

CHAPTER IV

ACROSS THE OPEN

THE order came at last to move, and the men began to work their way along the support trench to the communication trenches which led up into the forward lines.

Up to now the battalion, singularly enough considering the amount of shelling that was going on, had escaped with comparatively few casualties, but they were not to escape much longer. As their line trickled slowly down the communication trench, Pug had no more than remarked on how cheaply they had got off so far, when a six- or eight-inch high-explosive shell dropped with a rolling *crump*, that set the ground quivering, close to the communication trench. The men began to mend their pace, and to hurry past the danger zone, for they knew well that where one shell fell there was almost a certainty of others falling. A second and a third shell pitched close to the other side of the

trench, but the fourth crashed fairly and squarely into the trench itself, blowing out a portion of the walls, killing and wounding a number of men, and shaking down a torrent of loose earth which half choked and filled that portion of the trench. The communication ways, and, indeed, all trenches, are constructed on a principle of curves and zig-zags, designed expressly to localise the effect of a shell bursting in any one portion. Practically every man in this particular section of trench was either killed or wounded, but the rest of the line did not suffer. But the German gunners, having found their target, and having presumably observed their direct hit upon it, had their direction and range exactly, and they proceeded to pound that portion of the trench to pieces, and to make it a matter of desperate hazard for any man to cross the zone covered by their fire. The zone, of course, had to be crossed, the only other alternative being to climb out of the trench and run across the open until the further shelter was reached. There was a still greater hazard attached to this, for the open ground in this locality—as the officers knew—was visible to the German lines, and would expose the men, immediately upon their showing above ground, to a certain sweeping torrent of shrapnel,

of machine-gun and rifle fire. So the portion of the battalion which was making its way down that communication trench was set to run the gauntlet of the smashed-in trench, and the shells which continued to arrive—fortunately—with almost methodical punctuality.

The procedure adopted was for the end of the line to halt just short of the fire-zone, to wait there, crouched low in the bottom of the trench, until a shell had burst, then to rise and run, scrambling and climbing over the fallen debris, into the comparative safety of the unbroken trench beyond, until the officer who was conducting the timing arrangements thought another shell was due to arrive, and halted the end of the line to wait until the next burst came, after which the same performance was repeated.

Larry and his three chums, treading close on one another's heels, advanced and halted alternately, as the leading portion of the line rushed across or stayed. They came presently to a turn of the trench, where an officer stopped them and bade them lie down, keep as close as they could, and be ready to jump and run when the next shell burst and he gave the word. The four waited through long seconds, their ears straining

for the sound of the approaching shell, their eyes set upon the officer.

Here she comes,' said Billy Simson, flattening himself still closer to the trench bottom.

They all heard that thin but ominously rising screech, and each instinctively shrank and tried absurdly to make himself smaller than his size.

'Just a-going to begin,' said Larry, with a somewhat forced attempt at lightness of tone.

'Don't you wish you was a bloomin' periwinkle,' said Pug, 'with a bullet-proof shell.'

There was no time for more. The screech had risen to a rushing bellow, and the next instant the shell dropped with a tumultuous crash, and the air was darkened with a cloud of evil-smelling black smoke, thick, choking, and blinding dust. The four were dazed and shaken with the shock, half-stunned with the thunderclap of noise, and stupefied with the nearness of their escape. But the next instant they were aroused to hear the voice of the officer beside them, calling and shouting to them to get up, to go on, to hurry across.

'Get on!' repeated Pug, scrambling to his knees and feet, 'My oath, get on. I wouldn't stop 'ere if I 'ad an invitation to tea with the King 'imself.'

'Come, you fellows!' said Larry, and ran with his shoulders stooped, and closely followed by the other three along a short, unbroken portion of the trench, out into where it was broken down and choked to half its height with the debris of fallen earth and stones. Over this the four clambered and scuffled hastily, to find the trench beyond it wrecked out of semblance to a trench, a tossed and tumbled shallow gutter, with sides fallen in or blown completely out, with huge craters pitting the ground to either side of it, with the black reek and thick dust still curling and writhing and slowly drifting clear from the last explosion. And in that broken welter were the fragments of more than earth or stone; a half-buried patch of khaki, a broken rifle, a protruding boot, were significant of the other and more dreadful fragments buried there.

Larry and the other three did not, to be sure, waste time upon their crossing, but, rapidly as they thought they were moving, they still managed to accelerate their pace as their ears caught the warning sound of another approaching shell, and within a few seconds of hearing its first sound, and the moment when it burst, they had rushed across the remaining portion of the fire-zone, had flung

themselves down the sides of the last earth heap, leaped to their feet, and dashed breathlessly into the next unbroken portion of the communication trench. They did not attempt to halt there, but ran on panting and blowing heavily, their packs and haversacks scrubbing one side or the other of the trench; their heads stooped, and their shoulders rounded like men expecting a heavy blow upon their backs. This shell did not pitch into the broken ground where the others had blasted the trench out of any recognisable shape. It burst overhead with a sharp, ear-splitting crack, a puff of thick, yellowish-white smoke, a hail of bullets and flying splinters.

The four men instinctively had half-thrown themselves, half-fallen in the bottom of the trench. It was well they did so, for certainly not all of them could have escaped the huge piece of metal which had been the head of the shell, and which spun down the portion of trench they were in, with a viciously ugly whirr, to bury itself a couple of feet above the footway in the wall, where the trench twisted sharply. It struck close to Pug, so close indeed that when it hit the wall, and then by its own force, breaking down the earth, fell with it into the trench bottom, Pug was able to stretch

out his hand and touch it. He gave a sharp yelp of pain and surprise as he did so, whipped his hand in again, and under his armpit.

'Strike me!' he exclaimed, with comical surprise, 'the bloomin' thing is red 'ot.'

'Come on!' gasped Billy Simson, struggling to his feet again. 'This whole blankey corner's too red 'ot for my likin'.'

They rose, and pushed hastily on down the winding trench. After that, although they themselves had no especially close shaves, the rest of the line suffered rather severely, for the German gun or guns that had been bombarding the one section of trench now spread their fire and began to pitch high explosives up and down along its whole length. The four had to traverse another short section that had been swept by a low-bursting shrapnel. There had been men there, and after he had passed, Larry found his knees shaking, and his face wet with cold perspiration.

'Kentuck!' he gulped, 'I'm a-laid—I'm sorry—I think I'm going to be beastly sick!'

Kentucky, immediately behind him, urged him on.

'Get along, Larry!' he said, 'you can't stop here! You'll block the whole line!'

But the line for the moment was blocked. That

shell-burst had left few alive in the section of trench, but the two or three it had not killed outright had been dragged clear, and down the trench a little way. Now, the men who had taken them out had stopped and laid them down and were shouting vainly—and rather wildly—for stretcher-bearers, and endeavouring—some of the more cool-headed amongst them—to fumble out first field-dressings and apply them to the worst of the many wounds. They halted there, busy and heedless for the moment of anything else, for a full ten minutes, while the trench behind them filled with men pressing on, shouting angrily and unknowing the cause of the block, to ‘Move on there!’ to ‘Get out of the way!’

The end of the line next to the wounded men were forced to try and push forward; the trench was narrow, barely wide enough at its floor-level to accommodate the figures stretched out in it and the men who stooped or knelt over them fumbling at them, rolling and tying the field-dressing bandages upon them; but the men made shift somehow to pass them, striding and straddling over their huddled bodies, squeezing past the men who tried to dress the wounds. These still struggled to complete their task, quite absorbed

in it, straightening themselves and flattening their bodies against the trench wall to allow a man to scrape past, stooping again about their work.

'Who has got a spare field-dressing?' or 'Give us your field-dressing,' was all they took time to say to the men of the passing line, until a wrathful voice above suddenly interrupted them.

One of the officers, fretting at the delay and the slow progress down the trench, had climbed out and ran, risking the shells and bullets along the level, to find the cause of the check. He shouted angrily at the men below him :

'Wounded? What's that got to do with it. That's no reason you should block the whole company going forward. Where do you think you're in—a communication trench or a field-dressing-station or a base hospital? Pick those men up—two of you to each man—and carry them along until you can find a place to lay them where you won't choke the whole trench; or carry them right on out of the communication trench.'

The wounded men were picked up somehow or anyhow by knees and shoulders, and carried and shuffled and bumped along the winding trench, until they emerged into the old British front-line firing trench.

Along this the Stonewalls now spread and took up their positions as supports for the lines that had gone ahead, and were now over somewhere amongst the German first-line trenches. From here they could look out over the couple of hundred yards' width of what had been the neutral ground, at the old German front-line trench. Beyond its parapet they could see little or nothing but a drifting haze of smoke, but in the open ground between the trenches they could see many figures moving about, and many more lying in still and huddled heaps of khaki. The moving men were for the most part stretcher-bearers, and the Stonewalls were struck with what appeared to them the curious lack of haste and indifference to danger that showed in their movements. During many months, and in many visits to the trenches and spells in the forward fire trench, they had come to regard the neutral ground in daylight as a place whereon no man could walk, or show himself, and live; more than that, had been taught by strongly worded precept and bitter experience that only to raise a head above the shelter of the parapet, to look for more than seconds at a time over neutral ground, was an invitation to sudden death. It struck them then as a most extraordinary thing

that now men should be able to walk about out there, to carry a stretcher in, to hoist it, climbing and balancing themselves and their burden carefully on the parapet, clear and exposed to any chance or aimed bullet.

Kentucky watched some of these groups for a time and then laughed quietly.

'Well!' he drawled, 'I've been kind of scared stiff for days past at the thought of having to bolt across this open ground, and here I come and find a bunch of fellows promenading around as cool and unconcerned as if there weren't a bullet within a mile of them.'

'I was thinkin' just the same thing,' agreed Pug, who was beside him, and looking with interest and curiosity over the open ground; 'but if there ain't many bullets buzzin' about 'ere now you can bet there was not long ago. There's a pretty big crowd of ours still lying na-poo-ed out there.'

But the ground was still far from being as safe as for the moment it appeared. The German artillery and the machine-gunners were evidently too busily occupied upon the more strenuous work of checking the advance. or did not think it worth while wasting ammunition upon the small and

scattered targets presented by the stretcher-bearers. But when a regiment which prolonged the line to the left of the Stonewalls climbed from the trench, and began to advance by companies in open order across the neutral ground, it was a different story.

An exclamation from Pug and a soft whistle from Kentucky brought Larry to the parapet beside them, and the three watched in fascinated excitement the attempt of the other regiment to cross the open, the quick storm of shells and bullets that began to sweep down upon them the moment they showed themselves clear of the parapet. They could see plainly the running figures, could see them stumble and fall, and lie still, or turn to crawl back to cover; could see shell after shell burst above the line, or drop crashing upon it; could see even the hail of bullets that drummed down in little jumping spurts of dust about the feet of the runners.

A good many more of the Stonewalls were watching the advance, and apparently the line of their heads, showing over the parapet, caught the attention of some German machine-gunners. The heads ducked down hastily as a stream of bullets commenced to batter and rap against the

parapet, sweeping it up and down, down and up its length.

'Doesn't seem quite as safe as we fancied,' said Kentucky.

'I don't think!' said Pug.

'Anyway,' said Larry, 'it's our turn next!

He was right, for a few minutes later their officer pushed along and told them to 'Stand By, to be ready to climb out when the whistle blew and to run like blazes for the other side.

'We'll run all right,' said Pug to the others, 'if them jokers lets us,' and he jerked his head upwards to the sound of another pelting sweep of bullets driving along the face of the parapet above them.

Before the whistle blew as the signal for them to leave the trench, an order was passed along that they were to go company by company, A being first, B second, and C third. A couple of minutes later, A Company, out on the right of the battalion, swarmed suddenly over the parapet and spreading out to open order as they went, commenced to jog steadily across the flat ground. Immediately machine-gun fire at an extreme range began to patter bullets down amongst the advancing men, and before they were quarter-way across the

'Fizz-Bang' shells also began to smash down along the line, or to burst over it. There were a number of casualties, but the line held on steadily. Some of the men of the remaining companies were looking out on the advance, but the officers ordered them to keep down, and under cover.

In C Company a lieutenant moved along the line, ordering the men down, and repeating the same sentences over and over again as he passed along.

'Keep down until you get the word; when we start across, remember, that if a man is hit, no one is to stop to pick him up; a stretcher-bearer will see to him.'

'That's all right!' said Larry to the others, when the officer had passed after repeating his set sentences, 'but I vote we four keep together, and give each other a hand, if we can.'

'Ear, 'ear!' said Pug. 'Any'ow, if any of us stops one, but isn't a complete wash-out, the others can lug 'im into any shell 'ole that's 'andy, and leave 'im there.'

'We'll call that a bargain,' said Kentucky briefly. They sat fidgeting for a few seconds longer, hearing the rush and crash of the falling shells, the whistle and smack of the bullets on the open ground beyond them.

'I'm going to have a peep,' said Larry suddenly, just to see how "A" is getting on.'

He stood on the fire step, with his head stooped cautiously below the level of the parapet, then, raising it sharply, took one long, sweeping glance, and dropped down again beside his fellows.

'They're nearly over,' he said. 'There's a lot of smoke about, and I can't see very clear, but the line doesn't look as if it had been very badly knocked about.'

'There goes "B,"' said Billy Simson, as they heard the shrill trill of a whistle. 'Our turn next!'

'That open ground is not such a healthy resort as we thought it a few minutes ago,' said Larry. 'Personally, I sha'n't be sorry when we're across it.'

He spoke in what he strove to make an easy and natural voice, but somehow he felt that it was so strained and unnatural that the others would surely notice it. He felt horribly ashamed of that touch of faintness and sickness back in the communication trench, and began to wonder nervously whether the others would think he was a coward, and funking it; still worse, began to wonder whether actually they would be right in so thinking. He began to have serious doubts

of the matter himself, but, if he had known it, the others were feeling probably quite as uncomfortable as himself, except possibly Pug, who had long since resigned himself to the comforting fatalism that if his name were written on the bullet it would find him. If not, he was safe.

None of the four looked to see how 'B' Company progressed. They were all beginning to feel that they would have to take plenty of chances when it came their turn to climb the parapet, and that it was folly to take an extra risk by exposing themselves for a moment before they need.

A shout came from the traverse next to them.

'Get ready, "C" Company; pass the word!'

The four stood up, and Larry lifted his voice, and shouted on to the next traverse.

'Get ready, "C"; pass the word!'

'Don't linger none on the parapet, boys,' said Kentucky. 'They've probably got their machine gun trained on it.'

The next instant they heard the blast of a whistle, and a shout rang along the line.

'Come on, "C"; over with you!'

The four leaped over the parapet, scrambling and scuffling up its broken sides.

Near the top Pug exclaimed suddenly, grasped

wildly at nothing, collapsed and rolled backward into the trench. The other three half-halted, and looked round.

'Come on,' said Kentucky; 'he's safest where he is, whether he's hurt much or little.'

The three picked their way together out through the remains of the old barbed-wire entanglements, and began to run across.

'Open out! Open out!' the officers were shouting, and a little reluctantly, for the close elbow-touching proximity to each other gave a comforting sense of helpfulness and confidence; they swerved a yard or two apart, and ran on steadily. The bare two hundred yards seemed to stretch to a journey without end, the few minutes they took in crossing spun out like long hours.

Several times the three dropped on their faces, as they heard the warning rush of a shell. Once they half-fell, were half-thrown down by the force of an explosion within twenty yards of them. They rose untouched by some miracle, and, gasping incoherent inquiries to one another, went on again. Over and over again fragments from the shells bursting above the line rattled down upon the ground amongst their feet. At least two or three

times a shell bursting on the ground spattered them with dust and crumbs of earth; the whole way across they were accompanied by the drumming bullets that flicked and spurted little clouds of dust from the ground about them; and all the time they were in the open they were fearfully conscious of the medley of whining and singing and hissing and zipping sounds of the passing bullets. They knew nothing of how the rest of the line was faring. They were too taken up with their own part, were too engrossed in picking a way over the broken shell-cratered ground, past the still khaki forms that lay dotted and sprawled the whole way across.

There was such a constant hail and stream of bullets, such a succession of rushing shells, of crashing explosions, such a wild chaos of sounds and blinding smoke and choking reek, that the whole thing was like a dreadful nightmare; but the three came at last, and unharmed, to the chopped and torn-up fragments of the old German wired defences, tore through them somehow or anyhow, leaped and fell over the smashed-in parapet, and dropped panting and exhausted in the wrecked remains of the German trench. It was some minutes before they took thought

and breath, but then it was evident that the minds of all ran in the same groove.

'I wonder,' said Larry, 'if Pug was badly hit?'

'I've no idea,' said Kentucky. 'He went down before I could turn for a glimpse of him.'

'I don't suppose it matters much,' said Billy Simson gloomily. 'He's no worse off than the rest of us are likely to be before we're out of this. Seems to me, by the row that's goin' on over there, this show is gettin' hotter instead of slackin' off.'

