

CHAPTER VIII

OVER THE TOP

THE long-delayed and long-expected crisis in the affairs of the Stonewalls came at last about mid-day, and they were moved up into the front line, into the battered trench held by the remains of another battalion.

This line ran curving and zig-zagging some fifty to a hundred yards beyond the shattered and shell-smitten fragments of a group of houses which stood on the grass- and weed-grown remains of a road. What was now the British front line trench had been at one time a German communication trench in part of its length, and apparently some sort of support trench in another part. But throughout its whole length it had been so battered and wrecked, rent and riven asunder by shell fire, by light and heavy bombs of every sort and description, that it was all of much the same pattern—a comparatively wide ditch, filled up and choked to half its depth in some places by fallen

walls and scattered sandbags, in other parts no more than a line of big and little shell-craters linked up by a shallow ditch, with a tangle of barbed wire flung out in coils and loops in front of the trench, with here and there a few strands run out and staked down during the night.

The face of the trench was no longer a perpendicular wall with a proper fire step, as all regularly constructed trenches are made when possible; the walls had crumbled down under the explosions of shell and bomb, and although some attempt had been made to improve the defences, actually these improvements had been of the slightest description, and in many cases were destroyed again as fast as they were made; so for the most part the men of the battalion holding the trench picked little angles and corners individually for themselves, did their best to pile sandbags for head cover, lay sprawling on or against the sloping trench wall, and fired over the parapet.

At the point occupied by the Stonewalls the opposing lines were too far apart for the throwing of hand grenades, but the line was still suffering a fairly heavy and uncomfortably accurate artillery bombardment. The trench was strewn along its length with a debris of torn sandbags, of packs and

equipments stripped from the wounded, of rifles and bayonets, mess-tins and trenching tools, and caps and boots and water-bottles. Collected here and there in odd corners were many dead, because scattered along the whole length of line there were still many wounded, and until these had been safely removed there could, of course, be no time or consideration spared for attention to the dead.

The Stonewalls passed in single file along the broken trench behind the men who still held the position and lay and fired over their parapet. There were many remarks from these men, caustic inquiries as to where the Stonewalls had been, and why they had taken so long to come up; expressions of relief that they had come; inquiries as to whether there was to be another attack, or whether they were to be relieved by the Stonewalls, and allowed to go back. The Stonewalls, of course, could give no information as to what would happen, because of that they themselves had not the faintest idea. They were pushed along the trench and halted in a much closer and stronger line than the widely spaced men of the defending force which had held it.

Larry remarked on this to Pug and Kentucky,

when at last the little group of which they were a part was told by their Sergeant to halt.

'I suppose,' said Kentucky, 'we're thicker along this line because there's more of us. Whether the same reason will hold good by this time to-morrow is another proposition.'

'I'm goin' to 'ave a peep out,' said Pug, and scrambled up the sloping face of the trench to beside a man lying there.

'Hullo, chum!' said this man, turning his head to look at Pug. 'Welcome to our 'ome, as the text says, and you'll be a bloomin' sight more yel-come if you're takin' over, and lettin' us go back. I've 'ad quite enough of this picnic for one turn.'

'As it bin pretty 'ot here?' asked Pug.

The man slid his rifle-barrel over a sandbag, raised his head and took hasty aim, fired, and ducked quickly down again. ''Ot!' he repeated. 'I tell yer 'ell's a bloomin' ice-cream barrow compared to wot this trench 'as been since we come in it. 'Ot? My blanky oath!'

Pug raised his head cautiously, and peered out over the parapet. •

'I s'pose that's their trench acrost there,' he said doubtfully, 'but it's a rummy lookin' mix up. Wot range are yer shootin' at?'

Pretty well point blank,' said the private. It's about 200 to 250 they tell me.'

'Oo's trench is that along there to the left?' asked Pug. 'It seems to run both ways.'

'I'm not sure,' said the other man, 'but I expect it's an old communication trench. This bit opposite us they reckon is a kind of redoubt; you'll notice it sticks out to a point that their trenches slope back from on both sides.'

'I notice there's a 'eap of wire all round it,' said Pug, and bobbed his head down hastily at the whizz of a couple of bullets. 'And that's blinkin' well enough to notice,' he continued, 'until I 'as to look out an' notice some more whether I likes it or not.'

He slipped down again into the trench bottom, and described such of the situation as he had seen as well as he could. He found the others discussing a new rumour, which had just arrived by way of the Sergeant. The tale ran that they were to attack the trenches opposite; that there was to be an intense artillery bombardment first, that the assault was to be launched after an hour or two of this.

'I 'ear there's a battalion of the Jocks joined up to our left in this trench,' said the Sergeant,

'and there's some Fusilier crowd packin' in on our right.'

'That looks like business,' said Larry; 'but is it true, do you think, Sergeant? Where did you get it from?'

'There's a 'tillery forward officer a little piece along the trench there, and I was 'avin' a chat with 'is signaller. They told me about the attack, and told me their Battery was goin' to cut the wire out in front of us.'

Kentucky, who was always full of curiosity and interest in unusual proceedings, decided to go along and see the Forward Officer at work. He told the others he would be back in a few minutes, and, scrambling along the trench, found the Artillery Subaltern and two signallers. The signallers had a portable telephone connected up with the trailing wire, and over this the Subaltern was talking when Kentucky arrived. He handed the receiver to one of his signallers, and crossing the trench took up a position where by raising his head he could see over the parapet.

'Number One gun, fire,' he said, and the signaller repeated the words over the telephone, and a moment later called sharply: 'No. 1 fired, sir.'

Kentucky waited expectantly with his eye on

the Forward Officer, waited so many long seconds for any sound of the arriving shell or any sign of the Officer's movement that he was beginning to think he had misunderstood the method by which the game was played; but at that moment he heard a sudden and savage rush of air close overhead, saw the Forward Officer straighten up and stare anxiously out over the parapet, heard the sharp crash of the bursting shell out in front. The Officer stooped his head again and called something about dropping twenty-five and repeating. The signaller gave his message word for word over the 'phone, and a minute later reported again: 'No. 1 fired, sir.'

Kentucky, not knowing the technicalities of gunners' lingo, was unable to follow the meaning of the orders as they were passed back from the officer to the signaller, from the signaller to the Battery. There was talk of adding and dropping, of so many minutes right or left, of lengthening and shortening, and of 'correctors'; but although he could not understand all this, the message was clear enough when the officer remarked briefly:

'Target No. 1; register that,' and proceeded to call for No. 2 gun, and to repeat the complicated directions of ranges and deflection. Presently

No. 2 found its target also, and the Forward Officer went on with three and the remaining guns in turn. For the first few shots from each he stood up to look over the parapet, but after that viewed the proceedings through a periscope.

Kentucky, establishing himself near the signaller, who was for the moment disengaged, talked with him, and acquired some of the simpler mysteries of registering a target, and of wire-cutting. 'He stands up at first,' explained the signaller, in answer to an inquiry, 'because he pitches the first shell well over to be on the safe side. He has to catch the burst as soon as it goes, and he mightn't have his periscope aimed at the right spot. After he corrects the lay, and knows just where the round is going to land, he can keep his periscope looking there and waiting for it. It's not such a risky game then, but we gets a heap of F.O.'s casualtied doing those first peeps over the parapet.'

After the Forward Officer had got all his guns correctly laid, the Battery opened a rapid and sustained fire, and the shells, pouring in a rushing stream so close over the trench that the wind of their passing could be felt, burst in a running series of reports out in front.

Kentucky made his way back to his own portion of the trench, and borrowing a pocket looking-glass periscope, clipped it to his bayonet and watched for some time with absorbed interest the tongues of flame that licked out from the bursting shells, ar'd the puffing clouds of smoke that rolled along the ground in front of the German parapet. The destruction of the wire was plain to see, and easy to watch. The shells burst one after another over and amongst it, and against the background of smoke that drifted over the ground the tangle of wire stood up clearly, and could be seen dissolving and vanishing under the streams of shrapnel bullets. As time passed the thick hedge of wire that had been there at first was broken down and torn away; the stakes that held it were knocked down or splintered to pieces or torn up and flung whirling from the shell-bursts. Other batteries had come into play along the same stretch of front, and were hard at work destroying in the same fashion the obstacle to the advance of the infantry. The meaning of the wire cutting must have been perfectly plain to the Germans; clearly it signified an attack; clearly that signified the forward trenches being filled with a strong attacking force; and clearly again that meant

a good target for the German guns, a target upon which they proceeded to play with savage intensity.

The forward and support lines were subjected to a tornado of high explosive and shrapnel fire, and again the Stonewalls were driven to crouching in their trench while the big shells pounded down, round, and over and amongst them. They were all very sick of these repeated series of hammerings from the German guns, and Pug voiced the idea of a good many, when at the end of a couple of hours the message came along that they were to attack with the bayonet in fifteen minutes.

'I don't s'pose the attack will be any picnic,' he said, 'but blow me if I wouldn't rather be up there with a chance of gettin' my own back, than stickin' in this stinkin' trench and gettin' blown to sausage meat without a chance of crookin' my finger to save myself.'

For two hours past the British guns had been giving as good as they were getting, and a little bit better to boot; but now for the fifteen minutes previous to the assault their fire worked up to a rate and intensity that must have been positively appalling to the German defenders of the ground opposite, and especially of the point which was

supposed to be a redoubt. The air shook to the rumble and yell and roar of the heavy shells, vibrated to the quicker and closer rush of the field guns' shrapnel. The artillery fire for the time being dominated the field, and brought the rifle fire from the opposing trenches practically to silence, so that it was possible with some degree of safety for the Stonewalls to look over their parapet and watch with a mixture of awe and delight the spectacle of leaping whirlwinds, of fire and bellowing smoke, the spouting debris that splashed upwards, through it; to listen to the deep rolling detonations and shattering boom of the heavy shells that poured without ceasing on the trenches in front of them.

'If there's any bloomin' Germans left on that ground,' said Pug cheerfully, 'I'd like to know 'ow they do it. Seems to me a perishin' blackbeetle in a 'ole could not 'ave come t'rough that shell fire if 'e 'ad as many lives as a cat.'

It almost looked as if he was right, and that the defence had been obliterated by the artillery preparation, for when the order came along and the British infantry began to scramble hurriedly over the parapet, to make their way out through the wire, and to form up quickly and roughly on

the open ground beyond it, hardly a shot was fired at them, and there was no sound or sign of life in the German trenches except the whirling smoke clouds starred with quick flashes of fire from the shells that still streamed overhead and battered and hammered down on the opposite lines.

The infantry lay down in the wet grass and mud for another two or three minutes, and then, suddenly and simultaneously, as if all the guns had worked together on the pulling of a string, the shells, without ceasing for an instant to roar past overhead, ceased to flame and crash on the forward lines, but began to pound down in a belt of smoke and fire some hundreds of yards beyond. Along the length of the British line whistle after whistle trilled and shrieked; a few figures could be seen leaping to their feet and beginning to run forward; and then with a heave and a jumble of bobbing heads and shoulders the whole line rose and swung forward in a long, uneven, but almost solid wave. At the same instant the German trenches came to life, a ragged volley of rifle fire crackled out, grew closer and quicker, swelled into one tumultuous roll with the machine guns hammering and rapping and clattering sharply and distinctly through the uproar. About the ears of the running infantry

could be heard the sharp hiss and zipp and whistle and whine of passing bullets, from the ground amongst their feet came the cracking and snapping of bullets striking and the spurts of mud thrown up by them. At first these sounds were insignificant, and hardly noticed in the greater and more terrifying clamour of the guns' reports, the shriek and whoop of the passing shells, the crashing bursts of their explosions. But the meaning and significance of the hissing bullet sounds were made swiftly plain as the rifle and machine-gun fire grew, and the riflemen and machine gunners steadied to their aim and task. The bullet storm swept down on the charging line, and the line withered and melted and shredded away under it. It still advanced steadily, but the ground behind it was dotted thicker and closer and more and more quickly with the bodies of men who fell and lay still, or crawled back towards their parapet or to the shelter of the nearest shell crater. The line went on, but half-way across the open ground it began to show ragged and uneven with great gaps sliced out of it at intervals. The wet ground was heavy going, and the fierceness of the fire and the numbers struck down by it began to make it look a doubtful question whether a sufficient weight of

men could reach their goal to carry the charge home with any effect. From one cause or another the pace slowed sensibly, although the men themselves were probably unaware of the slowing.

Kentucky, Larry, and Pug kept throughout within arm's length of one another. They had set out under the same bargain, to keep close and help one another if need arose; but Kentucky at least confesses that any thoughts of a bargain, any memory of an arranged programme, had completely left him, and very probably his thoughts ran in much the same direction as three-fourths of the charging line. His whole mind, without any conscious effort of reasoning, was centred on getting over the open as quickly as possible, of coming to hand grips with the Germans, of getting down into their trench out of reach of the sleetng bullets that swept the open. He arrived at the conclusion that in the open he was no more than a mere helpless running target for shells and bullets; that once in the German trench he would be out of reach of these; that if the trench were held and it came to hand-to-hand fighting, at least he would stand an equal chance, and at least his hand could guard his head. How many men he might have to meet, what odds would be against him, whether

the attackers would be thinned out to a hopeless outnumbering, he hardly troubled to think. That need could be met as it arose, and in the meantime the first and more imperative need was to get across the open, to escape the bullets that pelted about them. He ran on quite unconscious of whether the rest of the line were still advancing, or whether it had been exterminated. Arrived at the wrecked entanglements of wire he did look round to find Larry and Pug close beside him, and all three plunged into the remains of the entanglement almost side by side, and began to kick and tear a way over and through the remaining strands and the little chopped fragments that strewed the ground.

Kentucky was suddenly aware of a machine-gun embrasure almost in front of them, placed in an angle of the trench so as to sweep the open ground in enfilade. From the blackness of the embrasure mouth flashed a spitting stream of fire, and it came to him with a jerk that on the path he was taking he would have to cross that stream, that the bullets pouring from it must inevitably cut down his two companions and himself. He turned and shouted hoarsely at them, swerved to one side and slanted in to the trench so as to escape the streaming fire ;

but, looking round, he saw that the other two had not heard or heeded him, that they were still ploughing straight on through the broken wires, that another few paces must bring them directly in the path of the bullets' sweep. He yelled again hoarsely, but realised as he did so that his voice was lost and drowned in the clamour of the battle. But at that instant—and this was the first instant that he became aware of others beside the three of them having come so far—a man plunged past him, halted abruptly, and hurled something straight at the black hole of the embrasure. The bomb went true to its mark, the embrasure flamed out a broad gush of fire, a loud report boomed thunderously and hollowly from it—and the spitting fire stream stopped abruptly.

Kentucky ran on, leaped at the low parapet, scrambled on top of it, swung the point of his bayonet down, and poised himself for the leap. Below him he saw three faces staring upward, three rifle muzzles swing towards him and hang, as it seemed, for an eternity pointed straight at his face.

His mind was so full of that overpowering thought it had carried all the way across the open, the desperate desire to get down into the trench,

that, confronted by the rifle muzzles and the urgent need to do something to escape them, he could not for the moment readjust his thoughts or rearrange his actions. The instant's hesitation might easily have been fatal, and it is probable he owed his life to another man who at that moment leaped on the broken parapet and jostled him roughly just as two of the rifles below flamed and banged. As he half reeled aside from that jolting elbow he felt a puff of wind in his face, was conscious of a tremendous blow and violent upward leaping sensation somewhere about his head, a rush of cold air on his scalp. His first foolish thought was that the top of his head had been blown away, and he half dropped to his knees, clutching with one hand at his bare head, from which the shot had whirled his helmet. And as he dropped he saw beside him on the parapet the man who had jostled him, saw the swift downward fling of his hand as he hurled something into the trench and instantly flung himself to ground. Kentucky realised what the bomber was doing just in time to duck backwards. A yell from the trench below was cut short by a crashing report, a spout of flame and smoke shot up, and the parapet trembled and shuddered. The bomber

leapt to his feet and without a word to Kentucky leaped across the trench and ran along its further side, swinging another bomb by its stick-handle. He carried a lot more of these hanging and dangling about his body. They jerked as he ran, and it flashed across Kentucky's mind to wonder if there was no possibility of two of them by some mischance striking and detonating one another or the safety pins jolting out, when he saw the man crumple suddenly and fall sprawling and lie still where he fell. Reminded abruptly of his exposed position and of those significant whiskings and swishings through the air about him, Kentucky jumped to his feet, glanced over into the trench, and jumped down into it. At the moment he could see no other British soldier to either side of him, but in the trench bottom lay the three bodies of the men killed by the bomb. A sudden wild and nervous doubt shot into his mind—could he be the only man who had safely reached the trench? But on the same instart he heard cries, the rush of feet, and two or three men leaped over and down into the trench beside him, and he caught a glimpse of others doing the same further along.

‘Seen any of ’em?’ gasped one of the new-

comers, and without waiting an answer, 'Come along, men; work along the trench and look out for dug-outs.'

Kentucky recognised them as men of another company of the Stonewalls, saw that they, too, were loaded with Lom's, and because he was not at all sure what he ought to do himself, he followed them along the trench. The bombers stopped at the dark entrance to a dug-out, and the officer leaving them halted and shouted down it. In reply a rifle banged and a bullet hissed out past the officer's head. The men swore, stepped hurriedly aside, and one of them swung forward a bomb with long cloth streamers dangling from it. 'Not that,' said the officer quickly. 'It'll explode on the stairs. Give 'em two or three Mills' grenades.' The men pulled the pins from the grenades and flung them down the stairway and the rifle banged angrily again. 'That's about your last shot,' said one of the men grimly, and next instant a hollow triple report boomed out from deep below. 'Roll another couple down to make sure,' said the officer, 'and come along.'

Kentucky remembered the episode of the double entrance to the dug-out in the other trench. 'There may be another stair entrance further

along,' he said quickly. 'Come on,' said the officer abruptly, 'we'll see. You'd better come with us and have your bayonet ready. I've lost my bayonet men.' He led the way himself with a long 'trench dagger' in his hand—a murderous-looking long knife with rings set along the haft for his fingers to thrust through and grip. Kentucky heard a shout of 'C Company. Rally along here, C.'

'I'd better go, hadn't I?' he asked. 'I'm C, and they're shouting for C.'

'All right,' said the officer, 'push off. Pick up that rifle one of you. It's a German, but it'll do for bayonet work if we need it.'

Kentucky had no idea where 'C' Company was calling from, and down in the trench he could see nothing. For a moment he was half inclined to stay where he was with the others, but the shout came again 'C Company. Along here, C.' He scrambled up the broken rear wall of the trench, saw a group of men gathering along to the right, heard another call from them, and climbed out to run stooping across and join them.

'Hello, Kentuck,' he heard, 'where you bin? Thought you was a wash-out.'

'I'm all hunkadory, Pug,' he answered joyfully. 'I missed you coming across just after that

bomber slung one in on the machine gun. Lucky thing for you he did, too.'

Hey?' said Pug vaguely, 'wot bomber, an' wot machine gun?'

Well, I didn't think you could have missed seeing that,' said Kentucky, in astonishment.

You and Larry were running right across its muzzle. But where's Larry?'

Dunno,' said Pug anxiously. 'I thought 'im an you would be together. He was with me not more'n a minute or two afore we got in. Hope 'e 'asn't been an' stopped one.'

'Do you remember where you got in?' said Kentucky. 'I believe I could find where that machine gun was. If he was hit it must have been there or in the trench here. I think we ought to go and hunt for him.'

But their officer and sergeant had other and more imperative ideas as to their immediate programme. 'Pick up any of those picks and spades you see lying about,' ordered the sergeant, 'and try'n get this trench into shape a bit. The rest of you get on to those sandbags and pile 'em up for a parapet. Sharp, now, every man there. You, Pug, get along with it, bear a hand. That arm of yours all right? If it isn't you'd best shove along back to the rear.'