

## CHAPTER III

### THE EDGE OF BATTLE

THE men were awakened early next morning, and turned out, to find a grey misty dawn. One might have supposed that in the mist it would have been impossible for the gunners to observe and direct any fire, but for all that the artillery on both sides were fairly heavily engaged, and the bangings and thumpings and rumblings rolled away to right and left, until they died down in the distance into the dull muffled booming of a heavy surf beating on a long beach.

The Stonewalls breakfasted hastily on biscuits, cheese, jam, and tea, were formed up, and moved on to the road. They marched slowly up this in the direction of the front, and presently found the mist clearing away and then dispersing rapidly under the rays of the rising sun. It seemed as if the first beams of sunrise were a signal to the artillery, for the gunfire speeded up and up, until it beat in one long reverberating roar on the trembling air. The firing was not all from our

side either; although for the moment none of the enemy shells dropped very close to the Stonewalls, there were enough of them sufficiently close to be unpleasantly startling, and to send their fragments whistling and whining over their hastily ducking heads.

About seven o'clock a new note began to run through the bellowing of the guns—the sharp, more staccato sound of the rifles and machine guns, the distinctive bang of bombs and hand-grenades. The rifle fire, hesitant and spasmodic at first, swelled suddenly to a loud, deep, drumming roll, hung there for several minutes, pitched upward again to a still louder tone, then sank and died away, until it was drowned out in the redoubled clamour of the guns.

The Stonewalls were halted and moved into the side of the road, and squatted lining the ditches and banks, listening to the uproar, discussing and speculating upon its meaning.

'Sounded like an attack, sure thing,' said Kentucky, 'but whether our side is pushing or being pushed I have not a notion.'

'Probably ours,' said Larry; 'the yarn was going that we were to attack this morning, although some said it was for to-morrow.'

'Anyway,' said Pug, 'if our lot 'as gone over they've either got it in the neck, and 'ad to 'ook it back again, or else they're over the No-Man's-Land, and into the fust line.'

'That's what,' said Billy Simson. 'And 'ark at the bombs and 'and-grenades bustin' off nineteen to the dozen. That means we're bombing our way along the trenches and chuckin' 'em down into the dug-outs.'

It was true that the distinctive sound of the bursting bombs had risen again to a renewed activity, and from somewhere further up or down the line the rifle fire commenced again, and rose to one long continuous full-bodied roar. The sound spread and beat down in rolling waves nearer and nearer, ran outward again on both flanks, continued loud and unceasing.

The Stonewalls were formed up and moved on again, and presently came upon, and marched into, the ruined fragments of a village, with shattered and tumble-down houses lining the sides of the road. They began to notice a new and significant sound, the thin whistling and piping of bullets passing high over their heads, the smack and crack of an occasional one catching some upper portion of the ruined houses past

which they marched. Here, too, they began to meet the first of the backwash of battle, the limping figures of men with white bandages about their heads, arms, and bodies; the still forms at full length on the sagging, reddened stretchers. At one of the houses in the village a Red Cross flag hung limp over a broken archway, and through this the procession passed in an ever-quicken- ing stream.

The village street rose to the crest of a gentle slope, and when the Stonewalls topped the rise, and began to move down the long gentle decline on the other side, they seemed to step from the outer courts into the inner chambers of war. Men hung about the broken fragments of the buildings; ammunition carts were drawn up in angles and corners of the remaining walls; a couple of ambulances jolted slowly and carefully up the hill towards them; the road was pitted and cratered with shell holes; the trees, that lined both sides of it, trailed broken branches and jagged ends of smashed off trunks, bore huge white scars and patches, and strewed the road with showers of leaves and twigs. The houses of the village, too, on this side of the slope, had been reduced to utter ruin. Only here and there

were two- or three-sided portions of a house still standing; the rest were no more than heaped and tangled rubbish-heaps of stone and brick, broken beams and woodwork, shattered pieces of furniture, and litter of red tiles.

By now the bullets were singing and whisking overhead, crackling with vicious emphasis against the trees and walls. And now, suddenly and without the slightest warning, four shells rushed and crashed down upon the road amongst the ruined buildings. The men who had been hanging about in the street vanished hastily into such cover as they could find, and the Stonewalls, tramping steadily down the shell-smashed, rubbish-strewn street, flinched and ducked hastily to the quick rush and crash of another string of shells. An order was passed back, and the column divided into two, half taking one side of the road, and half the other; the rear halting and lying down, while the front moved off by platoons, with some fifty to a hundred yards between each.

A German battery was evidently making a target of this portion of the road, for the shells continued to pound up and down its length. After the sharp burst of one quartette fairly between the ranks of a marching platoon, there was a call

for stretchers, and the regimental stretcher-bearers came up at the double, busied themselves for a few minutes about some crumpled forms, lifted them, and moved off along the road back to the Red Cross flag of the dressing station. The shell-swept stretch of road was growing uncomfortably dangerous, and it was with a good deal of relief that the Stonewalls saw their leading platoon turn aside and disappear into the entrance of a communication trench.

'This 'ere,' said Pug, with a sigh of satisfaction, 'is a blinkin' sight more like the thing; and why them lazy beggars of a Staff 'aven't 'ad this communication trench took back a bit further beats me.

'It sure is a comfortable feeling,' agreed Kentucky, 'to hear those bullets whistling along upstairs, and we safe down below ground-level.'

The communication trench was very narrow and twisted, and wormed its way for an interminable distance towards the still constant rattle of rifle fire and banging grenades. The men had not the slightest idea what had happened, or what was happening. Some of them had asked questions of the stretcher-bearers or of the wounded back in the village, but these it appeared had come

from the support trenches and from the firing-line before the uproar of rifle fire had indicated the commencement of an attack by one side or the other. The long, straight, single-file line of Stonewalls moved slowly and with frequent checks and halts for over an hour; then they were halted and kept waiting for a good thirty minutes, some chafing at their inaction, others perfectly content to sit there in the safety of the deep trench. A few men tried to raise themselves and climb the straight-sided walls of the trench to the level ground, but the long grass growing there still hid their view, and the few who would have climbed right out on to the level were sharply reprimanded and ordered back by the officers and N.C.O.s; so the line sat or stood leaning against the walls, listening to the unintelligible sounds of the conflict, trying to glean some meaning and understanding of the action's progress from them.

The section of trench where Larry and his friends were waiting was suddenly overcast by a shadow, and the startled men, glancing hastily upward, saw to their astonishment a couple of Highlanders standing over and looking down upon them. One had a red wet bandage about his head the other his hose-top slit down and dangling about

his ankle, and a white bandage wound round the calf of his leg. The two stood for a minute looking down upon the men crouching and squatting in their shelter, on men too astonished for the moment to speak or do aught save gape upwards at the two above them. Somehow, after their relief at escaping from the open into the shelter of the trench, after the doubts and misgivings with which some of them had ventured to raise themselves and peer out above ground level, the angry orders given to them to get back and not expose themselves, after having, in fact, felt themselves for an hour past to be separate only from a sudden and violent death by the depth of their shelter trench, it took their breath away to see two men walking about and standing with apparent unconcern upon a bullet-swept level, completely without protection, indifferent to that fact. But they recovered quickly from their amazement.

'Holloa, Jock,' Pug called up to them, 'what's the latest news in the despatches? 'Ave we commenced the attack?'

'Commenced? 'Ay, and gey near finished, as far as we're concerned.'

There was a quick chorus of questions to this. 'How far had we gone?' 'Was the first line



taken?' 'Was the attack pushing on?' 'Had the casualties been heavy?' and a score of other questions.

The two Highlanders bobbed down hastily, as a heavy shell fell with a rolling *cr-r-r-ump* within a hundred yards of them.

'We've got the first line where we attacked,' said one of them after a moment, 'and we're pushing on to the second. They say that we have taken the second and third lines down there on the right, but the Huns are counter-attacking, and have got a bit of the third line back. I'm no' sure what's happened on the left, but I'm hearin' the attack was held, and pretty near wiped out. I only ken that our lot is tryin' to bomb up there to the left, and no' makin' much progress.'

His companion rose and stepped across the narrow trench.

Come on, Andy,' he said, 'we'll awa back to the dressin' station, and the first train to the North. This is no' just a health resort to be bidin' in. Good luck to you, lads.'

'Good luck, so long,' chorussed the trench after them, and the two vanished from sight.

There was a buzz of excited talk after they had gone—talk that lasted until word was passed

back along the trench and the line rose and commenced to stumble onward again.

'I suppose,' said Larry, 'they'll be moving us up in support. I hope we get out of this beastly trench soon, and see something of what's going on.'

Billy Simson grunted. 'Maybe we'll see plenty, and maybe a bit too much, when we get out of here,' he said, 'and it is decently safe down here anyhow.'

Pug snorted. 'Safe?' he echoed; 'no safer than it is above there, by the look of them two Jocks. They don't seem to be worritin' much about it being safe. I believe we would be all right to climb up out of this sewer and walk like bloomin' two-legged humans above ground, instead of crawling along 'ere like rats in a 'Ampton Coyrt maze of drains.'

But, whether they liked it or not, the Stonewalls were condemned to spend most of that day in their drains. They moved out at last, it is true, from the communication trench into one of the support trenches, and from this they could catch an occasional narrow glimpse of the battlefield. They were little the wiser for that, partly because the view gave only a restricted vision of a maze of twisting lines of parapets, of which they could tell

no difference between British and German; of tangles of rusty barbed wire; and, beyond these things, of a drifting haze of smoke, of puffing white bursts of cotton wool-like smoke from shrapnel, and of the high explosives spouting gushes of heavy black smoke, that leaped from the ground and rose in tall columns with slow-spreading tops. They could not even tell which of these shells were friends' and which were foes', or whether they were falling in the British or the German lines.

Pug was frankly disgusted with the whole performance.

'The people at 'ome,' he complained, 'will see a blinkin' sight more of this show in the picture papers and the linema shows than me what's 'ere in the middle of it.'

'Don't you fret, Pug,' said Larry; 'we'll see all we're looking for presently. Those regiments up front must have had a pretty hot strafing, and they're certain to push us up from the supports into the firing-line.'

'I don't see what you've got to grumble about,' put in Billy Simson; 'we're snug and comfortable enough here, and personally I'm not in any hurry to be trottin' out over the open, with the German Army shootin' at me.'

'I admit I'm not in any hurry to get plugged myself,' drawled Kentucky, 'but I've got quite a big mite of sympathy for Pug's feelings. I'm sure getting some impatient myself.'

'Anyway,' said Pug, 'it's about time we 'ad some grub ; who's feelin' like a chunk of bully and a pavin'-stone ?'

The others suddenly woke to the fact that they also were hungry. Bully beef and biscuits were produced, and the four sat and ate their meal, and lit cigarettes and smoked contentedly after it, with the roar of battle ringing in their ears, with the shells rumbling and moaning overhead, and the bullets piping and hissing and singing past above their trench.

After their meal, in the close, stagnant air of the trench they began to feel drowsy, and presently they settled themselves in the most comfortable positions possible, and dozed off to sleep. They slept for a good half-hour, heedless of all the turmoil about them, and they were roused by a word passed down along the trench.

They rose, and shook the packs into place on their shoulders, tightened and settled the straps about them, patted their ammunition pouches, felt the bayonets slip freely in their scabbards, tried

the bolts and action of their rifles, and then stood waiting with a curious thrill, that was made up of expectation, of excitement, of fear, perhaps—they hardly knew what. For the word passed along had been to get ready, that the battalion was moving up into the firing-line.

