

CHAPTER XIII

WITH THE TANKS

SOON after Kentucky rejoined them the Stone-walls were moved forward a little clear of the village they had helped to take, just as one or two heavy shells whooped over from the German guns and dropped crashing on the ground that had been theirs. The men were spread out along shell holes and told to dig in for better cover because a bit of a redoubt on the left flank hadn't been taken and bullets were falling in enfilade from it.

'Dig, you cripples,' said the sergeant, 'dig in. Can't you see that if they counter-attack from the front now you'll get shot in the back while you're lining the front edge of those shell holes. Get to it there, you Pug.'

'Shot in the back, livin' the front,' said Pug as the sergeant passed on. 'Is it a conundrum, Kentuck?'

'Sounds sort of mixed,' admitted Kentucky.

But it's tainted some with the truth. That redoubt is half rear to us. If another lot comes at us in front and we get up on the front edge of this shell hole, there's nothing to stop the redoubt bullets hitting us in the back. Look at that,' he concluded, nodding upward to where a bullet had smacked noisily into the mud above their heads as they squatted in the hole.

The two commenced wearily to cut out with their 'trenching tools a couple of niches in the sides of the crater which would give them protection from the flank and rear bullets. They made reasonably secure cover and then stayed to watch a hurricane bombardment that was developing on the redoubt. 'Goo on the guns,' said Pug joyfully. 'That's the talk; smack 'em about.'

The gunners 'smacked 'em about' with fifteen savage minutes' deluge of light and heavy shells, blotting out the redoubt in a whirlwind of fire-flashes, belching smoke clouds and dust haze. Then suddenly the tempest ceased to play there, lifted and shifted and fell roaring in a wall of fire and steel beyond the low slope which the redoubt crowned.

With past knowledge of what the lift and the further barrage meant the two men in the shell-

pit turned and craned their necks and looked over along the line.

'There they go,' said Pug suddenly, and 'Attacking round a half-circle,' said Kentucky. The British line was curved in a horse-shoe shape about the redoubt, and the two being out near one of the points could look back and watch clearly the infantry attack launching from the centre and half-way round the sides of the horse-shoe. They saw the khaki figures running heavily, scrambling round and through the scattered shell holes, and presently, as a crackle of rifle fire rose and rose and swelled to a sullen roar with the quick rhythmic clatter of machine guns beating through it, they saw also the figures stumbling and falling, the line thinning and shredding out and wasting away under the withering fire.

The sergeant dodged along the pit-edge above them. 'Covering fire,' he shouted, 'at four hundred—slam it in,' and disappeared. The two opened fire, aiming at the crest of the slope and beyond the tangle of barbed wire which alone indicated the position of the redoubt.

They only ceased to fire when they saw the advanced fringe of the line, of a line by now woefully thinned and weakened, come to the

edge of the barbed wire and try to force a way through it.

'They're beat,' gasped Pug. 'They're done in . . . ' and cursed long and bitterly, fingering nervously at his rifle the while. 'Time we rung in again,' said Kentucky. 'Aim steady, and pitch 'em well clear of the wire.' The two opened careful fire again while the broken remnants of the attacking line ran and hobbled and crawled back or into the cover of shell holes. A second wave flooded out in a new assault, but by now the German artillery joining in helped it and the new line was cut down, broken and beaten back before it had covered half the distance to the entanglements. Kentucky and Pug and others of the Stonewalls near them could only curse helplessly as they watched the tragedy and plied their rifles in a slender hope of some of their bullets finding those unseen loop-holes and embrasures.

'An' wot's the next 'tem o' the programme, I wonder,' said Pug half an hour after the last attack had failed, half an hour filled with a little shooting, a good deal of listening to the pipe and whistle of overhead bullets and the rolling thunder of the guns, a watching of the shells falling and spouting earth and smoke on the defiant redoubt.

'Reinforcements and another butt in at it, I expect,' surmised Kentucky. 'Don't see anything else for it. Looks like this pimple-on-the-map of a redoubt was holdin' up any advance on this front. Anyhow I'm not hankering to go pushin' on with that redoubt bunch shootin' holes in my back, which they'd surely do.'

'Wot's all the buzz about be'ind us?' said Pug suddenly, raising himself for a quick look over the covering edge of earth behind him, and in the act of dropping again stopped and stared with raised eyebrows and gaping mouth.

'What is it?' said Kentucky quickly, and also rose, and also stayed risen and staring in amazement. Towards them, lumbering and rolling, dipping heavily into the shell holes, heaving clumsily out of them, moving with a motion something between that of a half-sunken ship and a hamstrung toad, striped and banded and splashed from head to foot, or, if you prefer it, from fo'c'sl-head to cutwater, with splashes of lurid colour, came His Majesty's Land Ship 'Here We Are.'

'Gor-streuth!' ejaculated Pug. 'Wha-what is it?'

Kentucky only gasped.

'Ere,' said Pug hurriedly, 'let's gerrout o' this. It's comin' over atop of us,' and he commenced to scramble clear.

But a light of understanding was dawning on Kentucky's face and a wide grin growing on his lips. 'It's one of the Tanks,' he said, and giggled aloud as the Here We Are dipped her nose and slid head first into a huge shell-crater in ludicrous likeness to a squat bull-pup sitting back on its haunches and dragged into a hole: 'I've heard lots about 'em, but the seein' beats all the hearin' by whole streets,' and he and Pug laughed aloud together at the Here We Are's face and gun-port eyes and bent-elbow driving gear appearing above the crater rim in still more ridiculous resemblance to an amazed toad emerging from a rain-barrel. The creature lumbered past them, taking in its stride the narrow trench dug to link up the shell holes, and the laughter on Kentucky's lips died to thoughtfully serious lines as his eye caught the glint of fat vicious-looking gun muzzles peering from their ports.

'Haw haw haw,' guffawed Pug as the monster lurched drunkenly, checked and steadied itself with one foot poised over a deep hole, halted and backed away, and edged nervously round the rim

of the hole. 'See them machine guns pokin' out, Kentucky,' he continued delightedly. 'They won't 'arf pepper them Huns when they gets near enough.'

Fifty yards in the wake of the Here We Are a line of men followed up until an officer halted them along the front line where Pug and Kentucky were posted.

'You blokes just takin' 'im out for an airin'?' Pug asked one of the new-comers. 'Oughtn't you to 'ave 'im on a leadin'-string?'

'Here we are, Here we are again,' chanted the other and giggled spasmodically. 'An' ain't he just hot stuff. But wait till you see 'im get to work with his sprinklers.'

'Does 'e bite?' asked Pug, grinning joyously. 'Oughtn't you to 'ave 'is muzzle on?'

'Bite,' retorted another. 'He's a bloomin' Hun-eater. Jes' gulps 'em whole, coal-scuttle 'ats an' all.'

'He's a taed,' said another. 'A lollopin, flat-nosed, splay-fittit, ugly puddock, wi's hin' legs stuck oot whaur his front should be.'

'Look at 'im, oh look at 'im . . . he's alive, lad, nobbut alive.' . . . 'Does every bloomin' thing but talk.' . . . 'Skatin' he is now, skatin'

on 'is off hind leg,' came a chorus of delighted comment.

'Is he goin' to waltz in and take that redoubt on his ownsum?' asked Kentucky. 'No,' someone told him. 'We give him ten minutes start and then follow on and pick up the pieces, and the prisoners.'

They lay there laughing and joking and watching the uncouth antics of the monster waddling across the shell-riddled ground, cheering when he appeared to trip and recover himself, cheering when he floundered side-ways into a hole and crawled out again, cheering most wildly of all when he reached the barbed-wire entanglements, waddled through, bursting them apart and trailing them in long tangles behind him, or trampling them calmly under his churning caterpillar-wheel-bands. It was little wonder they cheered and less wonder they laughed. The Here We Are's motions were so weirdly alive and life-like, so playfully ponderous, so massively ridiculous, that she belonged by nature to nothing outside a Drury Lane Panto. At one moment she looked exactly like a squat tug-boat in a heavy cross sea or an ugly tide-rip, lurching, dipping, rolling rail and rail, plunging wildly bows under,

tossing her nose up and squatting again stern-rail deep, pitching and heaving and diving and staggering, but always pushing forward. Next minute she was a monster out of Pre-Historic Peeps, or a new patent fire-breathing dragon from the pages of a very Grimm Fairy Tale, nosing her way blindly over the Fairy Prince's pitfalls; next she was a big broad-buttocked sow nuzzling and rooting as she went; next she was a drunk man reeling and staggering, rolling and falling, scrabbling and crawling; next she was—was anything on or in, or underneath the earth, anything at all except a deadly grim purposeful murdering product of modern war.

The infantry pushed out after her when she reached the barbed wire, and although they took little heed to keep cover—being much more concerned not to miss any of the grave and comic antics of their giant joke than to shelter from flying bullets—the line went on almost without casualties. 'Mighty few bullets about this time,' remarked Kentucky, who with Pug had moved out along with the others 'to see the fun.' 'That's 'cos they're too busy with the old Pepper-pots, an' the Pepper-pots is too busy wi' them to leave much time for shootin' at us,' said Pug gaily. It

was true too. The Pepper-pots—a second one had lumbered into sight from the centre of the horse-shoe curve—were drawing a tearing hurricane of machine-gun bullets that beat and rattled on their armoured sides like hail on a window-pane. They waddled indifferently through the storm and Here We Are, crawling carefully across a trench, halted half-way over and sprinkled bullets up and down its length to port and starboard for a minute, hitched herself over, steered straight for a fire-streaming machine-gun embrasure. She squirted a jet of lead into the loophole, walked on, butted at the emplacement once or twice, got a grip of it under her upward sloped caterpillar band, climbed jerkily till she stood reared up on end like a frightened colt, ground her driving bands round and round, and—fell forward on her face with a cloud of dust belching up and out from the collapsed dug-out. Then she crawled out of the wreckage, crunching over splintered beams and broken concrete, wheeled and cruised casually down the length of a crooked trench, halting every now and then to spray bullets on any German who showed or to hail a stream of them down the black entrance to a dug-out, straying aside to nose over any suspicious cranny, swinging round

again to plod up the slope in search of more trenches.

The infantry followed up, cheering and laughing like children at a fair, rounding up batches of prisoners who crawled white-faced and with scared eyes from dug-out doors and trench corners, shouting jests and comments at the lumbering Pepper-pots.

A yell went up as the *Here We Are*, edging along a trench, lurched suddenly, staggered, side-slipped, and half disappeared in a fog of dust. The infantry raced up and found her with her starboard driving gear grinding and churning full power and speed of revolution above ground and the whole port side and gear down somewhere in the depths of the collapsed trench, grating and squealing and flinging out clods of earth as big as clothes-baskets. Then the engines cased, slowed, and stopped, and after a little and in answer to the encouraging yells of the men outside, a scuttle jerked open and a grimy figure crawled out.

'Blimey,' said Pug raptarously, 'ere's Jonah 'isself. Ol' Pepper-pot's spewed 'im out.'

But 'Jonah' addressed himself pointedly and at some length to the laughing spectators, and they, urged on by a stream of objurgation and

invective, fell to work with trenching-tools, with spades retrieved from the trench, with bare hands and busy fingers, to break down the trench-side under Here We Are's starboard driver, and pile it down into the trench and under the uplifted end of her port one. The second Pepper-pot cruised up and brought to adjacent to the operations with a watchful eye on the horizon. It was well she did, for suddenly a crowd of Germans seeing or sensing that one of the monsters was out of action, swarmed out of cover on the crest and came storming down on the party. Here We Are could do nothing; but her sister ship could, and did, do quite a lot to those Germans. She sidled round so as to bring both bow guns and all her broadside to bear and let loose a close-quarter tornado of bullets that cut the attackers to rags. The men who had ceased digging to grab their rifles had not time to fire a shot before the affair was over and 'Jonah' was again urging them to their spade-work. Then when he thought the way ready, Here We Are at his orders steamed ahead again, her lower port side scraping and jarring along the trench wall, her drivers biting and gripping at the soft ground. Jerkily, a foot at a time, she scuffled her way along the trench

till she came to a sharp angle of it where a big shell hole had broken down the wall. But just as her starboard driver was reaching out over the shell hole and the easy job of plunging into it, gaining a level keel and climbing out the other side, the trench wall on the right gave way and the Here We Are sank her starboard side level to and then below her port. She had fallen bodily into a German dug-out, but after a pause to regain her shaken breath—or her crew's—she began once more to revolve her drivers slowly, and to churn out behind them, first a cloud of dust and clots of earth, then, as the starboard driver bit deeper into the dug-out, a mangled debris of clothing and trench-made furniture. On the ground above the infantry stood shrieking with laughter, while the frantic skipper raved unheard-of oaths and the Here We Are pawed out and hoofed behind her, or caught on her driving band and hoisted in turn into the naked light of day, a splintered bedstead, a chewed up blanket or two, separately and severally the legs, back, and seat of a red velvet arm-chair, a torn grey coat and a forlorn and muddy pair of pink pyjama trousers tangled up in one officer's field boot. And when the drivers got their grip again and the Here We Are rolled

majestically forward and up the further sloping side of the shell-crater and halted to take the skipper aboard again, Pug dragged a long branch from the fascines in the trench debris, slid it up one leg and down the other of the pink pyjamas, tied the boot by its laces to the tip, and jambed the root into a convenient crevice in the Tank's stern. And so beflagged she rolled her triumphant way up over the captured redoubt and down the other side, with the boot-tip bobbing and swaying and jerking at the end of her pink tail. The sequel to her story may be told here, although it only came back to the men who decorated her after filtering round the firing-line, up and down the communication lines, round half the hospitals and most of the messes at or behind the Front.

And many as came to be the Tales of the Tanks, this of the Pink-Tailed 'un, as Pug called her, belonged unmistakably to her and, being so, was joyfully recognised and acclaimed by her decorators. She came in due time across the redoubt, says the story, and bore down on the British line at the other extreme of the horse-shoe to where a certain infantry C.O., famed in past days for a somewhat speedy and hectic career, glared in amazement at the apparition lurching and

bobbing and bowing and crawling toad-like towards him.

'I knew,' he is reported to have afterwards admitted, 'I knew it couldn't be that I'd got 'em again. But in the old days I always had one infallible sign. Crimson rats and purple snakes I might get over; but if they had pink tails, I knew I was in for it certain. And I tell you it gave me quite a turn to see this blighter waddling up and wagging the old pink tail.'

But this end of the story only came to the Stonewalls long enough after—just as it is said to have come in time to the ears of the Here We Are's skipper, and, mightily pleasing him and his crew, set him chuckling delightedly and swearing he meant to apply and in due and formal course obtain permission to change his land-ship's name, and having regretfully parted with the pink tail, immortalise it in the name of H.M.L.S. *The D.T.'s*.

