance away could not be made out. The Bavarians attacking from the south-east were still in column of route. An officer rode in their midst on horseback. Finding that they were close to the British line the charge was sounded. The mass came on in the closest formation. One minute they had uttered a cheer, the next a score or more of

machine guns opened upon them. As though struck by lightning, the mass went down as it seemed, together. It changed into a writhing rampart of dead and wounded. Along it men still unhit, could be seen digging themselves in for sheer life, and even using corpses as a shelter.

It was a terrible and ghastly spectacle, the result of a terrible and ghastly blunder. Hardened as they were, even the British troops were sickened by it. From out of the heap wounded Germans crawled towards the British lines. Some of the British went out and helped them in.

The attack from the north-east was also a failure. Whether it was the fate of the Bavarians or not, the heart went out of it. At the beginning it was violent, but it utterly petered out.

These crushing repulses were again followed by a renewal of the British onset. It was directed against the village or rather the group of houses on the ridge known as the Moulin de Pietre. Through a sweeping "curtain" of German fire the British infantry stormed the enemy's trenches with grenade and bayonet. Nothing could stand against their tenacity. They held on to their new positions until nightfall. It was found, however, that to keep these positions in face of the enemy's strength was a game not worth the candle. The line was therefore withdrawn and consolidated.

This work occupied the night, so that when

the morning of March 13 dawned the Germans found the British firmly entrenched east of Neuve Chapelle. The bombardment which the enemy at once opened from the Aubers ridge did very little damage. This, the fourth day following upon three days of hard and continuous fighting, was the most trying of all. The men were by this time in the last stage of fatigue. The devotion of the British soldier, however, is not readily fathomed.

Such was the battle of Neuve Chapelle. It cost the lives of nearly 2,500 British heroes, and casualties to nearly 9,000 others, while 1,751 were listed as missing. The losses of the enemy were some 18,000. In his dispatch Sir John French says: "The results attained were, in my opinion, wide and far-reaching." Not only did the British attack breach a part of the German front which had been elaborately fortified, and prove the power to breach it, and at a cost to the attacking force actually less than the force defending, but it set back in a decisive manner a scheme which the Germans had for six months been striving regardless of cost to carry through—the barring of access to the valley of the Lys. That valley is the military main road into Belgium, and as already pointed out, it is along it that there lie the railway junctions vital to the German position between the coast and the Aisne, and vital consequently to their whole position on the West. From their point of view,

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too, this much more than the crossing of the Yser is the way to the coast. The struggle, therefore, for mastery of the valley of the Lys represents a most important phase of the war.

As to the losses in the Battle of Neuve Chapelle it is now clear that they were due mainly to two things—the parts in the German first and in the German second line of defences which escaped the effect of the artillery “rafales”; and the late arrival of the reserve on the first day. If the artillery sweep in each instance was not perfect, it is at once just and necessary to point out that the flatness of the country rendered ranging far from easy, and that in each instance the section missed was comparatively but a very small bit of the line under fire.

We are now in a position to sum up the military results gained in the operations briefly told in this story. They were, as will be seen, of the utmost importance. Had the British troops not been transferred when they were from the Aisne, the whole course of the Western campaign, and with it the whole course of the War, must have been changed. With the vast superiority in numbers which, as events proved, the Germans were able to put into the field even before the end of October, a superiority aggregating nearly a million men, they would have been able, round the incompleated left flank of the Allies, not only to place themselves between the French and British forces and the coast, but, it is practically

certain, to place themselves between the Allied armies and Paris. They would have gained an unspeakable strategical advantage, and possibly also, as a consequence, a succession of decisive victories.

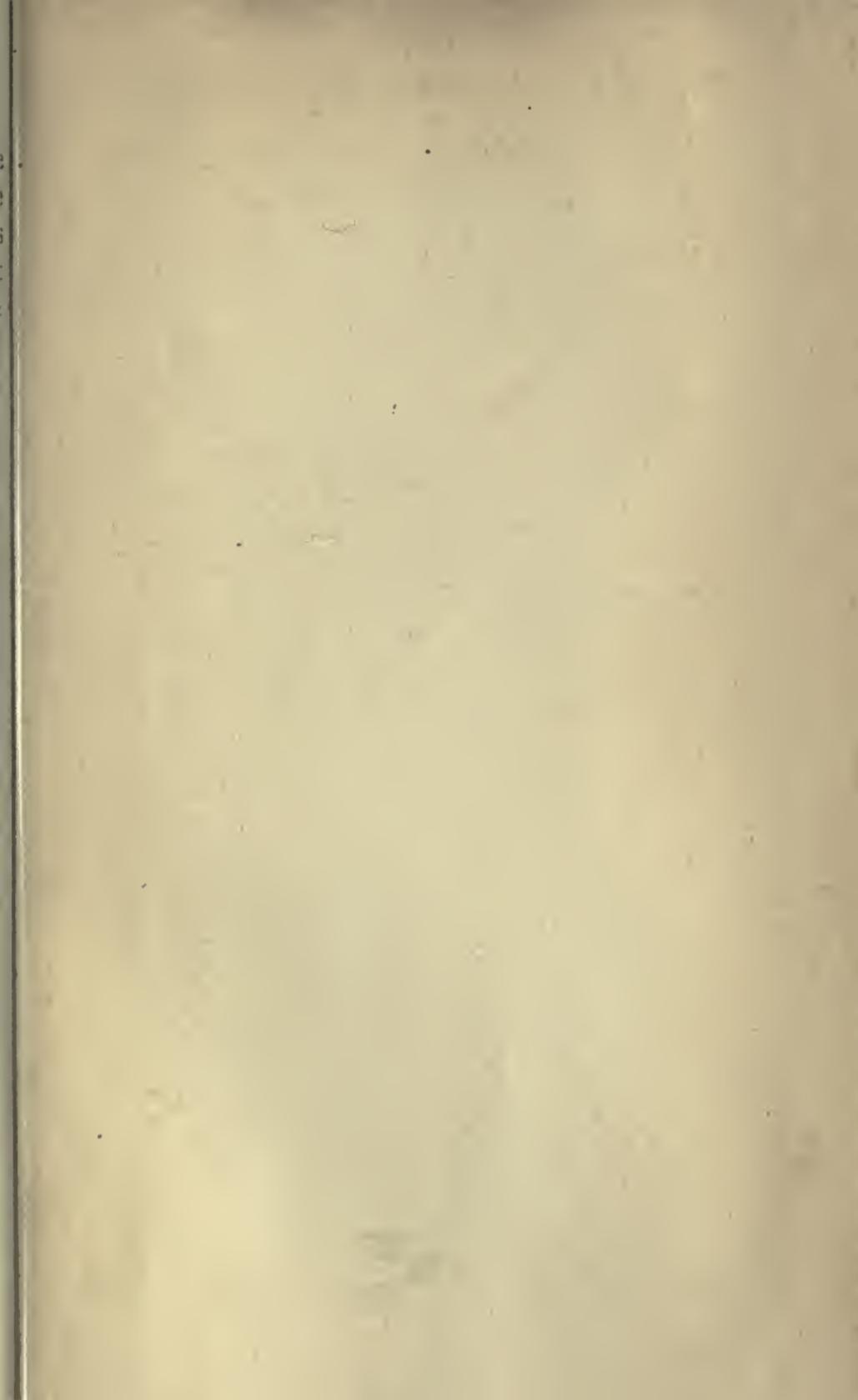
As it was, by the employment of the British troops to extend the left wing of the Allied line, this strategical scheme of the enemy was nipped in its first stages. Not only that, but it enabled the Allied generals completely to turn the tables. In place of enveloping the Allied armies as they had proposed, the Germans found themselves enveloped. To escape from this situation, which they well knew meant carrying on the War East and West with inevitably divided forces, a condition which eliminated their main chance of victory, they were forced to fight the first battle of Ypres. Despite their immensely greater numerical strength, they lost it through a succession of tactical blunders. To that has to be added the brilliant resource shown by Sir John French, and never more brilliantly than in the crisis of the battle on October 31.

Enabling the Allies to maintain their envelopment, the first battle of Ypres, both definitely checked the German offensive on the West, defeated their attempt to re-seize the strategical initiative, pinned down and by degrees wasted their main forces, and what perhaps is most important of all, ensured the necessity on their part of a division of forces between the two

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fronts. It is absolutely true to say that the later weeks of October were the chief crisis of the War. Only it may be when the events of this War fall in the course of time into a more just perspective shall we appreciate all we owe to the men who fought through that campaign.

To deal with the later and second battle of Ypres is beyond present scope. This little book will have served its purpose if, bringing into light the strictly historic truth of momentous and arresting events which may determine the destiny of Europe for ages, it has revealed at the same time the noble courage and the grand endurance of the British soldier, and has shown the majesty with which, like his fathers, he can do battle for his country.





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