

## CHAPTER XI

### FORWARD OBSERVING

AMONG the stock situations of the melodrama, one of the most worked to death is that of the beleaguered garrison at the last grasp, and the thrilling arrival of the rescuing force, at the critical moment. It is so old and threadbare now that probably no theatre would dare stage it; but in the war the same situation has been played again and again in the swaying and straining lines of battle in every variety of large and small scale. What the theatre has rejected as too theatrical, the artificial as too artificial, the real has accepted as so much a commonplace that it is hardly remarked. Actually, the battle-line is one long series of critical situations on one side or the other, the timely arrival, or failure to arrive, of assistance at the critical moment. The great difference is that in the theatre the rescue never fails to arrive, in war it often does.

Certainly the Stonewalls were as near the last

gasp as ever dramatist would dare bring his crisis ; but when their rescue came they were too busy helping it, too busy pushing the Germans back into what they hoped would be a similar unpleasant situation (without the timely rescue) to bother about it being a 'dramatic situation' at all.

The Scot and the three Stonewalls shooting from the shell-crater a little in front of the thin and scattered line were close enough to the front groups of the advancing German line to distinguish the features of the men's faces, when they were suddenly aware that the groups were going down : were vanishing from before their eyes, that the charging line came no nearer, that its front, if anything, receded. The front lines were being cut down now faster than they could advance, and the lines which fell dropped out of the low vision line of the defenders, and were hidden in the low-hanging smoke haze and in the welter of shell-pits, furrows, and heaps of earth over which the advance moved. The sound of the rifle fire swelled suddenly and heavily ; the air grew vibrant with the hiss and zipp of bullets.

The four in the shell pit continued to give all their attention to rapid shooting until the sound of running footsteps and shouting voices made

them turn. All along the line to right and left of them they could see figures running forward in short rushes, halting to fire, running on again, dropping into holes and opening a rapid fire from their cover. Into the pit beside the four tumbled three men one after another, panting and blowing, but shouting and laughing. 'Cheer oh, mates,' called one. 'Give us a bit o' room on the front edge there, will you?' Each of the three carried some burden. They clustered close together a moment, but with a delay of no more than seconds stood up and began to hoist into position on the pit's edge a light machine gun. 'Let 'er rip, Bill,' said one, who wore the tunic of an officer; and Bill, crouching behind his gun, started to 'let 'er rip' in a stream of fire jets and clattering reports.

'You boys were pretty near the limit, eh?' said the officer. 'Mighty near,' said Kentucky; 'you just sat into the game in time to stop 'em scooping the pool, sir.'

'Hey, Chick, get a move on wi' that loadin' there,' said Bill; 'you're hardly keepin' the ol' coffee-mill grindin'.'

'You're Anzacs, ain't you?' said Pug, noticing the shirt-tunic the officer wore. Bill was bare-

headed; Chick wore a metal helmet crammed down on top of his slouch hat.

'That's what,' said Chick, feverishly busy with his loading. 'What crowd are you?'

'Fifth Sixth Stonewalls,' said Pug.

'You was damn near bein' First 'n' Last Stone-colds this trip,' said Chick. 'Good job we buz'ed in on you.'

A few yards away another machine gun, peering over the edge of a shell crater, broke out in frantic chattering reports.

'That's Bennet's gun, I expect,' said the officer; 'I'll just slide over and see how he goes. Keep her boiling here, and mind you don't move out of this till you get the word.'

Chick nodded. 'Right-oh!' he said, and the officer climbed out of the hole and ran off.

For another minute or two the machine gun continued to spit its stream of bullets. 'They're breaking again,' said Kentucky suddenly; 'my Lord, look how the guns are smashing them.'

The attack broke and fell back rapidly, with the running figures stumbling and falling in clusters under the streaming bullets and hailing shrapnel. In less than half a minute the last running man had disappeared, the ground was bare of moving

figures, but piled with dead and with those too badly wounded to crawl into cover.

'First round to us,' said Bill cheerfully, and cut off the fire of his gun. 'An' last move to a good many o' them blokes out there,' said Chick; 'they fairly got it in the neck that time. I haven't seen such a bonzer target to strafe since we was in G'llipoli.'

'Is there many o' you chaps here?' said Pug. 'Dunno rightly,' said Chick, producing a packet of cigarettes. 'Bout time for a smoke-oh, ain't it, Bill?'

'I'm too blame dry to smoke,' said Bill. 'Wonder wot we're waitin' 'ere for now. D'you think the other battalions is up?'

'Have you heard anything about how the show is going?' said Kentucky.

'Good-oh, they tell us,' said Chick. 'We saw a big bunch o' prisoners back there a piece, an' we hear there's two or three villages taken. We came up here to take some other village just in front here. I s'pose they'll loose us on it presently.'

There was a short lull in the gunfire, and the noisy passage of the shells overhead slowed down. A shout was heard: 'Close in on your 'right, Stonewalls. Rally along to the right.'

Hear that ?' said Pug ; ' there is some Stonewalls left, then. Blimey, if I wasn't beginnin' to think we was the sole survivors.'

' We'd best move along,' said Kentucky, and the three made ready. ' Well, so long, mates,' said Chick, and ' See you in Berlin—or the nex' world,' said Bill lightly.

' To your right, Stonewalls ; close to your right,' came the shout again, and the three clambered out of their hole and doubled in across the torn ground to their right. There were other men doing the same, stooped low, and taking advantage of any cover they found, and gradually the remains of the battalion gathered loosely together, in and about the remains of the old trench. Pug and Kentucky anxiously questioned every man they met as to whether they had seen anything of Larry Arundel, but could get no tidings of him. The battalion was rapidly if roughly sorted out into its groups of companies, and when this was done and there were no signs of Larry, little could be concluded but that he had been killed or wounded. ' He'd sure ha.e been looking for us,' said Kentucky ; ' I'm afraid he's a wash-out.' ' Locks like it,' said Pug sadly. ' But mebbe he's only wounded. Let's hope it's a cushy one.'

The guns were opening behind them again, and bombarding with the utmost violence a stretch of the ground some little distance in front. 'It's a village we're to take,' one of the sergeants told them. 'That was our objective when the German counter-attack stopped us. We were to attack, with the Anzacs in support. Suppose we're going on with the original programme; but we're pretty weak to tackle the job now. Hope the Jocks on the left didn't get it too bad.'

'Should think we was due for a b/t of an ease-off,' said Pug. 'It's long past my usual desh-oo-nay time as it is.'

An officer moved along the line. 'Now, boys; get ready,' he said, 'the next bit's the last. Our turn's over when we take this village. Make a quick job of it.'

In front of them the ground was shrouded again with drifting smoke, and out beyond the broken ground and the remains of a shattered parapet they could see the flashing fires and belching smoke clouds of the shells that continued to pour over and down. In a minute or two the fire lifted back from the belt where it had been thundering, and at that the Stonewalls, with the Highlanders to one side and another regiment to the other,

rose and began to advance. From their front there came little opposition, but from somewhere out on the flank a rain of machine-gun bullets swept driving down upon them. The Stonewalls pushed on doggedly. It was heavy going, for the ground was torn and ploughed up in innumerable furrows and pits and holes and ridges, laced with clutching fragments of barbed-wire, greasy and slippery with thick mud. The Stonewalls went on slowly but surely, but on their right the other regiment, which had perhaps caught the heavier blast of fire, checked a little, struggled on again gamely, with men falling at every step, halted, and hastily sought cover amongst the shell holes. The Stonewalls persisted a little longer and went a little further, but the fire grew fiercer and faster, and presently they too, with the Highlanders on their left, flung down pantingly into such cover as they could find.

Kentucky and Pug had struggled along together, and sought shelter from the storming bullets in the same deep shell hole. Three minutes later an officer crawled over the edge and tumbled in after them. He was wounded, the blood streaming from a broken hand, a torn thigh, and a bullet wound in the neck.



One of you will have to go back,' he said faintly; 'I can't go further. You, Lee, and he nodded at Kentucky; 'd'you think you can take a message through to the gunners?'

Why, sure,' said Kentucky, promptly. Leastways, I can try.'

So the officer crawled to the edge of the pit and pointed to where, amongst some scattered mounds of earth, they had located the nest of machine guns. Then he pointed the direction Kentucky must take to find the Forward Observing Officer of Artillery. 'About a hundred yards behind that last trench we were in,' said the officer. 'Look, you can see a broken bit of grey wall. Get back to there if you can, and tell the officer where these machine guns are. Tell him they're holding us up and the C.O. wants him to turn every gun he can on there and smash them up. Take all the cover you can. You can see it's urgent we get the message through, and I don't know where any of the regular runners are.'

'Right, sir,' said Kentucky; 'I'll get it through.' He nodded to Pug, 'S'long, Pug,' and Pug nodded back, 'So long, Kentuck. 'Goo' luck.' Kentucky scrambled from the hole and

went off, crouching and dodging and running. No other man was showing above ground, and as he ran he felt most horribly lonely and appallingly exposed. He took what cover he could, but had to show himself above ground most of the time, because he gained little in safety and lost much in time by jumping in and out of the shell holes. So he skirted the larger ones and ran on, and came presently to the line of Anzacs waiting to support. He hardly waited to answer the eager questions they threw him, but hurried on, crossed the ruined fragments of the old trench, found presently a twisted shallow gully that appeared to run in the direction he wanted, ducked into it, and pushed on till he came almost abreast of the grey wall. He had to cross the open again to come to it, and now, with a hazy idea that it would be a pity to fail now, took infinite precautions to crawl and squirm from hole to hole, and keep every scrap of cover he could. He reached the well at last and crept round it, exulting in his success. He looked round for the officer—and saw no one. A shock of amazement, of dismay, struck him like a blow. He had struggled on with the one fixed idea so firmly in his mind, looking on the grey wall so definitely as his goal,

measuring the distance to it, counting the chances of reaching it, thinking no further than it and the delivery of his message there, that for a moment he felt as lost, as helpless as if the sun had vanished at noon. He was just recovering enough to be beginning to curse his luck and wonder where he was to look for the lost officer when a loud voice made him jump. 'Section fire ten seconds,' it said, and a moment later a hollow and muffled voice repeated tonelessly: 'Section fire ten seconds.' Kentucky looked round him. A dead man sprawled over the edge of a shell hole, a boot and leg protruded from behind some broken rubble, but no living man was in sight, although the voices had sounded almost elbow close.

'Hullo,' said Kentucky loudly. 'Artillery. Where are you, sir?'

'Hullo,' answered the voice. 'Who is there?' and from a tumbled pile of sandbags at the end of the broken wall a head was cautiously raised. 'Do you want me? Keep down, out of sight. I don't want this place spotted.'

Kentucky was creeping carefully towards him when a sepulchral voice from underground somewhere made him jump. 'Beg pardon, sir. Didn't catch that last order, sir.'

All right, Ridley,' said the officer. 'I was talking to someone up here'; and to Kentuck, 'What is it?'

Kentucky gave his message briefly. 'Right,' said the officer, pulling out a soiled map. 'Come along beside me here, and see if you can point the spot from here. Careful now. Keep down. If they spot this for an Oh Pip<sup>1</sup> they'll shell us off the earth.'

The officer was a young man, although under the mask of dirt and mud splashes and unshaven chin he might have been any age. He was sprawled against a broken-down breastwork of fallen bricks and timber, with a rough strengthening and buttressing of sandbags, and an irregular-shaped opening opposite his head to look out from. Kentucky sidled to the opening and looked long and carefully for landmarks on the smoke-clouded ground before him. He found the task difficult, because here he was on slightly higher ground, from which the aspect appeared utterly different to the little he had seen of it from below. But at last he was able to trace more or less the points over which he had passed, to see some of the Anzacs crouching in their cover and moving cautiously about behind it, and from that to locate the Stone-

<sup>1</sup> O.P.—Observation Post

walls' position and the rough earth heaps—which now he could see formed part of an irregular line of trench—where the machine-guns were supposed to be. He pointed the place out to the officer, who looked carefully through his glasses, consulted his map, looked out again.

'Likely enough spot,' he commented. 'It's been well strafed with shell fire already, but I suppose they have their guns down in deep dug-outs there. Anyhow, we'll give 'em another 'going over. Ridley!'

'Sir,' answered the voice from below. 'Stop. Fresh target. Machine-guns in trench. All guns. . . .' and followed a string of orders about degrees and yards which Kentucky could not follow. 'Now you watch the spot,' said the officer when the voice had reported 'All ready, sir,' and he had settled himself in position with glasses to his eyes. 'Watch and see if the shells land about the place you think the guns are.' He passed an order to fire, and a few seconds later said sharply, 'There. See them?'

But Kentucky had not seen them, and had to confess it. Or rather he had not seen these particular bursts to be sure of them, because the whole air was puffing and spurting with

black smoke and white smoke and yellowish smoke.

'They were a bit left and beyond where I wanted 'em,' said the officer. 'We'll try again. I'm firing four guns together. Look for four white smoke bursts in a bunch somewhere above your earth heaps.'

'See them?' 'I got 'em,' exclaimed the officer and Kentucky simultaneously a moment later. Kentucky was keyed up to an excited elatement. This was a new game to him, and he was enjoying it thoroughly. He thought the four bursts were exactly over the spot required, but the more experienced observer was not so satisfied, and went on feeling for his target with another couple of rounds before he was content. But then he called for high explosive, and proceeded to deluge the distant trench with leaping smoke clouds, flashes of fire, and whirlwinds of dust and earth. Kentucky watched the performance with huge satisfaction, and began to regret that he had not joined the artillery. It was so much better, he concluded, to be snugly planted in a bit of cover calling orders to be passed back per telephone and watching the shells play on their target. He was soon to find that this was not quite all the gunners'

business. He ducked suddenly back from the look-out as a shower of bullets thrashed across the ground, swept up to the broken wall, and hailed rattling and lashing on and round it. The hail continued for some seconds and stopped suddenly. 'Some beast out there,' said the officer reflectively, 'has his suspicions of this spot. That's the third dose I've had in the last half-hour. Machine gun.'

He went on with his firing, watching through his glass and shouting corrections of aim to the signaller below if a gun went off its target. Another shower of bullets clattered against the stones, and two spun ricocheting and shrieking through the loophole. Kentucky began to think observing was hardly the safe and pleasant job he had imagined. 'Afraid my little eighteen-pounder pills won't make enough impression there, if they're in dug-outs,' said the officer. 'Think I'll go'n ask the Brigade to turn the Heavies on to that lot. If you're going back you can tell your O.C. I'm fixing it all right, and we'll give 'em a good hammering.'

A shell shrieked up and burst close overhead, followed in quick succession by another and another.

Better wait a bit before you start,' said the Forward Officer. 'Looks as if they might be making it hot round here for a bit. Come along below while I talk to the Brigade. Carefully now. Don't let 'em spot you.'

The two crawled back, and then dived down a steep stair into a deep dug-out. Close to the entrance a telephonist sat on the ground with an instrument beside him. The officer squatted beside him and worked the 'buzzer' for a minute, and then explained the situation to whoever was at the other end.

'That's all right,' he said at the finish. 'The Heavies are going to hot 'em a bit. You'd better wait a little longer,' he continued, as the dug-out quivered to a muffled crash somewhere above them. 'They're still pasting us. I'm going up to observe for the Heavies,' he said, turning to the signaller. 'You just pass my orders back and the battery will put them through.'

He disappeared up the narrow stair just as another heavy shell crashed down. The signaller set his instrument beside him, lifted the receiver to his head, and leaned back wearily against the wall. 'Are you ready, sir?' he shouted a moment later, and faintly the officer's reply came back to



them, 'All ready,' and was repeated into the telephone. A moment later, 'Fired, sir,' the signaller shouted, and after a pause down came the officer's remarks, to be repeated back word for word.

Once Kentucky started up the stairs, but on reaching the open he heard what had failed to penetrate to the dug-out, the loud whistling screams of shells, the sharp crack of their overhead burst, the clash and thump of the flying fragments on the stones and ground. Kentucky came down the steps again. 'Bit warm up there ain't it?' said the signaller, continuing to hold the receiver to his ear, but placing his hand over the mouthpiece in speaking to Kentucky.

'Mighty warm,' said Kentucky. 'I don't fancy your officer's job up top there in the open.'

The signaller yawned widely. 'He's the second to-day,' he said. 'One expended to date—bit o' shrap—killed straight out.'

'You look kind of tuckered out,' said Kentucky, looking at the man. 'I'm nex' door to doin' the sleep-walkin' act,' said the signaller. He passed another order. 'We bin shootin' like mad for a week. Not too much sleep, going all the time, an' I 'aven't shut my eyes since yesterday morning.'

Another shell hit the ground close outside, and ne fragments of stone and dirt pattered down the stair.

'Can't say I like this,' said Kentucky restlessly. 'If a shell plunked into that entrance or bust it in where'd we be?'

'That's easy,' said the telephonist. 'We'd be here, an' likely to stay here,' and raised his voice again to shout a message to the officer.

They sat another five minutes with the walls shivering slightly or quaking violently as the shells fell close or at a distance. The telephonist sat apparently half-asleep, his eyes vacant, and his shoulders rounded, his voice raised at times to shout to the Forward Officer, sunk again to a monotonous drawl repeating the officer's words into the telephone. Once he glanced at Kentucky and spoke briefly. 'Why don't you get down to it an' 'ave a kip?' he said. And when Kentucky said he didn't feel particularly sleepy, and anyhow must move along in five or ten minutes, 'My Gawd,' said the telephonist; 'not sleepy! An' missin' a chance for ten minutes' kip. My Gawd!'

When the shelling appeared to have slackened Kentucky crawled up the stair, and after a word

with the officer set out on his return journey. Ahead where he judged the German position to be he could see a swirling cloud of dirty smoke, torn asunder every moment by quick-following flashes and springing fountains of earth and more belching smoke-clouds that towered upward in thick spreading columns, and thinned and rolled outward again to add still further to the dirty reek. The earth shook to the clamorous uproar of the guns, the air pulsed to the passage of countless shells, their many-toned but always harsh and strident shriekings. The greater weight of metal was from the British side, but as he hurried forward, stumbling and slipping over the wet and broken ground, Kentucky heard every now and then the rush and crash of German shells bursting near him. The rolling, pealing thunder of the guns, the thuds and thumps and bangings of their and their shells' reports, were so loud and so sustained that they drowned the individual sounds of approaching shells, and several times Kentucky was only aware of their burst on seeing the black spout of earth and smoke, on hearing the flying fragments sing and whine close past or thud into the wet ground near him.

He toiled on and came at last to an enormous

shell-crater in which a full dozen of the Anzacs squatted or stood. He halted a moment to speak to them, to ask how things were going. He found he had come through the main Anzac line without knowing it, so broken and upturn was the ground, and so well were the men concealed in the deeper scattered holes. This dozen men were well in advance and close up on the line which held the Stonewalls and which they were supporting.

'Your mob is just about due to slam at 'em again, mate,' said a sergeant, looking at his wrist-watch. 'You'd better hustle some if you want to go to it along wi' yer own cobbers. There goes the guns liftin' now. Time, gentlemen, please,' and he snapped down the cover of his watch and stood to look out.

Kentucky climbed out and ran on. The thunder of the guns had not ceased for an instant, but the fire-flashes and spouting smoke clouds no longer played about the same spot as before. The guns had lifted their fire and were pouring their torrent of shells further back behind the spot marked for assault. Now, as Kentucky knew well, was the designed moment for the attack, and he looked every moment to see a line of

figures rise and move forward. But he saw nothing except the tumbled sea of broken ground. saw no sign of rising men, no sign of movement. For full two or three minutes he hunted for the Stonewalls, for the line he wanted to rejoin; and for those precious minutes no beat of rifle fire arose, no hail of bullets swept the ground over which the attack should pass. Then a machine gun somewhere in the haze ahead began to chatter noisily, and, quickly, one after another joined it and burst into a streaming fire that rose rapidly to a steady and unbroken roar. Shells began to swoop and crash over the open too, and Kentucky ducked down into a deep shell hole for cover.

‘What’s gone wrong?’ he wondered. ‘They were sure meant to start in when the guns lifted, and they’d have been well across by this. Now the Boche machine-gunners have had time to haul the guns from their dug-outs and get busy. What’s wrong? Surely the battalion hasn’t been clean wiped out.’

He peered cautiously over the edge of his hole, but still he saw no sign of movement. He was completely puzzled. Something was wrong, but what? The Anzacs had told him the attack was

due, and those lifting guns had backed their word. And yet there was no attack. He waited for long minutes—minutes empty of attack, empty of sign, empty of everything except the raving machine guns and the storming bullets.

