

THE BRITISH
CAMPAIGN
IN FRANCE
AND FLANDERS

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

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THE BRITISH FRONT IN FRANCE AND FLANDERS

**THE BRITISH CAMPAIGN
IN FRANCE AND FLANDERS
JANUARY TO JULY**

1918

BY

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

AUTHOR OF
'THE GREAT BOER WAR,' ETC.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
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MCMXIX

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE'S
HISTORY OF THE WAR

Uniform with this Volume.

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AND FLANDERS

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THE BATTLE OF CAMBRAI.

With Maps, Plans, and Diagrams

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

LONDON, NEW YORK, AND TORONTO

PREFACE

This fifth volume deals with one of the most tremendous episodes in history, when the vigour of the German attack and the desperate resistance of the British both on the Somme and in Flanders, held an awestruck world in suspense. A million men released from the Russian front, rolled across Europe and, swelling that great tide which was already banked up before the British breakwater, it washed over all the front line barriers and threatened at one time to sweep down to the sea. The account of how the British Army, upon which incomparably the greater pressure fell, rose to the occasion and first slowed and then held the terrific flood is one of the most wonderful of military epics. At the same time every credit must be given to the loyalty of the French commanders who, while guarding their own extended lines, endeavoured to spare all possible help to their hard-pressed Allies. This volume carries the story of the German attack to its

close. The next and final one will describe the enormous counter-attack of the Allies leading up to their final victory.

The Chronicler has been faced by many obstacles in endeavouring to preserve both accuracy and historical proportion while writing contemporary history. He would gratefully acknowledge that his critics in the press have shown a kindly indulgence, which arises, no doubt, from an appreciation of these difficulties. There has, however, been one conspicuous exception to which he would desire to call attention, since a large question of literary etiquette is involved. From the beginning a series of unflattering and anonymous articles have appeared in *The Times* Literary Supplement, commenting adversely upon each volume in turn, and picking out the pettiest details for animadversion. Upon enquiry, these articles—in whole or part—are admitted to have been written by the Hon. J. W. Fortescue, who is himself the official historian of the War. On being remonstrated with, this gentleman could not be brought to see that it is not fitting that he should make anonymous attacks, however *bonâ fide*, upon a brother author who is working upon the same subject and is therefore in the involuntary position of being a humble rival.

Having stated the facts they may be left to the judgment of the public.

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.

CROWBOROUGH,
May 1, 1919.

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CHAPTER I

EVENTS UPON THE BRITISH FRONT UP TO MARCH 21, 1918

The prospects of the Allies—Great dangers from the Russian collapse—State of the British line—Huge German preparations—Eve of the Great Offensive.

Events upon the British Front to March 21

The New Year of 1918, the fourth of the world war, opened with chequered prospects for the Allies. Upon all subsidiary fields of action the developments were good. In Palestine, General Allenby, the victor of Arras, had shown himself to be a fine soldier upon the larger scale, and had fought his way up the old highway of history which leads from Egypt by Gaza to Jerusalem. Homely crusaders in tattered khaki stood where once Godfrey de Bouillon and his chivalry had worshipped before the shrine of religion, and the cavalry of Australia, the yeomen of the Shires, and the infantry of London won once more the ground which Richard of the Lion Heart with his knights and bowmen had contested in the long ago. Surely in all the strange permutations and combinations of the world war there could be none more striking than that! By April the British force covered all the northern approaches to the city and

extended its right wing to the Jordan, where our Arab allies in the land of Moab were pushing the Turks back along the line of the Damascus railway.

On another road of world conquest, that from British Bagdad to Nineveh, the British and Indian columns were also both active and victorious. The knightly Maude had perished from cholera contracted by his own courtesy in drinking a proffered cup of village water. His successor, General Marshall, formerly his Chief of Staff, and as such conversant with his aims and his methods, carried on both one and the other, moving his men north until the spectator who compared their numbers with the immensity of the spaces around them, was appalled at the apparent loneliness of their position. By May his raiding cavalry were not far from the Turkish supply depot of Mosul, where the barren mounds, extending over leagues of desert, proclaim both the greatness and the ruin of Nineveh. Salonica continued in its usual condition of uneasy and malarial somnolence, but gratifying reports came of the belated rally of the Greeks, who, acting with the French, won a smart little victory against their Bulgarian enemies upon May 31. German East Africa had at last been cleared of German forces, but General Lettow Vorbeck, to whom we cannot deny remarkable fortitude and leadership, wandered with his piebald commands in the depths of the forests and marshes of Mozambique, still evading his inevitable capture, and master only of the ground on which he camped.

But these distant campaigns had only a remote and indirect effect upon the war in Europe. Here the late winter and the early spring of 1918 saw the balance tilted against the British and their comrades in the West, through causes over which they had no control. Russia had completely broken down. In her case, with a rapidity which made it difficult to realise the situation, autocracy had changed to liberty, liberty to license, and license to chaos. The absolute dissolution of all fighting power was partly due to national folly and partly to deliberate treachery. The leaders of the extreme party had arrived from Switzerland with a free pass granted by the German authorities. Instantly they set to work to subvert the comparatively sane government with which the name of Kerensky is chiefly associated. Lenin and his associates seized the reins of power and guided their mad team up to and over the precipice. It was clear to any observer that such a frenzy of insanity must have its reaction, and great pity was felt for those more honourable Russians who were compelled to look on at the degradation of their country. The new super-democracy began its career by repudiating its debts of honour, and by betraying all the other democracies of the world. Such conditions could not last; but meanwhile the Germans overran the

country at their pleasure, practically annexed both Finland and the Ukraine, and helped themselves to harvests, warships, or anything else they might desire. Chivalrous little Roumania, with the foe in front and the traitor in the rear, was compelled to make such hard terms as she might—surely one of the most bitter tragedies of history.

As a result of this huge defection the whole force of Germany and of Austria, together with a good deal of captured Russian artillery, was available for the Western war, and from November to March an endless succession of troop trains were bearing the divisions which had extended from the Baltic to the southern frontiers of Russia, in order to thicken the formidable array already marshalled across France. A great Austrian army assembled on the line of the Piave, where the Italians had formed their new front, while a second force in the mountains upon their flank seemed to hang suspended like an avalanche, ready at any instant to crash down into the valleys. In spite of this imminent danger the situation was so threatening in France that half of the British and French force in Italy had to be recalled, while the gallant Italians actually sent some divisions of their own best troops to aid the Allies in the more vital theatre of war. It was not only the vast concentration of infantry which formed the immediate menace, but it was the addition to the German gun power, in which the Austrians greatly assisted. The enemy was acting also upon internal lines and with excellent radiating communications, so that by assembling large bodies in certain central points he could hurl them against any portion of a long arc of the Allied line and depend upon several days of battle before the reinforcements could intervene. This, as it proved, was a very great advantage. He had also used his Russian experiences to initiate and improve a new form of attack by which he was confident, with a confidence which proved to be well justified, that he could certainly make a deep impression upon the Allied line, and turn the war, for a time, at least, into one of open movement. Such was the very favourable position of the German army at the opening of the tremendous campaign of 1918, which was enhanced by the fact that they had reduced to slavery the population in their rear, and had thus gained a very solid present advantage at the cost of a universal hatred and execration of which no man now living will see the end. In the hope of being a nation of victors they took steps which will brand them as a nation of monsters so long as history is read—a nation with modern minds but with worse than mediaeval souls.

The Allies were not without their consolations, though they lay rather in the future than in the present. Their veteran armies, though somewhat outnumbered,

had done so well in the offensive of the year before that they had good reason to believe that, acting upon the defensive, they would either hold the German onslaught, or at worst inflict such losses that they would gradually bring them to an equilibrium. Neither France nor Britain had called upon its last reserves to the same extent as Germany, and behind both was the mighty power of America. Up to date the American forces landed in France had not been sufficiently trained or numerous to influence the course of events, but from the spring onwards there was a steady flow, and hardly a day elapsed without one or more transports laden with troops arriving in the British or French ports. The men were of splendid spirit and physique, and the mere sight of them revived the weary souls of those who had fought the hard fight so long. It was the knowledge of these reinforcements and the constant drafts from Britain which stiffened men's courage and steeled their breasts in the desperate days to come.

Turning our eyes now from the general prospect and concentrating our attention upon the dispositions of the British army, it may be said that the ranks had been filled once more after the very expensive fighting of the autumn. Divisions were, however, weaker than before for, following the German model, one battalion had been taken out of each brigade, so that in future a division consisted of nine ordinary units and one pioneer. Of the six divisions lent to Italy three had been brought back in view of the German menace. The line still ran from Houthulst Forest and Passchendaele in the north along the familiar curve by La Bassée and Lens to the east of Vimy Ridge, and thence along the first Hindenburg Line, with the one six-mile breach in front of Cambrai. The Third Army, under Sir Julian Byng, covered the ground between Arras and Cambrai, whilst the Fifth, under Sir Hubert Gough, carried it south from that point. His junction with the French was an indeterminate one and was twice moved to the south, the second move on February 15 carrying his right wing across the Oise as far south as Barisis, eight miles beyond La Fère. There is no doubt that in lengthening his line to this extent Sir Douglas Haig took on more ground than his troops could be reasonably expected to hold, and that General Gough was given a hard task. It was done, as was shown in a subsequent debate, against the better judgment of the British at the urgent behest of M. Clemenceau. We must remember, however, that our Allies had frequently taken risks in order to help us, and that it was for us to reciprocate even though it might occasionally, as in this instance, lead to trouble. There was a tendency at the time for soldiers and politicians to put the blame upon each other, whereas all were equally the victims of the real cause, which was the crushing burden placed upon us by the defection of our Ally. It is easy to be wise after the event, but it was impossible

to tell with any certainty where the impending blow might fall, and M. Clemenceau was very naturally anxious about the French line in Champagne, which was strengthened by this extension of the British flank. There is in truth no need for mutual reproach, as every one acted for the best under the almost intolerable circumstances imposed by the new conditions.

Before referring in detail to the tremendous storm which was visibly banking up in the East, and which broke upon March 21 along the British lines from the Scarpe to the Oise, some allusion should be made to one or two sharp German attacks in the extreme north, by which the enemy endeavoured to draw the attention of the Allies away from the district in which their first real attack was planned. In the first of these, delivered upon March 8 to the south of Houthulst Forest, in the area formerly occupied by the Second Army, the German stormers, attacking on a mile of front, gained a footing in the advanced trenches over a space of 500 yards, but were driven out again and past their own front line by a spirited counter-attack. The losses of the Thirty-sixth Reserve Division, who carried out the operation, were considerable, and their gains were nil. The second attack was made upon the same evening in the neighbourhood of Polderhoek Château, to the south of the Ypres front. Here again some trench elements were secured in the first rush, but were entirely regained by the 10th K.R.R. and 13th Fusiliers of the 111th Brigade, who restored the line. Neither attempt was serious, but they were operations on a considerably larger scale than any others during the winter. These attacks were delivered upon the front of Jacob's Second Corps, which belonged to Rawlinson's Fourth Army, but within a few days Plumer had returned from Italy, and he, with the Second Army, took over this sector once again.

We must now turn to the long stretch from Monchy in the north to La Fère in the south, a front of fifty miles, upon which the great German blow was about to fall. It is said that after a tour of the whole line General Ludendorff determined upon this as being the most favourable region for a grand attack. Granting that for general motives of policy the assault should be on the British rather than on the French army, it is clear that he could have come to no other decision since Flanders at that time of year might have been a morass, and the rest of the line was to a large extent upon commanding ground. On the other hand the desolate country which had been already occupied and abandoned by the Germans was in front of their new advance, and it was likely that this would act as a shock-absorber and take the momentum off a victorious advance before it could reach any point of vital strategic importance. The German Staff seems, however, to

have placed great confidence upon their secrecy, their numbers, and their new methods. Their ambitious plan was to break right through to Amiens, to seize the line of the Somme so as to divide the Allied armies, and then to throw their weight to right or to left as might seem best, the one movement threatening the Channel ports and the other Paris. Their actual success, though it was considerable, fell so far short of their real intentions that disappointment rather than triumph must have been their prevailing emotion. Looking first upon their side of the line one can appreciate in a general way the efficient methods which they took to ensure success. The troops had been exercised in the back areas during the whole winter in the new arts of attack, which will be more fully indicated when the battle opens. They were then assembled at various railway junctions, such as Valenciennes, Maubeuge, Wassigny, and Vervins, sufficiently far from the front to escape direct observation. Then for seven nights in successive marches the troops were brought forward, finally reaching the front lines on the night before the attack, while the guns, the mine-throwers, and the munition dumps had already been prepared. The whole affair was upon a gigantic scale, for sixty divisions, or half a million of infantry, were thrown into the battle upon the first day, with half as many in immediate reserve. Secrecy was preserved by every possible precaution, though the British aeroplanes, casting down their flare lights upon crowded roads, gave few hopes that it could be sustained. Three of the most famous generals in the German service were in immediate charge of the operations. General Otto von Below, the victor of the Italian disaster, with the Seventeenth Army in the north; General von Marwitz, who had distinguished himself at Cambrai, with the Second Army in the centre; and General von Hutier, the conqueror of Riga and the inventor of the new tactics, with the Eighteenth Army in the south. It was to the last, which was under the nominal command of the Crown Prince, that the chief attack was allotted. Forty divisions, with large reserves, were placed under his command for an assault upon General Gough's lines between Cambrai and the Oise, while twenty divisions, with corresponding reserves, were thrown against the British Third Army, especially that section of it opposite Croisilles and Bullecourt. Never in the history of the world had a more formidable force been concentrated upon a fixed and limited objective. The greatest possible expectations were founded upon the battle, which had already been named the "Kaiser Schlacht," while the day chosen had been called Michael's day, or the day of Germany's revenge.

We shall now turn from the German preparations and examine that British position upon which the attack was about to fall. It was divided into two

sections, a point north of Gauche Wood upon the Cambrai front being roughly the point of division between the Third and the Fifth Armies. These armies were of equal strength, each having twelve divisions of infantry in the line or in immediate support. These divisions with their respective positions and varying experiences will presently be enumerated. For the moment it may be stated that the Third Army consisted of four corps, the Seventeenth (Fergusson) in the Arras-Monchy sector, the Sixth (Haldane) carrying the line past Bullecourt, the Fourth (Harper) continuing it to near the Cambrai district, and the Fifth (Fanshawe) covering that important point where the gap in the Hindenburg Line seemed to make an attack particularly likely. The Fifth Army in turn consisted of the Seventh Corps (Congreve) in the southern part of the Cambrai district, the Nineteenth Corps (Watts) from south of Ronssoy to Maissemy, the Eighteenth Corps (Maxse) in front of St. Quentin, and the Third Corps (Butler) covering the great frontage of 30,000 yards from Urvillers, across the Oise, down to Barisis, eight miles south of La Fère. This long curve of fifty miles was strongly fortified throughout its whole length, but the position was stronger in the north where the British had been in their lines for a year or more. In the southern sector the new ground which had been taken over was by no means so strongly organised as its defenders desired, either in the portion formerly held by the British or in the French sector, where only two lines existed. In the north a system of successive lines had been adopted, called respectively the forward line, the corps line, and the army line. In the south there was less depth to the defence, but every possible effort was made to improve it, the work proceeding night and day, and the soldiers being tied to it to an extent which gave little time for military exercises. In this work the cavalry and special entrenching battalions gave valuable help. As a result, by the third week of March the south was as well prepared as the number of men available would allow. There were not enough to man continuous lines of trenches over so great a front. A system was adopted, therefore, by which there was an advanced zone, consisting of a thin line of infantry supported by numerous small redoubts, each of which contained several machine-guns and a company of infantry. These were to take off the edge of the assault, and it was hoped, as half a mile separated the two armies, and the fields of fire were good, that before reaching the position at all the enemy would suffer severely. A thousand yards behind the advance zone was the true battle zone, where the main body of the infantry lay behind barbed wire with the support of isolated forts. Beyond these again was a third zone, 2000 yards farther to the rear, but this had not yet been completed. Behind the whole position in the southern part of the line was the great bend of the River Somme, which was also being organised as a reserve line, but was very incomplete. It should be

emphasised that these deficiencies were in no way due to the British command, which was so assiduous in its preparations that it rather raised the ridicule of certain unimaginative people upon the spot who cannot see a danger until it actually materialises in front of them. The fact that General Gough had been a cavalry general, and that his actions in the war had been aggressive rather than defensive, gave a false impression at the time in certain quarters. It is certain that nothing was neglected in the way of defence which skill could devise or industry carry out.

The general situation then upon the night of March 20, when the German preparations were complete, was that along the whole front the Germans were crouching for their spring, and that their first line consisted of sixty divisions, or more than half a million infantry, against the twenty-four divisions, or about 200,000 infantry, who awaited them. The odds were greatly increased by the fact that the Germans held some thirty divisions in immediate reserve, whereas the British reserves, especially in the south of the line, were few and distant. The German concentration of gun power was more than twice that of the British. The published account of a German officer claims it as fourfold, but this is probably an over-statement. In describing the results of this great attack we shall deal first with the sequence of events in the sector of the Third Army in the north, and then turn to those connected with the Fifth Army in the south.

CHAPTER II

THE SECOND BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Attack upon the Seventeenth and Sixth Corps

Disposal of the Third Army—Attack upon the Third Division—Upon the Thirty-fourth Division—Upon the Fifty-ninth Division—Terrible losses—Loss of Henin Hill—Arrival of Thirty-first Division—Hard fighting of the Fortieth Division—The East Yorkshires at Ervillers—The 15th West Yorks at Moyenneville—Recapture of Alette—Grand resistance of Third, Fifteenth, and Fourth Divisions before Arras—Final German check in the north.

Third Army. March 21.

Taking the account of this great action upon March 21 from the north, we shall begin with Sir Julian Byng's Third Army. The left of this force joined the Thirteenth Corps, which formed the flank of the First Army, to the north of Fampoux, while the extreme right touched the left of the Seventh Corps, the northern unit of the Fifth Army to the east of Metz-en-Couture opposite to Cambrai.

The Seventeenth Corps consisted of the Fifteenth and Fourth Divisions with the Guards Division in reserve. They extended as far south as the Sensée River, and were not seriously engaged upon March 21, though exposed to heavy shelling. We may for the time leave them out of the narrative. It was immediately to the south of them, upon the Sixth Corps commanded by General Haldane, that the storm burst in its full fury. Nothing can exaggerate the concentrated weight of the blow which fell upon this and the next portion of the line. The divisions from the north were the old fighting Third upon the Sensée section, the Thirty-fourth to the south of it, and the Fifty-ninth North Midland Territorials on the right. The Fortieth Division was in close support. These were the devoted units who upon that terrible day had to bear the heavy end of the load in the northern half of the line. Let us turn first to the arduous experiences of the Third Division.

This veteran division, still commanded by General Deverell, had all three brigades in the line, the 76th upon the left, the 8th in the centre, and the 9th upon the right, the battalions in the advanced line being the 2nd Suffolks, 2nd Royal Scots, and 1st Northumberland Fusiliers. The front covered was 8000 yards from Croisilles to the Arras-Cambrai Road in the north, both inclusive. This front had been strengthened by every device which experience could suggest, and was organised, as already explained upon three lines, which may be called the front, support, and reserve lines. Its backing of artillery was formidable, its moral high, and it offered a solid barrier to any enemy, however numerous.

Sixth Corps. March 21.

The preliminary bombardment here as elsewhere broke out shortly after five in the morning, and contained a large proportion of gas-shells which searched the rear lines and battery positions as well as the front defences. So far as the 76th Brigade in the north was concerned no serious infantry attack followed, and save for some sporadic advances which were easily shot to pieces, there was no organised attempt upon their sector. The same applies, though in a less degree, to

the central unit, the 8th Brigade. Here there were continual blasts of heavy fire during the day which decimated but were unable to shake the Royal Scots in the front trenches. Several times the enemy infantry made what was rather a menace than an attack, but on each occasion it dissolved into nothing. It is clear that nothing serious was intended and that these demonstrations were to hold the troops to their ground. On the right, however, in front of the 9th Brigade, the attempts were far more deadly and earnest. The first of these lasted from 7.30 till 10, and gained a footing in the front trenches, but failed before a determined attack by bombing parties of the Northumberland Fusiliers. In the afternoon the intermittent shelling became very severe, the trench mortar fire upon the front lines being so heavy as to knock them to pieces and stop all lateral communication. It was a nerve-shattering ordeal to the garrisons of these posts, crouching hour after hour in the midst of these terrible explosions. The bravest man on earth may find his spirit wilt under such conditions. Finally, about half-past three, there came a forward surge of grey infantry from Fontaine Wood which reached and occupied the front line, or the irregular hummocks where the front line had been. Every effort to extend this advantage was crushed almost before it could get started. There was complete stability here, but it was known that things were not altogether well with the Thirty-fourth Division upon the right, and masses of German infantry were seen moving down the Cherisy valley in that direction, a fair mark for the heavy guns. The 4th Royal Fusiliers were brought forward to reinforce their old comrades of Northumberland, and the line on the right was thrown back to get touch with the 11th Suffolks of the 101st Brigade. In this support position they were solidly linked with the units to right and left, so that the close of the day found the whole of this portion of the front absolutely intact, save for the loss of the obliterated front line.

We shall now turn to the fortunes of the next unit upon the right, the Thirty-fourth Division, a composite hard fighting body composed of Northumbrians, Scots, and East Anglian troops. General Nicholson, commanding this division, had learned from a prisoner that the coming German attack would begin at Bullecourt and then turn to the north. Such incidents make one doubtful of the wisdom of that policy of "teaching men to take an intelligent interest in the operations" which is so often advocated. In this case flank defences were arranged and all due preparation was made.

The blow fell even as had been foretold, but the portion of the line which was crushed in was on the front of the Fifty-ninth Division, to the right of the Thirty-fourth. The result was, however, that after the capture of Bullecourt, which

occurred about ten, the German stormers began to work round the right rear of the 102nd Brigade, the nearest unit of the Thirty-fourth Division. The flanking line of defence was manned by the 22nd Northumberland Fusiliers and strengthened by many Lewis guns, so that it took heavy toll from the masses of German infantry who were moving across. This flanking line was thickened by the 25th Northumberland Fusiliers and by the 1st East Lancashires. The heavy blow had forced back the Fifty-ninth Division, and by one o'clock Ecoust also was in the hands of the enemy, bringing them considerably to the rear of the Thirty-fourth. Up to 4.30 in the afternoon the Germans were attacking the 102nd Brigade from the flank, but up to that hour they had not succeeded in shifting the solid Tynesiders who held the improvised line. Nevertheless the heavy and constant shelling reduced the strength of the defenders, who in many cases were quite cut off, and had to hold their positions with bombs and rifles as best they could. Farther south the Germans, passing Noreuil in their western advance, had turned in considerable numbers to the north, well to the rear of the flanking line, so that the British in reserve found themselves facing south-west, but fought on none the less, the 22nd, 23rd, and 25th Northumberland Fusiliers in a mixed line holding firmly to their ground at the imminent risk of being cut off, while the 160th Brigade R.F.A. were firing at ranges of 800 yards. As the German flood rolled on it engulfed these guns, but the gunners withdrew the blocks and retired slowly, fighting in line with the infantry. This movement in turn affected the British garrisons of the more forward trenches, who in any case were very severely pressed by the German bombers, so that there was a general retirement towards the north in the direction of Croisilles. Outside this village the remains of the 101st and 102nd Brigades formed a line, and with the aid of the 10th Lincolns and 9th Northumberland Fusiliers of the 103rd Brigade held the enemy off from occupying it. The Fortieth Division was, as will be shown, coming up to fill the gap, and thus, although the Thirty-fourth had been curled backwards as if a huge steel plough had driven a furrow to the south of them, there was still no absolute fracture of the line. Towards evening patrols of the enemy had succeeded in filtering through into the village of Croisilles, but General Haldane had already seen that his corps front needed reorganisation in view of what had occurred to the south. Orders were given, therefore, to the 15th Royal Scots, who were still holding on near Croisilles, to abandon the village and take up new positions to the west of it. With the help of the 119th Brigade of the Fortieth Division these changes were made, and a line built up in front of Henin Hill for the next day's battle. The general result, therefore, of the day's fighting was, so far as the Thirty-fourth Division was concerned, that the left flank was still in touch with the Third Division in the northern support line, but that the right and

centre had to hinge back upon it on account of the break through to the south of them, and had been compelled to uncover Croisilles and abandon it to the enemy. The casualties had been high, especially in the 102nd Brigade upon the defensive flank. Of these, about 1200 out of a total trench strength of 1800 were lost, some being cut off but the greater number injured by the bombardment. Three companies of the 25th Northumberland Fusiliers were engulfed in the German tide and submerged, as were the field-guns already mentioned, which were fought by their crews until the very last instant. The 11th Suffolks upon the left flank of the 101st Brigade held absolutely fast all day, and by their fire gave great help to the Third Division to their north.

The next unit upon the line was the Fifty-ninth North Midland Division (Romer) which had a front of over 5000 yards. They covered the important villages of Bullecourt, Ecoust, and Noreuil, the former being in the very front line. The 178th Brigade of Sherwood foresters were upon the right and the 176th of Staffords upon the left, with the 177th of Lincolns and Leicesters in reserve. In the southern section of this position was the long shallow slope of the Noreuil valley, the nearer half of which came within the Fifty-ninth area, while the farther was held by the Sixth Division. It was speedily apparent by the intensity of the bombardment and by the rumoured concentration of the infantry that this was the centre of danger. About ten o'clock a demonstration was made against the 2/6 Sherwood Foresters upon the left, but the real attack came later when on the right centre a heavy mass of the enemy surged through the outpost line and established itself within the support line. At about the same hour the German infantry struck in great force up the channel of the Noreuil valley, and having pushed their way as far as the western edge of Noreuil turned to the north-west, working along a hollow road between Noreuil and Longatte. Two companies of the 2/5 Sherwoods, together with the 470th Field Company R.E., were caught between the pincers of this double German attack, and were entirely destroyed on the Noreuil-Ecoust Road, only one officer and six sappers making their way safe to Vraucourt. The 2/5 Lincolns of the supporting brigade, moving up to the support of their comrades, were themselves involved in the tragedy and three companies were practically annihilated. This rapid German advance, with the heavy British losses, had all taken place by 11 A.M., and created the situation which reacted so unfavourably upon the Thirty-fourth in the north. The Germans having got so far forward in the south were able to assail the flank of the 176th Brigade in the north, which threw out a defensive line as far as Ecoust and defended itself strongly. Their position, however, was an almost impossible one, and when later in the day the enemy took Ecoust and swung round to their rear

these battalions, already much reduced, were overwhelmed by the attack, the survivors joining up with the Thirty-fourth Division in their retreat. The machine-guns, so long as they were in action, caused heavy casualties to the enemy, but the latter were swarming on all sides, and eventually the guns had either to withdraw or were captured.

With the two front brigades destroyed and the whole position occupied, the Germans may well have thought that a long advance was within their power, but in this they were soon undeceived. The support brigade, the 177th, still barred their way, and it had been strengthened by Headquarters staffs, bands, transport men and others, and very especially by the pioneer battalion, the 6/7 Scots Fusiliers. These men occupied the third defence line, and from the Hog's Back on which it was sited, they defied every effort of the Germans to get forward from Ecoust. This position was well covered by artillery and supported by machine-guns. So strong was the defence that the enemy were beaten back three times, and on the last occasion, late in the afternoon, fairly took to their heels. Shortly afterwards the 120th Brigade from the Fortieth Division came into support, and the situation was saved for the day. How terrific had been the strain upon the Fifty-ninth Division may be reckoned from the fact that their losses were close upon 5000 out of a ten-battalion unit. It is true that they had been driven by vastly superior numbers out of their two front lines with the attendant villages, but evening found them still defiant, and, for the time, victorious, with their right still linked up with the Sixth Division and their left with the Thirty-fourth. There could not have been a finer recovery under more arduous circumstances. It was the last of the Fifty-ninth Division, however, for many a day to come, for the Fortieth (Ponsonby) taking charge in this sector, gathered to itself the fifteen field-guns still left of the artillery and the only remaining brigade. It was as well, for they would need every gun and every rifle in the dark days to come. Four German divisions, the 111th, 221st, 6th Bavarian, and 2nd Guards Reserve, had been engaged in the attack. Even admitting that some of these divisions were concerned also with the attack upon the Thirty-fourth Division, the latter had the 234th and some smaller units in front of it, so that it is within the mark to say that five German had attacked two British divisions, and by the aid of a vastly superior light and heavy artillery equipment had pushed them back to their reserve line, but had failed to break them. It was not a fight of which either nation need be ashamed.

This completes a superficial view of the experiences of the Sixth Corps upon March 21. In order to get the full picture one should understand that the Sixth

Division upon the right had also been driven from their sector, including several important villages. For the sake of continuity of narrative it will be best to merely indicate this fact for the moment, and to continue to follow the fortunes of Haldane's Corps during the fateful days which followed, casting a glance also to the north where the Seventeenth Corps was gradually involved in the fight. We shall bear in mind, then, the long slanting front from the old positions on the left to Henin Hill and the Hog's Back upon the right, and we shall return to the Third Division at the northern end of the line.

Sixth Corps. March 22.

The night had been quiet along the whole corps front, which seemed to imply some exhaustion of the attack. In the morning this lull still continued in the region of the Third Division, which had up to now been just outside the track of the storm. During the morning and afternoon of March 22 no serious attack was made upon this point, but in the evening the enemy, having made a lodgment upon Henin Hill in the south-west, was able to make a powerful onslaught from the flank which met with very little success. Its first onrush pushed back the 20th K.R.R., pioneer battalion of the division, in the trench called Hind Avenue, but the ground was regained by the 13th King's Liverpool, while the 4th Royal Fusiliers loosened the German grip of another small corner of trench. Up to nightfall the attempts continued, alternating with bombardments, but no progress was made, the 9th Brigade beating down every new advance.

About ten o'clock at night orders reached the division that as the Seventeenth Corps were falling back for strategic reasons to the west of Monchy on the north, while the Thirty-fourth were also retreating upon the south, the Third Division must retire in conformity with them. It was no easy task under a heavy shell fall and with an elated enemy in close contact. It was of importance that the telephoned orders should not be tapped, and it is suggestive of the world-wide services of the British soldier that they were sent over the wires in Arabic and Hindustani. Before morning the weary troops had been quickly withdrawn without confusion or mishap, and all were safely aligned in their new positions. Their defence of their battle-ground had been a splendid one, and though they had no huge mass attack to contend with, such as had dashed the line of the Fifty-ninth to pieces, still they had constant severe pressure and had withstood it completely.

Sixth Corps. March 21.

We left the Thirty-fourth Division upon the evening of March 21 still holding its reserve lines, with its three brigades in line, the 103rd on the right in touch with the Fortieth Division, and the 101st on the left where the Third Division joined it. A spirited little body, the J Special Company R.E., had joined the fighting line of the Thirty-fourth, and did good work with it. About 8 A.M. upon March 22nd the enemy attacked the 102nd Brigade in the Croisilles sector, but two attempts had no result, though the general British line was now 500 yards west of the village. About ten o'clock a misfortune occurred, for a heavy column of the enemy, moving up through a dense mist, broke through the 101st Brigade and carried the greater part of Henin Hill, a most important strategic point. The possession of the hill was, however, contested most strongly by the Fortieth Division machine-gun company and by the 11th Suffolks, who by their valiant resistance prevented the enemy from gaining the whole crest, though they could not stop them from extending north and south, which turned the line of the troops at the flanks and caused them to fall back. The troops to the south, the 15th and 16th Royal Scots, withdrew slowly to a new position west of Boyelles; the remains of the 102nd Brigade (it was but 500 strong at the beginning of the action) fell back upon the supports; while the valiant men of Suffolk, aided by Colonel Roberts' machine-guns, still fought stoutly upon the top of the incline, though entirely isolated upon the right flank. Finally the shattered remains of this staunch battalion withdrew towards the north-west, their slow retreat being covered by Lieutenant Woods, who met his death in the venture, and by a handful of machine-gunners.

The chief evil result from the capture of Henin Hill was in the south, where it enabled the enemy by a joint frontal and flank attack at the junction of the Thirty-fourth and Fortieth Divisions, to push back the 9th Northumberland Fusiliers and 13th Yorkshire, and to get possession of the village of St. Leger. The 103rd Brigade moved back to Judas' Farm to the west of St. Leger, while the 119th Brigade prolonged the line to the south. A few machine-guns, with their feed blocks removed, were lost on Henin Hill, but otherwise no booty was obtained by the enemy. On the evening of the 22nd the infantry of the Thirty-first Division was rushed to the front, and the Thirty-fourth Division after their two days of desperate and honourable battle, were drawn back for a rest. During March 22 the 103rd Brigade held on to St. Leger and St. Leger Wood, and so blocked the valley of the Sensée.

To the south of the Thirty-fourth Division the Fifty-ninth Division had now been entirely replaced by the Fortieth, save for the 177th Brigade, the artillery,

and machine-guns, some of which rendered splendid service during the day. There was little fighting in the morning of March 22, but about mid-day it was found that some hundreds of Germans with a profusion of machine-guns ("many bullets but few men" was the key-note of the new advanced tactics) were close to the divisional front in the region of St. Leger Wood. These were driven back, and fourteen of their guns taken, after some confused but vigorous fighting, in which Lieutenant Beal captured four guns himself before meeting a glorious death. Several times the enemy pushed strong patrols between the Sixth and Fortieth Divisions in the Vaux-Vraumont sector, but these were always expelled or digested. Shortly after mid-day, however, a very strong attack broke upon this line, pushing back the left of the Sixth Division and causing heavy losses to the Highlanders of the 120th Brigade upon the right of the Fortieth Division. The 14th Argyll and Sutherlands, with the 10/11 Highland Light Infantry, were the units concerned, and they restored their line, which had been bent backwards. Finding, however, that they had lost touch with the Sixth Division to the south, they fell back until communication was restored. All day groups of German machine-gunners could be seen rushing forward, their crouching figures darting from cover to cover, while all day also the guns of the division observed and shattered the various nests which were constructed. Major Nesham distinguished himself in this work. Towards evening of the 22nd it was known that Vraumont to the south was in German possession, and orders were given to withdraw to the new general line which this change and the capture of Henin Hill must entail. In the new position the Fortieth was still in close touch with the Sixth in the neighbourhood of Beugnâtre, the general line of the withdrawal being in a south-westerly direction. The losses had been heavy during the day, and included Colonel Eardley-Wilmot of the 12th Suffolks.

The line of the Seventeenth and of the Sixth Corps, upon the morning of March 23, stretched from the south of Fampoux, west of Heninel and of St. Leger down to Mory. The Seventeenth Corps had not yet been seriously attacked. We shall continue with the record of the Sixth Corps, which now consisted of the Third Division in the north, part of the Guards Division, which had formed up to their right, the Thirty-first Division north of Mory, and the Fortieth Division to the west of Mory, with outposts in the village. We shall again trace the events from the northern flank. No serious movement occurred during the day in front of the Third Division or of the Guards, but there was a report of concentrations of infantry and other signs which indicated that the storms of the south would soon spread upwards in that direction. The Thirty-first Division, the well-tried Yorkshire unit, still retained two of its old brigades, but

had an additional 4th Brigade of Guards, cut from the old Guards Division by the new system of smaller units. General Bridgford had taken over command just before the battle and would be the first to admit that the splendid efficiency of his troops was due to General Wanless O'Gowan, who had been associated with them so long. They carried a high reputation into this great battle and an even higher one out of it. On the morning of March 23 the division faced the Germans to the north of Mory Copse, having the 4th Guards Brigade upon the right and the 93rd Brigade upon the left. Two German divisions which had already been engaged, the 111th and the 2nd Guards Reserve, tried to break this fresh line and were each in turn broken themselves, as were the German batteries which pushed to the front and found themselves under the double fire of the Thirty-first and Thirty-fourth divisional artillery. Prisoners taken in this repulse gave the information that the Germans were already a full day behind their scheduled programme in this quarter. All attacks upon the Thirty-first met with the same fate during the day, but the enemy, as will be shown, had got a grip of Mory for a time, and pushed back the Fortieth in the south. Instead of a retirement the 92nd Brigade was brought from reserve and placed upon the exposed flank, while the Guards and Yorkshiremen still stood firm. In the evening the general line extended from north of Ervillers, where the 92nd Brigade was on watch, to the region of Hamelincourt, where the 93rd had their line.

Sixth Corps. March 23.

The heaviest work of the day had fallen upon the Fortieth Division, which had dug itself in west of Mory and of Mory Copse, with strong posts in the village itself. The enemy attacked in the morning of March 23 in great force and got complete possession of Mory. A splendid counter-attack, however, by the 13th East Surreys and 21st Middlesex at 2.30 P.M. regained the village. A deep cutting ran up to Mory from Vraucourt in the south-east, and along this the Germans sent their reinforcements, but the artillery of the British got the range of it and caused heavy losses. The village was held all day, under the local direction of Colonel Warden of the Surreys, and was violently attacked by the enemy after dark, with the result that desultory hand-to-hand fighting went on among the houses during the whole night. At one time the British had won to the eastern edge, and then again they were forced back to the centre. When one remembers that these men had been fighting for three days, with little food and less sleep, it was indeed a fine performance. One small post of the 18th Welsh under Sergeant O'Sullivan was isolated for nearly two days and yet cut its way

out, the gallant Irishman receiving a well-deserved honour. The morning of March 24 found little change along the line of the corps. If the Germans were already a day behind they showed no signs of making up their time. The 40th Machine-gun Battalion had done particularly fine work during the day. As an example of the gallantry which animated this unit it may be recorded that two of the guns having been rushed by the Germans near Ervillers, Lance-Corporal Cross volunteered to recover them single-handed, which he did in such fashion that seven German prisoners appeared carrying them and marching at the point of his revolver, an exploit for which he was decorated.

Sixth Corps. March 24.

March 24 was marked by considerable activity in the Mory district, but no strong attack developed to the north of it. On the front of the Thirty-first and Fortieth Divisions, however, the battle raged with great intensity. The enemy had full possession of Mory by 9 A.M., and was attacking the depleted battalions opposed to them along the whole divisional front so that they were compelled to fall slowly back, by the late afternoon held a line about half a mile east of the Arras-Bapaume Road. The situation to the south had been such that the Fourth Corps had to arrange to withdraw to the west of Bapaume, so that in any case the Sixth Corps would have been compelled to throw back its right flank. The Sixth Division on the immediate right had been relieved by the Forty-first, but touch had been lost and a gap formed, the enemy pushing on to Favreuil. The Forty-second Division was on the march up, however, in order to relieve the Fortieth, and two brigades of this formed a defensive line covering Gomiecourt.

These events had their reaction upon the Thirty-first Division to the north. When the enemy were seen in Mory at 9 A.M. they were upon the flank of the 4th Guards Brigade, which at the same time could see heavy columns massing to the east of St. Leger. The Guards at once dug in a new support switch line towards Ervillers and so kept touch with the Fortieth in its new position. The 93rd upon the left was in the meanwhile heavily attacked in front, the enemy coming on again and again with a powerful support from trench mortars. These attacks were all beaten back by the stout Yorkshire infantry, but nothing could prevent the enemy from working round in the south and occupying Behagnies and Sapignies. The British artillery was particularly masterful in this section, and no direct progress could be made by the Germans.

Sixth Corps. March 25.

In the late afternoon of the 24th the Germans made a new and violent attack upon the exhausted Fortieth Division and upon the 4th Guards Brigade on the right of the Thirty-first. In this attack the enemy succeeded in forcing their way into Ervillers, while the Fortieth reformed upon the west of it, so as to cover Hamelincourt and Moyenneville. The situation in the morning of March 25 was exceedingly critical for the two advanced brigades of the Thirty-first, the Guards and the 93rd, who had not budged from their position. The enemy were now to the right rear, and if they advanced farther northwards there was imminent danger that the defenders would be cut off. As usual the best defence of a dashing commander is an attack, so the reserve brigade, the 92nd, was ordered to advance upon Ervillers, which had already been consolidated by the 91st German Infantry Regiment. The 10th East Yorkshires led the attack and seized the village once again, but the situation was still critical, for the enemy were round the south-west, so that they enveloped the whole right wing of the division, which was stretched to cracking point with every man in the line. Touch had for the moment been lost with the troops on the right. As the Germans poured past the right wing of the Thirty-first they presented a menace for the future, but a most tempting mark for the present, and ten machine-guns were kept in continuous action for three hours upon ideal targets ranging from 300 to 1500 yards. The enemy losses upon this occasion were undoubtedly very heavy, but with fine persistency they kept upon their way, as one-idea'd and undeviating as a swarm of ants in a tropical forest. A thick trail of their dead marked their westward road.

There had been comparative quiet at the north of the line so that the narrative may still concern itself with the situation which centred round the Thirty-first Division. The relief of the Fortieth upon the right was now long overdue, and the men had been worked to the bone, but the fact that Solly-Flood's Forty-second Division had been deflected to the south withheld their succours. The Forty-first (Lawford), however, was gradually coming into action and thickening their shredded lines. Sapignies in the extreme south of the corps area had been taken by the Germans, but was recaptured in the morning of March 25 by parts of the 120th Brigade working with the 127th Brigade of the Forty-first Division. Strong German reinforcements came up, however, and the British line was pushed back in this quarter to the north-west until it crossed the high ground east of Gomiecourt. This southern sector was handed over before noon from the Sixth Corps to the Fourth, and in the evening the remains of the Fortieth Division were finally drawn out, having finished a splendid spell of service. The strain upon General Ponsonby, and upon his three Brigadiers, Crozier, Campbell, and

Forbes, had been enormous, but under the most extreme pressure their units had always maintained the line. Part of the 126th Brigade of the Forty-second Division was now on the immediate right of the Thirty-first Division, the 10th Manchesters connecting up with the 11th East Yorks and doing great work in covering that flank.

It has already been recorded how the 92nd Brigade, all of East Yorkshire, had beaten the 91st Prussian Regiment out of the village of Ervillers. A second regiment of the 2nd Guards Reserve Division, the 77th, essayed the adventure of turning the Yorkshiremen out, but met with a bloody repulse. "It was a sight to see," says one who was present. "We were only a battalion, probably 800 strong, while he had massed artillery and many thousands of infantry. They came over to us in columns, and they kept coming. They swarmed towards us, but they made no progress, and we could not shoot fast enough. For three and a half hours they came, and for three and a half hours we knocked them out. They were falling like ripe corn before the reaper. As fast as they fell others took their places, but they could not move the East Yorks." The 2nd Guards Reserve were worn out by this experience, and it must be admitted that their service in the battle had been long and arduous. They were relieved by the 16th Bavarians and the 239th Division, so that there was no surcease in the endless pressure.

At 1.15 the 93rd West Yorkshires upon the left of the line were attacked, but could no more be shifted than their brother Tykes in the south. The German stormers never reached the line, partly owing to the excellent barrage and partly to the steady rifle-fire. After a long interval of following false gods, such as bombs and rifle grenades, the British soldier was reasserting himself once more as the best average shot of all the forces engaged, though it must be admitted that the specialised German snipers with their weapons of precision were of a high excellence. All day the division stood its ground and hit back hard at every attack, but by evening the salient had become so extreme that it was necessary to readjust the line. They fell back, therefore, the 92nd covering the operation, and took up the line from Moyenneville to Ablainzeville, where they faced round on the morning of March 26, the 92nd on the right of the line, the 93rd upon the left, and the 4th Guards in reserve. On their north lay the division of Guards, on their south the Forty-second Division.

It was on this morning that an incident occurred leading to the loss of a village, but also to a singular instance of military virtue. It is the episode of Moyenneville and of the 15th West Yorkshire Battalion. It appears that an

officer in a state of concussion from the explosion of a shell, sent an order to the left of the line that they should retire. The Guards and other observers were surprised to see two British battalions walking back with sloped arms under no pressure from the enemy. By some chance the mistaken order did not reach the 15th West Yorkshires, who remained isolated in their position, and Colonel Twiss refused to follow the brigade until a positive command should arrive. In their loneliness they extended each flank in search of a friend, and finally stretched their left into Moyenneville village, which they found already strongly occupied by the Germans. To many minds this would have appeared to be an excellent excuse for retirement, but its effect upon the Yorkshire temperament was that they instantly attacked the village and drove the intruders out. One considerable body of Germans was driven down into a hollow and pelted with bullets until the survivors raised the white flag. Very large numbers of German wounded lay in and around the village, but it was not possible to send them to the rear. The enemy attacked Moyenneville again, but the battalion covered the western exits and denied all egress. For the whole of that day, the whole night, and up to the afternoon of March 27, this heroic body of infantry held their ground, though shot at from every side and nearly surrounded. Not one yard backwards would they budge without a definite written order. Not only did they hold their own front but their machine-guns played upon nine successive waves of Germans advancing from Courcelles to Alette, and sorely hampered their movements to the south. They covered 2000 yards for thirty-six hours and relieved the front of the Thirty-first Division from pressure during that time. When at last the survivors made their way back only four officers and forty men represented that gallant battalion. Colonel Twiss was among the missing. "This battalion," says the official record, "by its brave action relieved the pressure on our front throughout the whole day and gave the division time to establish its position near Alette." It was as well that this pressure should have been taken off, for both upon the 26th and the 27th the ammunition question had become serious, and disaster might have followed a more extended action.

Sixth Corps. March 27.

If we continue to follow the fortunes of the Thirty-first Division, so as to bring them to their natural term, we find it now covering the line from Alette in the south to Ablainzeville. The enemy were driving up on the right of the division between Courcelles and Ablainzeville, a space which was covered by the 92nd Brigade, who were fighting as brilliantly as ever. Touch had been lost with the Forty-second upon March 27. The East Yorkshires lost their outpost

line four times this morning and four times they cleared it with the bayonet. Colonel Rickman, the senior officer on the spot, fought for every inch of ground as he retired before the ever-increasing pressure. Finally the 92nd, worn to rags, were ordered to reform behind the 4th Guards Brigade at Alette, but so high was their spirit that when during the night there was word that the Guards were themselves hard pressed they eagerly sent help forward to them, while the Guards, with equal chivalry of spirit, strictly limited the number who should come. About six in the evening the Guards threw out a line to the south and joined up with the 10th Manchesters of the Forty-second Division to the west of Ablainzeville, so that the line was once more complete.

Sixth Corps. March 28.

March 28 found the battle still raging in front of the division, which had now been engaged for four days without a break and had beaten off the attacks of five separate German divisions. Two attacks were made, the one upon the 93rd Brigade, the other upon the Guards. Each attack got into the line and each was pitchforked out again. So broken was the enemy that they were seen retiring in crowds towards the north-east under a canopy of shrapnel. The British barrage was particularly good that day, and many assaulting units were beaten into pieces by it. The division was terribly worn, and the men could hardly stand for exhaustion, and yet it was a glad thought that the last glimpse which their weary and bloodshot eyes had of their enemy was his broken hordes as they streamed away from the front which they had failed to break. So thin were the ranks that the pioneer battalion, the 12th Yorkshire Light Infantry, was brought up to form the line. The Guards had taken their position somewhat to the west of Alette, and some of the enemy from the south filtered into the village, but they were shortly afterwards put out again by Shute's Thirty-second Division, which had come up for the relief. There was no attack upon the 29th, and upon the 30th the Thirty-first was able to withdraw, having established a record which may have been equalled but cannot have been surpassed by any division in this great battle. Five German divisions, the 111th, 2nd Guards Reserve, 239th and 16th Bavarians, and 1st Guards Reserve, had been wholly or partially engaged with the Thirty-first. Both sides had lost heavily and were exhausted. It was here, near Ervillers, that a German war correspondent has described how he saw the long line of German and British wounded lying upon either side of the main road.

It has been stated that the Thirty-second Division carried Alette after this unit had relieved the Thirty-first Division, and the operation may be treated here to preserve continuity of narrative. It was of more than local importance, as it was one of the earliest indications that the British army was still full of fight and that in spite of every disadvantage it meant to hit back at every opportunity. On taking over his section of the front, General Shute found before him the village of Alette, which was strongly held, but was on the forward slope of a hill so that it could obtain little help from the German guns. He at once determined to attack. The 15th Highland Light Infantry of the 14th Brigade were directed upon the village on the night of April 2, while the 96th Brigade continued the attack to the south. The result was a very heartening little success. Three companies of the Highlanders, numbering under 300 in all, carried the village, though it was held

by a German battalion. On the right, the 16th Lancashire Fusiliers made the attack, and in spite of one check, which was set right by the personal intervention of General Girdwood of the 96th Brigade, the objectives were reached. The two attacks were skilfully connected up by the 5/6th Royal Scots, while a party of sappers of the 206th Field Company under Lieutenant Cronin followed on the heels of the infantry and quickly consolidated.

Sixth Corps. March 24.

Whilst these stirring events had been in progress in the south, the north of the line had slowly drawn back in order to preserve conformity. The Seventeenth Corps, as already stated, were to the west of Monchy, and the left of the Sixth Corps was on the line of Henin, where the Third Division occupied a strong defensive position. This was strongly attacked upon the forenoon of March 24; especially on the 8th Brigade front, which was the right of the line, the Germans swarming up from the south-east of Henin and trying hard to work up the Henin-Neuville Vitasse Road. This attack fell particularly upon the 1st Scots Fusiliers, and it was completely repulsed with heavy losses, though it was facilitated by the sunken roads which converged upon Henin. The Germans in their retirement had to pass along a slope where once again they lost heavily.

Shortly after noon the left of the Third Division was also attacked, and the enemy obtained a temporary footing between the 1st Gordons and 8th Royal Lancasters of the 76th Brigade. From this he was very soon ejected, and though many bombing attacks were pushed with great resolution they had no results. March 25 was quiet upon the front of the Third Division, though the right of the Guards Division to the south near Boyelles was subjected to one heavy unsuccessful attack. That evening both the Guards and the Third Division had to make some retraction of their line in order to conform to the situation already described in the south, but March 26 passed without an attack, the soldiers listening with anxious impatience to the roar of battle on their right, unable to see the fight, and yet keenly conscious that their own lives might depend upon its results. The 27th was also a day of anxious expectancy, culminating upon the 28th in a very severe battle, which was the greater test coming after so long a period of strain. All three brigades were in the line, the 8th upon the right, 9th in the centre, and 76th in the north. Still farther to the north was the 44th Highland Brigade of Reed's Fifteenth Division upon which the storm first burst.

Sixth and Seventeenth Corps. March 28.

This brigade at 6.45 was assailed by a bombardment of so severe a character that its trenches were completely destroyed. The German infantry pushed home behind this shattering fire and drove back the front line of the Highlanders. This enabled them to get behind the left flank of the 2nd Suffolks and nearly surround them, while at the same time they pierced the front of the 1st Northumberland Fusiliers on their right. The front line of the 8th Royal Lancasters had also been penetrated, and the British infantry were pushed back and split up into various small squads of men, intermingled in the north with Highlanders of the 44th Brigade, and all fighting desperately with the enemy swarming thickly upon them. By 9.45 the whole front was in German hands. Enemy field-guns were lining Wancourt Ridge, and as the shattered formations tried to form a new line they were heavily shelled by them. The loss in officers and men was very heavy, Colonel James of the Royal Lancasters being among the dead. The withdrawal was made to the reserve line, which the 44th Brigade had already occupied in the north. This included the village of Neuville Vitasse which became untenable from shell-fire, and into the northern portion of which the enemy was able to push, but in the main the reserve system was occupied, the movement being covered by some of the 1st Gordons. At this point an equilibrium was attained and the enemy held after as desperate a conflict as any troops could be called upon to endure.

Sixth Corps. March 28.

On the right of the 76th Brigade the 9th Brigade had also been fighting very hard, and been compelled to yield some ground before the overpowering weight of the attack, especially that of the preliminary trench-mortar fire. The first enemy advance in the morning was completely beaten off with great loss. A second attack had driven in the 8th Brigade on the right, which enabled the Germans to get behind the two companies of the 13th King's Liverpool who were in the front line. These men fought to the end and were last seen standing on the parapet without a thought of surrender. At the same time a company of the Northumberland Fusiliers on their left shared their fate, save for one officer and twelve men who survived. The front line of the 8th Brigade had now ceased to exist, but the reserve line still held. An attack upon the 7th Shropshires who, with the remains of the other battalions, held on to it, was successfully shattered, even the battalion headquarters being brought into the desperate battle, while the guns on each side fought as hard as the infantry, barrage and attack succeeding each other with mechanical accuracy, and being answered by an equally efficient barrage and defence, for the British guns were extraordinarily well handled that

day. About mid-day the enemy got a lodgment on the right of the reserve line, but the Fusiliers, whose Colonel, Moulton Barrett, had been hit, and the 13th King's still fought furiously for what was left, and retained their ground until dusk, when they were drawn back into the reserve line in order to conform with the 76th Brigade.

The 8th Brigade upon the extreme right of the division had also endured heavy losses in men and some loss in ground. The front line was held by companies of the 1st Scots Fusiliers and of the 7th Shropshires. The enemy, after an unsuccessful attempt, got into the trenches of the latter and bombed their way along them, clearing that section of the front. It was bomb against rifle in the tortuous ditches, and the bomb proved the more handy weapon. The Scots Fusiliers, who were the next to be assailed, made shift with rifle-grenades, but these also ran short, and they were forced back, so that the survivors of the two front companies were driven across the Arras-Bapaume Road. Finally, as in the case of the other brigades, the reserve line was successfully maintained until evening.

No soldiers could have fought with greater bravery and skill than did the Third Division on March 28. They were assailed by at least three German divisions and by a crushing artillery, but they disputed every inch of ground, and finally fought their formidable adversary to such a complete standstill that he could not, with several hours of daylight at his disposal, and disorganised ranks before him, continue his attacks. It is true that he secured Henin and Neuville Vitasse, but he paid a rich price in blood. So broken were the enemy that the British wounded came back through their ranks without let or hindrance. A strong counter would have swept them out of the ground that they had gained, but neither the Third nor the Fifteenth, which had endured an equal attack upon the left, was in a condition to advance, while the Guards had been already withdrawn in accordance with the situation on their right. The blow which the Germans had received was shown even more clearly by their failure to attack upon the next day. On March 30 the Third Division was relieved by the Second Canadians. Their record was a great one, and their losses, 139 officers and 3500 men, were a measure of their services. In nine days, before a vastly superior force, they had only gone back 7000 yards, most of which was strategic withdrawal. Well might General Byng say, "By their conduct they have established a standard of endurance and determination that will be a model for all time."

Seventeenth Corps. March 28.

This desperate German attack on March 28 to the north of the British line had spread right across the face of the Fifteenth Scottish Division through the line of Orange Hill and on to Telegraph Hill, finally involving the Fourth Division on the other side of the Scarpe, and the right-hand unit of the Thirteenth Corps on their left, so that Horne's First Army was now drawn into the fray, which reached as far north as Oppy and Gavrelle. Along the whole of this long front there was constant fighting, which in the case of the Fifteenth Division was as desperate as that of the Third. All three brigades were in the line, each of them having two battalions in front and one in reserve. Never has the grand tough Scottish fibre been more rudely tested than on this terrible day of battle, and never has it stood the strain more splendidly. General Reed's men undoubtedly saved Arras and held up at least six German divisions which broke themselves on that rugged and impenetrable line, formed in the first instance by the 7th Camerons upon the right, the 13th Royal Scots in the centre, the 9th Black Watch and 7/8 Scots Borderers on the left. As already told, the shattering bombardment destroyed a large part of the right front, burying the garrison amid the ruins of their trenches, near their junction with the Third Division. Some fifty Camerons, under Colonel MacLeod, fought most desperately round their headquarters, and then fell back slowly upon the 8/10 Gordons, who were holding the Neuville Vitasse trench behind them. This was about 6 A.M. By 7.40 the whole front line, shot to pieces and with their right flank gone, readjusted their line to correspond, winding up near the Feuchy Road. There was no rest nor respite, however, for the whole German plan of campaign depended upon their getting Arras, so they poured forward their waves of attack regardless of losses. It was a really desperate battle in which the Scots, lying in little groups among the shell-holes and ditches, mowed the Germans down as they swarmed up to them, but were themselves occasionally cut off and overpowered as the stormers found the gaps and poured through them. The pressure was very great on the front of the Black Watch, north of the Cambrai Road, and there General Reed determined upon a counter-attack, for which he could only spare a single company of the 10th Scottish Rifles. In spite of the small numbers it was carried out with such dash, under the personal lead of Colonel Stanley Clarke, that the front was cleared for a time, and the Germans thrown back east of Feuchy.

Seventeenth Corps.

Meanwhile the Germans had made some advance to the north of the Scarpe,

and the 7/8 Scots Borderers on the left wing had to fall back to preserve the line. At 11 A.M. the enemy were raging in the centre of the line, and the 6th Camerons, north of the Cambrai Road, were forced backwards, the enemy piercing their front. Up to 1.45 the weight of the attack was mostly in the north, and ended by all three brigades moving back, with the enemy still striving with the utmost fury and ever fresh relays of men to burst the line. At 3 P.M. the German stormers had won the Bois des Bœufs, but were driven out again by the 9th Black Watch and by the 11th Argylls, who had lost their C.O., Colonel Mitchell. The division was worn to a shadow, and yet the moment that the German attack seemed to ease both they and the Fourth Division on their north advanced their front. In this single bloody day the Fifteenth Division lost 94 officers and 2223 men, but there can be no doubt that their action, with that of the Third Division and the Fourth on either side of them, was the main determining factor in the whole of this vast battle. General Reed (a V.C. of Colenso) with his Brigadiers, Hilliard, Allgood, and Lumsden, might well be proud of the way they held the pass.

North of the Scarpe all three brigades of the Fourth Division were exposed to a furious attack, and lost the village of Rœux, which was defended literally to the death by the 2nd Seaforths of the 10th Brigade, but the 1st Hants in the front line of the 11th Brigade and the 2nd Essex of the 12th stood like iron, and in a long day's fighting the enemy was never able to make any serious lodgment in the position, though the rushes of his bombing parties were said by experienced British officers to have been extraordinarily determined and clever. Very little ground was gained by the Germans, and of this a section upon the left flank near Gavrelle was regained by a sudden counter-attack of the Fourth Division.

Sixth and Seventeenth Corps. March 28.

Of the attack to the north of the Third Army in the Bailleul and Oppy district, it should be noted that it fell upon the Fifty-sixth London Territorial Division, who for once had the pleasant experience of being at the right end of the machine-gun. They took every advantage of their opportunity, and there are few places where the Germans have endured heavier losses with no gains to show in return. The Westminster and L.R.B.'s of the 169th Brigade were particularly heavily engaged, and a party of the former distinguished themselves by a most desperate defence of an outlying post, named Towy Post, near Gavrelle, which they held long after it was passed by the enemy, but eventually fought their way to safety. The attack lasted from seven in the morning till six at night, and the

Londoners had full vengeance for their comrades of July 1916 or August 1917, who had died before the German wire even as the Germans died that day.

It was a successful day for the British arms, so successful that it marked the practical limit of the German advance in that quarter, which was the vital section, covering the town of Arras. There is no doubt that the attempt was a very serious one, strongly urged by six divisions of picked infantry in front and four in support, with a very powerful concentration of artillery, which was expected to smash a way through the three divisions chiefly attacked. The onslaught was whole-hearted and skilful, but so was the defence. The German losses were exceedingly high, and save for a strip of worthless ground there was really nothing to show for them. It was the final check to the German advance in this quarter of the field, so that the chronicler may well bring his record to a pause while he returns to the first day of the battle and endeavours to trace the fortunes of the Fourth and Fifth Corps, who formed the right half of the Third Army. We have fixed the northern sector of the battle-field from Bailleul in the north right across the Scarpe and down to the Cojeul in its position, from which it was destined to make no change for many months to come. It was the first solidification of the lines, for to the south all was still fluid and confused.

Sixth and Seventeenth Corps.

A word should be said before one finally passes from this portion of the great epic, as to the truly wonderful work of the Army Medical Corps. In spite of the constant fire the surgeons and bearers were continually in the front line and conveying the wounded to the rear. Many thousands were saved from the tortures of a German prison camp by the devotion which kept them within the British lines. It may be invidious to mention examples where the same spirit of self-sacrifice animated all, but one might take as typical the case of the Fortieth Division, some details of which are available. Colonel M'Cullagh and his men conveyed to the rear during five days, always under heavy fire, 2400 cases of their own or other divisions, the whole of the casualties of the Fortieth being 2800. M'Carter, a British, and Berney, an American surgeon, both had dressing-posts right up to the battle-line, the latter being himself wounded twice. Wannan, a stretcher-bearer, carried thirty cases in one day, and ended by conveying a wounded friend several miles upon his shoulders. Private M'Intosh, attacked by a German while binding an injured man, killed the cowardly fellow with his own bayonet, and then completed his task. It is hard to work detail into so vast a picture, but such deeds were infinitely multiplied along that great line of battle.

Nor can one omit mention of the untiring work of the artillery, which was in action often for several days and nights on end. Occasionally in some soldier's letter one gets a glimpse of the spirit of the gunners such as no formal account can convey: "Our battery fired two days and nights without ceasing until spotted by the German observers. They then kept up a terrible fire until the British guns were silenced in succession. One officer was left standing when I was wounded. He shook my hand as they carried me away. I went leaving him with about seven men and two guns, still carrying on as if nothing had happened. This is only one battery among hundreds which showed as great pluck and tenacity as we did."

CHAPTER III

THE SECOND BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Attack on the Fourth and Fifth Corps

Attack on Sixth and Fifty-first Divisions—Engagement of the Twenty-fifth and Forty-first Divisions—Attack on Forty-seventh, Sixty-third, Second, and Nineteenth Divisions—The German torrent—Serious situation—Arrival of Sixty-second Division—Fighting before Albert—Gallant defence by Twelfth Division—Arrival of the New Zealanders, of the Australians, of the Thirty-fifth Division—Equilibrium.

Fourth Corps. March 21.

To the immediate south of the Sixth Corps the front line upon March 21 was held by Harper's Fourth Corps, which consisted of the Sixth Division (Harden) opposite to Lagnicourt with the Fifty-first Highland Division to the right of them, which famous unit was now under the command of General Carter-Campbell, whose name has been recorded in a previous volume as the only officer left standing in his battalion after the action of Neuve Chapelle. To the south of the Fourth Corps was the Fifth Corps (Fanshawe) with the Seventeenth Division (Robertson) on the left, the Sixty-third (Lawrie) in the centre, and the Forty-seventh (Gorringe) on the right covering the whole Cambrai salient from Flesquières in the north to the point near Gouzeaucourt Wood where the Third Army met the left flank of the Fifth. The line took a considerable bend at this point, marking the ground gained at the battle of Cambrai, and it was part of the

German scheme to break through to the north and south, so that without attacking the Fifth Corps they would either cause it to fall back or else isolate and capture it. Had their advance been such as they had hoped for, they would certainly have placed it in great peril. Even as it was, it was necessary to withdraw the line, but without undue haste or confusion. Great pressure was laid upon the Fifth Corps in later stages of the battle, but beyond a considerable shell-fall and demonstration there was no actual attack upon March 21. It was by holding certain sections of the line in this fashion that the Germans were able to pile up the odds at those places which were actually attacked.

It will be possible to describe the sequence of events with considerably less detail in this and other sectors of the line, since the general conditions of attack and defence may be taken as similar to that already described. Here also the bombardment began with its full shattering force of high explosive, blue cross invisible gas, mustard gas, phosgene, and every other diabolical device which the German chemist has learned to produce and the British to neutralise. In the case of the British infantry, many of them had to wear their gas masks for eight hours on end, and the gunners were in even worse plight; but these appliances, which will no doubt find a place in the museums of our children, were of a surprising efficiency, and hampered the experienced soldier far less than would have been thought.

The infantry advance was at 9.45, the Germans swarming in under the cover of Nature's smoke barrage, for here, as in several other parts of the line, a thick morning mist greatly helped the attack and screened the stormers until they were actually up to the wire, which had usually been shattered in advance by the trench-mortars. The line from Flesquières to Dernicourt in the region of the Fifty-first Division was less seriously attacked, and remained inviolate, but the northern stretch from Dernicourt to Lagnicourt was struck with terrific impact, and gave before the blow to very much the same extent as the divisions to the immediate north. The 71st Brigade in the Lagnicourt sector was especially hard hit, and was very violently assailed by a strong force of Germans, which included the 1st Prussian Guard. This famous regiment was at one time all round the 9th Norfolks, who succeeded at last in fighting themselves clear, though their Colonel, Prior, and the great majority of the officers and men in the battalion were killed or wounded. Even these wounded, however, were safely carried off, thanks to the devotion of Captain Failes and a handful of brave men. In this desperate struggle the whole brigade was decimated. The 16th and 18th Brigades had also suffered severely, but the division, in spite of its losses, was splendidly

solid, and fell back slowly upon the support of the 75th Brigade of the Twenty-fifth Division, which had hastened up to the danger point. By evening, the Germans, advancing in great numbers and with fine resolution, had occupied the four villages of Doignies, Boursies, Louverval, and Lagnicourt, their total penetration from Boursies in the south to Ecoust in the north, a stretch of seven miles, averaging about 3000 yards. This advance had completely turned the left wing of the Fifty-first, which was compelled to fall back in consequence, after stopping several attacks from across the Canal du Nord. All three brigades of the Fifty-first Division were in line, and of the three the left and centre had been seriously engaged, the enemy entering the front line of both before mid-day, and finally reaching the second system between Louverval and Lagnicourt, so that the defence lay along the Beaumetz-Morchies line. The Nineteenth Division was in general support in this quarter, and the 57th Brigade became practically the right of the Fifty-first Division. About 7 P.M. in the evening two battalions of it, the 8th Gloucesters and 10th Worcesters of the 57th Brigade, tried to turn the tide of fight by a counter-attack, with the aid of tanks, against the village of Doignies. This attack was successful in retaking half the village, but in the course of the night it was found necessary to withdraw before the increasing pressure of the enemy, who brought many machine-guns into the village. During the night it was arranged that the Fifth Corps should fall back from its dangerous position in the Cambrai salient, and by eleven next day the divisions which composed it were ranged from Highland Ridge, through Havrincourt and Hermies, in touch with the Fourth Corps in the north and with the left of the Fifth Army in the south. Whilst this very heavy attack had been made upon the Fourth Corps, Bainbridge's Twenty-fifth Division had been in close support of the two divisions in the front line. While the 75th Brigade, as already stated, was pushed up under very heavy fire to strengthen the Sixth Division in their desperate resistance, the 74th was allotted to the Fifty-first Division, which was in less serious need of help during the day. Griffin's 7th Brigade remained in reserve in front of Morchies, where upon the following morning its presence was invaluable as a solid unshaken nucleus of resistance. Eight German divisions were identified that day among those which attacked the two British divisions in the front line of the Fourth Corps.

Fourth and Fifth Corps. March 22.

There was no attack during the night, but the Germans thickened their advanced line and were all ready for another strenuous day, while the British, though hustled and overborne by the tremendous onslaught which had pushed

them back, were still within their battle positions and as doggedly surly as British infantry usually are in hours of stress and trial. Three strong attacks were made in the morning and early afternoon between Hermies and Beaumetz, all of which were driven back. There is no method of gauging the losses of the enemy upon such occasions, but when one knows that the machine-guns fired as many as 9000 rounds each, and that a single Lewis gun discharged 30,000 bullets, one can say with certainty that they were very heavy. These attacks fell upon the Highlanders on the right, the 7th Brigade in the centre, and the remains of the Sixth Division upon the left. Unhappily, a chain of defence is no stronger than its weakest link, which finds itself so often at points of juncture. Upon this occasion the Germans, continually filtering forward and testing every possible orifice, found a weakness between the 120th Brigade of the Fortieth Division in the north and the Sixth in the south. This weak point was to be mended by the Forty-first Division, which had been hurried up from Favreuil, but the time was too short, or the rent was too wide, so that the Germans pushed rapidly through and seized the village of Vaulx-Vraumont, separating the Fourth Corps from the Sixth. It was an anxious moment, and coupled with the German success at Henin Hill in the north it might have meant the isolation of the Sixth Corps; but the necessary changes were rapidly and steadily effected, so that before evening the Highlanders of the 120th Brigade feeling out upon their right and fearing all would be void, joined hands suddenly with the 15th Hampshires of the Forty-first Division in the neighbourhood of Beugnâtre. Before night had fallen upon March 22 the line had been restored and built up once more, though some five thousand yards westward of where it had been in the morning. That evening the Sixth Division was drawn out, weak and dishevelled, but still full of fight. With all the hammering and hustling that it had endured, it had saved its heavy guns and nearly all its field batteries. The Forty-first Division took its place, and incorporated for the time the 7th Brigade, a unit which had endured hard fortune, for it had held its ground splendidly with little loss until, after the fashion of modern war, events upon the other side of the horizon caused it to get the order to retire, an order which could not be obeyed without complete exposure and very heavy casualties, including Colonel Blackall of the 4th South Staffords. Each day of arduous battle was followed by a no less arduous night, during which, under heavy fire and every conceivable difficulty the various divisions were readjusted so that the morning light should show no impossible salients, no outlying indefensible positions, no naked flanks, and no yawning gaps. How easy are such exercises over a map upon a study table, and how difficult when conducted by dazed, over-wrought officers, pushing forward their staggering, half-conscious men in the darkness of a wilderness of woods and fields, where

the gleam of a single electric torch may mean disaster to all! And yet, as every morning dawned, the haggard staff-captain at the telephone could still report to his anxious chief that all was well, and his battle-line still intact between the Hun and his goal.

On the morning of the battle the general disposition of the Fifth Corps had been that the Seventeenth Division (Robertson) was in the line on the left, the Sixty-third Naval Division (Lawrie) in the centre, and the Forty-seventh Division (Gorringe) on the right, being the southern unit of the Third Army, in close liaison with the Ninth Division, the northern unit of the Fifth Army. Two divisions were in close reserve, the Second (Pereira) on the right, and the Nineteenth (Jeffreys) on the left.

Fourth and Fifth Corps. March 21.

The Forty-seventh Division was in a particularly important position, since it was the flank unit and the liaison between the two armies depended upon it. It had only come into line the day before the battle, taking the place of the Second Division, which was now in immediate support. On March 21 the 140th Brigade covered the right of the divisional front, and the 141st the left, the sector being that of La Vacquerie. In view of the menacing attitude of the enemy both the 142nd Brigade and the 4th Welsh Fusiliers Pioneer Battalion were brought nearer to the front line. So heavy was the gas bombardment in the morning that the front battalion of the 140th Brigade, the 17th London, had to evacuate some advanced trenches and to wear their gas masks for hours on end. The front line trenches were blown to fragments, and so also were many of their garrison. The following infantry advance, however, though vigorously conducted, had no great weight, and seems to have been the work of two battalions carrying out a subsidiary attack. By a counter-attack of the 19th London they were driven out once more.

Whilst this partial attack had been made upon the Forty-seventh Division, similar assaults had been made upon the Sixty-third in the centre, and upon the Seventeenth in the northern sector of the Fifth Corps. None of them made more than petty gains, but in each case the bombardment was formidable, chiefly with trench-mortar bombs and with gas. In the case of the Forty-seventh Division there was a considerable interval between the front brigades, because a number both of the 18th and 17th London had been absolutely destroyed, together with their trench. There were several other partial attacks during the day, but the

pressure was never extreme, and the withdrawal to Highland Ridge after dusk was carried out on account of the general tactical position. All wounded men were carried back, and no booty left to the enemy.

Meanwhile the left flank of the Fifth Corps had been covered by the 58th Brigade of the Nineteenth Division, the 9th Welsh Fusiliers being heavily engaged. During March 22, Havrincourt, Hermies, and the Beaumetz-Hermies line were held by the Seventeenth, Nineteenth, and Fifty-first divisions against repeated German attacks, and in the evening the Nineteenth was in touch with the Forty-first on its left and with the Second on its right.

Fourth and Fifth Corps. March 22.

On this night of March 22 the principal change was this movement backwards of the whole Fifth Corps. The retirement of the Fifth Corps continued during the day of March 23, and was caused by the necessity of conforming with the Seventh Corps to the south of it which, after valiant exertions, soon to be described, had lost Nurlu, so placing the enemy upon the right rear of the divisions in the north. Fins had also been taken in the same neighbourhood, The Fifth Corps was now heavily pressed in its retreat, all five divisions enduring considerable losses and having the menace of the enemy constantly upon their right flank. At noon the general line was east of Equancourt, and this line was held for a time, but the enemy was still thundering on in the north, his fresh divisions rolling in like waves from some inexhaustible sea. At 1.30 they were pushing their attack most desperately upon the weary fringes of riflemen and groups of tired machine-gunners, who formed the front of the Forty-first Division between Beugny and Lebucquière. In all, this division, with the Nineteenth and Fifty-first upon their right, sustained five strong attacks in the afternoon of this day, most of them from Vaulx-Vraumont. Eventually Lebucquière was taken, the enemy breaking their way at this point through the line of the exhausted Fifty-first Division, who had fought with splendid resolution. This German success placed the Nineteenth Division south of Beaumetz and at Beugny in a very serious position, as the enemy infantry got behind the 9th Welsh Fusiliers and 6th Wiltshires, who were only saved from total destruction by the staunch support of the 9th Welsh at Beugny, who held on desperately until the remains of the 58th Brigade could get back to them. These remains when the three battalions were reunited were only a few hundred men. The case of the 57th Brigade, which was fighting a hard rearguard action all afternoon, was little better, and both the 8th Gloucesters and 10th Worcesters

were almost overwhelmed by the swarms of Germans who poured up against their front and flank. A splendid stand was made by this brigade north-east of Velu, in which the men of Gloucester especially distinguished themselves, Captain Jones of A Company receiving the V.C. for his heroic resistance. Colonel Hoath of the 10th Warwicks conducted this arduous retreat, and his own battalion shares in the honours of a fight which was tragic in its losses, but essential for its effect upon the fortunes of the army. Captain Gribble of this battalion also received the V.C., his D Company falling to the last man after the best traditions of the British army. The 5th Brigade of the Second Division, upon the right of the Nineteenth Division, shared in the honours of this desperate business, the 2nd Oxford and Bucks being very heavily engaged. After the prolonged action the final line of the Nineteenth Division ran west of Bertincourt, the movement of retreat being to the south-west. So confused had been the fighting of the last two days that the Nineteenth Division which had been on the right of the Fifty-first was now upon their left. Still keeping a closely-knit line and their faces to the foe, the Third Army stretched that night from Sailly in the south to the west of Henin and Monchy. The Fourth Corps, which had been so badly mauled, was strengthened that evening by the inclusion of the Forty-second Division. The towers of Bapaume in the rear showed how far across the ravaged and reconquered land the British line had retreated.

The pressure here described had been upon the left of the Fifth Corps, but the situation upon its right flank had also been very awkward. The terrific weight thrown upon the Ninth Division had, as will be described, driven them farther westward than their left-hand companions of the Forty-seventh Division. The result was a most dangerous gap which exposed the whole rear of the Third Army. The 99th Brigade in the Equancourt district endeavoured after the fall of Fins to fill this front, but they were not nearly numerous enough for the purpose. The result was that the Forty-seventh Division, which moved back on the night of March 22 from Highland Ridge to the Metz-Dessart Wood line, had to reach out more and more upon the right in order to save the situation. In this operation two battalions, the 4th Welsh Fusiliers Pioneers and the 23rd London, sustained most of the attack and suffered very heavily upon March 23, while in the preliminary fighting upon March 22 the 18th London had many losses. By the morning of March 24, the Forty-seventh, beating off all attacks and keeping their position in the unbroken line, had fallen back to a new position, the 142nd Brigade, which formed the rearguard, fighting hard in its retreat, and having to brush aside those groups of Germans who had slipped in at the rear.

Fourth and Fifth Corps. March 24.

The morning of March 24 found the German torrent still roaring forward in full spate, though less formidable than before, since the heavier guns were far to the rear. Their light artillery, trench-mortars, and machine-guns were always up with the storming columns, and the latter were relieved in a manner which showed the competence of their higher command. It was a day of doubt and difficulty for the British, for the pressure was everywhere severe, and the line had frayed until it was very thin, while officers and men had reached the last limits of human endurance. At 8.30 in the morning the enemy was pressing hard upon the Seventeenth and Forty-seventh Divisions in the region of Bus and Le Mesnil, where they were endeavouring to keep in touch with the worn remains of the heroic Ninth Division on the left of the Seventh Corps. Saily Saillisel was still clear of the enemy, but the tide was flowing strongly towards it. The 51st Brigade of the Seventeenth Division occupied this village and threw out its left to the Londoners on the north of them. Bertincourt, which had become a dangerous salient, was evacuated, and the line now ran east of Haplincourt and Rocquigny, the three brigades of the Seventeenth Division occupying this latter village, Barastre, and Villers-au-Flos. On their north were two brigades of the Forty-seventh, the remaining brigade being south of Le Transloy. North of the Forty-seventh Division the Sixty-third Naval Division and the Second Division carried the line on to the junction with the Fourth Corps, where the exhausted Nineteenth Division lay across the Cambrai Road, with the even more shattered Fifty-first Division at Riencourt to the north of them. There was some very furious fighting in front of Rocquigny about mid-day, in which the 12th Manchesters of the Seventeenth Division, and the three battalions (18th, 19th, 20th London) of the 141st Brigade made a very desperate resistance. The fighting was continued until the defenders found themselves in danger of being surrounded, when they were withdrawn. The 140th Brigade, under Colonel Dawes, also did great service that day in holding the Germans from getting behind the line. The enemy was so far round that there was the greatest difficulty in clearing the transport, which was only accomplished by the fine rearguard work of the 4th Welsh Fusiliers, aided by the 11th Motor Machine-gun Battery, and 34th Brigade R.F.A.

It was, however, to the south, where the Third and Fifth Armies were intermittently joined and vaguely interlocked, that the danger chiefly lay. About noon, the enemy, finding the weak spot between the two armies, had forced his way into Saily Saillisel in considerable force, and pushed rapidly north and west

from the village. So rapid was the German advance upon the right rear of the Fifth Corps that Rancourt and even Combles were said to have fallen. In vain the Seventeenth Division overstretched its wing to the south, trying to link up with the Seventh Corps. Early in the afternoon Morval and Les Bœufs had gone, and the troops were back upon the mud-and-blood areas of 1916. For the moment it seemed that the British line had gone, and it was hard to say what limit might be put to this very serious advance. By midnight the enemy were north of Bapaume, and had reached Ervillers, while in the south they had taken Longueval, the key village of Delville Wood. It was indeed a sad relapse to see all that the glorious dead had bought with their hearts' blood reverting so swiftly to the enemy. In the north, however, as has already been shown in the story of the Sixth Corps, the enemy's bolt was shot, and in the south his swift career was soon to be slowed and held.

In the Favreuil, Sapignies, and Gomiecourt district, north of Bapaume, the advance was mainly accomplished through the pressure of fresh German forces upon the exhausted and attenuated line of the Forty-first Division, which still struggled bravely, and in the end successfully, against overwhelming odds. In the effort to hold a line the divisions which had been drawn out as too weak for service turned back once more into the fray like wounded men who totter forward to strike a feeble blow for their comrades in distress. The Sixth Division was led in once more, and sustained fresh and terrible losses. Its left fell back to Favreuil, exposing the right wing of the Fortieth Division. The Twenty-fifth Division to the east of Achiet found itself also once more overtaken by the battle. By evening the line had been built up again in this quarter, and the dead-weary British infantry snatched a few hours of sleep before another day of battle. The Nineteenth Division, reduced to 2000 rifles, lay from Le Barque to Avesnes, with the Second upon their right and the Forty-first upon their left, while the whole of this difficult retreat had been covered by the weary but indomitable Highlanders of the Fifty-first.

The really serious situation was to the south of Bapaume upon the old Somme battle-field, where the Germans had made sudden and alarming progress. Their temporary success was due to the fact that the losses in the British lines had contracted the ranks until it was impossible to cover the whole space or to prevent the infiltration of the enemy between the units. The situation required some complete and vigorous regrouping and reorganisation if complete disaster was to be avoided. Up to this point the British Higher Command had been unable to do much to help the two hard-pressed armies, save to supply

them with the scanty succours which were immediately available. Now, however, it interfered with decision at the vital spot and in the vital moment. To ensure solidity and unity, Congreve's Seventh Corps, which had been the northern unit of the Fifth Army, became from this time onwards the southern unit of the Third Army, passing under the command of General Byng. With them went the First, Second, and Third Cavalry Divisions, which had been doing really splendid service in the south. Everything north of the Somme was now Third Army. At the same time the three fine and fresh Australian Divisions, the Third, Fourth, and Fifth, were assembling near Doullens in readiness to strike, while the Twelfth British Division was also hurried towards the place of danger. The future was dark and dangerous, but there were also solid grounds for hope.

Fourth and Fifth Corps. March 21.

On the morning of March 25 the line of the Third Army, which had defined itself more clearly during the night, ran from Curlu near the Somme, east of Bazentin, west of Longueval, east of Martinpuich, through Ligny Thillo, Sapignies, Ervillers, and hence as before. The enemy, whose cavalry were well up and in force, at once began his thrusting tactics in the southern section of the field, and may have expected, after his advance of the day before, to find some signs of weakening resistance. In this he was disappointed, for both the 47th Londoners in front of Contalmaison and the Second Division at Ligny Thillo beat off several attacks with very great loss to the assailants. The units were much broken and mixed, but the spirit of the individuals was excellent. The pressure continued, however, to be very great, and in the afternoon the line was once more pushed to the westwards. There was severe fighting between Bapaume and Sapignies, where mixed and disorganised units still held the Germans back, but in the late afternoon three distinct gaps had appeared in the line, one between the Seventh and Fifth Corps, one in the Fifth Corps itself in the Pozières area of the Sixty-third Division, and one between the Fifth and the Fourth Corps. Fortunately, the resistance had been so desperate that by the time the Germans had their opportunity they were always so bedraggled themselves that they could not take full advantage of it. The general order of divisions in this area, counting from the south of Contalmaison, was Seventeenth, Forty-seventh, Sixty-third, Second, upon the morning of March 25.

The Seventh Corps, the previous adventures of which will be described under the heading of the Fifth Army, had now become the right wing of the Third Army. It had been strengthened by the advent of the Thirty-fifth Division, and

this unit now covered from west of Curlu to east of Maricourt, where it touched the right of the Ninth Division—if the thin ranks of that gallant band can be dignified by so imposing a title. The Highlanders covered the front to Montauban, where they touched the First Cavalry Division, but beyond that the enemy were pouring round their flank at Bernafoy and Mametz Woods. It was under these trying conditions that the Twelfth Division was ordered up, about noon, to secure the left of the Seventh Corps and entirely stopped the dangerous gap.

Another had formed farther north. The Seventeenth Division, who were on the right of the Fifth Corps, held from Mametz to Contalmaison. Thence to Pozières was held by the Forty-seventh. A gap existed, however, upon their left, between them and the Sixty-third Division, who were gradually falling back upon Courcellette. The left of the Naval Division was also in the air, having lost touch with the right of the Second Division who were covering Le Sars. North of them the Nineteenth Division extended from the west of Grevillers to the south of Bihucourt. The 57th Brigade in the north, under the local command of Colonel Sole, fought a fine rearguard action as the enemy tried to debouch from Grevillers. Considering how terribly mauled this brigade had been a few days before, this was a really splendid performance of these brave Midlanders, and was repeated by them more than once during the day. From their left flank to the north stretched a new division, Braithwaite's Sixty-second, which had upheld the honour of Yorkshire so gloriously at Cambrai. Their line ran west of Sapignies and joined the Forty-second Division at the point where they touched the Sixth Corps, east of Ervillers.

The front of the Sixty-second stretched from Bucquoy to Puisieux. The enemy kept working round the right flank, and the situation there was very dangerous, for everything to the immediate south was in a state of flux, shreds and patches of units endeavouring to cover a considerable stretch of all-important country. South of Puisieux there was a gap of four or five miles before one came to British troops. Into this gap in the very nick of time came first the 4th Brigade of the Second Australian Division, and later the New Zealand Division in dribbles, which gradually spanned the vacant space. It was a very close call for a break through without opposition. Being disappointed in this the Germans upon March 26 spent the whole afternoon in fierce attacks upon the Sixty-second Division, but got little but hard knocks from Braithwaite's Yorkshiresmen. The 186th Brigade on the right threw back a flank to Rossignol Wood to cover the weak side.

Meanwhile the enemy had made a spirited attempt to push through between the Seventh Corps and the Fifth. With this design he attacked heavily, bending back the thin line of the Ninth Division, who were supported by the Twenty-first Division, numbering at this period 1500 men. At four in the afternoon the German stormers got into Maricourt, but they were thrust out again by the Thirty-fifth Division. They had better success farther north, where in the late evening they got round the left flank of the Forty-seventh Division and occupied Pozières. The Londoners threw out a defensive line to the north and awaited events, but the general position between the Fifth and Fourth Corps was serious, as the tendency was for the gap to increase, and for the Fourth Corps to swing north-west while the other turned to the south-west. The Twelfth Division was transferred therefore from the Seventh to the Fifth Corps, and was given a line on the west bank of the Ancre from Albert to Hamel. This move proved in the sequel to be a most effective one. In the evening of this day, March 25, the line from Bray to Albert exclusive was allotted to the Seventh Corps, which was directed to leave a covering party as long as possible on a line from the River Somme to Montauban, in order to safeguard the retirement of the Fifth Army. Then came the Twelfth Division covering Albert, then the remains of the Forty-seventh and of the Second from Thiepval to Beaumont Hamel, all moving across the Ancre. It is said that during the retreat from Moscow an officer having asked who were the occupants of a certain sledge, was answered: "The Royal Regiment of Dutch Guards." It is in a somewhat similar sense that all mentions of battalions, brigades, and divisions must be taken at this stage of the battle. The right of the Fourth Corps was threatened by an irruption of the enemy at Pys and Ires, who threatened to get by this route round the flank of the Sixty-second Division, but found the Twenty-fifth Division still had vitality enough left to form a defensive flank looking south. At the same time the Forty-second Division had been driven back west of Gomiecourt, and was out of touch with the right of the Sixth Corps. Things were still serious and the future dark. Where was the retreat to be stayed? Was it destined to roll back to Amiens or possibly to Abbeville beyond it? The sky had clouded, the days were mirk, the hanging Madonna had fallen from the cathedral of Albert, the troops were worn to shadows. The twilight of the gods seemed to have come.

It was at that very moment that the first light of victory began to dawn. It is true that the old worn divisions could hardly be said any longer to exist, but the new forces, the Yorkshiremen of the Sixty-second in the north, the New Zealanders and the Twelfth in the centre, and very particularly the three splendid divisions of Australians in the area just south of Albert, were the strong

buttresses of the dam which at last held up that raging tide. Never should our British Imperial troops forget the debt which they owed to Australia at that supreme hour of destiny. The very sight of those lithe, rakish dare-devils with their reckless, aggressive bearing, or their staid fresh-faced brethren with the red facings of New Zealand, was good for tired eyes. There was much still to be done before an equilibrium should be reached, but the rough outline of the permanent positions had even now, in those hours of darkness and danger, been traced across the German path. There was but one gap on the morning of March 26, which lay between Auchonvillers and Hebuterne, and into this the New Zealand Division and one brigade of the Second Australians were, as already stated, hurriedly sent, the New Zealanders supporting and eventually relieving the Second British Division, while the Australians relieved the Nineteenth. The line was attacked, but stood firm, and the New Zealanders actually recaptured Colincamps.

March 26.

The chief fighting both of this day and of the next fell upon Scott's Twelfth Division, which lay before Albert, and was occupying the western side of the railway line. So vital was the part played by the Twelfth in this quarter, and so strenuous their work, that a connected and more detailed account of it would perhaps not be out of place. The 37th Brigade was in the north-east of Mesnil and Aveluy Wood, the 36th in the centre, and the 35th on the west bank of the Ancre, with outposts to cover the crossings at Albert and Aveluy. The men were fresh and eager, but had only their rifles to trust to, for they had neither wire, bombs, rifle-grenades, Very lights, or signals, having been despatched at the shortest notice to the battle-field. Their orders were to hold their ground at all costs, and most valiantly they obeyed it. It is only when one sees a map of the German forces in this part of the field, with the divisions marked upon it like flies upon fly-paper, that one understands the odds against which these men had to contend. Nor was the efficiency of the enemy less than his numbers. "The Germans scouted forward in a very clever manner, making full use of the old chalk trenches," says an observer. In the north upon the evening of March 26 the enemy crept up to Mesnil, and after a long struggle with the 6th Queen's forced their way into the village. Shortly after midnight, however, some of the 6th Buffs and 6th West Kents, together with part of the Anson battalion from the Sixty-third Division, won back the village once more, taking twelve machine-guns and a number of prisoners. The other two brigades had not been attacked upon the 26th, but a very severe battle awaited them all upon March 27. It began by a

heavy shelling of Hamel in the morning, by which the garrison was driven out. The Germans then attacked southwards down the railway from Hamel, but were held up by the 6th West Kents. The pressure extended, however, to the 9th Royal Fusiliers of the 36th Brigade upon the right of the West Kents, who had a long, bitter struggle in which they were assisted by the 247th Field Company of the Royal Engineers and other elements of the 188th Brigade. This brigade, being already worn to a shadow, was withdrawn, while another shadow, the 5th Brigade, took its place, one of its battalions, the 24th Royal Fusiliers, fighting stoutly by the side of the West Kents. There was a time when the pressure was so great that all touch was lost between the two brigades; but the line was held during the whole of the day and night of the 27th and on into the 28th. At eleven o'clock in the morning of this day a new attack by fresh troops was made upon the West Kents and the 7th Sussex, and the men of Kent were at one time driven back, but with the aid of the 24th Royal Fusiliers the line was entirely re-established. The whole episode represented forty-eight hours of continual close combat until, upon March 29, this front was relieved by the Second Division. Apart from the heavy casualties endured by the enemy, this gain of time was invaluable at a crisis when every day meant a thickening of the British line of resistance.

Fourth and Fifth Corps. March 27.

The fight upon the right wing of the 36th Brigade had been equally violent and even more deadly. In the fight upon March 27, when the Royal West Kents and 9th Fusiliers were so hard pressed in the north, their comrades of the 5th Berks and 7th Sussex had been very heavily engaged in the south. The Germans, by a most determined advance, drove a wedge between the Berkshires and the Sussex, and another between the Sussex and the Fusiliers, but in each case the isolated bodies of men continued the desperate fight. The battle raged for a time round the battalion headquarters of the Sussex, where Colonel Impey, revolver in hand, turned the tide of fight like some leader of old. The losses were terrible, but the line shook itself clear of Germans, and though they attacked again upon the morning of March 28, they were again beaten off, and heavily shelled as they plodded in their sullen retreat up the hillside to La Boisselle.

Fourth and Fifth Corps. March 26.

Meanwhile, the 35th Brigade had also been fighting for its life to the south. Albert had fallen to the Germans, for it was no part of the plan of defence to hold the town itself, but the exits from it and the lines on each side of it were

jealously guarded. At 7 P.M. on March 26 the Germans were in the town, but they had practically reached their limit. Parties had crossed the Ancre, and there were attacked by the 7th Norfolks, who were supported in a long fight upon the morning of the 27th by the 9th Essex and the 5th Northants Pioneer Battalion. The line was held, partly by the aid given by the 51st Brigade of the Seventeenth Division, who numbered just 600 men and were led by Major Cubbon. Whilst the line was held outside Albert, the Germans in the town had a very deadly time, being fired at at short ranges by the 78th and 79th Brigades Royal Field Artillery. The 7th Suffolks were drawn into the infantry fight, which became a more and more desperate affair, involving every man who could be thrown into it, including two battalions, the 1st Artists and 10th Bedfords from the 190th Brigade of the Sixty-third Division. These latter units suffered very heavily from machine-gun fire before ever they reached the firing-line. At 8 A.M. upon March 28 the Germans were still pouring men through Albert, but were utterly unable to debouch upon the other side under the murderous fire of the British. A single company of the 9th Essex fired 15,000 rounds, and the whole slope which faced them was dotted with the German dead. The town of Albert formed a covered line of approach, and though the British guns were still pounding the buildings and the eastern approaches, the Germans were able to assemble in it during darkness and to form up unseen in great numbers for the attack. At ten in the morning of the 28th another desperate effort was made to get through and clear a path for all the hordes waiting behind. The British artillery smothered one attack, but a second broke over the 7th Norfolks and nearly submerged them. Both flanks were turned, and in spite of great work done by Captain Chalmers with his machine-guns the battalion was nearly surrounded. The losses were terrible, but the survivors formed up again half a mile to the west, where they were again attacked in the evening and again exposed to heavy casualties, including their commanding officer. Few battalions have endured more. Late that night the 10th West Yorkshires of the Seventeenth Division came to their relief. The whole of the Twelfth Division was now rested for a time, but they withdrew from their line in glory, for it is no exaggeration to say that they had fought the Germans to an absolute standstill.

We shall now return to March 26, a date which had been darkened by the capture of Albert. Apart from this success upon the German side, which brought them into a town which they had not held for years, the general line in this quarter began to assume the same outline as in 1916 before the Somme battle, so that Hebuterne and Auchonvillers north of Albert were in British hands, while Serre and Puisieux were once more German. The existence of the old trenches

had helped the weary army to hold this definite line, and as already shown it had received reinforcements which greatly stiffened its resistance. The dangerous gap which had yawned between the Fourth and Fifth Corps was now successfully filled. In the morning of March 27 all was solid once more in this direction. At eleven on that date, an inspiring order was sent along the line that the retreat was over and that the army must fight out the issue where it stood. It is the decisive call which the British soldier loves and never fails to obey. The line was still very attenuated in parts, however, and it was fated to swing and sway before it reached its final stability.

Fourth and Fifth Corps. March 27.

The fighting upon the front of the Sixty-second Division at Bucquoy upon March 27 was as heavy as on the front of the Twelfth to the south, and cost the Germans as much, for the Lewis guns had wonderful targets upon the endless grey waves which swept out of the east. The 5th West Ridings, east of Rossignol Wood, were heavily engaged, the Germans bombing their way very cleverly up the old trenches when they could no longer face the rifle-fire in the open. There were three separate strong attacks on Bucquoy, which covered the slopes with dead, but the persistent attempts to get round the right wing were more dangerous. These fell chiefly on the 2/4 Yorks Light Infantry between Rossignol Wood and Hebuterne, driving this battalion in. A dangerous gap then developed between the British and the Australians, but a strong counter-attack of the 5th Yorkshire Light Infantry after dark, with the Australians and four tanks co-operating, recovered nearly all the lost ground.

Fourth and Fifth Corps. March 28.

On March 28 there was again a very heavy attack upon the 186th Brigade. The stormers surged right up to the muzzles of the rifles, but never beyond them. Over 200 dead were found lying in front of one company. One isolated platoon of the 5th West Ridings was cut off and was killed to the last man. Farther to the right there were several determined attacks upon the 187th Brigade and the 4th Australian Brigade, the latter being under the orders of the Sixty-second Division. These also were repulsed in the open, but the bombing, in which the Germans had the advantage of a superiority of bombs, was more difficult to meet, and the 5th Yorkshire Light Infantry were driven from Rossignol Wood and the ground which they had so splendidly captured the night before.

About 11 A.M. on this day the Forty-first Division had been ordered up to

man the east of Gommecourt. A brigade of this division, the 124th, co-operated with the 8th West Yorkshires and some of the Australians in a fresh attack upon Rossignol Wood, which failed at first, but eventually, after dark, secured the north end of the wood, and greatly eased the local pressure. On March 29 and 30 the positions were safely held, and the attacks less dangerous. On the evening of the latter date the Sixty-second Division was relieved by the Thirty-seventh.

Whilst these events had occurred upon the front of the Sixty-second Division, Russell's New Zealanders were holding the line to the south in their usual workmanlike fashion. From March 26 they held up the Germans, whose main attacks, however, were north and south of them, though March 27 saw several local advances against the Canterburys and the Rifles. On March 30 the New Zealanders hit back again at La Signy Farm, with good results, taking 295 prisoners. It was a smart little victory at a time when the smallest victory was indeed precious.

Fourth and Fifth Corps. March 21.

Reverting now to the general situation upon March 27, the weak point was north and south of the Somme to the south of Albert. Between the river and Harbonnière the left wing of the Fifth Army had been broken, as will be told when we come to consider the operations in that area. The German advance was pouring down the line of the river with the same fierce rapidity with which it had recently thundered forward over the old Somme battle-fields. Having annihilated the local resistance on the left bank of the river, where Colonel Horn and 400 nondescripts did all that they could, they were pushing on from Cerisy to Corbie. General Watts of the Nineteenth Corps, whose defence was one of the outstanding features of the whole operations, was hard put to it to cover his left wing, so in loyal co-operation the Third Army north of the river detached the hard-worked Cavalry Corps, who were always called upon at moments of supreme crisis, and who never failed to answer the call. It was actually engaged to the north of the river at the time, but disengaged itself in part, though the enemy was holding Cerisy and Chipilly and had got a bridge across the river which would enable them to get to the rear of General Watts' Corps. The means by which this very dangerous German move was kept within bounds comes within the history of the Fifth Army. Suffice it to say that the cavalry passed over the river and that the Seventh Corps, north of the river, extended to cover the wider front, throwing out a defensive flank along the north bank from Sailly-le-Sec to Aubigny.

Along the whole line to the north the pressure was great all day upon March 27, but the attacks upon the Fourth Corps, which were particularly severe, were repulsed with great loss at Beaumont Hamel, Bucquoy, north of Puisieux, and at Ablainzeville. Near Bucquoy the Sixty-second Division in these two days repelled, as already narrated, eight separate German attacks. This fighting has to be fitted in with that recounted in the previous chapter near Alette, in connection with the Thirty-first Division, in order to get a complete view of the whole German effort and the unbroken British line. Hamel was the only fresh village to the north of Albert which was taken by the Germans that day.

Fourth and Fifth Corps. March 21.

March 28 was remarkable for the very desperate engagement upon the front of the Sixth and Seventeenth Corps, which has been already described, and which marked the limit of the whole German advance in the northern area. The Fourth Corps farther south had its own share of the fighting, however, as already told in connection with the defence of Bucquoy by the Sixty-second Division. The line was held, however, and save for a small strip of Rossignol Wood, no gain at all came to solace the Germans for very heavy losses.

All through these operations it is worthy of note that an important part was played by reorganised bodies of men, so mixed and broken that no name can be assigned to them. Officers stationed in the rear collected these stragglers, and led them back into gaps of the line, where their presence was sometimes of vital importance. A divisional general, speaking of these curious and irregular formations, says: "There was no panic of any kind. The men of all divisions were quite willing to halt and fight, but as the difficulty of orders reaching them made them uncertain as to their correct action, they came back slowly and in good order. Once they received some definite orders they fell into line and dug themselves in at once." At one point 4000 men were collected in this fashion.

In the Australian area the enemy occupied Dernancourt, but otherwise the whole line was intact. It was still necessary, however, to keep a defensive line thrown back along the north bank of the Somme, as the situation to the south, especially at Marcelcave, was very dangerous. Thus, the Seventh Corps covered this flank from Corbie to Saily, and then ran north to Treux on the Albert-Amiens Railway. The arrival of the cavalry to the south of the river had spliced the weak section, so that on the morning of March 29 the British commanders from north to south had every cause to be easier in their minds. An inactive day

was the best proof of the severity of the rebuff which the Germans had sustained the day before, nor were matters improved from their point of view when upon March 30 they attacked the Australians near Dernancourt and lost some thousands of men without a yard of gain, or when the New Zealanders countered them, with the capture of 250 prisoners and many machine-guns.

This small chronicle of huge events has now brought the southern half of the Third Army to the same date already reached in the previous chapter by the northern half. The narrative has by no means reached the limit of the fighting carried on by this portion of the line, but equilibrium has roughly been attained, and if the story be now continued it leaves too wide a gap for the reader to cross when he has to return to the history of the Fifth Army upon the 21st of March. Therefore we shall leave the Third Army for the time and only return to it when we have followed the resistance of the Fifth Army up to the same date.

Third Army. March 28.

Before starting upon this new epic, it would be well to remind the reader of the general bearing of the events already described, as it is very easy in attention to detail to lose sight of the larger issues. The experience of the Third Army then, put in its briefest form, was that the attack upon March 21 fell with terrific violence upon the two central corps, the Sixth and Fourth; that these, after a most valiant resistance, were forced to retire; that the strategical situation thus created caused the Seventeenth Corps in the north and the Fifth Corps in the south to fall back, and that both of them were then pressed by the enemy; that for six days the army fell slowly back, fighting continual rearguard actions against superior numbers; that this movement involved only a short retreat in the north, but a longer one in the south, until in the Albert region it reached its maximum; that finally the Germans made a determined effort upon March 28 to break the supple and resilient line which had always faced them, and that this attempt, most gallantly urged, involved the Corps in the north as well as the whole line of the Third Army. The result of this great battle was a bloody defeat for the Germans, especially in the northern sector, where they made hardly any gain of ground and lost such vast numbers of men that their whole enterprise was brought to a complete standstill and was never again resumed in that quarter.

The losses of the Third Army during that week of desperate fighting when, in spite of the heroic efforts of the Medical Corps, the wounded had frequently to be abandoned, and when it was often impossible to get the guns away intact,

were very severe. Many divisions which numbered their 9000 infantry upon March 21 could not put 1500 in the line upon March 28. These losses were not, however, so great as they might appear, since the constant movement of troops, carried on very often in pitch darkness, made it impossible to keep the men together. An official estimate taken at the time and subject to subsequent revision put the loss of guns at 206, only 23 of which were above the 6-inch calibre. Forty-three others were destroyed. The casualties in the Third Army during the period under review might be placed approximately at 70,000, divided into 10,000 killed, 25,000 missing, and 35,000 wounded. The heaviest losses were in the Fifty-ninth Division, which gave 5765 as its appalling total, but the Sixth Division was little behind it, and the Forty-second, Forty-seventh, and Fifty-first were all over 4000. The Thirty-fifth Division had also a most honourable record, enduring very heavy losses in which the numbers of missing were comparatively small. Its work, however, was chiefly done at a later date than that which closes this chapter. In the estimate of losses there has to be included practically the whole personnel of the devoted battalions who held the forward line upon the first day of the German attack. In connection with the large number of stragglers, who were afterwards gathered together and showed by their conduct that they had no want of stomach for the fight, it is to be remembered that the men had been accustomed to the narrow routine of trench operations, that most of them had no idea of open warfare, and that when they found themselves amidst swift evolutions over difficult country, carried on frequently in darkness, it was very natural that they should lose their units and join the throng who wandered down the main roads and were eventually rounded up and formed into formations at the river crossings or other places where they could be headed off. Among the casualties were many senior officers, including General Bailey of the 142nd Brigade.

CHAPTER IV

THE SECOND BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Attack upon the Fifth Army. March 21.

The Fifth Army front—The story of a Redoubt—Attack upon Congreve's Seventh Corps—Upon Watts' Nineteenth Corps—Upon Maxse's Eighteenth Corps—Upon Butler's Third Corps—Terrific pressure—Beginning of the Retreat—Losses of Guns.

Fifth Army. March 21.

In dealing with the German attack upon the Fifth Army, the first point which should be emphasised is, that heavy as the fighting was in the north, still it was this southern advance which was the main one. The official account of the disposition of the German forces brings this fact out very clearly. From the Sensée River to the Bapaume-Cambrai Road they are stated to have had nine divisions in line and eight in close reserve, covering a front of nine miles. In the eight miles from Cambrai Road to La Vacquerie they had four divisions. In the southern area from La Vacquerie down to La Fère they had twenty-three divisions in the line and seventeen in reserve, covering a front of over forty miles. This front was defended by eleven British divisions, with three divisions of infantry and three of cavalry in reserve. So far as infantry was concerned the odds were 40 to 14, while the German guns numbered about 3500 to 1300 on the British line. These odds were serious enough if directed equally along the whole area, but when thrown in on special sectors they became more crushing. To add to the total picture of German strength, it should be added that twenty-five fresh divisions were thrown into the fight during the first week, nine upon the Scarpe front, three between the Ancre and the Somme, seven between the Somme and Montdidier, and six between Montdidier and the Oise. Against these have to be set British reinforcements, and the influx of French from the south. It was only on the first five days of battle that the odds were so overpoweringly with the Germans.

In this chapter we shall endeavour to gain a superficial view of the general course of events upon the whole front of the Fifth Army upon the fateful March 21. We shall then be in a position to appreciate the situation as it was in the evening and to understand those decisions on the part of General Gough and his subordinates which influenced the subsequent operations.

The front of the Fifth Army extended from its junction with the Third Army in the neighbourhood of La Vacquerie to Barisis, a village some miles south of the Oise, the total frontage being nearly forty miles. This was occupied by four corps. The northern was the Seventh, under General Congreve, a well-known soldier, whose V.C. and shattered arm proclaimed his past services to the Empire. This corps covered the southern part of the dangerous Cambrai salient and extended to the region of Ronssoy. From this point to Maissemy the line was held by General Watts with the Nineteenth Corps. Upon his right, extending as far as north of Essigny, was General Maxse with the Eighteenth Corps. From thence to Barisis lay the Third Corps under General Butler. All four were soldiers of wide experience, their leader, General Gough, had never failed in any task to which he had laid his hand, and the troops in the line comprised some of the flower of the British army, so that in spite of all disparity of numbers there was a reasonable hope for success. Arrangements had been made by which the French or British could send lateral help to each other; but it must be admitted that the liaison work proved to be defective, and that the succours were slower in arriving, and less equipped for immediate action, than had been expected.

The fortifications along the front of the Fifth Army were of various degrees of strength, depending upon the nature of the ground and upon the time that it had been in British possession, the north being stronger than the south. The Oise, which had been looked upon as an obstacle, and the presence of which had seemed to justify the extraordinarily long sector held by the Third Corps, had to some extent dried up and had ceased to be a real protection. In the main, the defences consisted of a forward line, a chain of small redoubts, each with four machine-guns and all connected by posts; a battle-line which was strongly wired and lay about 3000 yards behind the forward line; and a rear zone, the fortifications of which were not complete. If anything were wanting in the depth of the defences it has to be remembered that we are speaking of a vast tract of country, and that to dig a serviceable trench from London, we will say, to Guildford, furnishing it with sand-bags and wire, is a mighty task. There were no enslaved populations who could be turned on to such work. For months before the attack the troops, aided by the cavalry and by several special entrenching battalions, were digging incessantly. Indeed, the remark has been made that their military efficiency was impaired by the constant navvy work upon which they were employed. There is no room for criticism upon this point, for everything possible was done, even in that southern sector which had only been a few weeks in British possession.

Before beginning to follow the history of March 21, it would be well to describe the position and number of the reserves, as the course of events depended very much upon this factor. Many experienced soldiers were of opinion that if they had been appreciably more numerous, and considerably nearer the line, the positions could have been made good. The three infantry divisions in question were the Thirty-ninth, which was immediately behind the Seventh Corps, the Twentieth, which was in the neighbourhood of Ham, and was allotted to the Eighteenth Corps, and the Fiftieth, which was in general army reserve, and about seven hours' march from the line. The First Cavalry Division was in the rear of the Nineteenth Corps, while the Second Cavalry Division was on the right behind the Third Corps. The Third Cavalry Division was in billets upon the Somme, and it also was sent to the help of the Third Corps. Besides these troops the nearest supports were at a distance of at least three days' journey, and consisted of a single unit, the Eighth Division.

The German preparations for the attack had not been unobserved and it was fully expected upon the morning of the battle, but what was not either expected or desired was the ground mist, which seems to have been heavier in the southern than in the northern portion of the line. So dense was it that during the critical hours when the Germans were pouring across No Man's Land it was not possible to see for more than twenty yards, and the whole scheme of the forward defence, depending as it did upon machine-guns, placed in depth and sweeping every approach, was completely neutralised by this freak of nature, which could not have been anticipated, for it was the first time such a thing had occurred for two months. Apart from the machine-guns, a number of isolated field-guns had been sown here and there along the front, where they had lurked in silence for many weeks waiting for their time to come. These also were rendered useless by the weather, and had no protection from the German advance, which overran and submerged them.

The devastating bombardment broke out along the line about five o'clock, and shortly after ten it was known that the German infantry had advanced and had invaded the whole of the forward zone, taking a few of the redoubts, but in most cases simply passing them in the fog, and pushing on to the main British line. As it is impossible to give the experiences of each redoubt in detail, the story of one may be told as being fairly typical of the rest. This particular one is chosen because some facts are available, whereas in most of them a deadly silence, more eloquent than words, covers their fate. The Enghien redoubt was held by Colonel Wetherall with a company of the 2/4 Oxford and Bucks Light

Infantry upon the front of the Sixty-first Division. The redoubt formed the battalion headquarters, and was connected to brigade headquarters by a cable buried eight feet deep. In front were two companies of the battalion in the outpost line; behind was the fourth company ready for counter-attack. Early in the morning heavy trench-mortar fire was raining bombs upon the redoubt, and the wire was flying in all directions. At 6 the redoubt was so full of gas that even the masks could not hold it out, so the men were ordered below and put up gas blankets to fend it off. This could be safely done, as when gas is so thick it is not possible for the stormers to advance. At 6.15, what with fog and gas and blurred respirators, it was hardly possible to see anything at all. At 7.30 the gas cleared and there was a shower of high explosive shells with shattering effect. At 9.30 the barrage lifted and the garrison rushed up from their shelters and manned their posts, but the fog rolled white and thick across their vision. The cloud banked right up to their wire, while from behind it came all the noises of the pit. So nerve-shaking was the effect that some of the outlying men came creeping into the redoubt for human company. At 9.40 the whizzing of bullets all around showed that the infantry was on the move. The garrison fired back into the mist, whence came vague shoutings and tramlings. A request was cabled back for a protective barrage, but the inadequate reply showed that the British guns had suffered in the shelling. Suddenly the mist darkened at one point; it broke into running figures, and a wave of men rushed forward, scrambled through the broken wire, and clambered into the redoubt. The Oxfords rushed across and bombed them back into the mist again. There was a pause, during which the attack was reorganised, and then at 11 o'clock the German stormers poured suddenly in from three sides at once. The garrison stood to it stoutly and drove them out, leaving many bodies on the broken wire. The fort was now entirely surrounded, and there was a fresh attack from the rear which added fifty or sixty more to the German losses. At 11.45 there was some lifting of the fog, and Colonel Wetherall endeavoured to get across to the village, 300 yards behind him, to see if help could be obtained. He found it deserted. Stealing back to his fort he was covered suddenly by German rifles, was dragged away as a prisoner, but finally, late in the evening, escaped and rejoined the main body of his own battalion. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Cunningham had taken over the defence of Enghien redoubt, assisted by Lieutenant Richards with the machine-guns. Hour after hour fresh attacks were repelled, but showers of bombs fell in the confined space, and the garrison were continually thinned out. Despairing messages—"What shall we do? What shall we do?"—were sent back over the cable, but nothing could be done, for these outliers are the *enfants perdus* of the army, marked from the first for destruction. Finally, at 4.30, the great deep all around

them sent one heavy wave to submerge them, and the cable was for ever silent.

Such is the typical history of a redoubt. Some succumbed more readily, some survived until the afternoon of the next day; but the difference may sometimes have depended upon the various degrees of severity of attack, which was by no means the same upon all sectors. The total effect was the complete destruction of the eleven gallant battalions which held the advanced line of the Fifth Army, and the loss of all material therein. One can but hope that the enemy paid a full price. Occasionally a sudden rise of the mist gave the defence a splendid opening for their machine-guns. On one occasion such a chance exposed a German officer standing with a large map in his hand within thirty yards of the fort, his company awaiting his directions beside him. Few of them escaped.

Seventh Corps. March 21.

We shall now follow the line of the Fifth Army from the north. The Seventh Corps upon the left consisted of the Ninth (Tudor), the Twenty-first (Campbell), and the Sixteenth (Hull) Divisions in the order named, and it carried the line down as far as Ronssoy, where it joined on to Watts' Nineteenth Corps. The Ninth Division had two brigades in the line, and all the battalions both of the Twenty-sixth and of the South Africans were in the forward zone and exposed to the usual devastating losses. Their front joined that of the Forty-seventh Division at Fifteen Ravine in the north, and the Twenty-first at Chapel Hill in the south. About eleven o'clock the main advance of the Germans struck up against this front. There was no action upon the left between Gauche Wood and the canal, though the bombardment was exceedingly heavy. On the right in the neighbourhood of Gauche Wood the fighting was very severe all day, and the stormers were able to make little progress, although they attacked again and again with the utmost resolution. This attack fell mainly upon the South African Brigade, who held on with the same firm courage which they had shown at Delville Wood, and proved once more that there are no better soldiers in all the vast army of the Empire. It was only at this point, however, near the junction with the Twenty-first Division that the Ninth Division was attacked, for the German infantry was crushed by the artillery fire upon the left in front of Gonnellieu, so that the total losses of the Ninth upon this murderous day were probably less than those of other divisions in the Fifth Army. Gauche Wood was continually attacked, but the Quentin redoubt to the immediate north of it was left alone during the whole day. It was the 2nd or Natal South African regiment which held the extreme front, and after a very fine resistance they were driven

through the wood, until at 11.30 the Germans held it all, but the Africans still clung to the system of Chapel trenches to the immediate west and south of it. To this they held all day, being much helped by a local rise in the mist about eleven, which enabled the guns in Quentin redoubt to see their targets in the south. Finally, the Germans were compelled to dig in in Gauche Wood, and give up the attempt to get farther. No other point was gained upon the Ninth Divisional front. Meanwhile, the enemy had pressed their attack with great violence upon the immediate right, where it fell with special strength upon the 2nd Lincolns of the Twenty-first Division. At 12 they were well behind the right rear of the Africans, who were compelled to throw back a flank. The Lincolns held on splendidly, however, and the danger was arrested. At 3.30 a new concentration of the enemy developed in front of Vaucelette Farm, and was heavily shelled by the British guns. At 5 o'clock the fight was very desperate upon Chapel Hill on the southern limit of the South African area, where the Lincolns were still holding out but were being gradually pressed back. The 4th South African Regiment (South African Scots) was therefore ordered to counter-attack in this direction, which was done with great dash, the position upon Chapel Hill being re-established. Such was the general situation when at 8.15 orders were issued for the withdrawal of all units to the rear zone. This was done during the night, the general line of retirement being towards Sorel and Heudicourt, while the Scottish Brigade kept position upon the left. The order to retire came as a complete surprise, as all was well upon the immediate front, but the reason given was the penetration of the line at other points.

Upon the right of the Scots and South Africans of the Ninth Division the line was held by Campbell's Twenty-first Division, consisting of the Leicester Brigade and two brigades of North Country troops, all of them the veterans of many battles. They covered the ground from south of Gauche Wood in the north to Epehy in the south. Two brigades were in the line, the 62nd in the north and the 110th in the south, and were exposed all day to a very severe attack which they held up with great steadiness and resolution. Heudicourt, Peizière, and Epehy were the scenes of particularly severe fighting. In the evening these places, and the whole line through Quentin Ridge and east of Gouzeaucourt, were still firmly held by the defenders. It may truly be said that along the whole fifty-mile front of battle there was no point where the enemy met with a more unyielding resistance than in the area of the Twenty-first Division. During the long day three German divisions essayed the task of forcing Epehy and overcoming the defence of Chapel Hill, but as the night drew in all three lay exhausted in front of their objectives, and there would certainly have been no

British retirement had it not been for the movements in the other sections of the line. Only at one post had the enemy made any lodgment, namely at Vaucelette Farm, and here he could have been thrown out by a counter-attack had the general situation permitted it. The Leicesters and the Northumberland Fusiliers upheld the fame of their historic regiments on this day of battle, but two of the outstanding exploits in the fight lie to the credit of the Lincolns, who kept an iron grip upon Chapel Hill, and to the 15th Durhams, who made a dashing counter-attack which swept back the German advance when it tried to penetrate between Epehy and Chapel Hill. The village of Peizière was held by the 7th Leicesters of the 110th Brigade, who fought as this brigade has always fought and held the Germans out. Once with the help of flame-throwers they gained a lodgment among the houses, but the brave Midlanders came back to it and threw them out once more. It was a party of this same Leicester regiment which held the farm of Vaucelette, and fought it out to the very last man before they suffered it to pass from their keeping.

The fighting upon Chapel Hill was particularly severe, and was the more important as this eminence, lying almost upon the divisional boundary, enfiladed the Ninth Division to the north. There was a trench in front of the hill, called Cavalry Trench, and a farm behind called Revelon Farm, and the battle swung and swayed all day, sometimes the British holding all the ground, and sometimes being pushed back as far as the farm. The 1st Lincolns gained great honour that day, but they could not have held the hill were it not for the co-operation of the South Africans, who twice helped to retake it when it had been temporarily lost. The 11th Royal Scots from the Ninth Division Reserve Brigade struck in also with effect when the enemy filtered round the north edge of the hill and worked to the rear of it. They had got as far as Genin Copse when the Royal Scots attacked and hunted them back once more. The weak point of the Twenty-first Division lay upon their right where they had to throw out a defensive flank 3000 yards deep. They had not troops enough to cover this ground, and it was only the splendid work of the batteries of the 94th Brigade R.F.A. which prevented a disaster.

The Sixteenth Irish Division (Hull) lay upon the right of the Twenty-first Division, carrying the line to the south of Ronssoy. This division had two brigades in the line, the 48th to the left and the 49th to the right, and it appears to have sustained an attack which was of a peculiarly crushing nature. It cannot be denied that the wretched parochial politics which tear Ireland in two, and which are urged with such Celtic extravagance of language, cannot have a steady

effect upon national troops, but none the less every soldier will admit that the men who carried Guillemont and breasted the slope of the Messines Ridge have proved themselves to be capable of rising to the highest exercise of military virtue. If, therefore, they gave way upon this occasion while others stood, the reason is to be sought rather in the extra severity of the attack, which had the same crushing effect upon other divisions both in the north and in the south of the line. All these brigades were desperately engaged during the day, as was the 116th Brigade of the Thirty-ninth Division which came to the help of the Irish, while the other two brigades of this supporting division endeavoured to strengthen the line of defence in the rear zone with a switch line from Saulcourt to Tincourt Wood. On the right the attack was too severe to be withstood, and not only the advance line but the battle position also was deeply penetrated, the Germans pouring in a torrent down the Catelet valley and occupying Ronssoy and Lempire, by which they turned the flanks both of the Twenty-first in the north and of the Sixty-sixth Division in the south. Especially fierce was the resistance offered by the 48th Brigade in the north, some units of which were swung round until they found themselves sharing with the Twenty-first Division in the defence of Epehy. The 2nd Munsters lived up to their high reputation during a long day of hard fighting, and were for the third or fourth time in the war practically destroyed. Colonel Ireland was hit about 10.30 in the morning, and one company, which counter-attacked near Malassise Farm, was annihilated in the effort; but the survivors of the battalion were undismayed, and under Major Hartigan they continued to oppose every effort of the stormers. One of the features of the battle in this area was the fight maintained all day by C Company scattered in little parties over Ridge Reserve and Tetard Wood. Lieutenant Whelan was the soul of this fine defence, contesting every bay of his trench, and continuing to rally and lead his dwindling band until noon of the next day. A road ran past this position, and it was all-important for the enemy to move their artillery down it in order to press the retreat; but the Irishmen shot down the horse teams as they came until the passage was blocked with their bodies. Finally, all the scattered bands rallied near Epehy village, where, under Captain Chandler, who was killed in the contest, they fought to the last, until in the late evening their cartridges gave out, and the gallant Hartigan, with the headquarter staff of the battalion, was overwhelmed. Lieutenant Whelan, meanwhile, held his post near Epehy until noon of March 22, when he and his men fired their last round and threw their last bomb before surrender. The defence of Malassise Farm by Lieutenant Kidd and his men was also a glorious bit of fighting to the last man and the last cartridge.

The general situation upon the front of the Seventh Corps on the night of March 21 was that the Sixteenth Division, reinforced by the 116th Brigade, held the main battle positions, save on the extreme right, as far north as St. Emilie. Thence the line followed approximately the railway round and east of Epehy, in the region of the Twenty-first Division. East of Chapel Hill and Chapel Crossing it entered the holding of the Ninth Division, and passed west of Gauche Wood, through Quentin redoubt and so to the original line. Behind this indented position the 118th and 117th Brigades with the Sappers and Pioneers of the Thirty-ninth Division were hard at work upon the switch line, which should form a cover for retreat or a basis for reorganisation.

Nineteenth Corps. March 21.

Upon the right of the Seventh Corps lay Watts' Nineteenth Corps, which had two divisions in the line, the Sixty-sixth Lancashire Territorial Division (Malcolm) in the north, and the Twenty-fourth Division (Daly) in the south. They covered a front from south of Ronssoy to south of Maissemy. The Lancashire Division, the same which behaved so splendidly in the mud battle of Broodseinde, had all three brigades in the front, covering 4000 yards, and were exposed all day to a most terrific assault. From the north they were in the order 197th, 199th, 198th. To the south of them an even more strenuous attack was launched upon the Twenty-fourth Division, which had two brigades in the line. These were the 17th upon the left and the 72nd upon the right, with the 1st North Staffords, 8th West Kents, 1st Rifle Brigade, and 8th Queen's in front. About 11 o'clock the news came that the enemy was pushing through at the point of junction with the Eighteenth Corps upon the right, where there seems to have been a gap of some hundreds of yards between divisions, and later that they had penetrated into the village of Hargicourt in the rear of the Sixty-sixth Division. There was heavy fighting all day, and by evening the whole forward zone held by the 2/3 Lancs Fusiliers, East Lancashires, and Manchesters had passed into the hands of the enemy, Colonel Stokes-Roberts of the former battalion being among the casualties. The twelve redoubts which constituted the main defences of the battle zone held out stoutly all day, all three brigades fighting with great valour. The Germans were continually pushing in, however, upon the right of the Twenty-fourth Division and enlarging their gains in that direction, so that the First Cavalry Division was called up, and the Pioneer Battalion of the 2nd Cavalry Brigade was thrown in on the right of the Sixty-sixth Division near Roisel to form a defensive flank. By 1 o'clock the battle zone of the Twenty-fourth Division was seriously compromised. The 72nd Brigade upon the right

had been turned and the village of Maissemy had been taken by the Germans. Stone's 17th Brigade kept a tight grip, however, upon the hamlet of Le Verguier, and though many assaults were made upon it the place remained untaken in the evening. In the area of the Sixty-sixth Division the enemy was still gaining ground, however, and they had pushed on from Hargicourt to Templeux, where a counter-attack by the 6th Lancashire Fusiliers held them for a time. The fighting continued to be very bitter until late in the evening, for though the Germans had infiltrated all the ground between the redoubts, they were unable to overcome their resistance, or to take possession of their gains. At 10.15 the order from General Watts was that there should be no retreat, and that however great the odds against them—and it was manifest that they were indeed very great—the two divisions should prepare for a fight to a finish. Meanwhile, the Fiftieth Division (Stockley) in army reserve had been ordered, after a march of seven hours, to support the line of the Nineteenth Corps, taking up a position in the rear from the Omignon River to the Cologne River, upon a front which had been partly wired. With the early morning of March 22 there came a renewed German attack which forced back the left of the Sixty-sixth, who were always much handicapped by the deep incursion the enemy had made into the area of the Sixteenth Division to the north, which continually endangered their flank and even their rear. The battle was soon general along the whole front, and everywhere the resistance was most desperate, though the troops were gradually pressed back by the ever-increasing weight of the attack as Hindenburg's legions came rolling in from the east. Many a bitter curse went up that day from overwrought men against the perjured traitors on the Russian front, who to ease their own burden had thrown a double weight upon those who had helped and trusted them. At 11.30 in the morning the post of Le Verguier, which had been held so long and so gallantly by the 8th West Surreys, was at last carried by storm and its brave garrison destroyed or taken, though Colonel Peirs, who had been the soul of this defence, dashed out, revolver in hand, at this last moment, and got away in the mist. The whole line of the Twenty-fourth Division was shaken by the gap thus created. The pressure was very great also at Roisel, and the 151st Brigade from the Fiftieth Division had to be hurried up in order to hold back the advance down the valley of the Cologne, which would have turned the right flank of the Lancashire men to the north. The 9th Sussex was heavily engaged in this quarter and suffered severely. About noon a valiant attempt was also made by some tanks and dismounted troopers to turn the tide by recapturing the village of Hervilly, which had some temporary success. The German penetration had been too deep, however, and there was very pressing danger of isolation unless the corps fell back. This they did in the late afternoon and

evening, passing through the ranks of the Fiftieth Division behind them. "They were nearly all gassed and dead weary," said one who observed them as they passed. The 11th Hussars and 19th Entrenching Battalion most gallantly covered the retreat. The enemy were close at their heels, however, in great force and most aggressive mood, as the Fiftieth Division soon discovered. This unit will be remembered as the famous Yorkshire Territorial division who helped to turn the tide at the second battle of Ypres, and have shown their worth upon many fields; but on this occasion the odds were too heavy, though they held the enemy for the rest of the day. The lower half of the line between the Omignon and the Cologne rivers was held by Riddell's 149th Brigade of Northumberland Fusiliers, while the northern half was held by Rees' 150th Brigade, of Yorkshiremen. Against this thin wall dashed the full tide of the German advance as it swept on in the wake of the Nineteenth Corps. It was a long and hard fight in which the enemy had heavy losses, especially in front of Pœuilly, where considerable sheets of wire lay in front of the position of the 6th Northumberland Fusiliers. It was a most gallant affair—gallant on both sides. Their Colonel, Robinson, laid out his machine-guns in the long grass upon each side of this wire and enfiladed the German line with most murderous results. In the south the 4th Northumberland Fusiliers were attacked in front and on the right flank, and the pressure was so great that they had to abandon Caulaincourt, which was then recaptured and again abandoned by the 6th Northumberland Fusiliers from the supporting line. The enemy, with his usual wile, telephoned from the mausoleum, a central building, that reinforcements be sent to that point. Upon asking the name of the officer and getting no reply, General Riddell, in local command, turned on five batteries of 18-pounders and blew the mausoleum to pieces. At Pœuilly also there had been two successful counter-attacks, but the enemy was swarming round the southern flank in great numbers, and the river, which is not more formidable than an average South of England trout stream, was of little use as a protection. An important point named Nobescourt Farm, lying near the junction of brigades, had fallen into the hands of the enemy, and the village of Pœuilly was also taken. By evening the Fiftieth Division had done its work, however, as it had held up the pursuit and enabled the Nineteenth Corps to reach the line of the Somme without severe pressure. That night they received orders to withdraw, which were carried out in the morning of March 23, Martin's 149th Brigade in the south making a show of fighting in order to cover the movements of their companions in the north who were moving over a perfectly flat plain from Mons to Brie. Finally, General Riddell destroyed Tertry bridge and dropped back to St. Christ. During all these operations the German infantry were moving slowly forward in successive lines of skirmishers, about a thousand

yards from the British, who retired in leisurely fashion, continually turning and holding them up, so that the whole spectacle was exactly that of a well-ordered field-day. When the main body had reached the bridges, a single company of the 5th Northumberland Fusiliers lay out in the higher ground, under the leadership of Captain Proctor, who received the D.S.O. for his able conduct of the operation. This company held up a brigade for two hours, and then, their comrades being safely across, they withdrew in their turn, leaving half their number behind them. Every one being across, both the St. Christ and Brie bridges were blown up. The latter was a brand-new construction and was in charge of an American officer of engineers who distinguished himself by his cool courage, starting out alone, and bringing across the river a train full of ammunition which lay upon the farther side. The Twenty-fourth Division had crossed at Falvy, the rearguard action being fought by the depleted battalions of the 72nd Brigade. Colonel Pope of the 1st North Staffords, Colonel Charlton of the 4th Yorks, and Colonel Le Fleming of the 9th East Surreys were among those who had fallen.

Nineteenth Corps. March 23.

The Nineteenth Corps was now covering a total front of 20,000 yards along the western bank of the stream, which is shallow and marshy in these reaches. Their line was from Rouy-le-Crane in the south to near Peronne, with some small outposts to the east of the river. The Eighth Division (Heneker) had come up on the morning of March 23, and occupied the southern end of the line, with the remains of the Twenty-fourth, the Sixty-sixth, and the Fiftieth extending to the north. There we shall leave them while we return to the history of the front line upon March 21.

Eighteenth Corps. March 21.

On the right of the Nineteenth Corps was Maxse's Eighteenth Corps covering the ground from the Omignon valley to a point just west of St. Quentin, with three divisions in the line. These were the Sixty-first on the left, the Thirtieth in the centre, and the Thirty-sixth in the south. The Sixty-first Division, under General Colin Mackenzie, was one of those fine second-line Territorial units which have done so well in the later stages of the war. All three brigades were in the line, the 183rd Brigade of Scottish troops in the north, the 184th in the centre, and the 182nd in the south, both of the last being from the South Midlands. The 2/4th Oxforas, 2/5th Gordons, and 2/8th Worcesters were the devoted battalions which held the forward line, and so fierce was their defence

that the battle-line was able to maintain itself along the whole divisional front, in spite of very valiant efforts upon the part of the German stormers, who showed absolute contempt of death in their efforts to cut the wire at those points where their artillery had failed to do so. The story of the Enghien redoubt and its devoted defence has already been told, but belongs to the record of this division. The battle zone ran in the main along the eastern edge of the Bois d'Holnon, and this was desperately defended from morning to night. In the afternoon the high ground south of Maissemy, in the left rear of the division and outside their area, had been captured, and the 2/4th Berkshires endeavoured to help the Twenty-fourth Division in their counter-attack. The Berkshires lost heavily in this venture, and their gallant Colonel, Dimmer, who had won the V.C. in the early days of the war, was shot through the head leading his men on horseback to the very lip of a trench full of Germans. Horse and groom fell before the same volley. The Sixty-first resumed its line after this action in the north, and it maintained it intact until evening, the three divisions of the German attack being practically held up by the three heroic battalions in the front line, so that the full weight of attack never reached the main line. It was as solidly established in the evening as in the morning. The position of the enemy on their left rear had become more and more menacing, as after taking Maissemy they had pressed on to Villescholes. This led to dangerous attacks from the north on the early morning of March 22, in the course of which the 183rd Brigade had to fight desperately to preserve the flank of the division. The weight of this fighting fell chiefly upon the 8th Argyll and Sutherlands, who counter-attacked most valiantly, aided by the remains of the gallant 2/4 Berkshire's, who had suffered so severely the day before. Colonel M'Alpine Downie of the Argylls was wounded, and died next day. Even when the enemy had got as far westward as Vermand, the Sixty-first Division was still rooted to its ground, and the Highlanders on the left flank recovered by a spirited advance nine guns which had been overrun by the German advance between Maissemy and Villescholes. The 9th Royal Scots extended their line to the westward, and facing north presented an unbroken front to the constant hordes of Germans who were moving down the northern slopes of the Omignon valley in the direction of Caulaincourt. It was not until late in the afternoon of March 22 that the Sixty-first Division retired, still fighting, to a prepared position north of Vaux.

Eighteenth Corps. March 22.

Next to the Sixty-first Division was the Thirtieth under General Williams. This division had two brigades—the 21st (Goodman) and the 90th (Poyntz)—in

the line, the latter officer being known to all sportsmen as the famous Somerset batsman. The front of 4000 yards was from the immediate west of St. Quentin to the Somme, and included two notable strong points, Manchester Hill and the Epine du Dullon. The 89th Brigade under General Stanley was in the immediate rear. It was not used as a unit during the day, but the three fine battalions of the King's Liverpool Regiment, the 17th, 18th, and 19th, were dispersed in the evening to reinforce three separate units.

The fighting along the front of the Thirtieth Division was of a very desperate character. The forward battalions were the 2nd Wilts and the 16th Manchesters. Rushing through the gaps in their line of defence, the Germans flung themselves upon the battle zone, where after long fighting which lasted into the afternoon they gained possession of the two posts already mentioned, and worked into the main battle-line at Savy. Both brigades lost very heavily during these attacks, but the addition of the 18th and 19th King's from Stanley's brigade helped them to carry on under most trying conditions. Both these reinforcing battalions came in for severe fighting in the evening, and the 18th King's, which joined in a counter-attack by the 21st Brigade, was particularly hard hit, while the 19th had hardly an officer left, the colonel falling at the head of his men. As a final result of the day's battle both the brigades were somewhat driven in upon the front, but each held its line and was ready to renew the battle next morning. The 2nd Bedfords particularly distinguished themselves during this day of incessant fighting, making no less than six successful counter-attacks in order to clear their sector when it was partly occupied by the Germans. Up to 4 o'clock in the afternoon of March 22 the Thirtieth were still firm in their positions, and it was only the general situation of the Army which finally compelled them to abandon them. They dropped back upon the general line of Ham, where the three scattered battalions of the 89th Brigade had been ordered to form one unit once more. Of the Manchester men in the front rank upon the day of battle hardly a man ever got away, and their splendid Colonel Elstob lay dead with the greater part of his battalion around him. He had said: "The Manchesters will defend Manchester Hill to the last," and he lived and died true to his word. A superior officer reporting upon this episode said: "At about 11 o'clock Colonel Elstob informed me that the Germans had broken through and were swarming round the redoubt. At about 2 P.M. he said that most of his men were killed or wounded, including himself; that they were all getting dead beat, that the Germans had got into the redoubt and hand-to-hand fighting was going on. He was still quite cheery. At 3.30 he was spoken to on the telephone and said very few were left and that the end was nearly come. After that no further answer could be got."

On the right of the Thirtieth Lancashire Division was the Thirty-sixth Ulster Division under the command of General Nugent, one of the many good soldiers who were trained by South Africa for this greater ordeal. That scrambling and difficult campaign has, though its lessons were most imperfectly apprehended, proved to be an invaluable preparation for the leaders in the world's war of the future. The Ulster division had all three brigades in the line, the 109th (Ricardo) to the north, the 107th (Witteycombe) in the centre, and the 108th (Griffiths) in the south. The three outlying battalions were the 12th and 15th Irish Rifles and the 2nd Inniskilling Fusiliers, which suffered the common fate of all who held that post of danger. Not a man returned, save a few of the Irish Rifles, who swam down the canal that night.

Eighteenth Corps. March 21.

The front held by the Ulstermen was from the Somme on the left to the neighbourhood of Urvillers on the right, a distance of 6000 yards. Three German divisions attacked upon this frontage, but the edge of their onslaught was blunted by the splendid resistance of the three doomed battalions in the van. None the less, it surged with great violence all along the edge of the battle zone, but it was everywhere held save only at the hamlet of Contescourt, where the Germans obtained a lodgment. The whole defence of the division was imperilled, however, by the fact that the Germans had bitten deeply into the British line to the south of the 108th Brigade, getting as far as Essigny on their right rear, with the effect that a deep defensive flank had to be thrown back in this direction, which used up all the reserves of the division. Thus, when the Germans late that day and in the following morning pressed their advantage at Contescourt, and were stopped by the magnificent resistance of the 1st Inniskilling Fusiliers at the neighbouring village of Fontairie-les-Clercs, they should have been permanently held, as they were driven back in twelve successive attacks. As there were no reserves available for a counter-attack, however, the defence was gradually worn down by a great disparity of numbers, so that by March 22 the Germans had advanced into the sector of the line which ran down the course of the rivulet which is dignified by the name of the Somme.

Eighteenth Corps. March 22.

Such, in brief, was the experience of the three divisions which held the line of the Eighteenth Corps on March 21. The Twentieth Division in reserve was not employed during the day, nor were its services needed, for Maxse's Corps, though attacked by eight German divisions, was able to hold its ground, thanks

largely to the splendid resistance of the shock-absorbing battalions in the front line. Up to 4 P.M. of March 22 the enemy had made no permanent advance into the battle zone, but at that hour both flanks of the Corps had been turned at Maissemy in the north and at Essigny in the south, and the alternative was retirement or absolute isolation and destruction. It may then briefly be said that, thanks to the resolute resistance of the battalions in the forward zone, and to the solidity of those in the battle zone, the Eighteenth Corps was able to maintain its ground until it was ordered to leave it, and that save for some indentation of its front, especially at Contescourt, its main positions remained inviolate.

Third Corps. March 21.

Upon the right of the Eighteenth Corps lay the Third Corps, which covered the enormous front of 30,000 yards. Of the nine brigades in the corps, eight were in the line and only one in reserve, so that between the tenuity of the line and its want of support it was an extremely tempting mark for the German assault, especially as by ignoring the two brigades south of the Oise they could concentrate their whole force upon the six brigades in line in the north. It is true that the wide marshes of the Oise offered an impediment which covered part of the British line, but as already remarked, the waters were exceedingly low for the time of year, and the Germans very cleverly overcame whatever obstacle was left.

The three divisions which formed Butler's Third Corps were the Fourteenth Light Division (Cowper), which extended as far south as Moy, the Eighteenth Division (Lee) covering the ground between Moy and Travecy, and finally the Fifty-eighth Division (Cator) extending to Barisis, five or six miles south of the Oise. As usual, we will take them from the north, confining the narrative to the point at which the fighting in the front line came to an end.

The Fourteenth Division had all three brigades in the line, their order being 41st, 42nd, and 43rd from the north. This division, composed entirely of light infantry battalions, has had more than its share of desperate adventures during its service in France. Again and again, notably in the fire-attack before Ypres in 1915, in the third battle of Ypres, and upon the present occasion, they have been exposed to ordeals of the most tremendous kind. Their frontage was 5500 yards, which was not excessive as compared with that of other divisions, and it contained some high ground north of Essigny which should have been valuable for observation and defence, but none the less the attack was so severe and so

concentrated that it rapidly made an impression upon the defence, which became more serious as the day wore on. The three outlying battalions were the 8th and 9th King's Royal Rifles and the 6th Somerset Light Infantry, and these, as usual, were sacrificed almost to a man. The enemy then stormed in upon the line, making his advance here, as elsewhere, with a systematic skill which showed how thoroughly he had been drilled and exercised behind the line. This process of infiltration by which small bodies here, there, and everywhere extend their advance where they find a cranny into which to push and establish machine-gun posts which, unless they be instantly rooted out, soon grow into formidable positions, shows the remarkable adaptability of the German soldier—a quality with which, it must be admitted, the world had not credited him in the past. It may also be admitted that we yielded too easily to such tactics, and that there was a tendency, as was pointed out in a memorandum from the Higher Command, to consider a position as untenable because it was outflanked, instead of closing in upon the intruders and pressing each side of the nut-crackers against the intrusive nut. In many cases this was done, but in others small bodies of daring men with a few machine-guns were able to dislodge whole lines which they had managed to enfilade. On this occasion the Germans pushed in upon both flanks of the Fourteenth Division, but their most serious gains occurred about mid-day, when they captured Manufacture Farm north of Essigny, and, shortly afterwards the weighbridge west of that village. The 41st Brigade on the left were driven out of their headquarters, while the 43rd on the right were pushed back to the Gibercourt Road. A very weak point was evidently developing, so General Butler hurried up part of the Second Cavalry Division (Greenly), and also his only spare infantry brigade, the 54th (Sadleir-Jackson) in order to make a line of resistance at the switch line between Camas and Lizerolles. About 1.30 the Germans had got in between Essigny and Benay and taken Lambay Wood. In view of their accelerating advance and the ominous reports which were also coming in from the 173rd Brigade on the right, General Butler continued to build up his rear line, putting into it not only all three brigades of the Second Cavalry and the 54th Infantry Brigades, but also the 12th and 13th Entrenching Battalions, thus covering the whole rear zone of the corps. Isolated parties of the 41st Brigade were holding out in the main position upon the left, but Hinacourt had also fallen and the line was slowly rolling westward, so that by evening the Fourteenth Division had practically lost its hold of the whole of its battle position.

Things were going better, however, with the Eighteenth Division, which held 9000 yards of front in the centre of the Third Corps. As this great frontage was

maintained by only two brigades, the 53rd (Higginson) in the north and the 55th (Wood) in the south, it must have been very thinly held, and even admitting that the pressure was less than on either of the wing divisions, it was none the less a fine achievement to keep a grip on so wide an area. Three battalions were in the forward zone, the 8th Berks on the left, the 7th West Kents in the centre, and the 7th Buffs on the right, all of whom did splendidly, so that the defence of Fort Vendeuil, Cork, Cardiff, Durham, and other redoubts upon this point form a whole series of epics. Besides the infantry, the 79th Company Royal Engineers shared in the peril and the glory of this defence. The wires connecting up these forward garrisons were speedily cut, and no news came back all day, save the rattle of their rifle-fire. The first definite tidings of the German advance came back through the fog about 12 o'clock, when some gunners emerged from its folds and announced that the advanced guns had been overrun by the enemy. Soon after came a runner with a message from Colonel Crosthwaite of the West Kents to say that his headquarters was surrounded, and asking for a barrage on one side of it. A second message arrived from him: "Still holding, 12.30 P.M. Boche all round within fifty yards except rear. Can only see forty yards, so it is difficult to kill the blighters." It was the last word from the post. At 1.30 the enemy had closed in on the battle zone, and the high ground at Cerisy in the area of the 53rd Brigade had been lost. On the front of the 55th Brigade at the same hour strong parties of the enemy who had pushed between the redoubts in the fog had occupied Vendeuil, while a section of guns in Ronquet Wood had been rushed by them. The reserve company of the Buffs in front of the battle zone fought desperately against these intruders, while near the Dublin redoubt Captain Dennis fought his guns till 5 P.M., inflicting heavy losses upon the Germans, who collected in masses in front of the wire at this point. Eventually his gun-pits were rushed, all the gunners being killed or taken. The main weight of the attack fell upon the 53rd Brigade upon the left, and by the middle of the afternoon all the redoubts upon this front had gone, while the 55th was still well covered. The battle zone, however, was still intact, though the enemy massed heavily in front of Moulin Farm and opposite the switch line from Vendeuil to Ly-Fontaine. They came forward several times, but the mist had risen and the rifle-fire was accurate so that they made no progress. At Caponne Farm there was also a brisk attack, but the 10th Essex, the only battalion left in the brigade, held firmly to its position, though much plagued by low-flying aeroplanes who skimmed their very heads, while the British Headquarters was equally disturbed by a captured anti-tank gun with which the Germans kept up a point-blank fire. To ease the pressure upon this wing, General Lee put in the 8th East Surreys from divisional reserve to thicken the line in the neighbourhood of Remigny.

At 3.30 the covering forts upon the front of the 55th Brigade were still holding out. Fort Vendeuil had made a particularly fine defence and broke up a heavy attack. There was lamp signalling from this fort till 6 P.M., when the lamp went out for ever. The 7th Buffs, who had charge of all this portion of the battle front, did a magnificent day's work, and the famous regiment to which this battalion belongs has won no prouder laurels in all the centuries. Little is known of their fate save the pregnant facts that the front was screened all day, that repeated messages for help were received up to 8.30 in the evening, and that rifle-fire was heard from their posts till midnight. Bald words—and yet to him who can see they convey a sure picture of fading light, dwindling cartridges, and desperate men, baited from all sides and dying with clenched teeth amid the ever-flowing German hordes.

About 4 o'clock the Germans had not only penetrated deeply into the battle zone of the Fourteenth Division to the north, but had also dented that of the Fifty-eighth in the south, so that both wings of the Eighteenth were in a perilous state. The East Surreys were pushed forward, therefore, into the switch line from Gibercourt to Ly-Fontaine. Two regiments of dismounted cavalry from the Second Division were sent also to form a defensive flank upon the right of the 55th Brigade. At 6 P.M. the attack upon the battle zone of the Eighteenth had ceased, but it was being pushed hard upon the two wing divisions, and the Fifty-eighth had lost both Quessy and Fargniers. Orders were then issued to get behind the Crozat Canal after dark, this having always been chosen as the second line of defence. The 54th Brigade, which behaved with great steadiness, was directed to cover the retirement of the Fourteenth Division, and the guns were withdrawn first, so as to cover the infantry at the canal crossings. A few of the outlying posts were gathered up and brought back in safety. The East Surreys covered the withdrawal of the poor remains of the 53rd Brigade, while the 3rd Hussars covered the 55th Brigade on the right. It was a most difficult and delicate operation with a victorious and elated enemy swarming upon the rear, but it was successfully carried out, and by 6 A.M. the Third Corps were all across the canal, and the bridges in that sector had been destroyed.

The performance of the Eighteenth Division had been a very fine one, and it was one of the units which could boast that on the evening of that terrible day they still held the main position which they had covered in the morning. The main German attack seems to have been conducted by four divisions, the Thirty-fourth, Thirty-seventh, One hundred and third, and Two hundred and eleventh, while four more were identified as either partly engaged or in immediate reserve.

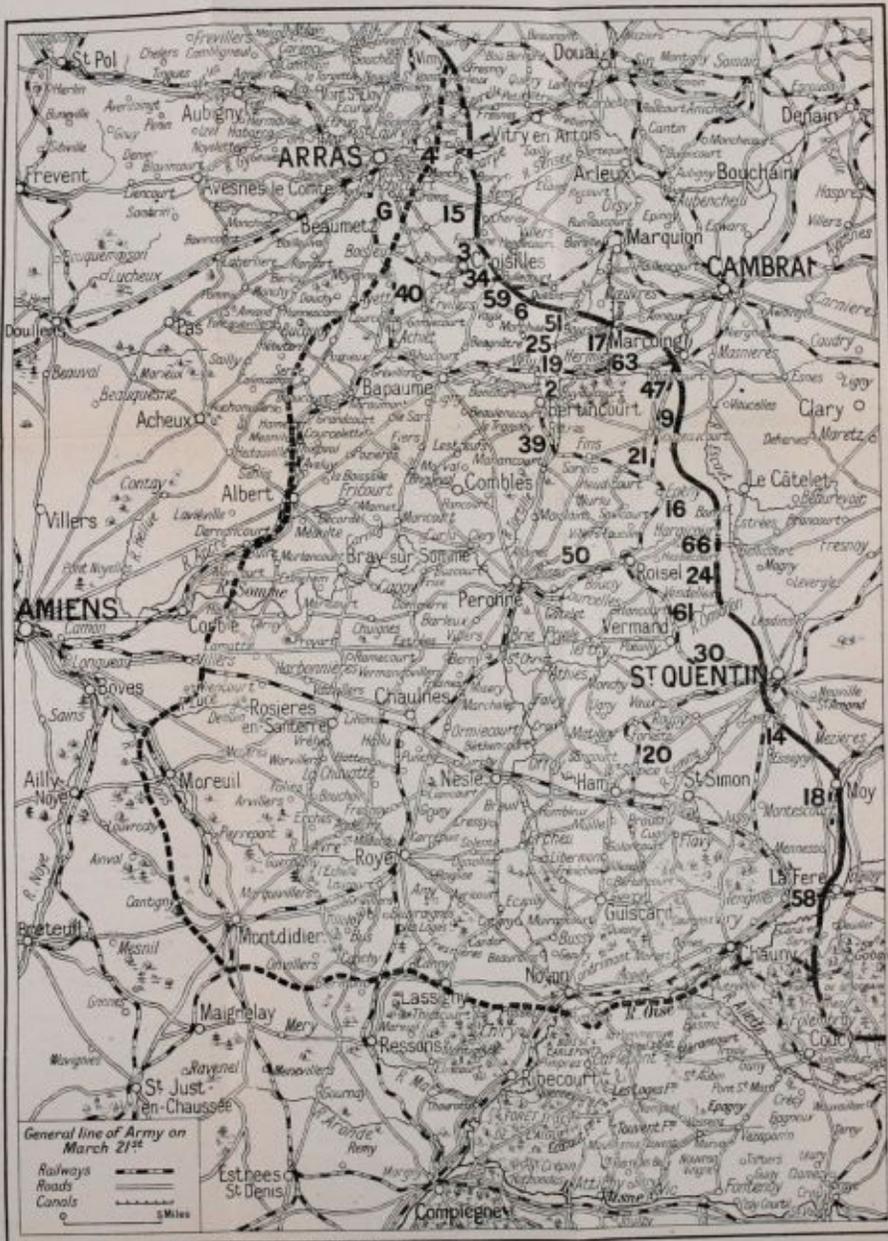
The direction of the attack was mainly from the north and came upon the front and flank of the 53rd Brigade, which could hardly call itself a battalion in the evening. The gunners had to fire by guess until the mist lifted, after which time they did great execution, and stuck to their pieces to the last moment. A particularly notable performance was that of Captain Haybittle of C Battery, 83rd Brigade Royal Field Artillery, whose guns, just south of Benay, were rushed in the mist at noon. He and his crews removed the blocks and held a neighbouring position with their rifles, directing at the same time the fire of two guns in the rear which played upon the German masses as they debouched from Lambay Wood. Afterwards he and his men fell back upon these guns and fought them until late in the evening, when both of them were knocked out. Nineteen hundred rounds were fired, and this stubborn defence did much to hold the northern flank of the battle zone.

It only remains now to give some account of the events upon the front of the 173rd Brigade (Worgan) of the Fifty-eighth London Division (Cator) upon the extreme right, in order to complete this rapid bird's-eye view of the events of March 21 upon the front of the Fifth Army. This brigade, which filled the space between Travecy on the left and the Oise upon the right, had the 2/1 Londons in the forward zone, the 2/4 Londons in the battle zone opposite La Fère, and the 2/3 Londons in the rear zone upon the Crozat Canal.^[1] The single battalion in front was attacked by the impossible odds of three German divisions, but held out for a long time with great constancy. Their brave Colonel, Richardson, was last seen surrounded by the enemy, but still fighting with his headquarters troops around him. The Germans stormed forward to the battle zone, but there on the high ground across the Oise they also met with a very vigorous resistance from the 4th Londons, aided by some sappers and a company of pioneers. It was indeed a great achievement of Colonel Dann and his men to hold up the attack with such disparity of numbers, for according to the official German account several divisions took part in the attack. Finally, as the afternoon wore on the enemy obtained a lodgment in the left of the position, and before evening they had occupied Travecy and part of Fagniers, winding up by the capture of Quessy. The 2/3 Londons had been drawn into the fight, and now the 2/8 Londons from the 174th Brigade were brought north and placed in reserve along the line of the Crozat Canal, across which the troops were now ordered to fall back. This battalion with the 18th Entrenching Battalion guarded the whole canal line from Condren Crossing on the right to the junction with the Eighteenth Division on the left. By 5 A.M. all troops were across and the bridges had been destroyed. The 2/4th Londons succeeded in removing all their stores and

munitions, and their remarkable achievement in holding the high ground of La Fère against ten times their numbers for as many hours, during which they inflicted very heavy losses upon their assailants and repulsed six separate attacks, was among the outstanding military feats of that difficult day.

[1] When two numbers are given to a Territorial battalion, for instance 2/4 Londons, it means that the 4th Londons have two battalions and that this is the second of them.

It is needless to say that the losses in men were very heavy on March 21, though it is difficult to separate them from the general losses of the retreat, which will be recorded later. Among senior officers of note who died for their country that day, besides those already mentioned, were Colonels Acklom of the Northumberland Fusiliers, Thorne of the North Staffords, Wrenford of the East Lancashires, and Stewart of the Leicesters.



General line of Army on March 21st.

CHAPTER V

THE SECOND BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Retreat of the Seventh and Nineteenth Corps

Problem before General Gough—His masterful action—Arrival of Thirty-ninth, Twentieth, and Fiftieth Divisions—Retreat of Tudor's Ninth Scottish Division—Destruction of the South Africans—Defence of the Somme—Arrival of the Eighth Division—Desperate fighting—The Carey line—Death of General Feetham—"Immer fest daran"—Advance Australia—Great achievement of General Watts.

Fifth Army. March 22.

The reader is now in a position to form some conception of the situation of the Fifth Army upon the evening of March 21, and to understand the problems which confronted its commander. He was of opinion, and the opinion was shared by some at least of his corps commanders, that had he had four or five divisions of reserves within easy call, he could unquestionably have held the line. He had, however, to deal with the situation as it stood, and no man could have had a more difficult and responsible task. His own reserves were already practically engaged. On the other hand, both his air service and the reports of prisoners assured him that those of the enemy were numerous and near. His line had been deeply dented in four places: in the sector of the Sixteenth Division at Ronssoy, in that of the Twenty-fourth Division at Maissemy, in that of the Fourteenth Division at Essigny, and in that of the Fifty-eighth Division opposite La Fère. These various points are, it will be observed, almost equidistant along the line, which tends to show that the German attack was conducted upon a plan which threw such forces upon limited areas that the result was almost a certainty, whatever troops might be holding them. It was the misfortune and not the fault of these gallant divisions that their thin ranks were in the very places which huge hordes of the enemy had marked in advance as their objectives.

It must have been clear to General Gough and to his corps commanders that a second day of battle, with the German reserves pouring up, would certainly mean a penetration of the line at these various weak points, and that the enemy would then be in a position to cut off large portions of the force. These units, be they divisions or corps, would no doubt fight to the last, but the end must surely be annihilation. In that case the general situation would have been an appalling one. It might indeed have been decisive for the whole war. There was nothing between the Germans and Amiens. Pouring westwards they would have destroyed all reserves almost before they could have alighted from their trains or their motors, and within a few days would have entirely cut off the British from

the French, with the estuary of the Somme between the two armies. Any hesitation would have been fatal. An immediate decision was imperative. That decision could only be that the British Army should retard the German advance by an obstinate rearguard action, that it should endeavour to preserve its line, and allow no unit to be cut off, that it should fall back in an orderly fashion upon its reserves, and that when it met them it should turn at bay and prevent the enemy from reaching his objective. This was the plan which General Gough instantly formed, and which he proceeded with firmness and moral courage to carry out. Orders were at once given that the weaker portions of the line should drop back behind the obstacles which had already been marked out as the best defensive lines. At the same time with great foresight he gave orders that the old French Somme trenches, from the river southwards, should be set in order as a last line of defence. He despatched his chief army engineer, General Grant, to carry out this order, and it was eventually a very vital one in ensuring the safety of the army in the last stages of its retreat.

The orders to each corps commander were given in the form of general indications, the details being left to his own judgment, for the position of each corps and the pressure upon it formed a number of independent problems. We shall turn to the north therefore, where, upon the whole, the situation was least critical, and we shall follow first the Seventh and then the Nineteenth Corps in their various movements until a condition of equilibrium was at last safely established. Let it be at once stated that the design was duly carried out along the whole line, and that the operation, which at the time was designated as a disaster, was really a remarkable example of how by the coolness of commanders and the discipline of their men, the most desperate situation may be saved and the most powerful and aggressive foe foiled in his attempts. What complicated the military problem of the Fifth Army was that the German threat was really aimed at Paris as much as at Amiens, and that if they could have got through at Essigny and cut off the Fifty-eighth Division there were hardly any reserves between them and the all-important metropolis.

Seventh Corps. March 22.

The morning of March 22 again presented those conditions of fog and low visibility which are favourable to the attack. There was no advance in the early hours upon the new positions of the Ninth Division, but the enemy directed his attention entirely to the Chapel Hill front of the Twenty-first Division upon the right, which was still held by the Lincolns. An attempt was made to relieve them

by the Scots battalion of the South Africans, who took over some of the northern line. The defence was a splendid one, but by 4 o'clock in the afternoon the Germans had gained most of this high ground by outflanking it, and the South Africans at Revelon Farm, who had been reinforced by the 11th Royal Scots Battalion from the 27th Brigade, were badly enfiladed in consequence by rifle and machine-gun fire from the south. Colonel M'Leod of the South African Scots, and many officers and men, were among the casualties. There was a withdrawal therefore of the right of the Ninth Division, and about 6.30 P.M. the Germans had got as far as Heudicourt, and the brigade staff at Sorel had to line up in order to resist his turning movement to the north. So far round had the Germans penetrated that the Africans were compelled to fall back due north for some distance until their rear was clear, when they retreated with the rest of the division westwards towards Nurlu. By two in the morning of March 23 the new positions had been reached, and the attenuated South African Brigade, which had borne the brunt of the fighting, was taken into divisional reserve. This difficult retreat was rendered possible by the desperate resistance offered by the 6th Scots Borderers, who formed a defensive flank south of Sorel and gave the troops to the north time to gain the new position. One company of the 11th Royal Scots was cut off in Revelon Farm, but managed to fight their way back, bringing with them an officer and eighteen other prisoners. No guns were lost by the Ninth Division save ten, which were without teams and were therefore destroyed.

Seventh Corps. March 23.

At this period there was some dislocation between the left of the Ninth Division and the right of the Forty-seventh, as is likely to occur where each belongs to a different corps and army. For a time there was a gap between them. This was partly overcome, however, on the evening of the 22nd by means of the Second Division, which lay in reserve behind the Forty-seventh and put its 99th Brigade under the orders of the Ninth Division so as to ensure unity of command in this position of danger.

Turning to the right wing of the Seventh Corps allusion has been made in the last chapter to the severe pressure upon the Sixteenth Division and its determined resistance. It will be remembered that it was reinforced by the 116th Brigade of the Thirty-ninth Division, and all three brigades were involved in the same heavy fighting on the morning of March 22, the German attack being relentless in its vigour. In the course of this severe action the village of St.

Emilie was lost, and was afterwards retaken in a very gallant fashion by the 1st Hertfords, a battalion which had greatly distinguished itself already at St. Julien and elsewhere. The orders were to retreat, however, and in this movement the switch line from Saulcourt dug and manned by the 117th and 118th Brigades proved invaluable. The army policy was to fight rearguards and delay the enemy, and this was most efficiently done during the evening of March 22, the flank of the Twenty-first Division being covered in its retirement, and the line held against vigorous attacks. Many of the guns of the Thirty-ninth Divisional artillery were lost through their extreme devotion in covering the retreat of the Sixteenth Division, for they frequently carried on until the infantry were behind them. The enemy was pressing his attacks with great vigour, and every withdrawal was followed up by strong bodies of troops and of field artillery.

Seventh Corps. March 22.

During these operations General Hornby had been in command of the division, but on March 23 General Feetham returned from leave and took over the duties. All day the Thirty-ninth Division was fighting rearguard actions as it fell back upon the Somme. In the course of them General Hornby, now in command of the 116th Brigade, was severely wounded. The roads running westwards to Peronne and Clery were crowded with traffic, but the Thirty-ninth Division turned at bay again and again, giving them time to get clear. By evening the remains of the Sixteenth Division had been practically squeezed out of the line, and the Thirty-ninth had the Sixty-sixth Division on its right and the Twenty-first on its left. At night it held a line from La Maisonnette along the canal to south of Ommiecourt. The enemy appeared to be much exalted by the capture of Peronne, and the 118th Brigade on the right heard them singing lustily during the night.

Seventh Corps. March 23.

On March 23 the German attack continued to be very heavy upon the front of the two Scottish brigades of the Ninth Division, which were in touch with the Fifth Corps in the north and with the Twenty-first Division in the south. So close and violent was the fighting that the 6th Scots Borderers were only extricated with difficulty. At 2 P.M. the line was east of Bouchavesnes, but by 4 P.M. the Twenty-first Division on the right had lost ground, and the flank and even the rear of the Ninth was for a time exposed until the Natal Regiment was thrown out south of Bouchavesnes to cover it. The three brigades of the Twenty-first Division were engaged all day as they slowly retreated before the swarming

enemy.

March 23 was a most arduous day for both the Highland and the Lowland brigades, for each of them was attacked again and again with the utmost violence. Though the attacks were repulsed each of them had the effect of weakening still further these units which were already much exhausted by hard fighting and incessant exertion. Gradually they were pushed to the westward until they found themselves lining the eastern edge of St. Pierre Vaast Wood, and manning the ridge which extended from that forest to the ruins of Saillisel. Their left at this period seems to have been in the air, as the 99th Brigade had been returned to its division, and they had failed to make contact with the Seventeenth Division, who were at the time just west of Saillisel. At this period the front of the Ninth Division seems to have covered 11,000 yards, and to have extended for at least two miles into the area of the Third Army, showing how desperate were the exertions needed to cover the ground and to prevent a break through.

Seventh Corps. March 24.

In the morning of March 24 the Scots could see the German infantry streaming forward over the open ground which had been evacuated upon the evening before. It was clear that a great attack was imminent, and at 9 o'clock, after a very heavy cannonade, it developed along the whole line. For three hours the Germans made repeated efforts to force their way through the Ninth Division, but on each occasion they were repulsed, and their losses at this point were exceedingly heavy. About mid-day, however, they had gained so much ground upon the flanks that the South Africans were almost surrounded, and shot into from north and south. The general British line had fallen back to the ridge east of Combles, 1000 yards behind, but General Dawson found it impossible to withdraw in daylight, so that his brigade was compelled to defend itself in its isolated position at Marrières Wood as best it could. The result was a disaster, but one of a most glorious kind, for the men fought until their last cartridges had been expended, and a large proportion of the survivors were wounded men. General Dawson was among the prisoners. It was reported afterwards from German sources that he was taken while working a machine-gun with his brigade-major lying dead beside him. The whole defence was said by the Germans to have been one of the finest things in the war. From that time forward the South African Brigade had practically ceased to exist until it was reorganised in Flanders. The supporting parties alone were left, and these were formed at

once into a composite battalion under Colonel Young, for no rifle could be spared from the fighting line at such a time. Whilst the South Africans had been engaged in this death struggle the 27th Lowland Brigade had been in a similar plight. All these battalions, the 6th Scots Borderers and the 11th and 12th Royal Scots, were very hard pressed, particularly the former. The Lowlanders extricated themselves from an almost desperate situation and fell back from St. Pierre Vaast to the position covering Combles. So great was the general dislocation of troops that one portion of the 5th Camerons found themselves that evening fighting with the Forty-seventh Division, while another was with the Seventeenth.

The main effort of the enemy upon March 24 was directed against the Fifth and Seventh Corps in the centre of the British line, though his energy at other points was sufficient to engage the full attention of all the other units. Heavy and fresh masses were poured in at the centre and the pressure was great. For the Seventh Corps it was the fourth day of incessant and desperate fighting. There were few men left, and these were very exhausted. Towards evening the left of the Seventh had been turned, and had been compromised by the occupation of Saily Saillisel. All attempts at counter-attack, however gallant, were destined to failure, or at the best evanescent success, for there was not the weight to carry them through. At 4.15 the report was: "The enemy is through on the right flank and has occupied Combles, Morval, and Lesbœufs." The Seventh Corps then fell back to the line Hem-Maurepas and threw out every stray unit it could get together—troops of cavalry, Canadian motor-guns, crews and machine-guns of tanks, and all the powdered débris of broken formations, in the direction of Bernafoy Wood to cover the exposed flank. It was still out of touch with the Fifth Corps. This movement gave the line an awkward angle from Peronne and made it almost impossible to hold the stretch of river. For the time the right of the Third Army was a good five miles behind the left of the Fifth Army—the result, as Sir Douglas Haig has stated, of an unauthorised local withdrawal due to misunderstanding of orders. The line near Peronne was still held by the Thirty-ninth Division. Throughout the morning of the 24th strong enemy forces were seen by them pushing forwards between Clery and Rancourt, where they were harassed by the British fire in enfilade, particularly on the roads, where the artillery of the Sixteenth and Thirty-ninth Divisions caused much havoc and confusion, doing great work at short range over open sights. Many excellent targets were missed, however, owing to that difficulty in liaison between the infantry and the guns, which was one of the greatest problems of the operations. During the day the average number of rounds fired per battery was 3000, most of

which were observed fire.

As March 24 wore on the position of the Thirty-ninth Division became untenable, as they heard upon one side of the loss of Saillisel, and on the other of the forcing of the Somme at Brie, Pagny, and Bethencourt. They moved back, therefore, at night with orders to hold the line from Buscourt to Feuilleres. The average strength of brigades at this time was not more than 20 officers and 600 men. From the morning of March 25 the Thirty-ninth Division passed to the command of the Nineteenth Corps, and its further arduous work will be found under that heading. During all this day Campbell's Twenty-first Division, still fighting hard in a succession of defensive positions, had its right upon the Somme, while its left was in intermittent touch with the Ninth Division.

The Ninth Division had fallen back, the two Scottish brigades being continually in action until they reached the Maricourt-Montauban line, where they supported the First Cavalry Division who were in front of Bernafoy Wood. The general line at this period from Montauban southwards was held by the Ninth Division, the First Cavalry, the newly-arrived and most welcome Thirty-fifth Division (Franks), the Twenty-first Division, now reduced to a single composite brigade under General Headlam, and then some oddments under Colonel Hunt. This brought the line to the Somme, on the south side of which were the remains of the Sixteenth and Thirty-ninth Divisions. This might sound an imposing force upon so short a front, but save for the Thirty-fifth each division was *nominis magni umbra*, none of them stronger than brigades. The Forty-seventh Division was retiring at this time upon Contalmaison, and a gap of several miles was appearing between the Fifth and Seventh Corps. During the movements upon March 24 the guns of the 65th and 150th R.F.A. did great work and earned the warm gratitude of the weary infantry. The enemy targets round Combles were all that a gunner could wish.

All troops north of the Somme were upon March 25 transferred to the Fifth Corps, and became part of the Third Army. The 27th Brigade was drawn out of the line, and the 26th was under the orders of the Thirty-fifth Division which took over the defence of this sector, relieving the exhausted Twenty-first Division. March 25 saw heavy attacks on Bernafoy which was lost once, but regained by the 106th Brigade. There was still a gap to the north, and no touch had been made with the Seventeenth Division, though the cavalry had built up a defensive flank in that direction. At 2 P.M. the Germans attacked from Ginchy towards Trones Wood, names which we hoped had passed for ever from our war maps. In the first onset they pressed back the 12th and 18th Highland Light Infantry of the 106th Brigade, but there was a strong counter-attack headed by the 9th Durhams which retook Favière Wood and restored the situation. A second attack about 3 P.M. upon the Thirty-fifth Division was also repulsed. The German pressure was so great, however, that the line of defence was taken back during the night to the Bray-Albert position. The enemy followed closely at the heels of the rearguards, though the guns were active to the last so as to conceal the retreat as long as possible. Early in the morning of March 26 the Lowland Brigade was again attacked with great violence, but the 12th Royal Scots, upon whom the main assault fell, drove it back with loss. Changes in other parts of the line, however, necessitated a withdrawal across the Ancre, so as to keep in touch with the Twelfth Division which had now come up on the left. The Ninth

Division upon this date numbered 1540 rifles with 20 machine-guns. It was shortly afterwards drawn from the line after as severe a spell of service as troops could possibly endure. The story of the retreat of the Seventh Corps has been indicated mainly from the point of view of this northern unit, but it will be understood that the Twenty-first, as tried and as worn as its Scottish neighbour, was keeping its relative position to the south, while the Sixteenth was conforming in the same way until the time when it passed into the Nineteenth Corps.

The Thirty-fifth Division, newly arrived from Flanders, did great and indeed vital work in upholding the weakening line at the moment of its greatest strain. A consecutive account of its work may make this clear. Pushing through the remains of the Twenty-first Division on March 24, Franks threw his men instantly into the thick of the fight, attacking the Germans in front of Clery. Marindin's 105th Brigade did great work that day, the 15th Cheshires on the right and 15th Sherwood Foresters on the left, attacking and, for a time, carrying the ridge of Clery, though it was impossible in view of the general retreat to hold it for long. The Germans were staggered by the sudden, unexpected blow, and they poured troops against their new antagonist, losing very heavily in their reconquest of the ridge. Finally the front line of the Sherwoods was practically annihilated, and the Cheshires were in almost as bad a way, but with the help of some Sussex men who were formed into an emergency unit, together with some signallers, they were able to draw off, and a line of defence was organised under General Marindin, but general orders arrived for a withdrawal to the front Curlu-Maurepas, which was safely carried out, the 17th Royal Scots covering the rear. It was a most ticklish business, as touch had been lost with the Ninth Division, but the wounded were safely evacuated, and all withdrew in good order, the 12th Highland Light Infantry finally bridging the gap upon the left. This battalion had lost in these operations its splendid Colonel, Anderson, whose work has earned a posthumous V.C. The enemy followed closely, and attacked again before dusk, but was driven off. The attack was renewed on the morning of March 25, but still without success, the 4th North Staffords bearing the brunt. The weary troops of the Scottish division, who had been engaged for four long days, were rallied here and formed into provisional fighting units, which did good service by relieving the 106th Brigade at Maricourt, when it was forced back. The pressure upon the division was desperately severe, but was slightly eased by the arrival of a Northumberland Fusilier battalion from the Twenty-first Division. That night the order was to withdraw to the line Bray-Albert.

Seventh Corps. March 25. March 30.

The general command of the retiring line in this section, including the Ninth, Twenty-first, and Thirty-fifth Divisions had for the time fallen to General Franks, who handed his own division over to General Pollard. The position was exceedingly critical, as not only were the units weak, but ammunition had run low. The line was still falling back, and the enemy was pressing on behind it with mounted scouts in the van. In this retreat tanks were found of the greatest service in holding the German advance. The route was through Morlancourt and Ville-sur-Ancre to a defensive position upon the right bank of the Ancre in the Dernancourt area, the orders being to hold the line between that village and Buire. Both villages were attacked that evening, but the Thirty-fifth Division on the right and the 26th Brigade on the left, drove back the enemy. By the morning of March 28 the line seemed to have reached equilibrium in this part, and the welcome sight was seen of large bodies of troops moving up from the rear. This was the head of the Australian reinforcements. During the day the enemy got into Dernancourt, but was thrown out again by the 19th Northumberland Fusiliers Pioneer Battalion. The 104th Brigade also drove back an attack in front of Treux Wood. It was clear that the moving hordes were losing impetus and momentum. That same evening the Australians were engaged upon the right and inflicting heavy losses on the enemy. On the night of March 30 the Thirty-fifth Division, which had lost nearly half its numbers, was relieved by the Third Australians.

Nineteenth Corps. March 23.

We shall now follow the Nineteenth Corps in its perilous retreat. It will be remembered that on the evening of the first day of the battle it had been badly outflanked to the north, where the Sixty-sixth Division had made so stout a resistance, and had also lost a great deal of the battle zone in the south, which was made more disastrous by the fall of Le Verguier at nine on the morning of March 22. The supporting line formed by the Fiftieth Division had also been pushed in at Pœuilly and other points, and it was with no little difficulty that the depleted and exhausted corps was able to get across the Somme on the morning of March 23, where they were ordered to hold the whole front of the river, including the important crossings at Brie. This, as a glance at the map will show, was a very considerable retreat, amounting to no less than ten miles in two days, but it was of the first importance to get a line of defence, and also to lessen the distance between the sorely tried army and its reserves. It was hard indeed to

give up ground and to be back on the line of Peronne, but there was at least the small solace that this was the ravaged ground which the Germans had themselves turned into a waste land, and that there was no town of any consequence nor any military point of importance in its whole extent.

By the late afternoon of March 23 the bulk of the Nineteenth Corps was across the Somme. The Germans had followed closely, and there was rearguard fighting all the way in which the Fiftieth Division slowed down the pursuit of the enemy. The officers who were entrusted with the defence of the line of river soon realised that they had a difficult task, for the dry weather had shrunk it into insignificance in this section, and owing to trees and thick undergrowth the fields of fire were very limited, while the thin line of defenders scattered over some twelve miles of front offered, even after the advent of the Eighth Division, an ineffective screen against the heavy advance from the east. Heneker's Eighth Division, a particularly fine unit consisting entirely of Regular battalions, had made heroic exertions to reach the field of battle, and fitted itself at once into its correct position in that very complicated operation in a way which seemed marvellous to soldiers on the spot.

In the evening of March 23 a number of Germans, some of them cavalry, were observed upon the farther side of the Somme and were heavily punished by artillery fire. None got across before dark, but during the night numerous bodies established themselves upon the western side. Local reserves had been placed near the probable crossings, and these in several cases hunted the enemy across again; but the fact was that the river could be forded anywhere, and that a German concentration on a given point could always overpower the thin local defence. The line of resistance was further weakened by the First Cavalry Division, which had linked up the Nineteenth Corps with the Eighteenth Corps on the south, being now ordered to join the Seventh Corps in the north. The general order of the troops at this moment was, that the newly arrived Eighth Division was on the extreme right touching elements of the Eighteenth Corps at Bethencourt and extending with the aid of one brigade of the Fiftieth as far as Eterpigny, nearly eight miles. From Eterpigny to Biaches, south of Peronne, were the remains of the Sixty-sixth Division, covering about four miles, and joining the Thirty-ninth Division on the right of the Seventh Corps near that point. The Twenty-fourth was lining up between Hattencourt and Chaulnes.

Nineteenth Corps. March 24. March 25.

It was on the front of the Eighth Division, at Bethencourt, at Pargny, and at St. Christ, that the Germans made their chief lodgments upon the western banks of the river on the morning of March 24. The Bethencourt attack was particularly formidable, both for its energy and because it aimed at the junction of the two corps. By two in the afternoon the German infantry were across in considerable numbers, and had forced back the right flank of the Eighth Division, which fell back hinging upon the river farther north, so as to oppose the repeated efforts which were made to enfilade the whole line. General Watts' responsibilities were added to next morning, March 25, for the two much exhausted divisions of the Seventh Corps which were holding the northern bend of the river from Biaches to beyond Frise were handed over to him when the rest of Congreve's Corps was incorporated in the Third Army. These two divisions were the Thirty-ninth and the Sixteenth, the former holding as far as Frise and the latter the Somme crossings to the west of that point. March 25 was a day of great anxiety for General Watts, as the enemy were pressing hard, many of his own units were utterly exhausted, and the possibilities of grave disaster were very evident. A real fracture of the line at either end might have led to a most desperate situation. The French were now at the south end of the river position, but their presence was not yet strongly felt, and with every hour the pressure was heavier upon the bent line of the Eighth Division, on which the whole weight of the central battle had fallen. By 10 o'clock on the morning of March 25, the defensive flank of the Eighth Division had been pushed back to Licourt, and had been broken there, but had been mended once more by counter-attack, and was still holding with the aid of the Fiftieth. The cyclists of the Nineteenth Corps, the armoured-car batteries, and other small units were thrust in to stiffen the yielding line, which was still rolled up, until after one o'clock it lay back roughly from Cizancourt to Marcheipot and the railway line west of that place. Later in the day came the news of fresh crossings to the north at St. Christ and Eterpigny where the Sixty-sixth Division had been pushed back to Maisonette. It was evident that the line was doomed. To stay in it was to risk destruction. At 4.15 the order was given to withdraw to a second position which had been prepared farther westward, but to retain the line of the Somme as the left flank. During these operations the Eighth Division had performed the remarkable feat of holding back and defeating fourteen separate German divisions during thirty-six hours on a nine-mile front, and finally withdrew in perfect order. Every unit was needed to cover the ground, and the general disposition of divisions was roughly as drawn:

	Hattencourt.		Estrees.		Herbecourt.		
		Chantres.		Assevillers.		Frise.	
R.	24	8	50	66	39	16	L.

It will be seen that General Watts' command had increased from two divisions to six, but it is doubtful whether the whole six had the normal strength of two. The new line had not yet been completed and was essentially unstable, but none the less it formed a rallying point for the retreating troops. It should be noted that from the morning of March 25 General Fayolle took over the command south of the Somme.

The Twenty-fourth Division, which had suffered so severely in the first two days of the action, was again heavily engaged during this arduous day. In the morning it had been directed to counter-attack in the direction of Dreslincourt in co-operation with the French Twenty-second Division. In the meantime, however, the whole situation had been changed by the right flank of the Eighth Division being turned, so that General Daly's men as they went up for the attack were themselves heavily attacked near Curchy, while the junction with the French could not be made. They fell back therefore upon their original position where hard fighting ensued all day, and a most anxious situation developed upon the southern flank, where a wide gap existed and the enemy was mustering in force. Colonel Walker, C.R.E. of this division, was killed that day.

Nineteenth Corps. March 26.

On the morning of March 26 the new line had been occupied. The Seventeenth Corps had retired in the night to the Bray-Albert line, which left a considerable gap in the north, to the west of Frise, but this was filled up by an impromptu line made up of stragglers and various odds and ends from the rear of the army. It was in the south, however, that the attack was most severe, and here it soon became evident that the line was too long and the defenders too weak, so that it could not be maintained against a determined assault. Before the sun had risen high above the horizon it had been shaken from end to end, the Twenty-fourth Division being hard put to it to hold Fonches, while the Sixty-sixth were driven out of Herbecourt. At 9.30 the order was given to withdraw, and with their brave rearguards freely sacrificing themselves to hold back the swarming enemy, the troops—some of them in the last stage of exhaustion—fell back upon a second position. It was at this period of the battle that Major Whitworth, the gallant commander of the 2/6 Manchester's, stood at bay with his battalion, which numbered exactly 34 men. He and 17 of his men were dead or wounded after this last stand, and 17 survivors were all that could be mustered that

evening.

Before the right wing fell back to Vrely there had been a good deal of fighting. The Twenty-fourth Division, which was now a mere skeleton, was strongly attacked in the morning of March 27, and Dugan's 73rd Brigade was pushed back towards Caix, the 8th Sussex having very heavy losses, including Colonel Hill, and Banham, the second-in-command.

The situation upon the other flank of the Twenty-fourth Division was also particularly desperate, and the 9th East Surrey, under Major Clark, sacrificed itself to cover the withdrawal of the 72nd Brigade. There were few more gallant actions in the war. Major Clark, writing from a German prison, gave a small account which enables us to get a glimpse of the actual detail of such a combat. The enemy's infantry were in force, he says, within 100 yards of his scattered line. "We managed to get back some hundred yards when I saw that our position was really desperate. The enemy were sweeping up from the south, and several lines of them were in between us and our next defensive line.... We were seen and the enemy began to surround us, so I decided to fight it out. We took up position in a communication trench, and used our rifles with great effect. Grant was doing good work till shot through the head, and Warre-Dymond behaved admirably. It was a fine fight, and we held them until ammunition gave out. They then charged and mopped up the remainder. They were infuriated with us. My clothing had been riddled with shrapnel, my nose fractured, and my face and clothing smothered with blood. There are 3 officers and 59 men unwounded. The rest of the battalion are casualties. It was a great fight, and the men were simply splendid. I have the greatest admiration for them. It was a glorious end." Such were the class of men whom the East End of London sent into the New Army.

The new position on March 26 may be depicted as follows:

	Rosières.		Framerville.		Froissy.	
	Rouvroy.		Vauvillers.		Proyart.	
R.	24	8	50	66	39	16 L.

The Germans followed up closely all along the line, the pressure being great everywhere, but greatest on the left, where the Thirty-ninth and Sixty-sixth disengaged themselves with difficulty, both of them being heavily attacked, and the Cambridgeshires fighting a fine rearguard action in Biaches. About two in the afternoon the troops were solidly established in their new positions, but the

extreme north of the line was in a very unstable condition, as the Sixteenth were fired upon from the north of the river and their left was in no condition to meet an attack. On the right, however, there was earlier in the day some very spirited fighting, for the Eighth and Fiftieth Divisions, though very worn, were in far better shape than their comrades who had endured the gassings and the losses of the first day.

The Fiftieth Division fought particularly hard to stop the enemy's advance, turning at every rise, and hitting back with all the strength that was left it. A very fine little delaying action was fought by its rearguard this day upon the line Lihons-Vermandovillers—Foucaucourt. The 5th and 8th Durhams, with a few of the 5th Northumberland Fusiliers and a couple of batteries, held up the advance for several hours and stood their ground with such resolution that two platoons of the Northumberlands were never seen again, for they held on to Foucaucourt until both they and the village were submerged. As the day wore on and the pressure increased, the Sixty-sixth Division was forced to let go of Framerville, for these men had fought without sleep for five days and nights. They staggered back through the rear ranks of the Fiftieth Division, consisting of the 4th Northumberland Fusiliers, who at once, under the personal leading of General Riddell and Colonel Anstey, both of them on horseback and in red-banded caps, rushed the village once again. It was a fine advance which was much helped by the way in which Captain Thompson in Vauvillers brought his machine-guns to bear upon the flank of the Germans advancing to the south of him. Brigade-Major Paget, a very rising officer, was killed in this spirited affair.

No gains could ever be held, as the general line was receding, but all such successful blows were of use as slowing down the German advance, teaching him caution, and gaining time—for time was the very essence of the matter. If there were time the line could be built up behind. If there were no time Amiens must fall. "I will fight before Amiens, in Amiens, or behind Amiens!" cried Foch. Brave words, but if Amiens went, the future was dark indeed.

Nineteenth Corps. March 27.

At eight on the morning of March 27 the Germans were raging once more along the whole line of the British breakwater. The gallant weary Eighth Division was heavily attacked near Rosières and the stormers reached the village, but Heneker's men counter-attacked in most heroic fashion, and cleared them out again, taking a number of prisoners. The 2nd Devons, 1st Sherwoods,

and 22nd Durham Light Infantry were the units engaged in this fine action.

News was bad from the north end of the line, and it was understood that the Germans were in Proyart, so both the Eighth and Fiftieth Divisions, out of their scanty ranks, sent reinforcements (R.E. details and the 2nd Devons) to help the Thirty-ninth Division. At 3 P.M. on March 27 the Germans were in Framerville, and an hour later were on the top of the Eighth and Fiftieth once more, in front of Harbonnière. The rearguard of the latter were the 4th and 6th Northumberland Fusiliers. The German guns were in full blast that morning, and the infantry full of ginger, but they could not break that protective line, thin, disciplined, and flexible. The two battalions could not cover the ground, and the Germans streamed past their flank. In order to support the advanced line every available man was assembled on the reverse slope of a rise, just out of sight of the Germans. In front of them they could hear the roar of the battle, ever growing nearer as the British line was rolled back. "We were a mixed crowd," says one who was among them. "Staff officers in red caps, clerks in spectacles, signalling officers, cooks, sappers, and that extraordinary never-beaten infantry." It was indeed one of the crises of the war, for the situation was desperate just south of the Somme, and if the enemy was through at this point also the line would be in fragments. The whole array waited over the curve of the hill, and as the enemy, in eight or ten waves, poured over the brow they fired at close range in the traditional Busaco fashion of the peninsula. A bayonet charge as of old completed the transaction, and the enemy broke and fled, with a barrage beating down upon his supports. The British infantry from the top of the rise was treated to the welcome, and, as it must be confessed, unusual sight of a large force of Germans all shredded out and hurrying for the nearest shelter, "like a football crowd caught in the rain." It is an instance of the incurable levity of British troops that they broke into the refrain of "Goodbye! Goodbye! There's a silver lining in the skyee!"

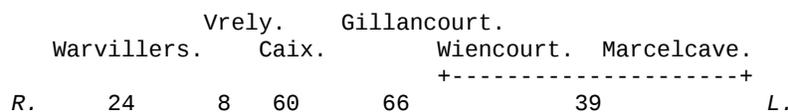
In spite of their cheerfulness, however, the losses had been heavy, both Colonel Robinson of the 6th and Colonel Wright of the 5th Northumberland Fusiliers being among the casualties. Each of the battalions now numbered little more than a hundred men.

This brisk counter-attack was a healthy little reminder to the Germans upon this section of the line that the British infantry might be overborne by numbers or by strategy, but that they were still the men who had in the previous year chased them again and again from the most formidable positions which they

could construct. But these points of aggressive resistance were now rare and the men were worn out. It does indeed seem to be an extreme example of the weakness of the reserves at this period in France, that in spite of the fact that the battle broke out upon March 21, no help save the one division had in the course of a week reached the overmatched and exhausted troops. It is true that the Higher Command may well have reckoned upon the French as reserves, and this would have been perfectly true had they been able to take over the ground in the south and contract the British line. They did take over the ground, but they took over most of the two British Corps as well, so that the Nineteenth Corps was little the better for their presence. Unaided by either their own people or by the French, the Nineteenth Corps still held on desperately with dwindling numbers to a line which was far beyond their strength.

Bad as was the position of the Nineteenth Corps, it was made worse by the ever-changing position in the north. When the Seventh Corps fell back to the line of Bray it was behind the left flank of the Nineteenth Corps. But now it was compelled to make a further move to the line Chipilly-Morlancourt, while all bridges were ordered to be destroyed up to Cherisy. This disposition was absolutely necessary in view of what was happening in the Third Army area; but it made the position more and more difficult for the men in the south, who had either to fall back or to see the gap of undefended river upon their left rear grow wider and wider. General Watts is a stubborn fighter with no idea of going back if it can be in any way avoided, so he held on in the south and fought a brisk, successful action there, while he sent such poor reinforcements as he could to the Sixteenth Division in the north, stopping the dangerous rent with any odds and ends upon which he could lay his hands. Three hundred improvised infantry, six Lewis guns, and a battery in armoured cars were the best that he could do, and these troops actually did hold the river line in the north from the early morning of March 27 until nightfall, against an ever-growing menace. But they could not cover all the ground, and the enemy, as was foreseen, was coming over the river and getting behind the British line. The Sixteenth Division was practically destroyed, and the Thirty-ninth was in little better case, though General Feetham showed great energy in re-organising all the débris of units upon the road, so that the line of resistance was very weak. In the afternoon a considerable party of Germans with machine-guns had got across the river at Cherisy, west of Morcourt, held by seventy men of the Sixteenth Division, and pushed on in the most daring way south-west to Lamotte and Bayonvillers. They were right across the rear of the Nineteenth Corps, and a great disaster seemed inevitable, but weary as the men were, and tired as were their leaders, they were still

capable of clear decision and swift action. The river was for the moment abandoned, the left of the line was swung south, and early upon March 28 they faced north in this sector, along the track of the Amiens-La Fère railway. Roughly, the new position may be traced as follows:



Nineteenth Corps. March 28.

This very difficult and remarkable disengagement was particularly trying for the Thirty-ninth Division since it had farthest to go and was in close contact with the enemy. It was carried out in broad daylight in the morning of March 28, and with such skill that there was no great loss in the 118th Brigade which covered it, but so close was the enemy that both General Bellingham and his brigade-major, Major F. Gunner, were captured while personally supervising the withdrawal. After this operation the remains of the Thirty-ninth Division were occupying the line from Marcelcave to Wiencourt inclusive, along the railway track. Germans were found in Wiencourt, and the two brigades, now reduced to two composite battalions under Colonel Saint, attacked them with success, but eventually occupied a line to the west. All the guns had been saved and were in action once more.

On the occasion of the reforming of the line as already described on March 28, the Fiftieth Division had fallen back upon Caix, where it held fast to the important bridge across the River Luce upon which a number of troops from various units were converging. Many of these were disorganised, and some, to use the expression of a spectator, "stone-cold"; but the same witness has recorded the splendid moral effect produced by one battalion which, marching in fours and with everything in most precise order, came swinging down the road, with no change after its seven days of purgatory save that two-thirds of its personnel had disappeared. This was Colonel Hancock's 1st Battalion of Royal Fusiliers from the Twenty-fourth Division—an object-lesson to all who saw it as to how discipline can outlast the most terrific tests which a soldier can be asked to endure.

Nineteenth Corps. March 28.

The enemy, still working down from the north, had threatened the new defensive flank at a point between Caix and Cayeux, but were held by a very spirited attack made by the men of the 22nd Entrenching Battalion. With considerable loss both to themselves and to the Germans, they held the line of the river until reinforcements arrived. The Thirty-ninth from the north and the Eighth and Twenty-fourth from the south were all converging upon the one point to take up their new positions. A Brigadier in command of the infantry, with 800 men and 3 batteries, held the bridge; but the Germans might have rushed it had it not been for a charge by the 151st Brigade, when the 5th and 7th Durhams drove back their advancing line. This spirited attack was led by General Jackson in person, who encouraged his men by blasts upon his hunting-horn. Speaking of one of their military heroes, a French historian has said: "Il avait la graine de folie dans sa bravoure que les Français aiment." All soldiers love it, and it is a wise leader who knows how to employ it. It was a time when every possible device was needed to hold the men, for the enemy was close upon the bridge, and the safety of the remains of several divisions depended upon the bridge being held.

Nineteenth Corps. March 27.

Returning to the general survey of the line of the Nineteenth Corps the Sixteenth Division was now rather a crowd of warlike particles than an organised unit. It was ordered, however, that every individual particle should be reassembled at Hamel so that the nucleus of a division should exist once more. Hard marching and hard fighting had reduced the Twenty-fourth Division to almost the same condition, though, thanks to a miraculous survival of most of the senior officers, the unit was still efficient. On the other hand, the Sixty-first Division from the Eighteenth Corps, numbering at this period 2400 men, was given to General Watts to help to form his new line. It was at first intended with the aid of these new troops to endeavour to clear the left flank, and for this purpose a counter-attack upon Lamotte was ordered. The newly-arrived men from the south, the 183rd and 184th Brigades, who could hardly stagger a mile, did actually carry the twin village of Warfusee and hold the edge of it for a time under very heavy fire—an operation in which Major Bennett of the Oxfords did conspicuously fine work. Several grand soldiers fell in this attack, including Captain Willick who had commanded the 2/4 Berkshires after the fall of the heroic Dimmer. His last speech to his men is worth recording. It was, "I know how you feel, boys, tired and worn out, but we have to stop them from breaking through." The support to this brave attack is said to have been "one gun, firing

wildly."

The line sloped back now from Demuin in the south to the Somme at a point opposite Sailly-le-Sec, the Sixty-first occupying the general sector just south of the Lamotte-Amiens Road. From there to the river had been a gap which it was absolutely vital to fill. An old line of trench existed here, extending from the river to Demuin, and early in the battle General Gough, amid all his preoccupations, had realised that it might be of great importance to have it ready as a rallying place. He had therefore deputed General Grant, his own chief of engineers, together with Colonel Harvey, his chief of staff, to organise it and to endeavour to man it, with any spare troops that they could find. This had been done, and after three days of feverish work, Grant had prepared a line and had thrust into it a most curious assortment of all sorts of details, made up of entrenching troops, American sappers, the staffs of various army schools, reinforcing units, and stragglers. On the third day General Grant was recalled to his official duties, but General Carey happened to be passing from the front to take over a divisional command, and he was deflected and placed in charge of this assembly of military samples, which included 500 cases out of hospital. There was a sprinkling of machine-guns with trained instructors to use them, but the line was thin and there was a want of cohesion in the elements which formed it. The great thing, however, was that the gulf was spanned between Watts in the south and Congreve in the north. There was still a trench and a line of British soldiers between the Germans and the open country that led to Amiens.

Nineteenth Corps. March 28.

March 28 was a day of destiny along the line, for upon that date were the first definite signs that the assault had failed so far as its ultimate objective was concerned, and that the Germans were not destined to overcome the British resistance. In the north, this was clearly indicated by the victory in front of Arras. In the south, the situation was still obscure and dangerous; but the mere fact that the day was got over without a catastrophe was in itself a success, for on March 27 the prospects were very ominous. The line now ran from Demuin to Marcelcave, and thence the improvised trench garrison carried it on to the river. The First Cavalry Division, which had come across from the north bank, formed a link between the Sixty-first in the north of Watts' line, and what we will now call the Carey line. The cavalry men were still full of fight, but they had done wonderful work since the first day of the battle, cementing every weak seam, and they were terribly reduced in numbers if not in spirit. Nothing can

exaggerate the debt which the infantry owed to all three divisions of cavalry for their tireless support during that awful week. They now tried to advance towards Lamotte, but they came upon the right flank of a very strong German force moving south-west from Cherisy, and though they endeavoured to harass it they were unable to make much impression. The 61st was also terribly worn. Upon this day the 184th Brigade lost Colonel Belton, its fifth commander, and was taken over by Colonel Pagan of the Gloucesters.

The southern end of the British line had troubles enough before, but they were now accentuated by the fact that the Germans had made a very rapid advance in the Montdidier sector which placed them in the right rear of the Nineteenth Corps. On this right flank there was much confused fighting, and a mixture of units which reached such a point before the morning of March 29 that the Twenty-fourth, or what remained of it, found that it had unwittingly changed from the right to the left flank of the Eighth Division. There could perhaps be no clearer illustration of the dimensions to which the division had shrunk. These confused movements caused loss of touch, and there was a time when Corps Headquarters had completely lost the right of the line, which was badly disorganised. It was a time of great danger. Yet another division, however, the Twentieth, was given to Watts, and though it was already worn to the bone, and could not reckon a thousand men in all three brigades, it was still battleworthy and formed an invaluable asset at such a time. They were lined up, or perhaps dotted along would be a fitter term, upon the front of Mezières-Demuin, and formed a frail barrier behind which the hard-pressed men could have a brief breathing space while they endeavoured to reform. By the late afternoon of March 28 this operation was in progress, and before 11 P.M. the new positions were actually occupied. The line, which was partly wired, now ran from Mezières, through Demuin, Marcelcave, and Hamel to the Somme, but it would be hard to add the exact alignment of the units, as in many places they were inextricably mixed. The Sixty-first and the Cavalry had been placed behind Carey's line, in order to support it should it weaken. South of this was the Twentieth Division, reinforced by fragments of other divisions, which among them had the strength and spirit to beat off a strong German attack delivered by the force which had been engaged by the cavalry in the morning. The country here was seamed by the old French trenches, which were woefully out of repair but none the less were of great value to the defence. Carey's force was involved in this German attack on March 28, but with the help of the First Cavalry Division they managed to hold their line. Upon that date the exhausted troops received the following well-timed message from the Fifth Army commander:

"By the grand and stubborn way you are holding out and delaying the advance of the enemy, the British and French reserves are being given the necessary time to come up and assume the offensive. Your great exertions and sacrifices are not being thrown away: they are of immense importance, and your resistance and your deeds in this great battle will live for all time, and will save our country."

Nineteenth Corps. March 29.

March 29 was another eventful and critical day for the Nineteenth Corps, and began badly for them, since the remains of the Eighth and Twenty-fourth Divisions had, as already explained, been thrust out of their positions and were mostly on the west side of the Avre and out of the line. The Fiftieth Division was only partly in position, the fighting strength of the Sixty-sixth was reckoned at 750 bayonets, and that of the Thirty-ninth at 500 bayonets. The Nineteenth Corps at this moment was nominally composed of eight infantry divisions—Eighth, Twentieth, Twenty-fourth, Sixteenth, Thirty-ninth, Fiftieth, Sixty-first, and Sixty-sixth; but it is questionable whether their united strength greatly exceeded that of a single full division, to such a point had the army been reduced. On the other hand, there was no direct evidence of excessive wastage upon the part of the Germans, who could be seen in large well-organised bodies moving in front of the British lines. The one consolation lay in the fact that their heavy guns, and even a good many of their field-guns, had been left behind. The machine-guns, however, and their newly-developed light field artillery were as energetic as ever. The British artillery had been weakened by capture and destruction, but it was greatly supplemented by several armoured-car batteries, Canadian and British, which did splendid service during these all-important days.

About mid-day on March 29 the French, and the remains of the Thirtieth Division under the French Higher Command, had abandoned Mezières upon the right flank of the Nineteenth Corps, and by so doing they exposed the right of the steadfast Twentieth Division. The fighting extended from the River Avre to Demuin. The 59th Brigade, which was in the south of the line, was forced to fall back, but two battalions of the 60th Brigade were thrown out to cover the flank and hold the German advance from getting behind the British line. At 2 o'clock these two brigades gathered their thin ranks together for a counter-attack, aided by the Fiftieth Division, which had now been telescoped into a single weak brigade. It was a remarkable attack, for most of the men were stumbling with utter fatigue, and could hardly totter forward with their rifles at the port. It was

the Riflemen and Shropshires who made the advance upon Mezières while their comrades stormed the surrounding woods. The 5th Durhams, 6th Northumberland Fusiliers, and 22nd Entrenching Battalion of the Fiftieth Division also did great things. There is evidence from the prisoners that the Germans at that particular point had lost very heavily and were much distressed, so that the combat was like those closing rounds of a hard-fought boxing contest, where the two exhausted combatants can but push and paw as they lurch against each other. The village was actually carried by the British, and a temporary easement secured, together with a handful of the 352nd Regiment, who stated that they had lost three entire companies in their first advance upon Mezières. This spirited counter-attack was covered by the guns of the Fiftieth Division which, under Major Johnson, had worked very hard during those last trying days.

About 2 o'clock on March 29 Watts' Corps was reinforced by another skeleton division, the Eighteenth—2000 bayonets, in all. It was merged with the Sixty-first and placed in the Berteaucourt-Bois de Blangy line. The thin ranks of the Twenty-fourth were still able to muster at the south end of the position, but only one brigade of the Eighth Division, the Twenty-fifth, was in a condition for service. This unit moved to the edge of Moreuil Wood, and co-operated with the French One hundred and thirty-third Division which was holding the line at that point. From this time onwards the Moreuil-Ailly-sur-Noye Road and everything south of it was French. As the British force dwindled its front also contracted, otherwise the situation would have indeed been impossible.

As it was, it continued to be desperately critical, for beyond the telescoping of units and the contraction of front there was no help for the British line, while the assailants were still very numerous and aggressive. About noon on this day, March 29, the Thirty-ninth Division, and indeed the whole army, sustained a severe loss in the person of General Feetham, a leader of great valour and experience, who was killed by a shell while walking with Colonel Gosset, his chief of staff, in the village of Demuin. His death was to some extent revenged at once by his devoted troops, for a German attack which followed at once down the valley of the Luce was driven back with heavy loss by the rifles of the infantry. General Feetham was replaced next day by General Blacklock. It is a remarkable fact that Feetham was the second commander of the Thirty-ninth Division killed within a fortnight, for General Cape, his *locum tenens*, fell upon the 13th of March.

Nineteenth Corps. March 30.

On the morning of March 30 the 61st Brigade of the Twentieth Division was on the south end of the line covering the bridge over the Luce at Hangard, while the 59th covered that at Dornart, the 60th lining up from Dornart to Berteaucourt. The Fiftieth Division had been now incorporated in the Twentieth. All the bridges had been prepared for demolition. The enemy were slowly pushing the French out of the Moreuil Wood upon the extreme right, small bodies of infantry gradually infiltrating the whole position. The Germans soon developed activity also in the Luce valley, and finally along the whole corps front. The Second Cavalry Division was sent into Moreuil Wood to help the French, but the whole right of the line began gradually to crumble in face of the repeated assaults. The remains of the Sixty-sixth and Twentieth Divisions were bent back, though the latter continued for a long time to hold the Demuin-Marcelcave line of road, but about 8 A.M. the Sixty-sixth Division was pushed out of Aubercourt. There was some weakness farther north also, between Villers and Marcelcave, but the never-failing First Cavalry Division stiffened the yielding line. At 10 o'clock the situation had improved in Moreuil Wood, where Seely's Canadian cavalry, with the 3rd Cavalry Brigade in support, were making their presence felt. They held the line along the edge of the wood from east of Moreuil, but had lost touch with the Twentieth upon their left. Later in the morning there was a strong German counter in this quarter which drove the cavalry back into the wood. Here at a later hour they were reinforced by the Eighth Division, if such a sonorous name can be given to a handful of dazed and exhausted men. The line at mid-day ran roughly as follows:

Moreuil Wood. Demuin. W. of Aubercourt. W. of Marcelcave.
2nd Cav. 20th. 66th. Carey. 61st. 1st Cav.

The great bulk of the British force lay to the north of the Luce River, and the Germans were making every effort to push the flank backwards or aside and to ford the stream. A wood named Little Wood lay in such a position as to help or hinder, such an attempt, and it was the scene of some fierce fighting. It was first occupied by one of the enemy's advanced parties. It was then retaken by some of the West Yorkshires of the 60th Brigade. These in turn were pushed out by the enemy. Finally, in the evening the 12th Rifles and 12th Rifle Brigade, with some French and scattered units of the Fiftieth Division, charged forward through the twilight, recaptured the wood, and re-established the whole line in this quarter. Nine machine-guns and fifty-three prisoners were taken. Well might General

Watts telegraph: "Well done, the Twentieth! Such a counter-attack after all your hard work is splendid."

Now at last there were signs of some relaxation in the dreadful strain. On this, the ninth day of the battle, the first British reserves, save only the Eighth Division, began to appear in the line. They were the 9th Australian Brigade, who came into the fight between Demuin and Aubercourt with their usual brisk gallantry. Their attack made some progress, and the 12th Lancers who advanced with them shared something of the glory. Although the final objectives were not attained, the line north of the Luce was stayed by their presence and made firm for the morrow. On this evening several of those heroic units which had fought themselves to the last point of human endurance from the beginning of the battle were taken from that stage where they had played so glorious and tragic a part. The remains of the Thirty-ninth, the Fiftieth, the Sixteenth, and the Sixty-sixth were all drawn back for re-organisation. It was theirs to take part in what was a defeat and a retreat, but their losses are the measure of their endurance, and the ultimate verdict of history upon their performance lies in the one single undeniable fact that the Germans could never get past them. Speaking of these troops an observer remarked: "They had been fighting for nine days, but were very cheerful and still full of vigour." The losses of some units and the exertions of the individuals who composed them can seldom have been matched in warfare. The 2/6th Lancashire Fusiliers, for example, had fought in the rearguard of the Sixty-sixth Division for the whole retreat under Captain Porter, the only officer left standing. They were now reduced to about a hundred men. Many battalions were in no better condition. Carey's nondescript force was also broken up on the evening of March 30. They had served a most useful purpose at a critical moment of the battle, and their formation may have prevented a disaster, but it should be emphasised that their existence was not some impromptu effort, but had been pre-arranged by the wise foresight of General Gough.

Nineteenth Corps. March 31.

On March 31 there were signs that the German flood was reaching full tide. They had acted to a wonderful degree up to their own saying: "Immer fest daran!" but they had now far outstripped their artillery support and the tenacious elastic British defence had worn them down. There was no attack on the morning of this day, but about noon the fighting broke out once more in the Moreuil Woods, the enemy pushing their way through them and slowly driving back the line of the Eighth and the Twentieth, while the French were again driven out of

the village of Moreuil. North of Marcelcave there was a day of quiet and re-organisation. The Sixty-first was still holding the Berteaucourt-Gentilles line, while the Eighteenth was holding the line of the Luce. In the evening the Eighth and Twentieth were again reinforced by the cavalry, and by the superior and heroic exertions of every one concerned the position on the right flank was maintained. The 2nd Berkshires distinguished themselves in this fighting. There is something more than a name even in this stage of the war in the old Regular battalions, for the chronicler finds that they stand out amidst the other units out of all proportion to their numbers. The 2nd Bedfords, 1st Royal Fusiliers, 2nd Scots Fusiliers, and many others upheld the honour of the grand old force.

The right wing had been considerably hustled in the Moreuil quarter on March 31, but on April 1 the Second Cavalry Division, which included the Canadian Brigade, made a sudden fierce counter-attack which threw the enemy back. Fifty prisoners and thirteen machine-guns were the fruits of this action. The British guns had played upon the wood during the whole night, and the enemy had suffered severely, for the assailants found the brushwood to be full of dead Germans. There was no other movement of importance on this day. The reformed Fourteenth Division was brought back into the battle and took the place of the Twentieth, the Fiftieth, and of the cavalry upon the front to the south of the Luce. Speaking of the latter troops after their nine days of martyrdom, a senior officer who saw them at this stage said: "In the last attack they were driven back about a mile towards Amiens, but after the first Bosch onrush they stood like rocks, repelling attack after attack, counter-attacking and regaining ground in such a manner that every day I marvelled at the doing of it, and at the men who did it."

Nineteenth Corps. April 4.

April 2 and 3 were quiet days, but on the 4th there was a very violent and general attack along the line of the Nineteenth Corps, and of the Thirty-sixth French Corps (General Nollet) which lay to the immediate south. The main weight of the battle fell upon the Fourteenth Division in their new positions, and by nine o'clock in the morning the Germans had gained some success to the north of the main Amiens Road. The Australian 9th Brigade, which was south of the road, held their line, but had to fall back 500 yards in order to conform with the general position. At 11.30 the enemy was still making progress, mostly on the front of the Fourteenth Division, and had reached the east edge of Hamel and of Bois de Vaire. The Third Cavalry Division, those indomitable troops, were

thrown in to thicken the line of the Fourteenth, and the Canadian motor guns from Villers-Bretonneux were also brought into the battle. Later two battalions of the invaluable Australian infantry came up at the double from the 15th Australian Brigade. If ever the arrival of strong loyal men in a time of darkness brought joy and comfort with it, it was when the Australians relieved the British line in these later days of the second battle of the Somme. "God bless them!" was the silent prayer that went down the weary line. Ground had been lost south of Villers-Bretonneux, and the line was bent, but the whole of the Third and Fifth Australian Divisions were streaming down to their places in the defence. The end of the retreat was at hand.

Nineteenth Corps. April.

Upon the evening of April 4, the line which was to be permanent for many months to come began to define itself, and order gradually evolved out of ever-shifting chaos. Lee's Eighteenth Division was now in touch with the Thirty-sixth French Corps at Hangard. Then at the Bois l'Abbé lay the 9th Australian Brigade. North of this, at the Bois de Gentilles, was the Third Cavalry Division. Thence in succession came the 15th Australian Brigade, the 43rd Brigade, the remains of the Twenty-fourth Division, the 8th Australian Brigade, the other elements of the Fourteenth Division, the Fifth Australian Division near Aubigny, and the Fifty-eighth Division in the north. This summary will show how Australia had braced the line. Upon the next day, April 5, Butler's Third Corps took over the whole area of the Nineteenth Corps, and the episode was at an end.

The retreat of General Watts across the ravaged country, his attempt to hold the long front of the Somme, his successive short retreats, his continual stands, and his eventual success, will always remain one of the most remarkable incidents in the war. This officer, who at the beginning of hostilities was a "dug-out," hardly rescued from a premature ending of his military career, showed in the highest degree those qualities of never despairing, and of rapidly adapting means to an end, which mark the competent soldier. He began with two units under his control, and he ended with fifteen, but no general ever had to handle more weary troops, or had more need of a clear head and a high heart. The strain upon him had been extraordinary—though indeed that is true of every corps and divisional commander in the line. As to the special features of this operation, it may be said to be remarkable for the improvisations of troops, for the continual use of entrenching battalions as combatants, for the work of the dismounted cavalry, for the self-sacrifice and energy of the motor batteries, and very

specially for the degree of mobility attained by the heavy artillery and the rapidity with which it came into action in successive positions. Military critics will draw many deeper lessons from these operations, but these at least are sufficiently obvious to catch the eye of the least experienced student.

The total losses of the Nineteenth Corps during this fourteen days of battle came to from 35,000 to 40,000, killed, wounded, and missing. The losses in guns were 41 heavy pieces and 73 field-guns, twelve of which were anti-tank guns in the forward line. The pressure sustained by some of the divisions would be incredible if the facts were not fully authenticated. Thus the Eighth English Division was attacked from first to last by eighteen different German divisions, including three of the Guards. Prisoners were taken from each so that their identity could not be disputed. Yet this same Eighth Division was engaged within three weeks in the victorious advance at Villers-Bretonneux. The German oracle Clausewitz has said that a retreating army should go back not like a hunted deer but like a wounded lion. His commentators would hardly find a better example than the British armies in the second battle of the Somme.

CHAPTER VI

THE SECOND BATTLE OF THE SOMME

The Retreat of the Eighteenth Corps, March 21-29.

Retreat of the Sixty-first Division—The Gloucesters at Beauvais—Fall of Ham—Retreat of the Thirtieth and Thirty-sixth Divisions—Great privations of the men—Fine feat at Le Quesnoy—Summary of the experience of Maxse's Corps.

Eighteenth Corps. March 22.

It has been shown that Maxse's Eighteenth Corps, covering the St. Quentin front, maintained its whole position on March 21, thanks to the splendid conduct of the three battalions in the forward line, and to the stout resistance in the zone of battle. It has also been told how the Sixty-first Division, the most northern unit, withdrew on the afternoon of March 22, very attenuated but still full of fight, to a prepared position between Vaux and Villévêque. At 4 P.M. that day

the three brigades, or what was left of them, were in line 1500 yards east of Beauvais, the 184th being in the centre, with the 182nd on its right, and the 183rd on its left. As they faced their pursuers they could plainly see the Germans pouring in successive waves from Atilly. The central brigade was commanded by General the Hon. Robert White, one of two gallant brothers who sowed their military wild oats in the Jameson Raid, and this unit, reduced now to a mere handful of Gloucesters, Berkshires, and Oxfords, was exposed to a scourging fire of shrapnel, which further thinned their ranks, their General being one of the casualties. No field ambulances were available at the moment, and as General White was led away badly wounded he saw the German cavalry breaking into the south side of Beauvais, while a large artillery dump west of the village was exploded by the enemy fire. The whole situation was chaotic, but the British infantry still hung together, retreating slowly and turning continually upon their pursuers. Some twenty German aeroplanes were quartering the district like so many fierce hawks, and diving with great daring from time to time into the very streets of the village, while the British falling back into cover fired up at them with their rifles and light machine-guns. Two of them came crashing down upon the roofs of the houses. It was rumoured that the enemy had already got close to Ham upon the right rear of the division, and they were round the left flank in the region of Holnon Wood. There was little artillery support available, for sixty per cent of the forward guns had been taken or destroyed in Holnon Wood, and the remaining batteries were getting away with their reduced teams, so that the retreat of the infantry was correspondingly slow in order to cover the withdrawal. In the north the Scotsmen of the 183rd Brigade were moving back near Villescholles in touch with the 72nd Brigade of the Twenty-fourth Division, both of them being much helped in their retirement by the 11th Hussars. All along the line the Germans were pressing very closely, but the Sixty-first kept wonderfully steady, though at Beauvais, where Colonel Wetherall had taken over the command when General White was wounded, the two parties were continually intermingled, so ardent was the pursuit and so leisurely the retreat. So mixed were the combatants that Major Howitt, brigade-major of the 184th, was dragged out from among his men, and was in the hands of the Germans for some exciting and instructive hours. "I must say the officers treated me well, though the escorts were very rough," says he. "For all my hatred I could not help admiring them intensely, for their deployment, discipline, and preparation were an eye-opener. They extended into battle order with hardly a sound and lay down preparatory for the next assault, bringing up mules dragging light trench-mortars, machine-guns, and ammunition." Major Howitt finally broke away from his escort, and by keeping so near to a burning ammunition dump that no one dared

to follow him, he succeeded in regaining his own lines.

The defence of the line in front of Beauvais was kept up with remarkable tenacity and ended by 150 men of the 2/5th Gloucester battalion performing what was an extraordinary feat, even in this war of miracles, for they held on to a line 2000 yards in length until 3.30 in the morning of March 23, holding up the whole German advance. All night the enemy tried to rush or to bomb this thin line of determined men, but it was not until the cartridges ran low that the British made their retreat, sneaking round the outskirts of the village which blazed behind them, and making their way to Longuevoisin where they joined their comrades, who had already given them up as lost, for they had been five miles behind the army. Colonel Lawson was in command during this heroic episode, and was ably supported by his two lieutenants, Rickerby and Dudbridge. Of the latter, it is recorded that in a later stage of the retreat he was in such a condition of absolute exhaustion that he was wounded three times in the course of a single day without ever observing it until evening. Utter nerve fatigue has its compensations as well as its terrors.

The Thirtieth Division had held on to its ground until four in the afternoon of March 22. Some units lingered to cover the retreat, the 2nd Yorkshires and the 17th Manchesters holding on to their redoubts until six o'clock, when they were in danger of isolation.

During their withdrawal both the Sixty-first Division and the Thirtieth Division to the south of it were covered by the 59th and 60th Brigades of the Twentieth Division. These two fine brigades, still intact and full of fight, allowed the weary soldiers to pass through their ranks, while they opposed a tenacious resistance to the pursuing Germans. When the Sixty-first and Thirtieth were across the canal of the Somme the covering division fell back in orderly fashion, and itself crossed the canal between Canizy and Bethencourt, the 60th Brigade being on the right and the 59th on the left. The 60th Brigade was compelled to fight hard to make good its retirement, and it struck back again and again at the German vanguard. In this fighting the 12th Rifle Brigade particularly distinguished itself, but its losses were heavy, and included its gallant Colonel, Maclachlan.

Early in the morning of March 23 it was known that the enemy had crossed the line of the Somme at Ham. The Thirtieth Division had retreated upon this important little town, which had been thrown into a state of defence by General

Stanley of the 89th Brigade, but his garrison was so utterly inadequate to cover the ground that his dispositions were useless, as the Germans could get round him on either side. He had with him in the first instance two entrenching battalions, the 21st and 23rd, two companies of gas engineers, the corps cyclists, and a mere handful of infantry. Late on March 22 he was joined, however, by his own three attenuated battalions of the King's, each of which had been heavily engaged in different parts of the battle. At the same time the 90th Brigade dropped back to the left of Ham and the 21st to the right. The division was bare on both flanks, however, and it was determined to continue the retreat. The bridges were blown up and such rolling stock as was possible was destroyed, but there were very many stores in the town which had to be abandoned to the enemy. It was a very great disaster, for it supplied him with much, and indeed served him as an advanced base, all ready-made for his operations in this part of the field. As to the loss of the river line, it has already been explained that in these higher reaches it is a very slight barrier.

March 23.

When the enemy had taken Ham he pushed along swiftly towards Esmery-Hallon on the heels of the retiring Thirtieth Division. The Thirty-sixth Division, which had been assisted in its retreat by the 61st Brigade of the Twentieth, had crossed the Somme to the east of Ham, and was now to the right of the Thirtieth (right and left being used all through these operations on the supposition that the unit is turning and facing the enemy). The Thirty-sixth Division crossed the Somme Canal at St. Simon, closely pressed by the enemy, and the 121st Field Company Royal Engineers and other sapper units performed great work under heavy fire, destroying no less than twenty-seven bridges. After the passing of the river by the Germans there were constant rearguard actions, one of the most spirited of which was at Villeselve, where the 9th Irish Fusiliers and the Royal Dragoons fought together and drove in the German vanguard. The general situation of Maxse's Corps upon the forenoon of March 23 was that the Thirty-sixth Division was over the Somme and near Golancourt and Bronchy, that the Thirtieth Division was dropping back upon Esmery-Hallon, and that the Sixty-first Division, retreating in the direction of Nesle had crossed the Somme at Voyennes and Offoy, continuing its retreat to the Nesle Canal. Between the Thirtieth and Sixty-first Divisions were the 60th Brigade on the right and the 59th on the left, who were also covering the Nesle Canal, but were quite ready to counter-attack should an opening present itself.

A British corps does not allow itself to be driven without hitting back, however great the odds may seem. A series of brisk skirmishes was going on all along the line. In one of these, just south of Ham, Colonel Watson with the 17th King's Liverpools came back on his pursuers and held them up for a time. More serious was the counter-attack organised by the main body north of Esmerly-Hallon. This attack struck southwards from Canizy and hit upon the right flank of the Germans, staggering them for the instant. It was carried out by the 60th Brigade and the 182nd Brigade, all under General Duncan of the former unit. This spirited advance was led upon the field by Colonel Bilton of the Sixty-first Division, and was delivered with such force that this small British detachment drove back for some distance the great army which was rolling westwards. It was impossible, of course, to recover ground permanently, but it gained invaluable time and eased the pressure upon the south end of the line for the whole of a critical evening. It was clear, however, that the capture of Ham and the crossing of the stream had turned the flank of the Twentieth and Sixty-first Divisions, who were defending the higher reaches of the same river. They were not to be frightened prematurely out of their positions, however, and at Bethencourt the 11th Rifle Brigade drove back a German attempt at crossing, while at Offoy the 12th Rifles also inflicted a sharp repulse upon the pursuers. That evening, March 23, the Sixty-first Division was practically amalgamated with the Twentieth, and both were concentrated near Nesle. They received at this time a most useful reinforcement in the shape of two batteries (16 guns) of Canadian motor machine-guns under Captain Meerling. There is not an officer or man of these much-tried battalions who would not admit a deep debt of gratitude to these splendidly efficient and energetic guns, which had such mobility that they were always where they were most wanted.

March 24.

The troops had on the morning of March 24 got behind the Somme Canal, which runs beside the river, all bridges had been broken, and patrols were pushed across where practicable so as to keep in touch with the enemy. It was not in this southern area, however, but at Bethencourt that the Germans did actually get across in force, by which they turned the flank of the 25th Brigade of the Eighth Division in the north and of the 59th Brigade in the south. An attack was instantly organised by the 11th Rifle Brigade, who had lost their Colonel, Cotton, the day before, and were now led by Major Bertie. They succeeded by a fine effort in driving the Germans for the time across the canal and gaining touch with the Eighth Division. The Germans pushed across once

more at Pargny, upon the other flank of the Eighth Division, and also renewed their attempt in greater force at Bethencourt, getting possession of the higher ground there. This time it was the Highlanders and Royal Scots of the 183rd Brigade who counter-attacked, acting as part of the Twentieth Division, and by half-past two in the afternoon the position had once more been re-established. The Canadian motor-guns were invaluable in this operation.

Upon the morning of March 24 the Sixty-first Division was barring the road from Ham to Nesle. The German progress had been checked in this direction by a spirited counter-attack carried out by the 5th Cornwalls, the pioneer battalion of that division, together with a mixed array of police, bandsmen, and other details, who advanced from Offoy to a depth of five miles, under Major Bennett. This little improvised force held on all night, and seems eventually to have joined up with the French in the neighbourhood of Esmery-Hallon.

The British were still holding the crossings at Voyennes and Offoy, but very hard fighting had broken out to the south, and the Germans, who had poured over in the neighbourhood of Ham, were now thrusting hard for Canizy. The road bridges had all been destroyed, but there was a railway bridge at Ham which had been taken out of the hands of the army authorities and left in charge of the railway department. This was either uninjured or at any rate inadequately destroyed, and was of immediate use to the enemy, enabling him to keep uninterrupted pressure upon the retiring troops. Canizy was now taken, but the 12th Rifles made an immediate counter-attack and forced the Germans back from the village. In this spirited operation they lost their gallant Colonel, Moore, who had led them with the utmost fearlessness.

Whilst the Germans were pushing forward at Canizy they had also maintained strong and continuous pressure upon the Thirtieth Division near Moyencourt, and upon the Thirty-sixth Division at Golancourt, causing the Ulster men, whose left wing was entirely in the air, to fall back westwards. The next line of defence, after the Somme had been forced, lies along what is called the Libermont Canal between Nesle and Libermont. It was necessary to fall back, fighting as best they could, and to place this obstacle, narrow as it was, between the weary soldiers and their pursuers. It was the third day since the men had had a decent meal or an uninterrupted rest, and they were very disorganised and broken. "Hundreds of men were streaming back," says one observer. "They had been without food for days and were done in completely. They were stopped and reformed at the bridges, where as many as 2000 were collected." It is such

plain sobering sentences which help one to realise that war is not, as large scale descriptions might seem to imply, a question of the moving of pieces upon a board, but that underneath the strategy lie the countless human tragedies, the tortured frames, the broken nerves, the prayers of brave men that they may still be brave, the torturing anxiety of officers, the ever-pressing burden which sometimes breaks the weary back which tries to hold it. Strategy reckons nothing of these things, but their accumulation makes up the terrible human tragedy of war, which brings humility to the most proud and fear to the most valiant. All equally feel the weakness of nature, but he is blessed who has the strength of spirit to cover and to combat it.

By mid-day on March 24 the Thirtieth Division was over the Libermont Canal, holding from Buverchy to Libermont, with the village and bridge of Raincourt as a joining point between the 90th Brigade to the north and the 89th to the south. It may be recorded, to descend suddenly from divisions to individuals, that the first sign of the new German advance was a single scout who appeared in the open in front of the canal, and was engaged in a prolonged and deliberate rifle duel by Lieutenant Harrop, with the result that he was finally brought in as a wounded prisoner. The Twentieth Division had also fallen back, the orders of brigades from the south being the 60th with its flank on Buverchy, the 59th resting on Quiquery, and the 183rd to link up with the Eighth Division near Mesnil St. Nicaise. The Thirty-sixth Division prolonged the line to the south of Libermont. The French reinforcements from the south were beginning by the afternoon of this day to get as far north as this section, and if not very weighty at the moment they were of great moral use as a promise for the future.

From the new positions of the British line the German infantry could now be seen advancing in platoon columns in three lines on each side of the Voyenne Road and heading for the Libermont Canal. Several parties of horsemen could be seen also, who were conjectured to be battery staffs, keeping up with the fight. The weak point was still near Bethencourt, between the Twentieth and the Eighth Divisions, where the gap tended to be wider as the enemy got more troops across and endeavoured to push the 25th Brigade north as has been described in dealing with the experiences of the Nineteenth Corps. They were reported before evening as having got as far as Morchain. The flank brigade of the Eighteenth Corps, the 183rd, was ordered to extend as far to the north-west as Potte in the hope of regaining touch, but though they reached that village they were still unable to bridge the gap. During the night there were heavy attacks upon Mesnil St. Nicaise in this region, which fell chiefly upon the Rifle

battalions of the 59th Brigade, which had been reinforced by the 20th Entrenching Battalion and the 11th Durhams, the divisional pioneer battalion. The general result was to force the British line some little distance to the westward. At Buverchy in the evening the German infantry also advanced in great numbers, but came under the very efficient guns of the Thirtieth Division, and lost very heavily. The enemy artillery was also very active so that both the Thirtieth near Buverchy and the Thirty-sixth farther south had many casualties. The French relief was making itself more felt, however, in this southern section, where they were already outnumbering the British. The latter were greatly worn—so much so that the 21st Brigade of the Thirtieth Division could hardly be said to exist, only about 100 of the Yorkshires being left in the line. By evening the centre of the position was near Moyencourt, some little distance to the west.

March 25.

In spite of the French reinforcements, which were not accompanied with artillery, the attack was still markedly stronger than the defence, so that March 25 was a most dangerous and critical day in this quarter of the field. To trace the developments from the north the enemy continued to press through the gap between the two corps, the Nineteenth and the Eighteenth, making a series of heavy attacks towards Mesnil-le-Petit and Nesle from the direction of Potte. This movement, powerfully followed up, pushed back the left flank from Quiquery to a point on the high ground 1000 yards west of Nesle. The 183rd Brigade, which was now a mere handful of Scottish infantry, superb in quality but reduced to the last stage of exhaustion, together with the thin ranks of the 59th Brigade of Rifles, could not, even with the aid of the Canadian motor-guns, hold the heavy masses who pressed down upon them. The French One hundred and thirty-third Division moving up in support had dug a line between Billancourt and Herly, but Nesle was abandoned to the enemy, the Twenty-second French Division retiring from this sector and falling back towards Roye. The 60th Brigade of the Twentieth Division, much helped by the 23rd Entrenching Battalion—these valiant diggers made their presence felt all along the line—still held stoutly to their positions from Quiquery to Buverchy, but their left and left rear were so compromised that it was clear they could not hold out longer. To the south the French, who had relieved the Thirty-sixth Division at Libermont, had been pushed back, and the British position was turned in their direction also. By the afternoon the French had taken over the line as far north as Buverchy, and the Thirtieth Division was ordered to fall back, but the Germans had advanced so rapidly from Libermont and got so far to their right rear that it was no easy matter either for the British or the French to get past them. Many had to swim the canals which striate this part of the country, and the 2nd Bedfords were especially hard-pressed before they were able to get away. The Twenty-second French Division was doing all it could to cover the approaches to Nesle upon the south, and the 184th Brigade cheered them loudly as they passed through their ranks. "They looked very fine men and seemed very much for it." General Wetherall of this brigade was badly wounded by a shell splinter in this period of the battle. And we have a vivid pen-picture drawn by a spectator of Brigade-Major Hewitt, some of whose adventures have already been recorded, holding Wetherall's wounded artery with one hand, while he wrote brigade orders with the other, for more than two hours on end. The 184th lost five commanders during the retreat.

Even if the local pressure had not caused a rapid withdrawal at this portion of the line, it would have been enforced by the general strategic position, for the German advance in the south had been so masterful that on this night of March 25 Roye was taken, which is far to the south-west of Nesle. The 61st Brigade had been sharing the hard fortunes of the Thirty-sixth Division, but now, as the latter had been drawn out, it was restored to the Twentieth Division. So severe had been the strain upon it that it only numbered about 500 bayonets, and some battalions, such as the 2/6th Royal Warwicks, had not a single combatant officer left standing. None the less, it was at once sent to man a supporting line stretching through Gruny, Cremery, and Liancourt, and had hardly reached it before the Germans were also at Liancourt. The brigade held them, however, and so enabled the front line to fall back upon an organised position whence, on the next morning, a swift retreat became necessary.

After dark on March 25 the One hundred and thirty-third French Division had come up to relieve the Twentieth and Sixty-first, but the situation was such along the line of the Nesle Canal that no fixed line could be formed, and the three divisions were finally greatly mixed up in the darkness and there was a good deal of confusion in their councils, since the general directions of the French were to fall back to the south, while the line of retreat of the British lay rather to the west. There was little time for deliberation, for word had come in that the Germans were closing in upon Liancourt, pressing south and west, in a way which threatened to cut off the whole forward line. At midnight, the British, many of them hardly able to move for fatigue, staggered off in such formations as they could assemble, with orders to concentrate north and east of Roye. Thanks largely to the presence of the remnants of the 61st Brigade near Liancourt, this most hazardous march was successfully accomplished, but as Roye was within the grasp of the enemy the movement was continued so as to reach a line between Hangest and Le Quesnel. The Germans were close upon them in the north, so the 61st Brigade, now down to 400 men, acted as flankguard, fending off their constant attacks. The war has shown few finer instances of disciplined and tenacious valour than in the case of the three handfuls of men who represented what had once been the 12th King's, 7th Somersets, and 7th Cornwalls. The enemy were in Liancourt, and their patrols were in actual hand-to-hand fighting with a French detachment aided by some of the Somersets. Other German troops pouring down from the north and using to the utmost the gap which had opened between the corps, endeavoured to cut in and to seize Le Quesnoy (not to be confused with Le Quesnel towards which the troops were marching). It was, however, upon their line of retreat, and about

halfway to their destination, so that a German occupation would have been serious. The post was most desperately defended by Captain Combe, the brigade-major of the 61st Brigade, with two Lewis guns and 100 men. Only eleven were left standing at the end of this defence, but the village was held for the necessary time, and the survivors only withdrew upon receipt of a positive order. Thus the flank march of the British from Roye to Le Quesnel upon the morning of March 26 was successfully accomplished, owing to the devotion of their covering party to the north. "It was very much of a rabble," says an officer, "and there was great difficulty in sorting out the men and arranging the units." None the less the future was to show that the force was no more beaten than were the old contemptibles after Mons.

March 26.

The Thirtieth Division had been drawn out of the line on the arrival of the French, but they were hardly started on their movement towards the rest which they had earned so well, when this great pressure arose, and every man who could still carry a rifle was needed once more in the line. On the morning of March 26 they were back then, between Bouchoir and Rouvroy. The 21st Brigade had now entirely disappeared, but the remains of the 2nd Yorks and the South Lancashire Pioneer Battalion were added to the 89th Brigade which was in the north at Rouvroy, while the 90th, under General Poyntz, filled the gap to Bouchoir. The Thirtieth Division had got considerably to the west of this line before they were recalled, and it was only by some splendid marching that they were able at last to throw themselves down upon the coveted ground before the German armies, which were streaming along the Roye-Amiens road, were able to reach it. As they faced the Germans the Twenty-fourth, now the mere shadow of a division, was on their left at Warvillers, while the Sixty-first and Twentieth were in support at Beaufort and Le Quesnel. Near Erches the Thirty-sixth Ulster men, whose relief, like that of the Thirtieth, had proved to be impossible, were still battling bravely, retaking the village of Erches after it had fallen to the enemy. The 109th Brigade also distinguished itself greatly in this area, the Irish Fusiliers Battalions of which it is composed holding on most desperately to the village of Guerbigny, at the extreme south of the corps front, and continuing a heroic defence during March 26, and long after it was isolated upon March 27. The artillery of the Ulster Division was particularly good in its covering fire during these operations, gaining the very grateful acknowledgments of the French troops and generals who were more and more concerned with this southern sector of the line. Speaking generally the troops had now reached the

region of the old French trenches, which grid-ironed a considerable area of country, so that it was certain that if men could be found to man them, the pursuit would no longer continue at the pace of the last two days.

Great work was done at this period by four of the Canadian motor-guns at the cross-roads, north-west of Rouvroy, where they not only inflicted heavy losses upon the enemy but delayed his advance while the exhausted troops were settling down into this new position. Every hour was of importance as giving reinforcements time to come up from the rear, and the general orders to the divisional generals were to hold on at all costs wherever defence was possible. A small body of corps cyclists under Lieutenant Quartermain co-operated splendidly with the motor-guns and did good service at this critical period of the retreat, during which there was very little artillery support behind the thin line of infantry.

March 27.

The German pressure on March 27 fell chiefly, as already shown, upon the Twenty-fourth Division and the other units on the extreme south of the Nineteenth Corps, which were forced back for some distance, and so threatened the stability of the line in the south. The 17th King's Liverpool, which was the flank battalion, held fast, however, and flung back their left to form a defensive line to the north. A small body of German cavalry performed a brilliant piece of audacious work in the darkness of the early morning of this date, pushing through the outposts of the Thirty-sixth Division in the south near Guerbigny, and capturing the Brigade Headquarters of the 109th Brigade, and also the chief staff officer of the division.

The future was full of menace, for the Germans were pressing on in great numbers. An observer near Bouchoir that evening (March 27) says: "I have never seen so many Germans in all my life—one huge dark mass about a mile away. With glasses one could see howitzers, machine-guns, trench-mortars, and field batteries, as well as infantry. It was a most wonderful sight. They seemed to be coming down the Roye Road, then moving off to the south, and some stopping in a mass."

The main German attack upon the extreme south of the corps line on March 27 fell upon the Thirty-sixth Division in the direction of Erches, with the result that the Ulster men fell slowly back upon Arvillers, the 60th Brigade throwing back a defensive flank to correspond. By 12.30 Bouchoir, held by the 90th

Brigade, was gained by the Germans, but the British formed a new line to the immediate westward of the village. An attack upon Folies was thrown back by the 59th Brigade. Towards evening some order came out of a rather tangled position, which may well be obscure both to writer and reader, since soldiers upon the spot found the greatest difficulty in separating the various confused elements. As night fell upon March 27 after much desultory and inconclusive local fighting, there was no great change in the British line which ran from Warvillers, still held by the Twenty-fourth Division, to the west of Bouchoir, where the Thirtieth held the line, and down to Arvillers held by the 60th Brigade of the Twentieth Division, which was temporarily out of touch with the Thirty-sixth Division. Hangest was held by the Sixty-first Division, and Le Quesnel by the Sixty-first and the French. That night the Twentieth Division was ordered to join the Nineteenth Corps, and their record under this new command will be found in the preceding chapter. One would have thought that they had reached the limits of human endurance, and their total numbers were not more than a thousand, and yet they were but at the beginning of a new chapter in their glorious history. The same words apply to their comrades of the Sixty-first Division, who were also ordered north. They were relieved by the French at Arvillers, and this portion of the line was on March 28 pressed back to the west of Hangest.

March 28.

The removal of the Twentieth Division at so critical a time could only be justified by the extreme and pressing need of the Nineteenth Corps, for it had the effect of producing an almost impossible position for the line in the south. Had it been possible to replace it at once with a solid French division, it would have mattered less, but as matters stood the One hundred and thirty-third French Division had itself been involved in the retreat and was greatly worn. There was so little time also to get it into its new positions that there was never any solid bastion upon that corner of the line. The result was speedily seen in the morning of March 28, when the Thirtieth Division were first subjected to a very heavy bombardment, and then looking south saw a general retreat going on from Arvillers, while their left flank at Warvillers was also very weak, since the Twenty-fourth Division was hardly strong enough to maintain itself. By 2 P.M. both flanks were bare, and the enemy were well round them in the north and in the south at Hangest. At one time it seemed impossible for the division to get clear, and even now their extrication seems miraculous to the officers who effected it. A rapid retreat was made through Mezières and on to Moreuil, which

only just avoided the closing pincers of the German advance. The French, who were in the act of relieving the Thirtieth Division, came away with them and had the same narrow escape. The block upon the road which formed the only egress is described as having been appalling, fugitives, refugees, and small disciplined columns of troops being crowded together from one end of it to the other. "The men were excellent," says an officer of the Thirtieth Division. "Their discipline was not a bit shaken." Such words could not truthfully be said of every unit, and yet soldiers can have seldom been more highly tried in any operation in history. Even the Imperial Guard may reach its breaking point, as the retreat from Moscow has shown. At Moreuil there is only one bridge, and had the German artillery been able to find it the result would have been a Beresina. As it was, the troops got across and speedily reformed upon the farther side of the river Avre.

This may be taken as the limit of the retreat of the Eighteenth Corps, since the stand in the north of the line and the thickening French resistance in the south brought the momentum of the German advance to a halt. How terrible the ordeal had been may be gathered from the fact that the Twentieth Division, as already mentioned, was not more than 1000 strong, the Thirtieth Division about 2000 strong, the Sixty-first Division 2100 strong, and the Thirty-sixth Division only a little stronger at the end of it. Again and again it had been on the brink of absolute disaster, but always by the wise dispositions of General Maxse and his divisional generals, seconded by the splendid tenacity of his men, the worst consequences had been avoided. Rapid readjustments had been needed, but a fatal break was always averted. The troops were handicapped in every possible way, for not only was their artillery far below strength, but for some reason the British Air Service during these days of stress was very weak in this southern area, while the German machines were very numerous and aggressive. The artillery officers were splendidly cool and efficient all through, and in the case of the 92nd Brigade Royal Field Artillery near Esmery-Hallon, it is said that the last gun was just 25 yards from the Germans when it limbered up. For two days the whole corps artillery was with the French, and did fine work with them, but to the great detriment of their own infantry. Some of the batteries remained for a long time with the French, and one French general has left it upon record that the failure of the Germans to capture Moreuil on April 4 was almost entirely due to the splendid shooting of the 306th Brigade Royal Field Artillery. After the first two days of the retreat no guns were abandoned by the Eighteenth Corps. The total losses of guns might be put at about 90 field pieces and 4.5 howitzers, with about 50 heavier pieces.

CHAPTER VII

THE SECOND BATTLE OF THE SOMME

The Retreat of the Third Corps

Movement across the Crozat Canal—Fight of the 173rd Brigade—Forcing of the Canal Line—Arrival of the French—Fight of Frières Wood—Splendid work of the Cavalry—Loss of Noyon—Final equilibrium—General retrospect of the Battle.

March 22.

We shall now complete this slight survey of a vast subject by following the fortunes of Butler's Third Corps upon the extreme right of the whole British Army. It has already been shown that the condition of this corps at the end of the first day of battle was most perilous, as its left flank in the region of Essigny, where the battle zone of the Fourteenth Division had been deeply pierced, was completely turned. The Eighteenth Division in the centre had, it is true, retained its ground, but the left brigade of the Fifty-eighth Division upon the right, the only brigade of that unit which was engaged, had also after a very desperate resistance lost their front positions at Quessy opposite to La Fère. Therefore orders had been given to draw off the troops during the night of March 21 across the Crozat Canal, and a covering line had been built up from the 54th Brigade, the Second Cavalry Division, and the 12th and 18th Entrenching Battalions in order to hold the German pursuit and to give the somewhat dishevelled troops time to re-organise their ranks. By 5 A.M. on March 22 they were over the canal and the bridges had been destroyed. The artillery had been got over first to cover the crossings, and the 54th Brigade, which had covered the rear of the Fourteenth Division, was lined up from Jussy to Mennessis. The Eighteenth Division (less the 54th Brigade) fell back in the line of Frières Wood, behind the canal. Many guns had been lost but the cavalry had thrown the 3rd and 5th Brigades of the R.H.A. into the firing-line to support the infantry, and two new batteries of the 96th R.F.A., only arrived the day before from England, came in at the nick of time.

It was of the first importance to destroy the bridges along the canal, but this

was found to be no easy matter. They had all been mined and prepared for destruction some time before by the French, but either the lapse of time or faulty material had caused such deterioration that the charges failed to explode, and had to be renewed and discharged under circumstances of great difficulty and danger. It was carried out none the less with great tenacity by the British sappers, but several weak points remained, notably a canal lock which had been so injured that the bed of the canal was exposed for some distance. The railway bridges here, as elsewhere, were also a source of weakness.

As the corps turned to face the enemy upon the south side of the canal the general line of battle showed the 41st Brigade just south of St. Simon, connected up on the left by the only surviving battalion of the 42nd Brigade with the 61st Brigade of the Twentieth Division who were in support of the Thirty-sixth Ulsters at that place. Then came the 43rd and 54th Brigades, facing Jussy and Mennessis with the 3rd and 5th Dismounted Cavalry Brigades in support. South of this point were the 4th Cavalry Brigade, the 55th Brigade, and the 53rd Brigade, all in the Frières area. Then came the 173rd Brigade in the Vouel neighbourhood with the 18th Entrenching Battalion and the 6th Dismounted Cavalry Brigade. This force had already lost heavily, and many of the men were suffering from gas, but they were sustained by the certainty that French reinforcements would speedily reach them from the south, as a system of mutual lateral support had been agreed upon between the commanders.

A line of trenches had been begun in this neighbourhood by the French some time before, and it had been carried on by Italian labour, but it was still very unfinished, with many gaps, so that the tired soldiers had to lay down their rifles and take to their trenching tools to get some cover. It was already clear that they would need it, for with early daybreak on March 22 the Germans showed that they had reached the north bank of the canal at Jussy. It was again very misty, and they were able to bring up their machine-guns and small artillery with perfect impunity and place them under cover. It was not until between 10 and 11 A.M. that the mist began to lift, and the British outposts peering through it could see the flash of the guns among the plantations on the farther side. At an earlier hour the Germans had tried to cross at Jussy, but had been driven back. It was already evident, however, that they were in a position to repair the bridges in such a way as to find a passage wherever they desired. The general situation might be described as a curious reproduction of the first action of the war when the two armies lay upon either side of the Mons Canal.

The French Sixth Army on the right had acted with loyal promptitude, and the One hundred and twenty-fifth Division, under General Diebold, was already moving up from the south. One would have imagined that the most efficient relief would have been to replace the two British brigades in the south of the Oise, and so re-unite the Fifty-eighth Division. For some reason this was not done, and General Worgan's 173rd Brigade continued to be a lone unit. A very welcome reinforcement consisted of nine batteries of French 75's. It was understood also that the whole Fifth French Corps, under General Pellé, was due at Noyon that evening, and that the Third British Corps would be relieved by it as soon as possible, but further help was slow in materialising.

At about 1 P.M. on March 22 the enemy made their first crossing of the canal in the region of the 173rd Brigade. They advanced from Fargniers in the direction of Tergnier village. The range of vision in this water-sodden region was not more than fifty yards, which greatly handicapped Colonel Dervicke-Jones of the 8th London, who was in local command of this sector, as it put his machine-gun defence out of action. The troops were spread over a front of 3000 yards, so that the various companies were widely separated. The first German advance was made across a lock gate by a number of men dressed in the uniforms of some of the 1st London, taken the day before—a ruse which was the more successful as a number of genuine stragglers had actually been in in this fashion during the morning. An attack followed during which C Company of the 8th Londons, while holding the enemy in front, were attacked by these pretended comrades upon the right rear, so that they were almost entirely destroyed. A road was thus opened across the canal, and the enemy opened out both north and south of the Quessy-Tergnier Road, cutting off those of the 3rd and 8th London who were on the farther side. These men fought to a finish, and only a few of them ever got back. Colonel Dervicke-Jones had taken up a position in an old French reserve line called the Butt line, with two companies of his battalion and some machine-guns, and was able to hold up the enemy all day in his immediate front, and to prevent several battalions from deploying out of Tergnier. The artillery also got on to the German infantry in this part of the field with good results. This Butt position was maintained until the morning of March 23. Farther up the line, in the region of the Fourteenth Division, other troubles had developed, and the pressure of the enemy was great. At 4.30 P.M. the defenders were reinforced, but the enemy were already across at several points and were advancing upon Cugny. There was desultory fighting along the whole corps front, and though there was promise of immediate French relief, no French troops seem to have been actually engaged upon March 22. About 6 o'clock in

the evening the enemy was across at Jussy Bridge and also at Montagne, but a fine counter-attack was made at this point by the 7th Bedfords and 6th Northhamptons of the 54th Brigade, aided by the 16th Lancers, which drove the German infantry across once more and caused considerable losses. In spite of this success the general situation upon the evening of March 22 was not cheering, and the task of the Third Corps which had been ordered to stand fast and form the southern hinge upon which the whole retreat should turn, was clearly a very difficult one. It was the more alarming, as the rapid progress of the enemy at Beauvais and Vaux at the centre of the army led to a demand for cavalry which could not be complied with without denuding the line to a dangerous and almost impossible extent.

March 23.

It was soon clear on the morning of March 23 that the Butt position on the right could not be maintained. The French had taken it over, but they were unable to hold it. A line was built up near Noreuil, where the remains of the 8th and 3rd Londons, aided by some French details, endeavoured all day to check the German advance. The main attacks were driving down from the north, and were heralded by a very severe machine-gun barrage, which rained bullets over the British position. The defence was much aided by a French armoured car upon the Quessy-Rouez road, and by a battery of 75's. The 4th London were to the south of the village and less exposed to the force of the advance. About six, after an hour of intense shelling, the Germans closed in upon Noreuil, the defenders, after a stout resistance which occasionally came to hand-to-hand fighting, being driven westwards. Colonel Burt, commanding the 6th Cavalry Brigade, barricaded his headquarters in the village and held the Germans off a long time by his deadly fire. It was not until long after the lines had been withdrawn that this brave officer had to be specially summoned to leave his post and fall back on Chauny. Finally, the retreat became general, but was rallied at the end of the Noreuil valley, where some 200 men collected, and with a good field of fire to help them, remained for some time on the defence. Late at night this small force was ordered to fall back to a new line at Chauny.

It has already been stated that two companies (C and D) of the 8th London (Post Office Rifles) had been cut off when the Germans got across the lock gate on the afternoon of March 22. These men, under Captain Gunning, had made a remarkable defence, crawling out with Lewis guns on to the lock gates in order to enfilade the advancing Germans. In the afternoon of March 23 they found

themselves with the Germans on three sides of them and the canal on the fourth. Captain Gunning and Captain Kelly with the survivors then fought their way through to Condren, where they still continued their resistance. These soldiers, who made so admirable a resistance, were largely men who had been combed from the Army Service Corps.

Whilst the 23rd of March had brought this heavy fighting to the 173rd Brigade, it had been a day of severe trial to all the other units of the corps front. The 54th Brigade was still covering the crossing at Jussy and Montagne, but the pressure was rapidly increasing as fresh German divisions made their presence felt. The situation was the more serious as General Butler already knew that the enemy were across the canal at Ham and had turned his left flank, but it was still hoped that a counter-attack in this quarter might throw him back, and so it was determined to hold on to the line. An emergency force of odds and ends, dismounted troopers, labour men, and returned leave men were gathered together at Crisolles and placed under the command of General Harman to co-operate with General Greenly who now led the remains of the Fourteenth Division, in guarding the left wing. Meanwhile there was very brisk fighting at Jussy, where the German infantry had once again, under the cover of many guns, got a footing upon the south side of the canal. They were at once vigorously attacked by a small body of the 11th Royal Fusiliers and of the Scots Greys and penned up in the village of Jussy. At 11 A.M. the Germans had also got across at Mennessis, but came under the fire of four machine-guns of the Canadian Mounted Brigade which inflicted heavy losses upon them. None the less at a second effort the Germans were across once more, driving back by the weight of their attack the worn ranks of the 7th Bedfords and of the 9th Scottish Rifles. At 11.30 they were half a mile south of Jussy, and might have got round the flank of the Bedfords but for the interposition of 200 Canadian dragoons. "These grim, square-faced men, with their parchment skins and their granite features, were a glad sight to our weary eyes," says one who was fighting beside them. There was a time when it was doubtful whether in this quarter there was anything but a line of dismounted troops between the enemy and Paris.

Every man who could be spared was hurried up to hold the weak points of the line, including the 8th Sussex, the pioneer battalion of the Eighteenth Division, the rest of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, and the 7th Cavalry Brigade, but the mischief had gone too far, and the situation upon the right of the line was even worse than at Jussy. The counter-attack of the French One hundred and twenty-fifth Division in the direction of Tergnier had not been a success, which is not to

be wondered at, for the French infantry had come fast and far, their ammunition was not plentiful, and they were working over strange ground against an aggressive and victorious enemy. Next to the French on that front was the 7th Queen's. Colonel Bushell found himself at one period in command of the left of the French as well as of his own Surrey men, and he led on this mixed following under an intense fire, being himself severely wounded and yet rallying them again and again. Little progress could be made, but at least he held the line firm for a time. This gallant colonel, after having his wound dressed, returned to the field of battle, fell insensible, and had at last to be carried off. Next to the 7th Queen's was the 8th East Surreys (both of 55th Brigade), which was also in the thick of the battle, as was the neighbouring 12th Entrenching Battalion. This line made a very fine resistance, but was slowly pressed back by weight of numbers until at 4 P.M. they were on the line Noreuil-Frières-Faillouel, to the left of the spot where the 173rd Brigade was still holding its ground. The remains of the 7th Buffs fell back also with the rest of the 55th Brigade, fighting hard, through Frières Wood, where to the south-west of the wood they found some old French trenches, in which, with the aid of the survivors of the Queen's, they, under Colonel Ransome, organised a line for the rest of that arduous day. This resistance held up some strong drives of the enemy which were evidently intended, in conjunction with the attack from Jussy in the north, to cut off all the troops in the woody country round Frières, and it acted as a most efficient screen during the withdrawal of the rest of the line.

The whole eastern limit of the British area was spotted at this period by small bodies of men who were working desperately to keep the German infantry from sweeping in from that side. At Noreuil, as has been shown, were the remains of the 173rd Brigade. At Frières Wood were the decimated 55th Brigade. Opposite Jussy were the 54th Brigade and the dismounted cavalry, slowly retiring before the ever-increasing pressure. In between these organised bodies were many smaller units all striving hard for the same end. Among these may be mentioned two companies of sappers, 80th and 92nd Field Companies R.E., who were extended upon the road north of Noreuil in touch with the 173rd Brigade on one side. These valiant men not only held their position all day, but actually made a counter-attack under Lieutenant Richardson in the evening, when they advanced until they were nearly surrounded. Finally they fought their way back to the Caillouel area.

As evening drew in the situation had become more and more difficult. The enemy had been driving in from every quarter all day without a respite, and the

troops, many of whom had been engaged for more than two days without a moment for rest or re-organisation, were in a great state of exhaustion. Only a handful of several battalions remained as a fighting force. The confusion was made worse by the fact that the light blue uniforms of the French were mistaken for the grey of the Germans, so that misleading and alarming reports were continually brought in to the commanders. All reserves were in the fight, and the need of relief was urgent. About 4 o'clock the Faillouel position was found to be no longer tenable, and the troops fell back through the village, which was immediately occupied by the enemy who were pushing up their troops in motor-lorries in this quarter. By 5 o'clock the right wing had come back 500 yards, and by evening the main position was at Caillouel, when the 54th assembled, numbering 650 bayonets all told, the three battalions of Bedfords, Northamptons, and Royal Fusiliers being each a little over 200 strong. Detachments of the Scots Greys and 20th Hussars joined them at that village.

The 53rd Brigade, fighting upon the left of the 55th Brigade, was as heavily engaged on March 23 as the other units of the Third Corps on the south side of the canal. At noon they had lent the 10th Essex to support their neighbours, and they consisted henceforth of only two weary battalions, the 6th Berks and 7th West Kents. At 3 o'clock in the afternoon they were heavily attacked and were pushed slowly back, struggling hard to keep the line. Major Tween led a counter-attack of his battalion headquarters, and checked the German advance at a critical moment, but was mortally wounded in the gallant endeavour. The two battalions were so weak that they had been telescoped into one, but good steel remains tough be it ever so thin, and the line still held. At 5.30 the 9th French Cuirassiers, long-booted giants, came up to help them, as did the 79th Field Company and various small details. At 7 the remains of the 55th Brigade were falling back through their ranks. When they had passed, the 53rd was also withdrawn as far as Commenchon, while the 55th reassembled at Bethencourt to the north. Three gallant Cuirassier regiments of the 1st French Cavalry Division covered the rear. All the troops that night were worn to rags, for it is to be remembered always that the great local disparity of force enabled the Germans to bring up perpetually lines of perfectly fresh men with a new impetus and inspiration, against men, many of whom had been gassed on the first day, and who were now weary to death and hardly able either to stand or to think, to order or to understand an order. On the whole long, tormented, struggling line there was no time or place where the pressure was greater than here. In spite of all the ardour of the attack the stubborn constancy of the defence may be measured by the fact that, save for one battery which was destroyed by shell-fire upon the

afternoon of the 23rd, no guns were lost in this corps either upon March 22 or 23. On the other hand, so great had been the destruction of machine-guns, especially upon the first day, that only two were left out of forty-eight in the Eighteenth Division, though these were augmented by six new ones on March 24.

The Sixth French Army, on the right of the British, was doing all it could to send up help, but it seems certain that none of this force was actually engaged before March 23, though it is stated upon good authority that in the liaison plans of the army the aid from the south was promised for the very first day. Any delay was not due to want of energy or loyalty of officers and men upon the spot. By the evening of March 23 the French units in the fighting-line were the One hundred and twenty-fifth Division, which made the unsuccessful counter-attack towards Tergnier, the First French Dismounted Cavalry Division, who fought side by side with the Eighteenth British Division, the Ninth and the Tenth French Divisions, both of which were on the extreme left of the Third Corps, and can hardly be said to have been engaged. As the French troops were now predominating in this sector, the command passed on the evening of March 23 to General Humbert, a dark, wiry little French veteran, commanding the Third Army. General Butler continued, of course, to command his own corps.

March 24.

On the morning of March 24 the situation to the south of the Crozat Canal was as follows. The Fifty-eighth Division still held its original line from Barisis to the Buttes de Rouy, with a party holding the bridgehead at Condren. Then on the general line north and north-east of Chauny were the broken but indomitable remains of the Londoners of the 173rd Brigade, mixed up with fragments of the French One hundred and twenty-fifth Division, the 18th Entrenching Battalion, and troopers of the 6th Dismounted Cavalry Brigade, together with the dust of smaller broken units. Up to La Neuville was covered by the worn brigades of the Eighteenth Division supporting the French Cuirassiers. North of that was the 326th Regiment of the Ninth French Division, and north of that what was left of the British Fourteenth Division up to a point within a mile of Cugny, which was in German hands. On the extreme left flank on this sector the Thirty-sixth Division and the 61st Brigade were in Ollezy and Eaucourt. There had been some fighting on the front of the Fifty-eighth Division during the night, but otherwise it was quiet, and the soldiers were able to snatch a few hours of sleep.

Once again there was a thick morning fog, under cover of which the German infantry broke suddenly upon the One hundred and twenty-fifth French Division, north-east of Chauny, driving them back towards Abbecourt. This placed the British troops at Condren in a perilous position, but it was essential to hold the line of the Oise, and any abandonment of the bridge would have been fatal. The Fifty-eighth Division was ordered to stand fast therefore, and the 173rd Brigade was reinforced by the 16th and 18th Entrenching Battalions. These entrenching battalions are, it may be remarked, entirely apart from the Labour Corps, and were soldiers, well officered and organised, formed from those units which remained over after the re-organisation of the three-battalion brigades. Apart from these were the labour battalions who also in those hard days were occasionally the final weight which tilts the balance where the fate of armies and finally of empires was in the scale. Manfully they rose to the occasion, and the Empire owes them a very special word of thanks. During the afternoon all the British and French troops in this quarter passed over the Oise, mostly in the Abbecourt district, blowing up the bridges behind them and passing under the command of General Duchesne of the Sixth French Army. This left a blank upon the right of the Eighteenth Division upon the north of the river, but General Seely brought up his cavalry and endeavoured to cover it, while the Second Dismounted Cavalry Division was pushed out upon the left of the Fourteenth Division in the north, to preserve the connection between the Third and Eighteenth Corps. The Third Cavalry Division under General Harman was thrown in also at this point, and about 2.30, having mounted their horses, they charged most gallantly in order to re-establish the line north of Villeselve on the front of the Ulster Division. The Royal Dragoons were prominent in this fine charge in which they sabred many of the enemy, took over 100 prisoners, and relieved the pressure upon the Irish Fusiliers of the 109th Brigade at a time when it was very heavy.

The whole corps front was slowly falling back during the day, partly on account of the steady pressure of the German attack and partly in order to conform with the line to the north. The Fourteenth Division, moving south-west through Crisolles, found itself in the evening on the west side of the Noyon Canal, covering the two crossings at Haudival and Beaurains. A vamped-up detachment of stragglers and nondescripts under Colonel Curling were placed to fill up the gap between the Fourteenth Division and Noyon. The left of the Fourteenth Division at Guiscard was covered by General Harman's detachment, and it is characteristic of the adaptability of the British soldier that seventy Northumberland Hussars who had become cyclists were suddenly whipped off

their machines, put upon horses and sent up to reinforce the thin ranks of the cavalry.

The centre of the line covering Caillouel was held all day by the Eighteenth Division, with the First French Cavalry Division still acting as a breakwater before the advancing flood. In spite of the gallant Cuirassiers the pressure was very great from the 54th Brigade who were in the north, through the 55th and down to the 53rd, which covered the north of Noyon. Some of the edge was taken from the German attack by the efficient work of the 82nd Brigade Royal Field Artillery and the 3rd and 5th Royal Horse Artillery, who were hard at it from morning to night. The French infantry on the left of the Eighteenth Division lost Guivry towards evening, but they held fast to Beaugies until after nightfall. About ten o'clock, however, the German infantry was into Beaugies, and the situation became dangerous as they were getting round the left flank of the Eighteenth Division, so that there was a general retreat to the rearward position called the Crepigny Ridge, which was not fully reached and occupied until 3 A.M. on March 25. That evening the Fifty-eighth Division reported that early in the day they had blown up all bridges and also the Royal Engineer dump at Chauny. So intersected is the whole country at the back of the line of the Fifth Army by watercourses, that the total number of bridges blown up during the retreat amounted to about 250; and only in two cases, that of the Ham Road bridge and that at Chipilly, was the result unsatisfactory.

March 25.

In the early morning of March 25 the Germans, who were still marching rapidly and fighting hard, were close to Guiscard, pushing on so swiftly that special troops had to be detailed to cover the heavy guns. General Butler had so far as possible pulled his dismounted troopers out of the fight and had restored them to their proper role, so that now he possessed a force of about 2000 horsemen, who were ready to execute the all-important functions of mounted infantry, so invaluable in a retreat. Under Generals Greenly and Pitman these horsemen did great work during the remainder of the operations.

Since the German pressure was still very heavy and the enemy were sweeping onwards in the north, it was necessary to continue the withdrawal of the line north of the Oise, while holding fast to the southern bank along its whole length. The first movement in this withdrawal was to the line Mondescourt-Grandru, and the second to the line Appilly-Babœuf-Mont de Béthéricourt. By

8.30 the Eighteenth Division in the middle of the line was effecting this retirement, the northern flank, which was the post of danger, being covered by the 11th Royal Fusiliers of the 54th Brigade. It was a most difficult and delicate business with the enemy pressing down continually through the woods and villages with which the country is studded. On the south the 53rd Brigade and the French Cuirassiers were withdrawing through Mondescourt in some disorder. When the troops were rallied and rearranged, there were no French troops upon the right. At 10 A.M. the 54th Brigade had reached the Grandru position, but were out of touch both with the French on their left and with the 55th Brigade on their right. They therefore continued to fall back upon Béthéricourt. At 1 o'clock a strong German infantry attack, in many lines, developed upon the right near Appilly and a heavy machine-gun barrage burst out over the 53rd Brigade and their immediate comrades upon the right, the 289th French Regiment. Up to 3 o'clock the Allies in this quarter were retiring under a very heavy fire, much helped by four valiant cars of the French Cavalry's Mitrailleuses Automobiles, who did splendid service in covering the exhausted infantry. The German infantry, pressing eagerly forward in expectation of that general débacle which never occurred, was riddled by the fire of these motor-guns and left swathes of dead behind them. The attack had the effect, however, of driving back the Allied line to such a point that a French force which was defending Mont Béthéricourt was entirely isolated and in great peril of destruction. Under these circumstances the French officer in command appealed to General Sadleir-Jackson of the 54th Brigade to make a great effort to rescue his imperilled men. Sadleir-Jackson without hesitation led back his men into the village of Babœuf, cleared it of the Germans, captured ten machine-guns with nearly 300 prisoners, and regained touch with the French, who were enabled to withdraw. The 7th Bedfords and 11th Royal Fusiliers were the heroes of this chivalrous exploit, where we were able to repay the loyalty which the French have so often shown to us. It should be added that a company of the 12th Entrenching Battalion, which like all the other entrenching units had gone through this severe infantry fighting without light artillery, signals, or any of the ordinary adjuncts of well-equipped infantry, was still so full of military spirit that without orders it joined in this victorious charge.

On March 25 the Germans were within shelling distance of Noyon, and the British evacuated successfully nearly 2000 wounded from that town. The counter-attack of the 54th Brigade had stopped the German advance for a time, and the Eighteenth Division was able to get across the river Oise, the guns and transport passing in the afternoon while the infantry got across that night and in

the morning of March 26, without serious molestation, being covered by their sappers and pioneers, who blew up the bridges as soon as the troops were safely across. At two in the morning of March 26 the French abandoned Noyon. At this time there were no British troops upon the north of the river save the remains of the Fourteenth Division which were finally relieved upon this date, and the Second and Third Cavalry Divisions, now under Generals Pitman and Portal, who harassed the German advance at every opportunity, and rendered constant help to the French rearguards. The Second Cavalry Division secured the high ground immediately west of Noyon, and held it until it could be handed over to the French infantry. The general line of the cavalry was facing north-east from west of Noyon, through Suzoy to Lagny, where they were in touch with the Tenth French Division. The left of the Second Cavalry Division had been prolonged by the addition of the Canadian Dismounted Brigade. These men soon found themselves involved in some hard fighting, for the Germans attacked the French at Lagny and drove them out. On one occasion this day, at the Bois des Essarts, the troopers of the Second British Cavalry Division galloped through the French infantry to hold off the attacking Germans, an episode in which Lieutenant Cotton and other officers gained the honour of mention in the French order of the day. The left of the cavalry was compelled to fall back finally to Dives, and the Canadians after a determined struggle were driven out of the woods which they occupied. Finally, the 3rd Cavalry Brigade (Bell-Smyth), consisting of the 5th and 16th Lancers with the 4th Hussars were nearly surrounded, and had the greatest difficulty in fighting their way out. Before night they were in touch once more both with the French and with their comrades of the 4th Brigade. On the morning of March 27 word came that the British cavalry was imperatively needed at the junction between the French and British armies. It was despatched forthwith to do splendid service in the north after having played a glorious part in the south.

March 28.

From now onwards the fighting upon the Roye and Montdidier front (both towns passed soon into German possession) was no longer connected with the Third Corps. The position to the south of the Oise showed that the Fifty-eighth British Division held from Barisis to Manicamp. Thence to Bretigny was the One hundred and twenty-fifth French Division. Thence to the east of Varennes were the Fifty-fifth French Division, with cavalry, and the First French Division up to Sempigny. Thence the line ran in an irregular curve through Lassigny to Canny, the enemy being well past that line on the north, and the direction of

attack being rather from the north-west. On the morning of March 28 orders were issued that the remains of the Third Corps should be transferred to the north, where they should join their comrades of the Fifth Army, from whom they were now separated by a considerable distance. Within the next two days, after some difficulties and delays in extricating the artillery, these orders were carried out, though it was not till some days later that the Fifty-eighth London Division could be relieved. This unit had not, save for the 173rd Brigade, been engaged in the recent fighting, but it had held a line of over ten miles of river, along the whole of which it was within touch with the enemy. One effort of the Germans to get across at Chauny on March 31 was met and repelled by the 16th Entrenching Battalion, who killed many of the assailants and captured nearly 100 prisoners.

So ended the vicissitudes of the Third Corps, which had the strange experience of being swept entirely away from the army to which it belonged, and finding itself under French command, and with French troops fighting upon either wing. Its losses were exceedingly heavy, including 20 heavy and 100 field-guns, with about 15,000 killed, wounded, or missing. The Fourteenth Division was the chief sufferer with 5880 casualties, 4500 of which came under the head of "Missing," and represent the considerable detachments which were cut off in the first day of the battle. The losses of some of the battalions approached annihilation. In spite of all pressure and all misfortunes there was never a time when there was a break, and the whole episode was remarkable for the iron endurance of officers and men in the most trying of all experiences—an enforced retirement in the face of an enemy vastly superior both in numbers and in artillery support. When we realise how great was the disparity it is amazing how the line could have held, and one wonders at that official reticence which allowed such glorious epics to be regarded as part of a great military disaster. Against the two and a half British divisions which were in the line on March 21 there were arrayed seven German divisions, namely, the Fifth Guards, First Bavarians, Thirty-fourth, Thirty-seventh, One hundred and third, Forty-seventh, and Third Jaeger. There came to the Third Corps as reinforcements up to March 26 two British cavalry divisions, one French cavalry division, and three French infantry divisions, making eight and a half divisions in all, while seven more German divisions, the Tenth, Two hundred and eleventh, Two hundred and twenty-third, Eleventh Reserve, Two hundred and forty-first, Thirty-third, and Thirty-sixth, came into line, making fourteen in all. When one considers that these were specially trained troops who represented the last word in military science and efficiency, one can estimate that an unbroken retreat may be a

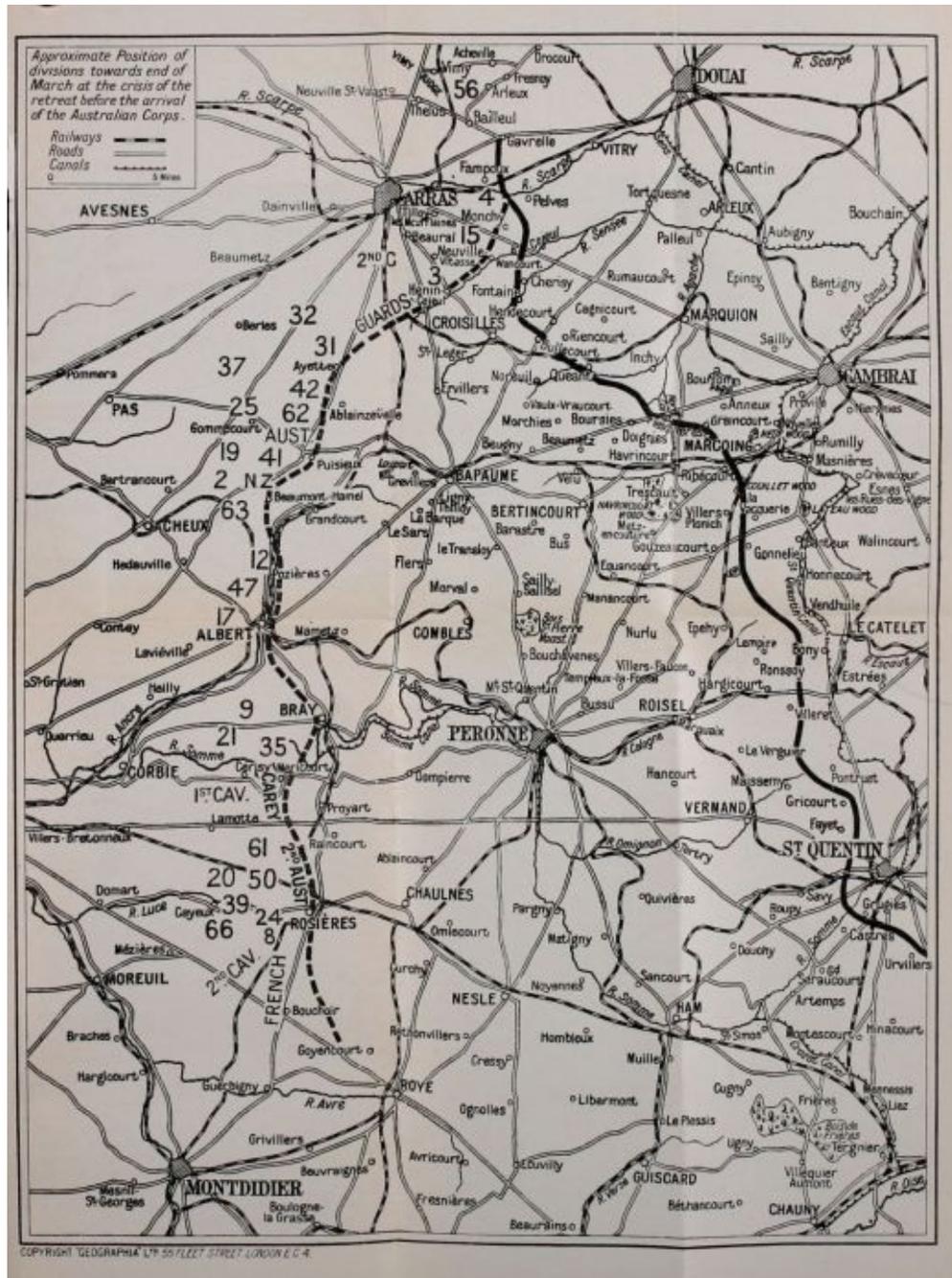
greater glory than a victorious advance.

Every arm—cavalry, infantry, and artillery—emerged from this terrible long-drawn ordeal with an addition to their fame. The episode was rather a fresh standard up to which they and others had to live than a fault which had to be atoned. They fought impossible odds, and they kept on fighting, day and night, ever holding a fresh line, until the enemy desisted from their attacks in despair of ever breaking a resistance which could only end with the annihilation of its opponents. Nor should the organisation and supply services be forgotten in any summing up of the battle. The medical arrangements, with their self-sacrifice and valour, have been already dealt with, but of the others a high General says: "A great strain was also cast upon the administrative staffs of the army, of corps and of divisions, in evacuating a great mass of stores, of hospitals, of rolling stock, of more than 60,000 non-combatants and labour units, while at the same time supplying the troops with food and ammunition. With ever varying bases and depots, and eternal rapid shifting of units, there was hardly a moment when gun or rifle lacked a cartridge. It was a truly splendid performance."

We have now traced the movements and the final positions of the eight corps which were involved in this terrible battle from the foggy morning which witnessed the German attack, up to those rainy days of early April which showed a stable line—a line which in spite of occasional oscillations continued from that date until the great British victory in August, to mark the point of equilibrium of the giant forces which leaned from east and from west. In this account we have seen the Seventeenth and Sixth Corps in the north fall back upon Arras and the Vimy Ridge, where they turned and dealt their pursuers such a blow that the battle in that sector was at an end. We have seen the Fourth, Fifth, and Seventh Corps struggling hard to make a line from Arras to Albert and down to the Somme; we have seen the Nineteenth Corps covering a huge front and finally holding firm near Villers-Bretonneux, and we have seen the Eighteenth and Third Corps intermixed with our French Allies helping to determine the line in the southern area of the great field of battle. That line running just to the west of Montdidier, Moreuil, and Albert was destined for four months to be a fixed one, though it was advanced during that time by the splendid audacity of the Australians, who gave their opponents no rest, and finally, with the help of the British Eighth Division, entirely re-won the town of Villers-Bretonneux when it was temporarily lost, and extended our outposts a mile or more to the east of it, as will be presently described. Save for this action there was no movement of importance during that time, though the general set of the tide was rather

eastwards than westwards.

One cannot leave so vast a theme as the second battle of the Somme without a few words as to the general impression left upon the mind of the writer by the many documents bearing upon the subject which he has had to peruse. In the first place, we cannot possibly deny that it was a great German victory, and one which was well earned, since it depended upon clever and new dispositions entailing laborious preparation with the intelligent and valiant co-operation of officers and men. The overpowering force of the blow, while it removed all reproach from those who had staggered back from it, depended upon the able way in which it was delivered. Having said so much, we must remind the German commentator that he cannot have it both ways, and that if a gain of guns, prisoners, and ground which fails to break the line is, as we admit, a victory to the Germans, then a similar result is a victory to the British also. He cannot claim the second battle of the Somme to be a victory, and yet deny the term to such battles as Arras, Messines, and Passchendaele. The only difference is that the Germans really did try to break the line upon March 21, and failed to do so, while no such design was in General Haig's mind during the battles of 1917, save perhaps in the last series of operations.



Position at the Close of the Great Retreat, March 30

There was a regrettable tendency after the battle to recriminations in the Press, and General Gough, who had been the head of the Fifth Army, was sacrificed without any enquiry as to the dominant force which he had to face, or as to the methods by which he mitigated what might have been a really crushing disaster. It can be safely stated that in the opinion of many of those who are in the best position to know and to judge, there was absolutely nothing upon the

military side which could have been bettered, nor has any suggestion ever been made of anything which was left undone. The entrenching had been carried out for several months with an energy which raised protests from the men who had to do it. There might almost be room for the opposite criticism that in the constant work of the navy the training of the soldier had been unduly neglected; but that was the result of the unavoidable scarcity of non-military labour. The extension of the front was undoubtedly too long for the number of men who had to cover it; but this was done at the express request of the French, who had strong military reasons for drawing out and training a number of their divisions. It was taking a risk undoubtedly, but the risk was forced upon the soldiers, and in any case the French have taken risks before now for us. The blowing up of the bridges was well done, and the only exception seems to have been in the case of railway bridges which, for some reason, were taken out of the hands of the army commander. The reserves were insufficient and were perhaps too far back, but the first item at least depended upon the general weakness of manpower. Nowhere can one lay one's hand upon any solid ground for complaint, save against the rogues and fools of Brest-Litovsk, who by their selfish and perjured peace enabled the Germans to roll a tidal wave of a million men from east to west, with the certainty that they would wash away the first dam against which they struck. If there is any military criticism to be made, it lies rather in the fact that the French help from the south was nearly sixty hours before it made itself felt at the nearest part of the British line, and also in the surprising number of draft reserves kept in England at that date. Within a month of the battle 350,000 had been sent to the front—a very remarkable feat, but a sign, surely, of an equally remarkable omission. Had ten emergency divisions of infantry been made out of the more forward of these drafts, had they been held ready in the rear zones, and had the actual existing reserves been pushed up to the front, it is safe to say that the German advance would have been stopped earlier and would probably not have got beyond the Peronne-Noyon line. If, as was stated in Parliament, it was confidently expected that the German attack would strike exactly where it did, then it does seem deplorable that the nearest reserve to the Fifth Army, a single division, had, through our weak man-power, to be kept at a three days' journey from the point of danger. If, instead of searching the record of the General for some trace of weakness, our critics had realised the rapidity of his decision, with the moral courage and grasp of actuality which he showed by abandoning his positions—no easy thing for one of his blood and record—and falling back unbroken upon a new line of defence beyond the German heavy artillery, they could not have failed to admit that the country owes a deep debt of gratitude to General Gough. Had he hesitated and his army been isolated and

destroyed, the whole war might well have taken a most sinister turn for the worse.

Granting, however, that the disaster was minimised by the prompt appreciation of the situation by the General in command, by the splendid work of his four corps-commanders, and by the co-operation of every one concerned, it is still undeniable that the losses were very heavy, and the result, even after making every allowance for German wastage, a considerable military disaster. In killed, wounded, and missing in the Fifth Army alone the figures could not be less than 50,000, including Feetham and Malcolm, army divisional generals, with Dawson, Bailey, White, Bellingham, and numerous other brigadiers and senior officers. In field-guns 235 were so lost or destroyed out of 600, in medium heavies 108 out of 494, in 8-inch or over pieces 19 out of 98. Great quantities of stores, especially at Ham, fell into the hands of the enemy, but so far as possible they were burned or made useless. Bad as the episode seemed at the time, it is clear now to any one who looks back upon it that it had no evil effect upon the result of the war. The Germans were exposed to very heavy losses which they could ill afford. They have admitted to 180,000 in documents published since the armistice but this may be an understatement. They were drawn away from their famous lines to which they did not return until they were so reduced that they could not hold them. Finally, it led to that concentration of power in the hands of Marshal Foch which was worth many sacrifices to attain. Sir Douglas Haig, from his many services and long experience, might well have put forward claims to the supreme place, and it is characteristic of the nobility of this great soldier that it was in response to a telegram from him to the Prime Minister, in which he named General Foch for the position, that the change was eventually carried through.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SOMME FRONT FROM APRIL 1 ONWARDS

The last waves of the storm—The Twelfth Division at Albert—The Forty-seventh Division at Aveluy Wood—The Australians in the south—Capture of Villers-Bretonneux by the Germans—Recapture by Australians and Eighth Division—Fierce fighting—The first turn of the tide.

April 1918.

The limit and results of the second battle of the Somme had been defined when the Australians, New Zealanders, Second Canadians, and fresh British divisions took the place of their exhausted comrades towards the end of March. The German reserves, great as they were, were nearly exhausted, and they had no more men to put into the fight. The final line began to clearly define itself, running from a few miles east of Arras where the Seventh and Sixth Corps had struck back so heavily at the German pursuit, through Neuville Vitasse, Boyelles, Alette, Bucquoy, Hebuterne, Auchonvillers, Aveluy, just west of Albert, Denancourt, Warfusee, and Marcelcave. The worst storm was over, but even as the sinking sea will still send up one great wave which sweeps the deck, so the German battle front would break from time to time into a spasm of energy, which could effect no great purpose and yet would lead to a considerable local engagement. These episodes must at least be indicated in the order of their occurrence.

One great centre of activity was the ruined town of Albert, for the Germans were able to use it as a covered approach, and thus mass their troops and attempt to break through to the westward. The order of divisions in this sector showed that the Sixty-third and Forty-seventh, still fighting in spite of their wounds, were to the immediate north-west. The Twelfth Division was due west. South-west was the Third Division of Australians and south of these the Fourth. On each of these, and sometimes upon all of them, the strain was very great, as the Germans struggled convulsively to burst the bonds of Albert. It should be noted that the Fifth Army had for the time passed out of being, and that all the southern end of the line was now held by the Fourth Army under General Rawlinson.

April 4.

The main attack upon the Albert sector was on April 4, when the Germans made a violent effort, and the affair reached the proportions of a considerable battle. About eight in the morning the action began by a severe and sudden attack upon the Australian Division 1000 yards south of Albert, and also on the railway near Denancourt. The Australians fought as Australians have always fought in this war, but the onset was very heavy, supported by a shattering fire, and they were forced to yield some ground.

April 5.

North of the Australians was the Twelfth Division with the 35th and 36th Brigades in the line, in that order from the south. The temporary recoil of the Australians rendered the 35th Brigade vulnerable, and the Germans with their usual quick military perception at once dashed at it. About 1 o'clock they rushed forward in two waves, having built up their formation under cover of the ruined houses of Albert. The attack struck in between the 7th Suffolks and 9th Essex, but the East Anglians stood fast and blew it back with their rifle-fire, much helped by the machine-guns of the 5th Berks. Farther north the attack beat up against the left of the Forty-seventh and the right of the Sixty-third Divisions, but neither the Londoners nor the naval men weakened. The pressure was particularly heavy upon the Forty-seventh, and some details of the fighting will presently be given. The next morning, April 5, saw the battle still raging along the face of these four divisions. The Germans attempted to establish their indispensable machine-guns upon the ridge which they had taken on the south, but they were driven off by the Australians. The 36th Brigade in the north of the Albert sector had lost some ground at Aveluy, but about noon on April 5 the 9th Royal Fusiliers with the help of the 7th Sussex re-established the front, though the latter battalion endured very heavy losses from an enfilade fire from a brickfield. The 5th Berks also lost heavily on this day. So weighty was the German attack that at one time the 4th Australians had been pushed from the high ground, just west of the Amiens-Albert railway, and the 35th Brigade had to throw back a defensive wing. The position was soon re-established, however, though at all points the British losses were considerable, while those of the Germans must have been very heavy indeed.

It has been stated that to the north of the Twelfth Division, covering Bouzincourt and partly occupying Aveluy Wood, was the Forty-seventh Division (Gorringe), which had been drawn out of the line, much exhausted by its prolonged efforts, some days before, but was now brought back into the battle. It stood with the 15th and 20th London of the 140th Brigade on the right, while the 23rd and 24th of the 142nd Brigade were on the left. Units were depleted and the men very weary, but they rose to the crisis, and their efforts were essential at a time of such stress, for it was felt that this was probably the last convulsive heave of the dying German offensive. It was on April 5 that the German attack from the direction of Albert spread to the front of the Forty-seventh Division. The bombardment about 8 A.M. reached a terrific pitch of intensity and was followed by an infantry advance through clouds of gas and smoke. The main attack fell upon the left of the divisional line, and was met by a sustained rifle, Lewis gun, and artillery fire, which could not be faced by the

stormers. At one time the left of the 23rd London was penetrated, but a rally re-established the position. The enemy were rushing forward in mass formations, and their desperate tactics offered targets which ensured very heavy losses.

About 9 o'clock the right brigade was also involved in the fighting, the enemy advancing in force towards Aveluy Wood. Here also the assault was very desperate and the defence equally determined. The 15th (Civil Service Rifles) was heavily attacked, and shortly afterwards the Blackheath and Woolwich men of the 20th Battalion saw the enemy in great numbers upon their front. The whole line of the division was now strongly engaged. About 10 A.M. a company of the 24th London was driven from its position by concentrated rifle-grenade fire, but a support company sprang to the front and the line was unbroken. At 10.30, however, things took a grave turn, for a sudden rush brought the assailants into the line between the two left flank battalions, outflanking and destroying the outlying company of the 23rd London. These men fought bravely to the end and took heavy toll of the enemy. At the same time the 20th London came under a shattering shell-fire which put every Lewis gun out of action. It was also enfiladed by machine-guns from the corner of Aveluy Wood, where the Germans had penetrated the line. The 20th threw out a defensive flank and held on. The 15th on their right were still in their original positions.

At 11.40 the 23rd London, which had suffered from the German penetration of its left company, was exposed all along its line to machine-gun fire from its left rear, where the enemy had established three posts. The result was that the position in Aveluy Wood had to be abandoned. The 22nd London from the reserve brigade was now pushed up into the firing-line where the pressure was very great. The weight of the attack was now mainly upon the 20th, who held their posts with grim determination in spite of very heavy losses, chiefly from trench mortars and heavy machine-guns. It was a bitter ordeal, but the enemy was never able to get nearer than 300 yards to the line of the 20th, and if they caused heavy losses they endured as much from the British fire. About 12.40 the enemy seemed to be mustering at the south end of the wood for a grand final attack, but the gathering was dispersed by the machine-guns of the Londoners.

At four in the afternoon, after a truly terrible day, the Forty-seventh Division determined to counter-attack, and the 22nd Battalion was used for this purpose. They had already endured heavy losses and had not sufficient weight for the purpose, though eight officers and many men had fallen before they were forced to recognise their own inability. The failure of this attack led to a further

contraction of the line of defence. The Sixty-third Division on the left had endured a similar day of hard hammering, and it was now very exhausted and holding its line with difficulty. For a time there was a dangerous gap, but the exhausted Germans did not exploit their success, and reserves were hurried up from the Marines on the one side and from the 142nd Brigade on the other to fill the vacant position.

When night fell after this day of incessant and desperate fighting the line was unbroken, but it had receded in the area of Aveluy Wood and was bent and twisted along the whole front. General Gorringe, with true British tenacity, determined that it should be re-established next morning if his reserves could possibly do it. Only one battalion, however, was available, the pioneer 4th Welsh Fusiliers, who had already done conspicuous service more than once during the retreat. An official document referring to this attack states that "no troops could have deployed better or advanced more steadily under such intense fire, and the leadership of the officers could not have been excelled." The casualties, however, were so heavy from the blasts of machine-gun fire that the front of the advance was continually blown away and no progress could be made. Two platoons upon the left made some permanent gain of ground, but as a whole this very gallant counter-attack was unavailing.

This attack near Albert on April 4 and 5 was the main German effort, but it synchronised with several other considerable attacks at different points of the line. One was just north of Warfusee in the southern sector, where once again the Australians were heavily engaged and prevented what at one time seemed likely to be a local break-through. As it was the line came back from Warfusee to Vaire, where the Australian supports held it fast. Farther north the Fourth Australian Division was sharply attacked opposite Denancourt, and had a very brisk fight in which the 13th Brigade, and more particularly the 52nd Regiment, greatly distinguished itself. The object of the fight was to hold the railway line and the position of the Ancre. The tenacity of the Australian infantry in the face of incessant attacks was most admirable, and their artillery, ranging upon the enemy at 1500 yards, as they came over the higher ground behind Denancourt, inflicted very heavy losses. One gun fired 1250 rounds without a stop.

The village of Hangard and Hangard Wood were at that time the points of junction between the French and British armies. The extreme right unit of the British was Smith's 5th Brigade of the Second Australian Division (Rosenthal). The 20th Battalion on the southern flank was involved on this and the following

days in a very severe and fluctuating fight in which Hangard Wood was taken and lost several times. Colonel Bennett, an Australian veteran whose imperial services go back as far as the Suakin expedition, had to cover 3500 yards with 600 men, knowing well that there were no reserves behind him and that the point was vital. With heavy losses he managed, with the 19th Battalion beside him, to dam the German flood until help could arrive. So fierce was the fighting that 750 dead Germans were picked up in the Hangard Wood. On April 7 the wood was abandoned, but under no compulsion and in accordance with the general movement of the line.

April 5 and 6.

About 10 A.M. on April 6 the enemy renewed his attack upon the junction between the Forty-seventh and Sixty-third Divisions, but it was the British turn to mow down advancing lines with machine-gun fire. No progress was made, and there were such signs of German weakening that the British made a sudden local advance, capturing two machine-guns and some prisoners. In this affair it is characteristic of the spirit which still remained in the weary British troops, that Corporal March of the 24th London went forward and shot the opposing German officer, bringing back his maps and papers.

The German commanders were well aware that if the line was to be broken it must be soon, and all these operations were in the hope of finding a fatal flaw. Hence it was that the attacks which began and failed upon April 4 extended all along the northern line on April 5. Thus the New Zealand Division on the left of the points already mentioned was involved in the fighting, the right brigade, consisting of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade, being fiercely attacked by some 2000 storm troops who advanced with great hardihood, and at the second attempt recaptured the farm of La Signy. The German officers seem upon this occasion to have given an example to their men which has often been conspicuously lacking. "A tall Wurtemburger," says the New Zealand recorder, "ran towards our line with nine of his men. In one hand he carried a cane and over his arm a light waterproof coat. He was a fine big fellow over six feet high.... Just at the critical moment some Lewis-gunners took a hand in the business, the officer was shot dead, and most of the others were killed or wounded."

On the left of the New Zealanders the attack was extended to the road between Alette and Bucquoy. Here a brigade of the Thirty-seventh Division in the south and of the Forty-second in the north were heavily attacked and Bucquoy was taken, but before the evening the defenders returned and most of the lost ground was regained. The right of the Thirty-seventh Division had advanced in the morning upon Rossignol Wood, that old bone of contention, and had in a long day's struggle got possession of most of it. Three machine-guns and 130 men were the spoils.

April 21, 22.

From this time onwards there were no very notable events for some weeks in the Somme line, save for some sharp fighting in the Aveluy Wood sector on April 21 and 22, in which the Seventeenth, Thirty-fifth, and Thirty-eighth Divisions were all involved. The enemy tried hard to improve his position and did succeed in gaining some ground. The attacks were costly to both sides but the results were futile. The British outposts, and particularly those of the Australians, maintained an aggressive attitude throughout, and it was more and more impressed upon the German mind that in spite of his considerable advance and large captures, it was an unbeaten army which lay before him.

April 24.

On the morning of April 24 a very determined attack was made by the Germans upon the front of Butler's Third Corps in the area of Villers-Bretonneux. This small town is of great importance, as it stands on a curve of the rolling downs from which a very commanding view of Amiens is obtained, the cathedral especially standing out with great clearness. Already the city had suffered great damage, but the permanent loss of Villers-Bretonneux would mean its certain destruction. The attack was urged by four German divisions and was supported by tanks which did good service to the enemy and broke in the British line, held mainly at this point by Heneker's Eighth Division which had hardly recovered from its heroic services upon the Somme.

It is suggestive of the value of the tanks whether in German or in British hands that where the attack was unsupported by these machines it broke down under the British fire, as on the right of Cator's Fifty-eighth Division to the south and on the left of the Eighth Division. There were fifteen German tanks in all, so their array was a formidable one, the more so in a mist which was impenetrable at fifty yards. It was for the British now to experience the thrill of helpless horror which these things can cause even in brave hearts when they loom up out of the haze in all their hideous power. The 2/4th Londons on the south of the village were driven back to the line Cachy-Hangard Wood, so that their neighbours of the 2/2nd London had to conform. The 2/10th London counter-attacked at once, however, and penetrated Hangard Wood, doing something to ease the situation. The 2nd Middlesex and 2nd West Yorks were overrun by the tanks, much as the Roman legionaries were by the elephants of Pyrrhus, and even the historical and self-immolating stab in the belly was useless against these monsters. The 2nd Rifle Brigade were also dislodged from their position and had to close up on the 2nd Berkshires on their left. The 2nd East Lancashires had also to fall back, but coming in touch with a section of the 20th Battery of divisional artillery they were able to rally and hold their ground all day with the backing of the guns.

The 2nd Devons in reserve upon the right were also attacked by tanks, the first of which appeared suddenly before Battalion Headquarters and blew away the parapet. Others attacked the battalion, which was forced to move into the Bois d'Aquenne. There chanced to be three heavy British tanks in this quarter, and they were at once ordered forward to restore the situation. Seven light whippet tanks were also given to the Fifty-eighth Division. These tanks then engaged the enemy's fleet, and though two of the heavier and four of the light were put out of action they silenced the Germans and drove them back. With these powerful allies the infantry began to move forward again, and the 1st

Sherwood Foresters carried out a particularly valuable advance.

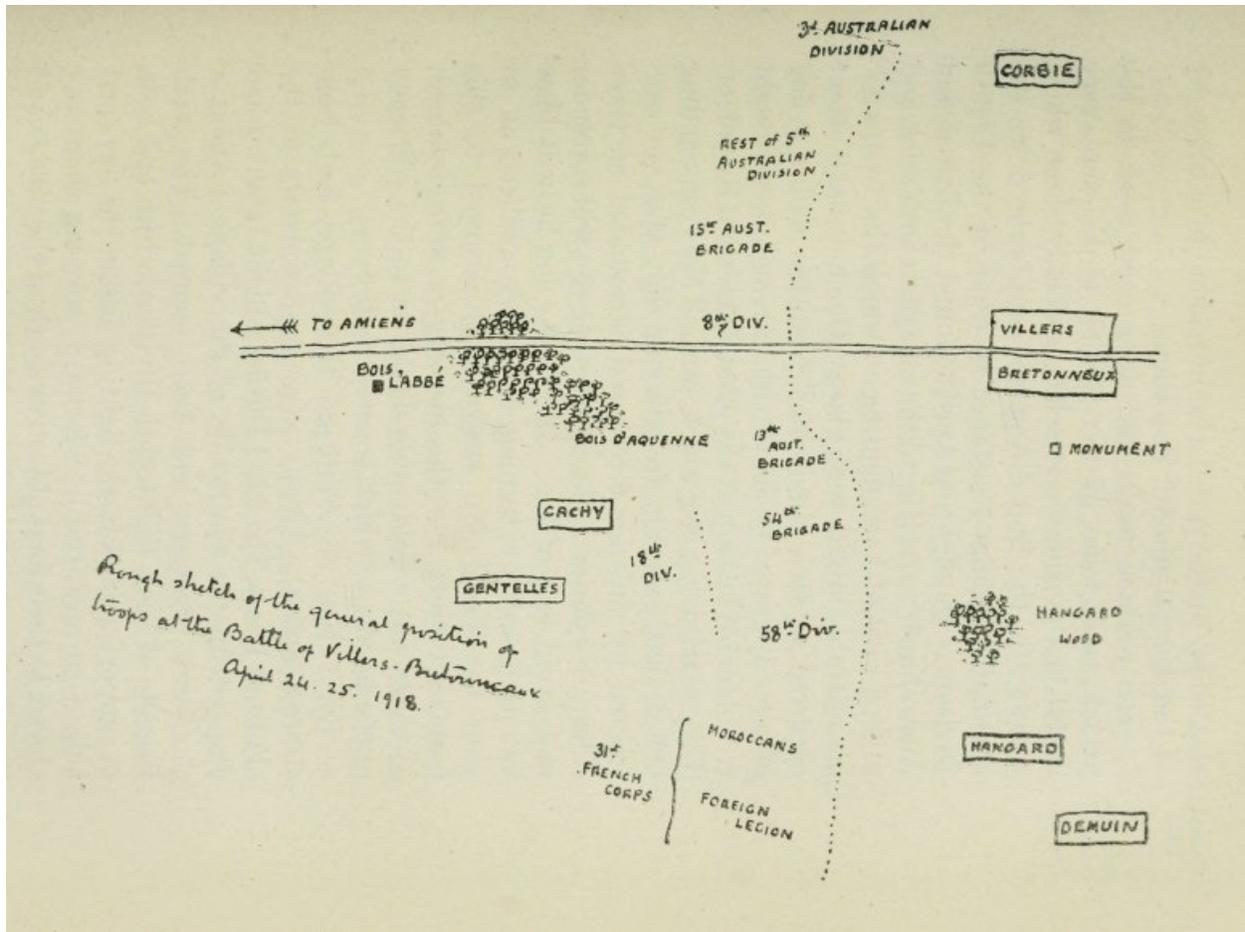
Shortly after noon the 173rd Brigade of the Fifty-eighth Division saw the Germans massing behind tanks about 500 yards east of Cachy, with a view to attacking. There were three whippets still available, and they rushed out and did great work, catching two German battalions as they deployed.

The Fifty-eighth had good neighbours upon their right in the shape of the Moroccan corps, a unit which is second to none in the French Army for attack. These were not engaged, but under the orders of General Debeney they closed up on the left so as to shorten the front of General Cator's division, a great assistance with ranks so depleted. His troops were largely lads of eighteen sent out to fill the gaps made in the great battle, but nothing could exceed their spirit, though their endurance was not equal to their courage.

On the evening of April 24 General Butler could say with Desaix, "The battle is lost. There is time to win another one." The Germans not only held Villers-Bretonneux, but they had taken Hangard from the French, and held all but the western edge of Hangard Wood. The farthest western point ever reached by the Germans on the Somme was on this day when they occupied for a time the Bois l'Abbé, from which they were driven in the afternoon by the 1st Sherwoods and 2nd West Yorks. They had not attained Cachy, which was their final objective, but none the less it was very necessary that Villers-Bretonneux and the ground around it should be regained instantly before the Germans took root.

For this purpose a night attack was planned on the evening of April 24, and was carried out with great success. The operation was important in itself, but even more so as the first sign of the turn of the tide which had run so long from east to west, and was soon to return with such resistless force from west to east.

For the purposes of the attack the fresh 13th Australian Brigade (Glasgow) was placed under the General of the Eighth Division, and was ordered to attack to the south of Villers, while the 15th Australian Brigade made a similar advance upon the north. Each of these was directed to pass beyond the little town, which was to be cleared by an independent force. On the right of the Australians was the balance of the Eighth Division, which had to clear up the Bois d'Aquenne.



Rough Sketch of the General Position of Troops at the Battle of Villers-Bretonneux, April 24-25

The attack was carried out at 10 P.M., the infantry having white arm-bands for identification in the darkness. There was no artillery preparation, and the advance was across unknown country, so that it may be placed among the most hazardous operations in the war. In the case of the 13th Australian Brigade, the 52nd Battalion was on the right in touch with the British, while the 51st was on the left, with the 50th in support. From the onset the machine-gun fire was very severe, especially against the 51st Regiment, but the admirable individuality of the Australian soldiers was of great service to them, every man getting forward through the darkness as best he could. The weather was ideal, for there was sufficient moon to give direction, but not enough to expose the troops to distant fire. The German flares were rather a help to the attack by defining the position. The Australian front got as far forward as Monument Wood, level with the village, but the 173rd Brigade on their right was in some difficulty, and they themselves were badly enfiladed from the town, so they could not maintain their

more advanced position. The 2nd Northhamptons, attached to the 13th Australian Brigade, had been told off to take the town itself, but both their colonel and their adjutant were killed during the assembly, and some confusion of orders caused the plans to miscarry. On the north of the town the 15th Australian Brigade, with the 22nd Durhams attached, had been an hour late in starting, but the 60th and 59th Regiments got up, after some confused fighting, to a point north of the town, which was entered after dawn and cleared up by the 2nd Berkshires, aided by a company of the Australian 58th Battalion.

The German tanks had done good work in the attack, and some of the British tanks were very useful in the counter-attacks, especially three which operated in the Bois d'Aquenne and broke down the obstinate German resistance in front of the Eighth Division. Daylight on April 25 found the British and Australian lines well up to the village on both sides, and a good deal of hard fighting, in which the troops got considerably mixed, took place. One unusual incident occurred as two blindfolded Germans under a flag of truce appeared in the British line, and were brought to Colonel Whitham of the 52nd Australian Regiment. They carried a note which ran: "My Commanding Officer has sent me to tell you that you are confronted by superior forces and surrounded on three sides. He desires to know whether you will surrender and avoid loss of life. If you do not he will blow you to pieces by turning his heavy artillery on to your trenches." No answer was returned to this barefaced bluff, but the messengers were detained, as there was considerable doubt as to the efficiency of the bandages which covered their eyes.

By 4 P.M. on April 25 the village had been cleared, and the troops were approximately in the old front line. The 22nd Durham Light Infantry had mopped up the south side of the village. About a thousand prisoners had been secured. The 54th Brigade of Lee's Eighteenth Division, which had been in support, joined in the fighting during the day, and helped to push the line forward, winning their way almost to their final objective south of the village and then having to yield 200 yards to a counter-attack. The fast whippet tanks were used during this action, and justified themselves well, though, as in the case of all tanks, the value of the instrument depends mainly upon the courage of the crew who handle it. One British tank, under the command of a leader named Craig, seems to have been all over the field wherever it was most needed, so that some weeks after the fight the present chronicler in visiting the field of battle still heard the legend of his prowess. As to the German resistance a skilled observer remarks: "The enemy handled his machine-guns with great boldness.

The manner in which he pushes forward numbers of guns, relying upon the daring and initiative of the crews to use them to best advantage, may lead to a greater number being lost, but he certainly inflicts enormous casualties in this way."

April 26.

There was an aftermath of the battle on April 26 which led to some very barren and sanguinary fighting in which the losses were mainly incurred by our gallant Allies upon the right. There was a position called The Monument, immediately south of Villers, which had not yet been made good. The Moroccan Division had been slipped in on the British right, and their task was to assault the German line from this point to the north edge of Hangard Wood. Part of the Fifty-eighth Division was to attack the wood itself, while on the left the Eighth Division was to complete the clearance of Villers and to join up with the left of the Moroccans. The Eighth Division had already broken up three strong counter-attacks on the evening of April 25, and by the morning of April 26 their part of the programme was complete. The only six tanks available were given to the Moroccans. At 5.15 on the morning of April 26 the attack opened. It progressed well near the town, but on the right the Foreign Legion, the very cream of the fighting men of the French Army, were held by the murderous fire from the north edge of Hangard Wood. The 10th Essex and 7th West Kents, who had been lent to the Fifty-eighth Division by the 53rd Brigade, were held by the same fire, and were all mixed up with the adventurers of the Legion, the losses of both battalions, especially the West Kents, being terribly heavy. The Moroccan Tirailleurs in the centre were driven back by a German counter-attack, but were reinforced and came on again. Hangard village, however, held up the flank of the French. In the evening about half the wood was in the hands of the Allies, but it was an inconclusive and very expensive day.

The battle of Villers-Bretonneux was a very important engagement, as it clearly defined the *ne plus ultra* of the German advance in the Somme valley, and marked a stable equilibrium which was soon to turn into an eastward movement. It was in itself a most interesting fight, as the numbers were not very unequal. The Germans had five divisions engaged, the Fourth Guards, Two hundred and twenty-eighth, Two hundred and forty-third, Seventy-seventh Reserve, and Two hundred and eighth. The British had the Eighth, Fifty-eighth, Eighteenth, and Fifth Australian, all of them very worn, but the Germans may also have been below strength. The tanks were equally divided. The result was

not a decided success for any one, since the line ended much as it had begun, but it showed the Germans that, putting out all their effort, they could get no farther. How desperate was the fight may be judged by the losses which, apart from the Australians, amounted to more than 9000 men in the three British divisions, the Fifty-eighth and Eighth being the chief sufferers.

As this was the first occasion upon which the Germans seem to have brought their tanks into the line of battle, some remarks as to the progress of this British innovation may not be out of place—the more so as it became more and more one of the deciding factors in the war. On this particular date the German tanks were found to be slow and cumbrous, but were heavily armed and seemed to possess novel features, as one of them advanced in the original attack upon April 24 squirting out jets of lachrymatory gas on each side. The result of the fighting next day was that two weak (female) British tanks were knocked out by the Germans while one German tank was destroyed and three scattered by a male British tank. The swift British whippet tanks were used for the first time upon April 24, and seem to have acted much like Boadicea's chariots, cutting a swathe in the enemy ranks and returning crimson with blood.

Treating the subject more generally, it may be said that the limited success attained by tanks in the shell-pocked ground of the Somme and the mud of Flanders had caused the Germans and also some of our own high authorities to underrate their power and their possibilities of development. All this was suddenly changed by the battle of Cambrai, when the Germans were terrified at the easy conquest of the Hindenburg Line. They then began to build. It may be said, however, that they never really gauged the value of the idea, being obsessed by the thought that no good military thing could come out of England. Thus when in the great final advance the tanks began to play an absolutely vital part they paid the usual price of blindness and arrogance, finding a weapon turned upon them for which they had no adequate shield. If any particular set of men can be said more than another to have ruined the German Empire and changed the history of the world, it is those who perfected the tank in England, and also those at the German headquarters who lacked the imagination to see its possibilities. So terrified were the Germans of tanks at the end of the war that their whole artillery was directed to knocking them out, to the very great relief of the long-suffering infantry.

From this time onwards this front was the scene of continuous aggressive action on the part of the Australians, which gradually nibbled away portions of

the German line, until the day came for the grand advance of August 8. One of the most successful of these was on May 19, when the village of Ville-sur-Ancre was taken by a sudden assault with 20 machine-guns and 360 prisoners. A second very sharp fight, which may be mentioned here, though it is just beyond the scope of this volume, was on July 1 and following days in the Aveluy sector, near the Ancre, where the Twelfth and Eighteenth Divisions had three bouts of attack and counter-attack, in which the 37th and 54th Brigades were heavily engaged, the honours of the action being about equally divided between the British and the Germans.

CHAPTER IX

THE BATTLE OF THE LYS

April 9-12

The Flanders front—Great German onslaught—Disaster of the Portuguese—Splendid stand at Givenchy of the Fifty-fifth Division—Hard fight of the Fortieth Division—Loss of the Lys—Desperate resistance of the Fiftieth Division—Thirty-fourth Division is drawn into the Battle—Attack in the north upon the Ninth, Nineteenth, and Twenty-fifth Divisions—British retreat—General survey of the situation.

Nearly a hundred German divisions had been used against the British alone in the great offensive which began on March 21 and ended in the first week of April. At this time the British forces in France, including Portuguese and Overseas divisions, numbered sixty in all. Of these no less than forty-four had been engaged in the great battle, and all of these were either still in the line, tied to the Amiens front, or else had been drawn out in a shattered and disorganised condition, having lost on an average not less than from 4000 to 5000 men each. It will be seen that there was only a very small margin over, and that if the Germans by a supreme effort had burst the line and reached the estuary of the Somme, it would have been possible to have caused a great military disaster. Especially would this have been the case if the northern flank of the British could have been driven in as well as the southern, for then the mutilated and shaken army would have been hurled in upon itself and would have found itself

crowded down upon a sea-coast which would have given few facilities for embarkation. In the hopes of a *débauche* in the south the Germans had prepared out of their huge reserves a considerable force in the north which would have formed the second claw of their deadly embrace. When the first claw missed its grip and could get no farther it was determined that the other should at least go forward and endeavour to reach the Channel ports. Although the Somme estuary had not been attained, none the less the Germans knew well that three-quarters of the whole British force had been engaged, and that most of it was not fit to take its place in a renewed battle. Therefore they had reason to hope for great results from their new offensive in Flanders, and they entered upon it with a good heart.

The omens were certainly propitious, but there were two factors which were in favour of the British—factors which could not yet have been adequately appreciated by the Germans. The first was the new unity of command under General Foch, a soldier famous for his writings in peace and for his deeds in war. This great leader, who had distinguished himself again and again since the first month of the war, when he had played a vital part in checking the German rush for Paris, was selected with the cordial consent of every one concerned, and especially of Sir Douglas Haig, as Generalissimo of the Allied forces. Therefore a common control and a common policy were ensured, so that the German chiefs could not turn their whole force upon half of the Allies with the assurance that the other half would find the operations outside their war map. Hence the British in Flanders, though they would have to fight their own battle for a week or two, could count confidently upon receiving help at the end of that time.

The second and more immediate factor, was that by a fine national effort a splendid stream of efficient drafts had been despatched from England during the great battle—young soldiers it is true, but full of spirit and most eager to meet the Germans and to emulate the great deeds of their elders. Their training had been short, but it had been intense and practical, with so excellent a result that one could but marvel at the old pre-war pundits who insisted that no soldier could be made under two years. These high-spirited lads flocked into the depleted battalions, which had often to be reformed from the beginning, with a skeleton framework of officers and N.C.O.'s upon which to build. It was of course impossible to assimilate these drafts in the few days at the disposal of the divisional generals, but at least they had adequate numbers once more, and they must be taught to be battle-worthy by being thrown into the battle, as Spartan fathers have taught their boys to swim.

One more sign of the times was the quick appreciation by the American authorities of the desperate nature of the crisis all along the Allied line. With magnanimous public spirit they at once gave directions that such American troops as were available and had not yet been formed into special American divisions should be placed under British or French command and fitted temporarily into their organisation. The few complete organised American divisions in France had been on the Alsace line, but some of these were now brought round to thicken the French army on the Oise. But most important of all was the effect upon the shipment of American troops, which had averaged about 50,000 a month and now rose at a bound to 250,000, a number which was sustained or increased for several months in succession. This result was helped by the whole-hearted co-operation of the British mercantile marine, which was deflected from its other very pressing tasks, including the feeding of the country, in order to carry these troops, and actually handled about two-thirds of them whilst the British Navy helped to find the escorts. So efficiently were the transport arrangements carried out both by British and Americans; that when a million men had been conveyed they were still able to announce that the losses upon the voyage were practically nil. Even the lie-fed bemused German public began to realise in the face of this fact that their much boomed submarines were only one more of their colossal failures.

The German attack upon the British lines by the army of General von Quast in Flanders broke on the morning of April 9. There had been considerable shelling on the day before along the whole line, but as the hour approached this concentrated with most extreme violence on the nine-mile stretch from the village of Givenchy in the south to Fleurbaix, which is just south of Armentières in the north. This proved to be the area of the actual attack, and against this front some eight German divisions advanced about 6 o'clock of a misty morning. So shattering had been their bombardment and so active their wire-cutters, who were covered by the fog, that the advanced positions could hardly be said to exist, and they were able to storm their way at once into the main defences.

The point upon which this attack fell was held the by four divisions, all of which formed part of Horne's First Army. The general distribution of the troops at that time was that the Second Army stretched from the junction with the Belgians near Houthulst Forest down to the Messines district where it joined the First Army. The First Army had weakened itself by an extension to the south, and Plumer's force was about to extend also, and take over the Laventie district, when the storm suddenly burst upon the very point which was to be changed.

Two corps were involved in the attack, the Fifteenth (De Lisle) in the Armentières region, and the Eleventh (Haking) in the region of Givenchy. The latter had two divisions in the line, Jeudwine's Fifty-fifth West Lancashire Territorials defending the village and adjacent lines, while the Portuguese Second Division (Da Costa) covered the sector upon their left. The depleted Fiftieth Division (Jackson) was in immediate reserve. On the left of the Portuguese was Ponsonby's Fortieth Division which had lost five thousand men in the Somme battle only a fortnight before, and now found itself plunged once more into one of the fiercest engagements of the war, where it was exposed again to very heavy losses.

The main force of the German attack fell upon the Portuguese line, and it was of such strength that no blame can be attached to inexperienced troops who gave way before so terrific a blow, which would have been formidable to any soldiers in the world. The division held the line from 2000 yards south of Richebourg l'Avoué to the east of Picantin, a frontage of 9350 yards, or more than half of the total front of the assault. The division had all three brigades in the line, and even so was very extended to meet a serious assault. The 3rd Brigade from the First Portuguese Division was in immediate support. The 5th Brigade was on the right, covering Le Touret, the 6th in the middle, and the 4th on the left, covering Laventie. Behind the whole position lay the curve of the River Lys, a sluggish stream which moves slowly through this desolate plain, the Golgotha where so many men have died, Indians, French, British, and German, since the first months of the war. In all that huge flat canalised space it was only at Givenchy that some small ridge showed above the dreary expanse.

The Portuguese had been in the line for some months, but had never experienced anything to approach the severity of the shattering bombardment which poured upon them from four in the morning. When an hour or two later the storming columns of the German infantry loomed through the thick curtain of mist, the survivors were in no condition to stand such an attack. All telephone and telegraph wires had been cut within the first half-hour, and it was impossible to direct any protective barrage. The artillery in the rear, both British and Portuguese, had been much weakened by a concentration of gas-shells extending as far as Merville, so that the infantry were left with insufficient support. The gunners stood to their work like men, and groups of them continued to fire their guns after the infantry had left them exposed. These brave men were killed or captured by the enemy, and their batteries were taken. In the rear the roads had been so shattered by the German fire that it was impossible to get a tractor or

lorry up to the heavy guns, and there was no way of removing them. All observers agree that the crews of the heavy guns did excellently well. The whole front had fallen in, however, and in spite of scattered groups of infantry who showed the traditional Portuguese courage—that courage which had caused the great Duke to place them amongst his best soldiers—the position was in the hands of the enemy. By mid-day they were at Le Touret upon the right, and the guns there were blown up and abandoned. About the same time they had reached Estaires upon the left and Bout Deville in the centre. Before evening the German line was four miles from its starting-point, and had reached the River Lawe, a small affluent of the Lys. From this time onwards the Fiftieth Division, coming up from the rear, had taken over the front, and the Portuguese were out of the battle. The Germans in their day's work had taken 6000 prisoners and 100 guns, many of them in ruins. It should be mentioned that the Portuguese ordeal was the more severe, as breast-works had taken the place of trenches in this sector. All were agreed that General da Costa did what was possible. "He is a fine man, who does not know what fear is," said a British officer who was with him on the day of the battle.

The caving in of the front of the line had a most serious effect upon the two British divisions, the Fifty-fifth and the Fortieth, who were respectively upon the right and the left of the Portuguese. Each was attacked in front, and each was turned upon the flank and rear. We shall first consider the case of the Fifty-fifth Division which defended the lines of Givenchy with an energy and success which makes this feat one of the outstanding incidents of the campaign. This fine division of West Lancashire Territorials, containing several battalions from Liverpool, had some scores to settle with the Germans, by whom they had been overrun in the surprise at Cambrai at the end of the last November. At Givenchy they had their glorious revenge.

The position of the Fifty-fifth Division was a strong one, extending for some thousands of yards from the hamlet of Le Plantin in the south to Cailloux in the north, with a section of the old British line a thousand yards in front, a deserted trench half full of water and festooned with rusty wire. There were outpost companies along the scattered line of ruined houses, and a few posts were thrown far out near the old trench. The village line consisted of a series of well-concealed breast-works and loopholed walls without any continuous trench, the whole so cunningly arranged that it was difficult to get the plan of it from in front. Each post or small fort had its own independent scheme of defence, with good enfilade fire, concrete emplacements, belts of wire, and deep ditches.

Very early in the day the left flank of the position had been entirely exposed by the retirement of the Portuguese, so that during the whole long and desperate struggle the general formation of the division was in the shape of an L, the shorter arm being their proper front, and the longer one facing north and holding up the German attack from inside the old lines. The northern defensive flank does not seem to have been entirely improvised, as some precautions of this nature had already been taken. The new front extended from the hamlet of Loisne upon the stream of that name, through a second hamlet called Le Plantin, and so down to the canal. The first strain of the fighting fell chiefly upon the 165th Brigade (Boyd-Moss), consisting of three battalions of the famous King's Liverpool Regiment. The 6th and 7th Battalions were in the line with the 5th in support at Gorre, but as the day wore on and the pressure increased, units from both the other brigades were drawn into the fight, so that all participated in the glory of the victory. By 8.30 the flank was entirely naked, and the Germans in small but audacious bodies, with a constant rattle of rifle and machine-gun fire, were pushing in between the outer posts of the British division, overwhelming and obliterating some of them by a concentrated fire of trench mortars. Some of these isolated garrisons held out in the most desperate fashion, and helped to take the pressure off the main village line. One particularly brilliant example was that of Captain Armstrong of the 1/4th South Lancashires, who with A Company of that battalion defended a moated farm, literally to the death, having been warned that it was a key position.

About mid-day the German attack was still creeping in, and had gained one important outpost called Princes' Island. The 10th Liverpool Scots from the 166th Brigade, a battalion which has a great record for the war, had come up to thicken the line of defenders. Amid the crash and roar of constant shells, and a storm of bullets which beat like hail upon every wall and buzzed through every crevice, the stubborn infantry endured their losses with stoic patience, firing steadily through their shattered loopholes at any mark they could see. At 1 o'clock some audacious stormers had got so far forward on the left that they were in the rear of the Brigade Headquarters, and were only held there by spare men from the transport lines who chanced to be available. The attack was drifting down more and more from the new ground, so about this hour the 5th South Lancashires, also of the 166th Brigade, were sent across to the north of Loisne to hold the stream. Each flank was attempted in turn by the wily assailants, so that when the left proved impervious they charged in upon the right, and captured Windy Corner, which is near the canal upon that side, continuing their advance by attacking Le Plantin South from the rear and the flank, so that the defenders

were in an impossible position. Having taken this point it seemed as if the Germans would roll up the whole long thin line from the end, and they actually did so, as far as Le Plantin North. Here the British rallied, and the survivors of the 6th and 7th King's made a furious advance, pushed the Germans back, retook Le Plantin South, and captured a number of prisoners. The position was still serious, however, as the Germans held Windy Corner, and had penetrated between the British right and the canal, so as to get into the rear of the position. A great effort was called for, and the men responded like heroes. The 2/5th Lancashire Fusiliers from the 164th Brigade (Stockwell) had come up, and these fine soldiers, with the weary remains of the two King's Liverpool battalions, rushed the whole German position, dragging them out from the pockets and ruins amid which they lurked. In this splendid counter-attack more than 700 prisoners were taken in all, with a number of machine-guns. At the end of it the British right was absolutely intact.

Whilst these stirring events had taken place on the right flank, there had been heavy fighting also on the left. Here the British defence had been based upon two small but strong forts, called Cailloux North and Route A Keep. The latter fell early in the action, the German infantry coming upon it so unexpectedly in the fog that the machine-guns were at the moment mounted upon the parapet and elevated for indirect fire. They were put out of action, and the place was surrounded and taken. This greatly weakened the left wing of the defence. Farther still to the left the Germans were pushing through Loisne, and the fort called Loisne Central was heavily engaged. This portion of the line was held by the 166th Brigade. Once the German wave actually lapped over into the little fort, but the place was not taken, and its machine-guns still clattered and flashed. All day the Germans were held at this point though the pressure was great. During the night the 13th King's Liverpools from the 9th Brigade were sent as a reserve to the weary line. At 7.40 on the morning of April 10 the enemy, under cover of a murderous barrage, attacked Loisne once more, striving hard to break in the left of the British defence. The garrison suffered terribly, but none the less the stormers were shot back into their shell-holes and lurking-places. Two successive attacks on the forts of Cailloux and Festubert had no better success and were less strongly urged. At seven in the evening they again, with a sudden rush, got a footing in the fort of Loisnes, and again were driven out, save for twenty-one who remained as prisoners. Another day had passed, and still Lancashire stood fast and the lines were safe. On April 11 the whole position was swept by a heavy shell-storm, and the German infantry clustered thickly in front of the crumbling barricades. The guns both of the Fifty-fifth and of the

Eleventh Division played havoc with them as they assembled, so that the attack was paralysed on the right, but on the left the two little forts of Festubert East and Cailloux were both overwhelmed. The former, however, was at once retaken by a mixed storming party from the 5th and 13th King's Liverpools. Late in the evening Cailloux Keep was also stormed, and once more the position was intact.

There was now only Route A Keep in possession of the enemy, and it was determined to regain it. The guns had quickly registered upon it during the day, and at midnight they all burst into a concentrated bombardment which was followed by a rush of two companies, one drawn from the Liverpool Scots and the other from the 13th King's Liverpools. The place was carried by assault, and the garrison held it strongly on the 12th and 13th against a series of attacks. It was a most murderous business, and the brave little garrisons were sadly cut about, but they held on with the utmost determination, having vowed to die rather than give the fort up. The survivors were still there, crouching among the ruins and exposed to constant heavy shelling, when on April 15 the old epic was ended and a new one was begun by the relief of the Fifty-fifth Division by Strickland's First Division. The episode will live in history, and may match in tenacity and heroism the famous defence of Ovillers by the German Guards. The casualties were heavy, but it may be safely said that they were small compared with those of the attacking battalions.

The story has been carried forward in this quarter for the sake of connected narrative, but we must now return to the events of April 9, and especially to the effect produced upon the Fortieth Division by the exposure of their southern flank. This fine unit, with its terrible wounds only half healed, was exposed all day to a desperate attack coming mainly from the south, but involving the whole of their line from Laventie to Armentières. The division, which is predominantly English, but contains one brigade of Highland troops, fought most valiantly through the long and trying day, enduring heavy losses, and only yielding ground in the evening, when they were attacked in the rear as well as in front and flank.

In the morning the Fortieth Division had the 119th Brigade (18th Welsh, 21st Middlesex, and 13th East Surrey) on the right, while the 121st Brigade (20th Middlesex, 12th Suffolks, and 13th Yorks) was on the left, joining up with Nicholson's Thirty-fourth Division which held the Armentières front. The right of the Fortieth was involved in the heavy initial bombardment and also in the subsequent infantry advance, which established a footing in the front trenches of

the 119th Brigade. Whilst a counter-attack was being organised to drive the stormers out, it was found that the right and the rear of the position were threatened by the advance through the Portuguese. The 120th Scottish Brigade in reserve was ordered to form a defensive flank, but the 10/11th Highland Light Infantry, the nearest unit, found itself almost overlapped, and the brigade had to fall back upon the bridges at Nouveau Monde in order to protect the river crossings. The 2nd Scots Fusiliers covered the bridge-head, while the whole of the 119th Brigade fell back to the line of the Lys, save only the garrison of Fleurbaix. The 121st Brigade was still holding its line in the Bois Grenier sector. By 1 o'clock the bulk of the Fortieth Division was across the Lys, the bridges being destroyed one by one as the day advanced. The destruction was not in all cases complete, and in that of the Pont Levis at Estaires was absolutely checked by a chance shell which destroyed the leads, and prevented the explosion. The enemy, under cover of machine-guns mounted in the houses of Bac St. Maur, were able to cross the river here and get a footing upon the northern bank. The 74th Brigade from the Twenty-fifth Division and the 150th from the Fiftieth were coming up, however, and it was still hoped that the German advance might be checked. So severe had the fighting been that the 18th Welsh had only 5 officers and 120 men standing in the evening.

The 121st Brigade were in the meanwhile endeavouring to hold the Fleurbaix defences on the left of the line. At 11.30 A.M. the Germans were in the east of the village, but the 12th Suffolks, who formed the garrison, put up a most determined resistance, in which they were aided by a company of the 12th Yorkshires Pioneer Battalion. It was not till 5.30 that the village was nearly enveloped, and the troops had to make their way as best they could to the north bank of the Lys. The 20th Middlesex and 13th Yorkshires, with their flank badly compromised, still held on to the Bois Grenier sector. These battalions on the left were taken over by the Thirty-fourth Division, with whom they were now in close liaison.

On the morning of April 10 the two brigades which had crossed the river were in very evil case, having sustained heavy losses. They were concentrated about Le Mortier. The 74th Brigade was in position south of Croix du Bac in touch on the right with the 150th Yorkshire Territorials. All day the enemy were pushing west and north, but meeting a strong resistance from the British who had an excellent trench, the Steenwerck switch, to help them. Some ground was lost, but much of it was regained in the evening by a spirited counter-attack of the 14th and 10/11th Highland Light Infantry, the 2nd Scots Fusiliers, and the 21st

Middlesex, which advanced over 600 yards. The pressure was great and unceasing, however, so that the morning of April 11 found the line farther back again. The two brigades were reduced to about 1000 men, who were concentrated at Strazeele, while the 92nd and 93rd Brigades of the Thirty-first Division came up in their place. A brave counter-attack by the 93rd Brigade at Le Verrier gained its objective, but created a dangerous gap between it and the 92nd Brigade on its right, which was filled, however, by the 11th East Yorkshires. On the 12th the remains of all three brigades were strung out to cover Strazeele and Hazebrouck from the east and south-east, but next day they were relieved by the welcome appearance of the First Australian Division, whose advent will afterwards be explained. It had been a very desperate term of service, in which for three days the sappers of the 224th, 229th, and 231st Field Companies Royal Engineers had to fight as hard as the infantry. The Fortieth, like the other divisions described, were driven back, but only as the buffer is driven back, with the ultimate result of stopping the force which drove it. They were much aided by the guns of the Fifty-seventh Division under General Wray. The losses of the division were 185 officers and 4307 other ranks. When one reflects that the losses on the Somme three weeks before had been equally heavy, one can but marvel.

We shall now follow the fortunes of the Thirty-fourth Division (Nicholson), which was on the immediate left of the Fortieth, covering a sector of 8000 yards, including the town of Armentières. On the north, near Frelinghien, it joined the right of the Twenty-fifth Division. On the night of April 7 the enemy fired an enormous number, 30,000 or 40,000, gas-shells into Armentières, and soaked it to such an extent with mephitic vapours that it became uninhabitable. Otherwise there was no warning of an impending attack, which came indeed as a surprise to all the forces engaged.

On April 9 the division lay with the 103rd Brigade upon the right section and the 102nd upon the left, with the guns of the Thirty-eighth Division behind them. The main attack on this day was entirely upon the two divisions, the Portuguese and the Fortieth, to the south. There was heavy shelling, however, of the back areas, especially Armentières and Erquinghem. When as the day advanced everything on the right had given way or weakened, the 103rd Brigade threw back a long thin defensive line, facing south, which ended in the direction of Fleurbaix. At the same time the reserve 101st Brigade was ordered up to cover Bac St. Maur Bridge. One battalion of the Reserve Brigade, the 11th Suffolks, got into Fleurbaix, when by a happy chance they were able to reinforce their

own comrades of the 12th Battalion. These two sturdy East Anglian units held the village in a very desperate fight for many hours. The 15th and 16th Royal Scots of the the same brigade had some hard fighting also as they continued the defensive line formed by the 103rd Brigade, and tried to prevent the victorious Germans from swarming round and behind the Thirty-fourth Division. Some idea of the danger may be gathered from the fact that of two brigades of artillery engaged one was firing south-west and the other due east. The original front was never in danger, but it was a desperate conflict upon the refused flank.

During the afternoon the Germans crossed the Lys at Saily and Bac St. Maur, though the bridge at the latter place had been destroyed. Their progress, however, had slowed down and become uncertain. The 74th Brigade of the Twenty-fifth Division had come under the orders of General Nicholson, and was at once directed against the village of Croix du Bac, with the ultimate design of recovering the Bac St. Maur crossing. The 74th Brigade succeeded in clearing Croix du Bac of the enemy, but night fell before they could get farther. The morning found this brigade sandwiched in between the Fortieth and Thirty-fourth Divisions, while the 147th Brigade had also moved up in support. It was soon found, however, that the enemy had got so far west in the south that they outflanked the 74th Brigade, who had to retire on April 10 through Croix du Bac and Steenwerck. On the same morning the Twenty-fifth Division had been attacked near Frelinghien, and the Germans penetrated as far as the northern bend of the Lys, north of Armentières. The left of the Thirty-fourth Division was now entirely in the air. It was clear, therefore, that a retirement north of the Lys was necessary, and about 3 P.M. in a sedate and orderly fashion it was started and carried through, covered by the fire of the 147th Brigade. The Thirty-fourth drew off in fine order, the rearguards stopping from time to time, especially in the streets of Armentières, for the purpose of beating back the advancing German patrols. All bridges were destroyed, and no unwounded prisoners were left. The men of the Thirty-fourth were loud in praise of the way in which the Yorkshire Territorials of the 147th Brigade covered their right flank during this difficult and dangerous extrication. We will now, having traced the effects upon the Fifty-fifth to the south, and upon the Fortieth and Thirty-fourth Divisions to the north, return to the situation created on April 9 by the breaking of the Portuguese.

Jackson's Fiftieth Division, without its artillery, had only arrived from the Somme on April 8, having lost half its old soldiers, so that 50 per cent of the personnel were drafts. It had also suffered severely in officers, and was very

battle-weary and exhausted. It was placed in billets at Merville, with two battalions of the 151st Brigade holding redoubts at Lestrem south of the Lys close to Estaires.

As soon as it was seen that the situation was serious, about 8 o'clock in the morning, the division was put in motion. The 151st Brigade was ordered to extend its left into Estaires, while the 150th prolonged the line north of Estaires. The 149th was held in reserve, though one of its battalions, the 4th Northumberland Fusiliers, was sent in to strengthen the right. The intention was that the Fiftieth Division should hold the line until the reserves could be brought to the point of danger.

By two in the afternoon the Germans could be seen all along the front, and some of the Portuguese had made their way through and between the ranks. A very heavy fire was opened by both lines of infantry, and the Germans advancing by short rushes made continuous progress towards the eastern bank of the stream. Yorkshire and Durham stood solid upon the farther side, however, and 5000 recruits endured a long and terrible baptism of fire from the afternoon to the evening of that spring day. It was on the right at Lestrem, where the British were to the east of the Lys, that the pressure was most severe, and eventually the 151st Brigade found it impossible to hold this point, while farther to the north, upon the left of the Yorkshire men, the German infantry of the 370th Regiment had won a footing upon the western bank of the Lys at Saily and Bac St. Maur. The British guns were beginning to concentrate, however, and invaluable time had been gained by the resistance of the Fiftieth Division. As night fell the 5th Durhams were still holding Estaires, while the 5th and 6th Northumberland Fusiliers from the reserve were standing firm along the stretch north and east of Estaires. Farther north still were the 4th East Yorks, 4th Yorks, and 5th Yorks in that order from the south, all very weary, but all holding tenaciously to their appointed line. During the night the Fifty-first Highland Division (Carter-Campbell) came up on the right of the 151st Brigade to cover the weak point at Lestrem and all the line to the south of it. A brigade of the Twenty-fifth Division also came up to Steenwerck north of where the river line had been broken, but it was too late for an effective counter-attack, as considerable forces were already across, which were spreading out north and south on the western bank.

The fall of night made no change in the battle, and the darkness was lit up by the red glare of the incessant fire. For many hours the line was held, though the

Germans had brought up fresh divisions for their attack. Early in the morning of April 10, however, they won a footing in Estaires, which was desperately defended by the 5th Durhams. By 8.45, after long-continued street fighting, the Germans held the whole town, with the exception of the south-western extremity. The fight raged all day backwards and forwards through this little straggling place, the infantry upon either side showing the most determined valour. About 9.30 the 6th Northumberland Fusiliers, under Colonel Temperley, made a brilliant counter-attack, crossing 1500 yards of open country with only three batteries to cover the movement. Before 10 o'clock they were into Estaires and had cleared the main street, rushing house after house and driving the Germans down to the river edge, where they rallied and remained. The 149th Brigade had promptly sent forward its machine-guns, and these were mounted on the highest houses at the south end of the town, to fire on any enemy reserves coming up south of the Lys. They raked the Germans on the farther bank and caused heavy losses. All day the remains of the 5th Durhams and 6th Northumberlands fought desperately in Estaires, and held nearly all of it in the evening, which was in a way a misfortune, since it allowed the Germans to concentrate their heavies upon it during the night in a whole-hearted fashion which rendered it absolutely untenable. The morning of April 11 found Estaires a No Man's Land between the lines of infantry. In spite of a fresh advance by the 4th and 5th Northumberland Fusiliers, it was found impossible to regain the place, while the Germans gradually extended their line from the river crossings which they had retained all through. By mid-day on April 11, the British line was 500 yards west of the town.

In the southern portion of the line the 151st Brigade of Durhams had been slowly forced back from the Lestrem sector until they were on the line of the Lys, which they reached in the evening of April 10. At that date the 150th Yorkshire Brigade was still firm upon the river, but the left-hand battalion, the 5th Yorks, had thrown back its flank, since the enemy, brushing aside the right wing of the Fortieth Division, had crossed the stream and turned the Fiftieth from the north. The Fortieth was still fighting hard, as already described, and endeavouring to hold back the attack, so that the German advance was slow. Early in the morning of April 11 the attack became very severe, and broke through to the west of Estaires—the river at this point runs from west to east—driving back the Durham Brigade, which was absolutely exhausted after forty-eight hours of ceaseless fighting without assistance. Their resistance had been an extraordinarily fine one, but there comes a limit to human powers. The whole division was at the last extremity, but fortunately at 12 o'clock on the 11th, two

brigades of the Twenty-ninth Division (Cayley) came up in relief. So close was the fighting, however, and so desperate the situation, that General Riddell of the 149th Northumberland Fusiliers Brigade refused to disengage his men from the battle, since the confusion of a relief might have led to disaster. He was at the time holding the line astride the Meteren Becque, north of Estaires, covering about 1000 yards of vital ground. Here the Germans attacked all day, making prodigious efforts to push the 4th and 5th Northumberland Fusiliers out of Trou Bayard. The ground between this point and Pont Levis, the bridge at the east end of Estaires, was dead flat, and afforded no particle of cover. Fifteen British machine-guns stationed beside the infantry swept all this expanse, and cut down each wave of attack. Four times the place was supposed to have fallen, and four times the Germans fell back, leaving long grey swathes of their dead. It was not until 3 P.M. that the stubborn Northumbrians found that their right was completely exposed, and were forced to retire from a position which they had sold at a terrible price.

Instead of dying down the German advance was attaining a greater proportion with every day that passed, for it seemed to their commanders that with so favourable an opening some very great success lay within their power. In spite of the arrival of the Fifty-first and Twenty-ninth Divisions the battle raged most furiously, and the weight of the attack was more than the thin line could sustain. The Germans had rapidly followed up the 151st Brigade as it drew out, and there was a fierce action round Merville and Robermetz in the early afternoon of April 11. The exhausted Durhams turned furiously upon their pursuers, and there was fierce hand-to-hand work in which even General Martin and his Headquarters Staff found themselves handling rifles and revolvers. The Thirty-first Division (Bridgford) had come up and taken position in the rear of the Twenty-ninth, with their left flank facing east to hold off the enemy, who were now close to Steenwerck in the north. By nightfall Merville had gone, and so had Neuf Berquin, which lay between the 151st and the 149th Brigade, rather in the rear of the latter's right. At this period the Twenty-ninth Division, with the Thirty-first behind it, was on the left or north of the 149th Brigade, covering the ground between Neuf Berquin and Steenwerck. The enemy had turned the right of this line as already described, and now through the events in the north, which will soon be narrated, the left of the Twenty-ninth Division was also turned, and the situation became most dangerous, for the enemy was in great force in front. A consultation was held by the various general officers affected, and it was decided to make a side slip under the cover of darkness to the line of Vierhouck-Meteren Becque. The British had to fight, however, to gain this position, so far had the

enemy outflanked them, and when the 149th Brigade, with their indomitable Northumbrians, now reduced to a few hundred men, had cut their way through to Vierhouck it was only to find it empty and the British line about 1000 yards to the west of it, where the 4th Guards Brigade of the Thirty-first Division had just begun to arrive. The Northumbrians held on to Vierhouck none the less on the morning of April 12, and the Guards Brigade came forward.

Whilst this stern fighting had been in progress, and while the Fifty-fifth kept its iron grip upon Givenchy and Festubert, the Fifty-first Highland Division to its north, along the line of the Lawe Canal, had been very hard pressed. All three brigades had been engaged in most desperate defence and counter-attack, the fighting being so close that two at least of the Brigadiers had been compelled to drop maps and binoculars, while they seized rifles from their orderlies. The canal was half dry and offered a poor front, but it was sustained until the Germans got across in the north where the left flank of the 153rd Brigade was turned and had to fall back. The Gordons and Black Watch of this unit fought most fiercely in the neighbourhood of Vieille Chapelle, and the Germans will long remember their meeting with the clansmen. Finally their line swung back west of Lestrem, keeping in touch with the right flank of the Fiftieth Division.

At this period the 184th Brigade was the only one in the Highland Division which was still capable of service, for the others had lost so heavily and were so wearied that rest was absolutely necessary. The Sixty-first Division (Colin Mackenzie), still very weak after its service on the Somme, came up in the Robecq sector, and, with the aid of the surviving Highland Brigade, formed a barrier to the terrific German pressure, the whole coming under General Mackenzie. This line was held by these troops up to the 23rd of April.

Meanwhile, to revert to the early days of the battle, the German attack was raging with great fury upon the centre and left of this line, and finding a gap between the Twenty-ninth Division and the 149th Brigade it poured through it with most menacing results, but the 4th Guards Brigade counter-attacked and retrieved the situation west of the Vieux Berquin-Neuf Berquin Road, as will be told in detail in the next chapter. Farther north, however, the German attack made more progress and rolled forward to the south of the village of Merris. The 6th Northumbrians with only two officers left standing—one of them their gallant Colonel, Temperley,—still held on to their old stance at Vierhouck, though reduced to the strength of a company, and in such a state of physical exhaustion that the men fell to the ground fast asleep between the attacks. One

young soldier woke up during his nap to find the Germans among them, on which he sprang up, shot the German officer, and organised a charge which re-established the line. As darkness fell on the evening of April 12 the survivors of the Fiftieth Division were drawn from the line, though some were so entangled with other units that they stayed and shared in the severe fighting of April 13.

As already shown the Givenchy bastion was held firm, which meant that the Fifty-first Division was also to some extent helped to resist attack, since an enfilade fire from the Fifty-fifth would beat upon any advance against them. Such advances were repeatedly made upon April 11 and were splendidly countered. North of this point the Fiftieth, Twenty-ninth, and Thirty-first Divisions had all suffered heavily, while the line had been bent back in a curve from the La Bassée Canal to a maximum depth of ten miles, ending on the night of April 12 in a position from west of Merville through the two Berquins to Merris. The Twenty-ninth Division, which is a particularly good comrade in a tight place, had been very hard pressed, with its brigades sent hither and thither wherever a leak was to be stopped. It was in this action that Colonel Forbes Robertson, one of the heroes of Cambrai, earned the coveted Cross by fighting on horseback at the head of his men like some knight of old, and repeatedly restoring the line when it was broken. In spite of all valour, however, the general movement was westwards. Whilst these misfortunes had occurred in the southern sector, others not less serious had occurred in the north, owing to the great extension of the German attack. It is to these that we must now turn.

The enemy had achieved a considerable success upon April 9 when they succeeded in establishing themselves across the Lys at Sailly and Bac St. Maur, because by doing so they had got to the south-west of Armentières. They had prepared another attack in the north, and it was evident that if it had any success the Armentières position would be impossible. Early in the morning of April 10 the usual shattering and pulverising bombardment which preceded a full-dress German attack broke out upon the right of the Second Army, involving the front from the Ypres-Comines Canal in the north down to the Lys River at Armentières, thus joining up with the battle of yesterday, and turning the ten-mile front into one of twenty. The chief points in this line are Hollebeke in the north, Wytschaete in the centre, and Messines in the south, with Ploegsteert Wood and village and Nieppe as the final connecting links with Armentières. It was all classic and sacred ground drenched with the blood of our bravest. There can be few regiments in the British Army which have not at one time or another left their dead upon this shell-pitted slope, or upon the levels which face it.

The order of the Second Army from the north at this time was Twenty-second, Eighth, Second, and Ninth Corps. It was the Ninth Corps (Hamilton-Gordon) which was now attacked. The order of divisions upon this front was Campbell's Twenty-first Division astride the Ypres-Menin Road, the Ninth (Tudor) in the Hollebeke district, the Nineteenth (Jeffreys) covering 6000 yards east of Messines and Wytschaete from Ravine Wood in the north to the Douve in the south, and finally the Twenty-fifth Division (Bainbridge) on the right, which was already in a most unfavourable position, as its right flank was menaced by the driving in of the Fortieth and threat to the Thirty-fourth on the preceding day, while one of its brigades, the 74th, had been taken away to cover Steenwerck from the German advance at Bac St. Maur. It was upon these divisions, and, in the first instance, upon the two southern ones that the new German attack from the Fourth Army of our old enemy General von Armin broke on April 10. It should be remembered that, like so many of their fellow-units, both of these divisions had been very heavily engaged in the south, and that their losses within the last two weeks had been very great. Verily we have travelled far from the day when it was laid down as an axiom that a corps which had lost a quarter of its numbers would not stand to its work until time had effaced the shock.

Since the main assault on April 10 fell upon the Nineteenth Division the story can be most plainly told from their central point of view. The left of their line was held by the 58th Brigade (Glasgow), consisting of the 6th Welsh and 9th Welsh Fusiliers. The right was held by the 57th Brigade (Cubitt) which contained the 10th Warwick, 8th Gloucester, and 10th Worcesters. The 56th (Heath) was in reserve. It was upon these troops that there fell the strain of an attack which can seldom have been exceeded in severity. The total German force on the corps front was eleven divisions, and of these no less than five were directed on the morning of April 10 upon the depleted ranks of General Jeffreys' unit.

A very thick mist prevailed, and through this protective screen the German infantry advanced about 6 o'clock, driving swiftly through all the forward posts, and putting them out of action in exactly the same fashion as on March 21. The enemy were in great numbers, and their advance was swift and resolute. Within half an hour of the first alarm they had made a lodgment in the main position of the 57th Brigade, and had also broken in the face of the left wing of the Twenty-fifth Division to the south. The garrisons of the outlying posts were never seen again, and it was observed that they were greatly hampered by their camouflage screens which they had no time to tear away in the face of so rapid and

overwhelming an attack. At 6.40 the enemy were deep in the position of the 57th Brigade, especially near Gapard Spur, which marked the centre of that unit. At 7.30 the whole brigade was in difficulties, which was more marked in the centre than on either flank, but was serious at every point of the line. The 8th North Staffords of the Reserve Brigade were brought up at this hour to help in the defence of this weakening sector. Before they could arrive upon the scene the enemy had made such progress that he had reached the crest of the ridge and had occupied the village of Messines. The 68th Brigade in the north had not yet been attacked, but General Glasgow seeing his right flank entirely exposed had thrown back a defensive line. Close to this line was a post named Pick House, and upon this the mixed elements of the left of the 57th Brigade, chiefly men of the 10th Warwicks, now rallied and formed a strong centre of resistance. The Twenty-fifth Division to the south had been also very hard pressed, and was in immediate danger of losing the important knoll, Hill 63, so that the reserve brigade of the Nineteenth Division had to send the two remaining battalions, the 4th Shropshires and 9th Cheshires, to strengthen their defence. There was thus no longer any support for the Nineteenth Divisional fighting line in their great need, save for the 5th South Wales Borderers, their pioneer battalion, and the 81st Field Company R.E., both of whom were thrown into the battle, the pioneers pushing bravely forward and connecting up with the 10th Warwicks at Pick House. Meanwhile the 8th North Staffords had made a fine attempt to retake Messines, and had actually reached the western edge of the village, but were unable to gain a permanent footing. Their right was in touch with the 8th Gloucesters, and some sort of stable line began to build itself up before the Germans. They had been unable to occupy Messines in force, owing to the rifle-fire which became more deadly with the rising of the mist. The scattered groups of infantry lying upon the ridge on either side of Messines were greatly heartened by the splendid work of A Battery, 88th R.F.A., under Captain Dougall, which remained among them, firing over open sights at the advancing Germans. "So long as you stick it I will keep my guns here!" he shouted, and the crouching men cheered him in return. He was as good as his word, and only withdrew what was left of his battery, man-handling it across almost impossible ground, when he had not a shell in his limbers. This brave officer received the Victoria Cross, but unhappily never lived to wear it.

The 8th North Staffords, still lying opposite Messines, extended their left down the Messines-Wytschaete Road in an endeavour to join up with the men at Pick House. Thus a frail curtain of defence was raised in this direction also. Shortly after mid-day things began to look better, for the gallant South African

Brigade (Tanner) of the Ninth Division was despatched to the rescue. So severe had been its losses, however, that it numbered only 1600 bayonets, and had hardly been re-organised into battalions. Late in the afternoon it advanced, the 1st Battalion on the left, 2nd on the right, and though it had not the weight to make any definite impression upon the German front it entirely re-established the line of the road from Messines to Wytschaete, and reinforced the thin fragments of battalions who were holding this precarious front. The South Africans incurred heavy losses from machine-gun fire in this very gallant attack.

The Ninth Division had hardly relinquished its Reserve Brigade when it found that it was itself in urgent need of support, for about 2 o'clock on August 10 the attack spread suddenly to the northern end of the line, involving the 25th, 26th, and 58th Brigades, all under General Tudor, who was now responsible for the Wytschaete front. So infernal was the barrage which preceded the attack, that the right of the Ninth Division in the vicinity of Charity Farm was driven in, and the 58th Brigade, with both flanks in the air and smothered under a rain of shells, was compelled also to fall back upon its support line. About 4 P.M. the 58th Brigade was broken near Torreken Farm, and the 6th Wiltshires, who were the flank battalion on the right, were cut off and lost heavily. The enemy were driving hard at this period towards Wytschaete, but the 9th Welsh stood fast in a cutting to the south of the village, and held the Germans off with their rifle-fire. So ended a most trying and unfortunate day, where the overborne troops had done all that men could do to hold their ground, fighting often against five times their own number. The prospects for the morrow looked very black, and the only gleam of light came with the advent, about midnight, of the 108th Brigade (Griffiths) from the Ulster Division, with orders to fight alongside the exhausted 57th, whose commander, General Cubitt, was now directing the local operations to the west of Messines. The Wytschaete front was also strengthened by the inclusion in the Ninth Division of the 62nd and later of the 64th Brigade of the Twenty-first Division. Farther south the 75th Brigade north of Armentières had been driven back by the enemy's attack, and the 7th Brigade on its left, finding its flank uncovered, had hinged back upon Ploegsteert Wood, where it held its line as best it might. Thus on the left, the centre, and the right there had been the same story of unavailing resistance and loss of valuable, dearly-bought ground. Even more serious, however, than the local loss was the strategical situation which had been created by the German advance in the lower sector, by their crossing the Lys, and by the fact that on the night of April 10 they were closing in upon Steenwerck and La Crêche far to the right rear of the defenders of the Messines line. It was a situation which called for the highest qualities of generals

as of soldiers.

By the morning of April 11 General Plumer, dealing out his reserves grudgingly from his fast diminishing supply, placed the 147th Brigade of the Forty-ninth Yorkshire Territorial Division (Cameron) behind the Twenty-fifth Division in the Ploegsteert region, and a brigade of the Twenty-ninth Division to the north of it. Such succours were small indeed in the face of what was evidently a very great and well-prepared attack which had already shaken the whole northern front to its foundations. The Higher Command had, however, some points of consolation. If the vital sectors could be held there was the certainty that strong reinforcements would arrive within a few days from the south. The Amiens line was now certainly stabilised, and if once again an equilibrium could be secured then the last convulsive efforts of this titanic angel of darkness would have been held. With no illusions, but with a dour determination to do or die, the British line faced to the east.

The immediate danger was that a gap had opened between Messines and Wytschaete, while another was threatened farther south between Ploegsteert and the Nieppe-Armentières Road. The pressure upon the Damstrasse was also very great in the region of the Ninth Division. The first disposition in the Messines area was to strengthen the line of resistance by pushing up the three battalions of the 108th Brigade, the 1st Irish Fusiliers on the left near Pick House, the 9th Irish Fusiliers west of Messines, and the 12th Irish Rifles in the Wulverghem line. The attack on the morning of April 11 was not heavy in this direction, but was rather directed against the Twenty-fifth Division in the Ploegsteert district, where it came ominously close to Hill 63, a commanding point from which the Messines position of the British would be taken in reverse. General Jeffreys of the Nineteenth Division determined none the less to stand his ground, but he threw out a defensive flank along the Messines-Wulverghem Road, and mounted machine-guns to hold any attack from the south. Meanwhile the 57th, South African, and 108th Brigades, in spite of this menace to their right rear continued to hold the Messines front. There was severe fighting on this sector during the afternoon in which the remains of the 2nd and 4th (Transvaal Scots) Battalions were pushed back for some distance, but counter-attacked under the lead of Captain Green, regaining most of the ground that they had lost, and connecting up with the 5th South Wales Borderers, who were still holding fast near Pick House. This line was maintained until the general withdrawal. It was further strengthened by the 146th Brigade, one of the three units of the Forty-ninth Division, which were all engaged at different points. One battalion, the 7th West

Yorkshires, called on suddenly to fill a gap, made a very fine advance under heavy fire, and restored the situation. It remained in the line until, on April 16, it was almost annihilated by a terrific German attack upon it.

But the situation on the right rear was getting worse and worse. In the evening it was definitely known that Hill 63 had at last fallen after a long and obstinate struggle. The Twenty-fifth, and later the Thirty-fourth Divisions had held up against great odds, but the main force of the enemy was now striking upon that line, and the British were forced to withdraw from Le Bizet towards Nieppe. These German gains enforced a completely new re-arrangement of the forces in the north if they were to avoid being taken in the rear. This change of a wide and far-reaching character was quickly and safely effected during the night of April 11 and 12. It involved moving back the three northern corps into their battle zones, leaving only outposts in advance. They still covered Ypres, but the retirement meant that all that had been won in the mud-and-blood struggle of 1917 had passed into German keeping, and coupled with the loss of Messines it seemed to threaten that the old salient might be renewed in as disastrous a fashion as ever. This retirement was rather in the nature of a precaution against the possibilities of the future. What was of most immediate importance was the withdrawal of the lines which were at such close grips with the enemy to the west of Messines. By the morning of April 12 the general line of the Nineteenth Corps was Steenwerck Station, Pont-d'Achelles, Neuve Eglise, Wulverghem, Wytschaete. No immediate German attack followed on the withdrawal. This abstention on the part of the enemy was due in part to the wonderful work done by a small nest of four machine-guns on the Messines-Wulverghem Road under the command of Lieutenant Hodgson. This small unit had already fought for forty-eight hours, but on this third day of the battle their services were invaluable, for they shot down hundreds of Germans as they endeavoured to debouch from Messines and descend the slope. Save for two wounded men none of this band of heroes ever returned. Among other detachments who behaved with great heroism were a few men of the 5th South Wales Borderers, B Company, under Captain Evans, who maintained themselves at Pick House, north and east of Messines, for three days, until they were at last rescued by the 58th Brigade from the north.

Whilst these fresh dispositions and general retrogressions had been made on this front the Thirty-fourth Division to the south had also been compelled to rearrange its positions. It has already been described how, under cover of the 147th Brigade, they withdrew in absolute order across the Lys. April 11 saw such continued pressure, however on the right of the Twenty-fifth and the whole of the Thirty-fourth Divisions that it became clear early in the afternoon of April 11 that further retirement was imperative. This began at dusk, the three brigades retiring by the Armentières-Bailleul Road, while the 147th still acted as rearguard. They retired through the 74th and 88th Brigades near Bailleul Station, fighting back all the way and considerably harassed by the German guns. On the morning of the 12th the general line was Steam-mill-Bailleul Station-southern border of La Crêche to a point about 500 yards north-east of Pont d'Achelles on the Bailleul Road. Along this line the order of battle from the south was the 147th, 75th, 101st, 74th, 102nd, and 88th Brigades. Nieppe, which had been evacuated, was occupied by the enemy later in the day, and on the evening of April 12 the line was pushed a little farther back to De Seule.

There was no fighting on the new line opposite Messines on April 12, but the battle was, as has been shown, raging furiously elsewhere, and the situation in the south, where the enemy was making progress, must deeply affect that in the north. Had an aviator taken a swift flight from Hollebeke to Givenchy on this day, following the deep curve which had formed in the British line, his observations would have been roughly as follows: in the Hollebeke district he would have found no extreme pressure, and that the Ninth Division, reinforced by the 58th Brigade, was holding the line not far westward of their original position. From there onwards he would have skirted the new line of the Ninth Corps, as already indicated, and would have seen the remains of the Nineteenth Division covering the north of it, the Twenty-fifth Division, also in fragments, about Neuve Eglise, and the Thirty-fourth Division near Steenwerck. He would next observe with consternation or joy according to his colours, that there was a considerable gap before Bailleul. At the other side of this gap he would come upon elements of the Thirty-first and Twenty-ninth Divisions, hard-pressed and worried by the advance which the enemy had made through Merville on their right. He would catch a glimpse also of some thin lines of resistance, still farther south, which represented all that was left of the Fiftieth Division. Finally, he would see the Fifty-first and the Fifty-fifth on the extreme south, both of them standing firm in their positions. Looking eastwards he would see pouring across the Lys the legions of Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, hurrying to improve their

blow, while behind the British lines he would see new divisions, the Fifty-ninth Midlanders at Wulverghem, the Thirty-third near Bailleul, the Sixty-first near Robecq, the 4th Guards Brigade followed by the First Australians near Hazebrouck, all hastening with heavy hearts but the most grim determination to throw themselves across the path of this German invasion which already threatened the most vital points in Flanders. Far to the south also our aviator would perhaps have seen the smoke of many trains, and out at sea might have made out the little dots which marked in the one case French, in the other British, reinforcements. Such was the general panorama upon the Flanders front on the evening of April 12.

CHAPTER X

THE BATTLE OF THE LYS

April 13-May 8

Desperate situation—Sir Douglas Haig's "win or die" message—Epic of the 4th Guards Brigade at Hazebrouck—Arrival of First Australian Division—Splendid services of Thirty-third Division—Loss of Armentières, Bailleul, and Neuve Eglise—The First Division at Givenchy—Fall of Kemmel—Battle of Ridge Wood—Great loss of ground—Equilibrium.

Up to April 13 twenty-eight German divisions had been traced in the battle of Flanders. Since the whole British Army consisted of sixty divisions, and only thirteen had been engaged in Flanders, one can gather how terrible had been their task.

By the fourth day of the battle the purpose of the enemy became more clear. It was evident now that his attack consisted really of three movements. The northern of these, consisting of about six divisions, had for its task to drive through Wytschaete and Messines to Bailleul. At present it was held up in the north by the Ninth Division, but had made its way in the south until Neuve Eglise was the only village which intervened between it and Bailleul. The central attack, consisting of the main force, had taken Armentières and penetrated ten

miles deep, capturing Merville, reaching the Clarence River, touching Robecq, and threatening St. Venant. This deep penetration reacted upon the British flanks to north and south of it. Finally, there was an advance by seven or eight divisions in the south, which had been held at Givenchy, but had bent the line back the from that point, Bethune being the immediate objective. The hammering of the Germans was remorseless and terrific. All that the British needed was a little time, but it seemed as if it would be denied them. Help was coming, but it did not arrive so quickly as the new divisions which Von Armin and Von Quast were pouring over the Messines Ridge and across the plain of the Lys.

The position was very menacing, as was shown by an order of the day from the British Commander-in-Chief which is unique perhaps in our military annals—a stern call to duty and to death, pitched on the very note which would arouse the historic tenacity of the British soldier. Documents have been avoided in this chronicle, but this one at least must be quoted in full. It was addressed to all ranks of the British Army under his command.

"Three weeks ago to-day," said Sir Douglas Haig, "the enemy began his terrific attacks against us on a fifty-mile front. His objects are to separate us from the French, to take the Channel ports, and destroy the British Army.

"In spite of throwing already 106 divisions into the battle, and enduring the most reckless sacrifice of human life, he has, as yet, made little progress towards his goals. We owe this to the determined fighting and self-sacrifice of our troops.

"Words fail me to express the admiration which I feel for the splendid resistance offered by all ranks of our army under the most trying circumstances.

"Many amongst us now are tired. To these I would say that victory will belong to the side which holds out the longest.

"The French Army is moving rapidly and in great force to our support.

"There is no other course open to us but to fight it out. Every position must be held to the last man: there must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall, and believing in the justice of our cause, each one of us must fight to the end.

"The safety of our homes and the freedom of mankind depend alike upon the conduct of each one of us at this critical moment."

No words can describe the danger of the crisis more clearly than this clear call from a leader remarkable for his judgment and restraint, exhorting his men to fight to the death with their faces to the raging German line, and their backs to those all-important harbours on which the fate of the world was now depending. The German vanguard was forty miles from Calais on the day that the appeal was made, and there was no strong line to be forced, save that strongest of all lines which was formed by Sir Herbert Plumer and his men.

A new unit had come into line on April 13. This was the Thirty-third Division under General Pinney. It was at once thrust in to fill the gap in front of Bailleul, where it found itself involved from that date onwards in most desperate fighting, in which it was associated with the Thirty-first Division. The narrative of the services and trials, both of them very great, which were rendered and endured by these divisions may be best told in consecutive form, as a too strict adherence to the order of dates produces an effect which makes it difficult to follow the actual happenings. We shall first consider the operations at Hazebrouck and Meteren, where these two divisions and the First Australian Division were chiefly concerned, and we shall afterwards return to the north and follow the fortunes of the Nineteenth, Twenty-fifth, Forty-ninth, Thirty-fourth, and other divisions which were holding the northern curve.

Central Area. April 12.

The line was very weak on April 12 in front of central Hazebrouck, and yet it was absolutely vital that this important railway junction should not fall into German hands. The need was pressing and desperate, for the German attack was furious and unremitting, while the British line was so thin, and composed of such weary units, that it seemed impossible that it could hold. The exhausted remains of the Fiftieth Division, who had been at it continually ever since the breaking of the Portuguese front, were hardly capable now of covering or defending any serious front. Yet if the ground could be held, the First Australian Division, brought hurriedly back from the Somme and in the act of detraining, would be in the line within twenty-four hours. There have been few moments more heavy with fate during the whole of the campaign. Everything depended for the moment upon Pinney's Thirty-third Division, upon the worn remnants of the Twenty-ninth Division, upon the 92nd and 93rd Brigades, and upon the 4th Guards Brigade of the Thirty-first Division who were brought up from Pradelles, and thrown hurriedly across the path of the advancing Germans.

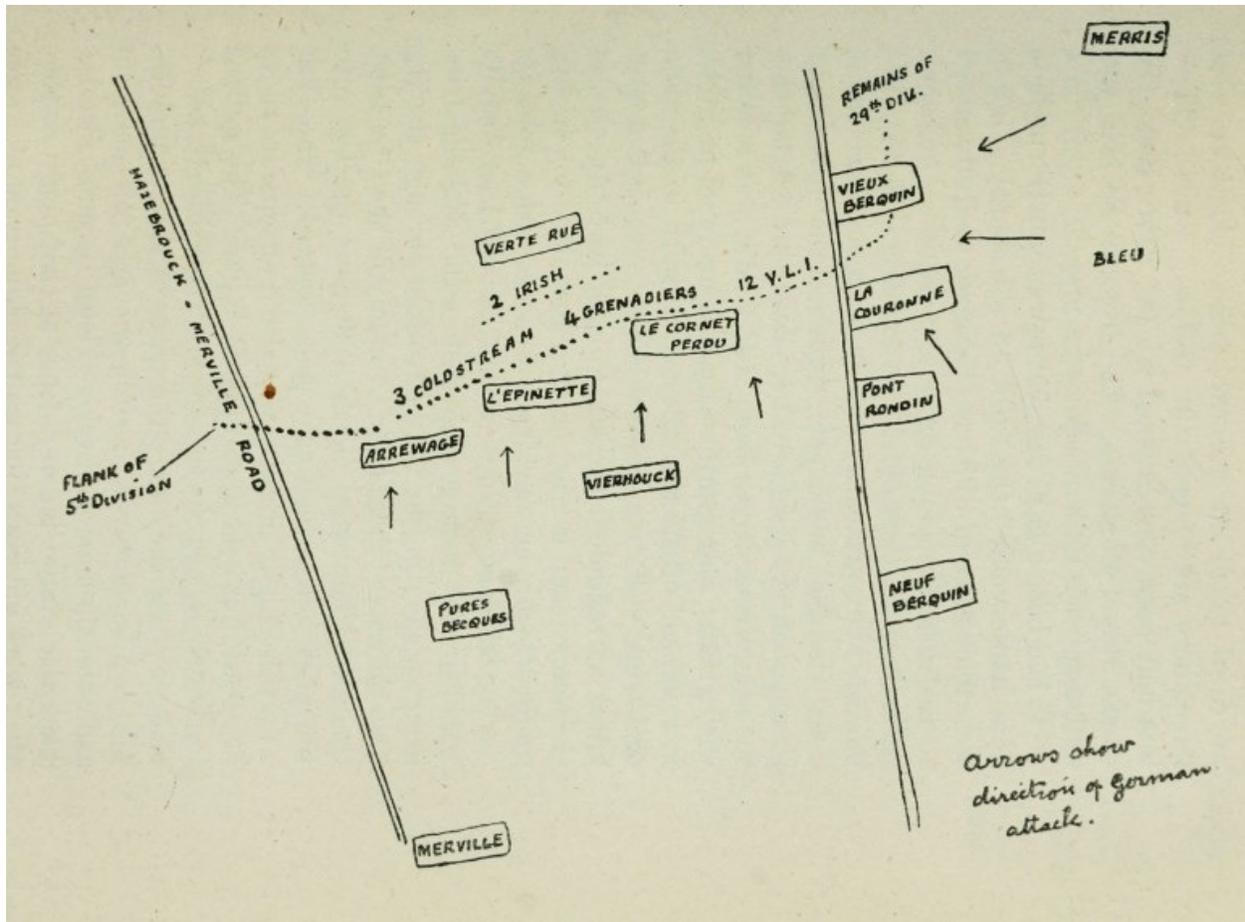
Of the Thirty-first Division the 92nd and 93rd Brigades had already been heavily engaged on April 11 as already recorded. The Guards Brigade had been delayed in its journey and was still fresh. General Reedman of the 92nd Brigade was in local command, and the situation was a particularly difficult one. At all costs Hazebrouck must be covered until reinforcements could arrive, for if the line were cut there was no end to the possible evils. When Merris fell General Reedman still held the heights west of Merris with the 10th East Yorkshires, while the 11th East Lancashires were to the south, and the remnants of the 86th and 87th Brigades of the Twenty-ninth Division held on to Vieux Berquin. This line held until 5 P.M. on April 13 in spite of very stormy attacks and very little help from the guns. About that hour the right of the line gave way under severe pressure, and Vieux Berquin was taken, but the Germans were bottled up in it and were unable to get forward. There they remained until the great turn of the tide. We must now, however, turn our gaze to the immediate south and follow the phases of the wonderful stand made by the remaining brigade of the Thirty-first Division, the 4th Guards Brigade, who found themselves involved in a desperate battle in front of Hazebrouck.

Without enumerating a number of obscure hamlets which are rather confusing than helpful, it may be said that the brigade under General Leslie Butler covered the north of the main road from Merville to Hazebrouck, with their right resting upon the Bourre, a small sluggish stream. Vierhouck represented roughly the centre of their line. It was a country of flat cultivated fields, with many roads and watercourses lined with willows, which cut the view. There were untouched farms with their human and animal on every side. To the west lay the great forest of Nieppe. On the right were the 3rd Coldstream, on the left the 4th Grenadiers, with the 2nd Irish in close support. They were in position on the morning of April 12, and at once found the enemy in front of them, who after a strong preliminary bombardment advanced in great numbers along the whole line. The rifle-fire of the Guardsmen was too deadly, however, and the attack dissolved before it. The German machine-gunners were exceedingly aggressive, "not to say impudent" as a Guards officer explained it, and many losses were sustained from their fashion of pushing forward upon the flanks, and worming their way into every unoccupied crevice. Nothing could exceed both the gallantry and the intelligence of these men. Having cleared their front the Guards endeavoured to advance, but the Coldstream on the right met with murderous fire from the village of Pures Becques, and the movement could get no farther, nor were the Grenadiers much more fortunate on the left, though Captain Pryce with his company broke into some outlying houses, killing a

number of Germans, seven of whom fell to that officer's own automatic. This whole gallant episode occurred under the very muzzles of a German battery, firing with open sights at a range of 300 yards.

At this period the brigade seems to have got ahead of the general British line, and to have had both flanks entirely exposed to every sort of enfilade fire. About four in the afternoon the right company of the Coldstream, numbering only forty men, had to turn south to face the enemy. The Germans had thrust into the centre of the Coldstream also, but No. 2 Company of the supporting Irish, acting without orders upon the impulse of the moment, and aided by the surviving Coldstream, completely re-established the line. The Irish, who were led by Captain Bambridge, were almost annihilated in their dashing effort to ease the pressure upon their English comrades. Their leader was wounded, Lieutenant Dent was killed, and only eleven men of the company were left standing. On the left the Germans were 500 yards in the rear, and here a rearrangement was called for and steadily carried out. An hour later another violent attack was made at the junction of the two battalions, but it also was driven back in disorder. The Germans had brought their guns well forward and into the open, but they met their match in Lieutenant Lewis of the 152nd Brigade Royal Field Artillery, who directed the scanty British artillery, and handled his pieces in a way which was much appreciated by the weary Guardsmen.

The readjustment of the line enabled the 4th Guards Brigade to link up with the 12th Yorkshire Light Infantry, pioneer battalion of their own division, which was holding the line at La Couronne, and fought that day with the utmost tenacity and resolution. On the left flank of the Yorkshiresmen, near Vieux Berquin, were the worn remains of the Twenty-ninth Division.



Rough Sketch of Guards' Position, April 13

Night fell upon a sorely-tried but unconquered line. The two front battalions had lost at least a third of their effectives. Under the screen of darkness the position was re-organised, and it was hoped that the Fifth Division, drawn back from Italy, would be able to effect a relief. This could not be fully accomplished, however, and at best only a small contraction of the front could be effected, so that the morning of April 13 found the exhausted Coldstream and Grenadiers still facing the German attack. Their line had been strengthened by the 210th Field Co. of the Royal Engineers. The front to be held was still very wide for so weakened a force.

It had been a hard day, but it was only the prelude of a harder one. On April 13 the morning began with thick mist, of which the Germans took advantage to rush their machine-guns to very close quarters. At early dawn the Coldstream found themselves once more heavily attacked, while an armoured car came down the road and machine-gunned the outposts at a range of ten yards. After

severe mixed fighting the attack was driven back. At 9.15 it was renewed with greater strength, but again it made no progress. It is typical of the truly desperate spirit of the men, that when every man save one in an outpost had been killed or wounded, the survivor, Private Jacotin of the Coldstream, carried on the fight alone for twenty minutes before he was blown to pieces with a grenade.

The left flank of this battalion had also been heavily attacked, the enemy, with their usual diabolical ingenuity, shouting as they advanced through the fog that they were the King's Company of the Grenadier Guards. They were blown back none the less into the mist from which they had emerged. The 12th Yorkshire Light Infantry was also four separate times attacked, but held to its appointed line. This gallant unit fairly earned the title of the "Yorkshire Guards" that day, for they were the peers of their comrades. Meanwhile, however, outside the area of this grim fight the Germans had taken Vieux Berquin, pushing back the scanty line of defence at that point, so that they were able to bring up trench-mortars and guns to blast the Yorkshire battalion at La Couronne out of its shallow trenches. Captain Pryce, on the extreme left of the Guards, found the Germans all round him, and his Grenadiers were standing back to back and firing east and west. The company was doomed, and in spite of the gallant effort of a party of Irish Guards, who lost very heavily in the venture, the whole of them perished, save for Sergeant Weedon and six men who reported the manner in which their comrades had met their end. Captain Pryce had led two bayonet charges, first with eighteen men, which was entirely successful, and later with fourteen men, who buried themselves in the grey of the German ranks, and there remained. Such was the end of No. 2 Company of the 4th Grenadiers, and of its commander. This brave man received a posthumous V.C. in the record of which it is stated that with forty men he had held up a German battalion for ten hours and so saved a break through.

Apart from this flank company the centre company of the Grenadiers at this period consisted of six unwounded men, while the right company was twenty strong. All the officers were down. They were hemmed in on two sides by the enemy, but they were still resisting as the shades of night fell upon them. By dawn the Grenadier battalion had ceased to exist.

The 3rd Coldstream on the right were hardly in better case. The right company was surrounded, and fought until there was only a handful left. A few survivors fell back upon the Fifth Division and the Australians who were now well up to the line. The orders to the Guards had been to keep the Germans out

until the Australians could arrive. They had been faithfully obeyed. The total casualties had been 39 officers and 1244 rank and file, the greater part from two weak battalions; 17 per cent of the brigade mustered after the action. Soldiers will appreciate the last words of the official report which are: "No stragglers were reported by the A.P.M." It is an episode which needs no comment. Its grandeur lies in the bare facts. Well might General de Lisle say: "The history of the British Army can record nothing finer than the story of the action of the 4th Guards Brigade on April 12 and 13."

Whilst the Guards had made their fine stand to the east of Hazebrouck, the rest of the Thirty-first Division, covering a front of 9000 yards, had a most desperate battle with the German stormers. The fine north country material which makes up the 92nd and 93rd Brigades had never been more highly tried, for they were little more than a long line of skirmishers with an occasional post. In some parts of the line they were absolutely exterminated, but like their comrades of the Guards, they managed somehow or other to retain the positions and prevent a penetration until reinforcements arrived. The remains of the Twenty-ninth Division on the left had also fought with the utmost devotion and held the line at the price of a heavy drain upon their weakened ranks. It has been calculated that the line held by the 31st Division upon these days was 5½ miles long, and that it was attacked by the 35th and 42nd German divisions, the 1st Bavarian Reserve, and 10th, 11th, and 81st Reserve divisions.

It would be well to continue the action upon the Hazebrouck front by giving at once an account of the operations of the First Australian Division under General Sir Harold Walker, which had the remarkable experience of being sent from Flanders to the Amiens front, being engaged there, and now being back in the Flanders front once more, all in little over a week. They detrained on April 12, and on the 13th their 2nd Brigade (Heane) found themselves in front of Hazebrouck with the remains of the 92nd British Brigade on their left and with the hard-pressed 4th Guards Brigade in front of them. In the evening the remains of the Guards were withdrawn through their line, and they were facing the pursuing Germans. On their left the Australians were in touch with the 1st Cameronians of the 19th Brigade in the Meteren area.

This fierce fighting was going on in a country which was new to war, with unbroken soil, whole cottages, and numerous refugees, who by their flight before the German vanguard complicated a situation which was already so chaotic that it was very difficult for the generals on the spot to grasp the relative positions of

the attack and the defence.

Central Area. April 14 onward.

On April 14 the Germans, advancing behind a deadly barrage, came forward through Merris and Vieux Berquin. They soon found, however, that they had before them fresh and steady troops who were not to be driven. The immediate German objective was the high ground from Mont de Merris to Strazeele. The 2nd Australian Brigade was on the right and the 1st (Leslie) on the left. Both were equally attacked, and both met their assailants with a shattering fire which piled the level plain with their bodies. Three lines swept forward, but none reached the shallow trenches of the "digger" infantry. The 3rd and 4th Battalions held the line to the north where the pressure was greatest. The One hundred and twenty-third French Division was in support, but there was never any need to call for their co-operation. Strazeele, however, was blown to pieces by the German guns.

April 15 and 16 were comparatively quiet, and the Australians busily strengthened their lines. On the 17th a sharp attack was made upon the 1st and 4th Battalions on the left and centre of the 1st Australian Brigade, the advance coming up the valley between Merris and Meter en. This also was cut to pieces by rifle and gun-fire, so that it made no progress whatever.

The 3rd Australian Brigade (Bennett) had been in reserve, but it was destined for severe service after Meteren had passed out of the hands of the Thirty-third Division in the manner elsewhere described. They had actually relieved some of the worn elements of the British Thirty-third and of the French One hundred and thirty-third Divisions to the west of Meteren, and on April 22 and 23 they endeavoured by two separate movements upon either flank to fight their way back into the little town. The first operations carried out by the 11th and 12th Battalions were successful, but the final push into the town by the 9th and 10th met with heavy opposition, and the casualties were so great that the attempt had to be abandoned. The three Australian brigades were shortly relieved, after their very valuable spell in the line. They were destined soon to find themselves with their comrades on the Somme once again.

Whilst the 1st Brigade had won a complete defensive victory in the north of the line, the 2nd Brigade had done equally well in the south. The 7th and 8th Battalions were in the line, and both were heavily engaged, especially the latter, which faced Vieux Berquin. The German attack was once again a complete

failure, and it was clear that the Australians had the historical honour in Flanders as well as on the Somme, of saying, "Thus far and no farther," upon the sector which they manned.

We pass on to the movements of the Thirty-third Division, which arrived upon the scene of action on April 11, and from that time onwards played an ever increasing part in this great world crisis. General Pinney had the experience of first being denuded of large part of his own proper force, which was given away, brigade by brigade, to points of danger, and afterwards of not only seeing them reunited under his hand, but of having the remains of four divisions and a great number of details under him, and so being in actual command of the whole operations to the south and west of Bailleul. To his coolness, firmness, and well-tried fortitude, the nation owed much during those few desperate days.

The 100th Brigade (Baird) was moved forward at once to come under the orders of General Bainbridge, who, with his Twenty-fifth Division, had endured so much in the Ploegsteert district and was in urgent need of help. We shall follow them from the date of their detachment to that of their return to their own unit. On April 11, after dusk, they took their position, covering Neuve Eglise, the 16th King's Royal Rifles on the right of the line, the 2nd Worcesters in the centre, and the 9th Highland Light Infantry in reserve, the 148th Brigade being on the left, and the 75th Brigade on their right, the latter much exhausted by two days of battle. Immediately to the north lay the much enduring battle line of the Nineteenth Division, which has already been fully described. Two points can hardly be described simultaneously, but these facts are to be read in conjunction with those already given in the last chapter, and it is to be understood that the whole situation at Neuve Eglise reacted from hour to hour upon that farther north, since a German capture of the town would place the enemy in the rear of General Jeffreys and his men.

Northern Area. April 13.

On April 12 there was no direct attack upon this area, but about 4 P.M. the 75th Brigade on the right, which was much worn, was driven back and a gap created, which was filled in by such reserves as could be got together at the shortest notice. In the morning of April 13 it was found that this flank was still very open, the nearest organised unit being the 88th Brigade of the Twenty-ninth Division, which was also stretching out its left in the hope of making connection. The enemy, however, pushed through early on April 13, getting to the rear of the

100th Brigade, and swinging north into Neuve Eglise which they captured. The Glasgow Highlanders, the only battalion of the Highland Light Infantry which wears Highland costume, attacked at once with all the vigour of fresh troops, and cleared the Germans out of the town at the point of the bayonet. The enemy had filtered into the brigade line, however, and parties of them were in the rear of the Worcesters. The hardest part of all was borne by the 16th King's Royal Rifles, who, being the flank battalion, bore all the weight of an advance which had enveloped them upon three sides, front, flank, and rear. Of this gallant battalion there were hardly any survivors. The Worcesters threw back their right flank, therefore, in order to cover Neuve Eglise upon the south and south-east, while the Twenty-fifth Division were on the north and north-east.

The mishaps of a dark day were still not over, for the enemy about 4.30 made a determined attack and again punctured the over-stretched line. Some of them drove their way once more into Neuve Eglise, brushing aside or scattering the thin line of defence. Another strong force broke into the front of the 100th Brigade and drove a wedge between the Glasgow Highlanders and the Worcesters. The headquarters of the latter battalion was in the Municipal Building of Neuve Eglise, and put up a desperate, isolated resistance for many hours, Colonel Stoney and his staff finally making their way back to their comrades. In this defence the Chaplain, the Rev. Tanner, greatly distinguished himself. The survivors of the 2nd Worcesters had also maintained themselves in Neuve Eglise as house neighbours to the German stormers, but after mid-day on April 14, finding themselves entirely cut off, they fought their way out, leaving the Square round the Church and Mairie piled with corpses. The town was now entirely German, with results already described upon the northern section of the outflanked line. Once more the Worcesters, the heroes of the old Gheluvelt battle, had placed fresh laurels upon their faded and battle-stained colours. The remains of the 100th Brigade were now reassembled on the Ravelsberg ridge, west of Neuve Eglise, where they faced their enemy once more. So worn was it that the survivors of the Rifles and of the Highlanders were clubbed together to form one very weak composite battalion. On their right now was a collection of odds-and-ends under General Wyatt about a thousand strong, while on their left was the 103rd Brigade of the Thirty-fourth Division, with the 148th in support.

Northern Area. April 14 onwards.

This latter brigade had aided in the defence of Neuve Eglise, and done very severe service, two of the battalions, the 4th Yorkshire Light Infantry and the 4th

York and Lancasters, having sustained heavy losses. During the two days in which the fate of the village hung in the balance these battalions were engaged in constant defence and counter-attack, especially on April 13, when in one desperate sally they captured a German colonel and nearly a hundred of his men. When the village fell on April 14 the gallant Yorkshiremen still held on close to it and gave no ground until they were ordered that night into reserve. The other battalion of the brigade, the 5th York and Lancaster, had been ordered to Steenwerck, where also it had borne a distinguished part in the fight.

The Germans were now nursing their wounds and also digesting their gains, so that there was a very welcome pause which was mainly in favour of the defence, who had good hope of reinforcement. A number of French batteries appeared as the forerunners of relief, and helped to break up an advance upon the Ravelsberg on the morning of April 16. A second attack had no better luck. Some posts were taken but were won back again with the help of the 9th Northumberland Fusiliers of the 103rd Brigade.

April 17 saw a fresh attack which was preceded by a barrage which tore gaps in the thin line of the Highlanders. It developed into an infantry attack, which gave the enemy possession of an orchard near the line. The Highlanders, aided by some of the 6/7th Scots Fusiliers of the 177th Brigade, tried hard to win it back, but could at best only block the exits. After dark that night the brigade was relieved by the 148th Brigade, and staggered out of the line with only 800 men unscathed. General Baird's infantry had endured an ordeal which exceeded what the most disciplined troops could be expected to survive: 58 officers and 1424 men had fallen in their splendid defence of Neuve Eglise.

The other brigades of the Thirty-third Division had meanwhile been involved in situations hardly less critical than those which had faced Baird's Brigade at Neuve Eglise. Maitland's 98th Brigade, which found itself on April 12 in the Ravelsberg area, was placed to the north of Bailleul as a support to that place, and the narrative of its doings will be found in the subsequent account of the defence of Meteren.

Northern Area. April 12.

The 19th Brigade (Mayne) of the Thirty-third Division had been detailed to cover Meteren to the west of Bailleul against the northward sweep of the Germans. At 9.40 on April 12 it was known that the enemy had got through at Merville, that their cavalry had been seen at Neuf Berquin, and by noon that this

swiftly advancing tide was submerging Merris only three miles south of Meteren. General Pinney, deprived of two of his brigades, had only under his hand the 19th Brigade, with the 18th Middlesex Pioneers, 11th and 222nd Field Companies Royal Engineers, and the 33rd British Machine-gun Corps under Colonel Hutchinson, an officer who until he was gassed, was a tower of strength to the defence. At mid-day the place was under heavy shell-fire. There is a windmill in a prominent position south of the town overlooking the dead flats of Flanders. In and around this was stationed the 1st Queen's West Surrey. East of the town, facing Bailleul, was the 5th Scottish Rifles, while the 1st Scottish Rifles (The Cameronians) were in reserve. The whole situation was under the direct control of General Pinney, and he was reinforced in the course of the day by several very welcome units—9th Corps Cyclists, 22nd New Zealand Entrenching Battalion, and others. Strazeele was included in the line of defence, which joined up in the night with the hard-worked Twenty-ninth Division.

The situation on April 12 in this quarter of the field was most alarming. Everything in the south seemed to be in a state of chaos, and the line was for the moment absolutely fluid. The fall of Merville and of Estaires had been exploited with extraordinary energy by the Germans, who were rushing on at the very heels of the retiring and often disorganised troops, who were dead-beat after two days and nights of constant exertion. It was all important to build up some sort of line south of Meteren, but events were moving so fast that it was doubtful if it could be done. It was here that the value of the new machine-gun organisation, perfected during the winter, was brilliantly exemplified. Colonel Hutchinson was able to throw forward the whole of his guns to make up for the local weakness of the infantry, and he ran great risks in doing so, since he had only broken men and stragglers to man the gaps between his gun positions. The crisis was such, however, that any risk had to be taken, and the 33rd Battalion of the Machine-gun Corps saved the situation. On the other hand it is not too much to say that a humble hero, Driver Sharples, whose motor-lorry was handy, saved the 33rd Battalion, for he not only rushed up eight guns under heavy fire, with their crews, but he brought up afterwards on his own initiative the wire and other essentials which enabled them to hold their position. It was a supreme example of what can be done by one brave, clear-headed man. The German tide was flowing at a rate which was measured as 1½ miles in forty minutes, but now it was to reach its limit, when it came under the fire of these eight guns upon Windmill Hill. The advance was not only from Merris in the south but even more along the Bailleul-Meteren Road, which was crowded with their troops. By dusk the infantry of the 19th Brigade had taken the place of the weary fragments

who lined the front, and the immediate danger of a complete rupture of the line was over.

Northern Area. April 13.

At 5.30 A.M. on April 13 the attack upon Meteren commenced with a strong advance against the 1st Queen's at the Windmill, and gained some ground in the centre. The usual tactics of rushing up machine-guns was tried, but in spite of the mist they had very limited success. The 98th Brigade was now in support, and the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were ordered forward to cover Meule Houck Hill on that side. At 10.30 the Queen's were again fiercely attacked, and after changing hands three times the windmill in their position remained with the stormers. At noon a well-knit line had been formed in front of Meteren, with the Yorkshiremen of the 92nd Brigade in touch on the right, while their brother Yorkshiremen of the 147th Brigade were on the left, drawn respectively from the Thirty-first and the Forty-ninth Divisions. There were cheering rumours that the First Australians and the hundred and thirty-third French were both speeding upon their way, but the need of the present was very great, for the German guns were many, while there was hardly one to aid in the defence.

At 4 P.M. the Germans were beating once more along the whole front of the division, but by 5.30 were back in their own line, what was left of them, much the worse for the venture. News came, however, that Vieux Berquin had fallen, and that Meteren was to be taken next day at all costs. Meanwhile, in spite of the severe fighting, the losses had not been heavy, save in the 1st Queen's, which had borne all the brunt of three separate attacks. Colonel Kemp-Welch and his men had a very severe ordeal that day. Cavalry appeared more than once in front of the position, and one body, 200 strong, were cut to pieces by a sudden concentration of machine-guns. The splendid machine-guns still played a prominent part in the battle. One of them having been submerged by a rush of the enemy, Corporal Hurd returned single-handed, advancing 200 yards beyond the line, and brought it back upon his shoulder. At one time the supplies of belts ran short, but they were brought up in most dashing fashion. "At noon," says an officer, "the fighting limbers with belt-boxes, barrels, and S.A.A. were galloped through a hail of shell to our gun positions in a style reminiscent of the Royal Horse Artillery upon an Aldershot field-day." The result was great. "Gunnery and gun-commanders report having piled the dead enemy before their guns."

Northern Area. April 14

Shortly after dawn on April 14 the 1st Queen's was in the wars once more, and from six to eight there were constant attacks along the whole line from Strazeele on the right to Bailleul Station on the left, the latter forming the front of the Thirty-fourth Division. The 1st Cameronians, those stern descendants of the Covenanters, beat the enemy away from Strazeele about noon. At one time there were renewed attacks upon both the Queen's and the Cameronians. It is difficult to know which was the more admirable, the perseverance of the attacks or the tenacity of the defence. About five in the evening another fierce wave of storm-troops swept up from the south; and for one critical moment found a gap in the line. Two companies of the stalwart labourers of the 2nd New Zealand Entrenching Battalion threw themselves into the breach, and the position was restored. When night fell, the whole line, though shaken, was still intact, and the assault had been a complete and a costly failure. Such operations, which littered the fields of Flanders with their dead, go far to explain the German weakness in the latter part of this campaign of 1918.

Northern Area. April 15.

April 15 was quiet in the morning on the front of Meteren, but the afternoon proved to be disastrous at Bailleul, since Ravelsberg and Mont de Lille were stormed by the Germans, with the result that the town had to be vacated. The Thirty-fourth Division had been withdrawn from this position, and the Fifty-ninth North Midlanders (Romer) had taken their place, but this division had, as already described, suffered extraordinary losses on the Somme front, and was in no condition to undertake another considerable operation. It had already been partly engaged in Flanders, and its losses had been increased. Under these conditions it is not surprising that the determined assault of the Germans should have forced the line. It would appear upon the map that this German success entirely outflanked the position of the Thirty-third Division, but fortunately a switch line had been constructed which was now manned by the remains of the Thirty-fourth Division, while the Fifty-ninth passed through it and concentrated in the rear. In this way an extension of the German success was prevented, in spite of great energy upon the part of the enemy, who had his patrols a kilometre to the west of the town before night. The 98th Brigade had now taken the place of the 19th in the line, the 4th King's Liverpools relieving the Queen's at the Windmill, while the 5th Scottish Rifles relieved the Cameronians near Strazeele.

Northern Area. April 15 onwards.

In the efforts to stop the German advance from Bailleul the 147th Brigade of

Cameron's Forty-ninth Yorkshire Division played an important part. This unit, containing the 4th, 6th, and 7th Battalions of the West Riding Regiment found themselves in the front line on the evening of April 15, and held hard to a defensive position north-west of Bailleul. For two more days, April 16 and 17, they maintained the fight, inflicting and receiving heavy losses, but with the balance well in their favour. The dour Yorkshiremen made it clear at last to their equally dour assailants, that there was no road through their ranks, however they might thin them.

In the early morning of April 16 the enemy by a very sudden and violent attack broke through the switch line and made a lodgment in the eastern outskirts of Meteren. In spite of determined counter-attacks made during the morning by the 1st Middlesex, the 4th King's, and the gallant New Zealand Trench Battalion, it was not possible to clear these houses to which the enemy's machine-gun parties clung with great bravery. Evening found them still in possession, but all efforts to debouch to the north and west had been stopped. The Australians were coming up on the right, so that the Thirty-third were able to shorten their line.

One farm west of Meteren was penetrated by a pushful party of Germans, but they were beaten out of it and destroyed by the 11th Field Company of sappers, who took a number of prisoners.

On April 17 the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders had come into the line, relieving the 18th Middlesex Pioneers. About 10 A.M. this battalion was violently attacked, but drove back its assailants, as did the Thirty-fourth Division on the left at about the same hour. At six in the evening another very severe attack developed upon the front of the 4th King's. For a time the line appeared to be penetrated, but the 1st Middlesex and units of the One hundred and thirty-third French Division, which had newly arrived, made a brisk counter-attack, and the situation was completely restored. It must indeed have been discomposing to the enemy to find that each success which he won, whether it was the taking of Neuve Eglise, of Bailleul, or later of Mount Kemmel, instead of being an opening which led to victory, was only a passage to further trials and further losses in an unending vista. The edge of the attack had now been completely blunted in this quarter. April 18 was quiet, and on the 19th, as the Australians and French were up, arrangements were made for drawing the Thirty-third out of the line which they had so splendidly made good. Their losses in the six days amounted to 145 officers and 3302 men. A few days later Monsieur Clemenceau arrived to convey to General Pinney and his battle-worn

men the thanks of the French Republic for their iron defence of an essential line.

The Thirty-fourth Division was last mentioned in this narrative when it fell back from Nieppe on April 12, and was afterwards compelled to take position on the right of the Twenty-fifth Division in the De Seule neighbourhood. Among other losses during the retreat was a tried soldier, General Gore of the 101st Brigade.

Northern Area. April 13 onwards.

On the 13th the enemy made several tentative attacks, but had no success. Late in the afternoon, however, he had succeeded in penetrating the line of the Twenty-fifth Division between Neuve Eglise and De Seule. This success left the left flank of the Thirty-fourth in the air. The 103rd Brigade had moved to the Ravelsberg Ridge, however, and so gave a definite line upon which to withdraw, extending from Bailleul Station to Crucifix Corner, which was a very important position. The 103rd Brigade was now on the left of the line, and the 102nd on the right. There followed, on April 15, a day of very severe fighting, the enemy making continual and very fiery attacks along the whole line, especially upon the three points, Steam Mill, Mont de Lille, and Crucifix Corner. The latter was carried by the enemy and then was retaken by the 9th Northumberland Fusiliers. Mont de Lille was held by the 74th Brigade, and Steam Mill by the 147th, each the centre of a very deadly combat. Steam Mill was lost and yet again retaken by the Yorkshire Territorials who were aided by the 1st Middlesex from the Thirty-third Division. It was a long and arduous day of battle, inexpressibly trying to the wearied troops engaged. General Nicholson had under his hand six brigades that day, and senior officers upon the spot have testified to the masterly use which he made of them. That night the Fifty-ninth came up into the front line and relieved the exhausted infantry. The relief, however, was but a momentary one, for on the afternoon of April 15 the Germans delivered yet another strong attack upon the Ravelsberg line, now held by the Forty-ninth, Fifty-ninth, and Thirty-third Divisions. The Fifty-ninth, as already described, fell back through the Thirty-fourth Division, which again found itself in the front line. The two flank divisions both fell back to conform, and lined up with the remains of the Thirty-fourth on the new line near St. Jans Cappel, which held firm from April 16.

On April 17 there was yet another day of heavy fighting upon this line, both flanks and the Meule Hook being strongly attacked, but the position was

successfully held, and one more limit seemed to have been reached in the advance. The same six brigades under General Nicholson, reduced now to the strength of battalions, were still throwing an iron bar across the German path. From the right the 147th, 74th, 101st, 102nd, 103rd, and 88th, all of them with set teeth, held on to the appointed line which receded under pressure and was yet again re-established. The 88th, under that remarkable young soldier, General Freyberg, had some especially hard work to do.

Late on April 20 this goodly fellowship in arms was dissolved, the three separate brigades returned to their divisions, and the Thirty-fourth was relieved by the French. The artillery of the Thirty-eighth Welsh Division fought throughout these awful days at the back of the infantry, who could not say too much for these guns or for General Topping who commanded them. Save two howitzers hit on April 9, no gun of this division was lost during all this close and severe fighting. South of the Lys many of the Royal Army Medical Corps remained with their wounded, and were taken prisoners, sharing with their charges the wretched treatment which was still meted out to British captives, especially behind the lines and before reaching the camps in Germany.

It should be added that the sappers of the 207th, 208th, 209th Field Companies and the 18th Northumberland Fusiliers Pioneers fought like ordinary infantry, and did splendid and essential service in holding the line.

We shall now turn to Jeffreys' Nineteenth Division which we left on the 12th of April, holding on to the Wulverghem-Wytschaete front, with formidable enemies in front of them, but an even more formidable menace upon their right flank, whence came constant rumours that the enemy had at last penetrated the hard-pressed Twenty-fifth Division, had occupied Neuve Eglise, and was pushing up along the lines of the northward roads which would turn the whole of the position. Late at night on April 12 it had been ascertained that these reports were premature. The units of the 108th Ulster Brigade on the right of the line and connecting with the Twenty-fifth Division had been penetrated and driven back, but were strengthened and stayed by the advent of the 8th Gloucesters. The situation was obscure on the right, and there was a dangerous gap which was filled early in the morning of April 13 by the energy and initiative of Captain Macintosh of the 94th Field Company Royal Engineers, who with a handful of the 10th Worcester's pushed his way in, and showed a bold front to the enemy.

The 2/5th Sherwood Foresters from the 178th Brigade (Stansfeld) of the

Fifty-ninth North Midland Division had also been ordered to face south and with the help of some machine-guns to hold off the turning movement from that quarter. All these movements were carried out in pitch darkness and amid a situation so confused that it was impossible to define which was the attacking line and which the line of defence. The general scheme of the battle in this area on the morning of April 13 was that the Twenty-fifth Division, with the help of the 148th Brigade of Yorkshire Territorials, was fighting desperately in and around Neuve Eglise to the north of those units of the 100th Brigade, whose defence of the town has already been described. Next to them on the north lay the remains of the 108th Brigade, then the battalion of Sherwood Foresters, and then the 57th Brigade with the 8th Gloucesters on the southern flank. All the morning the roar of battle rose from Neuve Eglise where the German stormers fought hand to hand with the British infantry, who had been strengthened by the addition of that fine battalion, the 4th Shropshires from the Nineteenth Division. The contest swung and swayed as fresh German troops were thrown into the struggle, but at last about half-past ten in the morning the attack was defeated, the German infantry fell back in sullen groups under the constant fire of the defenders, and the British line was pushed forward to the south of the village.

During the day, which was spent under heavy fire of artillery and the imminent menace of attack from the grey clouds seen gathering upon the Messines Ridge, the remaining battalions of the 178th Brigade, the 2/6th and the 7th Sherwood Foresters, were pushed into the line to relieve the exhausted 108th Brigade. It was clear that great German concentrations were being made upon Neuve Eglise, and that the village was in danger, so every arrangement was made to accommodate the line to the situation which would arise if that important point were taken, and the Wulverghem position became in consequence untenable. This new line would run from Meteren through Kemmel and Spy Farm to Spanbrockmolen. The night of April 13 would have been quiet upon the front of the Nineteenth Division had it not been for the constant pre-occupation and alarm caused by the varying fortunes of the fighting at Neuve Eglise, in which they were well aware that their own fate was concerned. The attack had been renewed with fresh forces, and the Twenty-fifth Division was extremely exhausted and could only be helped by other units which were in no better case. Again and again the Germans were deep in the village. Again and again they were evicted. It seemed to be the beginning of the end, however, when it was announced towards morning that the Twenty-fifth Division was out of touch with the British troops upon its south flank, and that the Germans filtering through this gap had got to Nordhoek, west of Neuve Eglise, and were

pushing to the north in the rear of the British position, By morning of April 14 Neuve Eglise had been abandoned, though it does not appear to have been solidly occupied by the enemy until mid-day, and snipers of both armies infested the ruins.

Northern Area. April 14.

The loss of the village and of the low ridge which adjoined it had a most sinister effect upon the general strategic position to the north, and it was indeed fortunate that measures had been taken in advance to deal with the new situation. The Nineteenth Division on April 14 found itself shelled heavily all day, while it was machine-gunned and trench-mortared from the right where its flank was now in the air. The position of the right-hand unit, the 4th Shropshires, south of the Neuve Eglise-Wulverghem Road, became impossible, as the Germans were in the rear, and indeed upon three sides of them.

Major Wingrove stuck to his position till mid-day, and no battalion could have given a more cogent example of steadiness and fortitude in adversity. About 2 P.M. the Germans began to emerge in force from the villages, beating up against the gallant Shropshires, who retired slowly and steadily, taking toll of their assailants, while the Sherwood Foresters of the 178th Brigade helped them to hold the enemy at arm's length.

As the day wore on the pressure became more insistent, until about seven in the evening Major Wingrove, of whom it has been stated by his General that "his tenacity, gallantry, and determination had held the much-tried and isolated line up to this time," was severely wounded. When his inspiring presence was removed there was a break to the north of Neuve Eglise and the Twenty-fifth Division, now reduced to a handful, were retreating westwards, while the Nineteenth was being rolled up from the south.

General Jeffreys' force was now in so dangerous a position that it had actually to form a front to the west as well as to the east, a difficult manoeuvre which was carried out with great coolness and skill by Colonel Sole of the 10th Worcesters, who was in charge of the new line, aided by Major Parkes of the 8th Gloucesters. The men were rallied, led into their new positions, and a dangerous penetration was narrowly averted. Later a new line was built up with the Forty-ninth Yorkshire Territorial Division in the place of the Twenty-fifth Division on the right, reinforced by the 71st Brigade from the Sixth Division. Next to them on the left was the 178th Sherwood Foresters Brigade, then the 108th Brigade,

and finally the 58th Brigade, standing just in their old positions. The changes in the British line were such that whereas it used to face east, it now faced almost south from near Meteren to Kemmel and Spanbrockmolen. The latter marked the point of junction upon the left with the right of the Ninth Division. This line was not fully occupied till April 16.

Northern Area. April 15.

On April 15 the intermediate positions were attacked, the 9th Welsh Fusiliers, on the extreme left of the line, and the remains of the 6th Wiltshires being heavily engaged. No impression was made. At a different point the Germans had better results to show with the 108th Brigade, and made some progress, but the Sherwood Foresters once more mended the line. In the evening it was reported that the enemy had taken Crucifix Corner and were moving westwards. The strength of all battalions had now fallen to such a point, owing to constant shelling and incessant attacks, that it was very difficult to form more than a line of outposts. By evening of April 15 all the troops concerned, the remains of the Twenty-fifth, the Forty-ninth, and the Nineteenth Divisions were on the general line Meteren-Kemmel, facing south to the German advance, but also threatening the German right flank if they should press too far to the west. The remnant of the 108th Ulsters was relieved that night.

Northern Area. April 15.

A heavy attack was made at 6 A.M. on the morning of April 16 upon the front of the Ninth Division, which had withdrawn in conformity with the new northern line. The 62nd Brigade of the Twenty-first Division had, as already stated, been put under the orders of General Tudor of the Ninth Division, for his unit had been greatly weakened by the terrible losses of the South Africans. The North Countrymen of the 62nd fought desperately against great odds, but they were pushed out of Spanbrockmolen, and later out of Wytschaete.

They found a new line to the north, however, and the Germans tried in vain to bend it. The 58th Brigade had thrown back its own line to correspond, and joined up with the 62nd at Lacache Farm. Late that evening the worn and weary troops were deeply comforted by the sight of a small group of blue-clad men with classical helmets surveying the German lines through their glasses. It was the vanguard and the observers of the Twenty-eighth and One hundred and thirty-third French Divisions which were coming up to the aid of the Ninth.

Northern Area. April 17.

It was clear that the commanding position of Kemmel, a hill which overlooks a wide range of country, was the immediate objective of the enemy in this quarter. About 10 A.M. on April 17 they put down a heavy barrage, and then pushed on in force with the intention of breaking in the British line and capturing the hill. The battalions attacked were the three Sherwood Foresters units, with the 8th North Staffords and 10th Warwicks of the 57th Brigade. This attack was a complete failure. Weary as they were the sturdy Englishmen stood fast to their lines, and beat their assailants back in blood and ruin. Machine-gun fire from the crest of the hill contributed to the result, and the guns also did their share. The only German gain was a post called Donegal Farm between the Nineteenth and the Forty-ninth Divisions. A fresh attack was made upon the 10th Warwicks in the evening, but this also was thrown back with heavy loss.

Meanwhile, on the northern sector, the Ninth Division endeavoured to regain the ground which they had lost the day before, but their efforts had no great success, save that the 7th Seaforths of the 26th Brigade in a very brilliant advance fought their way into Wytschaete once more, and took possession of the village which they held until the following day, when the general position forced them to abandon it. On April 18 the fighting died down upon this front, and in the evening the gallant Nineteenth Division, after most glorious service, was relieved by the French Twenty-eighth Division, which took over the defence of Kemmel Hill. The total losses of this division had been nearly 4000 men, which, coming on the top of the heavy losses on the Somme in the previous fortnight, formed such a record as had seldom been equalled. Nor was their ordeal yet at an end, and many a stout battle was still to be fought before a rest should come.

All these stirring episodes, including the glorious destruction of the 4th Brigade of Guards, the formation of a permanent line by the Australians, the defence of Meteren and Bailleul by the Thirty-third and other divisions, the fighting at Neuve Eglise, and the defence of the Wytschaete and Messines fronts by the Nineteenth and Ninth Divisions with odd brigades to help them, all came within the area of Plumer's Second Army, which still consisted of the Ninth and Fifteenth Corps in the line. It should be mentioned that of fourteen divisions contained in this army on March 21 no less than twelve had been sent down to the Somme, while the remaining two, the Forty-ninth and Twenty-ninth, were under orders to go at the moment when the great battle in Flanders broke out.

Southern Area. April 14.

We shall now for a moment turn to the left flank of the First Army in the south which had so far, in spite of heavy attacks, lost very little ground. It has already been described how the Fifty-fifth Lancashire Division stood like a rock at Givenchy and Festubert, while the Fifty-first and afterwards the Fourth Division struggled desperately to hold back the attack on their left. The former had been relieved on April 16 by Strickland's First Division, while the Highlanders and Fourth Division also had been drawn out, and gave place to Deverell's Third Division, which had done so splendidly and lost so heavily upon the Somme.

After the repulse from the Fifty-fifth Division, the Germans had contented themselves with shelling Givenchy, but they had pushed on, as already narrated, to the north of the position, and had got as far as Locon. The result was that the First Division had a long frontage which faced due north and a shorter frontage to the east.

Southern Area. April 16.

The Fourth Division held the front at this period to the east of Robecq, being on the right of the Sixty-first, with the 184th Brigade between them. It was used on April 14 for a counter-attack which was carried out at night, and which achieved a local success by the recapture of the village of Riez, with 150 prisoners. This operation was carried out by the 11th Brigade, with the 1st Hants and 1st Somersets in the lead, and was a very workmanlike little action which was the more valuable when coming at a period of general recoil.

Southern Area. April 18.

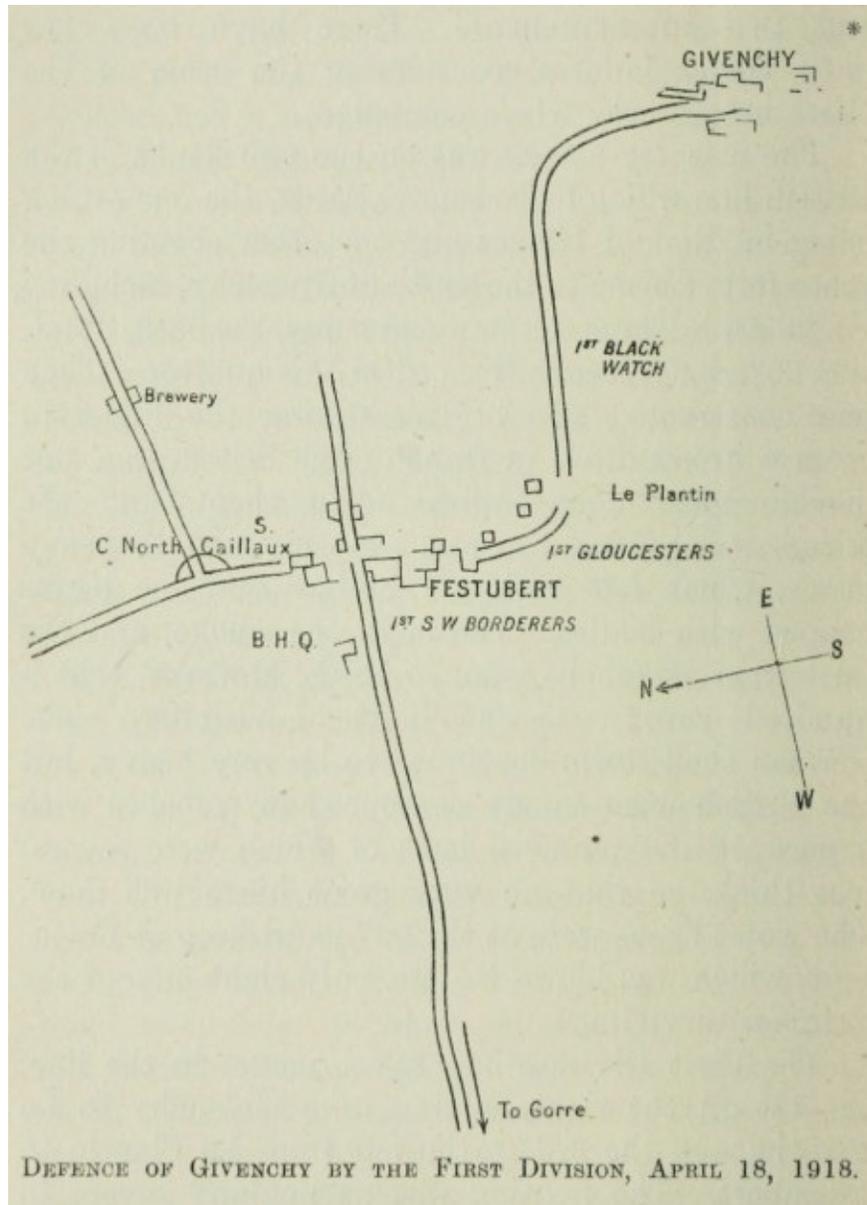
On April 18 the new German attack upon the First Division at Givenchy began with a bombardment of great violence. Their plan upon this day was to carry Givenchy and Festubert by storm, and to win the line of the canal as far west as Gorre. They would then capture the high ground at Hinges, and so command the canal right up to Robecq. No doubt they calculated, and with justice, that if they could overcome the men on the spot they would find that the reserves had all been drawn away to the north. Their plan was wrecked, however, by the fact that the men on the spot were not to be overcome. Eighteen German battalions moved forward to the attack, and all of them suffered heavily without gaining any appreciable advantage. So heavy was the slaughter that

many German companies were reduced before evening to twenty or thirty effectives, while the three battalions of one regiment were left under the respective command of one lieutenant and two sub-lieutenants. There have been few more costly failures, considering the scale of the operations, in the whole campaign.

The infantry attack was on the two flanks of the British line which looked northwards, the one attack being in front of Hinges and the other covering the space from Loigne to the south of Givenchy, including Festubert. Three German regiments, the 98th, 361st, and 202nd Reserve, advanced in this quarter. They had constructed two bridges during the night to cross a broad ditch in front of the British line, but machine-guns were trained upon them, and the troops which tried to cross were exposed to heavy losses, which left both the bridges and the banks heaped with bodies. The mist, the smoke, and the dust from the shells were so thick, however, that a hundred yards was the limit of visibility. The German shell-storm continued to be very heavy, but the British were snugly ensconced in trenches with a parapet and parapets, both of which were several feet thick, so that no very great harm was done. The worst losses were at the advanced keep at Festubert, which was blown to bits, only eight men of the garrison surviving.

The First Division had two brigades in the line, the 1st on the right holding from Givenchy to Le Plantin, and the 3rd to the left from Le Plantin to Festubert. The fighting was particularly severe in the latter sector of the line. As the garrison looked north they saw through the rising mist about 8.15 in the morning the enemy advancing in small groups of light machine-guns, coming over a slight rise some 900 yards east of Festubert. These troops pushed bravely on, though they had no cover but shell-holes, and they suffered very severely. The 1st Gloucester, under Colonel Tweedie, on the right and the 1st South Wales Borderers on the left, battalions with the halo of the first Ypres battle round their heads, held the line and littered the open ground with their steady rifle-fire. There was a gap in the defences at a point called Willow Road, and into this the enemy poured more quickly than they could be shot down. Their rush carried them through, and into the houses and gardens of Le Plantin. A company of the Gloucesters under Captain Handford was cut in two, but both sections stood fast, Lieutenant Hall on one side, and the company commander on the other, closing in on the centre and preventing reinforcement, while Lieutenant Gosling attacked with the reserve company. The Germans ran field-guns right up, but the crews were shot down. So matters remained until the afternoon, the stormers

being in the British position, but so pinned down by rifle-fire that they could not raise their heads. On the other hand, German snipers in the houses and trees were very deadly to any runners or other exposed defenders. Whilst matters were in this stage in the Le Plantin area, they were even more critical at Festubert. The enemy, moving up behind a good barrage, overran a part of the South Wales Borderers and forced their way into an orchard just south of the keep known as Route A. Thence they tried to get into the rear of the defence. About eleven Sergeant-Major Biddle of D Company ran the gauntlet to Brigade Headquarters to explain the situation and ask for help. Captain Smith got together a party of odds and ends, under twenty in number, who made their way up the west side of Festubert and prevented the extension of this dangerous German movement.



DEFENCE OF GIVENCHY BY THE FIRST DIVISION, APRIL 18, 1918.*

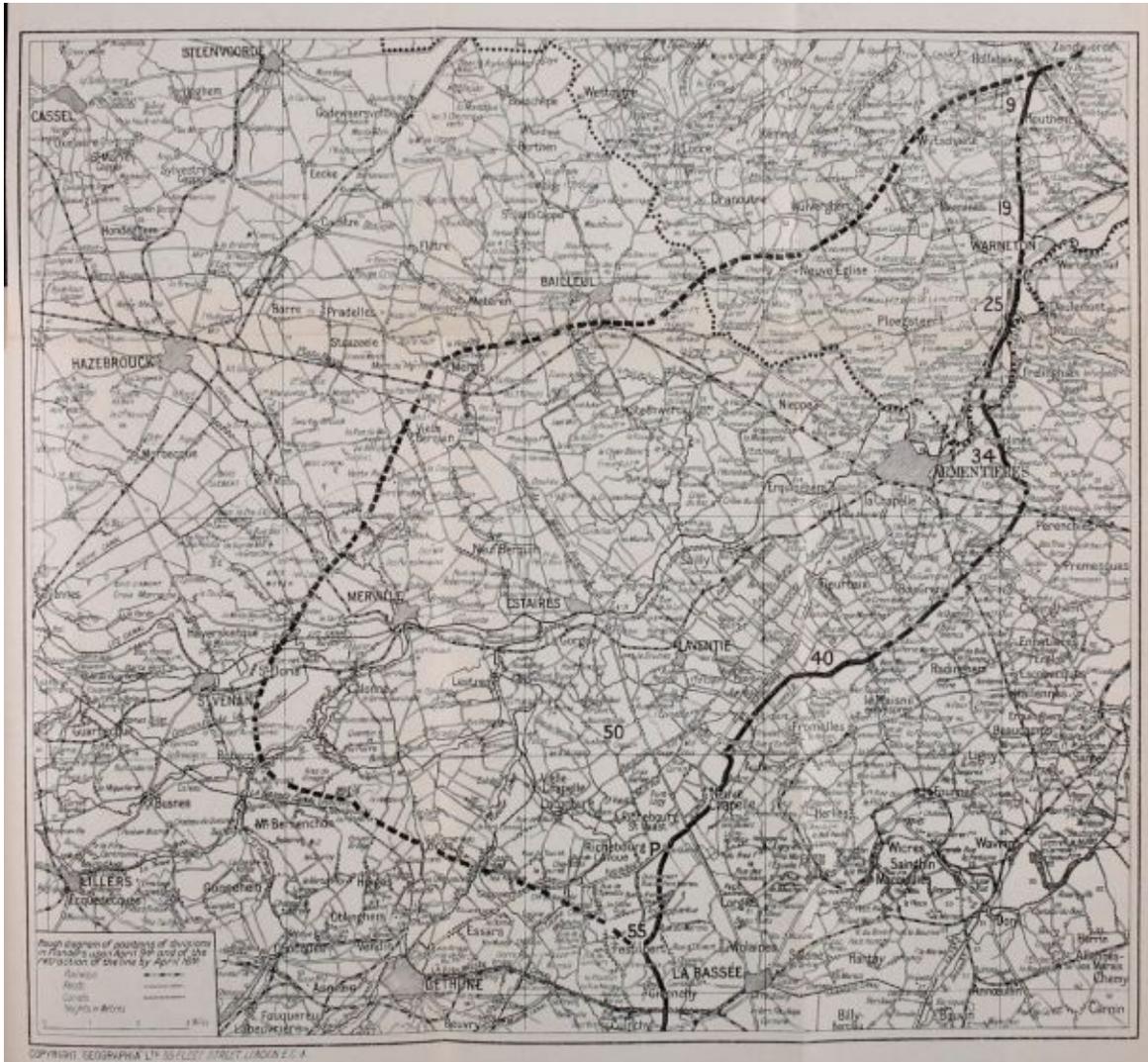
* This rough plan was drawn by an officer engaged in the action.

By two o'clock the attack was definitely defeated, and by three the Germans were retiring along the whole line. They found it, however, very difficult to disengage themselves from their advance positions. They tried to crawl back from shell-hole to shell-hole, while the British stood up all along the parapets and shot them in scores. Absolutely demoralised, many of the Germans threw away their arms. Their retirement probably cost as much as their advance. Those

who had got into Le Plantin had to run the gauntlet between two halves of the Gloucesters in getting out, and few of them escaped. The performance of the 1st Gloucesters was remarkable, for they were at one time attacked front, flank, and rear by a force estimated at four battalions. It is recorded that the barrels of their new Lewis guns were worn smooth by the intensity of one day of battle. The 1st Brigade on the right of the defence from the canal to Le Plantin was also heavily attacked, though their ordeal was not so long or severe as that of their comrades on the left. The 1st Black Watch, the flank battalion next to the Gloucesters, had some especially heavy fighting, but kept their ground intact, and did their full share towards the victorious result. The whole affair was a fine feat of arms, for the German gun power had greatly increased since April 9, while the repulse was even more decisive. It proved to be a final one, as the Germans made no further attempt to force their passage to Bethune. During all this long fight the Third Division beyond Loigne on the left was holding the line firmly against all German pressure. So ended April 18. Before the evening of the 20th all outlying posts had been cleared of the Germans. On this same date, April 18, there was a sharp action to the immediate left of this Givenchy fighting, when the Fourth Division held up a German attack, and afterwards countered, capturing the Bois Paquan in the Kobecq sector. Two hundred prisoners were the fruits of this action, but they were dearly bought, for many officers and men were killed or wounded. Among the former were two grand soldiers, Colonel Armitage of the 1st Hants and Brigade-Major Harston of the 11th Brigade. This forward movement was continued later by the Sixty-first Division, who did very good work on April 23, General Pagan of the 184th Brigade being a leader in the advance, which was notable for a fine attack by the 2/5th Gloucesters under Colonel Lawson. Shortly afterwards General Colin Mackenzie of this division, who had done splendid work from the first days of the war, was wounded while reconnoitring in front of his line and had to return to England.

There now followed a short pause in the German attack, and we may look around and follow the general line of the defence at this period before the action was renewed. On the extreme north of the Second Army the Belgians had relieved the Thirtieth Division, and thus shortened the British line. Then came the Ninth and Twenty-first British Divisions near Wytschaete. South and west of this point the front line had been taken over by General de Mitry with the Thirty-sixth French Corps, which now succeeded the Ninth British Corps in this sector. The Thirty-fourth and One hundred and thirty-third French Divisions were in the line, with the Second French Cavalry Corps in co-operation. This most welcome and indeed vital reinforcement had taken over Kemmel, Mont Rouge, Mont

Noir, Mont Vidaigne, and Mont des Cats, the range of kopjes which screen the Ypres plain from the south. On the right of the French was the weary Fifteenth Corps, with the First Australian Division as the flank unit near Meteren. The British divisions in the north were in close support to the French, the Nineteenth and Thirty-fourth being near Poperinghe, and the Twenty-fifth behind Kemmel. Such was the general position in that northern sector, to which the battle was now more and more confined. Before following the further events it should be mentioned that on April 17 the Belgians in the neighbourhood of Bixschoote had been exposed to a very severe attack from four German divisions, which would have shaken the whole line of defence had it succeeded. It was met, however, with very great courage, and the Belgians proved themselves to be valiant soldiers, well worthy to be admitted upon entirely equal terms into the battle-line of the larger nations. They fought the action with heroic gallantry, and gave the Germans a severe check, killing some 2000 of them, and taking 700 prisoners with several guns. It was a notable performance, and the more welcome in a period of such stress.



Position of the Line in Flanders, April 9

Northern Area. April 25.

On April 25, at an early hour of the morning, the Germans made an attack upon the northern line from a point north of Bailleul to the east of Wytschaete, a distance of about ten miles. The whole of this front, save the extreme eastern portion, was held by the French, who made a very gallant resistance to as fierce an assault as the war has seen. The main German objective was the very important height of Mount Kemmel, a bluff five hundred feet high, wooded upon the sides. This was held by the Twenty-eighth French Division, who fought most gallantly, but were finally overpowered by the four German divisions which were brought against it, including a division of Alpine troops, especially trained for hill fighting. The Allied line was pushed back along its whole front,

Dranoutre and St. Eloi falling into the hands of the Germans, together with 6000 prisoners. It was the darkest hour of the Flemish battle, and was the more depressing as it came after a week of equilibrium in which the tide of invasion seemed to have been finally dammed. The German infantry had penetrated through the joining point of the French and British near Wytschaete, and at the same time through the French at Dranoutre, so that they were able to assail Kemmel Hill from both sides. It had fallen by nine o'clock. The Ninth Division in the north was forced to fall back upon the line of La Clytte, after enduring heavy losses in a combat lasting nine hours, during which they fought with their usual tenacity, as did the 64th and 146th Brigades, who fought beside them.

The Germans, having got through the French upon the right flank, had got round to the rear of the 27th Brigade, with the result that the 12th Royal Scots were almost entirely destroyed, and the Scottish Borderers were also very hard hit. None the less, with the enemy in front and rear, the Lowland infantry held out, finally making their way back in orderly fashion during the night. Farther north the line of the 64th and the 146th Brigades was broken and the remnants reformed in Cheapside, where their reserve battalions thickened their array. The 26th Highland Brigade threw back all attacks in front, and formed a defensive flank to the south, withdrawing at leisure and in order after dark.

Even the Ninth Division has seldom had a harder day, or a more honourable one. On the 26th General Cameron of the Forty-ninth Division took over this sector, and the Ninth went out of the line with very special messages of thanks from both the British and the French marshals.

Some small British units were involved in the disaster of Mount Kemmel as they were on the hill helping in the defence. Among these were the 19th Lancashire Fusiliers (Pioneers), the 456th Field Company R.E., and part of the 49th Battalion Machine-gun Corps, all drawn from the Forty-ninth Division.

Northern Area. April 26.

A determined effort was at once made to retrieve the situation, and a counter-attack upon the new German line was ordered for 3 A.M. on April 26. It was carried out by the Thirty-ninth French Division on the right, and by the Twenty-fifth Division (Bainbridge) on the left. The French advance was held by severe machine-gun fire on the line of the Kemmel Brook. The British advancing from La Clytte had more success, but were unable to maintain the ground which they had won. They went forward with Griffin's 7th Brigade on the left and Bethell's 74th on the right. The water was up to the men's waists as in the cold of the early morning they splashed their way across the Kemmel Brook. It was dismal and desperate work, but the spirit of the men, in spite of all that this division had endured, was still high, and they beat down all obstacles until they had forced their way into the village of Kemmel, where they secured 200 prisoners. Their own losses were heavy, however, including Colonel Cade of the 1st Wilts, Colonel Stewart of the 4th South Staffords, Colonel Reade of the 10th Chesters, and several other senior officers. It was now found that the flanks of both brigades were in the air, and as the losses were increasing through the enfilade fire, they were ordered to withdraw. It was still early, and the morning mist screened what would otherwise have been a very murderous operation. The final line held by the Twenty-fifth Division was about 1000 yards in advance of the starting-point.

It should be remembered that in this difficult and gallant night attack against a victorious enemy the young 19-year-old recruits, who now made up a considerable proportion of the decimated division, showed a very fine spirit and kept up with the veterans beside them.

Having repulsed the counter-attack of the French and of the Twenty-fifth Division, the enemy tried with great energy to improve his advantage, and Von Armin thundered during the whole of April 26 against the Allied line, trying especially to drive in the northern sector at Wytschaete and Eloi. The fighting on this line was very desperate during the day, and in spite of every effort the troops were pushed back from their forward positions. The strain fell chiefly upon the remains of the 26th Brigade of the Ninth Division, the Twenty-first Division, the 21st Brigade of the Thirtieth Division, and the Thirty-ninth Division. The 21st Brigade defended the northern portion of the line, and one of the outstanding feats of the day was the defence of the Old Bluff from morning to dusk by that grand battalion, the 2nd Bedfords. Farther south the two points called the Brasserie and the Spoil-Bank were eventually won by the Germans, but they

were defended with great determination by units of the Thirty-ninth Division, the 1st Herts, the Cambridgeshires, and the Sussex battalions. It was a day of struggle, and the most that the Allies could say was that they had prevented a break in their line. That night there was another general withdrawal along the front which brought the Allied position into very much the same trenches as had been occupied in the autumn of 1914. Such a result of four years' fighting might well have caused depression, and yet these brave hearts never for one instant relinquished their high hopes of the victory to come.

Northern Area. April 26 onwards.

The enemy had gained a spectacular advantage at Kemmel, and high hopes were raised in Germany that some great ulterior result would come of it, but in spite of strong efforts it was not destined that there should be any particular consequences from their victory. Observation can be obtained from a balloon as easily as from a hill, and the space upon the summit was so limited that the Allied guns could make it almost untenable. Strong efforts were at once made to push on upon the line Locre-La Clytte, which was held by the French. They repulsed three strong attacks on April 27, and though in the evening the Germans got into Locre, they were thrown out again by our tenacious Allies. Again on the morning of April 29 the enemy attacked along the whole line from Mont Vidaigne to Zillebeke Lake. This attack was repulsed with severe loss to the enemy, and must have gone far to convince him that he was not destined to develop his Kemmel success. The battle involved not only the front of the Thirty-sixth French Corps, but also that of the Twenty-fifth, Forty-ninth, and Twenty-first Divisions, all of which stood like a wall and beat off every assault. These attacks extended from north of Kemmel to Voormezele. The Twenty-fifth Division was next to the French on the right of the line, in the British centre was the Forty-ninth, while on the left the Twenty-first Division connected up with the Ninth, which was out of the direct line of attack.

Northern Area. April 29.

The 75th Brigade formed the fighting line of the Twenty-fifth Division on this day of battle. They found themselves on the western side of the Kemmel Brook, while the 3rd Prussian Guards lay on the farther side and advanced to the attack. To do this they had to pass over the smooth slope which led down to the stream, and they fell in heaps in the attempt. They huddled for shelter behind a group of huts, but the guns got on to them and blew them to pieces. Four distinct attacks were all equally murderous and unsuccessful. The 8th Border Battalion

was particularly conspicuous in the defence. Next to them, near Ridge Wood, were the well-trying Yorkshiremen of the Forty-ninth. For some reason the Germans at this point advanced in close formation with bayonets fixed. Such tactics received the slating which they deserved. Both the West Riding Battalions of the 147th Brigade and the York and Lancasters of the 148th were in the firing-line, and they amply repaid themselves for many a distressful hour. Once for three minutes the Germans made a lodgment, but at the end of that time a rush of bayonet-men pitchforked them out of their only gain. The Twenty-first Division held the line above Ridge Wood and on towards Voormezele. Upon them came the heaviest attack of all, and the slaughter of the Germans, coming on at a range of 400 yards under machine-gun and rifle-fire, was very murderous. The Leicester Brigade did particularly well this day, and so did the worn 89th Brigade of the Thirtieth Division, which had come under the orders of General Campbell of the Twenty-first Division. The German attack struck very hard against the front of this unit near the Brasserie on the Vierstraat-Ypres Road, and all three battalions, the 17th, 18th, 19th King's Liverpools, had desperate fighting, the 17th coming in for particularly rough treatment. It had each flank penetrated and one company surrounded, but still managed to shake itself clear.

The Belgians were also involved in this wide-spread attack, and both their lines in the north and those of the French round the Sharpenberg and Mont Rouge were held intact. This severe check, inflicted upon a force which was not less than twelve divisions, marked the beginning of the collapse of the great German offensive in Flanders, which had now lasted for twenty days of constant battle.

Early in May the Franco-British line still lay from Kemmel village in the south to Ypres in the north, taking Voormezele upon the way. If the Germans could succeed in bursting through here they would partly encircle Ypres, and would probably cause an evacuation, an event which might be of no great military importance, but could not fail to have a moral and political repercussion. Ypres stood like an oriflamme of war amid the ranks of the British Army. Here it was that in October 1914 they had said to the Germans, "Thus far and no farther!" Now in the fourth year the words still held good. If after all the efforts, all the self-sacrifice, all good blood so cheerfully shed, it was now to pass from their hands, no consoling lectures upon strategy could soften the heavy blow which it would be to those who relaxed the grip which their comrades had held so firmly. Yet it was this and no less which was at stake in these early days

of May. A crushing German victory with the capture of the coast was no longer to be feared. But an important local success, which would reverberate through the world, was still well within their hopes and their power.

At the moment of this important attack the southern sector of this line was held by the One hundred and twenty-ninth and Thirty-second French Divisions, the latter being next to the British just to the south of Vierstraat. To the north of the French lay the 30th Composite Brigade (Currie), which had been formed by telescoping the remains of the Thirtieth Division into a single unit. It had two splendid though attenuated Regular battalions, the 2nd Bedfords and 2nd Yorkshires in the line with the 17th King's Liverpools in immediate support. Still farther to the north lay Pinney's well-trying Thirty-third Division with the 98th Brigade (Maitland) in front. Their battle line consisted of the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the 4th King's Liverpools, and the 1st Middlesex, from south to north. Farther north still from the Voormezele region to the southern suburbs of ruined Ypres lay Marden's Sixth Division which was not involved to any great degree in the fighting.

Northern Area. May 8.

In the centre of the position was a well-marked line of trees forming the edge of Ridge Wood. Behind the British line was the village of Dickebush with the Dickebush Lake. These two points were the first objectives of the German attack, which broke with great violence at 7.30 in the morning of May 8. It was preceded by a lavish use of mustard gas shells, a hellish device which was used more and more from this time forward. This poison may be kept out of the lungs by a mask, but cannot be kept from the body, where it raises such blisters and irritation as may prove fatal in the same fashion as a bad burn. When enough has been poured into any position it can be made untenable by troops, since in heavy weather it hangs about for days, and has the unpleasant property of appearing to have vanished and yet becoming active again when exposed to moisture. Many a battalion which has crossed a dew-moistened field within the battle area has had reason afterwards to regret it.

Coming after so deadly a preparation the first rush of the Germans met with success, and they penetrated the line, both of the Thirty-second French Division and of the 30th Composite Brigade. Their advance brought them roughly to the south end of Dickebush Lake, whereupon the 98th Brigade threw back a flank from Ridge Wood to the lake, so as to cover themselves from a southern attack.

At seven in the evening a strong attempt was made to re-establish the line, the 19th Brigade (Mayne) being thrown into the battle. The counter-attack was made by the 1st Cameronians, advancing across the Hallebast-La Clytte Road, but they were in full view of the enemy whose machine-gun fire was sweeping the very grass from the ground in front of their feet. They could not get forward, and many of them never got back. A fine advance was made, however, by the composite King's Liverpools with the help of some of the Bedfords. It actually reached the old front line, but had lost so heavily that it was unable to retain it in the face of a renewed German assault, but stuck on as near as it could.

It should be explained that this King's Liverpool unit was really the old 89th Brigade which had been worn down to such an extent that the 17th, 18th, and 19th King's were now compressed into one battalion, 750 strong. Their heavy losses upon the Somme had been greatly increased in Flanders, and included Colonel Watson, the gallant and veteran leader of the 17th Battalion. Now under Colonel Rollo their sentiment was that of one of their officers who wrote, "We are still the 89th Brigade, call us what they like and put us in what division they please. The old spirit remains as ever." This was the unit whose swan song is here recorded. Next day the survivors made good their line, and handed it over intact to their relief.

To the north of this composite battalion (which was independent of the 30th Divisional Brigade already mentioned) the counter-attack was made by the 5th Scottish Rifles near Dickebush Lake, and by the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders at Ridge Wood. Both of these battalions won home and gained their full objectives. The great German local effort, urged by four strong divisions, the Fifty-second and Fifty-sixth in front, the Twenty-ninth and Thirty-first in support, had been held. Each of these convulsive efforts of Von Armin's tired army brought the final equilibrium and ultimate retirement more close.

The fighting died down entirely in this quarter, and the Fourteenth French Division took it over from the British. Indeed this day of strenuous battle may be said to have marked the end of the great Battle of the Lys, which had raged ever since April 9. The Germans had been fought to a standstill. They had in the course of a month's fighting won ground, prisoners, and guns, but it is possible in winning a battle to lose a war, and this is exactly what they had accomplished. An expensive and barren success had been achieved by a lavish use of their reserves, and on the day when those reserves were vitally needed, they had been wastefully strewn over the plains of the Somme and of Flanders. Never had the

British Army been more severely tried than at this time when their General issued his famous "back to the wall" appeal, and never had the individual soldier risen to a greater height. "The British Army," says an Italian observer who was present throughout the crisis, "impresses one with its inherent moral soundness. The German," he adds, "uses almost exclusively machine-guns and bombs, but the Englishman loves his rifle, and knows much better how to use it. He is a better marksman, he is more contemptuous of danger, and he is calmer, steadier, and feels himself individually superior to his enemy. The cheerfulness of the men is due in great measure to the noble, dignified, serene example of their officers, so simple in their gentlemanly bearing, so conscious of the reasons and the end of the war, so proud of their country and of its unshakeable prestige." It is a noble tribute, but none who know the men could say that it was a strained one.

No account of the battle of the Lys can close without a word as to the splendid work done by General Plumer, never wearied, never flurried, during those fateful days. Hardly less arduous was the experience of General Horne in the southern sector. The three corps commanders, too, who bore the brunt, and very especially General de Lisle, who only took over his command on the second day of the battle, will always be associated with one of the most desperate incidents of the war. But above and behind all is the commanding and heroic figure of Douglas Haig, impassive, serene, still working as he had worked four years before, at the mending of broken lines and the bracing of weak ones, until the hour should strike for his tremendous revenge.

CHAPTER XI

THE BATTLES OF THE CHEMIN DES DAMES AND OF THE ARDRES

May 27-June 2

The rest cure of the Aisne—Attack upon the Fiftieth Division—Upon the Eighth—Upon the Twenty-first—5th Battery R.F.A.—Glorious Devons—Adventure of General Rees—Retreat across the Aisne—Over the Vesle—Arrival of Nineteenth Division—Desperate fighting—Success of 4th Shropshires—

It had been determined to rest four of the crippled British divisions which had been heavily engaged first on the Somme and then in the battle of the Lys. These divisions were the Twenty-fifth (Bainbridge), Twenty-first (Campbell), Eighth (Heneker), and Fiftieth (Jackson), all forming the Ninth Corps (Hamilton-Gordon). Each of them had been cut to pieces twice in the course of little more than a month, and should by every pre-war precept have been incapable of exertion for a long time to come. They were reconstituted with numbers of recruits under fresh officers, both leaders and men with slight experience of actual warfare. They were then sent, via the outskirts of Paris, the direct route being under fire from the German guns in front of Amiens, and they were thrust into the French line just north of the Aisne in the region of the Chemin des Dames. The intention was to give them repose, but the change was looked upon with misgiving by the divisional generals, one of whom wrote to the present chronicler at the time saying, "They think it will be a rest cure, but to my mind it is more likely to be a fresh centre of storm."

As a matter of fact the Germans, who had now made two colossal thrusts, the one on March 21 on the Somme, the other at the Lys on April 9, were planning a third desperate attack at this very point. The competent military historian of the future with all the records before him will no doubt be able to pronounce how far it was wise for the German high command to leave two unfinished tasks in order to undertake a third one. On the face of it, it seemed an unlikely thing to do, and that perhaps is why they did it. The line at this position had few natural advantages and was not strongly held. In the opinion of British generals it would have been wise if it could have been drawn south of the Aisne, since a broad river is a good friend in one's front, but a treacherous enemy in one's rear. There were reasons, however, why it was not easy for the French to abandon the north bank, for they had spent much time, labour, and human life in capturing Craonne, the California Plateau, and other positions within that area, and it was a dreadful thing to give them up unless they were beaten out of them. They held on, therefore—and the British divisions, now acting as part of the French army, were compelled to hold on as well. The Fiftieth Northern Territorial Division had a frontage of 7000 yards from near Craonne to Ville-aux-Bois, including the famous California Plateau; on their immediate right was the Regular Eighth Division, and to the right of that in the Berry-au-Bac sector, where the lines

cross the Aisne, was the Twenty-first Division, this British contingent forming the Ninth Corps, and having French troops upon either side of them. The Twenty-fifth Division was in reserve at Fismes to the south of the river. The total attack from Crecy-au-Mont to Berry was about thirty miles, a quarter of which—the eastern quarter—was held by the British.

Confining our attention to the experience of the British troops, which is the theme of these volumes, we shall take the northern unit and follow its fortunes on the first day with some detail, remarking in advance that the difficulties and the results were much the same in the case of each of the three front divisions, so that a fuller account of one may justify a more condensed one of the others. The position along the whole line consisted of rolling grass plains where the white gashes in the chalk showed out the systems of defence. The Germans, on the other hand, were shrouded to some extent in woodland, which aided them in the concentration of their troops. The defences of the British were of course inherited, not made, but possessed some elements of strength, especially in the profusion of the barbed wire. On the other hand, there were more trenches than could possibly be occupied, which is a serious danger when the enemy comes to close grips. The main position ran about 5000 yards north of the Aisne, and was divided into an outpost line, a main line of battle, and a weak system of supports. The artillery was not strong, consisting of the divisional guns with some backing of French 75's and heavies.

The Fiftieth Division, like the others, had all three brigades in the line. To the north the 150th Brigade (Rees) defended Craonne and the slab-sided California Plateau. On their right, stretching across a flat treeless plain, lay the 151st Brigade (Martin). To the right of them again was the 149th Brigade (Riddell), which joined on near Ville-aux-Bois to the 24th Brigade (Grogan) of the Eighth Division. It may give some idea of the severity with which the storm broke upon the Fiftieth Division, when it is stated that of the three brigadiers mentioned one was killed, one was desperately wounded, and a third was taken before ten o'clock on the first morning of the attack.

The German onslaught, though very cleverly carried out, was not a complete surprise, for the experienced soldiers in the British lines, having already had two experiences of the new methods, saw many danger signals in the week before the battle. There was abnormal aircraft activity, abnormal efforts also to blind our own air service, occasional registering of guns upon wire, and suspicious movements on the roads. Finally with the capture of prisoners in a raid the

suspicions became certainties, especially when on the evening of May 26 the Germans were seen pouring down to their front lines. No help arrived, however, for none seems to have been immediately available. The thin line faced its doom with a courage which was already tinged with despair. Each British brigade brought its reserve battalion to the north bank of the Aisne, and each front division had the call upon one brigade of the Twenty-fifth Division. Otherwise no help was in sight.

The bombardment began early in the morning of May 27, and was said by the British veterans to be the heaviest of the war. Such an opinion meant something, coming from such men. The whole area from Soissons to Rheims was soaked with gas and shattered with high explosives, so that masks had to be worn ten kilometres behind the lines. A German officer declared that 6000 guns were employed. Life was absolutely impossible in large areas. The wire was blown to shreds, and the trenches levelled. The men stuck it, however, with great fortitude, and the counter-barrage was sufficiently good to hold up the early attempts at an infantry advance. The experiences of the 149th Infantry Brigade may be taken as typical. The front battalion was the 4th Northumberland Fusiliers under Colonel Gibson. Twice the enemy was driven back in his attempt to cross the shattered wire. At 4 A.M. he won his way into the line of outposts, and by 4.30 was heavily pressing the battle line. His tactics were good, his courage high, and his numbers great. The 6th Northumberland Fusiliers, under Colonel Temperley, held the main line, and with the remains of the 4th made a heroic resistance. At this hour the Germans had reached the main lines both of the 151st Brigade on the left and of the 24th on the right. About five o'clock the German tanks were reported to have got through on the front of the Eighth Division and to be working round the rear of the 149th Brigade. Once again we were destined to suffer from the terror which we had ourselves evolved. The main line was now in great confusion and breaking fast. The 5th Northumberland Fusiliers were pushed up as the last reserve. There was deep shadow everywhere save on the California Plateau, where General Rees, with his three Yorkshire battalions, had repulsed repeated assaults. The French line had gone upon his left, however, and the tanks, with German infantry behind them, had swarmed round to his rear, so that in the end he and his men were all either casualties or captives.

Colonel Gibson meanwhile had held on most tenaciously with a nucleus of his Fusiliers at a post called Centre Marceau. The telephone was still intact, and he notified at 5.45 that he was surrounded. He beat off a succession of attacks

with heavy loss to the stormers, while Temperley was also putting up a hopeless but desperate fight. Every man available was pushed up to their help, and they were ordered to hold on. A senior officer reporting from Brigade Headquarters says: "I could hear Gibson's brave, firm voice say in reply to my injunctions to fight it out, 'Very good, sir. Good-bye!'" Shortly afterwards this gallant man was shot through the head while cheering his men to a final effort.

The experience of the Durhams of the 151st had been exactly the same as that of the Northumberlands of the 149th. Now the enemy were almost up to the last line. The two brigadiers, Generals Martin and Riddell, together with Major Tweedy of the reserve battalion, rushed out to organise a local defence, drawing in a few scattered platoons for the purpose. As they did so they could see the grey figures of the Germans all round them. It was now past six o'clock, and a clear, sunny morning. As these officers ran forward, a shell burst over them, and General Martin fell dead, while Riddell received a terrible wound in the face. In spite of this, he most heroically continued to rally the men and form a centre of resistance so as to cover Pontavert as long as possible. The 5th Northumberland Fusiliers with a splendid counter-attack had regained the position of Centre d'Evreux, and for the moment the pressure was relieved. It was clear, however, both to General Jackson and to General Heneker that both flanks were exposed, and that their general position was an acute salient far ahead of the Allied line. The Twenty-first Division was less affected, since it already lay astride of the river, but the French line on the left was back before mid-day as far as Fismes, so that it was absolutely necessary if a man were to be saved to get the remains of the two British divisions across the Aisne at once.

Pontavert, with its bridges over river and canal, was in the hands of the Germans about 7 A.M., but the bridge-heads at Concevreux and other places were firmly held, and as the men got across, sometimes as small organised units, sometimes as a drove of stragglers, they were rallied and lined up on the south bank. The field-guns had all been lost but the heavies and machine-guns were still available to hold the new line. Some of the 5th Northumberland Fusiliers were entirely cut off, but fought their way through the Germans, and eventually under Major Leatheart reported themselves at the bridges. So rapid had been the hostile advance that the dressing-stations were captured, and many of our doctors and wounded fell into the hands of the Germans to endure the hard fate which these savages so often reserved for the brave but helpless men who fell into their power. It is a terrible fact which should not be forgotten, that among these torturers the nurses and the doctors held in many cases a prominent

position.

The 150th Brigade, under General Rees, which was defending the Craonne position, had endured an even heavier ordeal than the others. It was on the extreme left of the British line, on the right of the French 118th Regiment. This latter seems to have been entirely destroyed or taken early in the attack. The British brigade lay in front of Craonne upon the edge of the California Plateau, with the 5th Yorks on the right and the 4th East Yorks on the left. The 4th Yorks were in brigade reserve in Craonelle, immediately behind the fighting line. The Germans got through the French on the left, also through a gap down the Corbeny railroad on the right of the 150th and left of the 151st Brigade. Colonel Thomson of the 5th Yorks, a very brave and experienced soldier who was said by those who knew him best to be worth half a battalion in his own person upon the day of battle, was in charge on the right, and hung on with tooth and claw to every inch of ground, but his little force, already greatly weakened by the cannonade, was unable to resist the terrible onslaught of the German infantry. Two counter-attacks were attempted by reserve companies, but each was swept away. The Germans were on the flank in Craonne and enfiladed the line with a machine-gun. Colonel Thomson's last words over the telephone to Headquarters were, "Good-bye, General, I'm afraid I shall not see you again." He was killed shortly afterwards. Major Haslett of the East Yorks made an equally desperate resistance on the other flank, and finally he and a wounded sergeant-major were captured with their empty pistols in their hands. Meanwhile the Brigade Headquarters at La Hutte were practically surrounded and under a terrible fire. General Rees endeavoured to get into touch with his only remaining battalion, the 4th Yorks, but they had already been overrun by the enemy. Colonel Kent, with sixteen men, had thrown himself into a house in Craonelle, and had fought until the whole party were killed or wounded. The enemy was now several miles to the rear of the few survivors of the 150th Brigade, who endeavoured to make their way back as best they might. It gives some idea of how completely they were cut off that General Rees, after many adventures and escapes, was finally stopped and taken by encountering the main line of the German traffic coming down the road which he had to cross. This was late in the day of May 27, when the enemy was well across the Aisne. It may be of interest to add that General Rees was taken before the Kaiser next morning, whom he found upon the California Plateau. The emperor behaved with courtesy to his prisoner, though he could not refrain from delivering a monologue of the usual type upon the causes of the war and the iniquity of Great Britain in fulfilling her treaty obligations.

Some account must now be given of the experiences of Heneker's Eighth Division which occupied the centre of the British line. This division, like the others, had been sent to the Aisne for a rest cure after its terrific exertions upon the Somme. Full of raw soldiers and inexperienced officers it would have seemed to be entirely unfit for battle, but it had the two solid assets of experienced leading in the senior officers and great regimental traditions, that ever present stand-by of the British Army. Young as were the troops they took General Heneker's orders literally when he issued the command that the posts were to be held at all costs, and, as a consequence, hardly a single battalion existed as a fighting unit after the engagement.

The British field-batteries were mostly to the north of the river, and were greatly damaged by the preliminary German fire. They were accurately located by the enemy, and were smothered in poison and steel. So were the Gernicourt defences, which formed an important tactical position with a permanent garrison on the right of the division. All three brigades were in the line, the 25th on the right, the 24th in the centre, and the 23rd on the left. The outpost line was utterly overwhelmed in the first rush, the experience being much the same as on March 21, for each small body of men found itself isolated, and could only do its best to hold its own patch of ground. Thus at 5.15 A.M. a pigeon message was sent, "H.Q. 2nd Berks, consisting of Colonel Griffin, Captain Clare, and staff, are surrounded. Germans threw bombs down dug-out and passed on. Appeared to approach from right rear in considerable strength. No idea what has happened elsewhere. Holding on in hopes of relief." Their position was typical of many similar groups along the front, marooned in the fog, and soon buried in the heart of the advancing German army. The right of the 25th Brigade had been thrust back, but on the left the 2nd Berkshires made a desperate resistance. The whole front was intersected by a maze of abandoned trenches, and it was along these that the enemy, shrouded in the mist, first gained their fatal footing upon the flank. The 2nd East Lancashires were brought up in support, and a determined resistance was made by the whole brigade within the main zone of battle. The German tanks were up, however, and they proved as formidable in their hands as they have often done in our own. Their construction was cumbrous and their pace slow, but they were heavily armed and very dangerous when once in action. Eight of them, however, were destroyed by the French anti-tank artillery. At 6.30 the 25th Brigade, in shattered remnants, was back on the river at Gernicourt.

The attack on this front was developing from the right, so that it came upon the 24th Brigade an hour later than upon its eastern neighbour. The 2nd

Northhamptons were in front, and they were driven in, but rallied on the battle zone and made a very fine fight, until the German turning movement from the south-east, which crossed the Miette south of the battle zone, took the line in flank and rear. In the end hardly a man of the two battalions engaged got away, and Haig, the brigadier, with his staff, had to cut their way out at the muzzle of their revolvers, shooting many Germans who tried to intercept them. The 23rd Brigade was attacked at about the same time, and the 2nd West Yorkshires managed to hold even the outpost line for a time. Then falling back on the battle position this battalion, with the 2nd Devons and 2nd Middlesex near the Bois des Buttes, beat off every attack for a long time. The fatal turning movement threatened to cut them off entirely, but about 7.30 General Grogan, who had set his men a grand example of valour, threw out a defensive flank. He fell back eventually across the Aisne south of Pontavert, while the enemy, following closely upon his heels, occupied that place.

Many outstanding deeds of valour are recorded in all the British divisions during this truly terrible experience, but two have been immortalised by their inclusion in the orders of the day of General Berthelot, the French general in command. The first concerned the magnificent conduct of the 5th Battery R.F.A., which, under its commander, Captain Massey, stuck to its work while piece after piece was knocked out by an overwhelming shower of German shells. When all the guns were gone Captain Massey, with Lieutenants Large and Bution and a handful of survivors, fought literally to the death with Lewis guns and rifles. One man with a rifle, who fought his way back, and three unarmed gunners who were ordered to retire, were all who escaped to tell the heroic tale. The other record was that of the 2nd Devons, who went on fighting when all resistance round them was over, and were only anxious, under their gallant Colonel Anderson-Morshead, to sell their lives at the price of covering the retreat of their comrades. Their final stand was on a small hill which covered the river crossing, and while they remained and died themselves they entreated their retiring comrades to hurry through their ranks. Machine-guns ringed them round and shot them to pieces, but they fought while a cartridge was left, and then went down stabbing to the last. They were well avenged, however, by one post of the Devons which was south of the river and included many Lewis guns under Major Cope. These men killed great numbers of Germans crossing the stream, and eventually made good their own retreat. The main body of the battalion was destroyed, however, and the episode was heroic. In the words of the French document: "The whole battalion, Colonel, 38 officers, and 552 in the ranks, offered their lives in ungrudging sacrifice to the sacred cause of the Allies." A

word as to the valour of the enemy would also seem to be called for. They came on with great fire and ardour. "The Germans seemed mad," says one spectator, "they came rushing over the ground with leaps and bounds. The slaughter was frightful. We could not help shooting them down."

Whilst this smashing attack had been delivered upon the Fiftieth and Eighth Divisions, Campbell's Twenty-first Division on the extreme right of the British line had also endured a hard day of battle. They covered a position from Loivre to Berry-au-Bac, and had all three brigades in action, six battalions in the line, and three in reserve. Their experience was much the same as that of the other divisions, save that they were on the edge of the storm and escaped its full fury. The greatest pressure in the morning was upon the 62nd Brigade on the left, which was in close liaison with the 25th Brigade of the Eighth Division. By eight o'clock the posts at Moscou and the Massif de la Marine had been overrun by the overpowering advance of the enemy. About nine o'clock the 7th Brigade from the Twenty-fifth Division came up to the St. Aubœf Wood within the divisional area and supported the weakening line, which had lost some of the outer posts and was holding on staunchly to others. The Germans were driving down upon the west and getting behind the position of the Twenty-first Division, for by one o'clock they had pushed the 1st Sherwood Foresters of the Eighth Division, still fighting most manfully, out of the Gernicourt Wood, so that the remains of this division with the 75th Brigade were on a line west of Bouffignereux. This involved the whole left of the Twenty-first Division, which had to swing back the 62nd Brigade from a point south of Cormicy, keeping in touch with the 7th Brigade which formed the connecting link. At 3.20 Cormicy had been almost surrounded and the garrison driven out, while the 64th Brigade on the extreme right was closely pressed at Cauroy. At six in the evening the 7th Brigade had been driven in at Bouffignereux, and the German infantry, beneath a line of balloons and aeroplanes, was swarming up the valley between Guyencourt and Chalons le Vergeur, which latter village they reached about eight, thus placing themselves on the left rear of the Twenty-first Division. Night fell upon as anxious a situation as ever a harassed general and weary troops were called upon to face. The Twenty-first had lost few prisoners and only six guns during the long day of battle, but its left had been continually turned, its position was strategically impossible, and its losses in casualties were very heavy. It was idle to deny that the army of General von Boehm had made a very brilliant attack and gained a complete victory with, in the end, such solid trophies as 45,000 Allied prisoners and at least 400 guns. It was the third great blow of the kind within nine weeks, and Foch showed himself to be a man of iron in being

able to face it, and not disclose those hidden resources which could not yet be used to the full advantage.

The capture of Pontavert might have been a shattering blow to the retreating force, but it would seem that the Germans who had pushed through so rapidly were strong enough to hold it but not, in the first instance, strong enough to extend their operations. By the afternoon of May 27 they were over at Maizy also, and the force at Concevreux, which consisted of the remains of the Fiftieth and part of the Eighth and Twenty-fifty Divisions, was in danger of capture. At 2 P.M. the Germans had Muscourt. The mixed and disorganised British force then fell back to near Ventelay, where they fought back once more at the German advance, the Fiftieth Division being in the centre, with the 75th and 7th Brigades on its right. This latter brigade had been under the orders of the Twenty-first Division and had helped to hold the extreme right of the position, but was now involved in the general retreat. Already, however, news came from the west that the Germans had not got merely to the Aisne but to the Vesle, and the left flank and rear of the Ninth Corps was hopelessly compromised. Under continuous pressure, turning ever to hold up their pursuers, the remains of the three divisions, with hardly any artillery support, fell back to the south. On the western wing of the battle Soissons had fallen, and Rheims was in a most perilous position, though by some miracle she succeeded in preserving her shattered streets and desecrated cathedral from the presence of the invaders.

The Eighth Division had withdrawn during the night to Montigny, and, in consequence, the Twenty-first Division took the general line, Hermonville-Montigny Ridge, the 64th Brigade on the right, with the 62nd and 7th in succession on the left. Every position was outflanked, however, touch was lost with the Eighth on the left, and the attack increased continually in its fury. Prouilly fell, and the orders arrived that the next line would be the River Vesle, Jonchery marking the left of the Eighth Division. On the right the Twenty-first continued to be in close touch with the French Forty-fifth Division. All units were by this time very intermingled, tired, and disorganised. The 15th Durhams, who had fought a desperate rearguard action all the morning upon the ridge north of Havelon Château, had almost ceased to exist. The one gleam of light was the rumoured approach of the One hundred and thirty-fourth French Division from the south. It had been hoped to hold the line of the River Vesle, but by the evening of May 28 it was known that the Germans had forced a passage at Jonchery, where the bridge would have been destroyed but for the wounding of the sapper officer and the explosion of the wagon containing the

charges. On the other hand, the Forty-fifth French Division on the right was fighting splendidly, and completely repulsed a heavy German attack. When night fell the British were still for the most part along the line of the Vesle, but it was clear that it was already turned upon the west. Some idea of the truly frightful losses incurred by the troops in these operations may be formed from the fact that the Eighth Division alone had lost 7000 men out of a total force of about 9000 infantry.

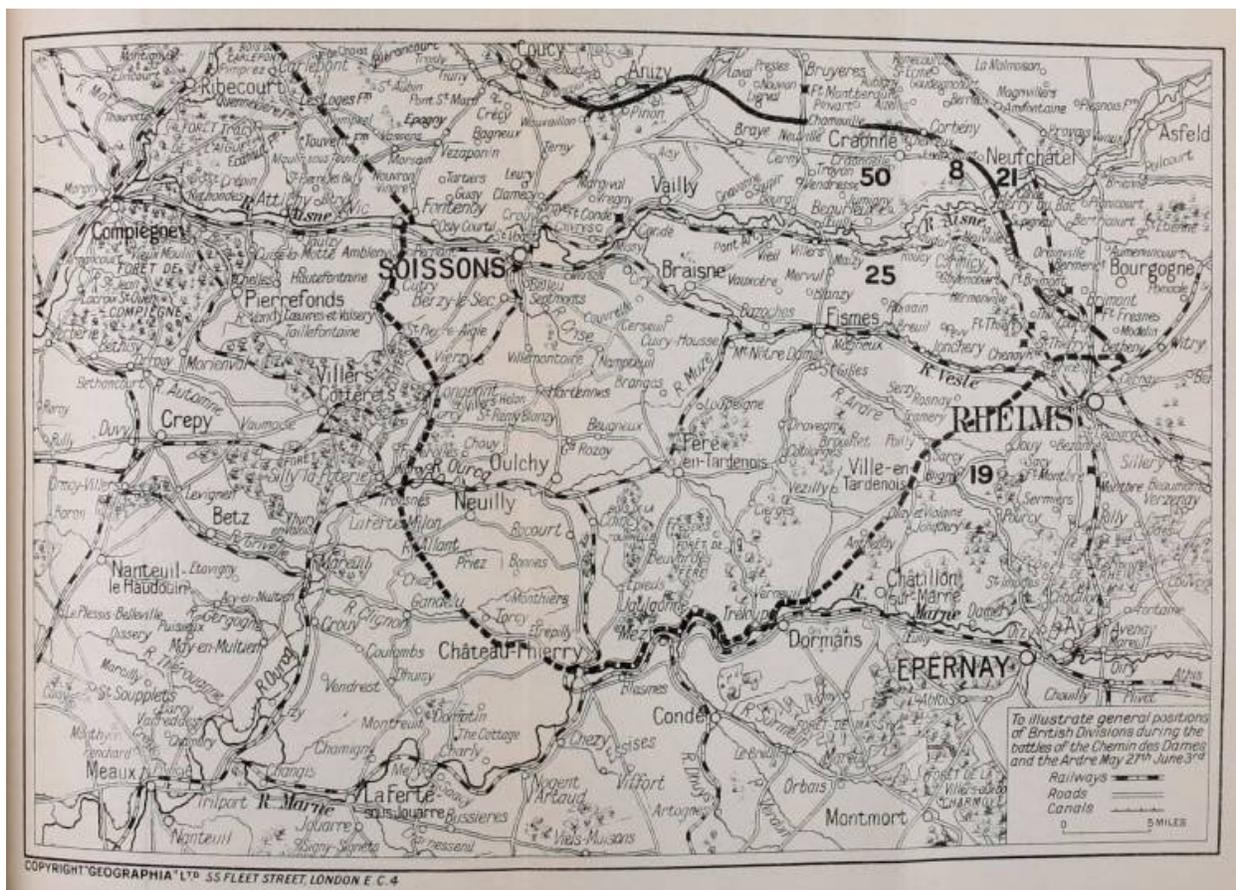
About eight in the morning of May 29 the enemy renewed his attack, pushing in here and there along the line in search of a gap. One attempt was made upon the Twenty-first Division, from Branscourt to Sapicourt, which was met and defeated by the 1st Lincolns and 6th Leicesters. Great activity and movement could be seen among the German troops north of the river, but the country is wooded and hilly, so that observation is difficult. Towards evening, the right flank of the fighting line was greatly comforted by the arrival of the French Division already mentioned, and the hearts of the British were warmed by the news that one of their own divisions had come within the zone of battle, as will now be described.

When the Ninth Corps was sent to the Aisne, another very weary British division, the Nineteenth (Jeffreys), had also been told off for the French front with the same object of rest, and the same actual result of desperate service. So strenuous had the work of this division been upon the Somme and in Flanders, that the ranks were almost entirely composed of new drafts from England and Wales. Their destination was the Chalons front, where they remained for exactly twelve days before the urgent summons arrived from the breaking line on the Aisne, and they were hurried westwards to endeavour to retrieve or at least to minimise the disaster. They arrived on the morning of May 29, and found things in a most critical condition. The Germans had pushed far south of the Aisne, despite the continued resistance of the survivors of the Eighth, Twenty-fifth, and Fiftieth British Divisions, and of several French divisions, these débris of units being mixed up and confused, with a good deal of mutual recrimination, as is natural enough when men in overwrought conditions meet with misfortunes, the origin of which they cannot understand. When troops are actually mixed in this fashion, the difference in language becomes a very serious matter. Already the Allied line had been pushed far south of Fismes, and the position of the units engaged was very obscure to the Higher Command, but the British line, such as it was, was north of Savigny on the evening of May 28. Soissons had fallen, Rheims was in danger, and it was doubtful whether even the line of the Marne

could be held. Amid much chaos it must, indeed, have been with a sense of relief that the Allied generals found a disciplined and complete division come into the front, however young the material of which it was composed.

A gap had opened in the line between the Thirteenth French Division at Lhery and the One hundred and fifty-fourth near Faverolles, and into this the 57th and 58th Brigades were thrust. The artillery had not yet come up, and the rest of the Allied artillery was already either lost or destroyed, so there was little support from the guns. It was a tough ordeal for boys fresh from the English and Welsh training camps. On the left were the 10th Worcesters and 8th Gloucesters. On the right the 9th Welsh Fusiliers and 9th Welsh. It was hoped to occupy Savigny and Brouillet, but both villages were found to be swarming with the enemy. Remains of the Eighth and Twenty-fifth Divisions were still, after three days of battle, with their faces to the foe on the right of the Nineteenth Division. They were very weary, however, and the 2nd Wiltshires were brought up to thicken the line and cover the divisional flank north of Bouleuse. This was the situation at 2 P.M. of May 29.

The tide of battle was still rolling to the south, and first Savigny and then Faverolles were announced as being in German hands. A mixed force of odd units had been formed and placed under General Craigie-Hackett, but this now came back through the ranks of the Nineteenth Division. On the right also the hard-pressed and exhausted troops in front, both French and British, passed through the 2nd Wiltshires, and endeavoured to reform behind them. The Nineteenth Division from flank to flank became the fighting front, and the Germans were seen pouring down in extended order from the high ground north of Lhery and of Treslon. On the right the remains of the Eighth Division had rallied, and it was now reinforced by the 2nd Wilts, the 4th Shropshire Light Infantry, and the 8th Staffords, the latter battalions from the 56th Brigade. With this welcome addition General Heneker, who had fought such a long uphill fight, was able in the evening of May 29 to form a stable line on the Bouleuse Ridge. By this time the guns of the Nineteenth Division, the 87th and 88th Brigades Royal Field Artillery, had roared into action—a welcome sound to the hard-pressed infantry in front. There was a solid British line now from Lhery on the left to the eastern end of the Bouleuse Ridge, save that one battalion of Senegal Tirailleurs was sandwiched in near Faverolles. Liaison had been established with the Thirteenth and One hundred and fifty-fourth French Divisions to left and right.



British Line on Chemin des Dames

The early morning of May 30 witnessed a very violent attack along all this portion of the line. By 6 A.M. the enemy had worked round the left flank of the 10th Worcesters at Lhery, driving before them some of the troops, French and British, who were exhausted from the long battle. It is difficult for either writer or reader to imagine the condition of men who have fought a losing battle for three days without cessation. If Foch saved up his reserves during these weeks of agony, it was surely at a precious cost to the men who bore the weight. The left company of the 10th Worcesters lost all its officers and 60 per cent of its men, and Lhery had to be left to the enemy. Meanwhile, the Senegalese, who, like all tropical troops, are more formidable in attack than in defence, were driven in near Faverolles, the Germans making a frontal attack in eight lines. They pushed through the gap, outflanked the 9th Welsh Fusiliers on the left and the 2nd Wiltshires on the right, cutting off a platoon of the former battalion. Both these battalions suffered very heavily, the Welsh Fusiliers especially being cut to pieces. At both ends of the line the remains of the front battalions had to fall

back upon their supports. The 74th Composite Brigade, already referred to as being under General Craigie-Hackett, fought on the left of the Nineteenth Division, and was ordered to hold the Lhery-Rohigny Road. The pressure, however, upon these tired troops and upon the remains of the 10th Worcesters continued to be very great, and by 11 A.M. the situation was critical on the left of the line, the flank having been driven in, and the 8th Gloucesters enfiladed so that the D'Aulnay Wood could no longer be held. These changes enabled the Germans to close in upon the 9th Welsh and the remains of the 9th Welsh Fusiliers, attacking them in front and flank. The troops on their right gave way, and the assailants were then able to get round the other flank of these two devoted battalions, and practically to surround them, so that very few won their way back. The whole front line had gone with the exception of the 10th Warwicks on the left. For a time it seemed as if there was nothing to limit this powerful thrust of the enemy, but in the usual miraculous fashion a composite party of odds and ends, drawn from stragglers and details, hastily swept together by General Jeffreys, were hurried up to the high ground south of Ville-en-Tardenois. With the aid of four machine-guns from the Nineteenth Division this force held the victorious enemy from coming further, covered the left flank of the 10th Warwicks, and formed a bastion from which a new wall could be built. A second bastion had been made by the 5th South Wales Borderers, pioneers of the Nineteenth Division, who had dug in south of Rohigny and absolutely refused to shift. Up to 2 P.M. the 2nd Wilts also held their ground north of Bouleuse. Between these fixed points the 57th and 58th Brigades were able to reorganise, the 15th Warwicks and 9th Cheshires covering the respective fronts. On the right the Twenty-eighth French Division had relieved the One hundred and fifty-fourth, while the 4th Shropshires and 8th North Staffords, both still intact, formed a link between the two Allies. Touch had been lost on the left, and patrols were sent out to endeavour to bridge the gap. At this period General Jeffreys of the Nineteenth Division commanded the whole British line. A serious loss had been caused by the wounding of General Glasgow, the experienced leader of the 58th Brigade. General Heath of the 56th Brigade took over the command of both units.

The Germans had reached their limit for the day, though some attempt at an attack was made in the afternoon from the wood of Aulnay, which was beaten back by the British fire. It was rumoured, however, that on the left, outside the British area, he was making progress south of Rohigny, which made General Jeffreys uneasy for his left wing. Up to now the British had been under the general command of the Ninth British Corps, but this was now withdrawn from

the line, and the Nineteenth Division passed to the Fifth French Corps under General Pellé, an who left a most pleasant impression upon the minds of all who had to deal with him. On May 31 the front consisted of the French Fortieth on the left, the French Twenty-eighth on the right, and the British Nineteenth between them, the latter covering 12,000 yards. The weary men of the original divisions were drawn out into reserve after as severe an ordeal as any have endured during the whole war. The 74th Composite Brigade was also relieved. Some idea of the losses on the day before may be gathered from the fact that the two Welsh battalions were now formed into a single composite company, which was added to the 9th Cheshires.

The morning of the 31st was occupied in a severe duel of artillery, in which serious losses were sustained from the German fire, but upon the other hand a threatened attack to the south-west of Ville-en-Tardenois was dispersed by the British guns. About two o'clock the enemy closed once more upon the left, striking hard at the 6th Cheshires, who had been left behind in this quarter when the rest of the 74th Composite Brigade had been relieved. The 10th Warwicks were also attacked, and the whole wing was pushed back, the enemy entering the village of Ville-en-Tardenois. The Warwicks formed up again on high ground south-east of the village, the line being continued by the remains of the 10th Worcesters and 8th Gloucesters. Whilst the left wing was driven in, the right was also fiercely attacked, the enemy swarming down in great numbers upon the French, and the 9th Cheshires. The former were driven off the Aubilly Ridge, and the latter had to give ground before the rush.

General Jeffreys, who was on the spot, ordered an immediate counter-attack of the 2nd Wilts to retrieve the situation. Before it could develop, however, the French were again advancing on the right, together with the 4th Shropshires. A local counter-attack had also been delivered by the 9th Cheshires, led on horseback with extreme gallantry by Colonel Cunninghame. His horse was shot under him, but he continued to lead the troops on foot, and his Cheshire infantry followed him with grim determination into their old positions. The ground was regained though the losses were heavy, Colonel Cunninghame being among the wounded.

The attack of the 2nd Wiltshires had meanwhile been developed, and was launched under heavy fire about seven in the evening, moving up to the north of Chambrecy. The position was gained, the Wiltshires connecting up with the Cheshires on their right and the Gloucesters on their left. Meanwhile, advances

of the enemy on the flank were broken up by artillery fire, the 87th and 88th Brigades of guns doing splendid work, and sweeping the heads of every advance from the Tardenois-Chambrecy Road. So ended another very severe day of battle. The buffer was acting and the advance was slowing. Already its limit seemed to be marked.

On the morning of May 31 the British position extended from a line on the left connecting Ville-en-Tardenois and Champlat. Thence the 57th Brigade covered the ground up to the stream which runs from Sarcy to Chambrecy. Then the 56th Brigade began, and carried on to 1000 yards east of the river Ardres. The line of battalions (pitiful remnants for the most part) was from the left, 10th Warwicks, 10th Worcesters, 8th Gloucesters, 2nd Wilts, 9th Cheshires, 8th Staffords, and 4th Shropshires. Neither brigade could muster 1000 rifles, while the 58th Brigade in reserve was reduced to 350. The three sapper field companies, the personnel of the trench-mortar batteries, and every straggler who could be scraped up was thrust forward to thicken the line.

The German attack was launched once more at 4 P.M. on June 1, striking up against the Fortieth French Division and the left of the British line. Under the weight of the assault the French were pushed back, and the enemy penetrated the Bonval Wood, crossed the Tardenois-Jonchery Road, and thrust their way into the woods of Courmont and La Cohette. Here, however, the attack was held, and the junction between the French and the Warwicks remained firm. The front of the 57th Brigade was attacked at the same time, the 8th Gloucesters and the 2nd Wilts on their right being very hard pressed. The enemy had got Sarcy village, which enabled them to get on the flank of the Gloucesters, and to penetrate between them and the Wiltshires. It was a very critical situation. The right company of the Gloucesters was enfiladed and rolled up, while the centre was in deadly danger. The left flank and the Worcesters held tight, but the rest of the line was being driven down the hill towards Chambrecy. A splendid rally was effected, however, by Captain Pope of B Company, who led his west countrymen up the hill once more, driving the enemy back to his original line. For this feat he received the D.S.O. At this most critical period of the action, great help was given to the British by the 2nd Battalion of the 22nd French Regiment, led in person by Commandant de Lasbourde, which joined in Pope's counter-attack, afterwards relieving the remains of the Gloucester's. Lasbourde also received the D.S.O. The success of the attack was due partly to the steadiness of the 10th Worcesters on the left, who faced right and poured a cross-fire into the German stormers. It was a complete, dramatic little victory, by

which the high ground north of Chambrecy was completely regained.

A withdrawal of the whole line was, however, necessary on account of the German penetration into the left, which had brought them complete possession of the Wood of Courmont on the British left rear. The movement was commenced at seven in the evening, and was completed in most excellent order before midnight. This new line, stretching from Quisles to Eligny, included one very important position, the hill of Bligny, which was a prominence from which the enemy could gain observation and command over the whole valley of the Ardres, making all communications and battery positions precarious.

The general order of units in the line on June 2 was much the same as before, the 5th South Wales Borderers being held in reserve on the left, and the 2/22nd French on the right of the Nineteenth Division. These positions were held unbroken from this date for a fortnight, when the division was eventually relieved after its most glorious term of service. The British Ninth Corps was busily engaged during this time in reorganising into composite battalions the worn and mixed fragments of the Eighth, Twenty-fifth, and Fiftieth Divisions, which were dribbled up as occasion served to the new battle-line. A composite machine-gun company was also organised and sent up.

Several days of comparative quiet followed, during which the sappers were strengthening the new positions, and the Germans were gathering fresh forces for a renewed attack. Congratulatory messages from General Franchet d'Esperey, the French Army Commander, and from their own Corps General put fresh heart into the overtaxed men. There was no fresh attack until June 6. On that date the line of defence from the left consisted of the Fortieth French Division, the Eighth Division Composite Battalion (could a phrase mean more than that?), the 10th Warwicks, 10th Worcesters, 8th Gloucesters, 58th Brigade Composite Battalion, 9th Cheshires, 8th North Staffords, 4th Shropshires, and Twenty-eighth French Division. At 3 A.M. there began a tremendous bombardment, mostly of gas-shell, which gave way to the infantry advance at 4 A.M., the attack striking the right and centre of the British line, in the section of the all-important Bligny Hill. As the enemy advanced upon the front of the 58th Composite Battalion, the men who were the survivors of the 2nd Wilts, 9th Welsh Fusiliers, and 9th Welsh, fired a volley, and then, in a fashion which would have delighted the old Duke, sprang from their cover and charged with the bayonet, hurling the Germans down the slope. It was a complete repulse, as was a second attack upon the front of the Gloucesters and Worcesters who, with a similar suggestion of the

legendary Peninsula tactics, waited till they could see their foemen's eyes before firing, with the result that the storming column simply vanished, flinging itself down in the long grass and hiding there till nightfall. There was no attack on the left of the line, but the 9th Cheshires and the North Staffords both had their share in the victory. The Twenty-eighth French Division on the right had given a little before the storm, and the British line was bent back to keep touch. Otherwise it was absolutely intact, and the whole terrain in front of it was covered with German dead.

The German is a determined fighter, however, and his generals well knew that without the command of Bligny Hill no further progress was possible for him in the general advance. Therefore they drew together all their strength and renewed the attack at 11 A.M. with such energy and determination that they gained the summit. An immediate counter by the 9th Cheshires, though most gallantly urged, was unable to restore the situation, but fortunately a battalion was at hand which had not lost so grievously in the previous fighting. This was the 4th Shropshires, which now charged up the hill, accompanied by the remains of the undefeated 9th Cheshires. The attack was delivered with magnificent dash and spirit, and it ended by the complete reconquest of the hill. For this feat the 4th Shropshires received as a battalion the rare and coveted distinction of the Croix de Guerre with the palm. This local success strengthened the hands of the French on the right, who were able in the late afternoon to come forward and to retake the village of Bligny. June 6 was a most successful day, and gave fresh assurance that the German advance was spent.

There was no further close fighting in this neighbourhood up to June 19, when the young soldiers of the Nineteenth and other divisions were withdrawn after a sustained effort which no veterans could have beaten. In the official report of General Pellé to his own Higher Command, there occurs the generous sentence: "L'impression produite sur le moral des troupes françaises par la belle attitude de leurs alliés a été très bonne." Both Allies experienced the difficulty of harmonising troops who act under different traditions and by different methods. At first these hindrances were very great, but with fuller knowledge they tended to disappear, and ended in complete mutual confidence, founded upon a long experience of loyalty and devotion to the common end.

From this date until the end of June no event of importance affecting the British forces occurred upon the Western front. The German attack extended gradually in the Aisne district, until it had reached Montdidier, and it penetrated

upon the front as far south as the forest of Villers-Cotteret, where it threatened the town of Compiègne. In the middle of June the German front was within forty miles of Paris, and a great gun specially constructed for the diabolical work was tossing huge shells at regular intervals into the crowded city. The bursting of one of these projectiles amidst the congregation of a church on a Sunday, with an appalling result in killed and wounded, was one of those incidents which Germans of the future will, we hope, regard with the same horror as the rest of the world did at the time.

The cause of the Allies seemed at this hour to be at the very lowest. They had received severe if glorious defeats on the Somme, in Flanders, and on the Aisne. Their only success lay in putting limits to German victories. And yet with that deep prophetic instinct which is latent in the human mind, there was never a moment when they felt more assured of the ultimate victory, nor when the language of their leaders was prouder and more firm. This general confidence was all the stranger, since we can see as we look back that the situation was on the face of it most desperate, and that those factors which were to alter it—the genius of Foch, the strength of his reserves, and the numbers and power of the American Army—were largely concealed from the public. In the midst of the gloom the one bright light shone from Italy, where, on June 17, a strong attack of the Austrians across the Piave was first held and then thrown back to the other bank. In this most timely victory Lord Cavan's force, which now consisted of three British Divisions, the Seventh, Twenty-third, and Forty-eighth, played a glorious part. So, at the close of the half year Fate's curtain rang down, to rise again upon the most dramatic change in history.

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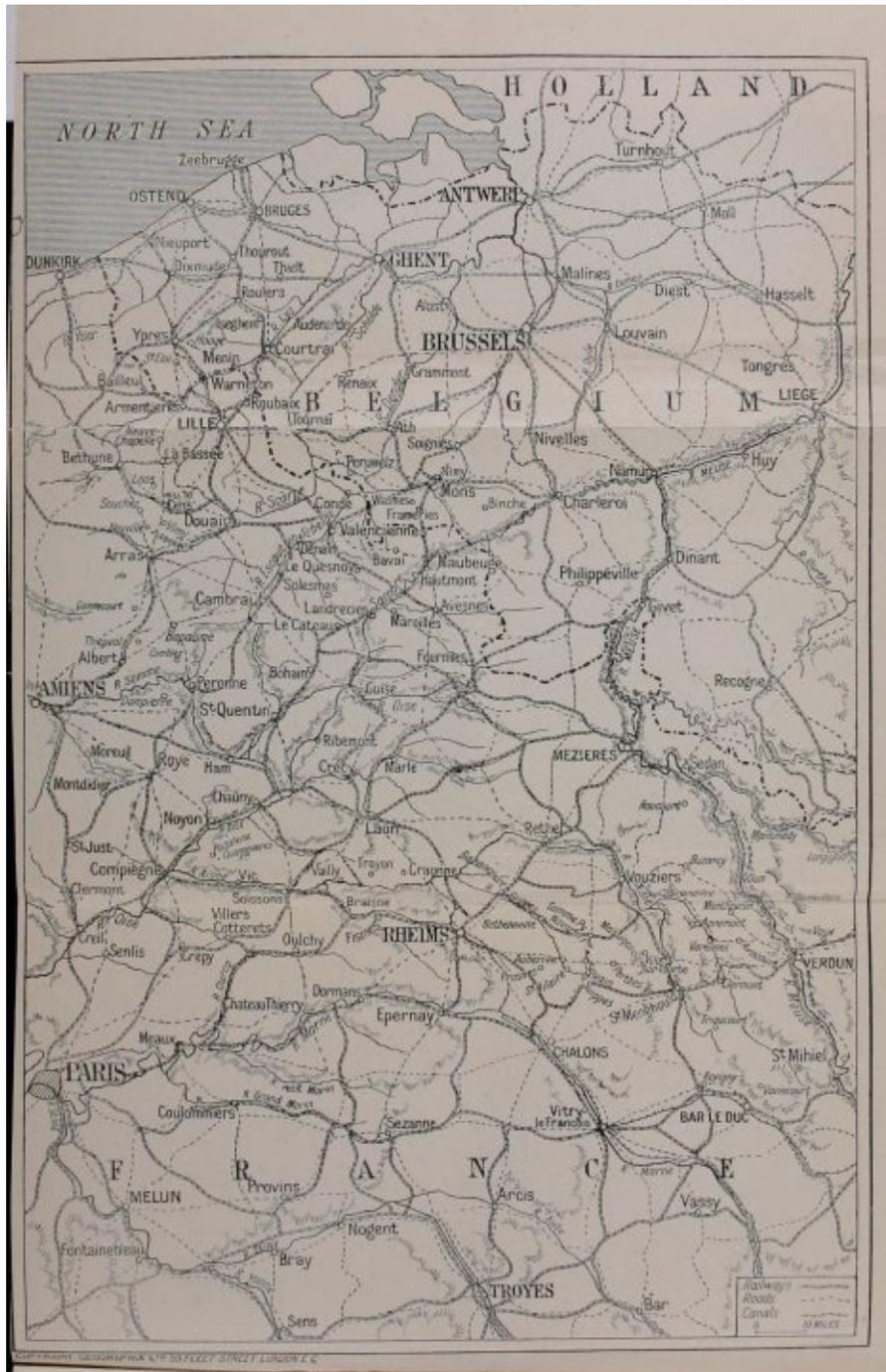
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THE END



Map to illustrate the British Campaign in France and Flanders

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