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"THEY CREPT ALONG BEHIND THE BANK, UNDER THE LEE OF WHICH THE TANK LAY SHELTERING"

Under Haig in Flanders

A Story of Vimy, Messines and Ypres

BY

CAPTAIN F. S. BRERETON

Author of "The Armoured-car Scouts"
"From the Nile to the Tigris" "On the Road to Bagdad"
"With Joffre at Verdun"
&c. &c.

Illustrated by J. E. Sutcliffe

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UNDER
HAIG IN FLANDERS

CHAPTER I

The Village of Hurslet

As a general rule it may be said, with some degree of assurance, that opinions tend to differ on numerous subjects, important and unimportant. Yet there was a curious and striking unanimity with regard to the occupants of the two most important houses in the little village of Hurslet, in Somerset, which lies just outside the boundaries of a fairly large provincial town, towards which its one street straggles. Indeed, journeying towards that particular town, where the inhabitants of Hurslet are wont to do their shopping, one is struck by the curious fact that the village houses seem to have made an effort at one time to join up with their big neighbour. They are bunched close together at the bottom of the hill, as if for mutual protection; they march up the steep hill with considerable

boldness, but towards the top begin to straggle, as if the builders had lost energy. There are gaps, getting bigger and bigger, till, finally, the street ends in a puny cottage, while the top of the hill itself is graced by an imposing mansion.

"And so it's been ever since I was a boy, and since my father's boyhood too," declared Sergeant Higgins, a local character, who had returned to his native place after years of army service, and was the proud proprietor of the "Morning Sun", an inn which was a credit to the neighbourhood. "Time was when the Hall was the only big house hereabouts. That is, the only house with gentry. Then comes the other, the Dene, and we had two lots of families. Proper gentlefolk I call them."

Who could be a better judge, for had not the gallant sergeant served for many years in the army, and had not his special calling therein thrown him into contact of the closest with numbers of officers?

"There's officers and officers," he would tell the village folk, who visited his bar of an evening and drank a glass of his ale. "One gets to be able to tell between them. Some's fair to middling, some are good, and others very good. There ain't many that you could call less than that. No; on the whole, the army attracts the best of our young gentlefolk."

"And you'd say as them up at the Hall and t'others at the Dene was equal?" asked George Critchet, himself a man of some importance in Hurslet, for he owned and ran the local store.

"Men same as you, Sergeant, who has travelled a heap, and who's instructed all and sundry in gymnastics, gets to know. You'll have come across a power of gents what was orfficers, you will?"

The Sergeant nodded affably and smiled. He was a tall, well-built man some fifty-four years of age, yet active and lissom, though to be sure a little less active than of yore. For your gymnastic instructor in the army must needs be a man of exceptional power, strong as a horse, agile as a goat, a disciplinarian, smart, intelligent, and able to control classes, whether of recruits or of junior officers.

"Ha, evening, Tom!" he called cheerily to a new arrival, a whiskered shepherd, who pushed the door of the bar open and shuffled forward. "What's the news?"

"News, Sergeant. Well, they be a-calling for new recruits. Derby recruits they tell 'un. Seems there's some new sort of arrangement for the war, and Lord Derby's put his name to 'un."

For a while the topic of conversation was changed, for we open our chapter at a time when the gigantic war, in which we are engaged as we write, had raged for many a month, when the tide of German invasion of France had been rolled back across the Marne River, and when that long line of trenches had been dug from the North Sea coast, close to Dunkirk, to the far-away frontier of Switzerland. There Belgians had held the northern sector with tenacity—flooding the country, and so placing a barrier between themselves and the enemy. Farther south, along the greater portion of that four-

hundred-mile trench-line, the French had magnificently held their defences, while in the neighbourhood of Ypres—to be ever famous in our annals—down to Bethune, some twenty miles south, that heroic British Expeditionary Force had hung on to the line, though overwhelming forces of Prussians had been flung at them. Forget not that "Contemptible Little Army", as the Kaiser dared arrogantly to call it! It saved England. Its record will never be beaten.

Months had gone by. Britain, wherever the flag flew, was arming. Kitchener's hosts were assembling, and Derby groups of recruits were now to be formed. The matter, as one can imagine, was discussed threadbare in Hurslet. Then, as is wont in such places, local affairs occupied the attention of the people.

"Muster Riven at t' Hall, he's a good 'un," quoth Farmer Standish as he chatted with the Sergeant. "The Doctor, down below, he's no wuss, and folks swear by him. I've only got good things to say of Miss Riven, but if you wants to hear more, go and ask the women in the village."

"Aye, and the children," another voice chimed in. "They'll tell you. She's nuss and everything to 'em. They bless the very ground she walks on."

"They do," the Sergeant agreed readily enough. "It's a treat to catch a sight of that little lady, and no more than seventeen years of age I should imagine. But when you comes to the other, to Mister Riven's nephew, why——"

"You wonders how he's ever agreed to have

him," said the farmer. "That's queer, for blest if he ain't coming down the street and his cousin with him."

There was a move to the prettily curtained window of the bar, strong boots crunching the sand with which the floor was dusted. Necks were craned, and all eyes were turned upon the two figures approaching.

"Aye, a good 'un to look at, that Missy Riven, and she's as good as she looks," declared one old fellow warmly. "I mind the time when——"

"But you'd hardly dare say that of t'other, Muster Riven's nephew," someone interrupted. "He's tall, and by the way he's dressed you'd say he ought to be in Lunnon. But he ain't liked. He's that haughty. 'Sides, there's queer tales about him."

"And then he ain't jined up, same as every other young gent hereabouts. Why, there ain't none left but him and Doctor's son, and he'll go quick, soon as he's eighteen. He's the lad for you, and—yes—there he's a-coming from the opposite direction."

The smallest affairs are of moment in an isolated village, and the passing of people along the roadway of the single street of Hurslet on this particular day drew many a gossip and many a villager to the window. Perhaps two dozen pair of eager eyes watched the coming of Miss Riven and of the tall and haughty youth beside her, her cousin, and, from the opposite direction, of Roger Norman, son of Dr. Norman. Nor could the watchers have

gazed upon two more dissimilar young fellows than Frank Riven on the one hand, marching haughtily beside his little cousin, and Roger Norman, son of Hurslet's doctor, himself a much-respected gentleman.

"Just you watch the two of them," said the Sergeant, leaning over the backs of his clients filling the bay window of the "Morning Sun", for he was taller than they, and peering over their heads. "There's Mister Frank Riven swaggering along as if he was the owner of the village, and letting Miss Riven carry a basket that anyone can see is heavy. Then there's young Norman, Roger Norman, a-swinging along with an easy stride that'd tell if he was on the barrack square, with his head nicely held, his legs well beneath him, knit all together as you might say, as bonny and jolly a lad as you want to look on."

"Aye, aye, that's it," agreed one of those present. 'A proper figure, Sergeant, and no swagger. And folks do say as he's the most promising pupil you've got between here and the town, and that's saying somethin'."

It was saying a good deal, as a matter of fact, for gymnastic instructors who leave the army with an Aldershot training and an army reputation are not apt to languish if they wish to make themselves useful. Indeed, thanks to the help of his wife, the Sergeant was able to leave the "Morning Sun" when he wished to do so, and not only did he instruct the boys and girls of many a neighbouring school in gymnastics, but he held classes for youths and

young men, where boxing, fencing, and gymnastics were carried to a high pitch of excellence.

"You've spoken the truth," he told the last speaker. "For his height and weight Roger is a first-class pugilist, and he's got the brains and the temper to fight. He's one of those stocky lads who can take a heap of hammering and come out fresh in the end."

Anyone who cared to take a close look at Roger Norman as he came striding up the street just then would have willingly agreed with the Sergeant's dictum, for here was a neat, active figure, a youth, neither tall nor short, broad-shouldered, narrow at the waist and hips, with powerful limbs, and with a keen, resolute, if jolly face. Roger wasn't exactly a handsome lad. He was more jolly than handsome, one would say. But ugly, certainly not! His merry features swept that impression away altogether.

"Good afternoon, Miss Riven," he cried gaily, lifting his cap as he drew near the approaching couple at a point almost opposite the "Morning Sun". "Why, you're heavily laden. Allow me, please."

Those who watched saw the swaggering Frank Riven scowl as Roger approached, and noted—for country folk are swift enough to see such things, being above all things courteous—noted that this young man nodded curtly, almost threateningly, at Roger.

"There ain't no love lost between them two. Leastwise, this Muster Riven ain't got no sort o'

liking for Roger Norman," growled one of the onlookers.

"And not likely either," grinned another. "You ain't forgotten, Jarge, what hap'd this ten months back, when Muster Riven he comes to live with his uncle. Ain't you heard o' that? Well, this here Roger catches that fine young cock a-bullyin' of his cousin, Missy Riven. Leastwise, that's what folks says, though Roger Norman ain't never let on about the matter. They says as, once the little lady's back was turned, this here lout of a nephew follers Roger and lays in to him with a stick. Flesh and blood don't——"

The Sergeant laughed, a good-natured, hearty laugh, and flashed a knowing look at his audience, who turned at the sound of his mirth to look at him.

"Laid on with a stick. So he did. So that young cub of a Frank Riven did," he agreed, smiling amiably, pride in his voice, "and you can believe me when I say that there never was a more surprised individual within two minutes."

"Oh! Aye! Now what?" they demanded.

"Why, Roger gets busy same as I've taught him to do, and Frank Riven goes away a heap wiser. No, he doesn't exactly love Roger Norman. Watch him if you want to make sure."

The fact was too apparent to call for argument, for the tall youth, who had first come into the view of the watchers in the comfortable bay window which graced the parlour of the "Morning Sun", and who now stood almost directly before them,

made no effort to hide his feelings. Tall and sallow, and rather inclined to be weedy, one would have said of Frank Riven, meeting him in London, that he was one of those aimless, and possibly brainless, elegants who, before Armageddon began, were to be found in that city. Not, it should be added, that elegants are necessarily brainless, for have not the smart youth of London set up a record in this war to make one wonder? But no one would have accused Frank Riven of being dashing, or keen, or bold, or of bubbling over with patriotism. The fact that he still lounged in Hurslet was sufficient to prove that. Some would undoubtedly have suspected him of being faint-hearted, evil-tempered, selfish, and utterly unfeeling, while all would have agreed as to his overbearing manner.

"The fellow's a trouble to me," Mr. Riven had declared to Dr. Norman when the latter had dropped in at the Hall, as was his wont every Sunday evening. "He comes to me practically a pauper, for my poor brother made a hopeless mess of things. But instead of having modest ideas of things, this youngster, I find, is inclined to be a spendthrift. Work frightens him. He won't lift a finger to help one of the household. He's selfish and quarrelsome, and—and——"

"And, in short, he's no good," added the Doctor grimly.

"Not a bit. I can get him to do nothing useful. A young man of his years should have joined the army months ago. He doesn't seem to care what is happening in France and elsewhere. He merely

lolls about and—well, quarrels with his neighbours and with his surroundings."

The Doctor sniffed. "He needs doctoring," he said, with that same grim smile.

"Doctoring!" exclaimed Mr. Riven. "But——"

"But he isn't ill? Certainly not. Only tired with doing nothing, and perhaps with eating too many good things. He wants attention in another sense. You want to be firm with him."

"Ah, yes! To be sure," mused Mr. Riven. Being firm was not, however, in his nature, and no one knew that better than did the Doctor. Otherwise, would this Frank Riven have continued to lounge about the village of Hurslet when all the young men of his age were in France, at the Dardanelles, in Egypt,—in any case, in the army at that moment?

"What—what would you do?" asked Mr. Riven.

"Do!" said the Doctor, his eyes twinkling. "Do what Roger did. Give this young lout a lesson!"

"Ah, yes! I agree; he deserved the thrashing Roger gave him. But—er—how——?"

"Cut off his pocket-money. Send him about his business. Invite him to earn his own living."

Earn his own living indeed! Frank Riven was the last to attempt to do that. For years a weak father had allowed him to do as he desired, and, now that he was gone, Frank was sufficiently sharp to discover at once that his uncle was much as his father had been. Almost from the first he had defied him.

"Join the army!" he had guffawed, when once Mr. Riven had summoned up sufficient courage to mention the matter. "Be a soldier? No, thanks! Not while there are other fellows who like the job and are willing to do it. Thanks, I'll stay on here! Hurslet suits me."

If the village suited Frank Riven, he in any case did not exactly command the good feeling of its inhabitants. That fracas with Roger had not added to his reputation, while the very whisper that he had been rough with his cousin had incensed the whole of Hurslet. Finally, the villagers objected to a lout, dressed in foppish attire, who swaggered amongst them when already the best of their sons had joined the army.

"He don't half scowl, oh no!" grinned one of the watchers in the window. "And—and young Roger only just smiles at him. Seems to me that afore very long there'll be another ruction yonder. Well, the little lady don't object to his attentions, and that's saying something."

More than one of the inmates of the parlour exchanged glances. Gossip in a village leaves very little to imagination, and settles most things, small and sundry. Long since it had settled the affairs of the younger generation at the Hall and the Dene.

"It's only jest natural, ain't it? Muster Roger, as fine a young chap as you can drop eyes on, 'ill be a-walking along with Missy Riven one of these fine days. Of course, of course." And many wise old heads had nodded.

Frank Riven, too, had somehow or other thought of the same thing. Or perhaps he had overheard local gossip. In any case, he had decided that Roger was an upstart, from the very moment when he first came to his uncle's house and there met that young fellow.

"And wants a deal of watching too," he told himself sourly. "Too friendly here by a long way. I'll have to deal with that chap sharply."

His first attempt had not been a success. Yet Frank Riven was not to be easily beaten. His first dislike of Roger had been inflamed tenfold by the chastisement he had received, and the flame of his hate was smouldering. It made him writhe to meet Roger. It made him grind his teeth to watch the pretty smile with which his cousin Elsie greeted him, and now, as Roger relieved that little lady of the burden which Frank should have carried, it made the latter positively stamp with anger. Muttering, he turned away, leaving Roger to escort his cousin.

"Oh, Frank," she called after him, "do come too!"

But that fuming person marched off, head in air, trembling with passion, while Elsie stared after him, her face clouded.

"Come along, dear," said Roger, taking her gently by the arm. "Don't take any notice. He's out of sorts. Now where can I carry this basket for you?"

Twenty pair of inquisitive eyes watched the couple as they passed down the street to halt at

Widow Plunket's, where good things were taken from the basket and Elsie vanished within the widow's cottage on an errand of mercy. Twenty pair of somewhat resentful orbs followed the scowling form of Frank Riven.

"He ain't no good, that there lout," voiced the general opinion. "I ain't often seen a chap scowl same as he done, and then only in his cups. He don't mean no good to that young Roger. And I'll tell yer why. He's just jealous. He wants our Roger to hands off with Miss Elsie, as if Roger and the lady was thinking o' marriage in these times, and they only yet boy and gal. But that there swaggerin' feller's got a game to play. Folks say as he's nigh a pauper. Well, he don't work, do he? Then what's he arter?"

Heads nodded with a vengeance; eyes now swung round to the Sergeant.

"No good," that individual told them with emphasis. "That Frank's a hound. No gentleman would have scowled and behaved as he did just now before a lady. I don't like his looks. I'll just warn our Roger."

Yet would a simple warning suffice, and was this Frank Riven really capable of injuring Roger? Only the future could decide that point, and the future was indeed to open the eyes of Hurslet's villagers widely.

CHAPTER II

A Catastrophe

PRECISELY three weeks after the meeting in Hurslet's single street, which we have just recorded, Roger set out for the Hall to pay a farewell visit, for on the morrow he was to return to school for his last term.

"Of course, there's no reason why you should leave then," his father, the worthy doctor, told him as they sat over a late supper the night before. "But, then, you may like to."

"I certainly should, Father," Roger replied. "I shall be eighteen years of age in the middle of the term, and that's the recognized or legal age for enlistment. I shall join up next hols. Have you any objection?"

"None whatever," his father ejaculated, though, to tell the truth, it was with a qualm, for the Doctor was a widower and Roger was his all. "None whatever," he repeated, with emphasis this time. "Of course I would have given anything could you have left school and pursued your studies at a hospital, for it has been agreed that you will follow in my steps, and practise one of these days in the village of Hurslet. But there—the thing's

impossible. In these days we must consider our country before everything. You will join up. God protect you, my dear fellow!"

Thus it was a recognized plan that Roger should return to school for his last term, and it was only a matter of habit and of custom which took him away to the Hall to say farewell, for he never neglected that little attention.

"I'll be back by seven o'clock," he told his father as he was leaving the Dene. "Mr. Riven is always engaged with letters after that hour, so that I should only be in the way if I stayed longer."

"Ha! Going to the Hall, sir?" ejaculated the gallant Sergeant when Roger peeped in at the "Morning Sun" to say farewell to his instructor. "And this is the last term, eh, Mr. Roger. Well, there's many a worse spot than the army, and many a fine fellow has joined it."

It was perhaps only natural that he drew himself up at attention at that moment and coughed huskily. "I don't regret the day that I upped sticks and accepted the shilling. It made a man of me, Mr. Roger; at least I hope so, and it'll do no harm to you, though I'm not saying that you haven't manly ways already. Well, you're off to the Hall. Good-bye and good luck, Mr. Roger!"

"Going up to the Hall," he repeated as he returned to the bright little parlour in which we first introduced him to the reader. "To say good-bye to the folks there. A fine young fellow."

"There's more than Muster Riven as'll be sorry that he's a-leavin'," came from one of the parlour

cronies. "Mind what we've a-said afore. The missie'll be cryin' her eyes out one o' these fine days when young Roger's took to khaki."

"Only, then that there cousin o' hers 'ill be smilin'," added another. "Unless he's took. Folks do say as there'll be conscription, when every fit man'll have to go. A good day I says! My two lads went right at the very beginnin', 'cos of them 'ere butchers o' Germans. One's dead. They killed him at Ypres, so I've given something. Why shouldn't every man make his gift. Bring in conscription, I say, and the sooner the better."

They watched the active strides of Roger as he went up the street, and saw him gain the top of the hill. Then, as dusk was falling, they drew the settle closer about the fire, which was a feature of the parlour of this friendly village hostelry, and continued to gossip. Roger bounded up the hill, gained the Hall, and knocked loudly for admission. A smiling maid answered the call, smiling because Roger was a favourite, and at once showed him into the drawing-room.

"And I'd as soon he come as any others," she told them in the kitchen on her return. "Master Roger's welcome every time here, and by all of us. Leastwise, not by that young cousin."

"Then it's lucky that he's out. Gone to the town," the cook told them. "Yes, you can't expect a stuck-up prig to like the lad that's given him a beating, so it's as well he's out o' the way. What's he a-doin' out of the village? What's he go to the town for so often?"

What, indeed! It was one of the many things which were worrying the gentle and somewhat weak Mr. Riven. Frank had come to his house months ago as a mere starveling, and had been received out of pure charity, and because he was a relative without friends and without means of subsistence. As has been stated, he had almost at once taken the measure of his weak and indulgent uncle, and for long now had done as he liked, had sulked or been sourly gay as suited his feelings for the moment, and of late had been remarkable more for his absence than for his presence. Those who marketed in the adjacent town spoke of seeing him often in a hotel of none too good reputation, while village heads wagged, and men whispered to one another that Frank Riven's acquaintances were none too excellent.

"There's a down-at-heels fellow that he's been seen with. Who's he?" people demanded.

"Who's he? Aye!" the knowing ones responded.

Little, as a matter of fact, was known, but that little was not to Frank's credit. On this very evening, indeed, he was strutting down the darkening road which led to Hurslet, with that down-at-heel individual stumbling along beside him, their heads close together—far closer, indeed, than the haughty Frank would have cared for on ordinary occasions, but now it seemed there was need for secrecy, and to guard against people overhearing.

"A 'fiver'," the shambling man at his side whis-

pered hoarsely. "Bless us, it's cheap! and there's lots wouldn't do it for that much. A 'fiver' down, and if the thing comes off, another—eh? Dirt cheap, dirt cheap!"

"Dirt cheap!" ejaculated Frank, raising his voice a trifle in his indignation.

"Hush! D'yer want to tell the neighbours? Dirt cheap, of course! Look here, young Mr. Riven—there's some as wouldn't call yer mister if they knew the game yer was up to—if yer afraid to do a thing like this yerself, yer've got to pay for it. Ain't it worth it to yer? Don't I know the reason? Wasn't I there when he gave yer the drummin'? My eye!—that lad can use his fists! I'd be sorry to have to be the one to stand up to him! And you thought you was goin' to give him a hiding yerself when you laid on to him with that stick of yours. Lor'! I thought you meant to break every bone in his blessed body, and then he ups, and, afore you can look round, yer seein' stars—thousands of 'em!"

Frank Riven gnashed his teeth and struck the ground savagely with his stick, almost more savagely than on the occasion when he had struck young Roger Norman. The grating voice at his ear irritated him beyond words, and the reminder the cunning wretch had given him increased his determination to revenge himself upon the one who had caused him so great humiliation. Never for a moment had Frank Riven forgotten Roger and the debt he owed him. Boy only though Roger was, though just arriving at the stage of budding man-

hood, yet this evil-minded youth had raised him to the position of a rival—a hated rival.

Forgetting that he himself, living at the Hall, might, by good conduct, by pleasant manners, in a hundred different ways, win the esteem and liking of his uncle and his fair cousin, he behaved like a bear there—sometimes worse—and put his want of popularity at the Hall, both with the servants and with his uncle and cousin, down entirely to our hero.

It was an utterly unreasonable position he took up, of course, yet was not Frank Riven already proved to be an unreasonable and boorish individual? That first attempt of his, the thrashing he had received for the blow he had given Roger, the latter's equanimity ever since, his friendly smile, his obvious desire to live on good terms with Frank, had only incensed the latter; and now this ruffian at his side prodded him, as it were, spurred him on, increased his anger and his desire for revenge.

"My!—a fine young fighting-cock!" the rascal grunted. "Owed it all to Sergeant Higgins—no, not all, for I tell you he's a good plucked 'un, and he'll want a lot of beating. Dirt cheap, I tells yer. Down with the brass, or—or what's to prevent me jawin'? I might go down to Hurslet now, and shout that there's a young chap, livin' like a swell at the Hall, wanting to cut the throat of Roger Norman—to cut his throat—not in the open, believe me, but secret like, when he wasn't looking."

Frank Riven gritted his teeth together, his eyes

were blazing, though the darkness hid that rather unpleasant feature; he kicked the ground and again struck it savagely.

"Done!" he exclaimed, searching in an inner pocket. "Done!—done with you!"

Handing out a note to the miscreant, he walked with him, feeling at the same moment that he would like to throttle the fellow. Then for a few minutes he fell to trembling, for what if this rascal did as he had threatened?

Frank Riven realized now that he was practically in his hands. For a long time he had been thinking out a scheme which would give him revenge over Norman; but not once had he thought that it would recoil upon his own head. He had diligently sought for this ruffian who now accompanied him, and thought that money alone would buy him. A little more knowledge of the world would have taught this insufferable young fellow that money alone will not buy even a rascal, and that the conspiracy he was hatching—had now almost brought to fruition indeed—was as dangerous to himself perhaps as it was likely to be to his promised victim.

"Done!" the fellow at his side exclaimed, and the two went on their way towards Hurslet in silence, till in fact the lights of the Hall were sighted. Then, as if they were a signal, they came to a standstill.

"You know what to do—you wait till I am inside, then——"

"Go on! I ain't a baby!" the man exclaimed,

crumpling the note at the bottom of a pocket in his tattered coat. "It ain't the first job of this sort that I've worked. You go on in; but mind you, a 'fiver' when the job's done—no waitin'—a 'fiver' down—and then mum's the word! You can trust me for ever!"

Anyone who had been able to see the rascal's face at that moment would have hesitated to trust him for one single instant, and would certainly never have thought of reposing confidence in him once he was at a distance. Close at hand in the broad daylight he would have been a man to beware of; in the dark, skulking along in the shadows, ready to work some sort of infamy, the man was dangerous. And when this infamy had been perpetrated, and perhaps Roger Norman had been injured, would Frank Riven be able to buy the silence of this rascal for a mere five pounds—for five golden sovereigns—of the liberal allowance which his uncle allowed him? Was it likely indeed? Already this ruffian was gloating over the possible future.

"When it is done," he chuckled hoarsely, as he stumbled off into the darkness after Frank had bidden him farewell, "when all the noise has died down, and the perlice has given the thing up as a job that's beyond 'em, that's when I come in again. Just about then the £5 will be gone, and I'll be wanting more, because money don't grow on trees and hedges. Oh yes!—he'll pay up, and pay up jolly well too! And if he don't——!"

The man's grimy fist closed about the note

secreted at the bottom of the pocket in his tattered jacket, and he grinned a grin which would have made Frank Riven shiver.

Meanwhile Roger, whistling as he went, had made his way up the village street of Hurslet, past those straggling houses, and so to the Hall crowning the top of the hill, where he had been welcomed as an old friend should be welcomed; and now, as Frank Riven's heavy tread was heard in the hall, he was saying farewell to the friends he had come to visit.

"Good-bye then, Roger, my boy," said Mr. Riven, gripping his hand, while with his disengaged fingers he slipped an envelope into Roger's pocket—for that was one of the pleasant little things that Mr. Riven never neglected.

Not that Roger was mean enough to come to the Hall on an apparent visit, before going back to school, with the one object of receiving that envelope. Indeed, he had protested on more than one occasion. But Mr. Riven had been a boy himself, and had not yet forgotten the days of his boyhood, and therefore never allowed Roger to return to school without a handsome addition to his financial resources.

"Good-bye, and good luck! It's the last term—eh, Roger? In three months' time you'll be joining up as a soldier, and before you can look round you'll perhaps be in France fighting these Germans. Good luck, lad!"

Elsie shook the hand of her hero—for Roger was that without a doubt—with a warmness which she

took no trouble to hide. Indeed, the warmth of her affection was shown by her flashing eyes, while this timid little girl was almost trembling, for she was thinking of the near future.

"Good-bye! See you when I come home again," called Roger, as he went through the hall, past Frank, who stood aloof and haughty, and so out into the garden. Then, whistling gaily, he trudged on to the road and turned towards the village.

Meanwhile, what of that ruffian who had stood still and let the sneaking Frank Riven move on to and enter the Hall? The darkness hid his features, hid the hideous grin which he had turned in the direction of his employer. If it had been broad daylight a man coming along the road just then might have recognized in this rascal the shambling, evil-looking fellow who haunted the market square of the adjacent town, and stood about corners and in the doorways of public-houses—a man dressed in tattered and torn raiment, down at heels, bleary of face, unshaven and unprepossessing, yet a sturdily built rascal, square-shouldered, deep-chested, and, as one could see, when one came to peer into his face, a man possessed of some determination. In short, had this fellow been educated and brought up amidst decent surroundings in a decent home he might have been quite a respectable member of society. But his father had died when he was a lad, and his mother many years before. The boy had been dragged up, had been subjected to every sort of evil influence, had lived his life in the gutter, one may say; and here was the result—a

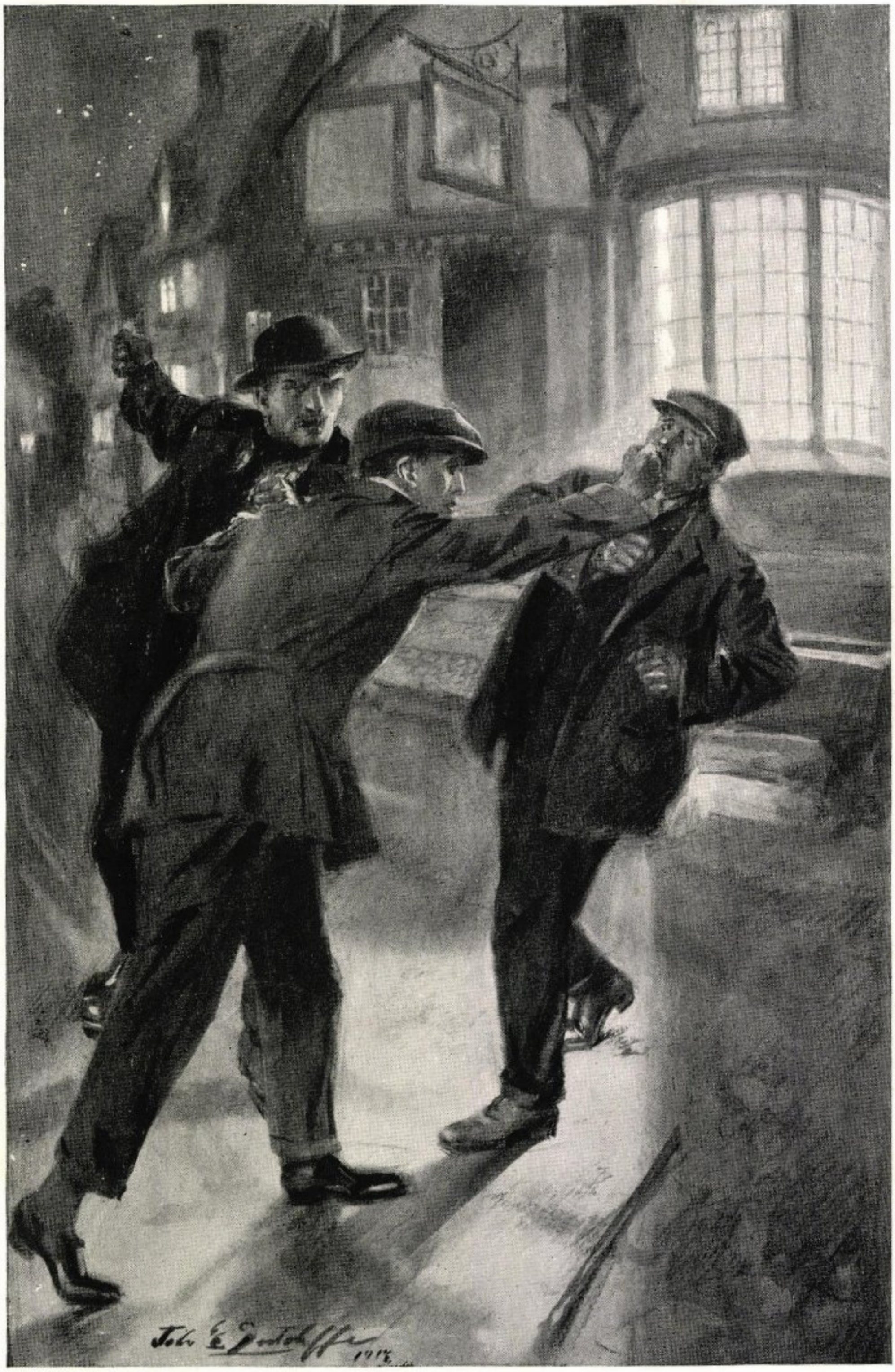
dissolute rascal, ready for any infamy so long as it brought him money and the wherewithal to slake an almost perpetual thirst.

"That's 'is door a-goin'!" he exclaimed, as he saw a beam of light sweep from the front of the Hall, which Frank Riven was just then entering. "A sweet young man that; and don't he hate t'other! Well, if I was asked to choose, it's not Frank Riven that I'd ask for. T'other's a lad with spirit and pluck and strength. Yes, I wouldn't like to have to stand up to him in broad daylight. But this ain't broad daylight."

He put a couple of dirty finger-tips to his mouth and sent forth a shrill whistle, repeating it twice, then he walked into the middle of the road and waited. Presently there came shambling towards him another individual much like himself—an habitué of the market square and the public-houses in the adjacent town, a rascal almost more unsavoury than this first individual.

"Ha! you've come, and just at the very moment that you're wanted. I've got the money," said the first. "Come on! Now you know the trick to be played. We're paid to give this young chap a hiding; and mind, it's got to be a good 'un! You won't bother about that, eh? 'cos everyone knows you've got a grievance against him."

That was a cunning move on the part of this rascal whom Frank Riven had engaged to carry out nefarious work for him. He had selected as his assistant a man whom Roger had quite unconsciously offended. To be sure, the lad was in no



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"HE STRUCK RIGHT AND LEFT, GETTING ONE FIST WELL HOME ON THE FACE OF ONE OF THE BULLIES"

way to blame himself, for quite unwittingly he had detected this man in the very act of thieving, and information he had given had led to his arrest. That was two years before, but Ern, as the rascal was called, had never forgiven or forgotten.

"I know," he said. "Come on! I've just been waiting for this business. This is a job that suits me downright. You can take it stright from me that if I get a hold on that kid I'll trounce him. I'll beat him within an inch of his life, s'welp me! within an inch of his blessed life."

The door opened again, and another broad beam of light was shot across the road, while silhouetted against it for some few brief seconds was the active, sturdy, rapidly-moving figure of Roger Norman. A minute later he had plunged into the darkness, the door had banged, and he and those two rascals were left practically alone in the neighbourhood. Stealthily and rapidly they went after him, while he, gay and boyish and light-hearted, stepped along, whistling loudly, thereby drowning any sounds they might have made.

It was perhaps five minutes later, when Roger had come to a point almost opposite the "Morning Sun", through whose cosy red-curtained windows a comforting and inviting ray of light was shining, that those two behind suddenly flung themselves upon our hero. A stick thudded on the ground beside him; for Ern, eager to have revenge, was the first to commence the attack, and, missing his aim in the semi-light, lurched forward, while his stick, jarring against the ground, was torn from

his hand. Then the other rascal bounced to the front, and, swinging his arm round, caught Roger a clout on the side of the head which sent him flying.

"Now then, get in, get in, Ern!" he called. "Take it out of him in the next minute, for by then people round will be alarmed and will be interfering."

It was lucky for Roger that that comforting beam of light did happen to emerge from the curtained windows of the "Morning Sun", for otherwise no doubt these two rascals would have overborne him. As it was, the clout sent him staggering, and then spurred him to action and woke him up from the pleasant dreams in which he had been indulging a moment earlier. Then, as he looked up, he saw two figures between himself and that light, men whose arms whirled and who were rushing towards him. Just as unconsciously as he took in every breath, he sprang into a position of defence, and hardly had the men reached him when he struck right and left, getting one fist home well on the face of one of the bullies.

"He's gone down! That was a straight 'un! Now for the other!"

Unable to understand why he should be so attacked, and taking these two men for footpads, Roger saw one of them stagger and fall, and then he rushed in at the other and dealt him swinging blows till, turning suddenly, the fellow bolted. Then Roger looked up.

"No one in sight! Not a sound! Goodness,

what an extraordinary thing to happen! Who were they? Why did they want to turn upon me like that? And—and, that fellow hasn't moved!—I can see him in the light cast from the Sergeant's windows. Stunned, I suppose—let's look. He's—he's dead—dead!" gasped Roger, as he knelt beside the man and first took his grimy hand and then lifted his head.

Both fell back helpless, the man stopped breathing, his limbs were flaccid. Even when Roger pulled his frowzy vest open and put his hand over his heart there was not a movement to be felt.

"Dead!" he said, as he sat up gasping, while blood dripped from his face. "I—I killed him! I—I—and no one saw it—no one's yet been round. I—what am I to do? No one would believe that I'd been set on by two people, and had killed one and driven the other off. It's—I—good heavens! what an awful position!"

He clapped one clammy hand to his cold forehead and shuddered. He was trembling all over now, not because of the attack made upon him and the reaction that often follows excessive action or some shock, but because of the other feeling that now possessed him. To have killed a man was awful—dreadful! It scared Roger. He seized that hand again and pulled at the arm, as though he thought that would awake the individual stretched so helplessly on the road. He looked, and, yes, horror of horrors! a little pool of blood was collecting by the man's head, pouring from one ear.

Perspiration dropped from his forehead; he rose

to his feet, his head in a whirl, and staggered away, staggered along the street hardly knowing where he was going or for what reason. "Dead! I killed him! There will be an inquiry! It's a frightful position. What am I to do? I can't go back to school with a thing like that on my conscience. I can't stand an inquiry, where people will point their fingers at me and say that I, known for my boxing in these parts, set on a man and killed him. It's—— I'll go!"

Let those who would blame Roger Norman, who would denounce him for not remaining in Hurslet and "facing the music"—the inquiry which would follow the outcome of the attempt these two ruffians had made upon him—recollect that he was still only a boy, though on the threshold of manhood. Other young fellows had been scared out of their wits and driven to take desperate steps under less strenuous conditions. It was wrong, no doubt; it was cowardly, perhaps; it was essentially a stupid action. Yet Roger, with that awful figure lying dead in the road always before him, crept back to the Dene, packed a bag, hurriedly wrote a short line to his father, and then went off into the darkness.

CHAPTER III

Making Friends

ROGER NORMAN stopped at the threshold of his father's house for one brief moment, and, pulling his watch from his pocket, looked at the time. It was just half-past eight.

"That settles it," he said, as he thrust the watch back and picked up his bag. "A train leaves the town at 9.15 and goes on to London; I'll travel by that, and decide what to do later."

As was his wont, he crossed the front lawn of the Dene at a rapid pace, went through the gate and out on to the road. Then, turning sharply to the right, he began his tramp through the deserted village of Hurslet. A second later he came to a brief halt.

"Couldn't do it," he told himself, mopping the perspiration from his brow.

For of a sudden that solitary figure lying in the dust before the "Morning Sun", with the friendly light from the red-curtained window streaming gently down upon him, rose before Roger's brain.

"Dead!" he told himself again; "and I killed him—awful!"

Like a thief in the night he crept off into a quiet

lane which zigzagged behind the village, and, taking to his heels, fled along as if fearful that someone was chasing him. At the far end he came out at the top of the hill just beyond the Hall, and, gaining the road, tramped steadily along it. Suddenly a figure hove in sight, and a lamp was flashed in his face.

"Ah—you! Where away then, Mr. Roger?"

Roger was taken aback by the sudden summons, for the policeman had been riding along the road without a lamp, and now the light which he turned upon this passenger whom he had met was from a covered lantern. If Roger had felt like a thief—like a murderer—before, as indeed he did, he now felt suddenly desperate. It was only with the greatest effort that he could answer.

"Why, where away, Sergeant?—Oh, I'm going off to the town to buy something."

"Buy something!" ejaculated the constable, "and it's getting on towards nine! Why, that's a strange move, Mr. Roger; shops will be closed, won't they?"

"Er—not mine, Sergeant," Roger answered. "Good-night."

"Good-night, lad."

"Now, what's all that mean?" the sergeant asked himself, as he stood on the high road, holding on to his bicycle, his dark lantern still turned on and illuminating his immediate surroundings. "Looked scared he did—looked properly frightened—as if he'd done something he was ashamed of. But not he. Roger Norman ain't that class of

young fellow. Now, if it had been that young Frank Riven I'd have been suspicious, and would think strongly of following. But no, there's been an upset of some sort, some trifling thing. Roger's a straight 'un!"

If he could have got into Roger's brain and read his thoughts he would have been greatly puzzled. No doubt this honest sergeant would have taken the lad by the hand, have persuaded him to tell his story, and would then and there have given him most excellent advice, with the result that our hero would have stayed in Hurslet to "face the music". But it was too late now; for once out of sight and, as he hoped, out of sound, Roger took to his heels like a hunted hare and bolted along the road.

"That alters my plans," he told himself, sitting down and panting after a while. "The sergeant recognized me. I know my manner was strange when he turned that lamp on; I know my lips were trembling, and he's sure to have spotted that. Then immediately the hue and cry is raised in Hurslet, he'll remember our meeting, and will set off in this direction to find me. That settles it!"

The sergeant would have been doubly surprised could he have seen Roger a little later, for, picking up his bag, our hero returned along the road, and, once more getting into that lane, gained his father's house without meeting a single person. Then he took his bicycle from the yard, mounted it just outside the garden wall, and sped off in precisely the opposite direction to that which he had first

taken. Half an hour later he arrived at a large village some three miles away, and wheeling his bicycle into a thick patch of trees, where it was hardly likely to be easily discovered, he left it there and pushed on to the station. The train which entered shortly after bore him up towards the north of England.

"Hallo!" said someone in the carriage which he had entered. "Going north? and all alone? So'm I—that's good business!"

Roger looked up sharply, suspiciously; for he now had fears of everyone.

"Yes," he said abruptly, "going north—and alone!"

He noticed that the man who had spoken was only a young fellow after all, perhaps only two years older than himself. He was a pleasant, sandy-haired fellow with a bright open face and a frank laugh which attracted Roger instantly.

"And you?" he asked, encouraged by the appearance of his fellow-passenger.

"Me! Oh, me!" said the youth, dragging a cigarette from a packet and proceeding to light it. "Well, I was doing a job down south, don't you know, and had taken on a contract. It's up now, and I'm returning north to my people. Then I move on again. I'm going to take on with the 'Derby' lot."

"Become a soldier?" asked Roger eagerly.

"Aye, become a soldier. I'd have done it months ago but for this contract. The war is going to be a long one, sonny, and so I said to

myself, first finish the job you're at, and when you are ready there'll be heaps of room for you and for many who come after. What about you? You don't look quite the age yet, only, of course, there's many a chap younger than you that's joined up. Some of the youngsters are so full of keenness you can't keep 'em back, and they do tell me many of 'em have made good over yonder."

"Made good over yonder!" Roger's hands were clenched, his finger-nails dug into his sweating palms. If only he could "make good"; if only he could quite wipe out the horrible deed perpetrated but recently. He did not stop to think, and never had yet since the tragedy, that it was not his fault that he had been set upon, and that all he had done was to strike in self-defence. He had killed a man; that was the overmastering thought that filled his brain. He must flee from justice, and must wipe out the awful disgrace which had fallen upon him.

"I," he stuttered, "I—I'm going to be a soldier too. That's why I'm travelling north."

"North?" queried the other. "But you belong hereabouts! You're a gent. Anyone could see that. Chaps like you go to their local depots to recruit, or at any rate up to London. You're the stamp of chap that's made into an officer. Why? I don't understand! What's behind it?"

He puffed a cloud of smoke in Roger's direction and glanced inquisitively at him, though he smiled all the while—a friendly smile. "Something funny," he was telling himself, "something queer

behind this. Troubles at home, eh? Someone's been driving him out — some sort of domestic worry. Nothing else, I'll swear; for he's a fine, clean-looking young fellow."

"I say," he began aloud. "Of course I'm not the one to ask why you want to go as a soldier —everyone wants to be a soldier nowadays who's anything of a man, and you'll be that soon, though I should take you now to be barely eighteen years of age. But why shouldn't we go along together? What d'you know? What's your trade? Oh, of course, you've not got a trade. Be honest; you go to a public school, don't you?"

"I do," Roger answered at once and quite frankly. "I——"

"Look here," said the young fellow, sliding along the seat until he was almost opposite our hero, "why not tell me what it's all about? Anyone can see from a glance that you're all of a flurry, that something's happened to upset you. Trust in a fellow! I won't go back on you whatever the tale is, though I'm sure it can't be bad. I'm not very old, I know, and so you might think twice before confiding in me. But I'm a square one, like you, I am. D'you believe it?"

Roger did. He looked up, and the two sat for a while staring into one another's eyes as if trying to read the other's character; then Roger stretched out a hand.

"I trust you," he said. "I'll tell you the story."

For a while he sat gripping the edge of the seat,

trying to control his emotion; for, to tell the truth, he was within an ace of breaking down. That awful tragedy had indeed almost unnerved him; the knowledge that he had killed a man had driven him wellnigh frantic. It would be a vast relief to get someone to share his story. Even if this young fellow were to condemn him, yet it would be a relief to open his lips and talk about the matter.

"I—I'm bolting from home!" he blurted out.

"Aye, bolting from home. Well, there's many done it before, and many will do it in the future," came the sympathetic answer, while, as if not to embarrass Roger too much, the young fellow leaned back and stared up at the roof, towards which he puffed energetic clouds of smoke. "Bolting from home," he went on; "that's not a great thing to worry about in these days. You'll get your troubles smoothed out later, and will return to the old folks. Every decent fellow does that. Well, what next? You needn't tell me what the bother was about. You'll think better of the folks at home when a few more hours have passed, and when you've cooled down a trifle."

"It isn't that," Roger told him, taking him by the sleeve and almost shaking him. "I'm—I'm bolting because I've killed a man!"

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed the fellow-passenger; "killed a man! That's something!"

Even he took a deep breath, and it was quite clear that he was thoroughly astonished, almost dismayed. He took his eyes from the roof of the

carriage, and fixed them askance on Roger, and even sidled a little farther away so as not to be exactly opposite him.

"Killed a man! My word!—murdered a man, d'you mean? Look here, youngster, I'm Bill Andrews; blurt out the whole story. If you're a murderer you go to the police at the first station we stop at. That 'ud be my duty. If you ain't, and you've just killed a man in some sort of way that I can't at the moment fathom, then we can talk the thing over. What's the tale?"

Roger pulled himself together with an effort, and gave his story in a few short trembling sentences, while Bill Andrews sat looking at him more directly, and, as the tale went on, tipped his billycock hat farther back on his head, ran his grubby fingers through his yellow locks, and then began mopping his forehead. At length he brought one brawny hand down with a thwack first upon his own knee and then upon Roger's, and set to laughing.

"I can see the whole thing," he said, gripping Roger's knee in a most confiding and reassuring manner. "You were set on to by these chaps, and of course they had a reason, though what it is neither you nor I perhaps can fathom; perhaps they mistook you for someone else, because youngsters same as you are not likely to have much money. Anyway they set on you and you killed one of 'em. Well, serve him right!"

"Serve him right!" gasped Roger utterly astonished.

"Aye, serve him right! He got his deserts!

And that's all about it. Mind, youngster, I'm not saying that you shouldn't have stayed behind at home and seen this thing through. There'll be an inquiry, of course. There'll be some bigwig or other in your neighbourhood sitting on the bench asking heaps of questions, and the police and all sorts of other people standing round and making themselves more or less disagreeable. You should have faced all that."

"But—" began Roger, protesting, "if I had——"

Bill Andrews stopped him abruptly, lifting one grimy hand.

"There's no 'but' about it," he said, "you ought to have stayed. You ought to go back there now, and face it out. Why not? But no, you can't, for this train don't stop for more than an hour, and by then we shall be in the Midlands."

Bill Andrews, the fresh-looking, honest young workman, who had already made such an impression on Roger, wrinkled his brow, and pushed his hat still farther back on his head. Then he became lost for quite a little time in a species of brown study, staring sometimes at the floor, then at the ceiling, and, later, straight into the face of the young fellow seated before him. A little later he commenced to mutter.

"Clean look about the chap—one of the public-schoolboy sort! I know 'em! And sometimes they've irritated me. But they've got grit and go, and they've made fine officers. They've shown that they can fight through difficulties, and there

ain't a shadow of doubt about it. Why shouldn't he fight the thing out himself?"

"See here, me lad," he suddenly exclaimed, speaking quite aloud this time, and once more bringing his hand down with a bang on Roger's knee, "you've made a mess of this here business."

Roger could do no more than nod his head in agreement.

"A wretched mess," he said sadly.

"You've behaved just as if you'd killed this chap on purpose," said Bill severely, pointing an incriminating and accusing finger at him.

"I've been a fool!" admitted our hero. "I know I ought to have stayed, but that fellow lying in the road there, so still and breathless, scared the life out of my body. I wasn't afraid of him when he was alive, and would have fought him longer if it had been necessary; but the fellow dead frightened me out of my senses."

Bill nodded his head to and fro in the most emphatic fashion, and it was plain to see that he thoroughly understood Roger's frame of mind after the attack which had been made upon him, and sympathized with the most perplexing and awkward position in which he found himself.

"I know, I know!" he repeated. "Decent brought-up chap, quite one of the toffs of the village, and never been in any disgraceful scrape before, is suddenly discovered street-brawling, and kills a man; then flees, afraid of his own shadow. Wait!" he suddenly cried. "How d'you know he was dead? Ever seen a dead man before?"

"No; but he didn't move."

"Gosh!" shouted Bill. "Didn't move indeed! Let's feel your muscles," and stretching across the carriage he gripped Roger's wrist, and then ran his powerful though somewhat dirty fingers up the sleeve of his jacket till he reached his biceps. Then he took a good look at his square shoulders.

"Huh!" he laughed derisively; "you're pretty well built for your age, you are; and if you and I was to stand up opposite one another, and you was to catch me a clean punch with your fist, and I went down, perhaps striking my head on the road, d'you think I'd move? I know what you're going to say—blood was coming from his ear. That don't say he was dead, does it? You might have cracked his skull, and small blame to you—but dead! It takes a good deal to kill a man sometimes, you know, young fellow."

What a weight those words lifted from Roger's mind! He snatched at them as a drowning man snatches at a straw, and instantly began to feel better. What if the rascal who had fallen upon him so suddenly, and whom he had left for dead in front of the "Morning Sun", were indeed still living? What a different complexion it would put upon the whole affair, and how easy it would be then to shake off the terrible feeling of depression which now assailed him!

"Heigh?" asked Bill, almost shouted it. "Heigh? Gosh! to hear a young chap like you thinking he knows everything, a-talking to me about dead men when he ain't never yet seen one. Look 'ere, me

lad, that man ain't dead until the police reports it; so there now, what d'you say?"

What Roger had to say was really said with particular emphasis on the following morning, when, having got out of the train at a certain north-country station in the very early hours, they invaded the refreshment-room as soon as it was opened. Later, Bill opened a morning paper, intending to read it while he discussed hot coffee and a most appetizing breakfast. Five minutes later he gave vent to a shout which quite startled a young woman in attendance upon them, and grabbed Roger by the shoulder with such force that that young man imagined himself already arrested.

"See here," said Bill hoarsely, "I'll read it to you: 'Midnight affray in the village of Hurslet. We are informed by the police that after dark two men appear to have made an attack upon the son of a local gentleman, well known for his boxing prowess. Little information has been obtained as to what followed, but the attack would appear to have been beaten off in the most summary manner, and one of the ruffians who attacked the youth was left apparently dead on the high road. When picked up by the police, however, he was found to be alive, and is now progressing favourably. A distressing part of the affair is that the young man attacked, evidently frightened by what had happened, left the village hurriedly. His whereabouts are sought; the following is his description:—' And that's you," whispered Bill, for it was not wise to let anyone else have access to their secret.

"That's you," he said, pointing to the description—"'5 feet 9 inches perhaps, brown hair, boyish face, square built, active and sturdy; answers to the name of Roger Norman.'"

"That's me," admitted Roger. "What a relief it is to hear that that fellow is really alive!"

"Roger Norman, look here, lad," said Bill, "d'you mean now to go on with this business, to attest and become a soldier?"

"I do," said Roger resolutely.

"Then you've got to drop the Norman part of your name. What'll you be? What about Sullivan—Roger Sullivan? That'll do for a time—eh? And mark this, you are already cleared; but you're starting in with me right down on the lowest rung of the military ladder. D'you want to climb? D'you want to show those folks at home that there's real good in you? Then here's your chance; are you for it?"

They went to the local recruiting depot and promptly attested. Then they were sent with a party of recruits to a camp at some considerable distance, where their training for the Western Front commenced instantly.

Roger Sullivan—Private Roger Sullivan as he was now known—looked in khaki a really fine young fellow. Read on, and you will hear how he started to make good his record.

CHAPTER IV

In the Trenches

"AND now we shan't be long," said Bill Andrews, gaily enough, as he and Roger, now fast friends, fell in for their last inspection prior to leaving for the front. "We've had a hardish time, eh? Lots of work, and hard work too."

"But pleasant enough," said Roger. "I've enjoyed it."

"Aye, that you have, and it's made a real man of you. Why, you've come on just wonderful. You've put three inches on round the chest, your shoulders have spread so that you've had to have a new issue of uniform, and blest if you ain't got heavier. Not fatter, mind you," said Bill, critically enough, eyeing his chum carefully and looking all round him; "not fatter, me lad, for you haven't an ounce to spare. You're just muscle and brawn, and are in first-rate trim for fighting."

To look at Roger just casually one would have admitted at once that he was a very proper young soldier indeed. No weediness about this lad, no shallow, stooping shoulders, no nerveless frame, and no trace of indecision. Roger, thanks to hard exercise and the very strenuous training period

through which he had passed, was now as tough as whipcord, thoroughly well set up, as hard as nails, ruddy and sunburned, or, rather, reddened and browned by constant exposure, and withal as jolly a fellow as you could well come upon.

"A good recruit—yes," the Adjutant at the camp had told his sergeant-major within three days of his arrival. "Of course he's drilled before. Know anything about the youngster?"

"Nothing much, sir. But he's tiptop. As keen as possible—well, even in these days, when we get all sorts in the ranks, he's a cut above the majority."

"Ah! How?"

"Talks like a—well, same as you do, sir. Has a way with him, and—and can hit hard. He's been to a school where they teach youngsters to stand up for themselves."

"How's that?" came the instant question.

"Like this, sir. There's been something queer about that there recruit. I ain't here to ask every one of 'em where he's come from, nor why he's jined up. Some of 'em has this reason, and some that, sir. Most of 'em's come along because of the tales of the Germans, and because they're the boys that mean to do their bit for the Old Country, and don't want fetching and don't mean to be fetched."

"Quite so. Quite so, Sergeant-major. Then you think——"

"I've guessed, that's all, sir, that this youngster, Private Sullivan he calls himself, come along for some other more particular reason than most of our recruits. If ever I saw a hunted, haunted young-

ster the first day here—it was him. He'd been recruited a week before, and transferred, you'll remember, and when he arrived he got mooning about, crept into quiet corners, shunned, as you might say, all the others except that Private Andrews, who's a good 'un too, though a different cut to Sullivan."

"Then how do you know that he's been to a school and so on? What about being able to protect himself?"

The Sergeant-major chuckled grimly and drew his six-feet-two up rigidly. He was no different from the usual stamp of sergeant-major, and was just as clever and wide-awake as the majority. Indeed he was the backbone of this training camp, right-hand to the Commandant and his Adjutant, and, like the Quartermaster, as indispensable, more indispensable indeed, than thousands of those who have set their particular value up as an excuse to escape conscription. Like his confrères, then, this sergeant-major knew his recruits intimately, took individual notice of them, studied their faults and their good points, and knew all that there was to know about the life of a soldier. He chuckled again, still standing rigidly at attention, while his piercing eyes looked over the head of the Adjutant.

"I dropped on him from the first," he said. "We don't want tears in a camp like this, and skulking in dark corners ain't the thing for young recruits. I got after young Sullivan, and I give him credit for making a willing effort right away to alter matters. But there are always busybodies

about a camp, and some of 'em's bullies. That Private Drury, somewhere from the slums of London, I believe, sets to to make Sullivan's life miserable."

"Ah! He's got the look and swagger of a bully. Or, rather, he had. I've noticed a change in the man lately," admitted the Adjutant.

"Then you can thank young Sullivan for it. Seems he stood a bit of foolin'. Then he ups, and they tell me he's got as pretty a style as any boxer you ever set eyes on. Drury ain't likely to interfere again, nor anyone in this camp. Yes, sir, Sullivan's worth watching."

The day had come when Roger had gone proudly enough to the tailor shop to have the galloon of a lance-corporal stitched on the sleeve of his tunic, and had worn his new honour with becoming modesty. Another red-letter day had arrived when a second stripe was added to that first one; and now that he had finished his training, could pitch a bomb with the best, knew all that was worth knowing about the art of trenching, and was possessed of more than a smattering of the science appertaining to the use of gas, and the methods to be adopted for protection against that barbarous weapon invented by the ruthless German, he wore a third stripe on his arm.

"Young for a sergeant, perhaps," reflected the Commandant, as he went down the line of men selected for the draft about to cross to France; "but knows his work, eh?"

"Thoroughly well, sir. Commands men well:

good-tempered but firm, quiet, and has an excellent record."

"And you'd recommend him, eh?" asked the Commandant, turning also to the Sergeant-major, ever at his elbow.

"For a commission when he's done some service at the front. Certainly, sir. A very likely candidate. Of course, you can't always guarantee that a good man here will be equally good in the trenches and in the face of the enemy. But Sergeant Sullivan will. He's——"

"Call him up," said the Commandant abruptly.

"Sergeant Sullivan. This way. March!" bellowed the Sergeant-major, tucking his cane beneath his left arm and casting a critical glance down the line awaiting inspection. "Captain Anstell's right, sir, begging pardon," he went on, *sotto voce*. "Sergeant Sullivan's a real good non-commissioned officer. He'll make an excellent leader one of these days, any time he's appointed."

See, then, Sergeant Sullivan standing at attention before his Commanding Officer, erect as a pole, carrying his pack and equipment in splendid fashion, and as if he hardly felt their weight, his rifle sloping over his shoulder, his right hand brought smartly over to the butt as he arrived opposite the officers, his eyes bright, his face keen and intelligent.

"Er—ah—Sergeant Sullivan," began the Commandant, "you've been mentioned as a non-commissioned officer of promise, and have been recommended to me as a candidate for a commission. Er—I suppose you would be willing?"

"I'd like to do some service at the front, first of all, sir," answered Roger directly. "I like soldiering here, but out there——"

"Precisely! One never knows how one will get on. But it is wonderful how our fellows have done. You'll do well, too, Sergeant. Had some education, I believe."

"Yes, sir."

"At a public school?"

"Yes, sir," said Roger, a cloud passing over his face; for since he had enlisted he had never once spoken of his past life save with Bill, and he was a chum to be relied on.

"Ah! Where?" asked the Commandant, while the Adjutant coughed significantly. "But, there," said the Commandant hurriedly, realizing that he was trenching on difficult and delicate ground, "that'll do, Sergeant Sullivan. Your name will be put forward. You're a credit to us, and will continue to be so."

"About turn! March!" shouted the Sergeant-major.

"Blimy!" growled Bill, watching the whole manœuvre. "Picked him out for a commission, I'll bet. Well, it had to come; only what about me?"

What about poor Bill, long since bosom chum of our hero?

"Don't think that it would make any difference," said Roger, as they went aboard the steamer which was to take them across to France. "Besides, I am not an officer yet, so why worry?"

Why worry, indeed, when so many things might happen; when they might be face to face with the enemy within a few days, and—and anything might occur. Any thoughts which the faithful Bill may have had on the matter were banished promptly; for what with the interest of embarking, what with the crowds of reinforcements aboard the ship, what with aircraft about and torpedo-boats scuttling around them, there was interest enough to attract his attention elsewhere. And then they reached the soil of France, where there was still more to look on at and remark about.

"We go up to a camp where regimental depots are situated, and there have some further training," the officer in command of the draft told Roger. "It'll be a strenuous time, and there we'll be taught the very latest things about trench fighting."

A couple of weeks later Roger and his comrades fell in once more and entrained, and that night marched into billets behind the firing-line.

"Of course one has seen lots of photographs of billets and French villages before," said Bill, when the draft was dismissed, and, having eaten their evening ration, he and Roger meandered down the street. "But the actual thing is different. Suppose we could be reached by shells here?"

Roger pointed significantly to huge gaps in the walls and roofs. "Naturally," he said, smiling, "billets for troops meant for the trenches have to be within easy distance, for men have to march down. Rest billets, though, are farther behind,

where there's little chance of shelling. Wonder what it'll feel like to be under fire?"

They had not very long to wait, for that very night a "hate" was turned by the enemy upon this particular locality, and shells whistled over the village. Yet between the shots men could be heard singing, while the twang of a banjo came to the ears of Roger and his friends. On the following morning, too, shells were dropping about, bursting on occasion and sending dirt and debris of wrecked houses into the air. Looking out from his billet, Roger could see soldiers walking, it seemed, aimlessly about the street, their "tin" helmets perched on the back of their heads, hands in pockets.

"Got used to shelling," he told himself. "Well, I can't say that I am yet, and every shell that comes over makes me stare and bob. But I've got to get used to 'em too, so here goes."

He jammed his steel helmet on to his head, and set off for a saunter with Bill.

"A near 'un that," declared the latter, when a shell plumped into a ruined barn near the far end of the street and blew it to fragments. "Lor', look at them chaps. One would think they liked shells by the way they are walking."

You would indeed, for the nonchalance and idle curiosity of the British soldier are something to wonder at. Here, where one might reasonably have supposed that they would have fled for cover, they actually strolled toward the barn to inspect the damage, and practically every man dangled a half-consumed cigarette between his lips, and

looked—and felt too, without a doubt—utterly at ease.

"Yer see," explained one merry fellow to Bill, when the latter tackled him on the subject, "there's such a heap of shells and other things flyin' about that you can't help yerself. Fust time I come out, same as you chaps, I was divin' and runnin' and sweatin' whenever a shell came near, till I was that worn out and miserable. But divin' don't save yer, nor does runnin', 'cos like as not you'll run into one of the beggars. So you gets a settled-down sort o' feelin'. You begins to feel amused with shells, and though some of 'em's annoyin', and sometimes they gets men, mostly you takes 'em just as you takes breakfast."

The taking of breakfast was quite an entertaining affair in these billets. Roger and Bill and the men with whom they had come to France had now joined the battalion they were to fight with, and had been appointed to a company. On returning to their billet they heard the bugle go for breakfast, and presently men told off for that fatigue went to the cook-house, where white-robed cooks handed them cooked rations for the messes they represented. Then frizzling bacon, not to be beaten anywhere, bread that might have graced the table of a Ritz hotel, and jam that would have been the envy of any housewife, were eaten in a room set apart for the purpose, some of the men perched on chairs, but the majority seated on the floor.

"We go up to trenches to-night," Roger was told when he went to get orders for his platoon.

"You'll see that each of your men has his full equipment and a day's rations, the latter uncooked. Be careful that gas helmets are in perfect order, and warn each man to carry a spare pair of socks. Trenches we go to are notoriously wet, and the men's feet require attention."

Just before dusk the feet of each man were anointed with oil, and the latter well rubbed in. Then loose boots were donned, packs were settled upon shoulders, and presently the regiment was marching along the road *en route* to the trenches. It was darker now, and flashes, hitherto unseen, punctured the gloom to right and left, behind them, and particularly in front. The roar of artillery-fire could be heard from a point at some distance, while somewhere in front a machine-gun was tapping out a staccato song, a guttural rat-a-tat-tat prolonged in bursts at times, then dying down, only to break out of a sudden with vehemence.

They were in the front-line trenches at last, and the men they had relieved were struggling along the zigzag communication-trenches which Roger and his fellows had just followed. Sentries were told off, packs were dumped, and soon the battalion was sleeping.

"Precious funny it all do look," said Bill, when breakfasts had been eaten on the following morning, and the two chums stood on the fire-step peering out toward the front through a periscope. "That'll be the German trenches just over there. Two hundred feet, more or less."

"Less," said Roger; "and that's their wire just

in front of the dirty snake-like streak which represents their trenches. Ours is twenty feet in front of and——"

The periscope he was observing the enemy through flew into fragments. Bill gave a startled cry. Roger grinned.

"Sniper," he said. "Now I wonder where that bullet came from."

"Get another periscope from trench stores," an officer, a subaltern in command of the platoon, told him, laughing. "You'll have 'em nearer than that, Sergeant Sullivan. Best put your periscope up in a different place, for the fellow who broke this one has probably been training on it for some while past. You and Private Andrews here had best keep a watch for that German. Fritz has worried us a heap lately with his snipers, and one of them in particular. No one's been able to spot the fellow."

"So it's up to us to do it, eh, Roger?" said Bill, becoming a little excited. "Now how's it to be done? Only by watchin', I suppose."

"I don't know. Let's get the new periscope and then think things over. Seems to me that merely to put one up and peer through it is to invite that sniper to knock a hole through it. No doubt they like to show off their good shooting in that way, and of course it takes a good shot to hit the mirror of a periscope. We've got to get artful."

"Get artful! Should say you have," broke in a fellow sergeant. "See here, Sullivan, I've been in trenches best part of eighteen months now, and

at times when periscopes weren't dreamt of. Snipers was more troublesome in those days than now, and perhaps just as artful. But snipin's become an art this many a day, and you ain't a-goin' to catch that Fritz by merely staring."

When the matter came to be put to the test, Roger and Bill and the other men engaged in the affair found that they had a very crafty German to deal with. To commence with, he splintered the new periscope, which Roger erected some yards to one side of the position the other had occupied, within a minute of its appearance. Then this same worthy contrived to send a bullet flashing past Roger's head, so that it almost took the skin from his ear, and certainly set his "tin" hat ringing.

"You've got to play some other game with that scum," said the sergeant who had spoken earlier. "He's out to kill and to bamboozle us, and he's done both, let me tell you. Seems to me we'd better get far along the trench and take the sniping officer with us."

For three hours a little band of eager folk attempted to discover the lair of the German, who was hidden somewhere opposite, and not till darkness began to fall was any one of them in the vaguest way aware of the lair which the man occupied.

"We've searched every tree and every little hillock of earth with our shots," grumbled Bill, who was getting quite indignant at their want of success. "Seems to me that this chap don't exist, else we should have discovered him."

"Phit!" A bullet licked its way past Bill's head,

causing him to duck hastily. Then it thudded into the rear of the trench, bringing down a miniature avalanche of earth, which set him muttering.

"Look at that," he cried, his anger rising. "Just as I says as he don't exist, he puts in a shot that nearly does for yours truly. I ain't a-goin' to put up with this much longer."

"Stop! I've spotted the fellow, I do believe," came from Roger, his eye glued to the periscope. "Bill, just put your helmet on your rifle and lift it an inch above the parapet. That'll do. Now wait."

Wait, indeed! There was no need to do that, for within half a minute the helmet was ringing like a gong and spinning round upon the muzzle of the rifle, while on inspection it was found to have been neatly perforated by a bullet.

"Good shootin'!" exclaimed the Sergeant. "That there Fritz has a straight eye and an uncommon good hiding-place. You say as you've spotted him, Sergeant Sullivan. Whereabouts?"

"Tell me, when does a fellow like this take up his post?" asked Roger, ignoring the question. "Not during the day, I'm sure, or he'd be seen. Then just before dawn, eh?"

"That's so. Just before it gets light. He'll sneak back to his friends now and put in a sleep, not forgetting a feed. Then he'll be up before dawn, will fill his water-bottle and his ammunition-pouch, and will put food into his haversack. After that he'll creep to his lair, and lie there waiting all day long. It's a craze with them Fritzes. They

like killing people in a dirty sort o' way, they do. I've known some of 'em keep up the game for a fortnight, during which they'll have put quite a number of our boys under. Yer see, even in trenches one forgets sometimes that it's war, and gets careless. But Fritz watches all the time, and it's the careless ones that pays toll to the sniper."

Roger stepped down from the fire-bench with a quick movement and faced them in the gathering gloom. Then he drew himself up at attention and saluted his platoon officer.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but I've spotted that sniper."

"Ah, spotted him, eh?" the officer looked Roger over critically. "Gentleman," he thought. "Speaks like an officer. Keen, too, keen as mustard. Ah, spotted that plaguey fellow. I'm glad. What then? The fellow has killed quite a lot of our men of late, and we shall be well rid of him."

"Then I'd like to go out and bag him, sir. He's hidden so that you can hardly hope to shoot him down from the trenches. There are the remains of an old barn opposite, behind which the German trenches run, and I feel quite sure that the sniper has his lair in the very corner, and is firing through a small aperture between the stones. They're only a foot high, so our guns can hardly be trained on them. Then he's banked earth in front, so as to disguise the real situation. But if I could go out very early in the morning, before he takes up his post, I rather fancy I might end his business."

"Good! You'll do! That's your sort, Sergeant. Come along to the Adjutant. He always encourages little things of this sort. You're sure of your facts, of course, and can tell him?"

Roger felt quite positive, and sketched the situation to the Adjutant a minute later. Then, just as the platoon commander had done, this officer looked our hero over critically.

"Game, I'll be bound," he thought. "In the pink, as we used to say at school. And fresh up in the trenches. Well, it will be a fine example to the rest. Very well, Sergeant Sullivan," he said aloud. "Choose a couple of men to accompany you, for these jobs can't be done single-handed, and be sure to warn the sentries before you go over. Take a bayonet only, or some trenching-tool, or a hammer, for a rifle would be in the way, and, remember, you've got to be back in these trenches before it's daylight or they'll riddle you with bullets."

"Then you can put me down for one of the two," said Bill, when Roger had rejoined him; said it, indeed, with an insistence there was no denying.

"And you can take it that I come too," laughed the sergeant who had already interested himself in the matter. "You'll want someone to cut their wire, and that's me, for I've done it often. Well, I'm glad to get off on a spree again. Trench life tires a fellow worse than billets."

A spree, indeed! It was a desperate and most adventurous undertaking. Not that Roger or Bill or the Sergeant thought of it in that way. They

ate their supper with gusto, sat chatting for a while, and turned in to sleep like children. Then, an hour before dawn, a sentry wakened them, and, having drunk a cup of steaming cocoa apiece, for comforts are not by any means non-existent in the trenches, the three made ready for a journey across No Man's Land into the country of the enemy.

CHAPTER V

Raiding Snipers

"HALF-PAST three," said Roger, bending over a glowing trench brazier about which hung a festoon of socks, for to preserve the feet in perfect condition in wet trenches dry socks are an essential. "Half-past three, and it begins to get light at a quarter after four. That gives us plenty of time I should say."

"Depends on the wire, and whether we have to cut much of it," answered the Sergeant, setting down his empty mess-tin and wiping his mouth with the back of a powerful hand. "Yes, that's the time, Sullivan," he continued, bending, as Roger had done, so that the reflection from the brazier illuminated his wrist watch. "Then let's see about weapons. How's that for mine?"

He produced a short, heavy stick, with a knobbly end into which a number of steel studs were driven. A cord threaded through the handle and passed over his wrist secured it to his person. Thrust into his belt was a huge pair of wire-cutters, for the wire used by the enemy is so strong and thick that it would almost hold up a battleship. A pair of heavy leather gloves completed his preparations.

Then Bill stepped into the light and held forward

his particular weapon. It was an artificer's hammer. "Same as I've been used to," he said, with a grin. "Three pound, and not an ounce under. If there's Germans to be hit, and I get in at 'em, well, there won't be no more snipin'. How about you, me lad?"

It was a matter of habit with him to address Roger in that way, though on formal occasions it was "Sergeant Sullivan," and "Yes, Sergeant. Right, Sergeant." But, then, this was not a formal occasion. The three were about to share the risk of a common enterprise, and danger levels the best of company.

"That's mine. Feel it," said Roger, holding out a short, leather-covered stick, which he had bought from an English store in the town nearest their billets. "Weighted with lead. More delicate-looking than the things that you fellows have, but——"

"But a beauty," declared the Sergeant, taking it and balancing it in one hand. "Comes up quick above the shoulder. Drops heavy, and with its own weight. Well, if Fritz comes in the way of that, Sullivan, there'll be little more to say about the matter. Ha! Here's the platoon officer."

A stocky little man approached along the dark trench and halted in front of them, still buttoning his war-stained tunic. Rats scuttled away from his feet as he did so, and could be heard racing along the boards flooring the trench. "Ah, that you?" he asked cheerily, coming close up to them. "Then you're ready. Now don't forget instructions. Lie

flat if they send up a star light. If you happen to be standing, remain absolutely still, and take no notice of their firing. I'm posting men along the trench to watch for your return. Just whistle to let us know that it's you, and you can rely upon our covering your movement. Good luck, lads!"

"Thank you, sir," they said.

"Then, carry on. Sergeant Sullivan, you're in command of the party and will report on your return. Off you go. It's a bonny morning for this business."

Himself only a youngster, this officer was, for all that, already a war-worn veteran, and had on many an occasion ventured toward the enemy trenches. But this expedition was on somewhat different lines; it was essentially a kidnapping affair, and only secrecy and determination could carry it to success.

Roger stood on the fire-bank and peered over the front of the trench. A pall of misty darkness stretched before him. To right and to left it hung, obliterating the landscape, the trench-line seaming the tortured ground, the double bank of wire-entanglements between British and German trenches, shell-holes, shattered masonry, the relics of village gardens, watercourses, roads, and a thousand and one objects. Not a sound could be heard, and not a gun startled the silence. Along that four-hundred-mile line of trenches men were sleeping in dug-outs, in holes, in natural caves, in every sort of shelter, with arms by their side, ready for instant action. Over them, watching through the hours of darkness, more thousands, the sentries, peered

out of trenches, stood about braziers, smoked, and gossiped.

Yet, were those sentries the only ones awake on this early morning? Roger clambered out of the trench, his loaded stick in hand, and was joined by Bill and the Sergeant. "Stop! A shot down there! Stand still!"

A Véry light was fired by some German sentry toward their left front, and, soaring upward, hung over No Man's Land, illuminating it so brightly that it seemed that no one there could escape detection.

"Spotted one of our working-parties yonder," whispered the Sergeant. "I caught a glimpse of them as the light burst. Guess they're standing still as statues, same as we are. There go some shots. Well, shots don't hurt anybody."

The light went out, drifting into the distance, and that misty darkness once again covered the land, hiding all from view. What would it have uncovered, however, were it suddenly lifted and the broad light of day had illuminated the scene? It would have shown thousands and thousands of soldiers, other than those wakeful sentries, toiling to meet the needs of their comrades. Fatigue parties repairing trenches, digging new ones, and delving saps. Ghostly figures out in front of the trenches repairing those snake-like wire-entanglements, men trudging along the communicating trenches with rations and ammunition and a hundred and one trench stores for the fighting troops, and yet again, masses of soldiers making their way

to the front line to relieve those who had already done a turn of duty. One could carry the description further and show those hundreds and hundreds toiling just behind the communicating trenches; wagons rolling along to dumps where trench parties received them, ambulances clearing the sick and wounded—a variety of workers, a nocturnal gang all bent on carrying on the war against the common enemy.

"Forward!" whispered Roger. "Dead ahead till we're through our wire, and then to the left. Catch hold of my belt, Bill, and let the Sergeant do the same. Ah! Here we are! A little to the left. Here's the gap. Look out that you don't get caught on the wire."

They spoke only in low whispers now, and having crept through the gap purposely left in the entanglement in front of their own trench, turned a little to their left, and, going on hands and knees, made their way slowly toward their objective.

"It'll want finding in this mist, too," thought Roger. "Still I marked it down very carefully, and think I ought to be able to lead almost exactly on to the spot. Bother it! There's another alarm, and another Véry light."

As the ball of flame soared overhead they flopped on their faces and lay perfectly still for some few minutes, listening to the rattle of musketry farther along the line. Once a shot rang out immediately to their front, and all three felt rather than heard the bullet cut its way through the rank grass just overhead.

"Come on! Here's their wire! Now, Sergeant! Get a grip of it with your gloved hands there, Sullivan. Now you, Bill, on the far side, so as it can't fly out and cut us. 'Sides, one can cut it easier and quieter. There she goes! Now for the next strand. This here stuff's so hard one wants a cold chisel, a big hammer, and an anvil to tackle it properly. Even geared-down shears like these want a bit o' handlin' to get through it."

Cutting their way through the enemy wire was indeed no easy matter, and minutes passed as they struggled with the tough material. At length, however, thanks to the powerful cutters with which they were provided, and in part to the strong gloves with which their hands were protected, they managed to clear the obstacle, and were ready to advance upon the spot where they hoped they would discover the lair of the sniper.

"Tie yer handkerchief to the edge of the gap here," whispered the Sergeant, as they lay at the foot of the wire peering eagerly ahead of them. "If we get rushed, and have to return in a hurry, a gap of this size wants a heap of findin', and delay means more and more bullets. That's the sort. Now, Sullivan."

"Dead ahead from this point, and not another word from either of us. I'll lead."

His heart was beating a merry tattoo against his ribs, and thudding so heavily and so loudly, it seemed, against his sturdy chest that Roger wondered vaguely how it was that the Germans did not hear it. Bump! Bump! Bump! It was like

the distant, dull report of a cannon. Bump! Bump! "Bah!" He shook himself angrily and sat up for a second.

"Too excited," he told himself. "Shan't get the business done if I'm so agitated. Besides, what's there to be excited about! Bah! Nothing!"

He felt better after that, and the thudding of his heart lessened. Behind him he could hear Bill's deep breathing, and behind him again a faint clink as the Sergeant's wire-cutters hit a flint lying in the grass. Then a sound from his immediate front came to his ears, and stretching out both hands he gave his comrades a warning touch.

"Three men talking, and not ten yards away. That'll be the enemy trench then. Good! They're moving off to the left. Now for it."

He was just about to lead the way forward again when for the third time an alarm was sounded. Some sentry away to the right, thinking he saw a British soldier coming toward him, blazed off his rifle, and at once fifty of his comrades followed suit, sending their bullets swishing across toward the opposite trenches. Then the inevitable Véry light soared, stabbing the misty darkness with a thousand flashes.

"Got it!" whispered Roger. "Led right on to the wall, and a wall it is without a doubt. That light was just what we wanted. There, it's gone! Come along, Bill. Here you are, Sergeant."

They crept on seven or eight feet, and found their further progress obstructed by a low wall of

stone, whose rugged and shell-broken top was thickly matted with rank grass and creeper. Roger ran his hands along it, feeling every crevice, for he had now discarded his gloves and tucked them into his belt.

"That's one of the loopholes the beggar fires through. Now I begin to get the hang of the thing. The wall is the remains of a barn, of which only one corner is left. Long grass growing all about practically hides it altogether. Just the very spot for a sniper I should say. Wonder whether the bird's at home. Stay here," he whispered to the others. "I'll go over."

Standing up, he felt his way along the wall till it ceased altogether, though at his feet he found tumbled and shattered masonry sunk in the grass. Then he passed to the other side of the wall and retraced his steps along it. Ah! The place was roofed in at the very corner. A piece of sheet-iron sloped upward to the top of the wall, and was supported on what felt like iron beams. On the top of the sheet were sand-bags, and on their summit again earth and rank grass.

"So that explains the mystery, and no wonder the lair has remained hidden even from the eyes of an airman flying low. From above, this spot will look like the grass all round, while from the front it's almost invisible. Now what's under the shelter?"

Very cautiously Roger went on hands and knees and thrust his hands beneath the roof of this sniper's dug-out. He found a deep hole with rough steps

leading down into it, and, lowering himself slowly by that means, he discovered a trench perhaps seven feet in length, shored up by side timbers, floored with wood, and provided with a fire-step which no doubt allowed the sniper to reach the aperture in the wall in front, through which he meant to pick off some hapless British soldier.

"Come in," he whispered to Bill and the Sergeant, clambering out of the hole and bending over the wall. "Step a few feet along this way and then come round. There's a trench down here, and we'll get into it before we do more talking. Hurry up; I can hear men coming."

They were all three down in the sniper's lair within a minute, and sat there for a while listening to some Germans near at hand as they chatted. Then they evidently separated, for only one man was left, no doubt a sentry, whom they could hear humming a melancholy refrain as he trudged to and fro in the trench not ten feet from them.

"Got to mark that man, eh?" said the Sergeant. "He might give trouble in the midst of our business. Now then, Sullivan, what's the move? This fellow may be along any moment."

"There are two of them. Feel about for yourselves. I've come across two rough wooden chairs, and two rifles each fitted with special sights. Looks likely, doesn't it?"

"As sure as eggs," growled the Sergeant. "They've got such a pretty perch here, and have had it so long, without a doubt, that they ain't afraid of its ever being located. So they just put

their tools down, as you might say, and goes home to bed and breakfast. What then?"

"What's this? A cupboard in the side of this hole, and—ammunition and what feels like an electric torch," whispered Bill, who had meanwhile been diligently feeling about his surroundings.

"A torch! Look out that you don't switch it on with the light upward. Just give a flash down here at the very bottom. That's the sort. See the rifles, Sergeant, and their sights. Well, that's for the sights. They'll be useful in our trenches."

Very rapidly Roger detached the special apparatus from these snipers' rifles, and tucked them in his pocket. Then he drew his two comrades even closer.

"Bill will creep off to the edge of the trench and mark that sentry," he said abruptly. "Sergeant, you'll lie down just here to the left and be ready to tackle the second man. I'll be in the bottom of the trench ready to deal with the first who enters. Of course, if more men come we shall have to raid 'em, and our bombs would then come in useful. Get into position at once, for I feel sure that it is getting lighter."

They parted without a word, Bill to creep off to the German trench and lay himself down almost on the parapet; the Sergeant to a spot just outside the sniper's lair; while Roger crouched in that cunning place itself. There they waited for ten long minutes, minutes which felt like hours, and there, as they crouched, they heard German soldiers moving here and there, sentries trudging their beats, messengers

coming and going. Someone coughed. A voice louder than the usual ones came to their ears. A party of men were undoubtedly approaching along the trench, a party which halted within three yards of the expectant Bill, while the voices became louder.

"Ten of 'em I make out," Bill thought, peering over the parapet. "Some of 'em's carrying stuff. Two of the blighters climbin' out o' the trench. They'll be our fellers."

"Saw two heads then," the Sergeant whispered to himself, and then peered down at Roger. "Look out!" he signalled. "Coming!"

Roger gripped his loaded cane, and sank back into a corner. The Sergeant sat up on one knee, and flourished his knobbly cudgel to make quite sure that he had it with him. Bill crept to his feet and fell in behind that party of Germans, all of whom were clambering out of the trench. Then the guttural voice of an officer was heard.

"Halt! Put the things down here. Not there, you pig! Here, here!"

There came the sound of a blow, while a man staggered.

"Now, get to work with your spades. We've got to get this place enlarged before morning. Here, you——" and he shot out a hand and gripped the man near him. "Why, what's this? A broad belt, a——"

Some sudden suspicion filled his mind, and, diving a hand into a pocket, he dragged forth a tiny torch lamp, and before Bill could imagine what was to happen turned a beam upon his face.

"English! A raid!" bellowed the officer, still gripping his torch, and flooding Bill's person with it. But only for a few swift seconds. For Bill struck perhaps as he had never struck before, and the light and this German officer went out with the blow, extinguished by a three-pound hammer.

The mêlée that followed is almost indescribable. Men shouted, sentries in the enemy trench opened fire in the direction where they had seen that lamp flash, while the group of men who had accompanied the snipers toward their lair turned in one or two instances to make back for safety. But Bill was there to intervene, a lusty Bill, who beat upon their heads with his hammer as a smith beats upon an anvil. As for the snipers themselves, they had gained the edge of the deep hole in which Roger was secreted before the officer had broken silence. One of them was even then clambering down that somewhat rickety ladder, while the other stood just behind him, fumbling for a cigarette with which he proposed to while the minutes away till daylight came and allowed him to continue his task of shooting unwary British soldiers.

Roger stretched out his free left hand, felt the boots of the man descending, and jerked his feet from the ladder. Then he fell upon the astonished soldier, and, gripping him by the neck, bundled him into the corner, shaking him as a dog does a rat.

"Hands up, quick! Move a finger after that and I brain you. Now follow out of the trench, and see that you don't move far away."

The man had shrunk into the corner, and for a

second or so could not so much as answer. Now, cowering there, he lifted his trembling hands and besought Roger to spare him.

"Don't strike," he whined, and his English was excellent. "I surrender. I—I'll go gladly, for I like England."

Pah! the man had been one of that ravenous band of waiters which may again batten upon a liberal British public in hotel and restaurant.

Crash! There was the sound of blows outside, and at once Roger threw the man into a corner and scrambled into the open. The Sergeant was there, dimly seen against the mist, the band of white which he, like his comrades, wore about his left arm easily visible. Men were swarming about him, while another figure with a white band was beating his way forward.

"Charge!" shouted Roger, for there was now no need for secrecy or silence. "Charge!" shrieked Bill, worked up to a pitch of excitement, his hammer falling like a flail, his sweeping blows raining on the enemy.

"Just you stow that there catawaulin' and lie still," growled the Sergeant, making good use of his own weapon, and addressing his remarks to a figure lying at his feet. "You can choose the best of two things. Either come along with me, or take yer medicine."

The individual at his feet evidently decided to come along, for he lay there trembling, while the Sergeant took a hand in the mêlée.

"Now let's get back. Come out, you!" called

Roger, going to the edge of the sniper's dug-out. "Make sure that you haven't an arm, for otherwise you'll get into trouble. Sergeant, bring your man along. Bill, go dead straight ahead, and keep an eye open for that gap in the wire."

Véry lights were flashing in the sky. Perhaps a quarter of a mile away a machine-gun was sending forth a loud, revolting death-rattle. Sentries perched on German fire-steps blazed at nothing, while sentries opposite watched and waited.

"That'll be the men," cried the platoon officer who had seen the departure of Roger and his two comrades. "They're coming through the gap and bringing prisoners with them. Make ready to cover 'em, men. Shoot hard if you get a mark. Hooray, they're making fine progress!"

It was lighter now—one would have thought dangerously light, for near objects were visible. But the morning mist hid all things at ten yards distance. Thanks then to that cover, Roger and his party threaded their way through the enemy wire, gained the parapet of their own trenches, and presently dropped into them with their prisoners.

"A very fine performance," said their Commanding Officer, who had been roused by the uproar, and now came crawling out of his damp dug-out. "Two snipers captured—eh! and you say that that is their lair? Ah, Sergeant Sullivan—eh? We'll discuss the matter later, but a very fine performance, I assure you."

Telephone bells buzzed, guns far behind the British line opened, while a trench-mortar came

into operation, aiming its shots under Roger's direction. Then a lucky shot, a huge burst of smoke, and the sniper's lair was blown out of existence.

If you had seen Bill and Roger and the Sergeant some fifteen minutes later, seated about a brazier munching their breakfast ration in most contented fashion, you would have thought that nothing whatever could have happened during the hours of darkness. Certainly to have imagined that these three had undertaken a raid and had just returned from a hazardous expedition was next door to impossible. Yet they had.

"They've done us a great service," said the commander of Roger's battalion. "Sergeant-major, you'll march those three to the orderly-room dug-out after breakfast. It's been a very fine performance."

Yet it was not the only operation in which Roger and his friends took part in the weeks which followed. Long acquaintance with trench conditions, the crash of guns all about them, and the falling of high-explosive shells around their heads, soon made of them hardened veterans. Roger could tell almost by the whistle whether an oncoming shell were of 5 or of 8 inches diameter, and learned to smile at close shaves, and to laugh as duds (unexploded shells) floundered into the trench. Then with his comrades he became immersed in gigantic operations, for the summer of 1916 arrived, and with it the Somme offensive.

CHAPTER VI

The Somme Offensive

IMAGINE a rising landscape splashed with flame and smoke, and woods and copses disappearing. Watch the rolling ground to the east of Albert as it is torn with shells, and see an avalanche of missiles rend asunder all traces of the living. For days and nights the British guns had thundered without cessation, pouring a tornado of bursting steel upon those elaborate and often concreted defences devised by the Germans, ripping up whole miles of wire-entanglements, demolishing trenches, burrowing even to the depths of deep dug-outs, and annihilating the defenders.

"There's never been anything like it before," said that platoon officer who had long since learned to like and appreciate Sergeant Sullivan. "I don't want to boast, of course, nor to yarn about myself, but this—this is really magnificent. Why, when we fellows of the original army got up against the enemy on the Aisne our gun-fire was, in comparison, like the firing of pop-guns. Well, it'll soon be over."

"And then we go forward, sir, I suppose?" asked Roger.

"Of course. Orders will be published this evening, and I wouldn't wonder if we were over the top to-morrow. Then we shall advance behind our barrage, and if we don't get as far as our objective —well, things 'll be funny."

He was tingling with keenness, as was Roger, and as were thousands more British soldiers along that front. Not alone there in front of Albert, but at a point some little distance to the north, and from thence right down to within some four miles of the River Somme, British soldiers hugged their trenches, lay flat in their funk-holes, dozed as best they could, in spite of that incessant and all-pervading gun-fire, or chatted and smoked nonchalantly, waiting for the order to advance, which all knew was coming. North and south of the River Somme as many gallant poilus, France's irresistible soldiers, lay in their trench-line, waiting also, deafened by their guns, casting an expectant eye now and again over the smoking landscape which led on to Peronne.

And then the order came. Men fell in, the trenches became a busy hive of activity, while thousands of tin helmets peeped above the parapets, and men stood, one foot on the firing-step, ready to go over.

"There the barrage starts!" said Roger's subaltern. "It'll shift those Germans right enough. But, of course, there'll be pockets of snipers and machine-gunners here and there. Keep a tight hold on the left of our platoon, Sergeant, and don't forget to make good use of your bombers. Our

chaps bowl their bombs over as if they were cricket balls, and the beggars over there hate 'em."

The beggars over there had been having an exceedingly warm time of it for hours now, for, indeed, the position as it existed at the beginning of the war had been amazingly reversed. As Roger's own particular officer had averred, the firing of our guns now was an entirely different matter. That noble band which in 1914 had faced a perfectly-equipped German army, and had been deluged by shells cast by guns out of all proportion numerically to our own, were about to be avenged by Britain's new armies, her bakers' and her tailors' sons, her men from behind the counter. Those of that first expeditionary force who survived, and stood awaiting the order to go over on that early July morning in 1916, listened with grinning faces and with approving glances to the roar of British guns behind them. Yes, it was different.

"As chalk from cheese," the officer told our hero. "I don't know for certain, but I should guess that we've more guns and bigger ones than the Germans possess, and more of 'em are coming over. As to the 'stuff' we put across, well it's terrifying. Ha! there goes the mine. Off you go, boys!"

"Time!" shouted some wag amongst the men. "On the ball, boys. Forward!"

A deafening roar from the left, a nerve-shattering detonation, set the ground swaying, and caused whole lengths of the parapet to tumble into the trenches. Then a cheer swung along the British line, figures clambered from the brown earth—

figures hardly distinguishable from their surroundings—and a moment later they were off. The huge Somme offensive had begun; our troops were moving uphill toward the German lines, covered by a barrage of bursting shrapnel which obliterated the landscape.

"Steady there! We're through their wire, but there's more of it ahead and uncut. Watch out for sneaks coming up behind us from their dug-outs. Sergeant Sullivan, take your bombers towards our centre, for I caught sight of a party of the enemy there."

"Down on your faces! A machine-gun!" shouted Roger, falling prostrate at that moment, a movement which the remainder of the platoon copied. "They've just uncovered the gun, and are sweeping the ground behind and under us. Here, Bill, keep an eye out for it."

Bill crept toward his chum, and for a while the platoon lay flat, though to their right and their left brown figures were still moving forward, while ever in front that barrage of shot and smoke moved onward. Yet just here, as at many another point, the advance was arrested by a hidden quick-firer. Bullets ripped across the open ground. Rifles cracked in all directions, while here and there, tumbled in the most fantastic positions and postures, lay brown men, khaki soldiers, the killed and the wounded, and about them men in field-grey, the uniform of the German.

"What's that? Ain't that the spot? Looks like that sniper's hole that we spotted months ago when

we first came out," shouted Bill, pointing to his front, and repeating the words at the top of his voice, for ordinary tones were drowned in the hubbub. "There! That was a man moving. That's the machine-gun, too."

"Hold on!" commanded Roger. "Here you, Tomkins, and the men on your right. Just keep up a steady fire at the spot to which Bill here's pointing. Bill, pull my pack off, will you? That's the thing. Now, I'm off to drop on those fellows."

The platoon officer, who, like his men, had thrown himself on the ground so as to obtain cover, now crept across to Roger, having seen his preparations.

"Capital idea," he said, grinning delightedly, for this young man seemed to be happiest in the midst of battle. "Look here, Sergeant Sullivan, you rush 'em from this side, while I creep over yonder and come in from that. Don't fire. Use your bayonet only, just as I shall. Then there won't be any chance of our blazing into one another."

Roger slid away at once, while the officer went in the opposite direction. Meanwhile half a dozen men kept up a desultory fire upon the spot which had attracted Bill's attention. "Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat," the gun coughed. "Tat-tat-tat," it spluttered, and the brown earth in front, and even under Roger's comrades, spurted jets of brown dust, while flints ricochetted in all directions. A shell whined its way toward them from the British guns and plumped

into the ground within a few feet of that German nest, where the machine-gun was in action. No, it had not rooted out the pest, for "Rat-a-tat-tat-tat," it still hiccoughed. "Tat-tat-tat."

Roger, slinking down a hollow, gained a spot nearer that nest, and in time a better view of it. Hidden in a concreted hole, with a cupola of the same material over them, were half a dozen men, one of whom was at that moment bolting from the shelter. Ah! He was down. One of the men watching behind had caught sight of the man, and there he was sprawling. Then another man put his head up, bobbed down again, and finally came clambering out.

"Getting scared," thought Roger. "But they won't relinquish that post till they're driven to do so. There it goes again. Hang that gun, for I see it's getting into those troops on the brow of the hill yonder. Well, here goes for it."

He leaped to his feet, swung his bayonet to the front, and went headlong toward the machine-gun position. Flick! A bullet swept past his ear. Click! He heard the closing of the lock as one of the garrison of the machine-gun nest threw out the empty cartridge. Roger could see the muzzle of the rifle now, and watched it swing in his direction. Then he dived to one side just as the report came, and then dashed on without hesitation. As he did so a short, stocky figure came sprinting from the opposite direction, and he and the officer met at the entrance to the concreted cover. Literally throwing themselves through the opening they fell upon

the German gunners there, and at once were engaged in a desperate conflict.

"Ha!" grunted one of the Germans, parrying Roger's thrust with a rifle and bayonet which he had snatched up. "Ha!" he grunted again, making a sudden thrust at him.

"Got him!" bellowed the officer, running his man through at that instant.

"Same here," shouted Roger, sweating with excitement. Then he went down with a huge German gripping him, while the officer and another enemy grappled together above, and finally came with a thud on those struggling beneath them.

"Reckon that was a pretty close business, eh?" said Bill, dragging the lifeless form of the German off our hero, while others of the platoon gently lifted the officer to one side. "This here chap had you gripped by the neck, and, seein' how blue you are, I should say that a little more and he'd have throttled you. Sorry Lieutenant Hawkin's put out o' action. This here greasy-lookin' German put his bayonet through his thigh, so he's all right for Blighty."

To speak the truth, Roger himself felt quite as fit for evacuation to England as did the officer, for the German with whom he had grappled had proved a tough antagonist. He was thoroughly shaken, and for a while in far worse condition than was the officer.

"Yes, it was a pretty bit of business," the latter smiled, when Roger staggered across to where he was lying, for the wounded officer had been

placed in a sheltered spot, while one of the regimental stretcher-bearers had ripped a huge hole in his trouser leg and had applied a first field-dressing. "Machine-gunners want a deal of doing in, and those fellows meant business. Sergeant Sullivan, I shall make a report of this affair. You've shown the most commendable dash and splendid bravery. Now get me a cigarette, do, and come and sit here and talk to me. Talk as man to man, don't you know. I'd like to know more about you."

Roger sat himself down beside the officer, as became an obedient sergeant, and promptly fainted.

"Hi!" shouted the gallant lieutenant. "Corporal Andrews, send over one of those stretcher-bearers to see to the Sergeant. Better still, there's our own M.O. [medical officer] coming towards us. Ask him to be good enough to step this way and have a look at the Sergeant."

The platoon had meanwhile halted, having gained the position assigned to it, so that the men lay stretched on the ground where a sunken road gave them cover. And to this spot there now advanced the officer whose business it was to attend to the hurts of this particular regiment, a man no longer young, with silver hairs showing at his temples, but active enough, full of vigour, and delightfully careless of his surroundings. Bullets were flicking across the ground. Brown puffs of dust told where they were striking. And every here and there shells thudded into the ground, and sent up cascades of earth, and sometimes flung a devastating shower of steel fragments and flints broadcast across

the landscape. Yet it was this officer's duty to attend to the hurts of his men wherever they might be at the time, whether at the front or behind the line in rest billets.

"Hallo!" he cried, gaily enough, reaching the officer. "You too! That makes the fifth of ours that have got winged, and poor young Crecy has gone under. God bless the boy! He was amongst the bravest. And what's to do?"

"Please see to the Sergeant. He and I rushed that machine-gun post together, and came in for a tussle. I thought he'd only been shaken, but just now he went off into a faint, and he looks to me almost as if he were dying."

"Dying!" Bill almost blubbered, for he sat now by Roger's side, nursing his head on his knee, and holding one limp, brown hand. "Dying, sir!" he gasped brokenly. "Not that, sir. He's—he and I are pals. Don't say that he's going."

"There, don't let's cry till we know what's really happened," the medical officer promptly responded, giving Bill an assuring pat on the shoulder. "Well, he's breathing, and that's one good sign, and his heart is beating quite reasonably. Fainted, did he? What's this?"

It was a broadening patch of red soiling Roger's tunic just under one arm, while the cloth in that neighbourhood was torn and blackened.

"Shot at close quarters. Shouldn't wonder if it happened as he rushed in at the enemy. Let's see what damage it's done. Not very severe, Corporal, I'm certain."

Bill could have blessed him on the spot. "I'm —thank you, sir," he said gratefully. "He and I, you know——"

"I do," the doctor answered promptly. "Good old friends, eh? Seen hard days and fine ones together. I fully understand, Corporal. Well, he's not going to die just yet, not nearly. He's been badly hammered, and this gun-shot wound here has broken a couple of his ribs rather badly. In a month he'll have forgotten nearly everything about it. Well, we'll patch him up. Feel better, Sergeant?" he asked as Roger opened his eyes.

"Better! I—I'm all right," our hero maintained stubbornly. Yet was he? When he tried to move even so small a thing as a finger he felt almost incapable, for all the strength seemed to have been driven out of his body. His huge frame—for months of trench warfare had broadened him wonderfully—was as helpless, even more so, than a child's, while he was utterly incapable of lifting his head.

"You'll just lie here as still as possible," said the doctor, when he had given Roger a drink from a tin cup which an R.A.M.C. orderly carried. "There will be bearers along here very soon, and before you know what has happened you'll be in clover. The Corporal here will stay with you, and your officer will also keep you company."

Brushing the dust from his tunic, cast upon it by a distant shell-burst, he went on in search of others needing his assistance, while Roger and the officer lay under the shelter of the bank lining that sunken

road, waiting for the assistance which they knew would not be long in coming. And as they waited and peered out at the surrounding landscape, now no longer smoking, and looked at the red roofs of Albert, and at the statue of the Virgin Mary and Child tilted at a sharp angle to which German cannon had blown it, the tide of war surged on before them. The barrage of flame and shrapnel and smoke crept ever onward, halting here and there where some stubborn enemy post resisted, watering the ground with missiles, and then creeping ever onward, followed by the khaki host who on this day of days were biting their way into the ground once held by the enemy. After that host came another mob of men, a well-ordered mob, who proceeded to clear up the battle-ground already conquered: ordnance men to pick up abandoned rifles and packs and helmets and what not; men to retrieve unused bombs and grenades which littered the ground in some places, and amongst them scattered parties of the R.A.M.C., bearing stretchers upon which both German and British wounded were soon reclining.

"My word, you'll soon be in Blighty!" said one of them as he bent over Roger. "Now, mates, easy with it. He's a G.S. of the ribs, and has got to be moved carefully. There we are, my lad. Why, you're a sergeant. I didn't think that, seeing that you're not much more than a youngster. Lift! Now off we go."

They carried him shoulder-high across the shell-pitted ground, and so to a road where little damage

had been done. There the stretcher was placed on a two-wheeled support, which presently bore him to an advanced dressing-station. It was merely a well-constructed hole in the ground, with a smoking kitchen beside it. But it had comfort in plenty for the wounded.

"Does one good to get a hot meal," said the officer who had accompanied Roger. "Look here, Sergeant, I'm going to send a chit over to the Adjutant, and am going to mention you for distinguished conduct. No objection to that—eh? Everyone knows that you've been selected for a commission, and this report will only hasten matters."

"An officer! And what about me?" grumbled Bill, a little later, when he and Roger were alone, for the officer had been carried off to an ambulance. "What am I to do? Serve on alone? 'Tain't possible."

"Alone!" exclaimed Roger, well knowing however what Bill meant. "You'll be with the rest of our comrades."

"And I don't say that they ain't right good fellows; but that ain't the same sort of thing," said Bill, quite sharply. "See here, me lad, I'm a-goin' to resign my stripes, if necessary, and come along as your servant."

No amount of argument would alter his decision, and just three weeks later, when Roger, now becoming convalescent, was sent across to England to take up the commission which he had already been given, Bill went with him.

"And what then?" he asked, a month later, when both were back in harness in one of the many big camps in England. "Do we return to the old regiment, me lad—sir, or——"

Roger laughed at him. "Hard to get out of old ways, isn't it, Bill?" he said. "Look here; you're to call me Roger, or me lad, just as you used to do, that is, when we're alone, while I shall stick to Bill. What's doin', you asked. No, we don't return to the regiment. That is to say, I don't. Of course, it's for you to choose what you'll do."

Bill flared up, and got quite angry. "As if——" he began. "You know well enough that you and me's goin' to stick to one another. What else do we do, then, if we don't go back to our fellows?"

Roger beckoned him closer. "Bill," he said, "can you keep a secret?"

"Me keep a secret. What secret?"

"This. They've started a new arm of the service, and I've been offered the command of a certain unit."

"Unit," grumbled Bill, scratching his yellow head. "What sort o' unit?"

"Something different to any that you've heard of. Come closer, for it's a real secret. I've accepted the post of commander of a Tank."

"A Tank! A—what?" demanded Bill, astonished, wondering vaguely whether Roger's mind were wandering.

"A huge armoured fort, made to grovel its way over the ground and across trenches. Something

that is still somewhat of an experiment, though successful already. A new weapon devised to attack the German and to force him backward, particularly his machine-gunners. Shortly put, a Tank is just a sort of pet name for a huge vehicle propelled by a petrol motor, covered with steel plates, and heavily armed with machine-guns and quick-firing cannon."

"And you're to command one! But it means that you'll have to go forward in advance of the troops. It—it means a whole heap of excitement," gasped Bill.

"I believe you," agreed Roger gaily. "We shall see quite a lot of the fun. That is, of course, if you agree to join me. If not——"

"Blimy!" shouted Bill, getting very much excited and interested. "Join you, me lad, why of course I will! It's a job I wouldn't miss for anything."

Thus it followed that in a secret place, as became such a secret engine, Roger trained his gun and his motor crews, and learned how to take a Tank into action. Then he crossed the Channel once more, and presently his machine forgathered with other beasts of similar shape and apparent unwieldiness in a Tankodrome—their head-quarters.

"There's a 'do' on to-morrow," he was told. "You'd best study these trench maps and photos. We're up against a strong place to which Fritz has been hanging like a leech, and we've got to push him out of it. Starting-off time 6 a.m. See that you've got everything in readiness."

A September morn, then, saw Roger board his Tank and set off for the adjacent front, for a landscape aflame with bursting shells as of yore, with a barrage blotting out the sky-line. Yet under what different conditions on this occasion, for his was the task to advance in front of the attacking troops, practically to meet the enemy single-handed.

CHAPTER VII

With the Tanks

A DAMP, early-morning mist had condensed upon the steel cuticle of the Tank which Roger was commanding, and dripped like tears from every projecting portion of it. Peering out through the port which gave him a view to the front, and then through those which allowed him a clear vision to the rear and on either side, he saw a dull-brown sea of earth around him, splotched here and there, towards the front in particular, with irregular blotches of green, now fast being torn asunder, while behind him green fields and uncut crops gave a most inviting prospect.

Quite near at hand were other leviathan Tanks similar to his, ready to go into action; while a little in rear were reserve battalions, kept in hand in case they should be wanted.

Someone shouted. An officer came near. "Move on!" he commanded abruptly. "You know your objective? Then carry on; and good luck to you!"

"Forward!" Roger gave the order, and at once the man controlling the mechanism of this enormous machine let his clutch in and engaged his gears, and set those two broad, long steel tapes,

which encircled the machine on either side, running, from its prow right back to the stern, slowly moving about the gear-wheels they encircled.

The crew clung to the nearest object, for experience had told them that, nicely padded though the interior was, rough ground and much shaking led to violent concussions and to many bruises.

"Dead ahead!" said Roger, now peering through his glasses and watching the storm of shells bursting on the hill-side in front, beyond our own trenches. "Speed her up a bit whilst we've got level country."

"Speed her up? Yes, sir," the driver responded.

Faster went those gear-wheels, propelling those long steel tapes, and louder grew the noise within the Tank. Drops of perspiration began to show on the foreheads of the crew, and dripped from beneath their steel helmets. The sun came up now, and in a twinkling, it seemed, dried up those other drops which had condensed outside on the steel cuticle. A glance through the ports showed the upper surface of this massive machine camouflaged, painted every variety of colour, bumping and heaving as it went along, brilliant in the sunshine.

"Hurrah!" someone shouted. "Go on into it, 'Mack'!" and an answering yell came from the interior.

"We'll show 'em!" muttered one of the crew. "There's those there chaps along with 'The Tower of London' what said that they'll beat us, that they'll lay out more German dug-outs than us, and

hold up more of them Germans—we'll show 'em what 'Mack' can do! She's just a d'isy!"

"Aye, aye!" answered his nearest comrade, his eyes sparkling in the gloom which obscured the interior of the Tank. "Aye, Bill, she's a d'isy!" And Bill Andrews, who by hook or by crook had contrived to accompany our hero, with the rank of Corporal, gripped his hand as if to thank him.

"Daisy" indeed! Those who watched the lumbering, gigantic carcass of this Tank called "Mack" would hardly have called her that; for the name daisy appertains rather to something delicate and unsubstantial. This monster engine of destruction heaved forward over the bumpy ground, nosed its way over the flats which had once been occupied by Germans, clambered across watercourses as though she could not deign to notice them, flopped over shell-holes which would have easily received a wagon, and coming across a patch of brambles growing beside a tree of no mean proportions, chewed the whole lot up, snapped the tree off, sending it down with a report as of a rifle, and went on unhindered and unhesitating.

There was pandemonium outside. British guns, far in rear of "Mack", were barking at the Germans. Shells whinnied and whined their way overhead, the noise they made drowned by the sound of the engine; but oncoming shells as they burst about this machine could be heard distinctly, and one, happening to explode not ten yards away, actually shook the leviathan.

Bill grinned, his nearest mate did likewise, and

began to chatter. Roger turned sharply, hearing them, and scowled.

"Stop talking!" he ordered; whereat Bill became silent and almost savage.

"Lor'!" he gasped; "to hear him! Ever since he's got this commission and been given a job, and a responsible one, too, he's become different. Oh yes, I know, he's just as friendly as ever, and always will be; but when he's on duty don't he snap his orders? Stop talking, indeed! Six months ago I'd have clouted his head if he'd jawed to me in that way."

Roger turned again, hearing him—or rather seeing him mutter.

"Look here, Corporal Andrews," he said, "if you're going to disturb things here, you'd better drop out while there's time and go back to billets! Stop her!"

The man in charge of the engine pushed out his clutch, and slipped his gear-lever into neutral.

"Stop her!" he repeated, as if he was driving an ocean liner.

"Now," said Roger severely, turning again on the culprit, whereat Bill subsided, hid his face in the gun-port nearest at hand, and appeared to be very much engaged in observing his surroundings. Then Roger smiled grimly, and nodded. "Go ahead!" he said, "and quick! For I want to make good whilst we've fairly good going. When we get across our own trenches into the ground we have been recently shelling, it will be a different matter altogether. Shove her ahead!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" sang out the driver.

Lurching and rolling and grinding its path onward, the Tank slowly approached that winding line which cut its way across the near horizon, and heads could be seen behind the parapet of the British trenches; then, as this huge steel beast drew nearer, and its crew could look a little farther into the trenches, the bodies of men could be seen, while hundreds and hundreds of expectant eyes were turned upon them. Men cheered, the shout ran down the line on either side till it was lost in the distance. Then there was a move in one particular part as the Tank tossed its way towards it.

Bump! The prow overlapped the trench, seemed to sniff at the other side and closely inspect it, then it laid its nose on the far shore of the trench, smashed the parapet down, crawled forward, lurched, and finally dragged its tail after it. Another bump, and a resounding bang, which threw more than one man from his hand-hold, and then rapid progress downward till they reached the bottom of a hill which had once been a German mine, and which was now a mine-crater.

"Shove her up!" commanded Roger. "She'll want all you can give her, for it's a steep climb. Gun on the right; look out for those fellows who are shelling us from that direction."

His words were drowned a moment later by the sudden rattle of the machine-gun mounted overhead; for the gunner there had caught sight of a number of Germans. They were right ahead, standing behind a bank of earth which hid them from

the British in their trenches, yet visible now that the Tank had clambered out of the mine-crater. Quick as a flash, the man in command of that machine-gun mounted overhead put his sights on them, and now as Roger looked they were fleeing in all directions.

"Stop her!" suddenly shouted Roger. "We'll go off now to the left, for they've got their guns ranged on the line we are following."

"That was a lucky move," he told himself a minute later, seeing shells plumping into the ground to his right, ground which he would have been covering had he continued the course he had then been following. "Thing is to change course pretty often, whenever the ground allows. Ha! I don't much like the look of the place we have got before us!"

Somewhere on his left a machine-gun spluttered —an enemy machine-gun—and bullets rattled on the carcass of the Tank till the interior was filled with reverberating echoes. A shell burst behind her tail, and fragments swept like hail over her, glissading from her steel carcass. But "Mack" went on, without so much as a thrill and without a tremble, save, indeed, for the trembling transmitted by her engines, for the rattle of those steel chains which were the means of her propulsion. She rolled this way and that; mounting what seemed a natural hillock, she crushed it under her and went on, leaving behind the debris of a smashed-in German dug-out.

A hundred figures suddenly stood up in a trench

which the Tank now overlapped, and shouted "Kamerad!" But as the Tank waddled on, ignoring them entirely, they fired salvos from their rifles at her, while a dozen of the bolder spirits ran out with bombs in their hands and flung them against this adventurous invader. Yet "Mack" did not wince, shed not so much as a particle of her steel coating; she only barked, and screeched like a viper at them, and, when the rattle of her machine-gun had ended, those Germans had ceased all opposition.

Bill shouted, and as the din within the Tank prevented Roger from hearing him, he stretched over from the gun he was commanding and dragged him by the sleeve.

"Coming nearer!" he said. "They'll have the range of us in a jiffy! There's one of 'em!"

"Shells!" exclaimed Roger, turning swiftly to look out, and dodging, for a shell whistled just over the top of the Tank, while another struck the ground not ten feet away from "Mack", and, bursting with tremendous force, slung a cascade of brown earth up in the air, the resulting fall practically obliterating the machine grovelling beneath it.

"But, bless you, this 'ere Tank don't take no notice of cascades of earth," growled Bill, holding on to his gun, and swinging it to another spot where a German machine-gun nest had come into view. "My hat! that hit 'em, plunk! And they won't fire any more of their bullets. Ah! that was a nasty one! Give us a heave! That's badly shook the old lady. You'd best be changing course!" he shouted, dragging at Roger's sleeve

again, for Bill still, in moments of great excitement, took some liberties with his old pal, now his commanding officer. "Change course!" he yelled. "They've got the range of us and will smash us into powder!"

Roger grinned back at him.

"You look after your gun!" he shouted, and then set his machine crawling away to the right, away from the track he had been following, and which was now being shelled very heavily from German guns hidden in the far distance.

He glanced upwards. Two enemy aeroplanes were circling high overhead, and near them a British "chaser" plane was just about to engage them. He looked behind. The landscape, clear and green and beautiful, looked totally unpeopled; yet the roar of cannon came from that direction, while flashes could be observed in dark corners. As for the whine and whistle of shells passing overhead, he could not hear them, though he knew they were there, while those thousands of tin-helmeted infantry men lay hidden in their trenches.

What a contrast that scene behind the British front was to this "No Man's Land" he was traversing! Shell-holes everywhere, some almost deep enough to swallow the huge machine he captained, others filled to the brim with rain-water, and offering an open-air bath in which a dozen men could have plunged comfortably; saps and trenches seamed the ground, and every here and there a little bump, a pinnacle of earth, hid a concreted German machine-gun post; while goodness only

knows how many dug-outs there were deep down below, sheltering men awaiting the oncoming of the British.

Crash! Something had gone wrong. The machinery within the Tank clattered and vibrated, while "Mack" herself began slowly to topple over. The crunch of masonry being splintered by the massive weight of this Tank, the rending of big timbers, came to the ears of the crew; then of a sudden "Mack" turned almost topsy-turvy, slid into a deep depression, flopped still lower, and lay inert, one of her front plates perforated by a beam of steel which had formed the roof of a dug-out.

"Gurr! What a rattle there was within the Tank, and how her steel driving-chains grated and roared as they made futile efforts to grip the earth and stones and debris beneath them! "Mack" reared her nose in the air, and made a desperate attempt to drag her huge carcass out of this hole which had entrapped her. Then she fell back with a crash, and that same steel beam gave her a mortal wound, thrusting right up through the floor and disabling her machinery entirely. Almost at the same moment heads appeared from the entrances of other dug-outs, a machine-gun opened upon the Tank, and within a minute or more, hundreds of the enemy came rushing towards her.

Let us leave Roger and Bill and the gallant comrades who with them constituted the crew of that leviathan which had dared to creep in front

of our attacking troops, and return awhile to the sleepy, peaceful hamlet which our hero had left now many months ago, where the "Morning Sun", that charming hostelry of which Sergeant Higgins was the proprietor, still threw its doors open widely and offered a welcome to the traveller; where the one single street straggled up the hill, and where still the Dene and the Hall were the only two residences worthy of particular mention.

There was a loud rapping at the door of the "Morning Sun" that night of the tragedy we have recounted, just about the time when Roger entered the train and first made the acquaintance of Bill Andrews.

"Hi!" someone shouted. "Hi, Sergeant Higgins! Come out 'ere; there's summat for 'e to see."

The worthy Sergeant emerged, carrying a lantern, and together he and the countryman who had summoned him bent over the form of that individual whom Roger had struck.

"Dead!" the countryman whispered in awed and hushed voice.

"Go on!" said the Sergeant. "He's got a badly cracked pate, but he's breathing. See here, there's a cut right across his head, and here's the bit of broken stone he fell against. What's this? His nose is swollen, and he's bleeding from the mouth! He's lost one of his front teeth. There's been a row here—a fight. I'm too old a pugilist to be taken in, I can tell you, and I've seen signs like this too often to be mistaken. George, you go

along and get the police; I'll stand watch over this fellow."

Very wisely the Sergeant called to his wife to bring him some water and the wherewithal to clean the wounds of the man lying in the centre of the main street of Hurslet, while he made no attempt to carry the man within the "Morning Sun".

"There's been a ruction out here," he told his wife, "and there may have been foul play for all I know. The police will want to know exactly what's happened, and as this fellow may not be able to talk again, though that is unlikely, and the chap he was fighting with isn't anywhere near, it is only right to leave things as they were, so as to give the police every opportunity. Ah, Sergeant!" he sang out, seeing a figure approaching, and behind the figure George, the countryman who had first given the alarm; "there's a job for you here, and it looks rather like a serious business. Here's a lamp; take a look round. I should say that there was a fight just here, and that this man was struck full in the mouth, for he's lost one tooth and was knocked over. See this stone here? It's a sharp flint, and there's blood on it. Now look at his head; we've just popped a wet towel over it to keep the dirt out; but there's a cut that the Doctor will have to attend to. Clear, isn't it?"

You couldn't expect a policeman to give his opinion on the spot. It was only right that this sergeant of the police should carefully walk round the spot where the injured man was lying, examining carefully every object with the help of the lamp

which Sergeant Higgins had given him. Then he coughed in the most significant manner.

"It's been foul play!" he said. "There's been a tussle out here; and from what I know of this man it will be he who attacked someone. As to how he was knocked out, you can see for yourself, Sergeant Higgins, that he was struck full in the mouth, and that his head came in contact with this flint, and that, of course, gave him the wound and robbed him of consciousness."

He told the tale just as if he himself had made the discovery, ignoring the fact that Sergeant Higgins had told him, practically in the same words, what had happened, some minutes earlier.

"Best lift him into the 'Morning Sun' then—eh?" suggested Sergeant Higgins; "then you can think out what you will do. Of course we shall want a conveyance to take the man to the Cottage Hospital, and someone ought to go across to warn Dr. Norman."

"Ah! Dr. Norman," said the sergeant of police thoughtfully. "I met his youngster up the top of the hill only a little time ago, and he looked funny. It couldn't be—eh? Sergeant Higgins——"

"Young Roger Norman the one to have knocked this fellow out? Hardly likely!" exclaimed Sergeant Higgins indignantly. "He's a quiet sort of fellow, and that you know well enough."

"Certainly," admitted the sergeant of police; "that's agreed, Sergeant Higgins. There never was a quieter nor a better lad. But I tell you I met him going up the hill just a little while ago,

and when I turned my lamp on him it wasn't the usual frank and gay Roger that I saw, but a young chap who was trembling, who'd been upset by something, and who told me a fib—said that he was going into the town to do a bit of shopping. It's—well—it looks fishy!"

It looked still worse when Dr. Norman was called, and, having arrived at the "Morning Sun" and attended to the injuries of the man who had been found in the street outside, took the sergeant of police and Sergeant Higgins aside and disclosed the note which Roger had left.

"This is an important piece of evidence," he said. "I leave it to you, Sergeant," he went on, addressing the policeman, "to take whatever action you think is necessary, guided by what you have seen, and by the contents of this letter. Only I ask you to consider what you would have done at Roger's age. He says here that he was set upon suddenly by two men, that he defended himself, that he killed one of them, and then, fearful of what must happen, left home, as he says, to become a soldier. I will do all I can to trace him. I wish he hadn't gone, for this is just the very time when he should have remained at home to 'face the music'. But——"

"But," burst in Sergeant Higgins with unusual warmth, "but you might have done the same thing, Doctor, at his time of life, and I should probably have bolted in just the same manner; the sergeant of police here knows that he would have been tempted to go. It's not a nice thing for a

young chap in his position to suddenly find himself running the danger of being accused of murder. He wouldn't think, and we wouldn't think, at the time, with this fellow lying looking like dead in the street, about the attack being unsuspected, and about the man's having come about his hurt through his own fault. We'd have been scared. We'd have bolted—eh, Sergeant?"

"Hum!" The sergeant of police considered the matter. Then when the ruffian who had attacked Roger had been taken to the hospital, he and the Doctor and Sergeant Higgins drove off to the adjacent town, where they consulted a magistrate. The following day an inquiry was held, and evidence was produced to prove conclusively that Roger was guiltless.

"Then I shall make no further effort to induce him to come back," said the Doctor. "The authorities have telegraphed to all their recruiting depots without avail. Let Roger go into the army, as I know he intended to do. In time he will write to his father. I'm not afraid that he will fail. He's one of those downright fellows who will do well as a soldier."

Roger had indeed done well. Bill Andrews was, with good reason, enthusiastic about him, while already Lieutenant Sullivan — commander of a Tank—had won the approval of his superior officers. More than that, Roger had long since been able to let his father know that he was alive and well and thriving, begging him at the same time to keep his change of name a secret.

But what of Frank Riven, dawdling his days away up at the Hall in stately magnificence? What of his charming cousin? And, again, what had happened to that rascal Ern, and the other one whom Roger had beaten so severely? One would have hoped that our hero had seen the last of them, yet this was not to be the case; for one at least of the trio of men was to dog his footsteps.

CHAPTER VIII

An Underground Duel

"SHUT all the ports," shouted Roger as the Tank he commanded came to an abrupt halt and settled down into the depths of a dug-out into which it had fallen. "Let's think for a bit; those fellows can go on heaving bombs and firing bullets till we have come to some decision."

"But—but—" shouted Bill, squinting through one of the ports left at the side for observation purposes, "but if they can get a bomb right under us, that'll do real damage. Ain't we in a dug-out, sir? Couldn't we get out and make along it, and tackle 'em from underneath?"

Crash! A German, standing some little distance from them, threw a hand-grenade, lobbing it beautifully on the very top of this huge machine. The explosion which followed almost stunned those within, while it positively shook the steel leviathan.

"Up there it won't do us much harm," thought Roger, as he peered out at the enemy; "but if they could sling them right underneath us, which I rather doubt, they might, as Bill says, smash us up altogether. This Tank is stranded. Probably it'll never get lifted out of this hole, for she's

wedged in firmly. Then what I've got to think about is the crew; I've got to save 'em if I can, and at the same time hold up as many of the enemy as possible. Dismount those machine-guns," he commanded suddenly, turning upon the man in charge of them. "You other fellows pick up those boxes of ammunition and make ready to leave the Tank. Hurry with it, for just now seems to me the opportunity to get away without the enemy knowing what's happened."

A sudden change had, in fact, come upon the situation of affairs since the Tank subsided into her inglorious condition. A minute ago, as soldiers peered out into the open, there seemed at least a hundred Germans hovering about them, while one, bolder than the rest, had even leapt on to the top of the Tank and had hammered upon it with a trenching tool till he had made the steel coat "Mack" wore ring again, and the interior echo. Then for some reason, unperceived by those within, the enemy had disappeared entirely, though later they understood that another Tank passing within range had turned its machine-gun upon them, scattering them, and driving them down underneath the ground into their shelters.

"Just the very opportunity for us," thought Roger; "they've gone below probably for protection, and, yes, there's another Tank over there, and it must be her guns that have driven 'em underground. Good! Now's our time! We are useless in here, and stand the chance of being blown up any moment. They're bound to have some sort

of explosives in their dug-outs, and boxed in this Tank we shall be unable to prevent their creeping beneath her; but we might put up quite a good show if we were in a dug-out. Open that door!" he shouted. "Now, out you go, and follow me. Bring the machine-guns, your rifles, and every scrap of ammunition."

It was no easy job to squeeze through the half-open door, for a mass of crushed masonry prevented its opening to the full extent, and at the best of times the exit from the Tank was anything but easy. However, Roger was able to squeeze his way through the narrow opening, and then along beside the projection which carried guns, and so to the prow of the Tank. There was a hole there, just showing beneath it, and sliding into that, he lowered himself into what was left of the particular dug-out into which "Mack" had seen fit to crush her ponderous weight. Behind him there was a tumbled mass of concrete and masonry, steel beams and earth, with some trenching tools, a rifle or so, and other impedimenta visible beneath the fallen debris. But in front there was a big open void, some underground passage, perhaps even a barrack-room constructed for the Germans.

"Better than nothing," he thought. "We've got to wall it in, though, at the far end, or else they'll be able to concentrate men here and rush us.

"Here, Bill," he called, "get your gun forward some twenty yards if you can, and take anything to build up a barricade. Send two or three of the men on to find sand-bags."

Bill grinned in the semi-darkness, and began to undertake the task with enthusiasm.

"Here, you," he said, catching hold of a diminutive person—one chosen, indeed, for his size, for big men are not required in Tanks—"here, you, get for'ard and forage round and bring back sand-bags. If you can find food and water, just shout, for it'll be more valuable to us here than will ammunition. See here, me lad," he went on, gripping another of the men told off to his machine-gun, "a bag full of bombs—them hand-grenades the Germans love so much—would be the thing for us; then you get in at it. Now, this is the place for the gun. What's this? a switch! Why, electric light! Blest if this ain't a luxury!"

Bill, like Roger and the rest of his comrades, knew well enough that electric light, down in the amazing dug-outs the Germans have prepared all along the Western Front, was nothing out of the ordinary—indeed knew that it was fitted in every dug-out; but to find a switch so readily, and, pressing upon it, to flood the place with light, was indeed a surprise, and one which delighted them. Right overhead a bulb cast its beams on every side, showing a wide cavern with vertical walls and a timbered ceiling propped by concrete beams. Towards the end could be seen a broad flight of stairs going upward, while close at hand was a brazier, though in these summer months there was no coal within it. Directly above could be seen a round opening, a tube leading upward through thirty or forty feet of soil which was piled over-

head, and then turning abruptly towards the British lines from which Roger and his crew had just made their progress.

Roger looked at it closely, peered about him, and then, going to the side of the dug-out, snatched up an object.

"Just as I thought," he told Bill, who was busily setting up his machine-gun; "it's a periscope which acts also as a ventilator, and will give us a good idea of what's happening above ground. Here, you, my lad, fix it up and stand here, and tell us what's happening. Now, boys, fill in that gap behind as quick as you can. What we've got to do is to build ourselves in, as it were, at this end, so that we can't be taken on both sides; that'll leave the Germans only the steps yonder down which they must come to fetch us, or down which alone they can fling their bombs."

There was great movement down in the dug-out for some fifteen minutes, during which time the man posted at the periscope reported that none of the enemy were yet to be seen. Bill rapidly got his machine-gun into position, while the second one also was placed beside him; then sand-bags, which had been found at the far end, and seemed to have been stored there for some purpose, probably with a view to repairing damages to the dug-out should they occur, had been dragged back to the spot where the machine-guns were stationed, and very rapidly a wall was constructed right across this underground cavern. Placed some five feet on either side of the centre of this wall were the

machine-guns, their muzzles projecting through it, though the remainder of these vicious machines was hidden entirely from the eyes of anyone who happened to come down the stairs opposite.

"Now, pile more bags on top," shouted Roger, "and one of you can take a look round to see if there are any more ventilators; if there are, we shall have to fill 'em up, for one of the things we've got to fear most of all is gas. These Huns will poison anything these days—water or air—and if they can't get at us with rifles or grenades, or machine-guns or shells, you may depend upon it, they are certain to think of some other 'frightfulness'. Turning the tube from one of their gas reservoirs down below here would be just the thing they'd think about. So, look lively!"

"And get your gas helmets ready," added Bill, who was wonderfully helpful to our hero. "What's that you've got there, young Jimmy? Where've you been? I see you just now coming down the stairs, which makes it look as though you've been paying a sort of pleasant visit to the Germans."

Anyone would have thought the same if they'd looked at the grinning face of the "Tommy" who now approached the wall on the far side, and slung a number of articles over it. Sweat was pouring from his brow, while his face shone in the rays of the electric light.

"You asked for food and drink, Corporal Andrews," he said lamely; "well, I went to fetch it."

"Well done!" cried Roger, delighted. "Half

a dozen good-sized bottles of water—eh? and a couple of haversacks of rations; this, with what we've brought ourselves, will keep us going for two or three days at least—that's splendid!"

"Where did you get 'em from?" demanded Bill, hauling this diminutive soldier over the sand-bag wall, and holding him in front of him while he cross-examined the youngster. "Really a-visiting the Germans?"

The youngster beamed on him. "Yes, Corporal," he answered. "There wasn't a soul about, and not a sound—at least not a sound of German feet, though one could hear the bang of shells and a machine-gun rattling. So I went up the stairs and found that they turn off sharp left and climb right to the surface, but they also turned off to the right, and went right down again into another dug-out. It was empty—that is," he added, grinning slightly, "empty but for lots of rifles, bunks all along the side, blankets, and so on, and these 'ere bottles and haversacks."

Roger was over the wall in an instant, and, ordering his men to remain where they were, ran forward to the steps and crept up them cautiously. Turning his head at an angle, he was able to see far above him, where those sloping steps above gained the open, an oblong patch of light, and framed in that patch, as it were, a huge flash of smoke and flame overhead, where a high-explosive shrapnel shell was bursting. Then he turned to his right, and, descending a short flight of steps, found himself in the dug-out which the young soldier had just

visited. It was brilliantly illuminated, and the electric light served to show that it was quite empty. Traversing it rapidly, Roger found another flight of steps at the far end leading at a sharp angle to another staircase to the open, and once again into a dug-out farther along.

"And so it goes on, I suppose," he thought, "one dug-out communicating with another, and bolt-holes at regular intervals. Seems to me that we've got to watch three places or quarters from which we can be attacked; fellows might descend from above, turn that corner, and be down the steps and into the dug-out in a moment; others might come along this dug-out, being reinforced from farther along, and those, attacking with the others from above, would certainly be too much for us. Also, there is the crushed-in dug-out behind, through which the Germans might dig their way after an interval. Good! I think I know what to do! I'll get back and talk it over with Bill."

He raced back along the dug-out, up the stairs, down again, till he was close to the sand-bagged wall, through which the two machine-guns grinned at him, and above the top lip of which half a dozen heads of the crew he commanded could be seen, and half a dozen pairs of eyes peered at him.

"Four of you men come along with me at once," he said. "Bill, post one man just at the top of these stairs, or, better still, go there yourself, and, if you can, climb up them and see what's doing. Wait, though! I forgot the periscope. That should be quite sufficient without our exposing anyone to

danger. Post yourself there, and have a man on this side of the wall whom you can send to warn us. Leave one man at the back, near the Tank, so as to make quite sure that the Germans won't come in from that direction. Now, me lads," he said, as his men came swarming over the sand-bags, having left their rifles on the far side, "let's get to this work as rapidly as possible. There are sand-bags in the dug-out just beyond. I want them brought along, and the whole gap leading from it to these stairs filled in. One of you look round for a crow-bar, too, for if we can break down the stairs, and make a mess of the place, it'll delay them far longer than will sand-bags."

They worked with furious energy for the half-hour which followed; men dragging sand-bags along and throwing them up the stairs, where they were at once piled out of the way, so that once the last man was through, they could be piled up so as to fill the gap. Then with a long bar of iron which they had fortunately discovered, and helped by a beam of wood torn from the dug-out, where it had done service in supporting one of the double tier of bunks for the German soldiers, they levered up the woodwork of the stairs leading from the second dug-out and destroyed them.

"Now, up with the wall," said Roger, who by this time was working in his shirt-sleeves. "As soon as we have got one layer of bags in place we will put others, for we can't have too many of them. Ha! That's you, Bill. What's the report?"

Bill looked quite excited.

"Things is going to move, sir," he said. "There's been heavy shelling, for I think our observers must have seen "Mack" come to grief and tumble into the dug-out; anyway they must have seen the Germans come out and begin to bomb us, so they turned every gun they'd got on the spot hereabouts, and have been lifting the ground as if there was earthquakes. But that's stopped now, and the Germans are coming up from their dug-outs again. They are hunting around; one of 'em's crept along towards the Tank. Looks to me as though we should soon be up against it!"

Up against it indeed! They had a horde of furious Germans swarming round their hiding-place within the next ten minutes. With the help of that useful periscope Roger was able to observe heads being thrust up from burrows in the ground at quite a far distance, then men appeared, and presently came running towards the spot where others had already congregated. Men shouted; others, getting into position, fired their rifles at almost point-blank range at the stranded Tank; while yet again others, finding that no machine-gun opened on them from it, grew bolder, and, crawling forward, threw grenades at the camouflaged surface which had protected Roger and his crew a little earlier. Bill laughed, more than one of his comrades tittered, for it amused them vastly to know that the Germans were expending so much ammunition uselessly.

"And it don't make no manner of difference to 'Mack', do it?" asked Bill, as they listened to the report of grenades exploding. "But I'm sorry,



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"IN AN INSTANT THE DUG-OUT WAS FILLED WITH THE DEAFENING ROAR OF TWO MACHINE-GUNS PUMPING BULLETS ON THE STAIRWAY"

you boys. She was a nice, kind, gentle beast, and did as she was told on most occasions. I don't deny that now and again she got a fit of the sulks, and wouldn't move—at least not forward—and sometimes even grudged going backwards when you gave her an order. But she did us well on the whole, and them Germans has had cause to hate her. Bless us! Listen to that one! If that ain't dented her plates, it's because it's bad German powder."

There came an interruption at that moment which caused all heads to turn towards the stairway. The man whom Roger had now stationed at the periscope gave vent to a warning shout, while a grenade, dropped from the surface of the land above, clattered down the steps which were out of view and exploded just before it reached the angle, displacing timbers, and filling the whole dug-out with smoke and dust. After that there came the rush of feet, a figure appeared at the angle, someone shouted, and then round the corner came a German officer, followed by a second, then by a mob of men, some armed with rifles and bayonets, others with grenades and sticks.

No need to give an order or to tell the crew of the Tank what to do. Men put in a tight position, such as this was, know well that their lives depend on instant action; and as to the courage and resolution of the men there was no question. One of the machine-guns snapped at once, a rifle was fired over the top of the sand-bags, and in an instant the dug-out was filled with the deafening roar and

rattle of two machine-guns pumping bullets on the stairway into the midst of the attackers.

"That's number one!" said Roger, some two minutes later. "That's stopped them with a vengeance! Now I fancy they'll go off and talk matters over a little, and try and think out some other way of getting at us. Let's try and put ourselves in their position for a moment—eh, Bill?"

"That's just the way, me lad—er, sir," Bill corrected. "If you get in a tight corner, and don't know much what to do, the best thing after that is to put yourself in the position of the fellows that's trying to get at you. What 'ud I do? What 'ud we do if we was up there in the open a-trying to dig out rats down below—rats, me lad, with teeth all sharpened. We've talked of gas, sir, ain't we? —and that's always a possibility."

"Then what about the Tank behind?" ventured one of the men—a sharp little fellow, whose eyes sparkled. "Seems to me that that's the most vulnerable point there is."

"'Vulnerable?'" said Bill, and grinned as he said it. "Why, that's a big 'un for you, Jimmy. That means easy to get at, don't it? Oh yes, of course, and I agree. 'Vulnerable'—eh? Did you hear what Jimmy said, sir? He says as how he thinks that the Tank behind here is the part from which we are now likely to catch it."

"Hum!" thought Roger, peering over his shoulder, and then walking back to the spot where the prow of the stranded Tank projected into the dug-out.

It was a queer thing to look upon. The huge, broad snout, blunted and covered with its hardened cuticles of steel, painted and streaked a variety of colours—camouflaged, indeed, just as huts and tents and wagons are in Flanders, so as to present a neutral tint, as it were, and escape the eagle eye of aeroplane observers; this blunt prow—a sorry object now—stared him full in the face, while just beneath it, as he bent down, he could see the ponderous steel beam which had at one time supported the roof of the dug-out beyond. Now, tilted by the weight of the Tank as it rode overhead, this beam had given way, had stood on its end, and then had dealt poor "Mack" a mortal wound, thrusting up through the base of the prow, tearing a huge rent in the steel as if it were composed of mere paper, and, as the ungainly and unwieldy leviathan gave a gasp—as it were a dying shudder—and came down finally with a thud, wrecking the interior machinery.

Yes, peeping in through the rent, Roger could see into the interior of the Tank, though for the most part it was in darkness.

"Wait! What's that? Look out!"

He gripped Bill's sleeve, and that worthy, pushing his commanding officer aside unceremoniously —though to be sure there was no one more polite than Bill on ordinary occasions—peered in himself, and exclaimed loudly:

"Swop me bob! The legs of them dirty Fritzes coming in! They must have opened the door from the top; and—s'welp me!—what are they doing?"

It was Jimmy who supplied the answer—little Jimmy, chosen for his diminutive stature, as we have said, but as keen, as energetic as any other member of the Tank's crew. "They're fillin' her up with explosives!" he shouted, his eyes wide open, looking startled. "They are a-layin' a train out from the door, and I suppose over the top. They are——"

Roger snatched him by the collar of his coat, dragged Bill by the sleeve, and turned promptly back to the men crouching behind the wall.

"There's not a moment to lose," he said. "Pick up your guns, rifles, and ammunition!—follow me!"

CHAPTER IX

Fighting to a Finish

THERE was bustle down in the depths of that dug-out, once Roger and his gallant crew had discovered the real meaning of the pause in the conflict which had followed that rush of the enemy down the stairs. The light gleaming from the electric bulb overhead, illuminating but dimly the interior of this queer place into which he and his men had scrambled, showed behind them, from the spot where the prow of the Tank stared in at them aimlessly, shattered walls, splintered timbers, fallen earth, and riven concrete pillars. About Roger himself there stood his crew, sweating with their exertions, a little wide-eyed, for the occasion was serious, waiting his directions. Then came the piled-up sand-bags, forming a protective wall, the breeches of machine-guns projecting from it, and ahead, with the rays of light gleaming upon them, the stairs leading upwards, with their sharp turn to the left to the open, and their turn to the right which gave admission to the second dug-out along this line of German hiding-places.

Yes, and on the stairs it showed the bodies of the fallen. The leading officer sprawled on his face on

the floor of the dug-out, one leg still resting on the stairs, the officer who had followed him half-tumbled over his body, and in the niche or platform, where the stairs turned, a pile of helpless individuals.

"Over you come!" shouted Roger; "bring your guns and ammunition, and pull these fellows out of the way. Sharp's the word! Bill, as soon as we have broken down the wall we erected yonder, you will carry on into the other dug-out, and will form a wall there. Look lively, lads, for in a little while that mine of theirs will be exploding."

"And what about setting a watch on them beggars there in the Tank?" demanded Jimmy, the eager Jimmy, just as Roger swung his legs over the sand-bagged wall. "They ain't got that mine ready yet awhile—they was only placing it when we looked just now. If I was to stay along there, squinting inside, and particularly if I was to use me rifle, I could stop 'em for a bit, and that 'ud give us time to move on and prepare other quarters."

Bill thumped him on the shoulder. "Good for you!" he shouted, boiling over with excitement; "good for you, Jimmy! You're the smallest chap we've got, but you've wits enough to give away to others of this party."

Roger laughed, for even then, in the stress of this affair, he could appreciate what Bill was saying.

"Carry on, then, Jimmy!" he cried. "Keep 'em off their explosives as long as you can. If you can, drive 'em out of the Tank altogether; though I doubt whether you'll succeed, for they can place their stuff in position by means of a pole or a rope.

Still, keep 'em out and give us as long time as you can. Now, Bill, over you go! Come along, men!"

If the Hun could have descended into the dug-out just then to see what was happening, he would have been amazed at the extraordinary activity of the little band of British soldiers whom he had entrapped down there, whom he confidently anticipated to destroy entirely. Not that it was an easy matter by any means.

"We shall have to be careful how we go," a goggled officer was saying to his subordinate as he stood within a trench quite close to the dug-outs, and into which that stairway led. "We've tried a rush down below and it didn't succeed. Those machine-guns of theirs would hold up any assault from that direction. Bah! It was a clever idea of theirs to dismount their machine-guns and take them from the Tank. Well then, what next? There's the periscope. Confound it! We don't happen to have any gas apparatus near at hand, though the idea of smothering them has occurred to me, and I have already sent off for it; but it will be two hours before we can get it up the communicating trench to this spot, and by then other troops will have come along and will reap the reward for making the crew down below captives. So there's the Tank left. Hurry in those explosives. Get your train laid, and blow the thing in ribbons! If that doesn't kill every man down below it'll stun them, and then we shall be in almost before the shock of the explosion has finished."

Jimmy, on hands and knees in the far end of the

dug-out, lay in wait, his rifle projecting through the rent in "Mack's" steel prow, his eye glued on the dusky interior, and upon a gleam of light which came through the slit-like door, through which the enemy undoubtedly had gained admission. He saw, a little later, a pair of legs dangling in that narrow gap—a pair of booted legs belonging to an officer, no doubt, or perhaps to one of the non-commissioned ranks of the Kaiser's army.

"Just a reminder like!" he told himself as he lifted his rifle to his shoulder. "One through the calf will make him howl, and will make others more careful."

The interior of the Tank rattled, reverberated to his shot, while a second later a shrill scream was heard even by those down in the depths of the dug-out. The legs were withdrawn very hastily indeed, and then voices were heard.

"Shouldn't wonder," said Jimmy, cheerfully enough, "shouldn't wonder if that was to stop 'em for a while, unless of course there's an officer that 'ud like to chance things and come down. If he does——"

He did. At that very moment there was a scuffling noise, and a figure dropped through the narrow doorway of the Tank and rushed towards him, while Jimmy's keen eye caught a view of another man following immediately behind this first one. Yet he did not wince, but, lifting his rifle, again sent in a shot, which caused the German to crash against the still hot machinery of the Tank, and laid the second man low also.

Meanwhile, Roger and his friends had been extraordinarily energetic. Running to the stairway, he himself had mounted to the angle where the stairs turned sharply and had peered upward. Then, finding that no one was observing that part, he posted a man at the angle to look out for the enemy.

"Lie down here amongst these dead Germans," he told the man, "and keep your rifle directed upwards and at your shoulder. If a head comes into view, open fire at once, for what we want to do is to keep 'em from observing our movements. Now, Bill," he called, peeping down into the dug-out again, "just heave these bodies aside, and let's break a way through the wall here by means of which we cut off the farther dug-out. That's the way, boys; now there's room for one of you to get through. Now, Bill, it's your job to push on and to see that all is clear in the other dug-out."

Thrusting his way through the narrow aperture which had been torn out, Bill was shot, like a pip from an orange, into the farther dug-out, and, getting to his feet again, looked round cautiously. A man joined him, and then a second, and together the three pushed on in the semi-darkness. They found the place untenanted, and at once Bill placed his two men at the far end, some little way back from the stairs, with orders to shoot down anyone who entered. By then Roger was through, and was joined at once by others of the crew of the Tank.

"Now, boys," he told them, "get to work!—and as hard as you can, building a wall just like

that other one. There are still some sand-bags left in here, but there won't be enough, so that we shall have to pass up the ones that we have already used. Line up, there! Some of you get back into the old dug-out, and sling the bags one to another."

At the best of times sand-bags are not the easiest or the lightest objects to handle and sling about. But men whose lives depend upon their efforts, who know that time is short in which to make defensive preparations, feel the weight of sand-bags hardly at all; and, though short of stature, the sturdy fellows whom Roger commanded made nothing of the task.

Bags were passed from hand to hand along the living chain from the dug-out they were vacating to this new one which their commander had selected. Perhaps a quarter of an hour elapsed, and by that time the bulk of the bags had been transferred to their new position. It was just then that Jimmy's rifle was again heard, speaking loudly, echoing through the dug-out, while that young fellow was seen a moment later to be retreating.

"Come along in through this opening, boys!" Roger shouted at once. "Now, let's build up this wall here through which we have broken a way so as to get into the other dug-out. There we are! Machine-gun posted nicely in the very centre, while the other is bagged up in the other room. Wait, though! just leave a little niche there for a rifle, for a single shot will do all we want to keep the stair-way clear in case they attempt to descend by it.

There we are, boys, in clover once more. Now, Jimmy, tell us what happened."

With a broad grin on his face the diminutive Jimmy narrated his own action.

"They was a-gettin' quite angry, sir," he said. "First of all I pipped one of 'em through the calf, and you should have heard him howl. Then two of the officers thought they'd show their men the way, and do me in in quick time. But they didn't. Oh no!" and Jimmy grinned the wider. "Oh dear no, sir!" he said, displaying a row of extremely uneven teeth, with a gap in the very centre of the upper row which gave him quite a quaint appearance.

"They didn't," nodded Roger. "Well?"

"'Cos they didn't!" went on Jimmy. "Just one shot got 'em both; and if there's a 'bust' yonder, I reckon they'll be in it. There was a heap of jawin' after that, sir. I could hear 'em up above, in their trench I should say, 'cos most of these dug-outs communicate with the trenches. Then a chap dropped a bomb into the tank, and I thought he'd busted me altogether. So did he!" grinned the incorrigible little fellow; "so did he, sir!"

"But he didn't, eh?" laughed Roger, amused with this man of his.

"You can take it that he didn't, sir, 'cos I'm here. But they came down in a swarm, and, though I fired hard, there was no keepin' 'em back. They started to fire through the rent in 'Mack's' prow, and I knew it was time to get going."

"Then we can expect an explosion at almost any moment," Roger told his followers. "One second; I see those crafty fellows have placed a periscope in every one of their dug-outs. Bill, you'll stand near it, or rather lie near it, because I want every one of you to stretch yourselves flat on the ground. Not that the explosion ought to damage us in here; though you never know, do you? Still these concreted dug-outs are very strongly built, and, seeing that the Tank has fallen into one of them, and has, as it were, opened up the place, the force of the explosion is more likely to go upward than to travel. Lie down every one of you. You can smoke, if you like, for I've no objection."

Ten long minutes passed, during which the crew of the Tank lay about the German dug-out waiting for the explosion which they knew must come, and fretting because there was no sign as yet of its arrival. Then, just as they began to believe that, after all, it would not occur, suddenly there was a deep rumble, and then a roar, while Bill at the periscope saw objects falling. The ground rocked, one or two of the beams in the dug-out started from their places, while a concrete post which supported the roof cracked in twain, and the upper half fell to the floor of the dug-out. Then silence followed for just a few seconds, though after that there was a murmur of voices and then much shouting.

"You can see 'em from here peering into the hole that 'Mack' made," reported Bill, "and, lor'! listen to that noise! Oh, ain't they angry?"

CHAPTER X

An Unpleasant Meeting

A SEETHING mass of Germans ran shouting about the trench, which cut its sinuous way in front of that long line of dug-outs buried forty feet beneath the soil of Flanders. At every stairway leading downwards men stood well back, peering into the depths and shouting. Where the ponderous and wrecked form of the unfortunate "Mack"—that steel leviathan which Roger and his crew had driven so gallantly up to the fighting-line—lay embedded, trapped, as it were, in a dug-out, there was pandemonium. In the smoke following that gigantic explosion men laboured with crowbars and pick-axes, while some in their frenzy made efforts to tear away the riven plates of "Mack" and make a passage into the dug-out where Roger and his men had been secreted.

"They'll be a-breaking through, sir," said Bill, posted at the periscope, from which he was able to get quite a good view of his surroundings. "Lor'! ain't our chaps chuckin' in stuff! Should say our observers have caught sight of the enemy a-bustlin' round after us, or perhaps the explosion attracted their attention."

"More likely that," asserted Roger, pushing his old friend aside and himself taking post at the periscope. "Yes, I think that must be it, for high explosives from the British lines are pouring on to this line of trenches and earthworks. Wait! A barrage is creeping towards us, and that looks as though our troops were coming on. That's good news, you men. If our chaps come along now, we shall best the fellows."

The diminutive Jimmy smacked one of his dirty thighs with a hand which was stained with earth, while across the sun-browned fingers a streak of dried blood meandered—for he had torn his flesh against the riven steel coat of "Mack"—his eyes opened wide, that same merry, reassuring grin splitting his features asunder.

"Our chaps a-comin' on, sir," he laughed; "and you think as we'll best these fellows? Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" they all chimed in, sending a British cheer which reverberated along the dug-out, caused dust and debris to fall from the concreted and planked roof, and set the electric bulb, dangling overhead, swaying. That cheer, too, went up the stairway and among the Germans still farther on.

"We've got to get in at once and take 'em—no, kill 'em," shouted an officer who was superintending the operations. That barrage means that the British are coming forward, and unless we are reinforced we shall never be able to hold this position. The trench is getting smashed to pieces. See here, Unter-leutnant Ersberger, take a party of men and lead them down the stairway that we

descended before when we attacked them; I'll lead a party through here, where the Tank has fallen, for we've now broken a hole through, which will give us access to the dug-out. When I whistle, rush down."

Men assembled in the trench outside that stairway down which forlorn men had made the similar attempt a little earlier, to whom Roger and his men had put a summary end. Others, under the direct supervision of the officer commanding, swarmed into the broken and bulging Tank till they filled it, and then, when the commanding officer's whistle sounded shrilly, they burst into the dug-out just vacated by Roger—a dug-out, it should be added, the interior of which was now buried in darkness, for the thoughtful Jimmy, coming away from his post at the prow of "Mack", had smashed the bulb with his bayonet.

There were shouts and the loud report of rifles. Two bodies of men, the one coming down the stairway, the other through the shattered interior of "Mack", met in the darkness of the dug-out, and there commenced a desperate and fierce encounter. Not, indeed, till a number of the Germans had been killed, did the discovery dawn upon the commander that Germans were fighting hand to hand with Germans; and only by dint of shouting, pulling the men aside, and blowing his whistle, did he contrive to put an end to this disastrous mêlée. A new bulb was then fixed to the electric-light pendant, and the Germans were able to look about and discern one another.

"Where, then," stuttered the commander, breathless with his exertions, fuming with rage, and ready to vent his wrath on anyone—"where, then, have those rascals got to? Where is Unter-leutnant Ersberger?"

"There!" replied one of the soldiers, surlily, pointing a dirty finger at a form lying on the floor of the dug-out. "He fell, sir, to your bullet."

"Bah!" the German officer growled his anger, and, starting forward, turned his unfortunate comrade over. "Bah!" he growled again, "to think of his stupidity! Could he not have known, when he got to the centre of the dug-out, that those British swine were gone, and that the men he was attacking were his own comrades? He deserves what he has got, and so do these other idiots. Now let us see what else there is to be done. Where have these fellows got to?"

Where, indeed? It took only a little investigation on the part of this officer to discover that sandbagged wall stretching across the opening which led from the little landing a few steps up the stairway, and which gave access to the next dug-out. He shouted his anger when he noticed the muzzle of a machine-gun protruding from it, and backed away hurriedly. Then he and his men rushed up through the shattered remnants of the Tank, gained the trench outside, and, narrowly escaping annihilation by shells sent from some far-off British battery, raced round to the next stairway.

"Ah!" he shouted. "No, there is no sign of them here, and no sand-bagged wall. Then per-

haps they have gone along the line of dug-outs—artful dogs that they are! Well, we will chase them. Hurry up, you men, for we still have time. Not until the British bombardment ends will their infantry advance; so let us make the most of the moment. Here, you, Sergeant, take a party along to the next stairway. I'll go down here and search the dug-out on my right and on my left. Pass the word on to other parties, and tell them to be quick about it."

The clatter of footsteps, on the steep stairway at the far end of the dug-out in which Roger and his men had now taken shelter, soon attracted their attention, and, at a sharp order from our hero, the electric lamp swinging directly overhead was extracted, leaving one other bulb at the far end, where the stairway entered the dug-out.

"That'll light 'em up beautifully," Roger told his men, "while we are in darkness. Bill, you'll command this wall. Jimmy, here, will be at the smaller one which blocks the stairway behind us, though I hardly think the enemy will come from that direction, for we've already taught him that that's a nasty position. So we've got to look for them from the front, and if we can stop 'em as easily as we did before, well, we shan't have cause to grumble. Ah! there's the first of them."

A man appeared at the corner of the stairway, and stood for a while on the little landing there, peering down into the dug-out.

"Come down," he shouted to the men behind him, for it was the commanding officer. "I think

they've gone right on, though there's just a chance that they might be here. Some of you go straight ahead into this dug-out on my left, the others follow me to the right, so as to make quite certain!"

More clattering of heavy boots, more deep breathing, and the rattle of accoutrements and arms. Then a mob of men crowded the landing, and some pushed on down the steps directly ahead, and so into the dug-out to which Roger and his friends had not yet penetrated. The remainder, perhaps thirty in number, followed the officer into that brightly illuminated patch at the far end of the underground space in which our friends had taken shelter.

"Give 'em one," whispered Bill, who had a bomber beside him, "just one in the very middle. You other boys keep your heads down under the wall. Roger," he shouted, forgetting their respective positions in this moment of excitement, "down with your head, we're a-goin' to——"

The explosion of a bomb amongst the Germans ended the sentence abruptly, and ended also the search of the German commanding officer and the band of men who had accompanied him. Only groans and shrieks followed, while through the smoke could be seen the rapid retreat of the soldiers of the Kaiser, their figures covered an instant later by the cloud of dust which filled the dug-out and almost stifled those within it.

"What was that?"—a splutter as of fireworks outside, the sharp, crackling noise penetrating to Roger and his men. The former dashed to the

periscope and peered through it, to discover, it seemed just over his head, a long continuous line running parallel with the trench outside, a line of white breaking cloud, here swelling into a broad sheet, in the centre of which a sudden flash penetrated, there thinning down till the blue sky right up above became visible. Then again, a splotch of white, a flash of flame, a crackling roar, and underneath a spreading wave of bullets—shrapnel bullets, which peppered the ground as if a gigantic watering-pot were held aloft, which drove holes into the soil and sent spurts of dust and earth upward.

"The barrage," he shouted, "right on the enemy trenches! Make ready, you men, for our fellows will be along here in a jiffy!"

Make ready, indeed! From Bill down to the very youngest soldier amongst the crew of the Tank each man's face was glowing, each young fellow held his rifle firmly gripped, his eyes fixed upon the commanding officer, excepting only those in charge of the machine-guns. They sat as rigid as statues, the one with his eyes fixed upon the stairway which gave access to the dug-outs from the trench above, and the other watching over the entrance to the stairway at the far end, where the single electric bulb illuminated the place, and poured its bright rays down upon the floor of this underground cavern and upon the figures tumbled there haphazard.

When Roger swung his periscope round and surveyed the ground to either side—the ground

beneath which that long line of dug-outs existed—he found those same splotches of dust where the shrapnel bullets were falling, but nowhere along the line was there a sign of the incoming of high-explosive shells, nowhere could he detect those huge upheavals of earth, those shattering detonations, those violent explosions which followed the fall of British shells of large diameter. But beyond, where No Man's Land continued—for now it did not belong any more to the Germans—behind the sinuous trench which gave access to the line of dug-outs, where machine-gun posts no doubt were hidden, where still more dug-outs existed, and where, for all he knew, thousands of the enemy were in hiding, there could be seen at close range a sight which would have petrified a novice. For the ground there was positively being tossed about as if by an earthquake. Huge mounds appeared at one spot, only to fall in and become vast cavities the next moment; a flat patch of ground, brown and bare, as he looked, suddenly was wiped out of existence by a falling shell, and the detonation and the flash were followed by a mighty and awe-inspiring upheaval. So it was to right and to left; so it continued on towards the enemy support trenches. British guns three and four and more miles away were registering on this long stretch of debated country. British shells, made by British women in factories which had come into life since this Armageddon began, were penetrating the ground in every direction, were seeking and searching inquisitively for dug-outs and cunning

machine-gun positions, were feeling now for the hidden enemy, and were blowing, sky-high, earth and concreted dug-outs, timbered posts, and the whole defensive works so laboriously prepared by the Kaiser and his ambitious people.

Turning the periscope in the other direction, towards the ground but lately traversed by that extraordinary barrage—by that line of bursting shells the range of which lifted continuously, that line which advanced as if it had human intelligence, which crept on and on, and had now reached this German line of trenches—Roger saw that it was covered with khaki dots, with men in tin helmets plodding onward, with bombers laden with grenades packed in the bags slung round their necks, with men toiling under the weight of Lewis guns and machine-guns of the heavier pattern, with sappers, with artillery observers, with runners, and with that famous line—that infantry line—which in other fields and in other days has moved forward to victory.

It was the British attacking force, bent on reaching the line where Roger and his men had come to grief, and on ousting the German.

No wonder then that Roger shouted! No wonder indeed that Bill led an answering cheer, and that the shouts of these interned soldiers reached the ears of the oncoming line of British soldiers!

"Pull down the wall! Shoulder your machine-guns! Now, boys, when I give the word, let's get up and join our fellows."

The barrage crept on like a living thing, plastering the ground immediately over the dug-out, filling

the air with a stifling smoke and with a constant crackle of exploding missiles. It stole forward, foot by foot, its deadly deluge searching every hole and corner. And walking behind it steadily, not charging, be it understood—for these men must traverse a considerable distance, and not one of them but was heavily laden—came that khaki line of heroes, wending their way round the shell-holes, each officer with his own particular objective, the whole movement all along the line co-ordinating, the attack carried out as if the men were on peace manœuvres.

Yet, peace indeed!

The splutter of machine-guns from some hidden post on the right laid men low almost in front of the periscope through which Roger was peering; it halted the line, and men to right and left took cover.

"Held up by a machine-gun! They'll have to clear it out before they can go forward," Roger told his men. "Wish our Tank was in running order, for we'd romp up to the place and blow it to dust. Still, boys, it hasn't been a bad adventure, has it?"

The grinning faces of the men gave him his answer better than words could have done; yet that they were eager for more adventure was self-evident.

"Chaps that 'as got used to the roaring, rattling inside of a Tank don't want to be cooped up all day in this 'ere sort of a dug-out," growled Bill. "I don't want to ask for no change, sir.

While there's Tanks on this front, and they are still able to do a job, why, Tanks is what'll always attract me. But if there ain't, when it so happens that our old gal gets knocked out of time, why, give me the open! Let me get up into the air! Don't stifle me down in a rat-hole, like this, as if I was a German."

"Nor me!" came in an almost plaintive voice from the ever-smiling Jimmy; "nor me, sir!"

"Nor me!" came practically from every one of the party.

"Then be a little patient," Roger told them. "That machine-gun is still holding up our fellows. Ah, the barrage has swept beyond it! Listen to the crackle and rattle of the thing! What's that? I see some of our men—our bombers, I expect—are creeping forward. Tack! tack! tack! There it goes again! and, yes, they don't seem to have spotted our fellows."

Other figures were now to be seen: the figures of Germans leaving the trench which gave access to the row of dug-outs in one of which Roger and his friends were hiding. They were creeping along the communicating trench which led eastwards towards the rear, slinking away, stopping now and again to fire their rifles at some khaki figure, yet moving along rapidly for all that, seeking cover in the distance.

There were others also, hundreds of others, whom he could not see, but who cowered in that long line of dug-outs: men fearful to move out, men perhaps many of them anxious to be captured—troops of

the Kaiser who had lost their superior officers, and who, finding themselves with no one in command, lay, inert, lacking decision and initiative, or desirous now, after many months of severe fighting, to give up the task which Germany had set them, and lay down their arms rather than continue the contest.

"Stop a bit!" shouted Roger; "a Tank!"

"A Tank!" echoed Bill. "A-goin' for that machine-gun?"

"Yes," Roger reassured him, "moving towards it, though it looks as if the officer in command had not yet spotted the exact position. But he has, he has!" he shouted a moment later, for flames swept from the sides of the Tank which had just come into view, rumbling and rolling across the open.

Then a spout of earth rose from the spot where Roger himself had perceived the snout of a machine-gun. There was a violent detonation there; flames took the place of the cloud of earth, and then smoke alone, and silence hung over that particular position. No longer was there the "Rat-a-tat-tat" of the machine-gun, for it and the men who had manned it had been put out of action.

"Pitch that wall aside! Pull your guns out, boys! Make ready!" shouted Roger. "Hurrah! Our men are now coming on fast, and will soon be into the trench and into the dug-outs. Bill, station yourself just along there at the stairway, and put your helmet on the top of your bayonet; warn our fellows that they've got friends down here, or

otherwise we shall have bombs smashing in on us. Hurry up, there, for our fellows are already dropping into the German trench which opens into this dug-out."

The voices of men outside could now be heard, the shouts of our soldiers, and presently a loud challenge.

"Hi!—you down there!" someone bellowed in broad Yorkshire accent, "will ye come oot of it, thin, noo, dead or alive?—or will ye stay thir and be smothered? Ye sons of guns, come oot!"

Bill made suitable answer.

"Sons of guns yerself, sonny," he shouted. "D'you think it's always a Fritz that you'll find in these 'ere places? Just put a couple of men up there to tell the boys that you've got down 'ere the crew of the Tank that went in front of you, and if there's an officer there, tell him to come down so that our officer can report to him."

The clatter of feet could be heard on the stairs some few seconds later; a familiar khaki figure turned the corner and then descended the remaining steps into the dug-out. By then Roger had leapt over the wall, and the two gripped hands, while the men set up a cheer which set the dug-out echoing. It was answered by the shouts and cheers of men who had followed the officer into this subterraneous cavern.

"Well, and what's it all about?" asked the officer, peering round, and at once noticing the sand-bag wall. "Looks as though you've been putting up quite a little show of your own here. But what's

this? Your Tank seemed to do a nose-dive farther along the line, a hundred yards along perhaps; how is it we find you here, then?"

"Oh!—how? Well, come along and look for yourself," said Roger, taking him by the sleeve; and the two clambered over the wall and made their way along the dug-out. "It's been quite a pretty little affair, I can tell you. Here we are! We climb up these stairs, pass through this sand-bag wall, which my men have already made a gap in, down the farther flight, and——"

"More Germans! You had a mix up with them here too, then. I begin to see it all," said the officer. "And that's the Tank—eh? Poor thing, she'll never move from that position. Yes, a very pretty little affair! Let's see. You are Lieutenant ——"

"Sullivan," said Roger promptly.

"Ah!—Sullivan," repeated the officer, taking a notebook from his pocket, "Sullivan—Lieutenant Sullivan. Oh! Sullivan—Tanks—I think? Con-gratulations!"

He snapped the cover of the notebook to, replaced a rubber band about it, shook hands again with Roger, and departed promptly. Ten minutes later he was with a superior officer, and, notebook in hand, was narrating the facts which he had ob-served in the dug-out.

"A splendid affair, sir!" he said. "That officer, Lieutenant Sullivan, has put up a show that is worth noting. I—er—think that it might be just as well, if you can spare the time, to go down and

inspect. A very fine little show, sir. You'd enjoy it!"

And enjoy it that officer did. When he had descended, indeed, he was so interested in it that he insisted upon our hero taking him over the ground of his recent conflict, and explaining the whole affair from the moment when the Tank had crushed its way into one of the dug-outs. Then he left, while Roger and his men clambered to the trench above, and, joining the advancing troops, went on with them.

"This way, this way, sir!" said a man in khaki, approaching them a little later—a man who, it should be explained, had suddenly caught sight of our hero, had peered at him in a half-frightened manner at first, and had then glared in his direction.

"The very man," he had muttered beneath his breath. "That young rascal who landed me one back in England! So he's out here! Good for me! Now's the time to pay off the score that I owe him."

"This way, sir!" he said. "Turn left now into this trench; the boys have gone on beyond."

No wonder that Roger and his crew were confused by all that they saw and found about them. Men were moving to and fro, German prisoners were passing back continuously, rifles were flashing in all directions, and often enough there came to their ears the rattle and grind of machine-guns. All the while, too, continuously and without a stop, there poured upon the ground shrapnel bullets

from that barrage still lining the sky and advancing. Indeed, but for the barrage, it was almost impossible to say which was the enemy's position, and where lay the lines of the British.

"This way, sir! This way, sir!" called the man in khaki who had suddenly accosted Roger. "Now along here; turn to your left, down this stretch, now into this dug-out."

Hurrying along the dug-out they passed into another, and from that still again into others. Then they emerged into a trench once more, to find that that barrage was now behind them.

"Stop!" cried Roger. "Where are we? Where are our men? We've moved beyond our barrage and must surely be in front of our attack, and almost in the support lines of the enemy. Where are our other men, Bill? What's become of them?"

Bill had clung closely to his old friend throughout, and in the hurry of their recent movements he had not noticed that the crew who had so gallantly supported Roger had been thrown off by their many turns and twistings. He and Roger were alone now with this man. Yet not alone. For of a sudden some fifty Germans pounced upon them, threw them down, and disarmed them; and when at length the two had recovered their breath and stood upright in the trench, prisoners amongst the Germans, there was that khaki figure still near at hand, a man who grinned sardonically.

"Know me?" he asked in perfect English, though there was just a suspicion of a guttural accent about it. "You don't know me, do you?

—eh, Mr. Norman? Look again, now! You wouldn't, would you? Well, just think, I'm the bloke you knocked out at Hurslet that day when me and Chawles, and a young gent what wants horse-whipping, made plans to give you a drubbing. I'm the one you left lying in the road in front of the pub! I'm the chap what got a month's hard labour! Look at me—I ain't forgotten old scores, don't you worry! For your number's up! Know what that means?"

Roger knew well enough: the man's face was sufficient to tell him. Yet he was almost too astonished at what he had heard, to be able yet to consider his position. It seemed hardly possible that the wretch who had lured himself and Bill into the enemy's lines could be the rascal who had attacked him in Hurslet. He had not caught so much as a glimpse of his face on that dark night, but now recognized him as a rough who had haunted that town adjacent to his home where he had so often gone shopping. Yes, this undoubtedly was the man. Roger shivered when he thought of the future.

CHAPTER XI

Armageddon

WAS there ever such an amazing coincidence? Was there ever such an extraordinary and fateful meeting as that which had occurred so near the banks of the River Somme, now to be ever famous in British history? Who, indeed, particularly amongst the humble and peaceful inhabitants of the village of Hurslet, where Roger's father lived and where also lived Mr. Riven, would have credited the tale that a rough, discovered unconscious one dark night in front of the hospitable portals of the "Morning Sun", and attended by the genial Sergeant Higgins, should meet out in France, in the midst of the titanic conflict being waged there, the youth whom he had attacked in such rascally fashion and who had been the cause of his undoing? Yet, there it was! The Somme offensive, in which British and French troops were now fully occupied, had seen already magnificent fighting, a huge success and some failures. It had provided thousands upon thousands of episodes and incidents, yet we trow not one, perhaps, more curious than this one.

Let us hark back for a while to England, to the

neighbourhood of Hurslet, so as to dip a little deeper into this affair, while we leave Roger and Bill prisoners in the hands of the Germans, with armed guards standing about them, and that grinning rascal, in khaki like themselves—a spy, planning their further downfall.

"Yes, it's a queer mix up, and there are folks hereabouts who are rubbing their eyes and wondering," said Sergeant Higgins one evening as his visitors sat about the parlour fire at the "Morning Sun" and discussed their evening ale; their number, be it noted, thinning somewhat, for the young and more active members of the customary party were conspicuous by their absence. "This country of ours has seen some change, I know, and has passed through times, in the long, almost-forgotten past, when stranger things happened. There have been days when every man in the country was called upon to protect his hearth and home, when flares lit up the hills from Land's End to John o' Groats, and men streamed out from their huts and hovels, from their castles and their palaces, to stem the tide of the invader."

"Aye, aye, the invader, Sergeant Higgins," quoth a bearded countryman, known in the locality for his debating powers, "but this ain't no invasion —not, at least, of England."

"Quite so! Agreed! An invasion first of all of Belgium and of Serbia, and then of France; all the same it's a German invasion, and, whether the Huns have broken their way into other people's country or whether they have reached this land,

the danger is all the same, though not quite so apparent. Everyone admits now," went on Sergeant Higgins, thumping the table with his brawny fist, "everyone agrees that the Germans are out to capture the world, to beat everyone, to grind every nation under their heel, and particularly Great Britain. So the call has come again, and has brought hundreds of thousands of young fellows to the army and to the navy who put patriotism before everything else. But the war's gone on. More men were wanted. We are fighting not only in France but in Egypt—on its Western and Eastern Fronts, in Mesopotamia, in Salonika, and Heaven knows how many other places! More men were wanted."

"And we had to have them; yes, we had to have them," chimed in the ancient countryman who had spoken earlier. "It had got to a point where it wasn't fair that one man should stay behind and enjoy peace and comfort, while his neighbour, because he was a red-hot patriot, broke up his home, forsook wife and child, and went into the army."

"Ha! ha!" chortled another individual, pulling a blackened clay from between his teeth; "there's them in these 'ere parts what knows all about that --eh? This 'ere conscription what's supposed to make things fair for everyone, what treats Bill like Tom, and Charles like Harry, it's caught by the tail more than one as we could speak of."

The rubicund ploughman laughed aloud again, and jerked a dirty sun-browned finger over his shoulder in the direction of the hill which led up

out of Hurslet, and, looking round upon his audience, nodded his head significantly.

"Aye, aye," they agreed, "there's many on 'em."

"And there's no need to wrap up their names either," said the Sergeant. "There was that young fellow, Roger Norman, who showed the way to the village; he was pretty nigh the first of all the young fellows to go, and he under eighteen years of age at the time. There was that Mr. Riven, slinking about the Hall up there, cutting a dash in the village, doing the swell in the town near by, and letting others go out and fight his battles. Well, conscription's caught him too. They tell me he's been to a training-camp as a cadet, and that now he's an officer somewhere in France. There's many a man, too, gone with him. D'you remember the case where young Roger was set upon out here in front of this public-house?"

The debating society around him—for the habitués of the "Morning Sun" had long since become a debating society, discussing threadbare every evening the affairs of the world in general and of Hurslet in particular—the folks collected there, nodded their heads, some most emphatically, while more than one chuckled.

"Aye, aye, it's taken the good and the bad, the slow and the fast, the chaps that wanted to go but couldn't well break their ties at home, and the chaps—there wasn't many on 'em, I'll wager," declared one of those present magnanimously—"the chaps that didn't want to go. That Mr. Riven, well, it hooked him by the leg. And all the better!

I mind the time when Roger Norman was assaulted, and the chaps that were brought out by the police; that Charles—he didn't seem to have a surname—he was hooked by the recruiting sergeant, and he's been off somewhere or other this many a day."

"But—but there was another fellow, the one who was picked up in front of the public-house here. He's the one I mainly referred to," said the Sergeant. "What was his name?"

"Aye, what was his name?" chirped one of the visitors present. "Furrin-sounding, wasn't it?—and to be sure he was an alien. His father used to be a baker up in the town yonder, and an elder brother—a good sort he was—took on the business. Germans all!"

"Ah! Germans!" the audience echoed.

"German!" exclaimed the old countryman who had formerly spoken. "Well, I reckon there's been good Germans and bad Germans; though most of 'em, as it's turned out, was bad. Folks do say that they've come here to England, and, what with their cleverness and their cunning, have got behind our people, have pushed them out of many a good job, and have stolen their businesses. I ain't a-sayin' that this baker man stole anyone's business, but he came here and set up for himself, no doubt because he could do better than in his own country; and seeing that he set up here, he must have taken the bread out of the mouth of some other baker, who, you might say, would be English. What's the name?"

"Fritz Hillstein," one of the audience prompted.

"I remember now; it was painted up over the shop as large as life afore the war begun; then when people began to say nasty things about Germans—and serve 'em right I says, 'cos it's true—the name got painted out, and Smith or something took its place. Hillstein's the name. The chap that young Roger Norman floored out here was Ernest, or something of that sort. Floored him, Sergeant. Eh? That comes of young Roger's boxing lessons."

The gallant sergeant smiled his appreciation, squared his shoulders, and threw his head back a trifle. After all, though he was getting, as he often expressed it, a "back number", it was pleasant to remember that he had been a fine athlete, a good gymnast, a first-class boxing instructor.

"Aye, aye," he sang out cheerfully, "young Roger Norman was a fine and promising pupil. As he grew bigger and stronger, the time came along when I had as much as I could do some days to look after myself and keep him off. In broad daylight there were few of his age who could stand up to him; but in the darkness anything might have happened. But I reckon he caught this Ernst Hillstein a crack that made him feel silly. It wasn't the stone against which his head came that knocked that German out entirely; it was the crack he caught full in the mouth, straight from the shoulder, one of the punches I taught young Roger. But what about this German fellow?"

"The police sergeant's the one who knows," a man who was present told them. "He was yarning to me only the other day about it. Seems that the father of these Hillsteins was a naturalized Englishman; so the son what runs the baking business is still up in the town yonder taking money from the English people. T'other son, the one that got knocked out, was a conscript, and that's all I know about it."

What a commotion, what a nine days' wonder, would have been created in the sleepy village of Hurslet if only those happy genial folk seated about the parlour fire in the "Morning Sun", yarning with Sergeant Higgins, could have known that Ernst Hillstein, the rascal whom Roger had punished, had not only been conscripted, but had contrived in some way to join the ranks of the enemy. We will pull aside the curtain to enable the reader to realize better what had happened.

Some cunning enemy agency in this country had kept in touch with Ernst Hillstein, as perhaps it had done with others of similar descent and of equally doubtful loyalty. In some way, this rascal, whilst wearing the honoured uniform of a British soldier, was yet heart and soul with the Kaiser's people. Bearing in mind his former history—the fact that he was known to the police as a vagabond and a rascal—it is more than probable that he was not actuated in this treachery by feelings of patriotism for the German Empire. More than probable was it that the hope of reward, the strong desire to grow rich at the expense of generous

people who had often befriended him, influenced his actions. Be the inducement what it might, Ernst Hillstein had become a spy for the Germans, had gone to France still as a spy, and there, still in touch perhaps with some cunning agency, had, while remaining a soldier in the British lines, contrived to pass information to the enemy. Who knows? That information might have been of little enough importance; yet at any moment this rascal might have tumbled upon some valuable item of information, which would have made his employment by the Germans an excellent bargain for them. Who knows, too, whether his actions had led to suspicion? In any case he himself began to fear that he would be apprehended, and hence, taking advantage of an advance on the part of the British in the neighbourhood of the Somme, he had joined the German army, taking with him Roger Norman and Bill Andrews.

It may be as well, before returning to our hero, that we should say a word or two with regard to this gigantic British offensive, which began in the neighbourhood of the River Somme on 1st July, 1916.

There is no need to describe events which had occurred before this date, for everyone must be aware of the incidents of the 1914 campaign, and of the desperate fighting which had taken place in 1915. Suffice it to say that, having stemmed the German tide of invasion in 1914, having held it up still more firmly, though desperate efforts were made by the enemy in the earlier part of 1915, the

British and the French gathered their strength together, and in September of 1915 launched a gigantic attack on the enemy, which, dwarfed by the fighting near the River Somme in 1916, was yet violent enough to be some indication of what was to follow.

The British in the neighbourhood of Loos, from Bethune down to the Ridge of Vimy, drove a wedge into the ranks of the Kaiser's army, and broke their way through concreted and iron-bound defences which had been laboriously prepared by the enemy. That offensive came to a stop as regards the British in front of the Hohenzollern Redoubt before Hulluch, and at the environs of Lens, the mining city of northern France. It captured the village of Loos and the coal-pits outside; and though it gave the British no great advantage in position, indeed none at all, it whetted the appetite of our troops, and increased their determination to carry a future offensive to greater success.

Pass down the long line of trenches holding up the German advance, pass south of the Ridge of Vimy where the French assaulted earlier in 1915 and had been checked, down through Arras to Compiègne, and so past Soissons on the River Aisne, where the left of that glorious Expeditionary Force, which Britain first sent to France in 1914, hung on to the river, down past Reims to the Champagne area—a flat, uninteresting, and uninviting chalk land. There, in September, 1915, the French flung themselves upon the Germans, as we flung ourselves upon the enemy in front of Loos

and Hulluch, and wrested much ground and many prisoners from him.

Armies, like individuals, must rest, must re-equip and re-organize after great exertions, and after those two offensives, in 1915, the British made ready for further fighting in the year that was to follow. Not only British soldiers, but a vast army of workers at home, of organizers and administrators, plunged whole-heartedly into the giant task of equipping Britain with guns and ammunition which would overpower those possessed by the enemy, who, in the earlier days, and even in 1915, still possessed an overwhelming quantity of batteries and missiles to hurl at our people.

History, no doubt, will tell the very interesting tale of how munition factories grew up throughout England. How men, aye, and women too, by the hundred thousand flocked to them to prepare material for their soldiers fighting in Flanders and elsewhere; and how, when 1916 dawned, our batteries in France were becoming far more numerous; while of ammunition there was such a supply as the world had never before seen and no man had ever contemplated.

In describing British operations, we pass over the months preceding July of this eventful year with the mere mention that in June the Canadian Corps were heavily attacked in front of Hooge and the Sanctuary Wood, quite close to Ypres, by an overwhelming force of Germans, and that with the spirit of those Canadians who had fought so valorously in the second Battle of Ypres, near

St. Julien, those gallant fellows held up the attack, and, driven in at the commencement, advanced with élan and recaptured their positions.

Finally, July 1st dawned to the thunder of hundreds of British guns, which for days had been deluging the German positions in Picardy, and there commenced along the front of the British Third and Fourth Armies, and along the front of the French line to their south, an attack the proportions of which were unprecedented.

But fully to appreciate the significance and intention of this huge operation, continuing as it did for weeks on end, it becomes necessary to launch into a brief description of the general war position. Recollect that Britain and France were not the only nations allied against the central peoples of Europe, comprising Germany and Austria and Bulgaria, with the Turks trailing off into the Middle East. The colossus Russia formed part of our alliance. Italy, too, was already taking no inconspicuous part in the effort to crush that military oligarchy which had grown up these forty years past in Germany and Austria. Portugal, too, had declared war on the Kaiser and his people, and as the months rolled on, others were to follow.

Fighting in those first months of the war, for the most part a war of defence, forced upon them by necessity, rather than of aggression, the Allied nations, perceiving the huge peril which threatened them—for the strength of Germany and Austria, and particularly of Germany, was then, and, indeed, is now as we write, enormous—the nations

in alliance with Great Britain called their most trusted people together, and conferences were held which settled not the policy of one of these nations alone, but a general policy to be adopted by them all.

In fact, once the tide had turned, and there were munitions in abundance, Russia and France and Britain and Italy were to strike at the enemy at the selfsame moment. More than that, so that the nation unable to supply itself easily with munitions might not be crippled in those efforts, others, such as Britain, with the vast arrangements she had made, would send supplies to that country.

Yet the best of plans go awry. The Germans, hemmed in on the Western Front, held firmly on the Eastern Front, where they had driven their way through Poland to the borders of Russia; and the Austrians also, held in Galicia by the Muscovite armies, and on the Italian Front by the troops of the gallant king of that nation, made their plans too, and upset those formulated by the Entente nations.

In February of this eventful year of 1916 the Crown Prince of Prussia—hated by countless thousands—launched a gigantic assault on the terrain round and about the city of Verdun, the apex of an important and very large French salient. Not long afterwards the Austrians, having collected guns and men and material in the Trentino, hurled their masses upon the Italians, striving to break in upon their lines of communication with the Isonzo Front, and bring about a coup which

might easily put the Italian nation out of the fighting.

But it is not our purpose to describe those huge conflicts in detail; we merely remind the reader that fighting at Verdun, which was of the bitterest and the fiercest, went on for months, and still continued in June, when our preparations for an offensive on the River Somme were completed. That offensive on the Trentino Front, on the part of the Austrians, made some progress also, and there were times when the Italians were hard pressed.

Finally it became necessary for the other partners of the alliance, Russia and Britain, to throw the weight of their blows upon the enemy, to distract their attention and draw off their concentrations then levelled upon the French and the Italians respectively. Thus, in June, Brusiloff launched an impetuous attack upon the Austrian Front in Galicia, and captured three hundred thousand prisoners and much booty. Then, within a few days of that attack, the Franco-British offensive on the Somme opened—that offensive in which Roger took no unworthy part, and in which he was wounded.

Space forbids that we should attempt even broadly to describe the series of operations which continued from 1st July, 1916, to well on into the winter. Suffice it to say that the British fought over a front some fifteen miles in length—a front every foot of which was heavily fortified, and provided with vast underground and concreted dug-outs. Yet it was not the capture of ground that we sought, nor the

destruction of dug-outs and defences; it was to drive a blow home at the heart of the enemy, to destroy the soldiers of the Kaiser, to break the strength of the German invader.

That we went far to achieve this object there is no doubt; for we destroyed numbers of the enemy and captured thousands of prisoners and guns, and much booty. Yet the German line, forced back though it had been, still remained; and behind it lay Roger and Bill Andrews, prisoners, taken by craft and treachery, with no opportunity, it seemed, of rejoining their fellows.

CHAPTER XII

Roger and Bill Andrews

"CAPTURED! What's it mean? Who's the bloke here? What's he grinnin' for?" growled Bill Andrews as he and Roger stood in that enemy trench surrounded by Germans, with Ernst Hillstein — the spy—gaping and mouthing near them. "See, you here, you German—for you ain't a British soldier I'm sure; I'll——"

"Steady!" Roger whispered. "Keep quiet, Bill; do nothing to rouse the anger of our guards. Who's he, you ask; listen whilst I tell you."

There came a lull in the storm of shells tumbling about the place, and heavy firing from a German battery some little distance off attracted the attention of their guards from the prisoners; even the wretch Ernst Hillstein stepped away some paces and peered over the parapet of the trench to watch what was happening, and in the interval Roger rapidly explained who this Ernst Hillstein was, how it happened that they were prisoners, and why it was that the man dressed in khaki who had lured them into the hands of the enemy had a grudge against him.

"He was nothing but a bully, and now that I see

him plainly (for you must remember that on the night when I knocked him over it was pitch-dark) I remember that he was a rascal well known by the police in the town near Hurslet. I seem to remember, too, that his father once kept a baker's shop and had once upon a time been a German."

"Ha!" growled Bill, "once a German, always one—eh?"

"Always," admitted Roger bitterly; "still, he was naturalized, and this fellow, because of that, and because he was born in England, would be British."

"To the backbone!" ejaculated Bill with an impatient stamp of his heavily-booted foot—"to the backbone—eh? I know 'em! I've seen and heard of 'em! Shouting at the top of their voices, and waving Union Jacks, and doing all that sort of thing in public; but behind yer back, mind you, plotting, planning, ready to help the Kaiser. Blood's thicker than water, Mr. Roger; the stuff what's been crammed into the heads of these Germans don't escape so easily, and what the father learned he'll have passed on to his sons. A spy, is he? Well, I'm not surprised at all. Tell us more about it."

Even when Bill had heard the whole tale he was still gaping with amazement. For, indeed, it was a most extraordinary and unfortunate coincidence that here in the heart of the Somme battle-fields this wretch should have come in contact with our hero. But Bill was the last soldier to grumble, and just the very one to make the best of every circumstance.

"What then?" he asked. "What's the next move?"

Roger shrugged his shoulders—a habit he had learned since he had come to France. "What next?" he answered. "That depends upon the Germans: I suppose we shall be hurried back along a communicating trench till we get to the rear, where we shall be herded with other prisoners. We shall be searched, disarmed, and sent off in trucks into the interior. Heaven knows when we shall see France again—or England."

"Unless," whispered Bill, for the Germans were turning towards them again—"unless——eh, mate?"

Roger nodded his head vigorously. "Unless we escape. Of course that's always something to be thought about," he said. "And if there's a chance we'll try it. You're game, aren't you, Bill?"

"Game!—me? And you ask it!" answered his companion indignantly. "Me as has fought alongside you these many days, me 'game' to escape from these Germans? Well, you wait; if the chance comes you'll learn a thing or two, you will, Mr. Roger!"

"Stop! They're turning back towards us. Remember, don't let that rascal rouse you to anger, and, whatever you do, don't attempt to strike him," whispered Roger. "By the way he looks at us he bears us nothing but ill will, and if he can only torment us and tantalize us sufficiently to get us to do something desperate and stupid—as, for instance, striking him—that would be doing precisely what

he wants. Remember, too, Bill, the record these Germans have; such an act would cause them to court-martial us at once—to kill us even without a trial. So be on your guard; keep cool, and, above all, keep your temper."

But when it came to the test, it was hard enough for Roger, let alone the impulsive Bill, to remain cool when Ernst Hillstein came near them. Finding that grimaces and grins, meant to show his delight at their discomfiture, were insufficient to rouse them, he took a rifle from one of the German infantrymen and belaboured them with the butt, finally even piercing Roger's coat with the point of a bayonet and wounding him slightly. That prick and the pain it caused sent the blood surging through Roger's veins, while it caused Bill to clench both fists and prepare to launch himself upon this ruffian.

It was fortunate, therefore, that just at that instant a German officer appeared upon the scene and gave a sharp order.

"Take the prisoners to the rear!" he commanded. "Go by the underground communicating trench, and see that you get a receipt for them when you hand them over. Ah! Who are you—you in khaki?"

Ernst Hillstein treated him to a friendly grin and answered in perfect German.

"Ah! One of our spies, then—born in England?" asked the officer.

"Yes, in England—and a good place too!"

"And have now taken sides against what are

really your own people?" demanded the officer, snapping out the question while he fingered the butt of his revolver.

"What else?" answered Ernst Hillstein a little surlily. "Isn't it helping the cause? Aren't you Germans in want of assistance?"

"Pah!" The officer turned on his heel with an exclamation of disgust and went off in the opposite direction, leaving the spy glowering after him, gnashing his teeth, and then staring after the retreating figures of Roger and Bill Andrews.

"Down here, quick—they've started shelling again!" commanded the non-commissioned officer who was in charge of their escort. "Close in behind, you men. If one of these fellows tries to escape, bayonet him without hesitation. Forward!"

It was a curious journey which they made under the ground on their way from that forward position, and in ordinary times Roger would have been vastly interested by his experiences. For though he, like thousands of other British officers and men, had lain out there in Picardy for many months, facing the positions along the Somme front which they had attacked on July 1st and the days which followed, not many, we imagine, had realized for a moment what gigantic preparations for defence the enemy had made—were making, indeed—all the time that our troops were assembling. Here, then, was evidence before him of the incessant labour of the enemy and of the extraordinary works which they had carried out.

That communicating trench into which he and



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"'TAKE THE PRISONERS TO THE REAR!' HE COMMANDED"

Bill were forced to descend, and along which they were escorted, was twenty feet beneath the ground, encased in wood from end to end, and lit by electric light just as brilliantly as had been the dug-outs. Down there in the cool depths of this boarded place the sound of guns quite close at hand came only as a gentle rumble, whilst shells might fall overhead and explode, almost without the inhabitants of this lair being aware of their coming. It pushed straight on without a curve and without deviation for many yards, until it entered a series of double-decked dug-outs capable of holding some hundreds of men, where, indeed, at that moment German reserves were massing.

"On! on!" commanded the non-commissioned officer in guttural tones. "Push on now, up those stairs. That's better; we're in the open, and only a stray shell can catch us."

Ploughing their way through the dust and debris of the German position, and now out of sight of the British—for they were descending the eastern slope of the hill upon which the German lines were constructed—Roger and his companion were hurried on for perhaps half an hour longer, and finally were thrust into a cage constructed of posts and barbed wire, where they discovered other British soldiers, who unfortunately were prisoners like themselves. An hour later they were searched; then, as the evening came along, they were marched to a near-by railway siding, were pushed into trucks, and presently were travelling towards the north-east in the direction of Germany.

"That's the sort of place one doesn't want to go to," said Bill, as he sat beside Roger in the dark carriage. "Seems to me, Mr. Roger, that now's the time for us to plan an escape if ever we're to do it; for in a little while, a few hours maybe, we shall be out of France and even out of Belgium, and then it'll be Germany! Hah! Germany! And matters will become different."

"Yes, different," agreed Roger. "But how? Here we are boxed in in this truck, some twenty-five of us, without weapons, without even a hammer with which to break a way out. Looks impossible, doesn't it, Bill?"

"Aye, it does," the latter answered somewhat sadly. "But you never know, do you? Think it over! You're the boy, Roger—Mr. Roger, I should say—you're the boy to get hold of something to fix these Germans and give us our liberty."

"And supposing," said Roger, all of a sudden—"supposing we do see an opportunity, are we then to move off, leaving our comrades here?"

"Ah! that's a question. Wouldn't be quite the thing—eh? Wouldn't like that sort of thing to be done to me, you know—not quite the game, eh, sir?"

"Certainly not," Roger told him; "certainly not, Bill. If one of these fellows suddenly had a chance of escape, and there was no opportunity to warn the others, of course he'd take it. That's part of the game of war. But here, with twenty-five of us—twenty-six counting myself—it couldn't be done, and I wouldn't even wish to do it. Boys," he called

out, "we're alone here, and there's no one to listen to what we are saying, for the train's rumbling and rattling so much. Supposing, you boys, there's a chance of getting away—supposing we could make that chance—what then?"

A sturdy Australian pushed his way forward, rising from the floor where he had been seated. "What then, sir?" he repeated, recognizing Roger as an officer. "Why, every one of us would come along. Show us the way, and we'll break our way out of the van and then take our chance of getting back to our fellows."

They were a mixed lot of British soldiers in that van: a Jock from the Highlands—a sturdy, bow-legged, mud-stained individual, whose tin helmet would persist in riding at a rakish angle on his head; a wizened individual from the West of England, who in better times was the life and soul of his battalion—a man who could sing a song and dance a jig with anyone, and who was seldom down-hearted. These soldiers came from the mountains of Wales, from the Midlands of England, from the south, from almost every part, and from quite half a dozen regiments; and, more than that, they came from battalions which had seen much fighting and were hardened veterans.

"Aye, show us the way, sir," they called one after another; "we're game for it. Anything's better than going to a German prison."

"Then how?—how's it to be done?" wondered Roger, first standing and peering out through the many cracks in the sides of the rickety van in which

they were travelling, and then squatting down again beside Bill and burying his face in his hands. "How? It's dark outside now, and if only these doors were opened there might be a chance. But look for yourself, Bill," he suddenly called aloud; "we're bolted and barred in, and perhaps the next van is full of Germans guarding the convoy. Looks impossible, don't it?"

"So did the German line on the Somme when we got to business first of all," said Bill sturdily. "The Germans thought their dug-outs and their what-nots impregnable—that's the word, ain't it? Impregnable. But we bored a way through 'em, and our chaps are barging their way on even at this moment. Things may look hard and difficult, but impossible—never!"

Yet two hours rolled by—two weary hours—while the darkness outside increased. Meanwhile the train of trucks crawled onwards, halting sometimes for half an hour and then moving on at a sluggish pace, while the parallel lines bore other trucks making towards the German front, some filled with ammunition, others with troops being pushed up to support their comrades in their vain attempt to hold up the British and the French attack.

At length they halted in a siding, and more hours passed, till, peering through a crevice, Roger felt sure that day was about to dawn. It was still quite dark, yet up in the eastern sky there was just a glimmer of light, a shred, torn as it were in the curtain of darkness, a shred of flimsy white which seemed to herald the dawn.

"What was that? Hush!" he called; whereat the men nodding round him held up their heads of a sudden and listened. "Hush! I thought I heard a gun somewhere near us! There it is again, and nearer still! What's it mean? For by now we must be well behind the German guns, and our guns could hardly reach."

Bill gripped him by the wrist: "Guns!" he said hoarsely, "anti-aircraft! It's some of our flying boys making their way over the German lines raiding their communications. Jingo, if that isn't a bomb falling near us! It 'ud be hard lines if one of our own men were to burst up this train, and smash us, his comrades."

The words had hardly left his lips when there came a terrifying crash and a shattering report quite close to the train, which set the trucks shaking and rocking; a blast of air struck the line of vehicles broadside, and almost swept them from the rails, while it caused more cracks to start in the rotten woodwork. Cries could be heard from farther along the train, the shouts of frightened men, and then loud orders. But the voice and the creaking of the wagons were drowned a moment later by another shattering detonation, followed by shrieks, while portions of an exploded bomb, which a British aeroplane had dropped from far overhead, hurtled through the air, shrieked past the wagons, and thudded into their sides.

As if someone had been stationed outside for that very purpose, the doors of the truck in which Roger and his comrades had been incarcerated burst

open, while they themselves were flattened upon the floor, and lay there half-stunned, wholly deafened, almost unable to comprehend what had happened. Then Roger pulled himself together, and, still shaking from head to foot, for the concussion had been extremely violent, he dragged himself to his feet, staggered to the side of the car, and looked out.

Men were running up and down the line, men shouting and bawling at one another. Just in front of the truck in which he stood was a tumbled heap of twisted ironwork and splintered wood, while the darkness hid the forms of Germans who had been travelling in it. There was another truck in front of that, also a wagon torn from its wheels and cast bodily to one side, and from that came the dismal cries of men who had been injured.

"Stop here!" he called over his shoulder. "Let no man move from the car; I'll be back as soon as I have found out what has happened."

He dropped to the rails and walked rapidly forward. Yes, the truck next to that from which he had just emerged was destroyed almost completely, while the one still farther in front had been hurled on to the other rail, and lay there like a crumpled-up concertina, from which came the notes of men whom it contained. Still farther along were other trucks also wrecked, for the British airman had aimed true enough, and had practically destroyed the convoy. Roger clambered up on to the ruins of that truck from which the voices came, and found that, just as in the case of the one which he had left, the doors had been burst open. A

bayonet was protruding from the entrance, inside lay a dead German, and over his legs a second. Groping about, his fingers lit upon another rifle, then upon the accoutrements of a German soldier lying amongst the bodies.

It was war. Had it been otherwise, Roger's first thought would have been to assist the poor wretches who had come to grief in the truck. But, he reflected, it was war, and their own security had to be considered. In a moment he slid down to the track again, and ran back to his comrades. Clambering up, he stood amongst them and issued his orders.

"Not a man must speak," he said sharply. "If you come upon a German, pass on without attempting to answer any question he may direct to you. There's a truck along the line here which has been wrecked and burst open. It appears to have held some German soldiers. There are arms in it. I want half a dozen of you to come along at once and collect those weapons; the remainder will get out of the truck and lie on the track near it till we return. Then we'll see what's going to happen."

In the confusion which reigned about that wrecked train, hardly a single German gave a thought to the British prisoners it had contained. They thought rather of their own safety. Bolting away from the scene, they cowered beside the track, fearful lest that British aeroplane should return and cause more damage. Thus it happened that Roger, and those men he took to the wrecked

truck, remained undisturbed, and presently returned to their comrades with a fine haul of arms and ammunition. A further search revealed more weapons, and in a very short space of time he had the satisfaction of knowing that there were rifles and bayonets, and in some cases revolvers, for every man of his command.

"Good, then!" he said. "Now, we'll march!"

"Where, sir?" demanded Bill, his pulses beating with excitement.

"Where? Just where it seems best and most convenient. Straight away from the track. First of all, then, we'll hunt for some sort of a place where we can hide and look out for something better! March! and not a word from any one of you! We want to get out of this mess, don't we, boys? so see that you're careful."

CHAPTER XIII

Cut Off

GROPING their way through the darkness, and hurrying from the railway track, since in its neighbourhood there were likely to be many German soldiers, Roger and the party of British troops he led tramped hurriedly off into the country, and, gaining a road, marched along it till the streak of gathering light in the eastern sky grew broader.

"There's a wood yonder," said Bill, who was marching beside our hero, pointing to an elevation which could be dimly seen in the gathering light away on their left. "Supposing we were to occupy it?"

"Let's!" replied Roger laconically. "'Any port in a storm,' Bill, and I haven't seen any other likely spot which offers a chance of a refuge. Let's push on, for the sooner we are under cover the better."

Breaking into a run, the party soon gained the summit of the hill and entered a dense growth of trees. Plunging into it, they continued their way until they were far in the interior, and until they were quite sure that it was of large proportions—a forest, in fact.

"Seems to me as though it extends for miles and miles," said Roger, as in their wanderings they came to the edge of the wood, and he was able to peep out. "It's now light enough for one to see quite a distance, and so far as I can ascertain the forest extends all along this ridge. That's all the better, isn't it? For the Germans are sure to expect that we are here, seeing that it's within easy distance of the railway, and will search it. That's one of the things we shall have to consider seriously; the next is food."

"Ah!—food," echoed Bill. "Things have been so exciting up to now that one hasn't given much thought to it, but arms and ammunition won't be much good to us unless we have got something to eat—something to live on."

Turning away from the edge of the wood, and now able to press on far more easily because of the gathering light, Roger and his men plunged deeply into the forest, and, finding a track, followed it for some two miles, and then, as it was now quite light, turned from it and buried themselves amongst the trees. An hour later they heard sounds in the distance, and presently came upon a clearing in which nestled a tiny French village, which appeared almost to have escaped the notice of the German invaders. Smoke was issuing from many of the chimneys, old people were emerging from their houses, while boys and girls were already walking out into the patches which French industry had cleared of forest, and where cattle were browsing.

"One of them beasts," said Bill, fastening a

covetous eye on a heifer not far off—"one of them beasts dragged in here and slaughtered and cooked would provide this little lot with a square meal, wouldn't it, Mr. Roger? And when you look at the smoke coming out of those chimneys—my, don't it give you an appetite! They'll be cooking things in there, Mr. Roger, omelettes, perhaps—lor', don't it make a man's mouth water! Um! I swear I can smell the coffee that they are preparing for breakfast, and—strike me, if there ain't fowls trotting about! Now, just a few of them, sir, would keep this little lot of soldiers quiet. D'you think it's possible?"

"Depends! We must look on for a while and make sure that no Germans are in the neighbourhood. There's something else, too, to be considered," said Roger, as he thought about the matter. "If I, for instance, were to make my way into the village, supposing no Germans to be there, and the people were to give me food for this party, who'd be the first to suffer?"

"Aye, who?" said Bill, scratching his head reflectively. "Everyone knows the Huns 'ud come down hard upon the old folks here. No, sir, it can't be done in that way; these French people must be kept ignorant of our presence. If we must have food, and, of course, we must, we've got to take it without asking."

"And in the meanwhile," added Roger, his brains working busily, "we've got to post look-outs, so that if the Germans do attempt to search this forest, we shall be aware of their coming."

They sat in a circle under the trees and discussed matters; in fact, held a species of council in which Roger and his men exchanged views quite freely. Then, to make sure that those who were to be posted as look-outs should have no difficulty in returning to their comrades, special instructions were given to the selected men.

"We've got to be unusually canny," said Roger, "and shall have to copy a Red Indian dodge, and one adopted by all American backwoodsmen: you fellows who go out must blaze your way by cutting a notch from the bark of the trees that you pass. A cut with a bayonet will do it easily, and will not delay you very much. Then, if you have to return, you will get back to the main party in double-quick time; also, you will have the feeling all the while that there is no possibility of losing your fellows."

Four men were quickly selected, and were at once sent off, two towards the edge of the forest which the party had recently left, and two in precisely the opposite direction. A fifth man was then posted close to the cutting which Roger and his men had followed a little earlier, while the remainder sat down within the shadow of the trees watching the tiny village.

Far away in the distance the deep guttural boom of guns could be heard, while more than once an aeroplane swished overhead bearing the iron cross —the mark of the Germans. Sometimes Roger even fancied that he could hear the distant faint rattle of machine-guns; but, after all, it might only have been fancy, for it was hours now since he and

his men had been incarcerated in that railway truck; and though the convoy of trucks had travelled on only at a snail's pace, yet, for all he knew, the spot where it was wrecked might have been miles from those historic battle-fields of the Somme, where British and French were fighting to defeat the Kaiser's armies.

What would Roger not have given to be back there with the British troops? And in that respect every one of the gallant fellows now with him held precisely similar views. For, like every one of the fine fellows whom Britain had trained and sent to the front, they had entered upon those Somme operations with a gusto there was no denying. This war is no ordinary war, as the least intelligent will admit, and one of the particular points for which it is notorious is the cosmopolitan character of the men who form the magnificent British force which our Empire has thrown into this battle of nations.

In the ranks there are to be found men from every part of the world where the British flag flies, and, indeed, from many other quarters. They have come from towns and backwoods and prairies of Canada, from the rugged interior of Newfoundland, from the farms and cities of Australia, and from a hundred different places. There are farmers, mechanics, workers in every class of material, professional men, lawyers, architects, and a host of others amongst them; while, throughout the ranks, the order of intelligence of our fighting-men may be said to be on a different plane entirely from that

of the men, for instance, who fought in the days of Wellington, in the Crimean campaign, even in the war we waged against the Boers in South Africa but a few years ago—those Boers who are now our firm friends and who have given us such able assistance.

What wonder, then, that throughout the ranks there is a clearer conception, in these days of better education, and having regard to the cosmopolitan character of the men themselves, than was the case in the former days? Individuals understand more readily and more thoroughly what it is they are fighting for, and, better still, they understand the nature of the operations in which they are to take their part. Thus, as the months of this war have rolled on, and first the German advance was checked, and then the might of Britain increased, so that she in her turn was able to drive forward, a keenness to be up and doing passed through the ranks, and the commencement of that gigantic Battle of the Somme found our soldiers ready and eager for the conflict, and thoroughly aware of the fact that it was not ground that they were fighting for, not so much the capture of this village or of that, but that they were fighting to break the strength of the German army, to drive in hard blows which should damage his strength and his *moral*.

To be torn then from the battle-line, when already our troops had achieved much in their efforts, was a huge disappointment, and one which Roger and his men felt keenly. As to the battle itself, it would be wellnigh impossible, in the space at our disposal,

to do more than give a rough description of it, for to do more would be perhaps to confuse our readers. Yet such an historical combat must of necessity receive adequate mention.

We have said already that the British had for months been preparing their blow, and that the conflict commenced on 1st July of this eventful 1916. Let us go further—let us even anticipate events a little—by stating that the conflict raged throughout the months of July, August, and September, and, checked by bad weather in October, proceeded once more in November. In effect, it was a series of battles all along the line, from Gommecourt, north and west of the River Ancre, down to Maricourt, just to the north of the River Somme; while from that point, where the French lay alongside our forces, the battle-line extended to some miles south of the Somme. Even to outline the advances made, to describe in the broadest detail the difficulties met with, the triumphs achieved, and the gallantry displayed by our men, would be to pack our pages. Let it suffice that we mention the fact that on that eventful 1st July, when the action opened, the British left, from Gommecourt down to and south of the River Ancre, met terrific German resistance, for it was just there that the enemy had anticipated an attack, and that they had massed guns and men in stupendous numbers.

Thus it followed that from Gommecourt to La Boiselle little or no progress was made, and very severe fighting ensued. But south of La Boiselle, to Maricourt, there was a brilliant advance to the

north and south of the Fricourt salient, which thus was almost surrounded, and, indeed, fell to our arms within a day or so; while farther south the French, striking with fury and that magnificent élan which has carried them to victory so often, found the Germans less prepared, and broke through their first-line defences. Thereafter British and French fought their way into the enemy's second line, and gained the ridges about the Somme. Another effort carried them to and through the German third line, and so to his fourth; while November saw the British advance along the line from Gommecourt to Thiepval, following the valley of the Ancre, where they had been repulsed on a former occasion, and saw them drive deep into the invader's position. One word more. Preparations for a renewed offensive in 1917 caused the enemy to consider the position seriously. For the Allies had been within an ace of wrecking their line and breaking right through in those operations of 1916. Fearful of such a happening, the Kaiser's troops retired, in the late spring, along a great length of their front, yielding to the Allies hundreds of square miles of ravished country. It was a symbol and a significant sign of what was to follow. It was a triumph for the Allies and a bitter blow to our ruthless enemy.

Having thus brought events to the year 1917, anticipating by some months, as we have mentioned, let us again return to Roger and his men, captives in the enemy country; yet hardly captives after all, seeing that they had escaped from their

guards and were at liberty behind the lines of the Germans.

"There's men marching over toward the wood, sir," one of the outposts who had been sent out to watch reported, some two hours later. "Fifty-two of 'em, sir, and an officer with them."

"Coming this way?" asked Roger anxiously.

"No, sir; entering the wood at the far end. I left my mate to keep an eye on them, and came in to report."

"Then we'll send a couple of men along the drive, so as to watch their movements. Better still, I'll go myself. Sergeant Thomas, you'll take command of the party while I'm absent, and will send along the drive if you have any further information. Bill, you and I'll go at once. We've got to deal with those fellows."

Leaving their men seated amongst the trees, and enjoining upon them the necessity to keep away from the observation of the villagers, Roger and Bill set off along the central ride, which made its way true and straight down the centre of the forest.

"We'll run," said Roger. "The sooner we know the intentions of those men the better. Of course, if it's possible, I shall let 'em pass through while we're hiding. But if they separate, and it is impossible to avoid them, I shall try to teach 'em a lesson."

Bill guffawed. "One of the same sort as you taught that there Ernst fellow. Now if he happened to come along, mark you, me lad, Mr. Roger, I'd ask leave to have a word or so with him, just

a word, sir. And you'll understand, we wouldn't want to get making speeches."

Bill swung the butt of his German rifle over his head significantly, and grinned, while Roger joined in his merriment.

"Stop! I saw someone. Ah! It's the man we posted up this way. Look here, Turner," said Roger, beckoning to the man whose figure he had espied lurking at the edge of the drive, "there is information that the enemy are entering the wood up at the far end. We're going to keep an eye on them. If by chance any come this way, get back to the party and warn them, and then send a message along to us. Now, Bill, trot."

They kept on at a steady pace for half an hour, and then, leaving the drive, dived in amongst the trees and bracken. Creeping through the wood now, it was not long before they heard voices, and presently came upon the party of Germans whose presence had been reported.

"Having a feed before beginning their search," whispered Roger, as he and Bill peered through the trees at the invaders. "Got a water-cart and a general-service cart with 'em."

"Rations," gurgled Bill. "Them ruffians has got a fire workin', and blest if they ain't cooking their grub. Bah! Ain't it sickening to see 'em, and we nigh starving."

"Sickening!" agreed Roger, sniffing the breeze, which wafted the smell of cooking meat from the enemy camp through the trees and so to his nostrils. "Sickening! Look here, Bill. It seems to

me that food and drink are just as important to us as is liberty. What's the good of freedom if you can't enjoy it, if you're starving?"

"Aye, what's?" grunted the Corporal. "Seems to me that instead of puttin' liberty first, we'd better get busy and think of our stomachs. We could hang on without food for another day, perhaps. But then we'd be weakened, and wouldn't be up to fightin'. So what about taking that cart and the grub in it, sir? Properly handled, our fellows would make short work of these fellows."

Roger thought hard as he watched the enemy, and then turned abruptly from the camp and led the way back toward the open ride, passing through the forest. "You stay here and keep an eye on 'em," he told Bill. "Hide in amongst the trees, and if they show signs of movement, return to the main party. I'll get back at once and bring them along. I'm going to take that cart, Bill, if there are a hundred Germans with it."

He left his old chum grinning, standing just within the trees, his rifle slung across his shoulder, ready for anything that might happen. Then Roger went off at his best speed, first amongst the trees and a little later down the centre of the drive, where his fleeing figure was hardly likely to attract attention. A quarter of an hour later he rejoined the party, just after one of the outposts had come in.

"Nothing to report, sir," he said to Roger, saluting as if they were still with the British army. "Those fifty men are all that have entered the wood on our side."

"Then all the better for our plans. I want all the outposts brought in at once," said Roger. "Let a man go out in each direction and follow the blaze marks. As soon as you get to our outposts, hurry back as fast as your legs can bring you. Boys, those Huns have good food and drink with them. I've an idea that you'd do a lot to get hold of it. Then, once we've fed, we shall be in a better position and in a better temper to consider the difficult future."

Under other conditions they would have cheered him. Now they showed their delight by broad grins. Then a man went off in each direction, while the others sat down and waited. Half an hour later the united party was hurrying along the drive, where presently they came upon Bill lolling amongst the trees, coolly smoking a clay pipe he had had the good fortune to have with him.

"And them chaps is a-doin' the same," he reported. "I've been across to their camp half a dozen times, and the last found 'em lollin' about, as if they was waitin' for another party. They was still eatin', hang 'em, and I felt like walking right in and gettin' what's left in the cart before they could finish with it. Officer been out into the drive once, and stood there listenin', as if he expected someone to come from the opposite direction."

"Ah! From the opposite direction. Then it looks as if two parties had been told off to search the forest. One of you men strike off to the left,

blazing a path as you go. The moment you hear or see more Germans approaching, come back and let us know. It looks to me, men, as if we might elude the search-party by marching towards the point of the wood. The Germans in camp near here entered near it, and probably searched it as they came along, and will report to the other party, should it arrive, that all is clear behind them. Now, if we slipped along pretty soon, we'd leave them the whole forest to search, and that'll keep them busy, while we can make off, if necessary, into the open. But first we must get something to eat, and as to that, very much depends on what course the enemy follow."

A careful move toward the enemy camp told Roger quite a lot, for he found the Germans there stirring. They were broken up into parties of four, and their officer was giving them their orders.

"Bother! Wish I could speak their lingo, for then I could tell what's going to happen. But it looks as if they were going to form a chain right across the wood on this side of the centre drive, while it's probable that the other party, when it arrives, will search the other side. The sooner we get beyond them the better."

"There's fifty of 'em and an officer marching through the trees in this direction," Roger was told immediately on his return to his men, for the one who had been sent off had come back within a few minutes. "Seems to me, sir, as if they'd bivouacked some way up toward the tip of the forest, for I could smell a fire."

"And they're marching down here, on this side of the drive?" asked Roger.

"This side, sir. Strung out in small parties so far as I could see; coming along slowly."

Roger was not the sort of officer who takes long to make up his mind.

"The sooner we're away from this the better," he told his men. "Slip across the ride at once, and see that not one of you makes a sound. We've got to get beyond the party I've just been watching, and then we shall be safe. Look out for dead twigs and branches, for they snap with the sound of a rifle. Get into single file once we're in the trees across the ride; and don't scatter, whatever happens."

They could hear voices coming from the distance now; and hardly had they contrived to slip across the wide drive cut through the forest than a figure emerged, an officer, who put a whistle to his lips and sent out a loud signal. A minute later another figure appeared, farther up, toward the tip of the forest, and the two, having saluted, approached one another.

"Come along quickly. We shall be lucky if we do it," whispered Roger. Then, leading the way toward the outside edge of the forest, he pushed on through the bracken and trees till he felt sure that he was well beyond the camp he had been watching. Turning then to his left, he struck boldly toward the tip of the wood, halting at last when he and his men were some hundreds of yards behind the enemy.

"That has done it splendidly," he told them. "Lie down and rest, and no talking. Bill, you'll come along with me. We must watch those fellows."

It was precisely half an hour later when the two reappeared, Bill evidently somewhat excited.

"They're off," explained Roger. "The men have been divided up into small parties and are marching away from us through the wood, searching each side of the drive. In half an hour they'll be out of hearing. Meanwhile it will interest you all to hear that they've packed their ration wagons in the camp which we just now slipped by, and have left ten men with them. Ten men won't keep you fellows away from your dinners."

"Ten men!" grinned Bill, pulling his belt in with a jerk. "Not a hundred of 'em won't keep us off. See here, mates, I'm that empty that I've got to hitch my belt up a hole, and even then I'm hollow. You ain't goin' to be kept away from grub that's yours for the takin', just because ten Huns is a-watchin' of it?"

Those fine fellows licked their lips and gripped their rifles, standing ready for Roger's orders. Ten men indeed! The pangs of hunger, which the mere mention of food near at hand increased, would have made them face with eager haste the hundred which Bill had mentioned.

CHAPTER XIV

Foiling the German

"AND then, of course, we comes to the other part of the business, a prickly, knotty sort o' business too, eh, sir?" grinned Bill as he lolled near Roger and sent a wisp of tobacco smoke across the clearing where Germans had so recently been feeding.

"And, as you was sayin', sir, a little while back, afore we'd had a feed, once we had got sommat tucked away under our jackets we'd be able the better to tackle this here future business."

"Precisely!" laughed Roger, amused as always by Bill's cheery sayings, while the men guffawed. Not, let us explain, that they forgot what was due to their officer. Far from it; especially since Bill had been able, during the few hours these gallant fellows had been together, to impart a few facts to them—facts, be it understood, relating to Roger in particular.

"Jined along o' me as a plain private. Was put up to non-commissioned rank afore you could say Jack Robinson, and gets marked for a commission before we leaves the old country. Well, you've seen and heard him, and you can judge that he's the one fit for such an honour. But it warn't his

speech—what's that of a gent—nor his smartness that got him the commission. No," said Bill, glowering upon his audience lest one should dare to disagree with him. "He just fought for and won it. Come closer, you chaps. There may be a Hun somewhere near, and you never know when they speak English. Come here, and I'll pitch yer a yarn of a Tank what'll make yer eyes water and yer ears twitch, a tale what's to do with this here officer."

Thus, thanks to the introduction Bill had given our hero, but more to Roger's own attractive personality and outstanding qualities, these men he now commanded took to him promptly, and already had the greatest confidence in him. Yet the affair was a strange one. Discipline, under the circumstances, was naturally enough relaxed; and, after all, Roger's own merry, smiling face encouraged a smiling response from these gallant fellows.

"Precisely!" laughed Roger when Bill had spoken. "I agree that we have fed well, and I cordially approve of the German ration which we have just eaten. Things have gone splendidly so far. Now we've got to consider how to get back to our own lines. That, my friends, will want quite a lot of doing."

"Quite!" they admitted, nodding at him.

"Quite!" agreed Bill with a shake of his tousled head. "Why not?" he suddenly exclaimed, tossing his head up and looking round the circle of his comrades, while he brought one huge, sun-baked paw down with a sounding crack on his thigh.

"Why shouldn't we?" he demanded; "eh? That's what I want to know. Who's to stop us?"

They looked at him in some kind of amazement; for it should be understood that the men assembled there in the wood, stretched at their ease, some seated with their backs resting against the tree-trunks, others lounging full length, the majority smoking—for they still had sufficient tobacco to go round, having fortunately captured quite a respectable ration lately—these men had, until a few hours ago, been practically unknown to one another. One man had been captured at the point where a British attack had not quite reached its objective, but, being caught by a counter-attack, or coming up against severe opposition, had been forced to retire, leaving prisoners in the hands of the enemy. Such affairs are inevitable in warfare; they occur fairly constantly all along the line, particularly in such gigantic operations as had been proceeding, and were even then still continuing along the historic front in Picardy. Other men had fallen captive in some other part, two or three more elsewhere, and so on. Not till they were herded in a prisoner cage at the back of the German front had these gallant fellows met, and not until they were ordered into that railway truck and went rumbling over the lines *en route* for Germany did they really come into close contact with one another.

Yet there was always that password amongst them which brings British soldiers together: they were soldiers of the King, comrades in this great

effort to destroy the German fiend—the Kaiser—and his war lords, and the military machine which they and the German nation between them had constructed with a definite purpose. That purpose, as all must admit, was to ravage the world, to stamp beneath the heel of Germany all opposing nations, to create a vast German Empire which should stretch round the globe, to oppose right by might, to slaughter ruthlessly all who objected. That was the undoubted purpose of the German nation. Yet, thanks to our gallant ally, France, thanks no less to the Russians, and—remember it to your dying day!—thanks to that gallant Expeditionary Force and to the soldiers who followed, the plot had been foiled, the conspirators had been checked. Each and every one of the soldiers who had gone to face the enemy was a brother, linked to the rest by a chain of circumstances which made fast friends and comrades of all.

Yet, if men became friendly on the instant because of the password we have mentioned, they yet may well be ignorant of the characteristics and the ideas and ways of their fellows. Bill was a good enough fellow, an excellent corporal, and a fine fighting-man. That is what the little company of soldiers had learned already. But what was this outburst?—the man was quite excited.

"Hold on!" cried the Sergeant whom Roger had placed in charge of the little party during his absence; "what's that, Corporal? I don't get you!"

"See here," said Bill, nettled because he was not yet understood, though a moment's reflection would have told him that that was impossible, seeing that he had not yet explained himself; "see here, Sergeant—beg pardon, Mr. Roger—but I suddenly thought of a wheeze. Here's ten of these German fellows what we've just taken prisoners—ten soldiers in field grey—we number twenty-six altogether. Let's go out and take sixteen more of the beggars; then what's to prevent us dressing up as Germans? That won't hurt anyone for awhile," he declared, glaring round at his comrades. "Who says it will? I'd like to hear him."

Roger smiled. This was Bill all over—the irresistible and emphatic and impulsive Bill.

"Hold on, Corporal, just a moment," he said, lifting a hand. "It's a splendid plan, I grant you, but——"

"Aye, but," echoed the Sergeant, "there's something against it, sir, I wouldn't wonder."

"That's for all of you to choose," said Roger. "Supposing, now, we'd sufficient German uniforms, and were to disguise ourselves in them, what then? We've got to fight our way out in any case, and before we get back to our own lines we shall meet with many difficulties. Just suppose we are rounded up and captured, what then?"

"Aye, what then?" sniffed the Sergeant.

"Ah! Oh! What then?" repeated Bill, his mouth rather wide open, looking a little crestfallen.

"You begin to get me, Corporal, I think. Sup-

posing we were rounded up, every one of us would be put against a tree and shot out of hand. The Germans aren't the people to draw fine distinctions, and though they would know very well that we had donned their uniforms merely for the purpose of making our escape, they'd arrest us and seize upon the opportunity of turning us into spies. Spies, I hardly need remind you, meet with little mercy from the enemy. Still," he went on, "if you would like——"

The Sergeant spoke up at once.

"We're ready to do just as you tell us to, sir," he said, his eyes sparkling; "and if you think that getting into German uniforms is the very best plan for us, why, we will do it, and take the risk, but——" and he shook his head.

"But you'd rather fight it out in khaki—eh?"

"I would," the Sergeant answered bluntly. "I'd far rather take my chance and be shot in clean fighting—in clean khaki—than be taken dead or alive in the Kaiser's uniform; dead or alive, sir, I don't want ever to be found wearing those colours."

"Then that settles it; so we can go on with plans for an escape. Naturally enough we shan't venture out of the wood till the night falls," said Roger. "I've been making a little calculation, and I feel quite sure that the very fact that the Germans left their ration-carts here, and those ten men in charge of them, points to their intention to return here this evening. Then, of course, they will learn at once that the prisoners they are in search of are, or have been, in the wood, and to-morrow the place

will be scoured from end to end. But perhaps we might get over that difficulty."

"Ah! now we're coming to it," said Bill, sucking at his pipe; "yes, sir?"

"But supposing we were to move on ourselves. If we placed outposts down the wood, who will warn us of the return of those Germans, we can meanwhile move up to the very tip of the forest; and then, as darkness falls, just when I imagine the enemy will return to their camp, we can slip out into the open, taking the carts and the prisoners with us. After that——"

"Hum! that's where it comes in, sir," said Bill, with a quaint grin; "the after part is the job. Still, we've been very lucky, so let's leave the after part to take care of itself."

Men nodded and smiled; jovial fellows seated round Roger sucked at their cigarettes or pipes with quiet contentment. Happy-go-lucky as the British soldier is, these fine fellows took everything that came without grumbling, though to be sure, earlier on in the day, the need for food had made them feel anything but pleasant. Now, the fact of having tucked away a most excellent meal, together with the full knowledge that the captured carts contained more provisions, sufficient indeed to support them two or three days, and, better still, the remembrance that they had so far outwitted the enemy, kept them in the very best of tempers.

Yet precautions had to be taken, and Roger, as became a careful leader, at once posted men far along in the wood on either side, and at the top

behind them, with orders to blaze their way to their posts, and to fall back at once and give information of any hostile movements. Hours passed, during which the remainder of the men slumbered for the most part, Roger himself even indulging in a siesta.

At six o'clock, when it was already getting dusk, steaming coffee was handed round by one of the men, and a ration issued; while the German prisoners, over whom stood two of the men, were also given food and drink. Just then one of the outposts returned.

"I've been right along the drive, past that French village, sir," he reported, "and by chance came to a place where by scouring to the outskirts of the wood I was able to look right along it. It goes on for some two or three miles in that direction, and then there is bare ridge for another mile or so, and then there are other tufts of wood about which I saw Germans."

"Ah—Germans! They've been searching for us then?" asked Roger.

"I think so—looks like it, sir. I could see some of them coming out of the woods, and there were parties marching away from the others. Altogether there were a score of little clumps of forest; but back here this wood ends at the top, the ridge descends, and you get lower ground leading to the railway, which was as clear as clear; I could even see the line where our train was wrecked, and the trucks lying smashed to pieces beside it. But I've come back, sir, to report that those two parties of

Germans are on their way back, and when I left them they had halted at the French village."

Roger stood up suddenly. If he had been Bill he would perhaps have given vent to some expressive exclamation, or have sent his palm crashing against his thigh, or in other ways given evidence of some amount of excitement. As it was, he merely stood erect and called the men about him.

"We'll move," he said. "Within ten minutes the outposts we sent along the drive will return, for they too will have heard the Germans. We'll send out for the others at once, and as soon as all have joined we'll march straight up through the trees or in the drive till we come to the very edge of the forest."

"Ha!" grunted Bill, glad to get a move on. "And then, sir?"

"And then," said Roger, "if only it's dark enough, we'll make our way into the open. Tell me, my lad," he suddenly demanded, turning to the young soldier who had recently returned and reported; "you saw roads—is there one which would help us to pass from the wood right along to those little clumps of forest that you have told us about?"

The man thought for a moment, and then smiled.

"Yes, sir; there is a road to the west that runs along quite close to the forest, keeping to the high land. I could see it running on for miles. It would do a treat, but—you're thinking of those other clumps, sir?"

Roger nodded. "Certainly," he said. "It must be quite obvious to every one of you that the Ger-

mans have searched all of them. If they thought it worth their while to send two large parties into this forest, they would certainly have detached men to see whether we had entered any of those others. Having searched them and found no trace of us, they will look elsewhere. Of course that suggests at once that we should select one of them and hide up in it."

"But—but, these here Germans," said Bill, jerking a dirty thumb in the direction of their prisoners, "what about them? Besides, are we to keep 'em and feed 'em on the grub that we've captured—and what'll be wanted badly?"

Roger smiled again at that, and the men burst into hilarious laughter at his answer.

"Oh, the men—our prisoners!" he said. "Well, of course, we don't want them, Bill, do we? Can't we lose 'em? Can't we halt at the edge of the wood once it's dark, send a party with our prisoners away into the country, say for half a mile, and set 'em loose, with orders to keep going on straight if they don't want to receive unpleasant treatment. After that, this party can turn which way it likes. They haven't overheard our plans, for I took care to have 'em put at a safe distance. You never know when one of your prisoners understands your language. Too many Germans have lived in our country."

"Aye," agreed Bill, "too many of 'em. I ain't one of the swells that goes to hotels and such like, but they tell me that in London, and in every big city, you couldn't eat unless food was placed before you by a German; and they'd got all the best

billets too, those Germans—the clever rascals! But this losing the prisoners, sir, that's the move—that's the ticket! Blest if it ain't the very wheeze to get over this 'ere difficulty. As to losing Germans, well, if you was to take a regiment or so and lose 'em altogether, who'd miss 'em?" he growled, with a significant toss of his head, and with the nearest approach to a sneer that anyone had seen this gallant and emphatic corporal indulge in.

Perhaps an hour later one of the outposts returned to say that the German parties were now leaving the village in the heart of the forest, and were moving towards their bivouac; and with him came his fellows.

"Then it's time we were moving," said Roger. "It's already quite dark in here, so we will make boldly for the central drive and pass along it. By the time we get to the outskirts of the forest it will be quite dark, and we shall be able to move into the open without difficulty. Bill, you will be in charge of the prisoners—you and half a dozen of the men. Pile their rifles on the carts, and take every round of ammunition they've got. Sergeant, you will take a man and go ahead at once, so as to make sure that our road is clear. You, Corporal Tims, will form a rear-guard with one of your comrades, so as to make sure that we shan't be surprised. Now let's get a move on!"

"Getting a move on," in the case of this little party of stranded British soldiers, consisted in the collection of their prisoners, a few sharp words of command, a flourish of Bill's rifle, and then the

movement of prisoners and escort through the woods into the drive. They were followed by Roger and the main party, and behind them came the captured carts—two water-carts, and two containing food and ammunition. Then the rear-guard moved on, all in perfect order and in silence. Not a soul was met during their progress, and at length, when the dusk had grown deeper, and the men could not see beyond fifty yards, they reached the very edge of the forest, and emerged from it into the open.

"Halt!" If Bill couldn't speak German he could give an order in such emphatic tones that even a dull obtuse Teuton could understand his meaning; and at that sharp order, which came like a crack from a pistol, the body of prisoners came to a standstill.

"The main body will advance with me down the road; the prisoners, under Corporal Andrews' command, will follow. Move on! March!" commanded Roger, while more than one of his men wondered what was his meaning.

Some twenty minutes later he halted his party far down the road, at a point where another road intersected it, or rather crossed it at right angles.

"Now you can take your party of prisoners to the right," Roger told Bill, pulling him aside for a moment, "and—er—you will lose 'em about a mile off. It won't hurt these fellows to do a double, so take them along as fast as you can."

"But—but—" spluttered Bill, "that's our way! —we're going to the right; that's what we decided."

"Of course, I know that," barked Roger, a little impatiently; "leave the thinking to me, and carry on your job without any further palaver—that is, if you can," added he, smiling grimly.

Bill drew himself up with a rueful grin. "Right y'are, sir!" replied he, and, turning to the waiting gang of prisoners, relieved his ruffled feelings by a peremptory order in a fierce tone, which set them moving in double-quick time in the required direction.

As the sound of their footsteps grew faint in the distance, Roger withdrew with his party into the wooded belt fringing the road, to await the arrival of the rear-guard with the carts. Flinging himself down well in cover at a point which commanded the road in either direction, he gave himself up to reflection. He did not underrate the seriousness of the position in which he and those who trusted themselves to him for safety found themselves, but his naturally optimistic disposition inclined him to look on the bright, rather than the dark side of their future prospects. So far luck had been with them. They had eluded the search-parties of the enemy, and captured a provision convoy. Indeed, the ten Huns left in charge of the ration carts, believing that the woods immediately around them had been thoroughly searched by their friends, were utterly taken aback by the sudden appearance of a party of men in khaki, and surrendered without resistance. Moreover, after capture, they had been so terrified by a pantomimic display, on the part of Bill, of the gruesome fate

awaiting them should any one of them venture so much as to whisper or move without permission, that they crouched silent and still in a huddled group, with anxious eyes upon their guards, until the issue of a generous ration to them as evening came on cheered them somewhat, and reassured them as to the intentions of their captors.

"We must just go on trusting to luck, and do the best we can, that's all about it," soliloquized Roger.

"Beg pardon, sir?" said the Sergeant enquiringly. He was lying a few yards behind the officer, eyes and ears on the alert.

"I think we can move again now," said Roger, for twenty minutes had passed and the rear-guard had joined up; "we'll go ahead along the road after Corporal Andrews, and when we have picked him up we will double. Sergeant, what's the report about those water-carts?"

"Half-full, sir; ration carts about the same. I reckon that there's about enough to keep this party going for about two or three days."

"Not enough," said Roger. "We shall have to pick up some live stock somewhere; but the first thing is to get under cover and to hide our tracks, so that there will be no fear of discovery. What's that? I can hear someone along the road. Halt!"

It was Bill and his men, who were trotting back towards them—a hilarious Bill and some giggling comrades. The trick which the escort had played upon their prisoners had tickled these men

immensely, and tickled the main party even more when Bill had told the story.

"It's too good almost to think about," he said. "There was them prisoners, as you might say anxious to get quit of us, and there was us escort wanting to lose 'em. So we moved down the road double quick, and I beats one of 'em with the end of a bayonet just to get him going. Then we comes to a fork, and I sees that the side road goes downhill into a sort of gully, with village lights about a mile off. 'You 'alt!' I shouts; and, believe me, they'd got used to my words of command, and come up sudden and quick, fearing perhaps that I'd use me bayonet. Then I says to 'em, I says: 'Yer blighters! d'yer see them there lights, down below? Then that's yer objective—h'objective,' I says, and they seemed to know all about it. 'You've got to move there double quick, and me after yer—me and these fellows. You're ready?' I asks 'em. 'Well, 'op it, quick! Forward! Double!'"

"And what then?" asked one of the men, just before Roger gave the word to march again.

"Ho! What then?" exclaimed Bill, who had been eagerly awaiting the question. "Believe me, they up sticks and gets off like racehorses, and me and the boys after 'em till we'd done a hundred yards as good as you'd see at any regimental sports. Then we chaps stops, and they goes on with their clumping boots drowning every sound, while we creeps back and sprints along the road here till we joins you. Listen! you can almost hear their boots

plodding along now. They'll be dead-beat and blown before they get to the village."

No doubt it was an excellent joke, and certainly one which delighted Roger's party; but now they had their own safety and security to attend to, and at once marched off along the road, and, clinging to the right, made their way along the side of the ridge upon the summit of which the forest grew, till they had passed beyond it and had gained the open downs. Half an hour later they entered an isolated clump of trees on the top of a knoll, from which Roger guessed that he would be able to survey the whole country, and, plunging into its depths, posted sentries and lay down to rest.

Had they eluded the enemy? Was it likely that they would be left in peace there? And, even so, how long could they remain? Every man's heart was with his comrades over the line; every man wished to return to the British army as soon as circumstances would allow him.

CHAPTER XV

A Clever Capture

Two days passed after Roger and his men had gained that solitary clump of green forest overlooking the long ridge to which they had made their escape, and during all that time nothing occurred to upset their tranquillity or to threaten their safety.

"Of course, from a height like this," reflected Roger, as he sat on the outskirts of the wood peering into the open, with the inevitable Bill beside him, "one can practically see all that the enemy are doing; and, incidentally, if we get back to our people, what we have seen will be of the utmost use. They didn't take my pocket-book from me, by the way, and I've been taking sketches and notes ever since we got to this ridge. But food's running out, Bill. What we've got to fear is, once again, not so much the Germans as starvation."

"Aye—starvation!" agreed Bill. "And what beats me is, how on earth we are to attempt to get back to the British. There don't seem a chance. How many miles are they away?"

"Twenty, perhaps—that's if we make for the Somme, which would be foolish. On the other hand, if we strike a little to the north, perhaps,

the line is twenty-five miles away. Yes, it's a difficult job, and I haven't an idea. How's it to be managed?"

"Aye—how?" repeated Bill, scratching his head. "How? It's a conundrum."

"You see," went on Roger, "there yonder is what I take to be Arras, though of course I'm not sure; but, if so, the town which is much nearer to us, and a little north, is Douai, while the heavy smoke much farther to the north may very well be hanging over the roofs of the city of Lille, one of France's northern manufacturing towns. If I am right, then Bethune lies farther to the west, cutting between Lille and Douai."

"Bethune," said Bill, pricking up his ears, "the place where we were billeted months ago, on the La Bassée Canal, what runs through our lines and on into the Germans'? Hold hard, young feller! —Mr. Roger, I mean. What about that canal? Supposing we get down into them parts? Supposing we was to take to the water?"

Roger clapped a hand on his shoulder, somewhat startling the Corporal. "Water! La Bassée Canal, or any other near! I believe it's the only way in which we can do it. If we could fly aeroplanes and capture an aerodrome we could get over easily enough, but that you can rule out as being utterly impossible. There's no other way that I can think of. The scheme's worth working out and considering. Water? Why not? Only, of course, it would be a terribly difficult job to get down to the La Bassée Canal without being dis-

covered. We should have to go at night; to move in the daytime would of a certainty mean capture."

That it was an exceedingly difficult task they had before them was unquestionable—so difficult, in fact, that the more Roger thought about it the more portentous did this difficulty become.

"You see," he told Bill and the Sergeant, both of whom entered into his counsels, "I'm not saying it's impossible to get across country the twenty-five miles which, we will allow, extends between this copse and the Vimy Ridge near Arras and between La Bassée and ourselves; either of these points are within quite reasonable distance. But the country is infested with the enemy; they've probably emptied the villages, and their soldiers will be billeted in every house, while nearer the front they will be in cellars or in dug-outs. One wants to be a fly to get through such a position."

"Aye, a fly!" Bill grunted. "Wish I was one, and the whole lot of us, then we'd take on that aeroplane scheme, Mr. Roger."

"Meanwhile," said the Sergeant, taking up the ball, as it were, and giving it a throw, "meanwhile we're stranded here; we've got, you might say, the whole of the country within a mile or so all to ourselves—lots of view all about, pleasant trees, and a breeze that sometimes is precious cold—but there's no food, as you've said before, and food we must have if we're to continue living."

Yes, the food question had become intensely difficult, and as the hours went on, and days passed —for a big movement of troops in the neighbour-

hood prevented Roger and his men from issuing from the wood and making an attempt to reach the British lines—the food position became actually desperate.

"There's no use in our going on any longer like this," said Roger at a council on the third evening; "we shall be famished by to-morrow evening. I'm going out myself to-night, and I'll take a couple of men with me. Better still, we'll send a party out on the other side, and see what we can get from the railway."

When dusk had fallen, three men issued from the north side of the wood, while Roger and Bill and another man marched out towards the south—towards the booming guns which played fitfully along the line.

"You fellows there will make for the railway and see what you can do about food," Roger had told the Sergeant, who was to command the other party; "it may happen that you will be lucky and be able to break open a truck. Of course, in our case there won't be any such opportunity, and what I'm going to do is to see whether we can't pick up some food in a neighbouring village. Whatever happens, take care you aren't followed, and of course I needn't say that if you are captured——"

"If we're captured, sir—'mum's the word'," said the Sergeant.

An hour's trudge took Roger and his two companions to the outskirts of a village which they had seen from their post amongst the trees, but a dog

barked loudly as they approached, and forced them to quit the neighbourhood. Then they took to the road, and, marching briskly along it, approached another village.

"Seems to me that there's a convoy on the road beneath, probably bivouacking for the night, and very likely the men are billeted in the cottages. What d'you say, Bill?" asked Roger, as they came to a halt on high ground looking down into this second village, which lay in a snug little hollow with the rays of a crescent moon streaming down upon it.

"Convoy, right enough, sir! Next thing is to find out whether they've posted sentries. If they have, there won't be much chance of doing anything," said Bill; "if not, you never know, do you? We might make off with a pile of food."

The three of them crept gingerly along the road until they were at the entrance of the village, and, venturing still farther along, found that a long convoy of wagons had halted in the market-place and in the street leading from the east to it. Also, thanks to the faint rays the moon cast, they were able to perceive the figure of a sentry passing to and fro in the market square, though elsewhere the convoy was deserted.

"And they're motor-wagons," said Roger—said it to himself rather than to his companions. "Now a motor-wagon will get over the ground in double-quick time, and—— Stop a moment, what's this wagon? Grub of some sort, I should say."

Bill pushed his face into the back of the tilted

wagon, cautiously entered, and could be heard moving about inside. A minute later he returned with a couple of tins in his hand, grinning, almost guffawing.

"What's this you said, sir?" he laughed, stretching his hands out. "Ain't this grub? Ain't this tinned victuals of some sort or other? Let's try 'em then. It won't take a moment."

"Wait a while. If there's no one in there, it's probable that the driver and the men in charge of the wagon have gone to their billet, and once we are under the tilt of the wagon we shan't be observed. Now then, I'll show a light, for I've got my electric torch with me. But, first of all, Bill, down the curtain at the back of the wagon, so that the beam can't be seen."

Crouching on the floor of the wagon, and screening the beam from the electric torch with their bodies, Roger caused it to shine upon the two tins which Bill had produced, and gave vent to a cry of delight. For, though he had been such a short time a prisoner, he had yet assisted in the capture of so many dug-outs and German fortified places, and had captured so many prisoners, that he, like all the soldiers fighting on the Somme front, had been familiarized with the sort of rations issued to the Kaiser's soldiers. Here, then, before him were two tins of vegetables and meat, not unlike the Maconochie ration issued to the British troops—palatable, and each tin providing an ample meal, biscuit and coffee alone being required to make quite a feast.

"And the chances are," he said, as Bill's strong fingers took the opening-key and ripped the cover of one of the tins off—"the chances are that there'll be bread or biscuit, or whatever the Germans have, and even coffee or tea in other wagons. What I'm wondering about is this: I'm thinking of those twenty-five miles we've got to cover; now supposing——"

Bill stopped in the very act of thrusting a nice little wedge of meat in between his strong teeth, and glared through the darkness at his leader.

"What was that you was a-wondering about, Mr. Roger?" he asked hoarsely. "You wasn't thinking, surely, of taking this 'ere machine and of running it away towards the front. Jingo!—but it's a fine scheme that! And what's to prevent us? This 'ere show would take the whole twenty-five of us easy. You could drive it—I could drive it—there's two or three more of the party that knows all about motor-wagons. We'd have grub on board—we'd——"

"Hold on a moment!" Roger warned him. "Sounds rosy enough, I know, but the morning will come, Bill, and then what's to happen? There's twenty-five of us in the wagon, we're in a part where we are strangers, there are Germans all over the place; someone will be sure to want to know why the wagon's there, what we're doing, and, above all, about the drivers."

Bill sat back and put both his hands down on the boards to support his weight, for the question rather floored him.

"Ah!" he said. "Oh! Y—yes, that's nasty. It begins to look as though we'd better collar what stuff we can here, and make back to our party; only—don't you see, Mr. Roger?—in a day or two's time the same position will arise again; we shall have to search for food again, and there will always be the question of getting back to our people. Why shouldn't we chance it?"

They ate on in silence, Roger thinking all the time, and balancing the pros and cons of such an enterprise.

"It's bound to be awfully risky," he told himself; "and when one looks at it, remembering what things are like behind our own lines, one is bound to confess that the venture seems hopeless. But we've got to make the attempt somehow and some time. This time we've been lucky to discover food, and on a future occasion we may be equally lucky; but the moment may come when we shall be absolutely starving, and then there may not be such a chance, no opportunity to snatch a motor-lorry such as this, and the only course left will be to hand ourselves over as prisoners. I'm bitten by the idea."

So was Bill and so was the young fellow who accompanied them. "We both of us vote for trying it on, Mr. Roger. It's not more than eight o'clock now, and if we could get our boys down here by midnight we should still have four hours in which to get away; four hours at, say, six miles an hour would take us right into the British lines, and would certainly take us to close behind the German

front. You say, what are we going to do with this 'ere wagon? Well, why do we want to hold on to it once it's taken us towards our destination? We fills our pockets with grub, Mr. Roger, and says good-bye to the motor-lorry."

"Done! We'll try it; and, what's more, we ourselves will set the ball rolling," declared Roger. "The first thing we'll do is to sneak along the other wagons and find out what they contain. This one seems to have some three or four dozen boxes, and before we move we'll just take a look at them. Here we are! tins—more tins—each box contains two dozen; that's more than we shall require, and so I propose that we fling out the boxes that are superfluous. Lend a hand here, and let's get the job done quickly."

Working very quietly, but quickly for all that, they lifted out of the wagon as many boxes as they considered unnecessary, leaving within a supply which would provide the whole party, with a wide margin, for three or four days, and which at the same time left ample space under the tilt of the motor-lorry for every man under Roger's command. Then Roger and Bill slunk off along the convoy, while the young soldier kept watch upon that single sentry. They entered other wagons, feeling their way cautiously at first—for it might be that a German driver was sleeping in his wagon—more boldly when they found the particular one they were searching quite empty. Curtains were at once drawn at the back, the light switched on, and the contents looked over.

In this way, within half an hour they had contrived to secure several boxes of biscuit, some sausages of the dried variety so loved by the Germans, and a few tins of coffee. With these they returned to the motor-lorry at the far end of the convoy, the one, in fact, which they had decided to secure for their own purposes.

"The next job," said Roger, as he stood just at the back of the wagon, "will be to get the engine going without that sentry hearing us. It's too much to hope that it will be so quiet as not to attract his attention, and of course the starting up of one of the cars at this time of night may very well make him suspicious. The question in my mind is whether we should creep along and pounce upon him."

"And that's what I think," Bill responded promptly. "It will be the shortest way, and if we're careful we shall manage to get him. Let's move, sir; it's getting late, and if we're not quick we may have to put off this little party till to-morrow."

Creeping back along the convoy, and getting the motor-lorries between themselves and the sentry, it was not long before the three had gained the centre of the market square, where they lay down underneath one of the vehicles, and for a time watched the sentry as he passed to and fro. Not a light was to be seen in any of the houses or cottages which formed the village, and not a sound came from any one of them. But presently, as they watched, a door almost opposite opened, and a broad beam of light

issued. Then a muffled figure came out, followed by a single man who carried a rifle. There was a sharp command, given in a low tone of voice, and the two marched across to where the sentry was standing; then another sharp command. The two soldiers faced one another and shouldered rifles; then the relief was left to pace to and fro, while the man who had been relieved marched back with the sergeant who had just posted the new sentry. The door opened again, that broad beam of light issued, the two figures disappeared, the door slammed, and once more the market-place was in darkness, and one solitary figure marched to and fro as if indeed there had been no change whatever.

"Um!" ejaculated Roger. "That's rather awkward; for the fellow yonder will be wide awake at the commencement of his tour of duty."

"Unless, Mr. Roger," whispered Bill, "unless he's been turned out of a warm bed, and has been awakened from a good deep sleep. Seems to me, from the early hour that these fellows have turned in, that they've had a long day, and, if that's the case, that fellow yonder is just as likely to be drowsy now as at the end of his turn of sentry. What about making a noise here? You and young Jimmy Carter lie under the wagon, while I creep round behind the sentry; then you knock on the wheel and attract his attention, and bring him over here to see what's happening. I'll stand yonder, by the door that's just now shut, and when the sentry moves I'll move up behind him. First

chance I get, I'll jump on to his back and clap a hand over his mouth. How's that for doing the business?"

They discussed the matter for a few moments in low voices, then Bill slipped out, and, crawling round the edge of the market-place and keeping quite close to the houses, presently gained the door for which he was aiming. It was just at that moment that that same door was opened, and once again a beam of light shot across the market square, illuminating the figure of the sentry, and there stood in the doorway an officer, with his coat wide open, his figure outlined by the light, his head bare, his feet in slippers.

"Ah!" he grumbled; "then that fellow's marching to and fro as I told him. You never know in these days, with these young and raw soldiers; you have to keep an eye on them as though they were schoolboys. Keep a lively look-out! Because you're miles behind the lines, don't think there's any the less need for watching."

The door banged again, the beam of light was cut off abruptly, and for the third time one solitary figure was left marching to and fro—the figure of a soldier who grumbled.

"And that's what we've got to expect from the likes of him. That's what we privates in the army get, now that our N.C.O.'s are promoted to the rank of officer. They say we are treated more roughly than ever before, and that's saying something. Need of watching indeed! As if there were enemies in these parts! Still, I'll keep moving to

and fro, for you never know when that old spy of an officer will be jumping out to watch you."

He cast a glance over his shoulder a few moments later, and, seeing a figure—the dim outline of a figure, it is true—standing in the direction from which the voice had recently issued, he went on his beat still faster, thinking that the officer who had cautioned him had slipped round from the back of the house, and was secretly watching his movements. Then, hearing sounds from an adjacent portion of the convoy of motor-lorries, and anxious to demonstrate to his superior how wide awake and watchful he was, he trudged in that direction; nor did he take any notice of the figure which followed, though he could hear the man's boots on the pavement of the market square.

"Who's there?" he demanded, still hearing sounds from under one of the motor-lorries. "Come out! It's forbidden to sleep near the convoy. Come out, I say, or I will fetch the sergeant of the guard to deal with you."

The steps following him came nearer, the figure which he imagined to be that of his own officer got within two paces of him, and then, just as the German soldier was about to turn to appeal to the man he thought to be his officer, the latter sprang upon his back, seized with one hand the lock of his rifle, and clapped the other hand—a broad, sun-browned paw—over his mouth. Almost at the same moment two figures issued from underneath the motor-lorry and fell upon the unfortunate fellow.

"Now let's tie him up," said Roger. "Carter, slip into that nearest lorry, and see if you can find a blanket or something of the sort; a length of rope would be better, though we shall want a bit of blanket to muzzle this fellow. Now, my friend, in case you speak English, let me advise you to keep quiet, for we are not inclined to be disturbed by your comrades—you understand?"

No, the man did not understand one word, but he could readily comprehend the seriousness of the situation. Indeed, far from wishing to give an alarm or to shout, and so let his comrades know of their danger, he sat on the *pavé* of the market square trembling violently, hoping that nothing worse was to befall him. Perhaps a minute later the young soldier, whom Roger had sent to search for a rope, returned with quite a length of it, and with a towel which some German soldier had left in the lorry, and with these the trio rapidly trussed their man and thrust a gag into his mouth, completely silencing him.

"Now we put him into this motor-wagon," said Roger, "and then we'll be off. That's the ticket! Lay him down on these floor-boards. Here's a rag or a blanket of some sort; cover him over, so that he won't be seen easily. Now let the curtains at the back fall to. That's all right; we'll be off to the other motor."

They ran along the convoy, and soon reached the lorry which they had already selected. Then Roger leapt into the driving-seat, while Bill went to the starting-handle and swung it vigorously. At

the fourth attempt the engine fired, when Bill and Private Carter leaped up beside our hero. Soon afterwards the motor-lorry was halted outside that copse of trees which sheltered Roger's party, and perhaps half an hour after that the whole of his following had embarked upon the vehicle they had captured.

"Couldn't be better," said Roger, as he leapt in again and engaged his clutch. "It's barely ten o'clock, I should say, so that we've got six hours at least of darkness before us. But I must confess we are awfully lucky; for if it hadn't been for the moon we should have had to light our lamps, and that would most certainly have attracted the attention of someone or other. As it is, we can push right on bang in the direction of Arras."

"Bang in the direction of the British lines, sir!" gurgled Bill. "Jingo! isn't this a picnic?"

CHAPTER XVI

Starvation or Surrender

THERE never was a happier nor more jubilant party of men than that which set off with Roger on the motor-lorry which he and Bill and their comrade had purloined from the Germans. When one considers their position one is bound to confess that it was quite unique—something altogether out of the ordinary.

"Of course there have been lots of fellows captured," said Roger, as the motor-lorry rattled and banged its way onwards, groaning as its iron-shod wheels fell into ruts and holes, and vibrating to the pull of the engine. "Fellows have made good their escape and have wandered about behind the lines of the Germans just as we are doing; and I have heard it said, though I cannot vouch for the truth of it, that in the beginning of the war—in those early days when the right wing of the German army advanced on Ypres—quite a number of our soldiers were left, as it were, high and dry, and took shelter in the woods. There it is supposed that they were fed by the French and Belgian inhabitants, and escaped capture for weeks together."

"And isn't there a tale, sir, of the French doing something similar?" asked Bill.

"There's a rumour. It is said that quite a considerable force of Frenchmen were cut off somewhere near the frontier between Belgium and Germany, and took to some wooded heights where they have ever since waged war with the enemy—a sort of guerrilla warfare. But it's a tall story," laughed Roger, "quite a tall story. Meanwhile our case is different. We've got our own transport—eh?"

Bill thumped his thigh with his big broad palm, and laughed uproariously. "We have that, sir, our own motor-lorry, and—s'welp me!—but there's one thing we've forgotten: we've thought of food, but what about petrol? A motor-lorry won't run for ever unless you stoke it up like an engine, and no doubt the Germans have got refilling posts. Wonder how our supply aboard this car is? Jingo! Hope we haven't made an error."

There were long faces amongst the men—and Roger's was as long as any of them—when, after an hour's run, they stopped the lorry and, getting down, carefully inspected their petrol tank. It was more than half empty; a stick, thrust in through the filling orifice and withdrawn, showed plainly in the rays of the moon that the lower third was wet and that the depth of petrol was very little.

"Dishes us!" growled Bill, scratching his head. "Puts the stopper on our game! She won't do twenty-five miles to the front line."

"No, but our legs will," said Roger resolutely, "and don't forget that we've already done some of the distance. Let's be thankful for small mercies,

Bill, and don't grumble over trivialities. The petrol we've got left will take us on for quite an hour, by which time we shall have covered perhaps twenty miles. Let's be thankful for that, I say. After all, you can't expect to drive this machine right through the German line and back to the British. It's not going to be such a walk-over as that, I can tell you."

It was hardly likely to be anything approaching such an easy affair, for the farther they went—the nearer, in fact, they approached the actual German front—the more congested did they find the roads and villages. Troops *en repos* filled hamlets and towns and villages ten miles behind the lines, and sentries, armed and wakeful, challenged the car, but as yet passed it through without further interference.

"But the very next village we come to," said Roger, "the sentry may stop us altogether, and then it's all 'U P'. Let's stop again for a moment and see how the petrol tank looks."

"Almost empty," Bill declared, making the test as he had done formerly. "Only a few drops left, about an inch covering the bottom of the tank. She's done—this old gal! She won't run much more than two or three miles farther."

"Then we'll say good-bye to her," said Roger, who during the last hour had been observing his surroundings more acutely than before.

The moon was higher now and gave a better light, so that he was able to make out, not alone their immediate surroundings, but the contour of

the ground towards which they were running: the hills and the dales, and sometimes the villages lying amongst them.

"I've been keeping an eye on things generally," he said, "and it appears to me that up there, where the ground rises, there is quite an amount of forest. We'll take the first road in that direction, running this car along the main road for, say, half a mile, so as to throw out anyone who may want to follow us. Where the road turns off, all save one of us will dismount, shoulder the boxes of food and our rifles, and tramp off. Before dawn we ought to be able to find some sort of cover."

"And after that?" asked Bill, who was always of an inquisitive nature.

"Oh!—After that? Well, let's get over one difficulty," laughed Roger; "we shall have plenty of them, I can assure you."

Driving the motor-lorry on at a steady pace, they halted a quarter of an hour later about a mile from a big dark splotch which seemed to block the road farther on, and which undoubtedly was a village of rather large proportions. A narrow lane left the main road at this point and struck off to the right; and here every one of the party, save Bill, dismounted, and, slinging their rifles, shouldered the boxes of food and ammunition which they had brought with them, and trudged off along the lane. Bill then engaged his gears and ran on for half a mile, when he abandoned the car beside the road and doubled back to join his comrades.

"Now on," said Roger, "and whatever you do,

make no sound. Don't talk! If anyone hails us, don't answer."

"And if they gets too inquisitive," asked Bill, "what then?"

"Wait until you get my orders," said Roger. "But whatever happens we want to avoid the German, and even the French people, still remaining in this part of the country. Not that I imagine there are many French peasants left behind, for it is said that the Germans have been clearing the whole country, and have been sending French and Belgian people into Germany to assist in their munition factories—deporting them in fact."

"Deporting them," growled Bill. "D'you think that back in England they realize what that means, sir? D'you think in the old country, where there ain't been no invasion, where there's few houses smashed about, and them only by bombs from Zeppelins and aeroplanes, that our people in the main realize what's happening over here, and what it means to be in the hands of the Germans—just helpless prisoners—to be driven out of house and home; to have the family divided—the father sent here, the mother there, the gals and boys in every direction? If that ain't brutality and outrage, call me another!"

There came growls from the men who heard what he was saying; and indeed there was no doubt that not alone these soldiers who accompanied Roger, but every man along the line, was roused to indignation when he thought of what was happening. Nor could there be any doubt as to the general

statement that Germany was deporting the unfortunate civilians who lived in the country they were occupying.

Tales had come to England, and had been transmitted over the world, showing how droves of helpless men, and wretched women, and boys and girls had been herded in trucks and railway carriages, and had been sent, the men perhaps into Germany to work in the mines or in some munition factory, the women to do agricultural work, and the boys and girls to assist them; how, in fact, there had been a ruthless splitting-up of families, many members of which would never again come together.

"Trees, right enough," said Roger, when the party had tramped on for an hour and were already beginning to ascend. "We're in wooded country, which makes it appear as though we should have a chance to hide. Now we'll halt for a while, for I'm sure those boxes are heavy; then, after ten minutes, we'll push on again, for we can't afford to delay. In perhaps an hour or a little more it will be getting light, and by then we most decidedly must be under cover."

When an hour had passed the party had ascended to quite a considerable height, and had gained a ridge not unlike that other which they had so recently left, except that here, though trees grew in abundance, there was no huge forest, as there had been before, but numerous clumps which afforded shelter. The lane itself had kept directly on from the main road, passing on three or four occasions through the crumbling remains of what

had once upon a time been tiny hamlets, but had been destroyed during the fighting of 1914. Now and again a farm could be seen, no doubt abandoned, like the hamlets; and, having clambered to the top of the hill, and sent offshoots here and there to farms and hamlets, the lane straggled amongst the trees, meandered on across a bridge of rotting timber, and finally reached a clump of trees wherein were the ruins of a homestead. On it went again into the distance, though Roger and his men did not pursue it.

"This is as good a place as we shall find," said Roger, as the men set down their boxes and sat upon them for a ten minutes' rest. "Unless the Germans make use of it as an observation station, which I don't think likely, for we are still some eight miles behind the lines, we shall probably have it to ourselves. Now, Bill, you get busy, and take one of the men with you. Search the roads and see if you can discover some sort of a place where we can take shelter. Sergeant, you look round and find a well—if there happens to be one, as is nearly sure to be the case. Timkins and Smith here will go on outpost duty to the far side of the wood. Private Campbell will take post under cover on the lane here, while Private Bond will move off to the right, farther along the lane, and keep a watch in that direction. Look lively, Bill, for the sooner we get ourselves under cover and know where we are to hide, the better it will be for all of us."

If the men had been depressed by the forced

abandonment of their purloined motor-lorry, they were now in the highest spirits. They had the utmost confidence in Roger, for, during the past few days, he had led them without a doubt most capably, and his cheery presence inspired them wonderfully. More than that, as the light grew and the men peered out under cover of the trees into the distance, they found a panorama stretched before them—a panorama which Roger surveyed with the utmost interest, and then explained to them.

"We've gone farther north than I thought," he told the men. "It looks to me, indeed, as though we'd got on to the main Cambrai-Arras road, and that we are now somewhere between Arras and Douai. There's Arras, right there in front. I feel sure of it, for you can see the German lines creeping right up close to it; while to the right, that ridge rising from Arras itself, where the River Scarpe flows towards Lens, is the famous Ridge of Vimy—Vimy which the French so gallantly tried to take, and to which the Germans have clung persistently. Hum!—it's a nasty place to try to break through. We shall be lucky if we do it, though you never know, do you? One can but try. Even the impossible is worth attempting under certain conditions, and just a little stroke of fortune may come our way. Things up to now couldn't have gone better."

"There's as fine a cellar under this 'ere ruin of a farm," said Bill, coming back rather breathless after a moment, "as you could hope to find in a

day's march. When we've done an hour's work in it—fatigue work, sir—and have cleaned it up, it will make a billet that you couldn't beat anywhere in Flanders; and I have a notion that, once we're down below, it would want a very inquisitive German to find us."

"Then down you go," commanded Roger; "we'll post three men on the surface, giving them instructions first of all how to make their way to the cellar, for of course they must do that under cover, otherwise, in case of a surprise visit, they would lead the enemy to us. Now, men, up with those boxes, and let's get into our dug-out. Then a meal wouldn't do us any harm; for, after our long drive and our tramp, the majority of us must be hungry."

They trudged off to the ruins of the farm, carrying their boxes, and thereafter busied themselves in cleaning the place, in drawing water from a neighbouring well, over which stood the usual windlass and the necessary bucket, and in making a fire which should not attract the enemy.

"Even a wisp of smoke would call the attention of one of those curious Huns," said the Sergeant. "But this won't make any smoke, sir. Here's charcoal—I found a store of it in what was evidently an outhouse, while here's some sort of a pail which will make a splendid fire-box. If we put it just outside the cellar, in a hollow I've noticed there, the fumes will go out into the open and won't do us any harm, while the heat will boil the water in no time, and do any other cooking we've a fancy for."

It was wonderful how rapidly the party broke up

into sections; one section making it its business, without the order of our hero, to sweep the cellar clean, to draw straw from the ruins of a neighbouring barn, and with that to make a comfortable bivouac; while another section set to work to open tins of provisions, to secure a pail, somewhat rusty, it must be confessed, yet a pail which, scoured with sand, was soon sufficiently clean, and in which water was soon steaming. Presently the appetizing odour of coffee was permeating the air, while, to the delight of all, a dozen huge German sausages dangled on a stick round the fire-bucket, frizzling in the heat, and sending out little puffs of smoke which set every one of the men sniffing.

"They ain't the sort of thing that's ever tickled my fancy before," said Bill, as he watched them twirling in the heat, "but there's no denying that they smell as good as possible. Mayhap they'll eat just as well, and, in any case, men placed as we are are not in a position to be too critical. How's that coffee, Sergeant? Smells to me as though it was ready to dish out. Mr. Roger, sir, breakfast's ready!"

How they enjoyed that first meal in the ruined farm, and how those gallant boys entered with zest into their new life, and delighted in the strange feeling which all possessed at the knowledge that they lay absolutely in the heart of the enemy's country!

They had only to creep out of that cellar amongst the trees and lie at full length, and they could watch the German lines stretching for miles from the city

of Lens down to considerably south of Arras, almost to the point where the Battle of the Somme was still raging. They could hear, the livelong day, the hum and boom of guns in Picardy, while every now and again the artillery on either side broke out, as it were, in fresh places; guns flashed, and smoke and shell-bursts could be seen along the line before them.

There were other things also which attracted their attention; there were long columns of carts and vehicles of every description moving over the roads which led to the German front line, and numerous columns of troops marching in the same direction. Now and again, too, aeroplanes swirled overhead, bearing black crosses upon their wings; while also, not once, but perhaps a score of times during the next three days, British aeroplanes swooped into view, sometimes engaging the enemy craft, hovering above the German lines, taking photographs of them, and refusing to be driven off even though many machines were sent up to attack them.

In this way five days passed, and Roger and his men had found not a single opportunity of moving. By then their provisions had failed; they were once more face to face with starvation.

"It simply comes to this," said Roger, as they held a council of war, and he put the facts before his comrades. "We have all of us been watching the country around. Up here it appears that we are perfectly safe from interference, but all round us there are enemy troops, and the farther you

look towards the enemy's front the more you see of them—they are swarming there. Nowhere have I seen a loophole through which we could creep. At one time I hoped that we might make our way to the River Scarpe and float down it. But you can see for yourselves that there's no chance even of getting to the river; and now we've come to a point where our provisions have run out. It seems to me that we've either got to surrender, which, personally, I don't propose to do, or we've got to start making raids upon those convoys you see marching hither and thither."

"Raids, sir? And why not?" asked the Sergeant. "Those we've already made have been successful, and another might prove equally so. Only, the one thing to be considered is this, that though we've hoodwinked the Germans in the past, the first raid we make in these parts will call their attention to us. They'll search the country, which means that as soon as we get the food we've got to move on to other quarters."

"Aye!" agreed Bill; "move on, that's sure. But other quarters ain't so easily found. From this hill you can take a wide squint all round, and I'd like to know whether any one of you has spotted another place that looks likely."

Heads were shaken all round the circle, for by now every one of the party knew the surrounding country almost by heart, had peered into its depths, had watched its roads, and knew every clump of its forest. There remained, therefore, the serious fact that to obtain a secure hiding-place they must go

farther afield, beyond their range of vision, and that was a matter almost impossible.

"We'll just have to think it out, boys," said Roger. "Food is again the greatest and most important consideration. Let's get that first of all, and then we can bother our heads about the other."

They went supperless to bed that night, and early on the following morning found themselves hungry and getting desperate. Determined to put an end to their troubles, Roger made plans during the day to leave the homestead and make for the nearest village, hoping by some stroke of luck to secure a further supply of rations. Yet the fates willed it otherwise, and, indeed, put a summary end to all their troubles. For it appeared that some inquisitive German had noticed on the previous day a figure standing out on the hill-side—that of one of Roger's outposts. Peering through his glasses, this German officer had detected the colour of khaki clothing, and, his curiosity and suspicions aroused —for an order had been published amongst the German forces informing them of the escape of prisoners—he telephoned his information across country, and on this particular evening troops converged upon the hill where Roger and his men were hiding, and mounted to the top under the cover of darkness. It was just an hour before midnight when a search-light played upon the ruined farm, and an officer with a stentorian voice ordered Roger and his men to surrender.

"There's nothing else for it," said Roger sadly.

"Boys, put down your rifles and come out. Above all, don't lose heart, and don't grumble; for remember that you were made prisoners many days ago, and that you've had a glorious time while we have been in company. There, sir," he went on, as he clambered into the open and advanced towards the officer, "my men surrender. We have left our rifles down in the cellar. Do me the favour of finding food for my fellows, for we are almost famished."

CHAPTER XVII

Within Sound of the Guns

CAPTURE, after so many days of freedom under such exciting circumstances, was indeed a bitter disappointment to Roger Norman and the gallant corporal, Bill Andrews, not to mention the other brave fellows in their company. It was therefore with long faces, yet not altogether despondent, that they marched from the cellar of the ruined homestead, and, following Roger, advanced amongst the Germans.

"So!" began the officer who had shouted to them to surrender. "At last! Tell me all about it."

"Not a bad sort, I should say," thought Roger, for the search-light playing upon the group of men about him, upon the German soldiers standing with rifles at the ready, and upon their officer, enabled him to detect the latter's features. "Perhaps he's one of the good sort; though there seems to be precious few of them. Tell you all about it, sir?" he answered.

"Yes!" came the instant demand. "Where did you come from? How is it that you've managed to elude us so long? You are the fellows, are you

not, who were proceeding by rail to the Fatherland?"

In a few sentences Roger told him how aeroplane bombs had shattered the railway convoy, how he and his men had slipped away in the darkness, and then narrated their further adventures down to the time of their capture.

"Hum!" reflected the officer, looking round at his captives and smiling upon them. "A very brilliant little performance, and you've my congratulations. When I was in England—and I spent some years there—such a thing would have been considered quite impossible. And so you managed to capture one of our motor-lorries and some food—a smart manœuvre! Well, well, my friends, it's come to an end, and you must face the future. Hungry, did you say?"

"As hunters," Roger told him promptly. "Awfully hungry! But for lack of food I do not think we should have had to surrender. We were making our way to your front in the hope of being able to slip through."

At that the officer laughed heartily. "Slip through, indeed!" he said. "Then indeed you are most optimistic individuals. For scarcely a rat could find its way through our lines of defence. However, form your men up and we will march back. I can promise you a meal as soon as we come to our camp."

That night the captives spent in a barbed-wire cage specially erected behind the German lines for the accommodation of prisoners, and there, to their

great gratification, they were given food and drink in plenty, and slept under canvas. On the following day, bustle in the camp told them plainly enough that they were to move on, probably into Germany.

"We shall be broken up, I expect, and separated," said Roger. "That is bad luck, Bill, isn't it? For we've been together so long now that it would have been nice to have finished the campaign in company. I shall apply for you as my servant though, and that may alter matters."

An hour later the prisoners were sorted out into groups, were carefully inspected, and then were marched off to the nearest station. Then for hours they travelled on trucks, just as they had done before, until they were in the heart of Germany. But here and there, where the train halted, groups of prisoners were set down and were marched off to prison. With one of these groups Roger and Bill Andrews went, and presently found themselves incarcerated in a fortress.

"And here, I suppose, we shall stop and rot till the end of the campaign," grumbled Roger, though to be sure he was seldom down-hearted. "We shall have little else to do but to kick our heels all day long, and to set our brains working to devise a means of escape. Escape, Bill; d'you hear that? That's the thing we've got to think about!"

"Oh, yes — escape! 'Tain't easy," agreed the Corporal, scratching his head in the old familiar manner. "But you never know. We've been

lucky in the past, and maybe we shall see a chance when it seems most unlikely."

Weeks passed in that wretched prison. The winter, with its piercing winds and frigid cold, took its toll of the unfortunate men incarcerated in the fortress. Harsh treatment—for the German is not given to leniency towards his prisoner—and meagre rations reduced the weight and the health of Roger and his comrades.

"But it is no use worrying about it," Roger said, over and over again; "and no use being idle. For it makes one think about things all the more. I'm sticking to the job of learning German, and you'd better take lessons with me, too, Bill. One of our guards lived in England before the war, and has quite a friendly feeling for the British, and already he's taught me quite a lot. Come now, settle down to it!"

What with lessons in German during the morning, an hour's exercise in the yard, and more lessons and more exercise after dinner, the days slipped by fairly rapidly; yet in spite of work, in spite of exercise, the weeks dragged, the months went by on leaden wings. But at last the winter passed, the weather became less inclement, and there was a feeling in the air of spring, which would change the landscape. Yet not once had an opportunity occurred of making their escape, and in spite of themselves Roger and Bill began to give up hope, and to wonder whether they would ever reach England.

"Form up the prisoners!" shouted a rough voice

one day towards the beginning of March, 1917. "Now, let me inspect them."

Then a senior officer went along the line of prisoners, pointing to this man with his finger, to that with his cane, pushing this one aside rudely and roughly, and beckoning others to advance.

"You'll do! You'll do! This one's too weak. Ah! this is a good, strong, stout fellow; let him join the party. Now, Captain, we'll march these men away to the station; give them blankets, for they have a long journey before them."

"A long journey!" wondered Roger, who had been selected to accompany one of the parties, and who, thanks to his lessons, could now understand German quite easily, and had become a fluent speaker. "Wonder what new prison we are to go to? and what do they want strong and stout men for? This is a mystery. Tell me," he said a little while later, while preparations were being made for their departure, happening to meet the German who had given him lessons, "tell me, my friend, what's happening?"

"Happening?" the man answered, looking a little uncomfortable, and then peering round to see whether he was observed. "Listen, Englishman—they are sending you back to the front."

"Back to the front!" exclaimed Roger, surprised at the announcement. "To the front!"

"Yes—to the German front. It's like this," whispered the guard. "We've been fighting now for more than two years, and men are getting

scarce in Germany. We want every man we've got to hold the front against your British army, which folks told us here would never be great—never be powerful. But we all know now that England adopted conscription. We have learned to our cost that the British army is a danger; so every man is being pushed up from the lines of communication to the front, and every prisoner—civil or military—is being made use of either here in Germany or behind our front."

"Behind your front!" exclaimed Roger, for he still did not quite understand the situation. "How? In what way?"

"Digging trenches and fortifying the lines to prevent the British and French armies breaking through, making concrete gun-chambers and dug-outs, working like slaves in the earth. Hush! the Captain's coming."

The guard, a man almost past military age, for otherwise he would not have been employed in the fortress, shouldered his rifle and went along his beat, while Roger strolled in the opposite direction. "Going to send us up to their front to dig trenches! Well, there's nothing they won't do, these Germans," he told Bill. "Of course the thing's strictly against international rules of warfare, but then Germany has already proved to the world that she cares nothing for rules, whether international or otherwise. She ruthlessly tore up that scrap of paper—the treaty which she herself had signed, and in which she declared that Belgium should always be independent. Since then she has

trodden under her heel many another document to which she had set her hand, and now she is going still further. In a few days, Bill, we shall hear the guns again."

"And in a few days, sir," said Bill, his eyes twinkling, "we shall be within easy distance of the British front. Ain't that better than being cooped up here in this fortress? Won't it let a man breathe easily? Shan't we see some life? For me it's a change for the good, and I'm not going to be the one to grumble about the Germans doing it."

They were marched to the railway station, herded in some covered trucks, and thereafter travelled through long weary hours towards their destination. Then they detrained, and were marched to a camp within easy distance of the German front, and, as Roger had said, within sound of the guns.

"There's not much going on yet awhile," Roger reflected the day after their arrival. "You can hear guns here and there, of course, but until the spring actually comes I do not suppose there will be any real fighting. Meanwhile we'll keep a bright look-out for a chance of escape to our lines."

How near that chance was, neither Bill nor Roger, nor indeed any of their comrades, nor the Germans themselves, could realize, though all who cared to think appreciated the fact that once the spring came, and with it drier weather, those British forces massed beyond the German line, and backed, rumour said, by an even greater mass of guns than had existed in 1916, would certainly commence an offensive. It might be in the neighbourhood of

Ypres; it might be on the blood-stained battle-field of the Somme again in Picardy; it might even be at Neuve Chapelle, or at any other point along the line where British troops were stationed. Who could have guessed, however, that when the first few days of April had passed, that expected British offensive should commence directly opposite the point where Roger and his friends were working?

"Guns—hundreds of guns!" shouted Roger one morning, as he and his working-party, having had their breakfast, marched from the dug-out; "British guns firing in this direction. What's it mean?"

They stood in the open listening for a while, and watching the landscape about them. Perhaps a mile to their front was the actual German first line; that row of sinuous trenches, wherein, sheltered in dug-outs leading from them, sat the German defenders. The line stretched from Lens to Arras, tracing its way through the brown earth and clambering upward to the heights of Vimy south of Lens, and so on to just east of the city of Arras to the south. To north and south, as they watched, but little was to be noticed; but directly in front, where the Ridge of Vimy thrust its way upward, and as it were cut off Roger and his friends from the British, splotches of flame could be seen upon the ridge, puffs of smoke burst here and there in many an unexpected position, while there came to their ears not only the distant thud of guns, but the nearer roar of exploding missiles.

"Going for Vimy!" said Roger, when the bombardment had gone on for some hours, and he and

his party were resting to take their midday meal. "What if our fellows were to break through? Supposing in some way or other we could make our way forward towards them."

"Supposing," said Bill, as he sat down on the step leading into the dug-out, and buried his head in his hands. "And why not?" he asked a little later, almost fiercely. "Why not, sir? If things go on like this, and the shelling gets worse, seems to me that the German front line will be almost cut off from those behind it. Look at the shells bursting now far nearer to us. Some of them are going over our heads too, and falling on the lines of communication. A few more of those guns and a few more shells will make it hard for the Germans tc send up rations to their front line, let alone ammunition. Why shouldn't we get lost? Who's going to find us in the midst of such a shelling?"

Roger clambered to the top of the adjacent hillock and surveyed the country. Shells were bursting on the Ridge of Vimy, sending up huge splotches of smoke and flame. Other steel missiles were falling on the slope behind the German first line, searching for other trenches, for dug-outs, and machine-gun positions. Huge shells were roaring their way toward the dug-out where his party was then sheltering. When he turned his head and looked behind the hillock, it was to see columns of earth spouting close to the roads which led to the German front, to see shells bursting in hamlets and villages used as German billets, and to watch dull banks of cloud arising from almost every quarter.

As for the noise, it was becoming more and more terrifying. Shells sailed overhead with the sound of express trains, or rather with the rattle and roar of trams passing along a paved highway. As to Germans, hardly a soldier was visible; for the army of the Kaiser had taken to its underground shelters —its shelters prepared with such immense labour, and too often by the sweat of unfortunate prisoners.

"We'll do it," he said, rejoining his men. "I reckon that there are now probably double as many guns firing in this direction as there were this morning. The whole place is alive with bursting shells, and from that hill up there it was quite impossible to detect a single German soldier, let alone a column of troops—all have taken to their dug-outs. Let's sit down and consider matters. But first of all we'll number the party."

"Yes, number the party," said Bill, who always backed Roger. "Now then, let's sit down in a circle and we'll soon count numbers. Thirty-two of 'em, sir," he declared a little later. "Thirty-two of 'em, and you and me makes the number thirty-four. Just a nice little gang to put up a fight when the time comes."

"Thirty-four," repeated Roger. "Now let's put ourselves as it were into the shoes of the Germans. What will they do with us?"

"With us, sir?" cried Bill. "Let's see now: it s time their ration party came up to us, but will it move under this shell-fire? Everyone knows they've got to send up stuff to men holding their front line; but will they bother about prisoners?"

"Yes," answered Roger promptly; "not because they want to give us our rations, but because it is essential that we should be moved from the area of fighting. After all, thirty-four men might put up quite a little fight, and might prove quite 'a thorn in the flesh' if left in this forward situation. So it seems to me that we've got to move as soon as we can. We've got to get lost, as it were, in these German defences. My advice is that, as soon as it gets dark, we move out of this dug-out and towards the front. Then we shall have to hunt for a dug-out which is empty, and if we are lucky enough to find it, we shall then be wise if we make preparations to sand-bag the entrances, so as to keep out the Germans."

There came vigorous nods from the men. Some who had looked a little downcast smiled, while the others were actually laughing uproariously.

"Just give us half a chance, sir—me and the mates here," cried Bill. "Let's find a quiet little sort of a spot where no Germans can come, and that'll protect us from our own shells; then if we could get rifles, same as we did before when we escaped from that railway convoy! My! won't we help our chaps to come and capture Vimy?"

CHAPTER XVIII

Vimy

It was dark as Roger and his men slid out of the dug-out in which they had been sheltering; yet how different was the darkness of this eventful night from that of those which had preceded it! Then, but for an occasional flare from one of the front-line trenches, or a rocket sent up farther along the line, the land seemed to have sunk into silence and to be deserted; but now—silence?

Pandemonium had been let loose all along this wide front, which ran up the height of Vimy, on the far side of which the French had struggled in vain, in months gone by, for the capture of the crest. The darkness itself was punctuated in a thousand places by splotches of flame, by twinkling dots of light, by sheets of fire which tore the night, as it were, into shreds, and then disappeared, seeming to leap to some other adjacent spot.

"Getting warmer," Roger told himself as he led the way across the open. "Seems to me that for a mile behind the front line there is hardly a yard that isn't being plugged with shells, and as we go towards it we run into pretty considerable danger. Bill, pass the word to the men to look

out for some other shelter. Let them spread out."

"Spread out, boys!" called Bill a moment later. "Hold hands, and let's walk quietly across country like that. No hurrying, or the line will be broken by some of you falling into shell-holes, or by one of us running his head into a shell. There, what did I tell you? Take it easy, men, or else you'll be asking for annihilation."

It was a big word for Bill, but he managed to pronounce it splendidly, though by then he was lying flat on his face. For indeed their British friends over yonder, out of sight behind the Ridge of Vimy, had put a sudden end to their exertions. They had lengthened their range; and hardly had Roger and his party gained 200 yards from the shelter they had deserted, when shells came bumping all round them.

"And none of 'em duds either," cried Roger, realizing their danger. "These are big high-explosives, and if one gets into the middle of us we shan't want to look for shelter afterwards. Let's get back, men—this way."

"No, this way, sir," shouted Bill. "You've lost direction; these 'ere shells falling all round have confused you."

They held a hurried and somewhat agitated council where they stood amongst the shell-holes, with steel missiles from the British guns hurtling over their heads and plunging all round them. Cascades of earth rose on either side, while the detonation of these high-explosive shells was ter-

rific. What with one thing and another, it was not to be wondered at that both Roger and Bill, and indeed every one of the men with them, were uncertain of their actual position. They had lost that excellent dug-out. No one knew which way to turn. They were, in fact, in a most serious predicament.

"Then straight on," shouted Roger. "Our dug-out was in the third line, I believe, so that there's bound to be a second line in front of us. Spread out, men, and walk along quietly. Bill, you take the far end of the line, I'll take the centre, and we'll put another man at the other end. Steady, boys; hurrying won't help us."

"Only one feels inclined to double up like a rabbit and run for ever and ever," grunted Bill, as he took his place at the far end of the line. "Them 'ere shells are something to try the temper and the courage of anyone. You wouldn't mind so much if they didn't make such a howling noise, but when you hears a couple of dozen express trains bearing down on you, why, you feels precious small, eh?"

"Yes!" his nearest neighbour agreed, readily enough, dropping into a shell-hole as one of the British guns landed a missile within a few yards of him. "'Struth! If you wants to know what it's like to feel in a funk, come under a British shelling."

No doubt the Germans, lying in their trenches in front, crouching in their dug-outs in the various lines constructed to oppose the British, and coming along the high roads to reinforce their fellows, would have agreed readily enough with the last

speaker. For, let it be realized, the years which had followed those earlier months of the war had brought about a great change in the circumstances and the fortunes of the combatants.

In 1914 and the earlier portion of 1915, it was the British—"that contemptible little army", as the Kaiser arrogantly called it—which lay so often hugging its ill-formed trenches while torrents of shells were poured upon it; it was the gallant old Regular army which had withstood so often that terrible ordeal, had hung on to their posts by sheer force of will and dogged courage, and had successfully arrested the advance of the invader. But now, in this year 1917, why, the shelling on the Somme was as nothing to it. Those British guns which had awakened beyond Vimy Ridge, and had hinted, as it were, to Roger and his men that their friends were about to attempt an offensive, had been joined now by a vast number of additional batteries. The gun-fire was literally terrific. Heard there, before the muzzle of the guns, the sounds were nerve-shattering in their intensity. But sound does not hurt nor alarm after a while, when one becomes used to it. It was those plunging shells —those weird, rattling, roaring missiles which flew overhead, which plumped here and there and everywhere into the ground, which penetrated into the depths of dug-outs, which burrowed concrete posts, and which burst anywhere, everywhere, where most and where least expected, with shattering reports, upheaving and obliterating the immediate surroundings—that struck terror to the heart.

"We can't stand any more of this," said Roger after a while, when already two of his men had been wounded by flying splinters. "We must make for some underground place, even if there are Germans in it. Here's the second line. Come into the trenches now. Here's the entrance to a dug-out."

Far down below he could see a twinkling light, and half-way down the stair he halted to carry on a whispered conversation with Bill.

"Certainly some soldiers down here," he said, "sheltering just as we want to."

"Ah!—sheltering same as we want to," repeated Bill. "Well, why should they have what we want and ain't got? What's to prevent us going in and sharing the place with 'em? Only, of course, we're prisoners."

"Are we? Does it look like it?" Roger flashed back at him. "One moment, while I pass up and talk to the men. Lads," he said, "down below there there's safety to a certain degree, and some Germans are enjoying it. Out here you stand the chance of being slaughtered by British guns any moment. Who is ready to charge down with me and capture the fellows down in the dug-out?"

If it hadn't been so dark Roger would have seen many a head bobbing upward, many a stern face seamed with a smile.

"Who's ready?" a hoarse voice replied. "Me—every one of us, sir; only let's get something with which to shock 'em!"

"Aye!—let's!" Bill echoed; "and then, Mr. Roger, we'll see what we can do with these fellows

what's got the place that we want, and mean to have."

"Search along the trench in either direction," Roger ordered; "there's sure to be trench stores of some sort—picks and shovels and so on, and perhaps some rifles. Pick up anything you can —and quick with it!—yes, quick, for there's a shell landing quite close to us."

Earth fell all round them, and even rattled on the steps of the dug-out which they had selected, as a huge eight-inch shell burst twenty paces away with extraordinary violence, shaking the whole terrain round, and flinging a spout of brown earth upwards. Others, too, were falling almost as near, while as Roger waited by the entrance to the dug-out he heard a shattering report a little farther along the trench line, and, following it, howls of terror from the inmates of some dug-out which had been wrecked.

"Sort of thing one would grin at, if one were behind the British lines with our shells sailing safely overhead," he thought grimly. "But when you're in a place like this, under the shelling of your own guns, with eight-inch shells and huge bits of metal flying all about, why, it's a different situation. Ah!—there you are, Bill. Now then, let's muster the men, and—one moment, search along the trench for another opening."

Without great difficulty they came upon a second opening, some forty yards along; for, almost invariably, these German dug-outs have at least two means of access, and not infrequently many shafts

leading vertically from them, acting in normal times as ventilators, and in times of stress providing a bolt-hole whereby soldiers can descend to the depths below, or with equal facility can gain the open.

"There's this 'ere second opening right along here," Bill told Roger, shouting the words in his ear, "and there ain't a doubt that if we search along the top, right over the dug-out, we shall find one o' them bolt-holes. What's the orders, sir? We rush from both ends, eh? and some of us falls down from the top and helps to upset 'em?"

"Just that!" Roger replied abruptly. "Divide the party into three, the third group consisting of, say, four or five men only. You take one of the entrances, while I take this one. Then, when I shout, down you go, and we'll attack them together."

Gathering together at the exits of the dug-outs, the two parties clambered down the stairs till they reached a point where they were still out of vision of the enemy sheltering below, though Roger, peeping round the corner, caught a glimpse of a number of bunks in which men were reclining, and of other figures of Germans seated about the place. Meanwhile, five of the men had discovered a bolt-hole over the very centre of the dug-out, and were already descending by the iron rungs secured to its sides. Then suddenly, with a roar, the three parties burst in upon the enemy; Roger wielding a trench shovel as he led his men, while Bill used

the haft of a pick, with which he struck out in all directions. Someone fired a weapon, and the bullet, striking Roger's shovel, shattered the shaft and left him helpless. Then an officer leapt to the front with a man beside him. Roger simply dived forward, driving hard with his fists, and a moment later was at grips with both of them. Over him and the two struggling forms his men poured with loud shouts, while from the other end of the dug-out came Bill, his voice heard above all the uproar.

Perhaps five minutes later quiet again reigned down below, while certain figures were resting in the bunks constructed along the side of the dug-out. They were the figures of some of Roger's men—for the Germans had vanished.

"There was nothing else for it," said Roger, when he had recovered his breath and could chat with Bill and some of the men. "If we'd kept them down here, those prisoners of ours would soon have had a chance to turn the tables on us, so there was nothing else for it but to turn them out and send them towards the rear; for to have let them pass along their own second line and gain another dug-out would have been to warn the Germans elsewhere, and to have had them searching for us. As it is, the fellows we've displaced will have the pleasure of crossing the same shell-swept ground that we have just left—and may they enjoy it! Now, men, let's search round for food, and let's make up our minds to rest here quietly till morning. This bombardment is so hot that I feel sure that at dawn the British will come over."

They spent the hours which followed in sand-bagging the entrances of the dug-out, taking special precaution to see that the anti-gas curtains were in position; for if, indeed, the British were about to attack, it was more than likely that they would send clouds of gas over the German line before advancing.

"It's just what Kaiser Bill's brought on his blessed self," Bill told one of the men unctuously, as they adjusted the curtain. "D'you see? Neither me nor you nor any one of us likes to walk about with a gas mask on, like a horse with his nose-bag tied about him, and I don't suppose these here Huns exactly enjoy the experience. But they asked for it —hey?"

"Yus," came the prompt answer, "asked for it, right enough, Bill. Me and one or two more of the boys 'ere was up in the old Second Army—when was it? Why, April, 1915, when Fritz first started the game of sending poison gas amongst us. Burr! Don't I remember it just, and how it caught us! But we was up to the trick precious soon! Got our masks to protect us, and now people say that our gas is so strong it makes them Huns sit up," he guffawed. "It fairly rolls 'em over!"

"Which makes one feel thankful that the Germans considered our lives of such value, when working behind their front, that they supplied us all with masks," broke in Roger. "My advice is that every man prepares to don his; for if our men attack early in the morning, they are nearly sure to come behind a cloud of gas. As Bill says,

the Kaiser and his barbarous war lords thought out and invented this special method of killing their enemies wholesale, and now that the Allies have learnt to retaliate, and give one better, they needn't grumble. What we've got to do is to look out for that gas, supposing it comes in the morning."

"And in the meanwhile we does a doss here!" laughed Bill, who was in capital spirits. "Just pass a quiet sort of night—dreams of home and our comrades yonder."

Bill might describe it as having a quiet time, and might laughingly refer to the sleep he proposed to indulge in, but few of the Germans behind the Ridge of Vimy contemplated the coming hours with equal assurance and pleasure. Not in one dug-out alone, but, literally, in thousands of them, men cowered. Soldiers of the Kaiser burrowed in the farthest corners, and sat there, in the light of the electric lamps, shivering, as they listened to the detonation of shells, trembling even more violently than did the concreted walls of their defences, dying often enough with a shudder, as more British shells got home and blew to fragments some underground burrow.

Roger sat the livelong night smoking captured German tobacco and occasionally drinking German coffee taken in the dug-out, listening to those same sounds, wondering often enough whether he and his men would survive this dreadful ordeal, for ordeal indeed it was. Like his comrades, he had experienced a German bombardment during the

Battle of the Somme and elsewhere, and knew what it was to have shells tumbling about his ears. But this—this British bombardment in the spring of 1917—was beyond all that had gone before. It was terrific—awful! So intense and so nerve-shattering that it almost drove men to madness. Sleep! The thing was out of the question altogether. A pleasant rest! Who could contemplate it?

Like Roger, all of those men sat listening, waiting, hoping, and yet fearful of what might happen. And so the hours went by, while the bombardment, instead of decreasing, became even worse as more "heavies" came into action, as more medium howitzers took up the refrain, and as hundreds of additional steel-throated cannons cast their missiles over the ridge. And then, when hours had passed, the note changed of a sudden. Those reports—punctuating every second, and sometimes overlapping one another, yet for all that distinct, each one, though no one could count them—suddenly fused together into one mighty roar as drum-fire was indulged in.

"They'll come now," Roger called to the men. "That's our barrage. Keep down here, every one of you, while I go up and watch to see what's happening."

"And while I come with you," Bill said stoutly. "You never know what may happen once you get up there into the trench; for if we're in the German second line, it stands to reason that our guns are out to crush it. So I'll come up too. Two heads is better than one, Mr. Roger, ain't they?"

They groped their way up the stairway from the dug-out, looking strange objects indeed, as they were wearing gas helmets; then, creeping into the trench, they peered out over the land, which was still almost completely hidden in darkness. Yet just a faint streak of dawn was breaking the sky, while flashes of shells helped to illumine their surroundings.

"And look at that barrage!" cried Bill, pointing over the parapet. "It's creeping up over the ridge. See it? There, it's on the very top! It's spluttering over the German first line! It's moving down this side! It's—— Our chaps must be close on after it. And what's that? There go the German guns opening up their barrage!"

"Too late to stop our men though," Roger shouted, feeling so excited that he could hardly stand still and watch what was happening. "If the attack has started, as I feel sure it has, our men would be marching within fifty feet of our barrage. The German barrage has gone right over ours; it will be playing now on No Man's Land behind the British attacking parties. What a conflagration! What a terrific sight! What a—— Look at that! Khaki!"

"Khaki!" yelled Bill, clambering half-way out of the trench in his eagerness.

For as the moments sped by, and that terrible drum-fire which announced the barrage grew louder, so also did the light grow in intensity. They could see the ridge—could see those snake-like communication trenches zigzagging their way up to the

German front line; could even perceive that line, or rather the land through which it had cut, now ploughed deep with shell-holes, torn to shreds, turned over, flattened out and broken up in the most extraordinary and marvellous fashion. But the figures there were not those of Germans. Those hurrying forms, that long, well-spread-out line, coming along at a steady pace following the ridge, that line was composed of soldiers dressed in khaki —of their British comrades. No wonder that Bill cheered. No wonder that Roger shouted hoarsely.

And then the smoke of the barrage came down of a sudden and blotted out the scene, while British guns, turning their attention from the first line of German trenches, began to search the second line once more, determined to obliterate it also.

"Down you go!" said Roger; "there's nothing to do until our men make good the first line and can advance. Perhaps that'll be to-day, perhaps soon, perhaps never."

"So we've to keep a bright eye open—eh, Mr. Roger? We'll go down now, as you say, and take shelter, but every now and again I'll pop up to see what's happening. Supposing our chaps don't get much farther forward, supposing some of the machine-gun posts the Germans have hold 'em up, are we to stick here and see our folks within calling distance?"

Roger could have laughed at Bill's eagerness—at his indignation. "Steady on!" he said. "You can trust us to make the most of any opportunity. D'you think I'm going to stay down in a dug-out,

Bill, and wait, with our fellows so close? No, no! Common sense tells us that we should take cover for a while, in the hope that our fellows will come forward; if not, then we go to them."

"We do!" Bill exclaimed with emphasis.

Yet the necessity never arose, for hardly an hour later the commotion and noise overhead lessened, and then ceased altogether; while, peeping up over the trench, Roger noticed that British shells were now falling on the third German line behind them. Yet of the British he could not see a sign, for what with smoke and mist the battle-field was obscured. Hardly, however, had he reached his comrades down below in the dug-out when other sounds attracted his attention: a machine-gun rattled somewhere near at hand, and then a voice reached the depths of the dug-out as some soldiers stood at one of the bolt-holes above and hailed the occupants.

"Hi, there!" he heard, and the voice was that of a Canadian soldier. "Come out of it, every one of you! If you don't, I've got somethin' here that'll warm you!"

The something was a bomb which he held all ready in his hand, while at each entrance to the dug-out, and at the bolt-holes, stood more Canadian soldiers with rifles slung, and bombs ready in hand to annihilate the men below should they attempt resistance.

"Hold on!" Roger shouted; while Bill, going to one of the bolt-holes, bellowed his loudest.

"We'll come up," Roger called; "don't shoot, and don't bomb us."

"One of them Fritzes what speaks English better'n you or I do," laughed one of the men above. "Come out, you sons of guns, and let's see yer! Ho!—it's you what speaks our lingo—eh? Why, what's this?—khaki?"

The bayonet dropped to Roger's chest; a huge Canadian stood over him. "What's this?" he growled; "a Fritz in best British khaki?"

"Stop! Wait a minute! Who are you? Why? No!—Yes! Really!"

An officer pushed the soldier aside and stared hard at Roger. Then, coming forward, he peered into his face, and then clapped a hand on to his shoulder.

"Sullivan, as I live!" he bellowed. "D'you remember me? D'you remember that machine-gun post that you and I rushed when we were serving together—you as a sergeant and I as a lieutenant? You were wounded then, Sullivan, and—— Shake hands, man, don't you remember?"

Roger did. Yet he was so overcome with this sudden meeting with old friends, with the return of himself and Bill and their comrades to liberty, that he could scarcely speak, now that those friends were all about him. It was with an effort that he steadied his voice, and then with a grip of iron that he took the hand of the one who had recognized him.

"I'm glad!" he said. "Now let us get rifles and ammunition; for I and all of these men here are anxious to do our turn against the Germans."

CHAPTER XIX

The Might of Britain

PASS along the line of British trenches as they stretch to the north, toward the Belgian sea-coast, cutting their devious way through the too often waterlogged soil of Flanders. See Lens, immediately to the north of that Vimy Ridge, which the gallant Canadians had captured; Loos, north again of the coal city which we have just mentioned, where British troops struck so hard a blow against the Teuton in 1915. Then note the Messines Ridge as it traces northward and so takes us on to Ypres and the heights of Langemarck and of St. Julien, ground which had long since become the cockpit of Europe.

That blow which the British had struck at Vimy was soon followed by others. The Messines Ridge was taken in brilliant fashion. St. Julien and Langemarck fell to the united efforts of French and British, while the lines south and north of Lens were pushed forward, pinching that city out as it were, and threatening its capture. Even as we write it may well have fallen, for the Canadians have again gone forward and have taken Hill 70, which dominates the city to the north, and are pressing toward its centre.

Here, there, everywhere along the line in Flanders and in France, the Allies—Belgian, British, French, Portuguese, and Russian—strike at the invader, crush his formidable defences with their overmastering gun-fire, and slay his soldiers. The line reels. Even though Germany has mustered every available man, and has called to her aid every artifice, every invention, her armies are put to the test, her resources are taxed to make good the losses.

"And so it goes on," Roger's new friends told him, when he and Bill had been transferred to a corps near Ypres, and were once more working with the Tanks. "If America don't hurry up she'll be too late, for everything is going rosily. Of course we've a big nut to crack, but between us we're making Fritz look foolish."

"Yes, and never for one moment leaving him alone," another officer followed. "If there is no big action on there are always raids, and we carry 'em out now even in daylight. Then there's the Flying Corps."

"Yes, the Flying Corps," quoth another. "Up all the time, night and day, swooping and bombing behind the enemy lines, smashing his hangars and aerodromes, pulling down his flyers, putting out his eyes, you might say, and then spotting his batteries for our artillery. It's terrific! They've got a new wheeze. Believe me, in our last 'push' there they were flying low down, some of 'em, just in front of our advancing line, putting machine-guns into action against the enemy infantry. It's terrific!"

He pulled hard at his pipe, and knocked the ashes out with an emphatic bang. Everyone who has followed the progress of this gigantic war must agree that the fighting has become amazing, terrific, beyond human endurance almost. Yet more is to come. The railways behind the line are groaning beneath their weight of shells, the British and French and Belgian fronts are seething with men. And behind, on the lines of communication, is an increasing army of women, driving pens or motor-cars, cooking, doing such work as loyal woman may do in times of stress, freeing the men for the conflict.

"It just makes yer open yer eyes wide and swaller, it does," asserted Bill as he sat on the end of the Tank which Roger now captained. "Seems to me that durin' the time that we was prisoners things has changed beyond — well, beyond — er what's the name?"

"Recognition," suggested Roger.

"Jest that. To begin with, Mr. Roger, this here line behind the front's so chock-a-block with men that you can scarce move. Then there's things that we never dreamed of. Cinemas with the latest pictures from Lunnon, and concert parties made up of soldiers that goes about making the men laugh with their play-acting. And behind, don't yer know, it's an eye-opener. Gals a-doin' this, gals a-doin' that; natives a-labourin' on the roads and railways—a swarming heap that all helps to keep the show a-goin'."

What Bill described in his own fashion was

nothing less than a triumph of organization—a British invasion of France and Flanders, though a peaceful one, we should hasten to mention. A new world had been brought into being, where British men and women predominated, and where the French civilians had become eager and interested onlookers, admiring, as they undoubtedly do, the determination and the eagerness of their ally.

"And to-morrow we get off," said Roger, some few days after his new Tank had been handed over to him. "To-morrow at dawn. Wonder what new adventures will come our way? Hope we shan't drop into a dug-out this time. But, anyway, we've a Tank that's far more powerful, and our guns should be useful."

See that Tank clattering and roaring its way through the wrecked houses where the fair village of St. Julien once stood. Watch as it heads for the enemy line, here broken and disjointed, and composed of a series of gun-pits and redoubts.

"Put her at it," shouted Roger, as his driver turned his head over his shoulder and looked enquiringly at him; for before the grovelling Tank there stretched a veritable lake of water. "Shove her through, for I'm going to attack that redoubt yonder. It's holding up this flank of our advance, and, so far as I can see, there's no other way of coming at it."

"Shove her at it? Yes, sir," came the answer, cut short by the firing of one of the guns the Tank carried.

"It's that there pill-box that I'm after," Bill shouted, as he peered through the port and indicated a tilted concrete structure some three hundred yards from them. "There's a nest of machine-gunners in there, and our shells don't seem to have done more'n shake 'em. Hooray! That has, though. That's put 'em out of action."

As the Tank wormed its way down a slope, sprawling in the mud—for continuous rain had made a mere of the ground around—Roger peered through the gun-port through which Bill had pointed. Yes, the last shot had taken effect, for the tilted pill-box, as our men call such isolated concrete strong posts, showed a huge gaping hole in its side, while a white flag was already flying above it.

Souse! The Tank wallowed into the lake, sending a bow wave up before her. Grunting and complaining, she wallowed forward, side-slipping in the ooze, her propelling chains coated with a foot of it, while slime and mud dripped from every quarter.

"She's a-goin' ter do it, sir," cried the driver, beaming on our hero. "If she'd refused, as you couldn't blame her, we should ha' stuck here and been a target. But she knows her job, she does. Up yer come, me beauty!"

"Left!" commanded Roger, as the Tank clambered out of its bed of ooze and waddled upward to higher ground. "Lay us alongside that redoubt quickly."

Bullets rattling against the steel sides of the Tank deafened them now. A grenade, flung by some

mechanical contrivance five hundred yards away, plumped on to the roof, rolled off and exploded, whereat the Tank shook her tail, as it were, in dignified manner, snorted, and went onward. Then a duel commenced which kept the oncoming British troops who witnessed it spellbound. For machine-guns poured a storm of bullets from the face of the redoubt, while grenades fell like stones in a hail-storm. The Tank rocked as if in agony, smoke filled the interior till none could see, and breathing was difficult. As to the heat, it was almost insupportable, for the Tank carried a full crew, and what with the necessity to wear gas masks, the confined surroundings, and the natural heat engendered by so great exertion, every man was perspiring as he had never done before. Then the guns she carried spoke.

"Stop!" commanded Roger. "This position will do for us, for that bank in front gives us some shelter while still allowing our guns to work. Dismount two of the machine-guns. I'll take 'em outside, with volunteers, and enfilade the German garrison from the other direction."

"Volunteers. That's me, sir!" shouted Bill.

"And me!"

"Stop! You're all volunteers, I can see. You three men nearest me will come. Two of you will each bring a machine-gun. The third and myself will carry the ammunition. Use your discretion, Bill, while I'm out. If you have to move position, remember that we're along at the far end of the bank."

Making their preparations hastily, Roger opened the narrow steel door and emerged, the men following. Picking up their burdens, they then crept along behind the bank, under the lee of which the Tank lay sheltering, and, almost immobilized by the sticky mud, into which they sank to their knees more often than not, slowly and laboriously made their way to the left.

"Stop again! We'll take a breather here," said Roger, for it was hard work they were undertaking. "I'm on the look-out for a spot, a break in the bank perhaps, where we can set up one of the machine-guns and get a clear line of fire right into the ports in the redoubt. Our guns will never break that concrete. We've got to get direct hits on the ports, or smother the men inside with bullets sent through 'em."

Another ten minutes of strenuous work and such a position was reached, a narrow break in the sheltering bank being come upon.

"The very place, eh, sir?" said one of the men, setting down his burden.

"Couldn't be better. Mind that you don't get seen by the enemy. Fritz, no doubt, has most of his attention turned upon the Tank, but there will be observers. That's one of our guns in position. You two men carry on and make the most of every opportunity, while I and Private Harris push ahead and look for another place. Don't open fire till you are sure that you are dead on, for unless you can silence a port you'll be swamped with return fire from the enemy."

Not for the first time in the conflicts which had raged along the British front had Tank officers emerged from the semi-security of their machines and dragged machine-guns into the open. After all, a Tank may usefully take a small force to within striking distance, and then, because of the ground, as in this case, be unable unaided to suppress resistance. Here was a case, in fact, where attack from another quarter was required, and the dashing Roger instantly adopted the plan we have followed. Then came the grinding rattle and roar of his machine-guns, while the steel leviathan near at hand shuddered under the recoil of her bigger armament. Chips of mud-caked concrete flew from the German redoubt, while one lucky hit blew in a port, joining it with another. The machine-guns brought about the greatest havoc. Popping up at closer quarters, and from an unexpected point, they riddled the interior of a portion of the redoubt, pouring bullets through the ports immediately in front of them, and sweeping on to others. Then, as a door opened and Germans swung out and headed toward their own lines, they rattled and roared again.

"Flag's gone up! Place surrenders!" shouted one of the men, while the Tank let fly a final shell.

"And here are the infantry. Let's join them," called Roger, returning to his first machine-gun party. "Put your guns down and take to your rifles. When we have secured the fort we can rejoin the Tank, and then go on. Here we are. Rush for the door. Ah! They've closed it from the inside."

"Shove a bomb up against it! Men, lie down!" commanded a young subaltern who had just arrived, plodding forward with his men. "Blow the show in, and then rush 'em. They've shoved a white flag up, but it don't say that they all surrender. This redoubt has two stories, and those above aren't taken yet."

They flung themselves down upon their faces in the wet mud, Roger and the others, and waited for the explosion of the bomb. Then, as it burst and threw the steel-coated door of the redoubt off its hinges, they rose to their feet with a yell, and poured through the opening into the interior. Men met them with bare bayonets. Men thrust and lunged at one another. In the twilight of the interior British and Germans struggled desperately, the enemy at bay, fighting for every inch, the British with an irresistible rush which carried all before it. And so, striking with their bayonets, swinging their rifles, heaving bombs before them, they fought their way onward, Roger and the subaltern at their head. And finally they won their way to the far end.

"But there's still the upper story to win," shouted Roger, breathing heavily after his exertions. "Who'll follow? I'm going for it!"

Who's following, indeed! Every man pushed his way forward. Roger leaped at the stairway—a solid construction, for the Germans had spared no pains and had grudged no labour—forced labour, be it added, the labour of unfortunate slaves—upon these concrete defences. A few steps took him to

the top, where a steel-coated door, like that on the outer wall, obstructed his entrance. But a burly soldier came to his aid, wielding a sledge-hammer. One, two, three. His blows fell in swift succession, and then they were through.

"'Struth! What's this? I've—I'm jiggered!"

No wonder that the fine fellow who had broken the door down was dumbfounded. No wonder that Roger, swift on his heels, and the men who followed, stood rooted to the spot; for, indeed, the interior of the upper story of this redoubt presented a most extraordinary appearance. Light filtered freely into it through many a port, and through the wide gap which that fortunate shell from the Tank had created. It showed a huge rectangular place, with bare concrete walls and floor, the latter strewn with the empty cases of spent ammunition. A broken gun lay on its side, and about it the stiff figures of two of its crew. Farther along, there were a dozen more figures—heaped together in every attitude—men who had been struck down by the machine-guns which Roger and his men had turned upon the place. There were odds and ends of accoutrements here and there, more bodies of the defenders, food scattered about, rifles, and what not. But it was not the confusion of the place which drew exclamations of amazement from Roger and his men. It was not the evidence they had here of the losses the Germans were suffering. It was something far different indeed. It was, in fact, the sight of a desperate encounter being waged between two people.



C 902

"'ONE OF THEM IS A BRITISH OFFICER. COME ON!' SHOUTED ROGER"

"Germans—eh! A row. Let 'em fight it out."

"Germans! No, one of 'em's English."

"One of them is a British officer. Come on," shouted Roger, taking in the whole scene at a glance. "He's unarmed, while the other fellow's got a bayonet. Rush 'em. Separate 'em at once. Capture the German."

That individual, German without a doubt, fought like a tiger. Flinging off the officer with whom he had been engaged, and whom he had desperately endeavoured to run through with his weapon, this man, square-shouldered and strong, backed into a corner of the redoubt, set his back to the wall, and faced the new enemies who assailed him.

"My man! Rush him!" shouted Roger, and at once flung himself forward. A deft feint, a swift wriggle, and he was behind the point of that bayonet. Then out flew Roger's fist, and in a moment he had dropped the German.

Long before our hero had recovered his breath Bill was standing beside him, arms akimbo, scrutinizing the man upon whom Roger had so recently flung himself.

"Things gets queerer and queerer," he told Roger at length, scratching his woolly head as if vastly puzzled. "This here chap seems sort of to dog your footsteps, Mr. Roger. First he's in Hurslet, your own village, a-wantin' to knock you out, and him the son of a German baker. Then he turns up in the British army, British down to his brace buttons, and we sees him a hob-nobbing with Fritz and his brothers. Then there's a curtain

drawn over the scene till we tumbles up agin him just here, when he's a soldier of our old friend, Bill the Kaiser."

"A spy. See that he's put in charge of an escort. But that isn't the queerest thing that's happened, Bill," said Roger—gasped it, in fact. "This officer here, look at him. Who do you think he is?"

"Think he is! Don't know him from Adam."

Well might Bill have said that, for the officer who had been engaged in deadly conflict with the German was almost unrecognizable. For what with his exhaustion, his generally dishevelled appearance, his torn clothing, he was a sorry object indeed, unlike the general run of British officers. Yet Roger recognized the man, and as the latter recovered his breath and his strength, and began to note his surroundings better, he too stared at our hero, then started, and finally covered his eyes as if he were ashamed. It was Frank Riven, the ne'er-do-well, the dandy of Hurslet, he who had hired Hillstein to wreak vengeance upon young Roger Norman, still hardly more than a boy—Riven, the man who had loafed about, leaving it to Bill and to Roger and to men of their stamp to come forward in their thousands in defence of Britain.

CHAPTER XX

Fight on for Freedom!

STRANGE things happen in these days of warfare, and stranger things had occurred, in the three years which had now elapsed since Armageddon opened, than this meeting between Roger Norman—Lieutenant Roger Sullivan as he was known—and Lieutenant Frank Riven. Yet, consider the added circumstance of this fight in front of St. Julien, witnessing the coming together of three men, our hero, Frank Riven, and that spy, Hillstein.

"It's—it's—swob me bob! it's fair took me breath away," gasped Bill, when he at length understood precisely what had happened, and had seen Hillstein put under an escort and marched out of the upper story of the captured German redoubt down to the basement. "There's that scum that's just been marched off, who'd have seen us shot months back, and him, too, in khaki at the time. Then this here orfficer. Well, it's a rum 'un!"

Roger signalled to him, and whispered an order. Then he called an officer who happened to be present to his side, and again whispered. At once all the men who, following Roger, had rushed up to the attack moved out of the place, and with them the officer.

"Now, shut the door," commanded Roger. "Put your back against it, Bill. Frank Riven," he called, "we are alone now, and there is no fear of interference. We have something to say to one another. Come nearer!"

The man raised his head and presented a troubled face, a face no longer sneering, but one expressing shame and sorrow. "Something to say to one another," he said. "Yes, yes. I—but I'll come nearer."

Rising to his feet, he staggered across the concreted floor and dropped down limply near Roger, again burying his face in his hands. Then he lifted his head of a sudden and looked beseechingly at our hero; while the latter, getting a better view of him now, saw with amazement that the officer, whose single-handed combat he had interrupted, whose life he and the men had, perhaps, saved—seeing that Hillstein was armed and Frank was not—wore on the breast of his tattered tunic a ribbon, a decoration given only to those who have shown courage and resource in face of the enemy. And knowing Frank of old he marvelled.

"Decorated! He! For bravery!" he wondered. "The fellow who played that mean trick on me, who set Hillstein and the other rowdy upon me. Impossible! But—but no. This war has done such heaps of things, and has changed so many people. Tell me," he demanded abruptly, pointing to the decoration; "that is yours? You won it in fighting out here? You have been mentioned in dispatches?"

"I have. Listen to me, Roger. Thanks to you, I won that honour out here; whereas, without you, I should have sneaked away to some hole or corner where I could escape service. It's you I have to thank."

"Me! For that decoration! I—I don't understand."

"But I do. I could tell yer, Mr. Roger," burst in Bill, who was an eager witness of the scene. "I know what he means. Speak out, Mr. Riven. You've got straight folks to deal with here, and I'm in the secret. Me and Mr. Roger was pals when he was down and out. The time he bolted from home, I mean; the time when he thought he'd killed a man—the man you'd set on him. Yes, you don't quite like them words. But they're the truth, same as it's the truth that you wasn't bad right down to the backbone, but only foolish, vicious, evil-tempered, and jealous, jest a loafer sufferin' from swelled head, and sufferin' too, perhaps, from the easygoin' ways of them that brought yer up and nussed you. Own up like a man! Your conscience got hold of you and tore yer badly. You began to feel glad that that Hillstein rascal had failed to carry out the job, and, rememberin' the hammerin' this here Mr. Roger had given yer, yer began to have respect for the chap as could beat off two rowdies what had set upon him. Yer began to——"

"Stop!" commanded Roger, but Frank Riven at once interposed.

"No, no!" he cried. "Let him go on with the

tale. It's true—true in every way, and I deserve it. Besides, it helps. Let him finish."

"And I will, and gettin' yer leave to do so proves that you ain't bad all through, same as I've already suggested. Not as it's for me, a corporal, to lecture his officers. But I'm in this here thing. As I've said, him and me was pals——"

"Were pals? Say, rather, are pals, Bill," interjected Roger. "Haven't we been prisoners together? Didn't we go through lots side by side before rejoining the British?"

"Prisoners?" asked Frank Riven vacantly.

"Aye, prisoners, and because of you—in a roundabout fashion," Bill told him sharply. "Listen here, while I finish. This here Mr. Roger was nigh broke, what with fear and remorse and what not, that night when I first met him. But he's the right sort of stuff to push ahead, and he'd learned that that fellow Hillstein was living. He made good all through, as the Canadians say, got his commission, and might be a captain now, but him and me run up agin Hillstein. Do yer think that chaps same as him forget? He was a spy, and jest lured us into the lines of the enemy, him being in khaki. There, you've got the tale now. It's because Mr. Roger's the right sort, because you wasn't altogether bad that you began to forget to hate him; and from forgetting you began to grow a bigger conscience. You remembered that the country wanted every mother's son of us. He'd gone, the fellow you now admired and whom you'd wronged. You made up yer mind to follow; to wipe out what

you'd done on the battle-field; to prove to him, fust of all, and then to all the rest in Hurslet, that you was good too. Now out with it!"

Frank Riven rose to his feet, and, striding across to gallant Bill Andrews, stood erect before him.

"You've spoken just what I have thought so often, just what I would have liked to say. Will you shake hands with me?"

"Will I? Why, bless me life, ain't you got that there ribbon? Don't I know that you're a-quivering with shame at this very moment, and yet a-tremblin' with hope. You played a dirty game in the old days, Mr. Riven, but you ring true now. Shake hands? Proud to!"

When Frank turned, Roger was standing just behind him, hand outstretched, and a smile on his face.

"With me too, Frank," he said. "Let bygones be bygones. Tell us all about Hurslet."

They chatted on for some while, and then went out to join again in the battle, Roger mounting his Tank, while Frank went to his own unit. But it was a very different Frank Riven now—a happy, natural, gay-hearted officer. For had not that strange meeting with Roger relieved his mind of a load, and had not his conduct since he joined the army—tales of which slowly filtered to Roger's ear—retrieved and repaired as it were some of his former misdoings? But it was Roger's forgiveness that he wanted most of all; and, after that, if he could win in the end some little appreciation, even friendship—though that seemed too good to think of

—from the youth whom he had practically hounded out of that old English village, then indeed would his cup be full. As for the meeting which had just taken place, Frank blessed the mishap which had caused him to be surrounded and taken prisoner, blessed the fact that Hillstein, now fighting with the Germans, had recognized him; and from that point would have changed nothing of all that had happened.

Think of the excitement in Hurslet village when Squire Riven went down with his pretty daughter to the Dene to congratulate the Doctor.

"Of course, you've been kind enough to keep us informed about Roger all along, and we knew that he had won a commission. But he was fighting under another name than his own, and that seemed to me to be unfair to him and to all of us. But there it is. I shall have it framed, eh, my dear?"

Together the three read the announcement in the paper, which ran as follows:—

"Lieutenant Roger Sullivan adopts his own name forthwith, and is now entered on the strength of the British army as Lieutenant Roger Norman."

"But that isn't all, eh, my dear?" the Squire shouted, waving the paper. "Doctor Norman hasn't seen it, has he? But we have, eh?"

Pretty Miss Riven acknowledged the fact with a blush and a smile of pleasure. "I knew it would be so one day," she said. "And—there it is."

"Military Cross. Lieutenant Roger Norman,"

read the Squire. "Military Cross, Doctor. And what for, eh? Then listen to this. 'For constant dash and courage in face of the enemy, and for the most efficient and gallant handling of his Tank. This officer recently escaped from the German lines, leading a band of British prisoners. He then proved himself to be a most resourceful officer.' What of that?" demanded the Squire. "Enough, you say. Well, we don't; do we, my dear? Not a bit of it. Look below. Same gazette, Doctor. Here we are, for I marked it with a pencil: 'Lieutenant Roger Norman to be Captain, dated August 24th'. How's that? Splendid, eh? Certainly! My dear, you agree without a doubt."

Everything was splendid, for a little while later Mr. Riven heard from Frank, having meanwhile had good accounts of him from other officers. Now he learned of that strange meeting at the front of the front, of the reconciliation, and of Frank's sorrow for what was past, and of his enthusiasm for our hero.

"So it all ends well, Doctor," he told his old friend. "Roger's done right well, as all of us knew he would; and, though he hadn't anything to clear himself of, for he knocked that man down in self-defence, yet it's fine to know that he first won a commission and then promotion. As to Frank, I'll admit," said the Squire ruefully, "that he was a young scoundrel. A vicious and sneaking prig and coward. But he's learned his lesson, he's wined off that score. he's made good, eh?

We'll forget the old days and give 'em both a great welcome."

To all of which the Doctor agreed readily enough, while the pretty daughter of the Squire flushed warmly, and her eyes glistened. Yet there was to be no sight either of Roger or of Frank for quite a while, for desperate fighting continued. Reeling under the blows British and French troops struck at her, Germany was called upon ever to protect herself from additional offensive strokes. That long line from the North Sea down to the Swiss frontier was aflame, now here, now there, and then at every point, almost without exception. Even as we write, the conflict, fierce elsewhere, has of a sudden blazed out anew at Verdun, that grave of the German Crown Prince's reputation, of that Teuton braggart who has sent so many thousands of his men to their end in front of the heights which enclose the Meuse at Verdun. True, his cannon have shattered the famous city, have wrecked its ancient buildings, have even sent their shells thrusting to the depths of the crypt beneath the ruined cathedral. But shatter the *moral* and defence of the French those guns never could, nor could all the troops Germany threw into this sector. Yes, of a truth, Verdun, like Ypres and so many other places, has been the grave not alone of a puppet's reputation, but of the reputation for invincibility of Prussian armies, and of countless Prussian soldiers.

Hold on! Heed not the croakings of the cranks, of the pacifists, of those who talk ever and risk

nothing by fighting. That revolution in Russia, which has seen the deposition of the Tsar and the uprising of a Republic, and the following demoralization of the once-conquering Russian armies, has given Germany and Austria, her fellow-conspirator, a little further space for breathing. But the day is dawning when those Russian hosts will again press forward against the common enemy; and then, with Italy thrusting as successfully as ever—and right gallant work her troops have done—with our Salonika and Mesopotamia armies advancing, and America, perhaps, shoulder to shoulder with her allies on the French front, the dam built by the sweat of thousands of hapless slaves—that concrete dam, teeming with machine-guns, and backed by the last of Germany's manhood—will break asunder. Wait and watch for that breach. Let none stand between you and it. Fight on, for victory and lasting peace lie beyond it. Only so, by the crushing of Germany, can the world return to freedom and tranquillity; only by the smashing of a system designed to crush the nations, and to place might—German might—above the rights of the peoples.

The village of Hurslet was all astir. The streets were lined with country folks in their best attire, while a triumphal arch actually obstructed the upper end. There stood the Squire and the Doctor, with Miss Riven close at hand, while near them was a gathering of the more important of the villagers. And at length a motor-car hove into

sight at the top of the hill, sailed down it, and crept toward the arch.

"Good gracious!"

"Oh, jingo! How are we to face it?"

"There's doin's down there, sir," said Bill, as he turned in the front seat of the car to look at Roger and Frank—to note, in fact, the look almost of terror which they now presented. "Why, ain't you glad? It's a-goin' to be a bean-feast. Blest if there ain't a deputation a-waitin' to meet you. Formal welcome, don't yer know. Smiles and any number of congratulations."

Roger and Frank merely groaned. To return home after so many months of active service, and under such different conditions in the case of each, was quite an event; but to be met officially as it were, to be fêted, perhaps to have to make a speech—well, it instantly set the two, who had faced the severest gun-fire on the French front, in a perspiration.

"I—oh hang it!" groaned Roger. "Goodness! The whole village is there. Go on, you idiot! Don't stop! I—we——"

The driver of the vehicle didn't turn a hair, but pulled up with nice precision immediately beyond the arch, and then smiled on the assembled people. As for them, they shouted themselves hoarse; whereat Bill grinned his most expressive grin and peered slyly at our hero. Roger and Frank meanwhile sat petrified, saluting, trying to appear at ease, ready to bolt if there happened to arrive an opportunity.

It was the firm grip of Sergeant Higgins which next interrupted the proceedings.

"No one more glad than I to see you back safe and sound, Mr. Roger," said he, and smiled as he made way for the Squire and his pretty daughter. "Proud to meet you again, Mr. Riven, and congratulations on the ribbon. A medal means a lot to a soldier. A 'mention' and a special reward don't come to everyone in the army."

How the few short days of that pleasant leave flew, and how the people of Hurslet fêted the two returned warriors! Be sure that they discussed the matter threadbare at the "Morning Sun", and listened again and again to the lurid pictures which Bill painted for them.

"You can put it down like this, Sergeant Higgins," that worthy said, as if finally, on their last evening, addressing first mine host, and then the assembled company. "Mr. Roger's A1. Mr. Riven don't come much behind him. They've both made good over yonder, and if things go well, they'll return to this place with further honours. Then I suppose they'll settle down—eh?" he asked, with a knowing smile, in which the company joined instantly. "Mr. Frank—I dunno what he'll do. Says, though, that he'll take on soldiering for good; which ain't wonderful, seeing how he's took to the job like a duck to water. Mr. Roger now—ah! there he goes. Ain't they a proper couple!"

They pressed to the bow-windows of the "Morning Sun" and peered curiously, and yet a little slyly,

into the street. A stalwart khaki figure was strolling up toward the Hall, and on his arm leaned the Squire's daughter.

"Hum! shouldn't wonder," said the Sergeant when they were seated again, jerking his head significantly toward the window. "Less unlikely things has happened in our time, and Mr. Roger's no bad judge I'll warrant. Friends, don't let us be too curious. But fill up. Here's my toast, and it is a real warm one. Here's to our two officers! Here's to Mr. Roger and the Lady!"

The cheer which followed was heard on the confines of the village, and Roger and his companion halted on the hill and looked backward.

"So it is agreed then, dear," Roger was saying as they turned again and went on arm-in-arm. "After the war we'll——"

A second cheer drowned the answer.

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