

CHAPTER II

THE OVERTURE OF THE GUNS

ALL that night the men, packed close in their blankets, slept as best they could, but continually were awakened by the roaring six-gun salvos from the battery beside them.

One of the gunners had explained that they were likely to hear a good deal of shooting during the night, 'the notion being to bust off six shells every now and again with the guns laid on the wire we were shooting at in daylight. If any Boche crawls out to repair the wire in the dark, he never knows the minute he's going to get it in the neck from a string of shells.'

'And how does it work?' asked the interested Arundel.

'First rate,' answered the gunner. 'Them that's up at the O.P.¹ says that when they have looked out each morning there hasn't been a sign or a symptom of new wire going up, and, of course,

¹Observation Post.

there's less chance than ever of repairing in daytime. A blue-bottle fly—let alone a Boche—couldn't crawl out where we're wire-cutting without getting filled as full of holes as a second-hand sieve.'

The salvoes kept the barnful of men awake for the first hour or two. The intervals of firing were purposely irregular, and varied from anything between three to fifteen minutes. The infantry, with a curious but common indifference to the future as compared to the present, were inclined to grumble at this noisy interruption of their slumbers, until Arundel explained to some of them the full purpose and meaning of the firing.

'Seein' as that's 'ow it is,' said Pug, 'I don't mind 'ow noisy they are; if their bite is anything like as good as their bark, it's all helpin' to keep a clear track on the road we've got to take presently.'

'Those gunners,' said Kentucky, 'tal'ed about this shooting match having kept on for four days and nights continuous, but they didn't know, or they wouldn't say, if it was over yet, or likely to be finished soon.'

'The wust of this blinkin' show,' said Billy Simson, 'is that nobc ly seems to know nothin'

and the same people seem to care just about the same amount about anythin'.

'Come off it,' said Pug; 'here's one that cares a lump. The sooner we gets on to the straff and gets our bit done and us out again the better I'll be pleased. From what the Quarter-bloke says, we're goin' to be kep' on the bully and biscuit ration until we comes out of action; so roll on with comin' out of action, and a decent dinner of fresh meat and potatoes and bread again.'

'There's a tidy few,' said Billy, 'that won't be lookin' for no beef or bread when they comes out of action.'

'Go on,' said Pug; '*that's* it; let's be cheerful. We'll all be killed in the first charge; and the attack will be beat back; and the Germans will break our line and be at Calais next week, and bombarding London the week after. Go on; see if you can think up some more cheerfuls.'

'Pug is kind of right,' said Kentucky; 'but at the same time so is Billy. It's a fair bet that some of us four will stop one. If that should be my luck, I'd like one of you,' he glanced at Arundel as he spoke, 'to write a line to my folks in old Kentucky, just easing them down and saying I went out quite easy and cheerful.'

Pug snorted disdainfully. 'Seems to me he said, 'the bloke that expect's it is fair askin' for it. I'm not askin' nobody to write off no last dyin' speeches for me, even if I 'ad anybody to say 'em to, which I 'aven't.'

'Anyhow, Kentucky,' said Arundel, 'I'll write down your address, if you will take my people's. What about you, Billy?'

Billy shuffled a little uneasily. 'There's a girl,' he said, 'one girl partikler, that might like to 'ear, and there's maybe two or three others that I'd like to tell about it. You'll know the sort of thing to say. I'll give you the names, and you might tell 'em'—he hesitated a moment—'I know, "the last word he spoke was Rose—or Gladys, or Mary," sendin' the Rose one to Rose, and so on, of course.'

Arundel grinned, and Pug guffawed openly. 'What a lark,' he laughed, 'if Larry mixes 'em up and tells Rose the last word you 'ays was "Gladys," and tells Gladys that you faded away murmurin' "Good-bye, Rose."'

'I don't see anythin' to laugh at,' said Billy huffily. 'Rose is the partikler one, so you might put in a bit extra in hers, but it will please the others a whole heap. They don't know each

other, so they will never know I sent the other messages, and I'll bet that each of 'em will cart that letter round to show it to all her pals, and they'll cry their eyes out, and have a real enjoyable time over it.'

Arundel laughed now. 'Queer notions your girls have of enjoyment, Billy,' he said.

'I know 'em,' insisted Billy; 'and I'm right about it. I knew a girl once that was goin' to be married to a chum o' mine, and he ups and dies, and the girl 'ad to take the tru-sox back to the emporium and swop it for mournin'; and the amount of fussin' and cryin'-over that 'girl got was somethin' amazin', and I bet she wouldn't have missed it for half a dozen 'usband; and, besides, she got another 'usband easy enough about two months after.' He concluded triumphantly, and looked round as if challenging contradiction.

Outside, the battery crashed again, and the crazy building shook about them to the sound. A curious silence followed the salvo, because by some chance the ranked batteries, strung out to either side of them, 'had chosen the same interval between their firing. Most of the men in the barn had by this time sunk to sleep, but at the silence they stirred uneasily, and many of them woke and

raised themselves on their elbows, or sat up to inquire sleepily 'What was wrong now?' or 'What was the matter?' With the adaptability under which men live in the fire-zone, and without which, in fact, they could hardly live and keep their senses, they had in the space of an hour or two become so accustomed to the noise of the cannonade that its cessation had more power to wake them than its noisiest outbursts; and when after the silence had lasted a few brief minutes the batteries began to speak again they turned over or lay down and slid off into heedless sleep.

Somewhere about midnight there was another awakening, and this time from a different cause—a difference that is only in the note and nature of the constant clamour of fire. Throughout the night the guns had practically the say to themselves, bombs and rifles and machine guns alike being beaten down into silence; but at midnight something—some a arm, real or fancied—woke the rifles to a burst of frenzied activity. The first few stuttering reports swelled quickly to a long drum-like roll. The machine guns caught up the chorus, and rang through it in racketing and clattering bursts of fire. The noise grew with the minutes, and spread and spread, until it seemed

that the whole lines were engaged for miles in a desperate conflict.

Arundel, awakened by the clamour, sat up. 'Is anybody awake?' he asked in low tones, and instantly a dozen voices around him answered.

'Is it the attack, do you suppose?' asked one, and a mild argument arose on the question, some declaring that they—the Stonewalls—would not be left to sleep there in quietness, if our line were commencing the push; others maintaining that secrecy was necessary as to the hour planned, because otherwise the Boches would be sure to know it, and be ready for the attack.

'May be,' some one ventured the opinion, 'it's them that's attacking us.' But this wild theorist was promptly laughed out of court, it being the settled conviction apparently of his fellows that the Boche would not dare to attack when he knew from the long bombardment that our lines must be heavily held.

As the argument proceeded, Arundel felt a touch on his elbow, heard the soft drawling voice of Kentucky at his ear.

'I'm going to take a little pasear outside, and just see and hear anything I can of the proceedings.'

'Right,' said Arundel promptly. 'I'm with you; I'm not a bit sleepy, and we might find out something of what it all means.'

The two slipped on their boots, moved quietly to the door, and stepped outside.

They walked round the end of the barn to where they could obtain a view clear of the building and out towards the front, and stood there some minutes in silence, watching and listening. A gentle rise in the ground and the low crest of a hill hid the trenches on both sides from their view, and along this crest line showed a constant quivering, pulsing flame of pale yellow light, clear and vivid along its lower edge, and showing up in hard, black silhouette every detail of the skyline, every broken tree stump, every ragged fragment of a building's wall, every bush and heap of earth. Above the crest the light faded and vignettted off softly into the darkness of the night, a darkness that every now and then was wiped out to the height of half the sky by a blinding flash of light, that winked and vanished and winked again and again, as the guns on both sides blazed and flung their shells unseeing but unerring to their mark.

Larry and Kentucky heard a call in the battery

near them, the quick rush of running feet, a succession of sharp, shouted orders. The next instant, with a crash that made them jump, the six guns of the battery spoke with one single and instantaneous voice. In the momentary gush of flame from the muzzles, and of yellow light, that blotted out all other lights, the two men saw in one quick glimpse the hedge, the leafy screens above the guns, the guns themselves, and the gunners grouped about them. Out to their right, a moment after the darkness had flashed down again over the battery, a neighbouring group of guns gave tongue in a rapid succession of evenly spaced reports. This other battery itself was hidden from the two watchers, but because of its nearness the flashes from it also flung a blinding radiance upward into the night, revealing the outlines of every roof and building, hedge and tree, that stood against the sky.

Their own battery, in answer to a hoarse bellowing from the megaphone of 'Section Fire—5 seconds,' commenced to pound out a stream of shells from gun after gun. Away to right and left of them the other batteries woke and added their din to the infernal chorus. The shells from other and farther-back batteries were rushing

and screaming overhead, and dying away in thin wailings and whistlings in the distance.

Another and different note struck in, rising this time from a shrill scream to a louder and louder and more savage roar, and ending with an earth-shaking crash and the shriek of flying splinters. A shell had burst a bare hundred yards from where the two stood, hurling some of its fragments over and past them to rap with savage emphasis on the stone and brick of the farm building.

Larry and Kentucky ducked hastily, and ran crouching to the corner of their barn, as another shrill whistle and rush warned them of the approaching shell. This time it burst farther off, and although the two waited a full fifteen minutes, no other shell came near, though along the crest of the sky-line they could see quick flashing burst after burst and thick billowing clouds of smoke rising and drifting blackly against the background of light beyond the slope.

The tornado of shell fire beat the rifles down again to silence after some minutes. The rolling rifle fire and clatter of machine guns died away gradually, to no more than an occasional splutter, and then to single shots. After that the artillery slowed down to a normal rate of fire, a steady

succession of bangs and thuds and rumblings, that, after the roaring tempest of noise of the past few minutes, were no more than comparative quiet.

'Seems like it's all over for this time,' said Kentucky.

'I'm glad we came out,' said Larry; 'it was quite a decent little show for a bit.'

Kentucky peered at him curiously. 'Did it strike you,' he said, 'the number of guns there were loosing off in that little show, and that most of those the other side are going to be doing their darnedest to spoil *our* little show, when it comes the time for us to be over the parapet?'

'I suppose that's so,' admitted Larry; 'but then, you see, our guns will be doing the same by them, so the game ought to be even so far as that goes.'

'The game!' repeated Kentucky reflectively. 'I notice quite a few of you boys talk of it as "a game," or "the game"; I wonder why?'

'I don't know,' said Larry, 'except that—Oh well—just because it is a game, a beastly enough one, I'll admit, but still a game that the best side is going to win.'

'The best side—' said Kentucky, 'meaning, I suppose, you—us?'

'Why, of course,' said Larry, with utter and unquestioning confidence.