

ADVANCE IN RETROSPECT

THE business of preparation is complete. The men know what work lies in front of them, if life is spared, before the sun, now setting behind the steep roofs and towers of Bailleul, rises again above the fortified ridge of Messines, still held by the enemy. As the column leaves its high resting place on Mount Ravetsburg and winds on towards the darkening East, a ground mist veils the sordid straggle of wreckage in the valley, where heaped debris of earth, metal and smouldering timber had once been trains of linked trucks loaded with explosives. A chance bomb dropped from the air yesterday had blown wagons, wheels, rails, sheds and men skywards in blasts of flame.

The thick dust stirred by the movement of many men fills eyes, mouth and nose, for the grass underfoot that once carpeted the country lane has been crushed out of life, and the earth that fed it has been powdered by the tread of innumerable feet. Yet the June evening is still redolent with hawthorn; and the scent of the hedgerows softens the acrid impact of sweat. Shellfire has not yet violated the virginity of trees in full leaf; and the eye lingers on their shapeliness as if to stamp their form on the mind. Within an hour the memory of them will seem as fantastic as the prospect of the trees further ahead which stand with stark limbless trunks pared of life-giving foliage by the engines of war.

The vibrant note of a homing aeroplane and the muffled beat of occasional gunfire seem to emphasize the stillness of the twilight. The land as it falls away in front flickers with red flashes, which delineate the girdle of defence round Ypres. Suddenly the senses take the familiar shock of explosion: the sky glares and coruscates with the burst and crackle of munitions stored in the graveyard of Neuve Eglise, where a well-directed shell has set them prematurely ablaze to the discomfiture of its peaceful tenants.

In the valley of Wulverghem many guns are just discernible, stalled wheel to wheel along the lynchet under the eastward rise. While the column halts, figures pass this way and that through the mist that covers the low ground and retains a deceptive vestige of daylight in its thin white

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shroud. A train of limbered wagons bumps over the rough ground with a jingle of harness, and a huddle of tanks that have just shed their netted camouflage start to feel their way stealthily ahead.

Falling into single file the column is engulfed in a trench heavy with the smell of freshly turned soil. In front shoulders humped under the load of battle equipment, and close walls of clay rising at either hand high above the head imprison the eye, until the fortunes of dawn may chance to grant the consolation of a wider view. Rest comes in the deep assembly lines with their pattern of bay and traverse. Scaling ladders are set ready on their eastern face. The constellations wheel in silence round the night sky, carrying with them the irrevocable minutes until the hands of men's watches mark the hour of three. There is the stir of cramped limbs, the murmur of final encouragement and farewell, and the long hidden lines of armed men stand grouped at the foot of the ladders.

Ten minutes after the hour—zero—the instant between waiting and action. The sky lights up with myriad tongues of flame. Body and soul are stricken with a cataract of sound. The ladders tip over and the men are flung off their balance as the trench reels to and fro on the unstable lap of an earthquake. The ground in front to left and right bursts open and vomits its soil skywards with a deep rumble of thunder that drowns the battering tattoo of the guns. Men clamber heavily up the sides of the trenches which have collapsed under the shock of many exploding mines; they move eastwards across the torn earth, following the crashing wall of the barrage as it pounds destructively forward foot by foot. Rockets green, red, and gold stream up from the bombarded lines, wreathed in a mist that glows dully red and is curdled with heavy wreathing smoke. Once across the bridges that span the old front line the way underfoot is less treacherous in the green untrodden belt of No Man's Land. The burst of shells all round and overhead and a rain of iron fragments warns the men advancing to ease their pace, for they lie too close to the barrage of the supporting guns. Soon the way becomes heavy and tortuous. Festoons of rusty wire, cruelly barbed, catch at the legs as the men pass carefully across hummocks and craters churned up by the days of incessant bombardment.

The first objective is passed unnoticed; it has been smashed out of recognition. A small grey figure detaches itself from the grey pall. It is an elderly man unarmed and bewildered. He stops short at the point of a bayonet. Hearing no word he can understand, he fumbles at the pocket of his grey tunic and draws from it a peace offering. It is a paper packet of cigarettes, and it bears on its label the word "*Tattersall's*." Sanity sired by Humour out of Laughter is reasonably purchased at the price of a spared life. The little man, still bewildered, stumbles instinctively towards the security of a cage. Dawn discloses the second objective, a battered, shapeless, untenanted ditch. Files of men wander by and begin to climb the ridge still hidden by the mist and the smoke of the barrage which pilots their advance with the close attention of a child bent on breaking to pieces everything within its reach.

The sharp crack of rifles fired close at hand and the thud of a bullet that smashes the bone of a man's arm quicken the mind to action. Heads are seen and known by the deep steel helmets that protect them. A handful of men with their rifles are still defending a pitiful fragment of trench under the lee of a stout concrete shelter. At the peremptory chatter of a Lewis gun they go below ground. Bombs thrown into the trench drive them to cover. From a hidden recess inside the shelter they defend themselves with pistols fired at those who break in and would have them surrender. Inside the low doorway is a pyramid of ammunition; "pineapple" grenades, stick bombs and boxes of bullets topped with signal rockets. A Verey Light discharged point blank sets fire to them. The shelter becomes an inferno of crackling reports and detonations, as innumerable bullets furrow the ceiling and walls and floor in their glancing eccentric flight. The deafening clang of the bursting grenades and the rush of the flaming rockets which fly with wild frustrated energy round the tiny space leave the defenders no chance of life. The massive concrete traps them in a close mesh of torture that sears, burns and suffocates. Three other shelters change hands without violence, for their defenders at a word come readily into the open with raised hands.

The view widens as the rising sun disperses the mist and discloses a brown waste of desolation. There is time to count

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the dead, dispose the living afresh and reflect on the chance of battle with rediscovered friends. Hunger and thirst tyrannize the first moments of relaxation. The man who has cooked for many months and in many places is already at his work. A bullet skims the ridge, and in its dropping flight lodges in his throat and kills him, as he kneels to tend the little fire and watches the water. The tea is made and a lark sings high overhead in the sunlight. The solace of both brings forgetfulness of the fighting that has passed far out of sight beyond the ruins of Messines.

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