

CHAPTER XIV

THE BATTLE HYMN

KENTUCKY was suddenly aware of an overpowering thirst. Pug being appealed to shook his empty water-bottle in reply. 'But I'll soon get some,' he said cheerfully, and proceeded to search amongst the German dead lying thick around them. He came back with a full water-bottle and a haversack containing sausage and dark brown bread, and the two squatted in a shell hole and made a good meal of the dead man's rations. They felt a good deal the better of it, and the expectation of an early move back out of the firing-line completed their satisfaction. The Stonewalls would be relieved presently, they assured each other; had been told their bit was done when the village was taken; and that was done and the redoubt on top of it. They weren't sure how many Stonewalls had followed on in the wake of the Tank, but they'd all be called back soon, and the two agreed cordially that they wouldn't be a little bit sorry

to be out of this mud and murder game for a spell.

An attempt was made after a little to sort out the confusion of units that had resulted from the advance, the Stonewalls being collected together as far as possible, and odd bunches of Anzacs and Highlanders and Fusiliers sent off in the direction of their appointed rallying-places. The work was made more difficult by the recommencing of a slow and methodical bombardment by the German guns and the reluctance of the men to move from their cover for no other purpose than to go and find cover again in another part of the line. Scattered amongst craters and broken trenches as the Stonewalls were, even after they were more or less collected together, it was hard to make any real estimate of the casualties, and yet it was plain enough to all that the battalion had lost heavily. As odd men and groups dribbled in, Kentucky and Pug questioned them eagerly for any news of Larry, and at last heard a confused story from a stretcher-bearer of a party of Stonewalls that had been cut off, had held a portion of trench against a German bombing attack, and had been wiped out in process of the defence. Larry, their informant was almost sure, was one of the

casualties, but he could not say whether killed, slightly or seriously wounded.

'Wish I knowed 'e wasn't hurt too bad,' said Pug. 'Rotten luck if 'e is.'

'Anyhow,' said Kentucky, 'we two have been mighty lucky to come through it all so far,' with nothing more than your arm scratch between us.'

'Touch wood,' said Pug warningly. 'Don't go boastin' without touchin' wood.'

Kentucky, who stood smoking with his hands buried deep in his pockets, laughed at his earnest tone. But his laugh died, and he and Pug glanced up apprehensively as they heard the thin, distant wail of an approaching shell change and deepen to the roaring tempest of heart' and soul-shaking noise that means a dangerously close burst.

'Down, Pug,' cried Kentucky sharply, and on the same instant both flung themselves flat in the bottom of their shelter. Both felt and heard the rending concussion, the shattering crash of the burst, were sensible of the stunning shock, a sensation of hurtling and falling, of . . . empty blackness and nothingness.

Kentucky recovered himself first. He felt numbed all over except in his left side and arm,

which pricked sharply and pulsed with pain at a movement. He opened his eyes slowly with a vague idea that he had been lying there for hours, and it was with intense amazement that he saw the black smoke of the burst still writhing and thinning against the sky, heard voices calling and asking was anyone hurt, who was hit, did it catch anyone. He called an answer feebly at first, then more strongly, and then as memory came back with a rush, loud and sharp, 'Pug! are you there, Pug? *Pug.*' One or two men came groping and fumbling to him through the smoke, but he would not let them lift or touch him until they had searched for Pug. 'He was just beside me,' he said eagerly. 'He can't be hurt badly. Do hunt for him, boys. It's poor old Pug. Oh, *Pug!*'

'H'lo, Kentuck . . . you there?' came feebly back. With a wrench Kentucky was on his knees, staggered to his feet, and running to the voice. 'Pug,' he said, stooping over the huddled figure, 'you're not hurt bad, are you, Pug, boy?' With clothing torn to rags, smeared and dripping with blood, with one leg twisted horribly under him, with a red cut gaping deep over one eye, Pug looked up and grinned weakly. 'Orright,' he

said; 'I'm . . . orright. But I tole you, Kentuck . . . I tole you to touch wood.'

A couple of stretcher-bearers hurried along, and when the damages were assessed it was found that Pug was badly hurt, with one leg smashed, with a score of minor wounds, of which one in the side and one in the breast might be serious; Kentucky had a broken hand, torn arm, lacerated shoulder, and a heavily bruised set of ribs. So Pug was lifted on to a stretcher, and Kentucky, asserting stoutly that he could walk and that there was no need to waste a precious stretcher on carrying him, had his wounds bandaged and started out alongside the bearers who carried Pug. The going was bad, and the unavoidable jolting and jerking as the bearers stumbled over the rough ground must have been sheer agony to the man on the stretcher. But no groan or whimper came from Pug's tight lips, that he opened only to encourage Kentucky to keep on, to tell him it wouldn't be far now, to ask the bearers to go slow to give Kentucky a chance to keep up. But it was no time or place to go slow. The shells were still screaming and bursting over and about the ground they were crossing, gusts of rifle bullets or lonely whimpering ones still whistled and hummed

past. A fold in the ground brought them cover presently from the bullets, but not from the shells, and the bearers pushed doggedly on. Kentucky kept up with difficulty, for he was feeling weak and spent, and it was with a sigh of relief that he saw the bearers halt and put the stretcher down. 'How do you feel, Pug?' he asked. 'Bit sore,' said Pug, with sturdy cheerfulness. 'But it's nothin' too bad. But I wish we was out'er this. We both got Blighty ones, Kentuck, an' we'll go 'ome together. Now we're on the way 'ome. I'd hate to have another of them shells drop on us, and put us out for good, mebber.'

They pushed on again, for the light was failing, and although the moon was already up, the half-light made the broken ground more difficult than ever to traverse. Pug had fallen silent, and one of the bearers, noticing the gripped lips and pain-twisted face, called to the other man and put the stretcher down and fumbled out a pill. 'Swallow that,' he said, and put it between Pug's lips; 'an' that's the last one I have.' He daubed a ghastly blue cross on Pug's cheek to show he had been given an opiate, and then they went on again.

They crept slowly across the ground where the

Germans had made one of their counter-attacks, and the price they had paid in it was plain to be seen in the piled heaps of dead that lay sprawled on the open and huddled anyhow in the holes and ditches. There were hundreds upon hundreds in that one patch of ground alone, and Kentucky wondered vaguely how many such patches there were throughout the battlefield. The stretcher-bearers were busy with the wounded, who in places still remained with the dead, and sound German prisoners under ridiculously slender guards were carrying in stretchers with badly wounded Germans or helping less severely wounded ones to walk back to the British rear. A little further on they crossed what had been a portion of trench held by the Germans and from which they appeared to have been driven by shell and mortar fire. Here there were no wounded, and of the many dead the most had been literally blown to pieces, or, flung bodily from their shelters, lay broken and buried under tumbled heaps of earth. Half a dozen Germans in long, flapping coats and heavy steel 'coal-scuttle' helmets, worked silently, searching the gruesome debris for any living wounded; and beyond them stood a solitary British soldier on guard over them, leaning on his

bayoneted rifle and watching them. Far to the rear the flashes of the British guns lit the darkening sky with vivid flickering gleams that came and went incessantly, like the play of summer lightning. It brought to Kentucky, trudging beside the stretcher, the swift memory of lines from a great poem that he had learned as a child and long since forgotten—the Battle Hymn of his own country. In his mind he quoted them now with sudden realisation of the exactness of their fitting to the scene before him—‘ Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored, He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword; His truth is marching on.’ Here surely in these broken dead, in the silent, dejected prisoners, in the very earth she had seized and that now had been wrested from her, was Germany’s vintage, the trappings out of the grapes of a wrath long stored, the smitten of the swift sword that flashed unloosed at last in the gun-fire lightning at play across the sky.

For the rest of the way that he walked back to the First Aid Post the words of the verse kept running over in his pain-numbered and weary mind—‘ . . . where the grapes of wrath are

stored; trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath . . . ' over and over again.

And when at last they came to the trench that led to the underground dressing-station just as the guns had waked again to a fresh spasm of fury that set the sky ablaze with their flashes and the air roaring to their deep, rolling thunders, Kentucky's mind went back to where the great shells would be falling, pictured to him the flaming fires, the rending, shattering crashes, the tearing whirlwinds of destruction, that would be devastating the German lines. 'Grapes of wrath,' he whispered. 'God, yes—bitter grapes of wrath.' And in his fancy the guns caught up the word from his mouth, and tossed it shouting in long-drawn, shaking thunder: 'Wrath—wrath—*wrath!*'

