

CHAPTER V

ON CAPTURED GROUND

'I WONDER what the next move is?' said Larry. 'I don't fancy they will leave us waiting here much longer.'

'Don't you suppose,' asked Kentucky, 'we'll wait here until the other companies get across?'

'Lord knows,' said Larry; 'and, come to think of it, Kentuck, has it struck you how beastly little we do know about anything? We've pushed their line in a bit, evidently, but how far we've not an idea. We don't know even if their first line is captured on a front of half a mile, or half a hundred miles; we don't know what casualties we've got in our own battalion, or even in our own company, much less whether they have been heavy or light in the whole attack.'

'That's so,' said Kentucky; 'although I confess none of these things is worrying me much. I'm much more concerned about poor old Pug being

knocked out, than I'd be about our losing fifty per cent. of half a dozen regiments.'

Billy Simson had taken the cork from his water-bottle, and, after shaking it lightly, reluctantly replaced the cork, and swore violently.

'I've hardly a mouthful left,' he said. 'I'm as dry as a bone now, and the Lord only knows when we'll get a chance of filling our water-bottles again.'

'Here you are,' said Larry; 'you can have a mouthful of mine; I've hardly touched it yet.'

Orders came down presently to close in to the right, and in obedience the three picked up their rifles and crept along the trench. It was not a pleasant journey. The trench had been very badly knocked about by the British bombardment; its sides were broken in, half or wholly filling the trench; in parts it was obliterated and lost in a jumble of shell craters; ground or trench was littered with burst sandbags, splintered planks and broken fascines, and every now and again the three had to step over or past bodies of dead men lying huddled alone or in groups of anything up to half a dozen. There were a few khaki forms amongst these dead, but most were in the German grey, and most had been killed very obviously and horribly by shell or bomb or grenade.

'They don't seem to have had many men holding this front line,' remarked Larry, 'or a good few must have bolted or surrendered. Doesn't seem as if the little lot here could have done much to hold the trench.'

'Few men and a lot of machine guns, as usual, I expect,' said Kentucky. 'And if this is all the trench held they claimed a good bunch of ours for every one of theirs, if you judge by the crowd of our lot lying out there in the open.'

The three were curiously unmoved by the sight of these dead—and dead, be it noted, who have been killed by shell fire or bomb explosions might as a rule be expected to be a sight upsetting to the strongest nerves. They were all slightly and somewhat casually interested in noting the mode and manner of death of the different men, and the suspicion of professional jealousy evinced by a remark of Billy Simson's was no doubt more or less felt by all, and all were a little disappointed that there was not more evidence of the bayonet having done its share. 'The bloomin' guns seem to have mopped most o' this lot,' said Billy. 'An' them fellers that charged didn't find many to get their own back on.' They were all interested, too, in the amount of damage done by the shells to the

trench, in the methods of trench construction, in the positions and state of the dug-outs. And yet all these interests were to a great extent of quite a secondary nature, and the main theme of their thoughts was the bullets whistling over them, the rush and crump and crash of the shells still falling out on the open, the singing and whirring of their splinters above the trench. They moved with heads stooped and bodies half-crouched, they hurried over the earth heaps that blocked the trench, and in crossings where they were more exposed, halted and crouched still, lower under cover when the louder and rising roar of a shell's approach gave warning that it was falling near.

When they had moved up enough to be in close touch with the rest of the company and halted there, they found themselves in a portion of trench with a dug-out entrance in it. The entrance was almost closed by a fall of earth, brought down apparently by a bursting shell, and when they arrived they found some of the other men of the company busy clearing the entrance. 'Might be some soo-veniers down 'ere,' one of the men explained. 'An', any'ow, we'd be better down below an' safer out o' reach o' any shell that flops in while we're 'ere,' said another.

‘Suppose there’s some bloomin’ ‘Uns still there, lyin’ doggo,’ suggested Billy Simson. ‘They might plunk a shot at yer when you goes down.’

‘Shouldn’t think that’s likely,’ said Larry. ‘They would know that if they did they’d get wiped out pretty quick after.’

‘I dunno,’ said one of the men. ‘They say their officers an’ their noospapers ‘as ‘em stuffed so full o’ fairy tales about us killing all prisoners that they thinks they’re goin’ to get done in anyhow, an’ might as well make a last kick for it. I vote we chuck a couple o’ bombs down first, just to make sure.’

Everybody appeared to think this a most natural precaution to take, and a proposal in no way cruel or brutal; although, on the other hand, when Larry with some feeling that it was an unsporting arrangement, suggested that they call down first and give any German there a chance to surrender, everybody quite willingly accepted the suggestion. So work was stopped, and all waited and listened while Larry stuck his head into the dark opening and shouted with as inquiring a note as he could put into his voice the only intelligible German he knew, ‘Hi, Allemands, kamerad?’ There was no answer, and he withdrew his head.

'I don't hear anything,' he said; 'but perhaps they wouldn't understand what I meant. I'll just try them again in French and English.' He poked his head in again, and shouted down first in French and then in English, asking if there was anybody there, and did they surrender. He wound up with a repetition of his inquiring, 'Kamerad, eh? kamerad?' but this time withdrew his head hurriedly, as an 'unmistakable answer came up to him, a muffled, far away sounding 'Kamerad.' 'There's some of them there, after all,' he said excitedly, 'and they're shouting "kamerad," so I suppose they want to surrender all right. Let's clear away enough of this to get them out. We'll make 'em come one at a time with their hands well up.'

There was great excitement in the trench, and this rather increased when a man pushed round the traverse from the next section with the news that some Germans had been found in another dug-out there. 'They're singin' out that they want to kamerad,' he said; 'but we can't persuade 'em to come out, an' nobody is very keen on goin' down the 'ole after 'em. We've passed the word along for an officer to come an' see what 'e can do with 'em.'

Let's hurry up and get our gang out,' said Larry enthusiastically, 'before the officer comes and the men set to work with a will to clear the dug-out entrance. 'It's rather a score for the Stonewalls to bring in a bunch of prisoners,' said one of the men. 'We ought to search all these dug-outs. If there's some in a couple of these holes it's a fair bet that there's more in the others. Wonder how they haven't been found by the lot that took the trench?'

'Didn't have time to look through all the dug-outs, I suppose,' said Larry. 'And these chaps would lie low, thinking the trench might be retaken. I think that hole is about big enough for them to crawl out. Listen! They're shouting "kamerad" again. Can't you hear 'em?'

He looked down the dark stairway of the entrance and shouted 'Kamerad' again, and listened for the reply. 'I wonder if the door is blocked further down,' he said. 'I can hear them shout, but the sound seems to be blocked as if there was something between us and them still Listen again.

This time they all heard a faint shout, Kamerad. Hier kom. Kamerad.

'Hier kom—that means come here, I fancy,

said Larry. 'But why don't they hier kom to us. Perhaps it is that they're buried in somehow and want us to get them out. Look here, I'm going to crawl down these steps and find out what's up.'

He proceeded to creep cautiously down the low and narrow passage of the stair, when suddenly he saw at the stair foot the wandering flash of an electric torch and heard voices calling plainly in English to 'Come out, Bochie. Kamerad.'

The truth flashed on Larry, and he turned and scuttled back up the stair gurgling laughter. 'It's some of our own lot down there,' he chuckled to the others. 'This dug-out must have another entrance in the next traverse, and we and the fellows round there have been shouting down the two entrances at each other. Hold on now and listen and hear them scatter.' He leaned in at the entrance again, and shouted loudly, 'As you won't come out and surrender, Boche, we're going to throw some bombs down on you.' He picked up a heavy stone from the trench bottom and flung it down the steps. There was a moment of petrified silence, then a yell and a scuffling rush of footsteps from the darkness below, while Larry and the others sat and rocked with laughter above. They pushed round the traverse just as a

couple of badly scared and wholly amazed Stone-walls scrambled up from the dug-out, and commenced a voluble explanation that 'the blighters is chuckin' bombs, . . . told us in English, good plain English, too, they was goin' to 'cos we wouldn't surrender.'

Just then an officer pushed his way along to them, and the joke was explained with great glee by Larry and the men from the other part of the trench. Everyone thought it a huge joke, and laughed and cracked jests, and chuckled over the episode. Kentucky listened to them with some wonder. He had thought that in the past months of peace and war he had come to know and understand these comrades of his fairly well. And yet here was a new side in their many-sided characters that once more amazed him. A couple of dead Germans sprawled in the bottom of the trench a yard or two from them; their own dead lay crowded thick on the flat above; the bullets and shells continued to moan and howl overhead, to rush and crash down close by, the bullets to pipe and whistle and hiss past and over; while only a few hundred yards away the enemy still fought desperately to hold their lines against our attacks, and all the din of battle rolled and reverberated unceasingly. And yet

the men in that trench laughed and joked. They knew not the moment when one of those shells falling so close outside might smash into the trench amongst them, knew that all of those there would presently be deep in the heart of the battle and slaughter that raged so close to them, knew for a certainty that some of them would never come out of it; and yet—they laughed. Is it any wonder that Kentucky was amazed?

And they continued to chuckle and poke fun at the two who had been the butt of the jest and had run from the flung stone, continued even as they began to move slowly along the ruined trench that led towards the din of the fighting front lines.

