

UNITS V. 1

## CHAPTER IX

### A SIDE SHOW

ALTHOUGH Pug and Kentucky were not allowed to go and look for their lost chum, and in fact did not know for long enough what had happened to him, the tale of that happening, I think, fits best in here. It is perhaps all the more worth the telling because it is a sample of scores of incidents that may never be heard of outside the few who participated in them, but are characteristic of one of the most amazing features of the New Armies—and that, mark you, is rather a big word, remembering we are speaking of something which itself is nothing but one huge amazing feature—the readiness and smoothness with which it has fallen into professional soldiering ways and the instinct for fighting which over and over again it has been proved to possess. And by fighting instinct I do not mean so much that animal instinct which every man has hidden somewhere in his make-up to look out for himself and kill the fellow

who is trying to kill him, but rather that peculiar instinct which picks a certain corner of a trench as a key to a local position, which knows that if a certain bit of ground can be taken or held it will show much more than its face value, which senses the proper time to hang on and the right moment to risk a rush.

These, of course, are the instincts of leadership, and these are the instincts which the New Army has shown it possesses, not only in its officers and non-coms., but time and again—in innumerable little-known or unknown incidents of battle that have been lost in the bigger issues—in the rank and file, in privates who never were taught or expected to know anything about leadership, in men brought up to every possible trade, profession, and occupation except war. One can only suppose it is an instinct deep rooted in the race that has lain dormant for generations and only come to life again in the reviving heat of war.

It will be remembered that Larry became separated from his two friends in their rush on the German line, and just as they reached the remains of the barbed wire before the German trench. For the greater part the wire had been uprooted and swept away by the storm of British

shells and mortar bombs, but here and there it still remained sufficiently intact to make a difficult and unpleasant obstacle.

Larry and Pug, deflected from their course by one or two yawning shell-craters, ran into one of these undestroyed patches of wire, and while Pug turned to the left, Larry turned right and ran skirting along its edge in search of a place through. Several other men did the same, and by the time they had found an opening there were about a score of them to go streaming through the gap and plunging at the broken parapet. Half of them were shot down in that last dozen yards, and as they opened out and went clawing and scrambling at the parapet with rifles banging almost in their faces, hand grenades lobbing over to roll down amongst their feet and explode in showers of flying splinters. The few who for the moment escaped these dangers, knowing that every instant they remained in the open outside the trench carried almost a certainty of sudden death, flung desperately at its parapet, over and down into it among the German bayonets, without stopping to count or heed what the hand-to-hand odds might be.

Larry Arundel, at the lip of the trench, suddenly

found himself poised above a group of some four or five men, checked his downward leap from a first instinctive and absurd fear of hurting the men he would jump down upon, recovered himself, and swung his rifle forward and thrust and again thrust savagely down at the grey coats and helmets below. Lim, saw the bright steel strike and pierce a full half its length with no other feeling than a faint surprise that he should sense so little check to its smooth swing, shortened the grip on his rifle, and, thrusting again as he jumped, leaped down into the space his bayonet had cleared. The last man he had stabbed at evaded the thrust, and like a flash stabbed back as Larry landed in the trench. But the two were too close for the point to be effective, and Larry's hip and elbow turned the weapon aside. He found himself almost breast to breast with his enemy, and partly because there was no room to swing a bayonet, partly because that undefended face and point of the jaw awoke the boxer's instinct, his clenched fist jerked in a fierce uppercut hard and true to its mark, and the German grunted once and dropped as if pole-axed.

But there Larry's career would probably have been cut short, because there were still a couple of

men within arm's length of him, and both were on the point of attacking, when another little batch of belated attackers arrived at the trench. Several of them struck in at the point where Larry was engaged with his opponents, and that particular scrimmage terminated with some abruptness.

Larry was a little dazed at the speed at which events of the past minute had happened, and also to some extent by the rather stunning report of a rifle fired just past his ear by a somewhat hasty rescuer in settlement of the account of his nearest opponent.

'Wh-what's happened?' he asked. 'Have we got this trench all right?'

'Looks like it,' said one of the others. 'But blest if I know how much of it. There didn't seem to be much of our line get in along to the right there to take their bit of front.'

'Let's have a look,' said Larry, and scrambled up the broken side of the trench. He stood there a minute until half a dozen bullets whistling and zipping close past sent him ducking past to cover.

'They've got the trench to our right safe enough,' he said, 'and they seem to be advancing beyond it. I suppose we ought to go on, too.'

'Wot's this fakement?' asked one of the

men who had been poking round amongst the debris of the shattered trench. He held out a two-armed affair with glasses at the ends.

'That,' said Larry quickly, taking it and raising it above the edge of the trench—'that's some sort of a periscope.' He looked out through it a moment and added: 'And a dash good one it is, too. . . . I say, that line of ours advancing on the right is getting it in the neck. . . . Machine-gun fire it looks like. . . . They've stopped. . . . Most of 'em are down, and the rest running back to the trench.'

He was interrupted by an exclamation from one of the other men who had climbed up to look over the edge.

'Look out,' he said hurriedly. 'Bomb 'over,' and he dropped back quickly into the trench.

A German stick grenade sailed over, fell on the trench parapet above them, rolled a little, and lay still, and in another second or two went off with a crash, half deafening and blinding them with the noise and smoke, but hurting no one. Some of the men swore, and one demanded angrily where the thing had come from, and 'Who frew dat brick?' quoted another.

But there was little room for jests. One, two,

three grenades came over in quick succession; one going over and missing the trench, another falling in it at the toe of a man who promptly and neatly kicked it clear round the corner of the traverse, where it exploded harmlessly; but the third falling fairly in the trench, where it burst, just as a man grabbed for it to throw it out, killing him instantly and slightly wounding one or two others.

'Who's got those Mills?' said Larry hurriedly. 'You, Harvey—chuck a couple over the traverse to the right. Must be some of them in there.'

Harvey drew the pins out of a couple of Mills' grenades and tossed them over, but even as they burst another couple of German grenades came over, one bursting in the air and the other failing to explode.

'I've spotted them,' suddenly said Larry, who had been watching out through the periscope. 'There's some sort of trench running into this about a dozen yards along. They're in there; I saw the grenades come over out of it.'

Some of the men with him had moved back out of the section of trench under bombardment, and as more grenades began to lob over there was a mild stampede of the others round the traverse.

Larry went with them, but pulled up at the corner and spoke sharply.

'See here, it's no good letting them chase us out like this. They'll only follow up and bomb us out traverse by traverse till there's none of us left to bomb out. Let's have some of those grenades, Harvey, and we'll rush them out of it.'

Some of the men hesitated, and others demurred, muttering that there weren't enough of them, didn't know how many Germs there were, ought to find an officer and let him know.

It was just here that Larry took hold and saved what might have been an ugly situation. He saw instinctively what their temporary or partial retirement might mean. The advance on the right had been held up, had evidently secured that portion of the trench, but could only be holding it weakly. The trench from which the grenades had come was evidently a communicating trench. If the Germans were free to push down it in force they might re-secure a footing in the captured main trench, and there would be no knowing at what cost of time and men it would have to be retaken from them.

All this he saw, and he also saw the need for prompt action. No officer, no non-com-



missioned officer even, was with them, and by the time they had sent back word of the position the Germans might have secured their footing. Apparently there was no one else there willing or able to take command, so Larry took it.

He had never given a real order in his life—even his orders to the office-boy or typist at home had always been in the form of 'Will you please?' or 'Do you mind?' He had no actual authority now to give commands, was the junior in years and in service to several there. But give orders he did, and, moreover, he gave them so clear and clean-cut, and with such an apparent conviction that they would be obeyed, that actually they were obeyed just as unhesitatingly and willingly as if he had been Colonel of the regiment.

In three minutes his dispositions were made and his directions given, in four minutes his little attack had been launched, in five minutes or little more it had succeeded, and he was 'in possession of the objective.' He had about half a score of men with him and a very limited supply of grenades, obviously not sufficient strength to attempt a deliberate bombing fight along the trench. So at the greater risk perhaps, but with a greater

neck-or-nothing chance of success, he decided to lead his little party with a rush out of the trench across the angle of the ground to where he had seen the branching trench running into theirs.

Two men were told off to jump out on the side they had entered, to run along under cover of the parapet and shoot at anyone who emerged or showed in the entrance to the communication trench: two more to fling over a couple of grenades into the trench section into which the communication-way entered and follow it up with their bayonets ready, one to push on along the trench and bring any assistance he could raise, the other to be joined by the two men above, and, if the main attack succeeded, to push up along the communication-way and join Larry's party.

This left Larry with half-a-dozen men to lead in his rush over the open. The whole of his little plans worked out neatly, exactly, and rapidly. He waited for the crash of the two grenades his bombers flung, then at his word 'Go!' the two men told off heaved themselves over the rear parapet, and in a few seconds were pelting bullets down the communication trench entrance; the bombers scuffled along the trench without meeting any resistance.

Larry and his men swarmed up and out from their cover, charged across the short, open space, and in a moment were running along the edge of the communication trench, shooting and stabbing and tossing down grenades into it on top of the surprised Germans there. There were about a score of these clustered mainly near the juncture with the other trench, and in half a minute this little spot was converted into a reeking shambles under the bursting grenades and the bullets that poured into it from the two enfilading rifles.

Every man in that portion of trench was killed—one might almost say butchered—without a chance of resistance. Another string of Germans apparently being hurried along the trench as reinforcements, were evidently stampeded by the uproar of crashing bombs and banging rifles, the yells and shouts of the attackers.

They turned and bolted back along their trench, Larry's men in the open above them pursuing and slaughtering them without mercy, until suddenly, somewhere across the open, some rifles and a machine gun began to sweep the open, and a storm of bullets to hail and patter about the little party of Stonewalls.

Larry promptly ordered them down into the

trench, and they leaped in, and, under cover from the bullets above, continued to push the retreating Germans for another hundred yards along the trench.

Here the enemy made a determined stand. and Larry instantly realised that, with his weak force, he had pushed his attack to the limit of safety. He left a couple of men there to keep the enemy in play for a few minutes with a show of pressing the attack with persistent bombing, and hurried the others back to a point that offered the best chance of making a stand.

He chose a short, straight stretch of trench running into a wide and deep pit blown out by one of our heavy shells. Round the edge of this shell-crater pit ran a ready-made parapet thrown up by the explosion, and forming a barricade across the two points where the trench ran in and out of it.

Man by man, Larry pointed out to his little force the spot each was to occupy, and bade him dig in for his life to make cover against the bombing that would assuredly be their portion very soon. He himself crawled up on to the open to some uprooted barbed wire he had noticed, was dragging together all the tangled strands and stakes he

could move, when he noticed a rusty reel of wire, half unwound, grabbed that, and shuffled back into the trench.

A shrill whistle brought his two outposts hurrying and hobbling in, one of them wounded in the leg by a grenade fragment, the other with a clean bullet wound through his forearm.

The barbed wire was hastily unreeled and piled in loose coils and loops and tangles in the straight bit of trench through which the Germans must come at the pit, while from the pit barricade one man tossed a grenade at intervals over the heads of the workers into the section of trench beyond them. But the wiring job had to be left incomplete when the arrival of two or three grenades gave warning of the coming attack, and Larry and the others scrambled hurriedly over the barricade parapet into the pit.

For the next ten minutes a hot fight—small in point of the numbers engaged and space covered, but savage in its intensity and speed—raged round the pit. The Germans tried first to force their way through by sheer weight of bombing. But the Stonewalls had made full use of their trenching tools and any scattered sandbags they could pick up, and had made very good cover for themselves.

Each man was dug into a niche round the inside of the parapet from which he could look out either over the open ground or back into the pit.

The Germans showered grenades over into the wired trench and the pit, and followed their explosions with a rush for the barricade. Larry, with one man to either side of him, behind the pit rim where it blocked the trench, stopped the rush with half-a-dozen well-placed Mills' grenades.

Almost at once the enemy copied the Stone-walls' first plan of attack, and, climbing suddenly from their trench, made to run along the top and in on the defence. But their plan failed where Larry's had succeeded, simply because Larry had provided its counter by placing a man to keep a lookout, and others where they could open a prompt rifle-fire from the cover of the pit's parapet. The attack broke under the rapid fire that met them, and the uninjured Germans scuttled back into their trench.

A fresh bombing rush was tried, and this time pushed home, in spite of the grenades that met it and filled the trench bottom with a gruesome debris of mangled men, fallen earth, and torn wire. At the end the rush was only stopped at the very parapet by Larry and his two fellows

standing up and emptying their rifle magazines into the men who still crowded into the shambles trench, tearing a way through the wire and treading their own dead under foot.

More of the Stonewalls were wounded by fragments of the grenades which each man of the attackers carried and threw over into the pit before him, and one man was killed outright at the parapet by Larry's side. He was left with only four effective fighting men, and, what was worse, his stock of grenades was almost exhausted.

The end looked very near, but it was staved off a little longer by the return of one of the severely wounded men that Larry had sent back in search of help, dragging a heavy box of German stick-grenades. Nobody knew how to use these. Each grenade had a head about the size and shape of a 1-lb. jam tin attached to a wooden handle a foot long. There was no sign of any pin to pull out or any means of detonating the grenade, but Larry noticed that the end of the handle was metal-tipped and finished off with a disc with notched edges.

A quick trial showed that this unscrewed and revealed a cavity in the handle and a short, looped length of string coiled inside. Some rapid and

rather risky experiments proved that a pull on the string exploded some sort of cap and started a fuse, which in turn detonated the grenade in a few seconds.

'Neat,' said Harvey, the bomber. 'Bloomin' neat: though I don't say as it beats the old Mills'. But, anyhow, we're dash lucky to have 'em. 'Ere they come again, Larry!'

'Suck it in,' said Larry briefly. 'There's more bombs than we'll have time to use, I fancy, so don't try'n save them up.' He shouted orders for any of the wounded that could move themselves to clear out, and set himself to tossing over the grenades as fast as he could pull the detonating-strings.

Then his last man on the look out on the pit rim yelled a warning and opened rapid fire, and Larry knew that another rush was coming over the open. That, he knew, was the finish because now he had no men left to keep up a fire heavy enough to stop the rush above ground, and, if Harvey and he went to help, the ceasing of their grenade-throwing would leave the attack to come at him along the shattered trench.

He and Harvey looked once at each other, and went on grimly throwing grenades. Then Harvey



dropped without a word, and Larry, looking up, saw a few Germans shooting over the pit rim. They disappeared suddenly as he looked, cut down—although he did not know that—by a heavy rifle-fire that had been opened by the British-owned trench behind him.

He yelled hoarsely at the one man left still firing from his niche up on the parapet, grabbed the box with the remaining grenades, and made a bolt across the pit for the other side and the trench opening from it. The rifleman did the same, but he fell half-way across, and Larry, reaching cover, glanced round and saw the other struggling to his knees, turned and dashed back, and half dragged, half carried the man across, up the crumbling edge of the pit, and heaved him over into the trench mouth. Then he took up his position behind the breastwork, made ready to hold it to the last possible minute.

In that last minute assistance arrived—and arrived clearly only just in time. Headed by an officer, a strong detachment of the Stonewalls, hurrying along the trench, found Larry standing waist-high above the barricade jerking the detonating-strings and hurling the last of his grenades as fast as he could throw them into the pit, from

which arose a pandemonium of crashing explosions, yells and shrieks, guttural curses and the banging reports of rifles.

The Stonewalls swarmed, cheering, over the barricade and down into the hole beyond like terriers into a rat-pit. Most of the Germans there threw down their rifles and threw up their hands. The rest were killed swiftly, and the Stonewalls, with hardly a check, charged across the pit into the trench beyond, swept it clear of the enemy for a full two hundred yards, and then firmly established themselves in and across it with swiftly-built barricades and plentiful stores of bombs. Larry's share ended there, and Larry himself exited from the scene of his first command quite inconspicuously on a stretcher.

