

## CHAPTER VI

### TAKING PUNISHMENT

'C' COMPANY of the Stonewalls progressed slowly for some distance up the communication trench, with the whistling of bullets growing faster the nearer they approached to the firing-line. This trench too had been badly damaged previous to the attack by the British artillery, and the cover it afforded to the crawling line of men was frequently scanty, and at times was almost nil. There were one or two casualties from chance bullets as men crawled over the debris of wrecked portions of the trench, but the line at last reached what had been one of the German support trenches, and spread along it, without serious loss.

This trench had been reversed by our Engineers, that is to say, the sandbags and parapet on what had been its face, looking towards the British line, had been pulled down and re-piled on the new front of the trench, which now looked towards the ground still held by the Germans. The trench

was only some three to four hundred yards behind what was here the most advanced British line, the line from which some of our regiments were attacking, and in which they were being attacked. Practically speaking, therefore, the Stonewalls knew their position was well up on the outer fringe of the infantry fighting, and through it swirled constantly eddies from the firing-line in the shape of wounded men and stretcher-bearers, and trickling but constantly running streams of feeders to the fighting—ammunition-carriers, staggering under the weight of ammunition boxes and consignments of bombs and grenades; regimental stretcher-bearers returning for fresh loads; ration parties carrying up food and water. There were still communication trenches leading from the 'Stonewalls' position to the firing-line, but because these had been and still were made a regular target by the German guns, had been smashed and broken in beyond all real semblance of cover or protection, and brought their users almost with certainty under the bursting shrapnel or high explosive with which the trench was plastered, most of the men going up or coming back from the forward trench, and especially if they were laden with any burden, preferred to

take their chance and make the quicker and straighter passage over the open ground.

The daylight was beginning to fade by now, the earlier because dark clouds had been massing, and a thin misty drizzle of rain had begun to fall; but although it was dusk there was no lack of light in the fighting-zone. From both the opposing trenches soaring lights hissed upwards with trailing streams of sparks, curved over, burst into vivid balls of brilliant light, and floated slowly and slantingly downwards to the ground.

The Stonewalls could see—if they cared to look over their parapet—this constant succession of leaping, soaring, and sinking lights, the dancing black shadows they threw, and the winking spurts of fiery orange flame from the rifle muzzles and from the bursting grenades, while every now and again a shell dropped with a blinding flash on or behind one or other of the opposing parapets. There were not many of the Stonewalls who cared to lift their heads long enough to watch the blazing display and the flickering lights and shadows. The position of their trench was slightly higher than the front line held by the Germans, and as a result there was always a hissing and whizzing of bullets passing close overhead, a smacking and

slapping of others into their parapet and the ground before it; to raise a head above the parapet was, as the men would have said, 'Askin' for it,' and none of them was inclined needlessly to do this. But the other men who passed to and fro across their trench, although they no doubt liked their exposure as little as the Stonewalls did, climbed with apparent or assumed indifference over the parapet and hurried stooping across the open to the next trench, or walked back carefully and deliberately, bearing the stretcher laden with the wounded, or helping and supporting the casualties who were still able in any degree to move themselves.

The Stonewalls were given no indication of the time they were to remain there, of when or if they were to be pushed up into the forward trench. The thin rain grew closer and heavier, a chill wind began to blow, setting the men shivering and stamping their feet in a vain attempt to induce warmth. Some of them produced food from their haversacks and ate; almost all of them squatted with rounded shoulders and stooping heads and smoked cigarettes with hands curved about them to hold off the rain, or pipes lit and turned upside down to keep the tobacco dry. 'They waited there

for hours, and gradually, although the sounds of fighting never ceased on their front, the rolling thunder that had marked the conflict during the day died down considerably as the night wore on, until it became no more than a splutter and crackle of rifle fire, a whirring and clattering outburst from some distant or near machine gun, the whoop and rush and jarring burst of an occasional shell on the British or German lines

At intervals the fight flamed upward into a renewed activity, the rifle fire rose rolling and drumming, the machine guns chattered in a frenzy of haste; the reports of the bursting bombs and grenades followed quickly and more quickly upon each other. Invariably the louder outburst of noise roused the guns on both sides to renewed action. The sky on both sides winked and flamed with flashes that came and went, and lit and darkened across the sky, like the flickering dance of summer lightning. The air above the trenches shook again to the rush of the shells; the ground about and between the front lines blazed with the flashes of the bursts, was darkened and obscured by the billowing clouds of smoke and the drifting haze of their dissolving. Invariably, too, the onslaught of the guns, the pattering hail of their

shrapnel, the earth-shaking crash of the high explosives, reduced almost to silence the other sounds of fighting, drove the riflemen and bomb-throwers to cover, and so slackened off for a space the fierceness of the conflict.

To the Stonewalls the night dragged with bitter and appalling slowness; they were cramped and uncomfortable, they were wet and cold and miserable. The sides of the trench, the ground on which they sat, or lay, or squatted, turned to slimy and sticky mud, mud that appeared to cling and hold clammily and unpleasantly to everything, about them, their boots and puttees, the skirts of their coats, their packs and haversacks, their hands and rifles and bayonets, and even to their rain-wet faces.

Long before the dawn most of the men were openly praying that they would soon be pushed up into the front rank of the fighting, not because they had any longing or liking for the fight itself, not that they had—any more than any average soldier has—a wish to die or to take their risks, their heavy risks, of death or wounds, but simply because they were chilled to the bone with inaction, were wholly and utterly and miserably wet and uncomfortable, were anxious to go on and get it

over, knowing that when they had been in the front line for a certain time, had been actively fighting for so long, and lost a percentage of their number in casualties, they would be relieved by other regiments, would be withdrawn, and sent back to the rear. That sending back might mean no more than a retirement of a mile or two from the front trench, the occupation of some other trench or ditch, no less wet and uncomfortable than the one they were in ; but, on the other hand, it might mean their going back far enough to bring them again into touch with the broken villages in the rear, with houses shattered no doubt by shell fire but still capable of providing rough and ready-made shelter from the rain, and, a boon above all boons, wood for fires, with crackling, leaping, life-giving flames and warmth, with the opportunity of boiling mess-tins of water, of heating tinned rations, and of making scalding hot tea.

There might be much to go through before such a heaven could be reached. There were certainly more long hours in the hell of the forward line, there was black death and burning pain, and limb and body mutilation for anything up to three-fourths of their number, to be faced. There were sleet-ing rifle bullets, and hailing storms from the

machine guns, shattering bombs and grenades, rending and tearing shrapnel and shell splinters, the cold-blooded creeping murder of a gas attack perhaps; the more human heat and stir of a bayonet charge; but all were willing, nay, more, all would have welcomed the immediate facing of the risks and dangers, would have gladly taken the chance to go on and get it over, and get back again—such of them as were left—to where they could walk about on firm ground, and stretch their limbs and bodies to sleep in comparative dryness. But no order came throughout the night, and they lay and crouched there with the rain still beating down, with the trench getting wetter and muddier and slimier about them, with their bodies getting more numbed, and their clothing more saturated; lay there until the cold grey of the dawn began to creep into the sky, and they roused themselves stiffly, and with many groans, to meet what the new day might bring forth to them.

The day promised to open badly for the Stonewalls. As the light grew, and became sufficiently strong for the observation of artillery fire, the guns recommenced a regular bombardment on both sides. From the first it was plain that the support trench occupied by the Stonewalls had been marked



down as a target by the German gunners. The first couple of shells dropped on the ground behind their trench and within fifty yards of it, sending some shrieking fragments flying over their heads, spattering them with the mud and earth outflung by the explosions. Another and then another fell, this time in front of their trench, and then one after another, at regular intervals of two to three minutes, a heavy high explosive crashed down within a yard or two of either side of the trench, breaking down the crumbling sides, blowing in the tottering parapet, half-burying some of the men in a tumbling slide of loose, wet earth and debris; or falling fairly and squarely in the trench itself, killing or wounding every man in the particular section in which it fell, blasting out in a fountain of flying earth and stones and mud the whole front and back wall of the trench, leaving it open and unprotected to the searching shrapnel that burst overhead and pelted down in gusts along the trench's length.

The Stonewalls lay and suffered their cruel punishment for a couple of hours, and in that time lost nearly two hundred men, many of them killed, many more of them so cruelly wounded they might almost be called better dead; lost their two

hundred men without stirring from the trench, without being able to lift a finger in their own defence, without even the grim satisfaction of firing a shot, or throwing a bomb, or doing anything to take toll from the men who were punishing them so mercilessly for those long hours.

Larry, Kentucky, and Simson lay still, and crouched close to the bottom of the trench, saying little, and that little no more than expressions of anger, of railing against their inaction, of cursings at their impotence, of wondering how long they were to stick there, of how much longer they could expect to escape those riving shells, that pounded up and down along the trench, that sent shiverings and tremblings through the wet ground under them, that spat at them time and again with earth and mud and flying clods and stones. In those two hours they heard the cries and groans that followed so many times the rending crash and roar of the shell's explosion on or about the trench; the savage whistling rush and crack of the shrapnel above them, the rip and thud of the bullets across trench and parapet. They saw many wounded helped and many more carried out past them to the communication trench that led back to the rear and to the dressing-station. For all through

the two hours, heedless of the storm of high explosive that shook and battered the trench to pieces, the stretcher-bearers worked, and picked up the casualties, and sorted out the dead and the dying from the wounded, and applied hasty but always neat bandages and first field-dressings, and started off those that could walk upon their way, or laid those who were past walking upon their stretchers and bore them, staggering and slipping and stumbling, along the muddy trench into the way towards the rear.

‘I wonder,’ said Larry savagely, ‘how much longer we’re going to stick here getting pounded to pieces? There won’t be any of the battalion left if we’re kept here much longer.’

‘The front line there has been sticking longer than us, boy,’ said Kentucky, ‘and I don’t suppose they’re having any softer a time than us.’

‘I believe it’s all this crowd trampin’ in an’ out of our trench that’s drawin’ the fire. They ought to be stopped,’ said Billy Simson indignantly. ‘Here’s some more of ’em now. . . . Hi, you! Whatjer want to come crawlin’ through this way for? Ain’t there any other way but trampin’ in an’ out on top of us ’ere?’

The couple of mud-bedaubed privates who had

slid down into the trench and were hoisting an ammunition-box on to the parapet stopped and looked down on Billy crouching in the trench bottom. 'Go'n put yer 'ead in a bag,' said one coarsely. 'Of course, if you says so, me lord dook,' said the other with heavily sarcastic politeness, 'we'll tell the C.O. up front that you objects to us walkin' in your back door an' out the front parlour; an' he must do without any more amnution 'cos you don't like us passing through this way without wipin' our feet on the mat.'

'Oh, come on an' leave it alone,' growled the first, and heaved himself over the parapet. The other followed, but paused to look back at Billy. 'Good job the early bird don't 'appen to be about this mornin',' he remarked loudly. 'or 'e might catch you,' and he and his companion vanished.

'What's the good of grouching at them, Billy,' said Larry. 'They've got to get up somehow.' He was a little inclined to be angry with Billy, partly because they were all more or less involved in the foolish complaint, and partly no doubt just because he was ready to be angry with anyone or anything.

'Why do they all come over this bit of trench, then?' demanded Billy. And I'm damned if

'ere ain't more of 'em. Now wot d'you suppose they're playin' at?'

'They're Gunners,' said Larry, 'laying a telephone wire out, evidently.'

A young officer, a Second Lieutenant, and two men crept round the broken corner of the trench. One of the men had a reel of telephone wire, which he paid out as he went, while the other man and the officer hooked it up over projections in the trench wall or tucked it away along the parts that offered the most chance of protection. The officer turned to the three men who crouched in the trench watching them.

'Isn't there a communication trench somewhere along here?' he asked. 'One leading off to the right to some broken-down houses?'

'We don't know, sir,' said Larry. 'We haven't been further along than this, or any further up.'

'The men going up to the front line all say the communication trenches up are too badly smashed, and under too hot and heavy a fire to be used,' said Kentucky; 'most of them go up and down across the open from here.'

'No good to me,' said the officer. But he stood up and looked carefully out over the ground in front.

'No good to me,' he repeated, stepping back into the trench. 'Too many shells and bullets there for my wire to stand an earthly. It would be chopped to pieces in no time.'

'Look out, sir,' said Larry hurriedly; 'there comes another one.'

The officer and his two men stooped low in the trench, and waited until the customary rush had ended in the customary crash.

'That,' said the officer, standing up, 'was about a five-point-nine H.E., I reckon. It's mostly these six- and eight-inch they have been dumping down here all the morning.'

He and his men went on busily with their wiring, and before they moved off into the next traverse he turned to give a word of warning to the infantrymen to be careful of his wire, and to jump on anyone they saw pulling it down or trampling on it.

'Lots of fellows,' he said, 'seem to think we run these wires out for our own particular benefit and amusement, but they howl in a different tune if they want the support of the guns and we can't give it them because our wire back to the battery is broken.'

The three regarded the slender wriggling wire

with a new interest after that, and if the rest of the trench full of Stonewalls were as zealous in their protection as they were, there was little fear of the wire being destroyed, or even misplaced, by careless hands or feet.

Billy Simson cursed strenuously a pair of blundering stretcher-bearers when one of their elbows caught the wire and pulled it down. 'Ow d'yer suppose,' he demanded, 'the Gunners' Forward Officer is goin' to tell 'is guns back there to open fire, or keep on firin', if yer go breakin' up 'is blinkin' wire?' And he crawled up and carefully returned the wire to its place.

'Look out,' he kept saying to every man who came and went up and down or across the trench. 'That's the Gunners' wire; don't you git breakin' it, or they can't call up to git on with the shellin.'

About two or three hours after dawn the German bombardment appeared to be slackening off, but again within less than half an hour it was renewed with a more intense violence than ever. The Stonewalls' trench was becoming hopelessly destroyed, and the casualties in the battalion were mounting at serious speed.

'Hotter than ever, isn't it?' said Larry, and the other two assented.

'We're lucky to 'ave dodged it so far,' said Billy Simson; 'but by the number o' casualties we've seen carted out, the battalion is coppin' it pretty stiff. If we stop 'ere much longer, there won't be many of us left to shove into the front line, when we're needed.'

'D'ye notice,' said Kentucky, 'that the rifle firing and bombing up in front seems to have eased off a bit, and the guns are doing 'most of the work?'

'Worse luck,' said Larry, 'I'd sooner have the bullets than the shells any day.'

'Ar'n't you the Stonewalls?' suddenly demanded a voice from above them, and the three looked up to see a couple of men standing on the rearward edge of the trench.

'Yes, that's right,' they answered in the same breath, and one of the men turned and waved his hand to the rear.

'Somebody is lookin' for you,' he remarked, jumping and sliding down into the trench. 'C Company o' the Stonewalls, 'e wanted.'

'That's us,' said Larry, 'but if he wants an officer he must go higher up.'

Another figure appeared on the bank above, and jumped hastily down into the trench.



Stonewalls,' he said. 'Where's "C"—why 'ere yer are, chums—'

'Pug?' said Larry and Kentucky incredulously. 'We thought that—why, weren't you hit?' 'Thought you was 'alf-way to Blighty by now,' said Billy Simson.

'You were hit, after all,' said Larry, noticing the bloodstains and the slit sleeve on the other's jacket.

'It?' said Billy Simson, also staring hard. 'Surely they didn't send yer back 'ere after bein' casualtied?'

'Give a bloke 'alf a chance to git 'is wind,' said Pug, 'an' I'll spin yer the cuffer. But I'm jist about puffed out runnin' acrost that blinkin' field, and dodgin' Jack Johnsons. Thought I was niver goin' to find yer agin; bin searchin' 'alf over France since last night, tryin' to 'ook up with yer. Where've you bin to, any'ow?'

'Bin to!' said Billy Simson indignantly. 'We've bin now'ere. We've bin squatting 'ere freezin' and drownin' to death—them that 'aven't bin wiped out with crumps.'

'We came straight across from where we left you to the old German trench,' said Larry, 'then up a communication trench to here, and, as Billy says, we've stuck here ever since.'

'An' 'ere,' said Pug, 'I've bin trampin' miles lookin' for yer, and every man I asked w'ere the Stonewalls was told me a new plice.'

'But what happened, Pug?' said Kentucky. 'You were wounded, we see that; but why ar'n't you back in the dressing-station?'

'Well,' said Pug hesitatingly, 'w'en I got this puncture, I dropped back in the trench. I didn't know w'ether it was bad or not, but one of our stretcher-bearers showed me the way back to the fust aid post. They tied me up there, and told me the wound wasn't nothin' worth worritin' about, and after a few days at the Base I'd be back to the battalion as good as ever; so I 'ad a walk round outside, waitin' till the ambulance come that they said would cart me back to the 'orspital train, and w'en nobody was lookin' I jist come away, and found my way back to w'ere yer lef' me. Then I chased round, as I've told yer, till I found yer 'ere.'

'Good man,' said Larry, and Kentucky nodded approvingly.

Billy Simson didn't look on it in the same light. You 'ad a chance to go back, and you come on up 'ere agin,' he said, staring hard at Pug. 'For God's sake, what for?'

'Well, yer see,' said Pug, 'all the time I've bin

out 'ere I've never 'ad a chance to see the inside of a German trench: an' now as there was a fust class chance to git into one, an' a chance maybe of pickin' up a 'elmet for a soo-veneer, I thought I'd be a fool not to take it. You 'aven't none of yer found a 'elmet yet, 'ave yer?' and he looked inquiringly round.

'Elmet,' said Billy Simson disgustedly. 'Blowed if yer catch me comin' back 'ere for a bloomin' 'undred 'elmets. If I'd bin you, I'd a bin snug in a 'ospital drinkin' beef tea, an' smokin' a fag by now.'

'Ah!' said Pug profoundly. 'But w'at good was a week at the Base to me?'

'You would 'ave missed the rest of this rotten show, any'ow,' said Billy.

'That's right,' assented Pug, 'and I might 'ave missed my chance to pick up a 'elmet. I want a blinkin' 'elmet—see—and wo's more, I'm goin' to git one.'