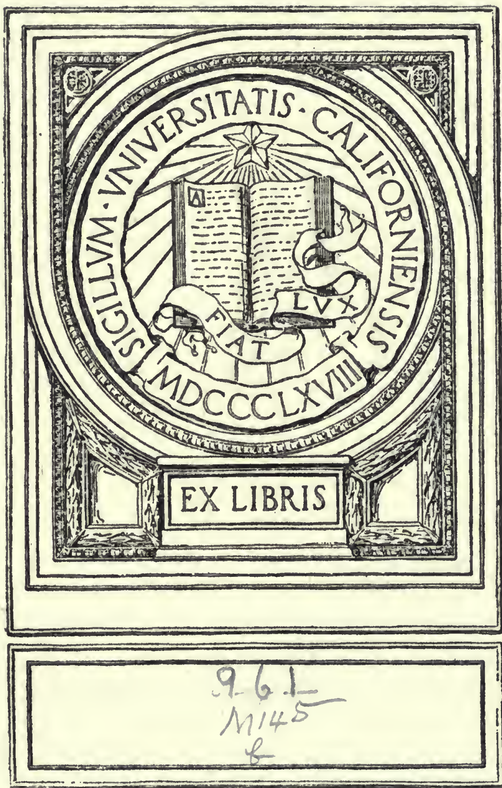
The BROWN BRETHREN

Patrick MacGill



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THE BROWN BRETHREN

PATRICK MACGILL

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BY
PATRICK
MacGILL

AUTHOR OF "THE RED HORIZON,"
"THE GREAT PUSH," ETC.

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

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TO MY FRIEND

J. N. D.

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CHAPTER I

AT THE CAFÉ BELLE VUE

Strict on parade! When I'm on it I'm ready
To shove blokes about if they do not keep steady!
Comin' the acid! Stow it there! or it
Won't do with me and then you'll be for it!
Swingin' the lead! Them, the dowsiest rankers
That ne'er 'ad C.B. or a dose of the jankers,
Swing it on Snoggers! I'd like them to do it
And good God Awmighty then, I'll put them froo it!

Off it, I'm off. Then I'll brush up my putties,
Try and look posh and get off wiv my butties,
A drink at the Café, a joke wiv the wenches,
Last joke per'aps, for we're due for the trenches.
Then stick to wiv pride as our mateys have stuck it
When kissin' the wenches or kickin' the bucket.

(From "A Service Song.")

THE night had fallen and the Café Belle Vue was crowded with soldiers in khaki. The day's work was at an end, and the men had left their billets to come out and spend a few hours in the wine-shop of Jean Lacroix. A

whole division was quartered in the district; it had come back from the firing-line and was enjoying a brief period of rest prior to its departure for the trenches again.

Even here, back near the town of Cassel, the men were not free from the sights and sounds of the fighting. At night they could see the red agony of war painting the distant horizon, and hear the far-off rumbling of the big guns as the thunder and tumult of the conflict smote across the world. The men back from the line of slaughter tried not to think too clearly of what was happening out there. In the Café Belle Vue, where the wine was good, men could forget things.

The Café was crowded. Half-a-dozen soldiers stood at the bar and the patronne served out drinks with a speedy hand. Behind her was a number of shelves on which stood bottles of various sizes. Over the shelves were two photographs; one was her own, the other was that of her husband when he was a thinner man and a soldier in the army. In the house there was one child, a dirty, ragged little girl, who sat in a corner and fixed a dull meaningless stare on the soldiers as they entered the café.

Jean Lacroix sat beside the long-necked stove

stroking his beard, a neat white little beard which stood perkily out from his fat chin. Jean Lacroix was fat, a jelly blob of a man with flesh hanging from his sides, from his cheeks and from his hands. He was a heap of blubber wrapped in cloth. When he changed his locality he shuffled instead of walking, when he laughed he shivered and shook his fat as if he wanted to fling it off. He was seldom serious, when he was, all those near him laughed. A serious Jean was a ridiculous figure.

His wife was an aggressive female with a dark moustache, the tongue of a shrew and the eye of a money-lender. She worked like an ant and seldom spoke to her husband. Jean, wise with the wisdom of a well-fed man, rarely said a word to her; he sat by the fire all day and spoke to anyone else who cared to listen.

A sergeant and three men entered and going up to the bar called for drinks. These soldiers were billeted at Y—— Farm which stood some three kilometres away from the Café Belle Vue. They belonged to the London Irish Regiment. The battalion had just come down from Hulluch for a rest. Having procured their drinks the four men sat down, lit their cigarettes and entered into a noisy conversation.

Before going any further it will be well to say a few words about these men, the principal personages of my story.

The sergeant's name was Snogger. He was a well-built man, straight as a ramrod and supple as an eel. He was very strict on parade, a model soldier, a terror to recruits and a rank disciplinarian. "When you're on parade you're on parade," was his pet saying. He had a tendency to use the letter "w" a little too often when speaking. Once he said admonishing a dilatory squad: "You blokes in the wear wank must wipe your wifles wiv woily wags in future!"

Sergeant Snogger was a handsome man, proud as Lucifer and very careful about his person. His moustache was always waxed, his finger nails were always clean, and whenever possible he slept with his trousers placed under his bed and neatly folded. Thus a most artistic crease was obtained.

Snogger had peculiar ears. Their tops pressed very closely into the head and the lobes stood out. Looking at the ears from the side they had an appearance similar to that of a shovel stretched out to catch something; seen from behind they looked as if crouching against a parapet waiting for an oncoming shell.

The men liked Snogger and the sergeant preferred the company of riflemen to that of his brother N.C.O.'s.

Bowdy Benners was a different type of man. A young fellow of twenty-four, slightly over medium height, but thick-set and sturdy. He had remarkably long arms, heavy buttocks and broad shoulders. The latter he swung vigorously when marching. This motion imparted a certain defiant swagger to the man which his placid nature utterly belied. He was of a kindly disposition, extremely good-humoured, but very self-conscious and blushed red as a poppy when spoken to. There was something very amiable and kind in his face; something good and comforting in his sleepy eyes, his rather thick lips and full cheeks. His ears perhaps were out of keeping with the repose which found expression on the rest of his features. They stood out from his head alert and ready, as it seemed, to jump from their perch on to the ground.

Bowdy could drink like a fish, but French beer never made him drunk and champagne merely made him merry. When merry he swore and his companions laughed at this unaccustomed violence.

"Devil blow me blind," he would say, stretch-

ing his long arm across the table at which he might be sitting and bringing down his massive fist with a thundering bang. "Devil blow me stone blind for a fool!" And all the soldiers around would laugh and wink at one another, as much as to say: "Is he not a big silly fool; not half as clever as we are."

Bowdy was not indeed particularly clever; he lacked excessive sharpness of wit. But his mates loved him, for his spirit of comradeship was very genuine and he had a generous sympathy for all things good and noble. Often when the boys' tongues were loosened in a French tavern one of them might be heard saying: "Old Bowdy's a damned good sort. I'd follow him anywhere, even to hell."

Then the others would answer: "None like old Bowdy. One of the best he is. And a good man."

Bowdy was indeed a good man; a great fighter. In raids, in bayonet charges and bombing encounters he was a force to be reckoned with and never had an adversary been known to get the better of him. Persistence, staying power and dogged courage were his great assets, and these when taken in conjunction with his good humour

and simple nature made him a loved comrade and worthy friend.

Bowdy was now seated at the inn table, drinking beer with his mate, an alert youth with a snub nose and bright vivacious eyes. His name was Spudhole.

Spudhole was a Londoner, a native of Walworth. His real name was Thomas Bubb, but his mates nicknamed him Spudhole, a slang term for the guard-room. The nickname became him, he liked it and was not a little proud of the fact that no man in the regiment spent as many days in the guard-room as did Rifleman Thomas Bubb. He was eternally guilty of trivial offences against Army regulations. This was in a great measure due to his inability to accommodate himself to a changed environment. He was a coster unchangeable and unchanged; to him an officer was always "Guv'nor," he addressed an officer as such, and the Colonel was the "ole bloke." His tongue was seldom quiet and the cries of his trade were ever on his tongue, even on parade he often gave them expression. He sang well, drank well, fought well, and loved practical jokes.

Once at St. Albans he dressed himself up as a corporal, took two of his mates to the railway

station and relieved the military police on duty there. Mistaking him for a real N.C.O. they left the station in his hands. Of course he took the first train to London. On his return he was awarded fourteen days' spud-hole.

When in the guard-room he decided to escape and at the hour of twelve on the first night when a sentry stood on watch outside his prison Spudhole broke the window with a resounding thump. Then he rushed back and stood behind the door. He was in stocking-soles, his boots were slung round his shoulders by the laces. On hearing the crash the sentry opened the door, sprang into the room and hurried to the window thinking that Spudhole was trying to escape by that quarter—and Spudhole went out by the door.

He was very good-natured, in fact quixotic. Once a recruit belonging to Bubb's section was so very slack that the officer brought him out in front of the squad and got him to perform several movements in musketry drill. The remainder of the party had to shout out when the man made any mistakes. As is usual, the onlookers saw many faults and shouted themselves hoarse. But Bubb was silent. When the slack recruit returned to his place in the ranks the officer spoke to Spudhole.

"Did you notice any of those mistakes?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Bubb replied.

"And why did you not say so?" enquired the officer.

"Well, I didn't want to give the bloke away," was Bubb's answer.

The youngster had spent four years in a reformatory; afterwards as a coster he presided over a barrow in a turning off Walworth Road. His pitch was one of the best in the locality. He fell in love with a girl who kept a barrow beside him. He often spoke of her to Bowdy Benners.

"She's not 'arf a bird," he would say. "Nobody can take a mike out 'er. I'm goin' to get spliced after the war too."

Near the stove sat the remaining soldier, an Irishman named Fitzgerald. He was a thin graceful fellow of about five-and-twenty, and could not, to judge by his appearance, boast of very good health. His lips full and red, his straight nose, delicate nostrils, black liquid eyes and long lashes betrayed a passionate and sensitive nature. He was a thoughtful man, grave and dutiful, but at times as petulant and per-

verse as a child. Even when most perverse he was good company.

He was exceedingly superstitious. His thoughts generally wandered with startling suddenness from one subject to another but this was probably due to the use of strong drink. He had had a college education but took to drink early and squandered all his resources. Then he became a rover and wandered through many parts of the world as sailor, tramp and outcast. He had slept in doss-houses, on the pavements, in the fields. Once indeed he was a trombone player in the Salvation Army, and again he fought in a Mexican rebellion. Then he belonged to a regiment, the soldiers of which had to wear great coats on their triumphal march through a certain town because of the bad condition of their trousers. Fitz knew a smattering of most languages but vowed that he was only proficient in one—bad language.

At present he was in a gay good humour and as he spoke to young Benners his voice, loud enough but very soft and pleasant, penetrated to the very corners of the inn.

"Do you ever feel afraid, Bowdy?" he asked. "Funky, you know." Then, without waiting for an answer, he went on: "God! I do feel afraid,

sometimes. Out on listening patrol. It's hell for a man with imagination. Crawling out in the darkness between the lines. You hear the grass whispering, and the darkness ahead of you may hide anything. An awful face covered with blood may rise up in front, a hand may come out and grasp you by the hair. The dead are lying around you, poor quiet creatures, but you know that they're stronger than you are. I often wish I couldn't think, that I lacked imagination, that I was a clod of earth, just something like that plebeian there." Fitzgerald raised his finger and pointed to Bubb who was rapping his idle fingers on the legs of his chair. Bubb gazed at Fitzgerald and laughed.

"Fleebian," he exclaimed. "I know wot that is. We 'ad one but the wheel came off."

"No imagination there," said Fitzgerald with an air of finality. "He couldn't be afraid, that creature. No soul. I dare ten thousand times as much to overcome my fear as that man would dare to win the V.C. When I go out on listening patrol I am always furthest out. I feel if I'm a yard behind the front man he'll consider me a coward, so I get out a yard ahead of him and I tremble all the time.

"God! I had a bad dream last night," Fitz-

gerald remarked swinging from one topic to another. "I dreamt I saw a woman dressed in black looking into an empty grave."

"That's a bad sign," said the sergeant. "You'll be damned unlucky the next time yer go up to the trenches. Ye'll never come back. Ye'll get done in."

"Oh, I'll come back safe and sound," Fitzgerald replied in all seriousness. "The dream was a bad one and portended some evil."

"And is it not bad enough to get done in?" asked Benners.

"There are things worse than death," was Fitzgerald's answer. "Death is not the supreme evil. But women! It's not good to dream of them especially if they're red-haired. Did you ever dream of red-haired women, Bowdy?"

Bowdy laughed but did not speak. Women apparently did not attract him much and in their company he was shy and diffident. Wanting to get away as quickly as possible from their presence he would rake up some imaginary appointment from the back of his head, ask to be excused and disappear. Behaviour of this kind though natural to Bowdy Benners was quite inexplicable to his mates. Fitzgerald having had a drop of wine was now in a mood to discuss womanhood.

"You're too damned modest, Bowdy," he said. "And you don't shine in the company of the fair, dear women. You know the natural mission of woman is to please man, and man, no matter what he feels, should try and look pleased when in her company. If he looks bored what does that signify, Bowdy Benners? Eh? It means that he has found her ugly. That's an insult to the sex, to feminine charms and womanly qualities. For myself I'd much sooner sin and please a woman than pose as a saint and annoy her. Women don't like saints; what they want most in life is Love.

"Love! Love is the only allurement in existence," said Fitzgerald rising to his feet. "It is the essence of life. Love, free and unrestrained, not tied to the pillars of propriety by the manacles of marriage. (That's a damned smart phrase, isn't it, Spudhole?) Love is sacred, marriage is not, marriage is governed by laws, love is not. Nature has given us love. It is an instinct and we shouldn't fight against it too much. Why should we fight against a gift from God? Some sacrilegious fool tried to improve on God's handiwork and made laws to govern love. It's like man to poke his nose in where it's not wanted.

He'd give the Lord soda water at the Last Supper."

Snoggers laughed boisterously, Bubb chuckled and a lazy smile spread over Bowdy's face. The gestures of the excited Irishman amused them. He sat down, took a deep breath, then went on to speak in a calmer voice.

"Love sweetens life," he said. "It is like sugar in children's physic. Here, Spudhole, were you ever in love?"

"Blimey, not arf," Spudhole answered and winked. "I'm not arf a beggar wiv the birds. I'm . . . ."

"That wench down at the farm, that girl Fifi is a nice snug parcel o' love," Snoggers interrupted, "I 'aven't arf got my 'and in down that quarter. Wot d'ye fink o' 'er, Fitz?"

"Who?" asked Fitzgerald. He had become suddenly alert.

"'Ear 'im," said Bubb, winking at the Sergeant. "Old Fitz ain't arf a dodger; one o' the nuts that's wot 'e is."

"Fifi, the girl at the farm," said Snogger in answer to Fitzgerald's question. "Yer don't say much when you're down there and 'er in the room but your eyes are never off 'er. . . . I wouldn't say nothin' against rollin' 'er in the straw . . . .

This mornin' . . . . a funny thing . . . . she came up to me and told me to put my 'and in 'ers. I obliged 'er. Then she said to me: 'Two sous for your thoughts.' I didn't tell 'er wot I was finkin' of, but I didn't arf fink."

Snogger laughed loudly; Fitzgerald was silent.

"Bet yer, yer wos finkin' somefing wot wasn't good, sarg," said Bubb.

"Aye; and old Fitz is gwine dotty on the wench," said the sergeant. "I see it in his eyes."

"Botheration," Fitzgerald remarked. "I know the girl by sight and I know she makes good café-au-lait, but I didn't even know her name until now."

"Sing a song, Fitz," Bubb called out. "A good rousin' song wiv 'air on't."

"I pay no heed to that creation, his tap-room wit and yokel humour," muttered Fitzgerald, turning to Benners. "But if you desire it . . . ."

"Give us a bit o' a song, Fitz," Benners replied.

"Give me a cigarette and I'll sing you a song that I love very much," Fitzgerald said. "It was sung in Ireland by the old women in the famine times when they were dying of starvation. You must picture the famine-stricken leaning over

their turf fires and singing their songs of desolation. (God! I think it was the turf-fires that kept the race alive.)"

CHAPTER II

THE LONE ROAD

"I want to go 'ome,
I want to go 'ome,
I don't want to go to the trenches no more,
Where the bullets and shrapnel do whistle and roar,
I want to go over the sea,
Where the Alley man can't get at me;
Oh, my!
I don't want to die,
I want to go 'ome!"

(A Trench Song.)

A STRANGE glow overspread Fitzgerald's face and he rose from his seat by the stove and sat down again on a bench in a corner and spread out his hands timorously towards an imaginary fire. He bent his head forward until it drooped almost to his knees and his whole attitude took on a semblance of want and woe beset with an overpowering fear. Benners gasped involuntarily as he waited for the song.

A long, drawn out, hardly audible note that wavered like a thread of smoke quivered out into the evil atmosphere of the apartment, it was fol-

lowed by a second and a third. A strange effect was produced on all the listeners by the trembling voice of the singer. Bubb gaped stupidly, his eyes fixed on the roof, as he rubbed his chin with the fingers of his right hand. The sergeant drew himself up and listened, fascinated. Fitzgerald's song was the song of a soul condemned to inevitable sorrow; there was not a relieving touch, not a glow of hope, it was the song of a damned soul.

"Oh, the praties they are small
Over here.
Oh, the praties they are small
Over here.
The praties they are small
And we ate them skins and all,
Aye, and long afore the Fall,
Over here.

No help in hour of need
Over here.
And God won't pay much heed
Over here.
Then whisht! Or He'll take heed
And He'll rot the pratie seed
And send other mouths to feed
Over here.

I wish I was a duck
Over here.
To be eating clay and muck
Over here.
I'd sooner . . . sooner . . . I'd sooner . . ."

"My God, I've forgotten it, Benners, forgotten the rest of the song," Fitzgerald exclaimed, throwing his unlighted cigarette on the floor and gripping his hair with both hands as if going to pull it out of his head. Then, as if thinking better of it, he brought both his hands to his sides and sat down on his original seat, his whole face betokening extreme self-pity.

"My memory!" he exclaimed. "My memory! Why was I brought into being?"

A minute's silence followed, then an eager glow lit up Fitzgerald's face. A happy inspiration seemed to have seized hold of him. "Benners!" he exclaimed in an eager voice. "Have you a cigarette to spare, Benners?"

"Gorblimey!" laughed Bubb. "Listen to 'im. 'E's always on the 'ear-'ole for fags, an' 'e throws arf of 'em away. 'E's not arf a nib, ole Fitz."

"Good Heavens, how can I endure such remarks from a damned Sassenach! (I beg your pardon, Bubb)" Fitzgerald exclaimed, gripping with both fingers the cigarette which Benners had given him and breaking it in two. "You don't understand me, Bubb, you can't. I don't bear you any malice, but, heavens! you are trying at times . . . . By the way," he added, "can you give us one of your songs?"

Bubb looked at Fitzgerald for a moment then lit a cigarette and got to his feet.

"Wot about Ole Skiboo?" he asked, addressing the remark to all in the room.

The soldiers knew that he was going to oblige and applauded with their hands.

Bubb fixed his eyes on the patronne and started:

"Madame, 'ave yer any good wine?
Skiboo! Skiboo!
Madame, 'ave yer any good wine?
Skiboo!
Madame, 'ave yer any good wine
Fit for a rifleman o' the line?
Skiboo! Skiboo! Skiboolety bill skiboo!

"Madame, 'ave yer a daughter fair?
Skiboo! Skiboo!
Madame, 'ave yer a daughter fair?
Skiboo!
Madame, 'ave yer a daughter fair?
And I will take her under my care,
Skiboo! Skiboo! Skiboolety bill skiboo!

"Madame, I've got money to spend,
Cinq sous! Cinq sous!
Madame, I've got money to spend,
Cinq sous!
Madame, I've got money to spend,
Seldom the case with your daughter's friend,
Cinq sous! Cinq sous, cinq slummicky slop! Cinq sous!"

The song, an old one probably, but adapted to suit modern circumstances, was lustily chor-

used by the soldiers in the room. Bubb having finished sat down, but presently rose to his feet again.

"'Oo'l whistle the chorus of 'It's a long way to Tipperary'?" he asked. "Everybody do it together and the one that does it froo I'll stand 'im a drink. Nobody to laugh. And the one that's not able to do it will stand me a drink. Is that a bargain? Nobody to laugh, mind."

The men agreed to Bubb's terms and started whistling. But they did not get far. They had drunk quite a lot and Bubb's final injunction tickled them. One smiled, then another. Bowdy Benners lay back and roared with laughter. He tried to form his lips round a note but the effort was futile. It was impossible to laugh and whistle at the same time. Fitzgerald was making a sound that reminded the listeners of an angry cat spitting. His cheeks were puffed out and his nose was sinking out of sight. The landlord rolled from side to side choking almost, even the patronne was smiling. The little ragged girl came across the floor and stood in front of Fitz, her hands behind her back. For a moment she stood thus, then she ran away giggling and hid behind the counter. Fitzgerald got to his feet.

"Bubb, Spudhole or whatever the devil they

call you, you've won," he said. "What a queer creature that child is, boys," he muttered, looking at the youngster which was peeping slyly out from behind the counter. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

Bubb approached the counter and drank the glass of vin rouge which Benners had paid for; then he thrust his hands in his trouser pockets and began to sing "Sam Hall."

> "My name is Samuel Hall,
> Tiddy fol lol, tiddy fol lol!"

"Bowdlerise it, you fool," Fitzgerald exclaimed sitting down again. "Bowdlerise the song or stop singing. Bad taste, Bubb, bad taste. Drink doesn't improve your morals."

Bubb ceased singing, not on Fitzgerald's behest, but because the sergeant was standing him a drink. Old Jean Lacroix who was slowly recovering from his fit of laughter turned to Fitzgerald.

"The Bosche broke through up by Souchez last night," he said, pointing a fat thumb towards the locality of the firing line. "He broke through in hundreds. He is unable to get back now and he is roving all over the country."

"They haven't been captured?" said Fitzgerald.

"Some of them," said Jean. "Most of them perhaps, but not all. Last night they were about here."

"Here?" enquired Fitzgerald. "Did you see them?"

"Have I seen them?" asked Jean, shivering with laughter. "They can't be seen. They disguise themselves as turnips, as bushes, as English soldiers. . . . . Last night two of your countrymen, soldiers, left here at nine o'clock; and got killed."

Jean paused.

"Where were they killed?" asked Fitzgerald.

"You are billeted at Y—— Farm, are you not?" enquired the innkeeper. "You are. Then you came along the road to-night coming here. Did you see a ruined cottage on your right, a little distance back from the road?"

"A mile from here?" said Fitzgerald. "Yes, we saw it."

"That is where it happened," said Jean Lacroix. "The two soldiers were found there this morning with their throats cut, lying on the floor."

Fitzgerald got to his feet and entered an outer room. There he found a copy of an English magazine lying on a chair. He picked it up and

presently was deep in an article which tried to prove that war would be a thing of the past if Prussia ceased to exist. When he had finished reading he came back to the man by the stove and found him sitting there all alone, his eyes fixed on the flames. Benners was not there, he had left, accompanied by Spudhole and the sergeant. The farm in which their company was billeted was some two miles off.

Fitzgerald looked at his watch and saw that it was nine o'clock.

"Nine o'clock," he said aloud, and something familiar in the words struck him. Two soldiers left the wine shop the night previous at nine o'clock and next morning they were discovered lying in a ruined cottage with their throats cut. None of the men now in the inn were billeted at Y—— Farm. Fitzgerald had to go home alone. He swung his bandolier over his shoulder, lifted his rifle from the table and went out into the night. The story which Jean Lacroix had told affected Fitzgerald strongly. A stranger in a new locality he was ready to give credence to any tale.

Fitzgerald had seen very little of trench warfare. True, he had come out to France with his regiment in March of 1915 but then he got

wounded on his first journey to the trenches and was sent back to England. He came out again in time to take part in the battle of Loos and got gassed in the charge. Followed a few weeks in the hospital at Versailles and then he was sent back to the trenches. He had seen a fortnight's trench warfare, done turns in listening patrol and sentry-go, before coming back with his battalion to Y—— Farm near the town of Cassel. So now, although first battalion man, he was in many ways a "rooky," one who was not as yet versed in the practices of modern warfare. Now, on the way back to his billet he thought of Jean Lacroix's story and a strange fit of nervousness laid hold of him. What might happen in the darkness he could not tell, and he wished that his mates had not gone leaving him to come back alone. They ought to have looked him up. He was annoyed with them. He was angry.

The road stretched out in front a dull streak of grey, lined with ghostly poplars, that lost itself in the darkness ahead. The night was gloomy and chilly, a low weird wind crooned in the grass and a belated night-bird shrieked painfully in the sky above. Far out in front the carnage was in full swing, the red fury of war lit the line of battle and darts of flame, ghastly red,

pierced the clouds in a hasty succession of short vicious stabs. Round Fitzgerald was the flat dead country, black and limitless, and over it from time to time swift flashes of light would rise and tremble in the gloom like will-o'-the-wisps over a churchyard. The sharp penetrating odour of dung was in the air, the night-breath of the low-lying land of Flanders.

The shadows gathered round the man silently. One rushed in from the fields and took on an almost definite form on the roadway in front. He could not help gazing round from time to time and staring back along the road. What might be following! He was all alone, apart from his kind, isolated. One hand gripped tightly on his rifle and the fingers of the other fumbled at his bandolier. He ran his hand over the cartridges, counting them aloud. Fifty rounds. But he had none in the magazine of his rifle. He should have five there. But he would not put them in now. He would make too much noise.

He walked at a good steady pace; and hummed a tune under his breath, trying thus to keep down any disposition to shiver. His eyes becoming accustomed to the darkness could now take stock of the roadway, the grassy verge and the ditch on either side. The poplars rose high and be-

came one with the sombre darkness of the sky. Shadows lurked in the ditches, bundled together and plotting some mischief towards him. His imagination conceived ghastly pictures of men lying flat in the shadows staring at the heavens with glazed, unseeing eyes, their throats cut across from ear to ear. . . . . What a row his footsteps created! The noise he kicked up must have echoed across the world. He hummed a tune viciously and stared intensely into the remoter darkness of the unknown.

The breeze whimpered amidst the poplar leaves and its sigh was carried ever so far away. Again a shadow swept up from the fields and took shape on the road in front. Fitzgerald advanced towards it quickly and collided with a solid mass, a living form.

"I am sorry," he muttered.

"Good evening," said a voice with a queer strange note in it. "You are out late."

"I am going back to my billet now," Fitzgerald said, and asked: "Where are you going?"

There was a moment's hesitation before the stranger replied, saying: "I'm going to the next village."

Fitzgerald could now see that the man was dressed as an English soldier in a khaki uniform,

a rifle over his shoulder and a bandolier round his chest. Germans often disguise themselves as British soldiers, Jean Lacroix said. . . . .

"What do you belong to?" Fitzgerald asked, stepping off after the momentary halt. The man accompanied him.

"The Army Service Corps," he answered readily enough, but his accent struck Fitzgerald as being strangely unfamiliar; in his low guttural tones there was something foreign. English could not have been his mother tongue. For a while there was silence, but suddenly as if overcome by a sense of embarrassment due to the silence, the man spoke.

"Have you been long in France?" he asked.

"I have been here for some time," Fitzgerald answered.

"What is your regiment?"

Being warned against giving any information to strangers, Fitzgerald gave an evasive reply.

"Oh, a line regiment," he said.

The man chuckled. "Looks like it," he said. "Are you billeted here?"

"I'm billeted at . . . ." Fitzgerald stopped and asked "Where are you billeted?"

"Oh, at the next village," said the man. "A number of the A.S.C. are billeted there."

Again a long silence. Their boots crunched angrily on the roadway and ahead the lights of war lit up the horizon.

"They're fighting like hell up there," said the man. "There's a big battle on now. Has your regiment been called up?"

As he spoke he pulled his rifle forward across his chest and fumbled with the bolt. Fitzgerald stared at him fascinated, his nerves strained to an acute pitch.

"What are you doing with your rifle?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing," the stranger answered and slung the weapon over his left shoulder.

Had the man a round in the breech? Fitzgerald wondered. For himself he had not even a cartridge in the magazine. What a fool he had been not to take the precaution of being prepared for emergencies. . . . . The stranger came close to his side and his shoulder almost touched Fitzgerald's. The Rifleman moved to the left, close to the verge of the road and his hand slipped towards his bandolier.

"It's very dark to-night," he said as his fingers closed on a cartridge.

"Very dark," said the man.

"There's no moon," Fitzgerald remarked as

he slipped the bolt of his rifle back. Then with due caution he pressed the cartridge into the mouth of the magazine. As far as he could judge the stranger had not noticed the action.

"No, there's no moon," he said in answer to Fitzgerald's remark.

"How far is it to the next village?" asked Fitzgerald and shoved the rounds into the magazine. The cartridge-clip clattered on to the cobbles.

"You've dropped something," said the stranger. "What was it?"

"I've dropped nothing," the Irishman replied. "I must have hit my boot against something."

He glanced at the stranger's face. White and ghostly it looked, with a protruding jowl and a dark moustache that drooped over the lips. As Fitzgerald spoke he pressed the bolt home and now felt a certain confidence enter his being. There was the round snug in the breech of his rifle. One touch of the trigger. . . . .

"Did you think I dropped a shilling?" he laughed. "Wish I had one to throw away."

"Many a one would wish the same," said the man gruffly.

Then he whistled a tune through his teeth, a

contemplative whistle as if he were considering something.

"You're at Y—— Farm, of course," he suddenly remarked. "There are a number of soldiers billeted there. You know the way to it?"

"I know the way," Fitzgerald answered.

"You leave the road at a ruined cottage along here and cross the fields," said the man. "I'm going that way myself."

"I leave the road further along," the Irishman said hastily.

"Nonsense," said the man. "Past the ruined cottage is the best way."

"I'm not going that way," Fitzgerald said.

"Not going that way," repeated his companion. "Why not?"

"I don't know the road through the fields there."

"But I know the way."

"I prefer to go further along," said Fitzgerald. "Two of my mates are just ahead."

"Where are they?" asked the stranger in a tone of surprise. "I thought you were all alone."

"They are just a few hundred yards on in front," was the answer. "Not so far away."

"Oh!" said the man. "Then that is why you're in such a hurry."

"I'm in no particular hurry," said Fitzgerald. "But it is wise to be back before 'Lights out.'"

He could see the ruined cottage in front now, a black blur against the night. The limitless levels stretched out on either side, frogs croaked in the ponds, now and then a light shot up from the fields, trembled in air for a moment and died away. The breezes of the night, the "unseen multitude," as the ancients called them, capered by, crooning wearily. In front, far ahead, the artillery fire redoubled in intensity and the sky was lit by the brilliance of day.

"Hell's loose out there," said the stranger. "It's not good to be there; it's not good to die."

The stranger turned off the road and walked a few yards down a lane in the direction of the cottage.

"I'm not going that way," said Fitzgerald coming to a halt. His companion stopped.

"Afraid?" he said.

"Afraid! H'm! I'm not afraid," the Irishman answered, nettled at the word. "All right, you go ahead. I'll follow."

The man did not move. He fumbled in his pocket and brought something out, something dark, small and tipped at the points as if with silver. Fitzgerald imagined it to be a revolver

and he slid his rifle forward so that its muzzle pointed at the man's body.

"Hold your weapon up, you fool," said the stranger, and a note of concern was in his voice. "I've a pocket lamp here. We'll get off into the fields now and I'll light the way with this. The place is full of ponds and drains. Last night I fell into a hole somewhere about this place . . . . you get off in front."

"I'll follow," said Fitzgerald. "You lead the way."

"All right," the man meekly responded. "Now we get off the road."

He slipped into the field and the Irishman followed. Both were now near the cottage and they could see its bare rafters and ruined walls clearly. It looked gloomy and forbidding . . . . As Fitzgerald gazed at the cottage he saw a light close to the dark ground; a tremulous flame gleamed for a moment and was gone.

"Did you see that?" asked the Irishman. "A light near the cottage?"

"I saw nothing," said his companion.

"You didn't see the flame. There's somebody in front. Friends of yours maybe."

"I've no friends here. . . . . You saw a light? . . . . Nonsense!"

"There, what is that?" asked the Irishman as he heard a thud as of somebody falling over a hurdle. "Did you not hear it?"

"Yes, what is it?" asked the stranger extinguishing his torch. "I heard something. Shall I shout?"

"Why?"

"Why?" exclaimed the man. "Only to find out who's there. Hallo!" he yelled.

Somebody answered with a loud "hallo!" and again a light gleamed in the darkness.

"Who's there?" shouted the stranger.

"It's us," came the answer. "Blurry well lost in this blurry 'ole. 'Oo are yer?"

"Spudhole!" Fitzgerald shouted in a glad voice for he recognised the voice of his mate. "Is Bowdy and the sergeant with you?"

"Oh! It's old Fitz," Spudhole exclaimed. "We're lost, the three o' us, and we don't know where we are. D'you know the way to the farm?"

"We'll soon get there," Fitzgerald replied. "I've somebody with me who knows the way."

"Bring 'im along 'ere then," said Bubb.

Fitzgerald turned to his companion who had just moved to one side, but now he could not see

him. On his right a dark form became one with the night and lost itself.

"Hi!" Fitzgerald shouted. But there was no reply.

"Hi there!" he cried in a louder voice, but no answer came back.

"There was somebody with me but he's gone now," he said to Bubb when he reached him where he stood along with Benners and the sergeant beside a dark pond near the ruined cottage.

"Well, we had better try and get back to our billet," the sergeant remarked. "Damn these beastly fields! We'll be damned unlucky if we don't get out o' 'em."

They got into the farmhouse at eleven o'clock. All their mates were in bed and the watch-dog at the gate bit Bubb in the upper part of the thigh as he came in.

CHAPTER III

IN LOVE

As I was going up the road
Ma'selle said, *"Voulez vous*
Come in and have some *pain et beurre*
And *café au lait* for two."

So now I hope the war won't end;
I'll never go away
And leave my little Madamoiselle
Who sells good *café au lait.*

I hope the war will never end,—
A curse upon the day
That takes me away from Madamoiselle,
Who sells good *café au lait.*

(From "The Love of an Hour.")

FITZGERALD made his way to the barn, which was above the byre, sat down in the straw but did not unloosen his puttees or boots.

A lamp swinging from a beam lit up the apartment, showing the straw heaped in the corners, the sickles and spades hanging from the rafters, the sleepers lying in all conceivable positions, the bundles of equipment, the soldiers' rifles

which stood piled in the corners out of the way. Now and again a rat glided across the straw, stood for a moment in the light, peered cautiously round, and disappeared. The air was full of the smell of musty wood, of straw, and of the byre underneath. All was very quiet, little could be heard save the breathing of the men, the noise of the restless cattle as they lay down or got up again. Snoggers and Benners laid themselves on the straw, Bowdy curled up like a dog, Snoggers stretched out as stiffly as a statue. Bubb undressed and Fitzgerald, getting to his feet, applied sticking plaster to the dog's bite.

"You'll go mad, you know," said Fitzgerald. "The only thing that can save you is to get three hairs of the dog that bit you and put them on here."

Having performed his job Fitzgerald sat down and Bubb dressed again. Then he lay on the straw, both hands in his overcoat pockets, one leg across the other and a cigarette in his mouth.

"Get down to it, Fitz," Snogger shouted. "Ye're damned slow o' showin' a leg in the mornin', you woman."

"It's all right, Sergeant," the Irishman replied. "I'm just goin' to look at a paper. I'll be in bed in a twinkling."

"Douse the glim 'fore you kip, then," said the sergeant. "Night!"

Fitzgerald fumbled in his pocket, brought out a newspaper and looked at it. His thoughts seemed to be elsewhere, for his eye, scanning the printed columns of an advertisement page, turned from time to time and rested on the face of Sergeant Snogger.

"I think it's safe now," said Fitzgerald, when five minutes had passed. "Old Snogger is snoring."

The sergeant was indeed asleep, but had not lost his military pose. He might have been frozen stiff while standing to attention on the parade ground and carried from there into the barn and placed down just as he had been standing. Bowdy was fighting Germans in his dreams. Bubb's cigarette had fallen on his clothes and the smell of burning pervaded the barn.

Fitzgerald got to his feet, dropped the newspaper, lifted the fag-end from Bubb's overcoat and turned out the lamp. Then, stepping across the sleepers, he made his way cautiously to the door and descended the steps leading to the farmyard. The night was very quiet; and very dark. The lights were out in the farmhouse; no doubt the occupants were all in bed.

"What am I doing out here?" Fitz asked himself. "I'm drunk, that's why." He stood still and he could feel his heart beating. Something was moving in the midden and grunting.

"It's a pig, I suppose," said the Irishman. "They're all over the place." Then he thought of the dog that had bit Bubb. "Will it bite me?" he questioned and moved hurriedly across the farmyard towards the gable end of the building. He stood there for a second to draw breath, then he went round to the back of the house.

All were not yet in bed, a light burned behind a small four-paned window and the shadow of a girl showed on the blind. Standing a little distance from the window, Fitzgerald stared at the shadow, watching its movements. For a moment he had a view of a face in profile, then of a head bent down and an arm stretching out as if pulling a needle from a piece of cloth. The girl no doubt was mending some clothes.

"That's Fifi," said Fitzgerald in a whisper. His voice was husky and a lump rose in his throat. "She's very graceful bending over her work . . . . Damn it! I'm in love with her . . . . If not that, I have a great respect for her ever since I saw her for the first time . . . . I suppose I have been a gay Don Juan, but Fifi

. . . . Well, I've never felt like this before . . . . Probably I'm drunk and to-morrow . . . . But all to-day and yesterday I felt the same . . . . I don't think I am drunk for I put the bandage on with a firm hand . . . . If she would open the window and look out only for a moment . . . . I want to see her; I must see her . . . . Suppose she spoke to me and then told Snogger in the morning, told him that I was hanging about her bedroom window all night, what would he say? . . . . Oh! damn Snogger, he's a fool . . . . I'll tap on the pane, anyway."

Fitzgerald went up to the window, pressed his hand softly against the pane, but drew it quickly away.

"I can't," he muttered under his breath. "My God, why have I not more courage . . . . a gay Don Juan . . . . But perhaps she'd do something awful, throw a tin of water or . . . . A gay Don Juan," he repeated, in a louder voice, and then added: "It doesn't matter. I'll let her know I'm here."

He raised his hand and tapped lightly on the pane, then turned, walked off for a distance of a few yards and stopped. Looking back he saw the light turned down and heard the window open. The girl looked out into the darkness.

"Who is there?" she called in a low voice. "What do you want?"

Moving quietly, Fitzgerald made his way back to the window again. The girl could see him now and apparently recognised him.

"English soldier, you should be asleep," she said, in a voice charged with laughter. "Go away. What do you want?"

"I want nothing," said Fitzgerald in a hoarse whisper.

In the shadows he could see the outline of her face, which looked strangely white. "I was up at the Café," he said. "Coming back I saw the light, so I tapped . . . . Is it not time for you to be in bed?"

"Listen to him!" said the girl, speaking in a whisper, and bringing her face close to the man's. "Time to be in bed, indeed! What does it matter to you when I go to bed? And I have work to do. You English soldiers never work . . . . Go away!"

"You are always working, Fifi," said Fitzgerald, without moving from where he stood.

"Always working," repeated the girl. "We are not like English girls; they never work. They have too much money. But I must go to bed,"

she said, making as though to shut the window. "Au revoir, English soldier."

"Not yet, not yet!" said Fitzgerald, speaking hurriedly. "I want to speak to you."

"What are you going to say?" asked the girl in a hesitating voice.

Fitzgerald was silent. He had so much to say, but in reality he said nothing at all. He merely coughed, unbuttoned the pockets of his tunic and buttoned them up again. He looked at the girl, and her eyes dropped.

"What are you going to tell me?" she asked.

"Nothing," Fitzgerald stammered. "I mean . . . . Au revoir, Fifi."

He turned round and walked away. When he got to the corner, he heard her calling.

"English soldier, come back," she said in a loud whisper.

Fitzgerald was back with her in an instant.

"What is it, Fifi?" he asked.

"Souvenir pour moi," she said, in a coaxing voice. "Jam, hat badges, many souvenirs. Boots for my father in the trenches. Other soldiers give me souvenirs often—but you—never. The sergeant gave me a big knife. Also chocolate. His mother sent it to him from England. But

you, you never give me anything. Will you give me some souvenirs to-morrow?"

"All right, I will, Fifi," said Fitzgerald. "Many souvenirs."

"And I'll give you beer, café-au-lait, several things," said the girl, pulling the window a little way towards her. "Au revoir, English soldier."

She held out her hand, the left, the nearer to her heart, and Fitzgerald took hold of it. Fifi looked at him smiling.

"Are you in love?" he asked.

"No," said the girl. "Are you?"

"No, certainly not," said Fitzgerald. "I never have been."

"I don't believe you," said Fifi. "You English cannot be trusted. The English girls are so well dressed."

"Why don't you believe me?" asked Fitzgerald, pressing her hand, and she made no effort to withdraw it. "I have never been in love; but now . . . . since I have met you . . . . I would do anything for you, Fifi. You are the nicest girl . . . ."

He paused, conscience stricken, for his words seemed so futile. For a moment he paused, and then a strange thing happened. In all his days afterwards he could not account for it. How it

took place was beyond his understanding, but he had taken Fifi in his arms and kissed her.

"Fifi, I love you," he said. "I'll do anything for you. After the war, I'll marry you, come here and live, or take you to England—whatever you desire . . . . Tell me that you care for me," he said, pressing her to his breast.

Fifi started back like a frightened fawn and pulled the window to. Almost immediately she opened it again and looked out.

"Go away, English soldier," she said, but there was no anger in her voice. "You're drunk and you should be in bed."

Fitzgerald hung around the place for quite an hour afterwards, but Fifi did not come to the window again.

Early the next morning, after a sleepless night, he found himself in the house of Josef Babette. The man himself was away at the war, his wife and daughter were running the place during his absence. They had only one servant, a relative of Madame Babette, an oldish man, lean and twisted up, with his mouth almost hidden between nose and chin. But he was a good worker; few could surpass him at his labour on the wet level fields. Madame Babette was very industrious, she got out of bed every morning at five and

nine at night saw her finishing up the day's labour. So from week to week, her toil went on all the year round. Only on Sunday did she seek a moment's relaxation, then she went to church, told her beads and prayed for her good man who was away in the trenches fighting the battles of France.

Fitzgerald was sitting near the stove, writing up his diary, a habit he contracted at the beginning of the war and which he was still religiously pursuing. Mother Babette was washing her dishes. She was a thin, shrivelled woman of forty years of age, bent a little through hard work but still untiring as an ant.

An adventurous hen was picking up the crumbs under the chairs. Two chickens, less daring than their older feathered friend, came in, stalked gingerly up to their mate, seized each a crumb in their beaks and ran off as fast as their red legs could carry them.

Mother Babette finished her work, wiped the table, dusted the stove, put the plates on the dresser and sat down. Fitzgerald continued writing, but looked up now and again and took in with his eye the walls blackened with smoke, the rafters festooned with spider webs, the strings of onions hanging from the beams, the

tall wooden clock beside the dresser and the dog which lay under the table, wagging its tail and shaking its ears as if trying to get rid of flies. . . . .

Then Fitzgerald's eyes were attracted by something else. Outside the door Fifi was standing, throwing crumbs to the hens which clustered round her feet. She was a well-built girl of eighteen with velvety black eyes and a fascinating face. She wore a grey blouse and a striped petticoat which reached a little lower than her knees, strong sabots and a kerchief which was tied carelessly around her head. A prudent and hard-working girl, she had already fed the pigs, foddered and milked the cows, in addition to the hundred and one little things which must be done every morning in a farmyard. She was in a good humour when she entered the house, her white teeth and bright eyes were made for laughter, and the girl's face generally wore a provokingly coquettish expression. But behind it all lay hidden a reserve of restraint and dignity which showed itself when the soldiers, speaking as soldiers often speak, went too far with an indelicate jest. Fifi would look steadily, with wide open eyes, at the speaker for a moment, then the eyelids would slowly descend and the girl

would rise to her feet and proceed with her work.

This morning, she went up to Fitzgerald where he sat beside the stove, writing.

"To your sweetheart?" she asked.

The Irishman flushed crimson and closed the diary.

"No, I have no sweetheart."

"You haven't slept; you look tired," said Fifi.

"I couldn't sleep. How could I, after last night?"

What a fool he had been, he thought. Raving of love and marriage at the café, then proposing marriage to Fifi. If Snogger and Bubb and Bowdy knew all that had happened last night, what would they say? They would never cease twitting him. And Fifi. What was she thinking of now? Of the affair at the window, probably. He looked up at her. Her eyelids dropped, but behind this shyness there was something impetuous and passionate in the whole of her personality. And he had kissed her last night. He had pressed those lips in one great kiss. But now she seemed very far removed from him. And the souvenirs. The request of the night before seemed so unworthy of the girl.

"You couldn't sleep last night," said Fifi. "Why not?"

"I was thinking of you, of all that took place."

"But you were drunk?"

"I was not. I remember all that happened. I have gathered up a lot of souvenirs for you."

"I don't want any," said the girl. "I was only joking."

"But you must."

"No, no. Have some coffee. Who are you writing to?" she asked.

"Nobody," said Fitzgerald. "It's part of a diary."

"Is that true?"

"Yes, quite true."

"Not writing to a woman in England?" said Fifi. "There was a soldier here some time ago. He used to run after me. And I discovered that he had a wife in England."

"I have neither wife nor sweetheart," said Fitzgerald. "But if you, Fifi . . . . I am serious, you know . . . ."

At that moment a French soldier came to the door, a man of about forty-two. Over his shoulder he carried a kit-bag. Fifi and her mother ran up to the man and embraced him. Josef Babette was back home on leave, after seven months of war. He was a strong-muscled, well-built man of medium size, a good soldier

and diligent worker. He was a well-to-do farmer, a respectable man, who was trusted by his neighbours and bounden to none. He placed his kit away carefully in a corner, bade good morning to Fitzgerald, and sat down. Fifi brewed a fresh pot of coffee; Babette spoke about the war. He had just come from Souchez, and it was a bad locality. He had never known a spot as bad. No peace day or night. And as far as he could see the war would never come to an end.

He drank his coffee, got to his feet, and went outside. Fifi, whose eyes were wet with tears of gladness, lifted the kitbag from the ground and took it into the bedroom.

"Where has your father gone?" Fitzgerald asked her when she returned.

"Oh, he has gone out to work," she replied. "Things are behindhand on the farm. We have so little help."

Fitzgerald went out into the farmyard. Josef Babette was harnessing a cart-horse, his coat off and his shirt-sleeves thrust up over his elbows. Sergeant Snogger was washing at the pump.

"Ow're yer feelin' after last night?" he asked.

"Not so bad, sergeant," Fitzgerald replied.

"Been in seein' Fifi?" asked the sergeant.

"I have," said Fitzgerald. "She's a splendid

girl. I love her, and if she'll have me after the war, I'll marry her. God! there's something grand in her; too good for me. But I don't know what to make of her. She won't trust me, thinks I'm married, or something like that. And I love her, but she refuses to understand me. We are so far apart, somehow."

Snogger looked through his soapsuds at Fitzgerald, astonished at the Irishman's burst of confidence.

"There is nothing artificial about the girl," Fitzgerald continued. "She is grand, so simple and original. She says what she thinks and is far too childish to hide her thoughts. And I don't think she has much of an opinion of us."

"I don't think any of these 'ere French wenches care much for an English Tommy," said Snogger. "They'll go a little way wiv 'em and then they turn the deaf ear. I never was able to fool about wiv 'em. They're more freer than English birds at first, but it's ''ands off' if you want too much. They're all right if it's only cawfee and kisses, but ye'll never get any further."

Snoggers winked knowingly and laughed. Fitzgerald made his way into the barn.

CHAPTER IV

TO THE TRENCHES

I knew a bird at 'Ammersmith and free or four at Bow,
But that was 'fore the war begun, a damned long time ago;
But I'm a blurry Tommy now and never lose a chance
When far away from dear old Smoke to kiss the girls o' France.
Never lose a chance,
Lead the dears a dance,
'Twasn't bad at 'Ammersmith; God! It's fun in France!
(From "Forgotten Girls.")

IT was early morning; the soldiers billeted in Y—— Farm were rousing themselves and making preparations for the march up towards the firing line. It was now coming towards the Christmas season; the weather was cold and rainy, the farmyard damp and muddy, and a haze rose over the midden in the centre of the yard. Inside the farmhouse two officers were sitting down at the only table eating a breakfast of bread, butter, eggs and tea.

The soldiers were in the barn preparing their early meal. The barn seen in daylight was a cold, bleak, cheerless place, with a broken roof and rough uneven floor. The men shivered as

they toiled. They had slept in the cold and felt frozen when they got up. A big fire had been lit in the byre beneath; the smoke filled the whole place and stung the eyes of the soldiers who worked at the cooking.

Sergeant Snogger was superintending operations upstairs and fretting, fuming and coughing. He was in a very bad temper, having lost a week's wages at the gambling table the night before.

" 'Urry up, you men," he yelled. "I never seed as slummicky a crush in my natural. Ye're slouchin' about same as if ye were in the trenches. Come on Bowdy! Come on Fitz! Get a blurry move on, ye Spudhole! Ye're dowsy, men, ye're dowsy! Ye must wake up. We're off from here in an hour's time and we've a long march before us. We'll be in the trenches for Christmas."

"Where are we stopping to-night?" asked Fitzgerald, who was pouring tea into a messtin of boiling water, brought up from the byre.

"At the Ritz," said Snogger with fine irony.

"I heard we were billeting at Vinant," someone remarked.

"I thought we were bound for Bethune," Bowdy Benners said as he lifted a rasher of bacon from the lid of his messtin.

"You thought," spluttered Snogger. "Gawd Almighty, man, you're not paid to think in the army! If you think too much you'll find yourself damned unlucky. Anyhow, you'll find things hot in the trenches when you get there this time, I'm telling you," he continued, lowering his voice. "There's big things in the wind. We are going up by slow stages. I'm glad that we're goin'. I don't like these rests; there's too much damned work to do. Give me the trenches when I'm on the look-out for a cushy time. It's better than 'ere."

The sergeant took stock of the apartment with vigilant eyes.

"Now this 'as to be swept out 'fore you go 'way," he said. "All fag-ends, straw and everything 'as to be cleaned out."

"Wot's the 'ell good o' cleaning this caboosh," growled Bubb. "It can't be made clean."

"It's got to be done," said Snogger, raising his eyebrows with the decision of a verdict beyond appeal. "It's horders, and if horders isn't obeyed ye'll find yourselves damned unlucky . . . 'As anybody got a fag to spare?"

Somebody handed the sergeant a cigarette and he lit it. This seemed to put him in a good humour and he began relating to Bowdy Benners

the story of his card-playing the night before.

"Couldn't get a card," he said. "I was dead off all the night. Once I got a top trotter, but Sergeant MacManus had a priol of deuces. I went some money on my 'and that go. But it's as I've always said: 'When a man's luck's out s'out, but when it's in s'in.'"

The sergeant paused as if waiting for the full wisdom of his remark to sink into Bowdy's brain. Then he shouted at the top of his voice, "Get ready, men, get ready! We'll soon be movin' off," and went out to the farmyard.

Much work was yet to be done, rifles had to be cleaned, odds and ends had to be collected from the straw. Here a knife and fork was found, there an entrenching tool handle, a tin of bully beef, a towel and a cake of soap. A great amount of stuff is lost in large barns; things disappear mysteriously, lost in the straw or stolen, perhaps, by the children of the billet. Soldiers treating themselves to meals at village cafés often find themselves served up with bully beef in new guise.

Outside in the farmyard the fowls were standing on the smoking midden, several of them scratching the dung with crooked claws in search of worms. In the midst of the assembly, a roost-

er, proud as Lucifer, was clucking amorously. Now and again he selected a gentle hen, walked leisurely round her and strove to attract her attention. The hen would fix a careless but coquettish look on him, stretch out a wing and stand on one leg for a moment. Afterwards she would succumb and the triumphant Sultan would stretch out his neck and crow a challenge to any cock that dared to listen.

At the hour of nine the battalion was ready to move off. The men were in a good temper now and full of confidence. The every-day inspection of equipment had been gone through, rifles had been examined and the men's feet looked at. All were so cool that it was difficult to believe that they were going up to the trenches, in which doubtless a number of them would lay down their lives. Most of the soldiers carried big French loaves on the back of their packs. The loaves had been holed through the middle, a string was placed in the hole and tied to the dees on the braces.

Sergeant Snogger made a final inspection of his platoon.

" 'Ave yer everything?" he asked, then without waiting for an answer he went on: "Course yer should 'ave everything. If ye 'aven't ye 'aven't

and that's all. Here, where the devil is Fitz?" he asked.

"Forgot somethin' and 'e's gone into the barn," Bubb replied.

"I see, I see," said Snogger, winking knowingly. "Fifi 'as gone in too, to 'elp 'im look for what 'e's forgot."

" 'E's fair dotty on the bird," said Bubb.

"But 'e's forgotten hisself," Snogger remarked. "If Captain Thorley finds 'im missin' he'll be for it. Ah, 'ere 'e comes."

Fitzgerald came out from the barn fully equipped and took his place in the ranks.

"Ye're just in time," said Snogger. "Another minute late and ye'd be for it."

Fitzgerald laughed awkwardly and cast a sheepish glance back at the barn. Fifi was standing at the door, and Bubb vowed she was crying.

"Fancy 'er cryin' cos you're goin' off, Fitz," he said.

Fitzgerald did not reply.

The company marched off, the men singing at the tops of their voices; Spudhole, as was his wont, leading the singing. He was a most vivacious youth, full of high spirits and good hu-

mour, fond of his fun and his beer, and as vital at the end of a journey as at the beginning.

Despite the distance which a regiment may travel, the soldier is as circumscribed in his area as the spoke of a limber wheel. The space is confined, and Spudhole Bubb was no less a prisoner on the march than he had been in the guard-room. Always the same mates in front, the same ruddy necks pressed sturdily back, the same red-brick hands swinging across the khaki, the same entrenching tool handles waving backwards and forwards, the same round loaves tied to the packs, the same red-haired sergeant with the tops of his ears pressing tightly to his head, the same platoon commander who now and again stood out from the ranks and shouted the ancient words of command. "Get a step there, get a step!" or "Cover off from the front" or some such order. Once in every hour a whistle was blown and the whole battalion halted. The Captain of a company would step out in front, halt, turn about and shout at the top of his voice, "Ten minutes. Left of the road. Fall out!"

The men would loosen their equipment and throw themselves down anywhere. Cigarettes would be lit, jokes passed, and rations taken out of haversacks. A few would drink from their

water bottles, sipping the water carefully, for it was impossible to know when the next pump would be reached.

At the end of the fourth hour and the sixteenth fag (Spudhole computed the length of a march by the number of fags he smoked on the route), Fitzgerald, who had been silent for quite a long time, turned to Benners and said: "You know, I had a damned strange dream last night. I dreamt that I was up in the trenches fighting a big German who got in my way somehow, and he ran his bayonet through my neck."

"You may get killed this time," said Benners.

"No, not this time," Fitzgerald replied. "I decided that by the cards last night. 'Red: I come back safe; black: I don't' I said to myself, cut the cards and turned up the ace of hearts. A good omen."

" 'Ear old Fitz!" muttered Spudhole, " 'e's always pullin' our legs."

"You don't understand, Spudhole," said Fitzgerald. "I'm damned superstitious. Once I dreamt . . . ."

"One night I had a dream," Bubb interrupted. "Dreamt I was 'avin' a feed at the S.P.O.* shop. Next day I was at the street corner a dogger-on

* Sausage, potato and onion.

for flatties. As I was there a copper comes round the other turnin' and flops into the banker school. 'Twasn't arf a barney. They sets about 'im an' knocks 'im down and I gets 'is 'at and I kicks it along the street. Didn't arf make a big 'ole in it either. But I was unlucky, for two other coppers comes up and collars me. I was put in the reformatory."

Sergeant Snogger detached himself from the ranks.

"Oo's got a fag to give away?" he asked as Fitzgerald came up.

"Here's one," said Fitzgerald, handing the sergeant a cigarette.

" 'Ave yer 'eard about the German as was captured about 'ere the other day?" asked Snogger, marching by the side of Fitzgerald and lighting the fag. " 'E was got sleeping in a ruined cottage near the Café Belle Vue. Dressed in khaki, with the badge of the A.S.C."

"Good God! I must have met that man," said Fitzgerald, and told for the first time the story of his adventure on the night of his return from the Café.

He told the story in full, frequently interrupting himself and going back in the narrative to present a detail which he had forgotten. When

he had finished he looked at Snogger, who had listened very attentively, and suddenly realised that the sergeant did not believe him. To be sure, Fitzgerald had wandered away a little from the absolute truth, and the story of his own behaviour had lost nothing in the telling. A sarcastic smile showed on Snogger's lips and Fitzgerald suddenly wished that the narrative had never been told.

"Damned good, or in French, tray bon!" said the sergeant in a drawling voice. "Blurry fine story. That A.S.C. bloke told me all about it. 'E was one of our own men, too, not an A.S.C. at all. You don't know the feller. 'E's in another company. But 'e's allus up to a joke. We planned it all out in the Café after old Fatty 'ad told that cock and bull story about the Germans breakin' through. The A.S.C. man was to wait for you on the road outside. Wasn't that the ticket, Spudhole?"

"That was 'ow we planned it out," said Bubb.

Fitzgerald puffed his cigarette viciously and his face was crimson. For a moment he was silent, then he spoke, turning to Bubb.

"I cannot follow your remark, Bubb," he said in a slow voice. "The crash of your falling aitches drowns all other sounds. You should

take a lesson in pronunciation from Sergeant Snogger. If you listen to him when he orders the 'wear wanks to wipe their wifles wiv woily wags,' you can't fail to become a master of English as it is spoken."

The sergeant blushed red as a beetroot. His imperfections in speaking were a great eyesore to the man, and only once before had he been twitted about the matter. Then thick ears and black eyes were kept as mementoes of the occasion.

But now he could say nothing; he had given Fitzgerald sufficient provocation to warrant the jibe. Without another word he went back to the head of his platoon. Fitzgerald relapsed into silence and the march went on.

At one o'clock came the order "Halt! Left of the road! Fall out!" And the men sank down wearily. Their packs were very heavy and their weight seemed to increase at every yard, justifying the soldiers' proverb: an ounce at the start is a pound at the finish.

"Blimey, I don't know why we carry all this 'ere clobber about wiv us," Spudhole muttered, leaning back on his pack and stretching out his legs to their fullest extent. "Ballyclavvy 'elmet, trench 'elmet, gas 'elmet and cap," he enumerated. "Bay'net, 'ipe, trenchin' tool, munition

(unner and eighty rounds), 'ousewife, 'oldall, ground sheet, messtin, razor, soap, comb, towel, paybook, clasp knife, iron rashuns, knife, fork and spoon, a bottle of water, a tin of condensed milk, a tin of café-o-lay, chocolate, matches and a box o' fags . . . ."

"I'll carry yer fags for you if you like," said Bowdy Benners.

"Will yer?" muttered Bubb. "I've lost things that way 'fore now."

"There are a lot of things which you haven't mentioned yet," Fitzgerald remarked. "There's the first field dressing, the loaf, your overcoat and spare shirt, pants, socks and vest. By the way, what are we stopping here for?" he asked. "There's no sign of dinner as far as I can see."

"You're damned unlucky about dinner," said Snogger, coming up at that moment. "There's no dinner, not yet for a while, anyhow. We're going away from 'ere by buses soon as they come along."

"Where to?" asked Bowdy Benners.

" 'Ome," Snogger answered sarcastically. " 'Ome to the trenches. Big doins up there, I s'pose."

"It's like the blurry Army," Bubb remarked with an air of finality. "Turnin' us out to fight

when we're just ready for a bit o' grub. I never could 'old with this 'ere war. Look, there they come, curse 'em!"

An omnibus came in sight, then a second, a third; coming from a village through which the battalion had just passed. As the vehicles drew up the spirits of the soldiers seemed to rise, jokes were passed with the drivers, mock enquiries were made and jesting answers were given: "Is this the bus for Wandsworth?" "Not this one—next along this way, No. 32." "Fares, please." "Full inside; room for two on top," etc.

The soldiers got on to the buses, which set off hurriedly when all were aboard. Nobody seemed to know where the battalion was bound for, but all anticipated big things ahead. The soldiers' hearts vibrated with a strange expectant thrill—something great was going to happen. Where? When? The men asked one another, but none could answer the questions. They stood on the threshold of great events; children outside the door of a chamber of mysteries.

CHAPTER V

MARCHING

The good French girls will cook brown loaves above the oven fire,
And while they do the daily toil of barn and bench and byre,
They'll think of hearty fellows gone and sigh for them in vain—
The billet boys, the London lads who won't return again.
(From "Soldier Songs.")

THE men moved wearily, grunting and stumbling, their uniforms muddy and dirty, their rifles held at all angles. Now and again one would stand still for a moment, look round, readjust his equipment braces and continue marching. On all faces was a sluggish indifferent look: the march from Y—— Farm had begun centuries ago and would never end. They kept walking and walking, drowsily heedless of all that went on around them.

Although midwinter the day had seemed very close, the night seemed closer still. The men sweated as they marched. The silence was profound, hopeless and oppressive. The crunching

boots were part of the eternal monotonous silence; when the column halted the cessation of movement came like a blow and almost stunned them as they stood. Where was the battalion going to? Nobody seemed to know and nobody cared now. Weariness had killed the men's curiosity.

Sergeant Snogger came along on the right flank of his company during one of these stoppages; his feet moving ponderously, his back crooked like an old man's.

"What's up?" somebody asked.

"Feel to the left or you'll be damned unlucky," he said. "Reinforcements!"

His voice was almost incoherent and his tones were charged with impatience.

Dark bulks took shape on their right, creaked and thundered for a moment, then vanished.

"Reinforcements!" someone muttered, and added: "On buses, London buses. Same as we came on t'other day. And we've been marching nearly all the time since then!"

Again the living body crawled forward step by step. Bubb leant forward on Fitzgerald's arm, fell asleep but still continued his march. Fitz could feel Bubb's hand on his own; it was soft and warm but very heavy. He tried to shake it

off but it clung tighter . . . . Why was it done to him? The Irishman was not conscious of having done any wrong. But to press his hand with pincers and crush him down with a steam hammer—it was too much . . . . He was falling through space with a monstrous load on his shoulders. Down, down, ever so far down and no bottom. The fall was endless. A branch of a tree stretched out towards his hand and he strove to grip it. It evaded him and he still fell . . . . Fitzgerald suddenly bounced into conscious life to see figures moving forward right in front of him. Then he knew that he was still marching, marching up to battle. "What battle?" he asked himself, and then became annoyed at his own curiosity. "I don't know," he muttered. "What the hell does it matter, anyway?"

"Are you sleepy?" asked Bubb, who had woke up.

"No," the Irishman answered unconcernedly. "Please take your hand away! Take it away at once."

Bubb paid no heed but his hand gripped tighter still. Fitz tried to shake it off, but the effort was monstrously futile. But what did it matter? He was living in a confused and muddled night-

mare and his mind was a great vacant chamber filled with spectres more impalpable than air.

"The lights!" somebody said. "Look at them!"

The starshells seemed very near, blazing in the heavens, green, red and white. The green was restful to look upon, the white hard and cold; the red starshells were lurid wounds dripping with blood. Fitz shuddered and his eyes sought the ground again. . . . .

. . . . . .

"On the left of the road, fall out!"

The command was given in a weak voice and the men dropped down on the withered grass. It was now almost dawn; the ambulance waggons were tearing along the road and the wounded could be heard groaning and cursing as the vehicles were jolted from side to side on the cobbled way.

The battle to which the London Boys were going was at an end now. The soldiers were dimly conscious of this but all were indifferent to the result of the conflict. . . . . Most of the men were already asleep. A cold breeze was blowing and high up in the air the starshells were

still blazing merrily over the firing line. . . . . Soldiers came tottering back from battle in platoons, in squads, in pairs. They were all war-worn and dejected, they straggled by, their heads sunk on their breasts. Now and again the men spoke to them, but they seldom made answer and when they replied their answers were ever the same.

"The Boche attacked," they said. "Christ! he didn't half send some stuff across 'fore he came over. We chased him back. But 'twas a fight."

Fitzgerald lay close to the earth and he could smell the moist clay and dead grass. It was very cold too. He turned over on his side and stretched out his legs to their full extent. It was now on the fringe of dawn . . . .

The earth grew pale and objects in the near distance took on definite form . . . .

Fitzgerald woke with a start and got to his feet. He had been asleep for a few minutes only. His mates were buckling their belts and grumbling at their lot. What was going to happen now? Going back again and all that damned trek for nothing. Not one of them could march another hundred yards . . . .

"We're not going far back," Snogger said. "Just a mile or so and we'll billet at a village.

Then you can all 'ave a kip. That's if ye're lucky."

"And the attack?" Fitz asked. "Was it beaten off?"

"Yes," said the sergeant. "The Germans got as far as our trench and there they stopped; some of them for good. We're lucky we weren't in it, I'm thinking . . . . Come on, boys, and pull yourselves together," he shouted. "We've got to get out of this before it gets too clear. It'll soon be broad daylight, and we'll be damned unlucky if we're 'ere then."

Wounded men who were able to walk straggled along the road. When they fell they fell silently and got up mutely. But many fell and did not rise.

The men were well on their way when dawn broke, and the rim of the sky flushed crimson. Dead mules lay on the cobbled ways, torn with ghastly wounds; drivers in khaki, helplessly impotent, lay huddled amidst their broken limbers. The roadway was gutted by shells and the poplars that lined the path were scarred and peeled by many a projectile. Behind, the shells were bursting and the sound of explosions quivered through the crisp clear air.

If the men looked back they could see the hills

behind, rising out of the dawn, the white mists in the Zouave valley—the valley of Death, the Cabaret Rouge, the inn on the Souchez Road, and Souchez itself which is now a heap of powdered dust. War had rent and riven many a village but Souchez it had powdered to dust. Not the fragment of a single wall remained standing and not a whole brick remained of the village of Souchez.

Higher than any of the hills of Lorrette rose "The Pimple," the highest peak in the district. From the top mile after mile of the surrounding country was visible—woods, roads, towns, villages and canals. The French were supposed to be holding it.

Sergeant Snogger, who had been marching in front, came back and kept in step with Bowdy Benners and his mates.

"The French lost 'The Pimple' last night," he said. "There were two thousand 'oldin' the place and the Germans turned every damned gun they'd got on it. Blew it to blazes, they did. Not one Frenchman came back; and they say none was taken prisoners. They were damned unlucky."

Half-an-hour's march brought the men to a little village, broken, ruined, untenanted. There

they halted while the officers inspected the cellars, seeking shelter where their men might sleep. Snogger's friends were lucky and found a cellar, the floor of which was littered with hay, and here they lay down, but not before they lit a candle to frighten the rats away. Holding himself erect, Snogger tried to unbuckle his equipment, but his fingers were unable to perform the task. "Damn it!" he shouted in a petulant voice and collapsed in a heap on the straw where he lay crumpled up. He might have been hit in the head by a bullet so sudden was his fall.

The men lay near the bottom of the cellar stairs; the apartment lost itself in unfathomable corners, and there the rats were scurrying backwards and forwards. Bowdy was just dropping off to sleep when a hoarse sepulchral yell echoed through the cellar and a strange unearthly figure rushed into the circle of candle-light, waving his arms in the air and shouting in a strange incoherent voice. The men were looking at a French soldier.

He came to a halt at the foot of the stairs; his eyelids slowly opened, the eyes took in the apartment—the dim candle, the forms lying on the floor.

"Who are you?" he asked in a steady voice.

Then as if collecting his scattered wits he muttered: "You are billeted here. I have just come down from the 'Pimple' . . . . I'm the only man left . . . . Who has a drop of water to spare?"

Thus did Fitzgerald, who woke up, translate the man's remarks. Bówdy gave him a drink of water. He lay down again in one of the men's overcoats and was soon asleep. As the men dozed off one by one the rats drew closer, peering curiously out from the darkness of the remote corners of the cellar . . . . Fitzgerald fell asleep to awake suddenly with a start. A rat had run over his face.

"The damned pests," he muttered getting to his feet. "I can't stand them. I'll get outside and sleep on the ground. God! it's strange how a little thing like a rat disturbs me," he muttered.

He went outside, lay down on the cobbles and slept the sleep of a weary man.

In the evening the battalion marched away from the neighbourhood of Souchez and entered the Loos Salient just in time for the Christmas season.

CHAPTER VI

CHRISTMAS EVE

The sergeant's water bottle's full,
But it is strange to see
The sergeant on the 'ear'ole for
Some water for his tea.
But ain't it strange when night is on
And we are out o' sight,
The sergeant takes his bottle out
And swigs from it all night
        Cold water—
        Co-o-old water—
Co-o, o-o, o-o, o-o, co-o-old water.

(From "The Lost Rum Ration.")

IT was about seven o'clock in the evening and an unusual silence brooded over the Loos Salient. In the trenches the silence always broods; the soldiers, not knowing what the moment may bring forth, are uneasy; and the eternal hidden menace of the Unknown is intensified by the stillness. The evening was intensely dark; black, impenetrable shadows bulked in the trenches and became the colour of the parapet, parados and bay. Objects quite near at hand took on strange fantastic shapes and looked like

men lying asleep on the firesteps; only a closer examination would show that the phantoms were sandbags or ammunition boxes. Many of the boys were smoking; the lighted cigarettes glowed like rubies set in an illimitable spread of ebony.

It was raining; a soft, almost caressing rain dropped sleekly and helplessly down on the firing line. In this manner it had been falling for hours; the trenches were filled to the firestep with slush and muck; the duck-boards were afloat, and men changing their position in the trench clambered out over the top and walked along the reverse slope of the parapet. Now and again a wayfarer stuck in the clinging quicksand of the trench floor, only to free himself when he succeeded in climbing out of his Wellington boots.

Fitzgerald sat down on the firestep and sank into the soft mud.. So complete was the stillness that he could distinctly hear all the varied sounds of the night mingling together in a long-drawn, slumberous murmur. The far-off death lullaby of a heavy shell, the soft, quivering croon of the damp wind, the sough of a boot as a soldier walked along the trench; the vague murmurings from a near dug-out, the enervating sizzle of falling rain, and the varied, indefinable night movements of Nature blended sleepily together

in a slumber that made for nightmares and fevered dreams.

Fitzgerald dozed off, only to wake in an instant by hearing voices speaking very close to him.

"Spudhole, my rifle is full of dirt; half a sandbag of chalk has gone down the barrel," said the voice of Bowdy Benners.

"Mine is full up o' muck, too," said Spudhole. There was an indifference in his tones. He seemed to have lost all interest in his best friend, his " 'ipe."

"I don't care a damn," he muttered. "A nipe's only made to be cleaned in this 'ere war as far as I can see."

"When is the rum coming up?" Bowdy enquired. "Probably we'll get none to-night."

" 'S'up," said Bubb, "round the next bay in the dug-out."

"Well, I'm off," said Bowdy. "I'm half frozen. I'm for a good tot if it's going . . . . By the way," he asked, as if it had suddenly occurred to him, "how many of our fellows were blown up by the mine this morning?"

"Seven or eight," said Bubb, "or maybe more."

"And to think that to-night's Christmas Eve," said Benners, as if the conversation had forcibly reminded him of the fact.

The two men clambered over the top and made their way towards the dug-out from which the rum was issued.

Fitzgerald got up and followed.

As he crawled over the sandbags a starshell rose into the darkness and lit the scene of war. The country showed wet and livid, the barbed wire entanglements wound crookedly along the levels. The wires stretched out waiting for their prey with threatening barbs.

In the brooding silence and the locality of war, Hate and Vengeance persisted, and were well in keeping with the ominous night, and here it seemed they found their most direct expression. Fitzgerald looked around, and queer, fragmentary thoughts rioted in his head. He remembered a verse of a song which he had once heard, and repeated it aloud.

> "Here comes I, Jack Straw;
> Such a man you never saw;
> Through a rock, through a reel,
> Through an old spinning-wheel,
> Through a mill hopper, through a bag of pepper;
> Sheep shanks, chicken bone—
> Give me a kiss or leave me alone."

"What has put this nonsense into my mind?" he asked himself. "Probably it is because it is part of a Christmas carol. . . . And this is

Christmas eve. . . . . Two thousand years gone by and the message of the Prince of Peace not made manifest yet. . . . . Well, I wonder if the rum is waiting . . . .?"

He made his way into the trench again, and came in sight of the dug-out, with its candle lit in a niche of the chalky wall, and its huddled occupants lying on the floor. A few, no doubt, were asleep. Two or three were sitting, their backs against the chalk, their heads bent down almost between their knees. All were dressed in sheepskin coats, khaki trousers and high boots, and wore full equipment, their cartridge pouches being well stocked with ammunition. Although a bank of earth was heaped up on the doorstep, it did not prevent the water from dripping inside. The floor of the dug-out was as mucky as the floor of the trench. Stooping down, Fitzgerald crawled in through the narrow door of the shelter.

Bubb was already inside, scraping the muck from his boots with a clasp knife. Behind him, with his back against the wall, sat Bowdy Benners, cutting a lump of cheese into small portions.

The cheese was a big item of the Christmas Eve rations.

He was sitting down now, his head thrust for-

ward, his big hands busy with the cheese. As Fitzgerald entered he looked up, then glanced round the dug-out.

"Not much grub to-night, boys," he said. "Four biscuits, a half a tin of bully and a piece of cheese for each man."

"And the rum?" asked Bubb, forestalling every man with the question.

"It's here all right," said Bowdy.

They stared open-mouthed for a full second, then a roar of delight echoed through the dug-out and the sleepers awoke. Bubb rose to his feet, whirled his clasp knife round his hand, endeavoured to dance a jig, and only stopped when his head came in forcible contact with the roof for the third time. Fitzgerald chuckled; a glow of satisfaction lit up his handsome face, and his eyes rested lovingly on the sandbag which stood in an angle of the wall near the door. Then he lay back, rested his head on the wall and stared at the candle. In that position he looked a very charming boy, and he knew it. In civil life he must have been very fond of society, the company of notable people, and above all of pretty women.

Again he looked at the sandbag in the angle of the wall, but his eyes were not the only ones

fixed on that object. And no wonder: the sandbag contained the rum jar.

"Well, wot about a tot?" asked Bubb.

Bowdy rose and took the sandbag into the middle of the room, where he uncovered the precious jar and filled a mess-tin of liquor. He handed the tin to Bubb.

"Cheero!" said the Cockney, and drank. He passed the tin round and wiped his lips. "There's some guts in rum," he muttered, and his voice was full of emotion. "Gawd! it doesn't 'arf warm up the inside of a bloke. Now, wot about a Christmas dinner?" he continued. "Bully ain't wot one would call très bon, is it? Christmas dinner of bully beef! Gor'blimey! that's no blurry good!"

"It's a funny thing that a full belly always is associated with happiness," said Fitzgerald, shaking his head and laughing loudly. Rum went easily to his head. "If a man gets married, he feeds well, and if a child is born to him, he stuffs himself with viands. It's always his belly."

"Always," said Bubb, reaching a second time for the mess-tin.

"It doesn't matter what Fitz says," remarked Bowdy Benners, sinking his chin into the collar

of his sheepskin coat. "What I say is this: We must have a Christmas dinner to-morrow."

"How can we get one?" Fitz enquired.

"Easy enough that," said Bowdy. "I know an old woman of the Café Calomphie. A parcel of good things could be got there for a few francs. I could go down to Les Brebis in an hour."

"But they're shelling the road," Fitzgerald remarked. "Blowing holes in it, and the houses are flying about the streets. Not only that, but you're not supposed to go away from here. And again, all shops are closed at nine o'clock. It's well past eight now. . . . ."

"But that doesn't matter," said Bowdy. "The woman of the café is a great friend of mine."

"Ye're a sly old dawg, Bowdy," said Bubb. "No one 'ud fink that to look at yer."

Bowdy went red in the face, and proceeded to buckle his equipment, his hands trembling a little over the job.

"We'll have a collection, anyhow," said Fitzgerald, and he flung a coin into his mess-tin. Several coins followed, and in the end the magnificent sum of twelve francs fifty was collected.

Bowdy put the money in his pocket, took a last

long-drawn pull at his cigarette, and went outside.

"I'll be back again in no time," were his final words.

The men turned their attention to the rum jar again; tongues were loosened and stories of past Christmases went round the dug-out. Bubb, strong on the traditions of the regiment, told the story of the Brigadier's kit inspection at St. Albans the Christmas previous.

"The 'ole Brig come round when 'e was inspectin' us, and 'e looked at my pack," said Bubb. " 'That's the neatest pack I've seed in the 'ole battalion,' says the Brig. ' 'Ave yer got everything that's laid down in orders in that 'ere pack?' 'e says to me. 'Everything,' I sez. 'I know that the contents of a nice pack is always nice and clean,' 'e says. 'I'll just 'ave a look at yer pack. Take it off and take out everything and lay them out,' 'e says. Gor' blimey! I did wot 'e ordered me, an' my bloomin' pack was full of straw. 'Twas lighter to carry than the or'nary caboosh. Fourteen days' spudhole," Bubb concluded.

Fitzgerald was singing a song and waving an empty mess-tin over his head. The song was one of his own making, a Rabelaisian production with a snappy chorus. All joined in and drank

in turn. Suddenly they heard the dull rumble of approaching shells and the loud explosions of the missiles in the fields outside. Fitzgerald lit a cigarette and finished a chorus.

"They're strafing again," he said. "The damned pastime will never come to an end."

CHAPTER VII

CHRISTMAS DAY

Blurry well freezin' and cold as sin,
  Christmas Day in the mornin';
The big guns welcome the Saviour in,
  Christmas Day in the mornin';
Used to have fingers and used to have toes,
Used to have ears as well as a nose,
But now I don't think that I've any of those
  Christmas Day in the mornin'.

Wish we was safe in a stall to-day,
  Christmas Day in the mornin';
Watching the cattle munchin' their hay,
  Christmas Day in the mornin';
The Prince of Peace was born, we're told,
Snug in a stall in the days of old;
Lord, look down on us 'ere in the cold,
  On Christmas Day in the mornin'.

(From "Carols of Good Will.")

THE dawn was at hand, the dawn of Christmas Day. Fitzgerald was standing on the firestep looking over No Man's Land towards the enemy's trenches. It was his hour on sentry-go. The rain was still falling, and his hands and feet felt very cold, but he was powerless to restore any warmth to his body by moving about. To leave the firestep for a mo-

ment was dangerous. He knew that if he stuck in the mud of the trench he could not extricate himself, for he felt utterly worn out. He had been warm enough when he went on watch owing to the rum which he had drunk, but now he was shivering as if his whole being had been stricken with ague. He tried to warm his legs by striking one against the other, but his feet felt so heavy that he desisted after two or three ineffectual endeavours to release them from the mud. The slightest movement was a monstrous futility, and now that it had become so difficult to move he did not want to remain still, and he had the greatest desire in the world to be free-footed and doing something.

The Germans were shelling the sector on the right, and the chill, wet morning was lit up by the lurid flashes of bursting explosives. The air was full of the rumbling and crashing of the conflict; shells sped across the trench, careering towards some distant objective, probably the village, where old Bowdy was routing out the essentials for a Christmas dinner. And Bowdy had not returned yet; some nine hours had gone by since he departed on his mission.

"Probably he has got blown to pieces," Fitzgerald muttered. "Poor old Bowdy."

Then he passed, without further thought of Bowdy, to memories which came into his head at random. He thought of his home, away up a little glen in Galway, of the neighbours there, of Doalty Fadhan, the great gambler, who always won when he turned his coat outside in, of Eamon Hudagh, who got drunk at Glenagh Fair and lost his clothes somewhere at night; in the morning he came across the hills in a red flannel petticoat; of Paddy Brogan who cleared out the same fair with a stone in the foot of a woman's stocking. "I wish I was in Glenagh now," Fitzgerald said. "A good turf fire, a bit and a sup and the neighbours coming in for the night's raking." Then all these memories and desires floated together and jumbled themselves up in his head, and he fell asleep. He was awakened by a feeling that everything was not as it should be. For the unusual there was only one place to look, out on his front, and his eyes were already fixed on the grey, formless level which lay between his trench and the enemy's. Nothing changed there, everything just . . . . Then Fitzgerald saw a huge bulk take shape on his right front, twenty yards from the trench and fifty yards away from the spot where he stood. The bulk rose upright, like a gigantic monster of some

pre-Adamite age, paused for a second as if considering something, then it burst in twain, and Fitzgerald flopped down into the mucky trench, half blinded and deafened by the flash and thunder of the exploding mine.

The earth had vomited its entrails out, a million rocks rioted through the air and ricochetted off the parapet; the dawn was thick with flying rubbish, the greater part of which seemed to be falling into the trench, dropping with a sickly splosh into the muck. The world was falling down around the ears of the Irishman.

"Out and man the mine crater!"

The order came along the trench like a half strangled whisper. Fitzgerald rose from the muck and spluttered the message along to the next bay, then gripped his rifle and clambered up and across the parapet.

Most of the men were already out and rushing towards the crater of the mine. Fitzgerald had a vivid impression of flying figures in sheepskin coats, of rifles in air, of bursting shells, of men stumbling, falling and rising, of hoarse-voiced oaths and imprecations, of queries and answers. "Not our mine, is it?" "I thought we were too far apart." "Are we to get into the blurry 'ole

'fore the gas clears away?" were a few of the remarks which came to his ears.

A corporal halted near him and shouted something about the risk the men were running. "We'll be poisoned by the fumes in the crater," he said. "We're coming across too soon. Far too soon," he muttered; "far too blurry soon!"

But no one paid any heed. To stop on the open was dangerous, and the Germans were out already. They could be seen, dark figures breaking through the enemy's barbed wire entanglements. Presently they would be engaged with the British in a hand-to-hand encounter for the possession of the crater.

Fitzgerald reached the rim of the hole and stood there for a moment looking down. Heavy coils of thick smoke wound snake-like along the bottom, where the black earth was illumined by ghastly phosphorescent lights that trailed up the sides in thin sluggish streaks. A few soldiers were already going down into the place and halting from time to time, taking stock of the scene before them. All were spluttering and coughing, and a few had pulled their gas helmets down over their heads and faces. "This is no blurry beanfast, I can tell yer," Spudhole muttered as he tried to clamber back, crawling with difficulty al-

most knee-deep in the rubble. As he moved the clay shot away from beneath him, and he found himself in the unenviable plight of being able to advance a foot, only to find himself slipping back a yard.

The enemy shelled with unceasing persistency, and men were getting struck on the rim of the crater. Anywhere was better than where they were standing—they flopped into the crater, making futile efforts to save themselves, from rolling to the bottom, by clawing at the clay of the sides. Once down, however, they found to their relief that breathing was easier than they had anticipated.

"What now?" somebody enquired, looking vaguely round.

"What indeed? What's to be done?"

"We'll get killed like blurry rats down 'ere . . . . The Alleymongs are coming over in droves. . . . ."

"It's better to fight them on the top than to let them stone us to death down here."

Sergeant Snogger, in a sheepskin coat, which was freshly ripped across the shoulder by a bullet or shell splinter, rolled down the side of the crater and landed at the bottom. In a moment he was on his feet.

"Up to the top, boys!" he cried. "Don't stand here arguing like fishwives. Up to the top or you'll be damned unlucky."

Immediately the men were crawling up like ants, but with extreme difficulty. Their heavy boots, their equipments and rifles impeded their movements, each man was a khaki-clad Sisyphus, battling against an incline such as the patient Sisyphus never experienced. The men, grunting and swearing, seemed to be making no headway, the scaling of the craterside, about sixty feet in depth, was a Herculean task for men strong of wind and limb, for them it was a task of despair.

"We'll never get there," Bubb grunted. Then his eyes sought the top. "Gor' blimey!" he muttered, "there they come."

A man, dressed in German uniform, stood on the rim of the crater, a rifle in his hand, and looked down. As the soldiers watched, he raised his rifle to his shoulder and pointed it at the crush in the bottom of the crater.

The movement was his last. Bowdy Benners arrived at that moment, dressed in full marching order, his rifle in his hand and the bayonet fixed. The "point" was delivered at the shoulder, and Benners' long arms put all the zest of a strong body into the movement. The German came

clean over the rim of the crater and rolled down to the bottom, clawing at the air with frenzied fingers.

Bowdy lay down at the top, and his rifle became active. Round after round sped across the open towards the foe, who were now coming up in bulk and getting very close to the crater.

"Keep it up, Bowdy!" cried Snogger. "Are they near?"

"They're not far away," said Bowdy without looking round. "Devil blow me blind, they'll be here in a second if you don't come up and give me a hand . . . . Ha! They've stopped now, a shell has caught a couple."

"All right, Bowdy, we're here," the sergeant shouted reaching the summit.

The main body of Germans, advancing in open order, was still some fifty yards away. As far as could be ascertained at the moment, the delay (they should have been across the open three minutes ago) was due to a heavy curtain fire which had greeted them just as they came out of their trenches. The fire caught them at the barbed wire entanglements, concussion shells tore up the wires and swept them around the bodies of the attackers, and the impartial shrapnel rained viciously down on the huddled heaps of wounded.

The quick were advancing, a dispirited party of men, in open order, glad to get away from their own trenches, which were suffering cruel chastisement. Some were willing to fight even yet; five or six had flung themselves down on the ground and trained their rifles on the British positions, opening a wild erratic fire of slight intensity. Cold hands never hold a rifle steady on a Christmas morning.

The men in the crater lay down behind the parapet which the exploding mine had formed and opened fire with deadly effect.

"That'll knock the blurry stuffin' out o' them," Spudhole remarked. "There they come now, their 'ands up in the air." It was even as he remarked. The advanced line of Germans put their timorous hands over their heads and stepped diffidently towards the mine. "Kamerad! Kamerad!" they whined, their arms shaking as if stricken with palsy. The snipers threw their rifles away and joined in with their mates. All were sick of the job.

"Take them prisoners," said Sergeant Snogger. "There's nothing else to be done."

An hour later when the wounded had been carried back to the trench and the prisoners were marched off to the village at the rear, the victors

were left to themselves, in undisputed possession of their hard-won crater.

The Christmas morning scene was one never to be forgotten: the rain-swept crater, the crumbling clay, the fumes of gunpowder, the dead bodies, the monotonous hum of ragtime choruses, the shells bursting across the top, the dirty rifles and the dirtier men who endeavoured to clean them. Bowdy Benners was there with a full pack and a bulging haversack. Fitzgerald and Spudhole were deep in a discussion on some nonsensical subject; but the discussion served its object, it brought the men's minds away from the stark reality of their surroundings. Snogger sitting on his haunches, was giving details of the fight to his platoon commander, Captain Thorley.

Bubb drew up towards Bowdy and asked him for a drink from his water-bottle. Benners handed it to him with a solemn look. Spudhole drank.

"Good?" asked Bowdy.

"Wonderful stuff," said Spudhole.

"Hand it round," said Bowdy.

All drank from the water bottle in turn, and each man winked knowingly when he drank. None of the men had expected any rum that morning, the rations of the night before had been

so short; the limbers met with a mishap when coming up to the Vallé Dump. Of course, all were aware that Bowdy had come into possession of the rum by illegitimate means. However, no enquiries were made.

"Now what about a smoke before dinner?" Bubb remarked, fixing a knowing glance on Bowdy. "'As anybody got a fag to spare? Many a pore bloke 'as 'gone West' since I 'ad my last fag."

Fitzgerald fumbled about in his haversack and found a box, a little tin box, lying snug and dry amidst a crush of papers and broken biscuits. Some fifty cigarettes were enclosed within. He handed them round.

They lit them up. The drink and the smoke exercised a cheering effect upon the men. A look of pleasure stole over every face and the men burst into uncontrollable fits of laughter when Spudhole, standing on a platform of clay, placed his arms akimbo and wished all a merry Christmas. "If we 'ave to spend the day 'ere, we must spend it 'ere, we must stick it 'ere, and there's no more to be said," he laughed. "We'll get relieved to-night," he added; "that's if we're lucky."

"Suppose we build a dug-out and light a fire,"

said Snogger. "There's 'arf-a-dozen poles standin' over the top; we've got waterproof sheets, trenchin' tools and good chalk to work in."

Drawing their tools from their equipment, the men set to labour with zeal, hollowed out a shelter in the chalk, roofed it over and lit a fire. The latter was the most difficult feat, and several entrenching tool handles had to be cut into thin spales and placed over the flames before the fire burned properly.

"Devil blow me blind if that's not very clever," said Bowdy Benners when the flames were dancing merrily against the wall of the dugout. "It almost puts me in mind of Christmas away in Blighty. Now we'll see what we've in hand for a meal for our Christmas dinner. I'll look in my pack."

He opened his pack and took out the treasures, which he piled against the wall of the dug-out. The pack contained three large loaves, cut into thick chunks, eight tins of sardines, a tin of condensed café-au-lait, two bottles of champagne and several slabs of Menier's chocolate. The bulging haversack was another treasure wallet; it contained apples and pastry in abundance, also a tin of lard, which would presently be used for frying bully beef.

During all the morning the artillery fire had not wholly slackened, but now a quiet moment held the line. Dinner was prepared. First the men made tea, using the water from their water-bottles and boiling it in mess-tins over the fire. Then they cooked their bully beef on the mess-tin lids and cut the bread into nice thin slices. It was Fitzgerald who proposed that all slices should be thin, and none gainsaid his whim. The first course consisted of sardines and bread; the second course of bread and fried bully. Tea was served with every course. Followed pastry for dessert, and fruit was served out in dainty portions. They brought the meal to an end by drinking French wine and English rum, and lighting up their cigarettes.

During the meal the platoon commander was deep in talk with Sergeant Snogger and when the Christmas dinner was over he came forward and spoke to the party.

"My boys," he said, "this, I suppose, is the most interesting Christmas you've ever spent."

Bubb: "Too interestin' for me, sir."

Platoon Commander: "Yes, I suppose it is. But I hope that neither you nor any of us will spend Christmas under such conditions again. Such things must be at times, I suppose, and see-

ing that it came to our turn, I must admit that we did as well as any platoon in the British Army. You stuck to your posts like bricks and reaped honours from a fight where the odds were very much against us. Rifleman Benners at a critical moment showed great resource in putting one of the enemy out of action. For this we must thank him."

Platoon: "Hear, hear. Good old Bowdy!" etc.

Platoon Commander: "I haven't much further to say except that I'm going to recommend Rifleman Benners for the D.C.M. I am not going to make any inquiries as to where he spent last night and the early hours of this morning. As all you men assert that he was in the trenches I'll take your word for it! I'm not going to inquire where the champagne, bread and other things came from, but if I may, I'll say that I've never in all my life enjoyed a meal half as well as I enjoyed my Christmas dinner in the Loos Salient."

That night the Irish were relieved.

A month later the D.C.M. was given to Bowdy Benners.

CHAPTER VIII

BACK TO HIS OWN

We're out't for duration now and do not care a cuss,
There's beer to spare at dinner time and afters now for us,
But if our buttys still were out in Flanders raising Cain,
We'd weather through with those we knew on bully beef again—
The Old Sweats!
The grub it was skimp with the Ole Sweats,
But if rations was small,
'Twas the same for us all,
Same for the 'ole of the Ole Sweats.

(From "Soldier Songs.")

THE dark night clung close to the wet levels of No Man's Land, and a breeze whimpered across the grasses, crooning wearily. The whole world seemed tired; the star-shells rose lazily over the German trenches, burned drowsily for a space, and fell sluggishly to earth. The light failing, the circle of horizon grew less, and objects quite close at hand became hidden from view. The hour was about ten, and Bowdy Benners felt tired and sleepy. He was sick of it all—the night raids, the attacks, and bombing encounters. His mind turned to home —quiet London—the peaceful houses, the easy

nights of untroubled sleep, afternoon teas, and the hundred-and-one comforts of civil life which were so far removed from him at the moment.

"It must be ten now," he muttered. "I suppose I'll get relieved presently."

The door of a near dug-out opened, and the ray of a candle shone out into the trench. One of his mates came out, his rifle in his hand, his waterproof ground-sheet over his shoulders.

"Is that you, Bubb?" he asked. "Taking a turn as sentry?"

"All right," Bubb answered. "Thought I wasn't coming out, eh? Are you fed up?" he asked.

"A bit sick of it," said Bowdy. "I'm tired of looking across the parapet day and night. How do you like it?"

"Rotten," said Spudhole. "The weather is so damned rotten! Everything's rotten."

He got upon the firestep, placed his rifle against the wall, and tied his waterproof across his shoulders.

"Old Flanagan is back," said Bubb, as Bowdy made his way towards the dug-out. " 'E 'as come wiv a fresh draft o' men."

"Who? Flanagan? Where is he?" Bowdy asked in one mouthful.

"He's in the dug-out," said Bubb.

Bowdy rushed in, almost trampling on the face of a man who was asleep near the door. Yes, Flanagan was there—handsome Flanagan, the gallant youngster with a college education.

He was an Irish boy and belonged to the section at St. Alban's in the old days. He was a fine-looking youth of medium height, with heavy dark hair, an intelligent forehead, impassioned nostrils and an air of aloofness which became him well. He had a frank and open expression, pensive grey eyes and high cheekbones. He came from the West of Ireland and had studied for the priesthood. But feeling that this was not his vocation he entered the Civil Service. His people belonged to an old Irish family full of pride and poverty. Flanagan, though well educated, was a bit of a rake and loved the bottle. When excited he spoke with a delicious brogue and paid little heed to his grammar, but he was an omnivorous reader and carried a number of books about with him in his haversack. Montaigne was a great favourite of his. He had gone home badly wounded seven months earlier and his mates never expected to see him out in France again.

He was now sitting in a corner of the dug-out,

his handsome face radiant with joy and eagerness, betraying a certain boyish innocence which in no way detracted from the dignity of his features.

"You've come back again, Flan?" Bowdy said, and gripped him by the hand.

"Yes, I'm back again," he answered.

"Glad to be with us?" Bowdy queried. "Glad to leave London and come out here?"

"Of course I am," he answered, handing Benners a cigarette.

The confession staggered Benners, but in a way he was not surprised. Flanagan was a youngster who took eagerly to the life of war, its romance and roving. He wanted to attempt everything; nothing was too big for him. With him it was no sooner see than try, and his store of enthusiasm was so unbounded that he generally succeeded in most projects. But to come back again when his wound must surely have been a permanent Blighty one!

"Why have you come back?" Bowdy asked. "Tell me all about it while I rouse the brazier and make a mess-tin of tea."

"A mess-tin of tea!" he exclaimed, as Bowdy bent over the brazier. "God, it's good to hear that, old man! The cups are so small at home.

Little things. But a mess-tin full! Heavens, things are done on such a big scale in the trenches! One gets long hours of fighting, of working, of watching. Everything is taken in big mouthfuls here; there's nothing petty in the job. But at home—the soft beds—but I could not sleep; the little tea-cups—but I had no appetite; the politeness, the swank, the fine dresses—but the whole thing made me ill. We've been looking on the gods here, and I went back to live with ordinary mortals—I couldn't stick it!"

"You're a big fool, Flan," said Benners, as he fanned the brazier with a week-old copy of an English paper. "I would like to get home. I'd be in no hurry . . . ."

"You think so," said Flanagan, "but you'd soon change your mind. I spent two months in hospital, then I was sent to a convalescent camp. But my shoulder wouldn't mend; you know I got it in the shoulder. I couldn't raise my arm; something was dislocated. But that didn't matter . . . . The convalescent camp was a damned nice place, near Brighton and beside the sea. There was an old sergeant-major, a rheumaticky old fellow who talked through his nose. But a good fellow all the same. We called him Nick Nock. He had no end of trouble with us, the Old Sweats,

and he was always on the look-out for me. Got my name into his head somehow, and maybe I was not easy-going enough for a rheumaticky old man. He must have been about sixty-five.

"We slept in huts. Nick Nock would come to the door of our hut in the early morning. 'Are yer all in bed yet?' he would shout. (Flanagan gave an imitation of a man speaking through his nose). 'Are yer never goin' to get up? Where's Flanagan?'

" 'Close the door, Nick Nock,' someone would say. 'It's too blurry cold. Close the door, will yer?"

" 'I'll not close the door,' the old man would answer. 'I'll get every man of you out o' bed 'fore I leave 'ere. They're up in all the huts bar this'n.'

" 'Oh! Close the door,' one would say, rising up in bed and lighting a cigarette.

" 'I'll not close the door,' the sergeant would answer. 'Wot I want to know is this: where's Flanagan?'

" 'Dead,' one would say. 'Gassed in the knees.'

" ' 'E's 'angin' on the wires,' from another.

" ' 'Is bed wasn't slept on last night,' from Nick Nock. 'When I see 'im, 'e'll be for it. And you'll all be for it if ye're not out o' kip when I

come back 'ere in ten minutes from now. Mind that.'

" 'Close the door, Nick Nock,' the hut would shout, as the sergeant turned to go out.

" 'I'll not shut the door.'

" 'Leavin' it like that and it so cold,' all would expostulate. 'Please shut the door.'

" 'I'll not shut the door,' from Nick Nock. 'One would fink that the whole damn caboosh is out on a Sunday School treat.'

"Then the old man would go out, closing the door behind him. Time for me to appear then. I would come out from under the table where I had hidden. I had been out all night and just got into the hut before Nick Nock."

"Was Nick Nock ever out here?" asked Bowdy.

"Sixty-five and rheumaticky, what could he do?" said Flanagan. "But he felt it. Once he said to us, 'You know, boys, I feel out o' place 'ere. You fellows 'ave been out an' fightin', and 'ere when you come 'ome, I'm bossin' ye. It's not fair.'

"Ah! but another time he gave us a lecture, and this was how he began:—

" 'Boys, there 'as been great changes in the harmy of late years. When I joined, it twasn't as good as it is now, but after I came things im-

proved, and at the present day a man cannot do better than roll up an' become a soldier.' "

"Damn Nick Nock," said Bowdy Benners. "Tell me something about yourself. What did you do after you left the convalescent camp?"

"Well, I went off on leave from the convalescent camp, lost my pass, and forgot when I had to return. I came back seven days late. Things took a turn; Nick Nock reported me and I was taken before a medical board. The board had to determine whether I was in a fit state to survive seven days in jankers or not. Three or four old and wise men pummelled me, sounded me, and did a lot of other things. Finally they discharged me from the army. God! I could jump over the moon with joy. I bought a suit of civvies, brown tweeds, patent leather boots, and a nice white collar, a dainty little tie, a velours hat. I was quite a swell. Some of my friends live in London and I stopped with them. They were going to help me, get me a bomb-proof job with good pay and lazy hours. I had been a bit of a rake before the war, but they did not mind that. A boy must have his fling. I had proved myself a man when the country called. You know the things they would say, stock phrases that are worthy of an auctioneer. I liked it for a little, Bowdy; but

then, the small teacups, the small talk, the little tit-bits of scandal . . . ."

Flanagan got to his feet, stuck his hands in his pockets, and looked at Bowdy.

"I used to lie awake at night—the beds were so damned soft and uncomfortable—and think of the nights spent out in the trenches, sitting in a snug dug-out with the rain pattering on the roof, or through it," Flanagan went on, fixing his gaze at the candle. "Again my thoughts would run on the long night marches up the road, with the moonlight on the cobbles, and the big poplars standing upright like pompous sergeant-majors, away up to the star-shells, the big guns and the trenches. I thought of these things night after night, and I began to feel afraid. I knew that it was coming, I knew that I would leave England and come out to France again. I felt stifled at home; everything was so small and little. God, the tea is beginning to bubble already!

"Do you remember, old man, that night when we lay in the orchard, waiting to go up to the trenches to attack?" he suddenly asked, thrusting his face almost into Bowdy's. "Do you mind the buses, crowded with soldiers carrying rifles at all angles, going by on the road, the star-shells flaring up in the sky, and the bayonets glittering?

The buses—going, going like hell, and the stars above shining through the apple trees—the trees were in blossom then, if you mind . . . . Don't you remember it?" he asked.

"I shall never forget it," Bowdy answered.

"And the raids?" he questioned, in a slow voice. "Crawling out through the long grasses with the poppies flicking you in the face, your nerves tense, not knowing what the next moment would bring. I thought of these things day after day, and in the end I succumbed to the old lure.

"'Twas a difficult job getting back again. There was I, dismissed from the army, and no more good as a fighter; my shoulder stiff and sore; my discharge papers showing that I was medically unfit, and in fact a thorough wash-out. But something had to be done. 'Twas then that I met old Nick Nock again. He was discharged, too—time-expired. I met him, I grieve to state, in a pub. I stood him a drink and told him my predicament. He thought for a moment, then he said: 'Why not come back from the back o' beyond, a sailor, go up to the recruiting station an' call yerself Bill Jackson an' get taken on again. Don't mention a word about yer shoulder, an' maybe the M.O. won't notice it. Gawd! I'd

go wiv yer meself, Flanagan, if it wasn't fer those damned rheumatics.'

"I tried the dodge, got taken on as Bill Jackson, who was at one time A.B. before the mast, and now Flanagan is dead to the British Army henceforward, evermore."

"The tea is about ready, Bill Jackson," Bowdy said, as his mate sat down on the floor between the legs of a man who was sound asleep and breathing heavily. "If you care to wait a little, I'll fry a rasher of bacon. Rations are pretty plump to-night."

"And is there any rum going?" Flanagan asked, springing to his feet again. He was too excited to remain still. "How strange that I had forgotten to ask about the rum rations until now," he muttered. "I suppose there'll be a tot after a little?"

"It's within the bounds of possibility," Bowdy remarked, as he put two rashers of bacon in the mess-tin lid and placed the lid on the brazier. "But we'll see to that later. Necessities before luxuries out here, Bill Jackson," he added.

The bacon was ready and they sat down, Flanagan and Bowdy, and commenced to eat. Meals have no season in the trenches, but they are always welcome.

"God, it's good to be back here!" said Flanagan. "I've never been so happy in all my life! I hope the war won't end until this happiness is worn out."

He was sincere in his expressions, and his mood almost became Bowdy's before the meal was at an end. They lay back when they had eaten and lit cigarettes. The smoke wreathed upwards to the roof, where the mice was scurrying amidst the rafters under the sandbags. The soldiers were still asleep on the floor, their bodies curled up in queer attitudes.

"They sleep sound," said Flanagan. "Who is that snoring? Is it old Snogger?"

"Snogger it is," said Bowdy.

"I thought so," said Flanagan. "I knew his snore. I couldn't sleep like that at home—I'm very glad to be out here again. It's a great life, and I like it more than ever before. I suppose I'll get tired of it again, after a while. The novelty will wear out in due time, I've no doubt. By the way, have you Fitzgerald with you yet?" he asked.

"He's here," Bowdy made answer. "He's in love with a French girl named Fifi. He's very fond of her."

"He's in love, is he?" said Flanagan. "I mind

him at St. Albans; he was in love so often. But none would take him seriously," he said. "Why, I don't know."

Bubb, the sentry, came to the door.

" 'Oo's next on?" he yelled. "Sleepin' there like 'ogs, you is. Get up out 't!"

"Leave him alone," said Flanagan, alluding to the soldier whom Bubb was endeavouring to rouse up. "I'll do his turn."

"Well, blimey, that's a strange caper," said Bubb, as Flanagan disappeared through the door. "One would fink 'e was in love wiv this 'ere caboosh. I know o' one squadder that ain't, that's this 'ere kid. Well, any'ow, I'm goin' to 'ave a kip."

Bubb and Bowdy lay down together and dropped off to sleep, listening to the patter of the rain on the roof, while outside on the firestep Flanagan was standing on guard, humming an old Irish song, his heart filled with the joy of a wanderer who has returned to his kind.

CHAPTER IX

TRENCH FEVER

Now out in the trenches you'll find to your cost
That the slower you shuffle the sooner you're lost;
There are actions done better the quicker they're done,
Like getting your rations or bombing a Hun,
Or dodging a pip-squeak or catching a flea,—
The quicker you do them the better they be.

(From "Trench Wisdom.")

THE Irish were back in the trenches again. It was night; the ground was covered with snow, and Spudhole who did not feel well was glad of an hour's rest in a dug-out.

The dug-out belonged at one time to the Germans. It was a spacious apartment stretching out into unfathomable corners. The dry floor was level as a board and all round the walls snug little crannies were scraped out in the clay. Here were stored all manner of odds and ends, bully beef tins, loaves, biscuits, coils of barbed wire, hand grenades, bandoliers, water jars, tins of jam, candles and firewood.

A brazier burned on the floor, the smoke curled upwards and was sucked out through a hole in

the roof as through a chimney. A dozen men sat around the fire, their sheepskin jackets steaming and the brass buckles of their equipment shining like gold. The blaze, burning high, lit up the steady eyes and ruddied the strong features of the men. Spudhole, half asleep, leant forward over his knees, his arms folded, his shoulders humped up and his helmet well down over his face. Bowdy Benners was writing a letter, his notepaper spread out on Bubb's back, his knees crossed. An old, wrinkled man of forty-eight, named Bill Hurd, was telling how his own son had joined the Army at the outbreak of war. Hurd was an Irishman and had worked as a carpenter on a big estate in Devon, and his son John had a job in his father's workshop.

" 'Twas two days after war was declared," Bill was saying, "and I was down in the kitchen waitin' till it was time to go out till my job. I was always an early riser. Upstairs I heard John singin' like a thrush. 'What's wrong with him?' I says till myself, for, though he was a good, willin' cub, he was not an early riser. When he came down I says till him, 'What's up wid ye this mornin'?' I says. 'I'm goin' till jine up,' he says. It most took my breath away. 'But ye're not only eighteen come the end of next week,' I

says till him. 'But I can be nineteen at a pinch,' he answers, and what was to be said to that? I ups and shakes him by the hand. 'Ye're a man, that's what ye are,' I says till him. 'And where are ye goin' to jine up?' I asks him. 'In the town,' he says, meanin' the town nearest where there was a recruitin' station. 'Then I'll go 'long wid ye an' see that ye're right fitted up,' I says to him. 'I must go out an' do an hour's work,' he then says. 'When I've finished that I'll be ready to go.' 'Right, me boy,' I says, for I knew that he wanted to go out and tell the other men what he was going to do.

"So we goes to the recruitin' station and the corp'ral there runs a tape over John. 'Ye'll do,' he says. 'Ye'll make a fine sodger.' So we went out, me an' him, and I goes wid him to the nearest tobacco shop. 'Now think of what ye're goin' to do,' I says till him. 'It's not an easy job, the job of a sodger. Now think,' I said, 'think, me boy.' He looked at me straight in the face and said, as if he was offended: 'Ye don't think I've done wrong, do ye?' Begorra, there and then, I just—and there were a lot iv people lookin' at us—I just caught him be the hand and squeezed it. 'Ye're a man,' I says, 'an' I'll get ye a pipe an' tobacco.'

"And so I did, and would ye misdoubt me when I say that he was as handy puttin' a match to a pipe as I was meself. But it's not easy to understand young cubs."

"When did you join up?" asked Snogger, who came into the dug-out at that moment.

"Long after that," said Billy. "There was a young fellow on the estate, the son of me mistress. A fine, hearty-lookin' fellow, a rale good lump iv a cub with laughey eyes and so handsome. He was a great friend iv mine. Well, he was an officer in the regulars, and he got hit in the eyes out here be a splinter iv a shell and he was knocked stone blind. He comes home, goes into hospital, and was there for long enough, but nothin' could be done. All hope was lost; he would be blind for life. And his mother, she took it as calm as anything. 'Billy,' she used to say to me, 'somebody must suffer and it's all for the country when all's said and done.' She was a brave woman; didn't wear her heart on her sleeve. I never saw her eyes wet, not until one day. 'Twas when her boy sent a wee fretwork letter-rack home from hospital as a present to his mother. He had made it himself, blind as he was, and it was very purty. I was doin' a bit of woodwork in the hall when it came in a

parcel. The mother opened the parcel and saw what was inside . . . . And she began to cry as if she would never stop. After that, when anybody spoke of her boy, she would burst out weepin'.

"Well, I liked the boy," said Billy. "So I thought 'twas up to me to have revinge for him on the Germans. So I had a clean shave and went to the recruitin' office and signed on as a man of thirty-nine."

"Ye should have had more sense," said Bubb, getting to his feet, and disappearing into a corner. No doubt the boy, who was not feeling well, wanted to snatch an hour's sleep.

Snogger looked at the men.

"Six of you for rashun fatigue," he said. "Two to relieve the men on guard. Whose turn is it?"

"I'm one," said Bowdy.

"Me as well," said Billy Hurd.

"Pull yourselves together, then, and git out," said Snogger. "It's two minutes past time."

Bowdy and Billy got to their feet, buckled their equipment and went out to their posts. An hour later they came back. Bowdy shook the snow from his sheepskin jacket and sat down on the ground beside the brazier.

"It's a very cold night outside," he said. "Freeze the horns off a brass monkey, it would. Where's Spudhole?" he asked.

"Wot's wrong now? Wot d'yer want?" asked a feeble voice, as Spudhole peeped out from a dark corner by the wall. He rose to his feet and buttoned his sheepskin jacket which had become loose.

"How are you feeling now, Spudhole?" asked Benners.

"Oh, I'm all right; in the pink," said Spud. "'Ave yer a drop of water to spare?"

Bowdy handed a water-bottle to Spud; the youngster raised it to his lips and drank greedily.

"Cold water's not a drink for a night like this," said Bowdy. "What you want is something hot. If I make a mess-tin of tea, will you have some?"

"Thank you," said Bubb, handing the bottle back.

"I'm goin' to 'ave another kip now," he added. "Rouse me up when it's my turn for sentry-go."

He lay back, closed his eyes and felt very cold. At intervals he shivered, shaking from head to foot. Innumerable currents of icy air seemed to have taken up their abode in the dug-out, living, crafty currents as cruel as enemies, which stole slyly down his back penetrating between flesh and

underclothing. They blew on the back of his neck; when he turned round he encountered them on his face, they stole out from all corners incessantly chilling him with their treacherous, frozen breath. He fell asleep, woke up, and it seemed to him that a swarm of ants had got into his throat and that other ants, thousands of them, were crawling over his arms and legs.

He got up, shook himself. His legs felt very weak, his head was spinning. He tottered over to the fire. Bowdy, who was pouring a handful of tea into the boiling water, looked up.

"Good heavens, Spudhole, you are looking bad," he said. "Feeling cold?"

"Cold's not the word," Bubb replied. "I wouldn't be worse off 'andcuffed to a ghost. Wot's the time?" he asked.

"Ten to eleven," said Bowdy, looking at his wrist watch.

"Just 'bout my time for sentry-go," said Bubb in a weak voice. "I s'pose I'm gettin' trench fever or somefin'," he added.

Bowdy placed a spoonful of condensed milk in the tea, stirred it and added sugar.

"This will warm you up," he said, filling the mess-tin lid with tea and handing it to Bubb.

"Then you can lie down agin near the fire and I'll do your turn as sentry."

Spudhole had the lid half raised to his lips. His hand shook, the tea splashed out in little drops which fell on the brazier.

"Bowdy!" he said, in a slow voice.

"What is it?"

"I've never failed at my work yet," said Spudhole. "I'm not 'ere in the trenches to shift my jobs on to other blokes."

"But you're feeling queer," said Bowdy. "If I felt like that I would go down and see the M.O. and get shoved into hospital."

"Would you!" said Spudhole, placing the mess-tin lid on the floor. "I know better. Wot did I 'ear yer say once? Ye'd never leave your trenches when the regiment was there unless you were carried out on a stretcher."

"That was only swank," said Bowdy. "You drink your tea, Spudhole, and lie down. I'll put a couple of sandbags round you and if you're not better in the morning, just run down and see the M.O."

"Well, I'm damned if I goes away from the line," said Bubb. "Not until the battalion is wiv me. That's settled."

He bent down, raised the mess-tin and drank the tea. Snogger came to the door.

"Next on sentry-go?" he called.

"I'm there," said Bowdy.

"It's my turn," said Bubb.

"No chewin' the fat, or some of ye'll be damned unlucky," said Snogger. "'Ooever's on's on, that's all; so get some elbow grease on and 'urry out. Them that's on's a minute and 'arf over their time already."

Spudhole went out, crawled up on the firestep and relieved the sentry. Leaning both arms on the parapet, he looked over No Man's Land towards the German trenches. The levels in front, a shell-scarred spread of ground set off in its ghastly array of barbed wire entanglements, was covered with snow. Here Nature had only one mood, a mood of sulky menace which overawed and subdued the tempers of the onlookers. The sky was coldly clear and a million stars showed in its broad expanse. But Bubb's circle of horizon was very small, objects quite near at hand stood out weirdly silhouetted with a blurred, though definite outline. The trenches were wrapped in ghostly solitude, the brazier aflare in the dug-out which Bubb had just left added no relieving tint to the blind helplessness of the night.

The sick boy stood back from the parapet and clapped his hands together in an endeavour to warm himself.

"Gawd, it's cold 'ere," he muttered. "I wish I was in the dug-out 'avin' a kip. 'Twould be so much better than standin' out 'ere. But I wouldn't 'ave it, naw, not at any price. I wouldn't shove my job on to any bloke. Bowdy would do sentry-go for me, good old Bowdy, and so would old Flan if 'e warn't down at the dump, but why should they? I wouldn't mind lettin' them do it if it was out o' the trenches."

"How are you getting on, Spud?" asked a voice from the trench. "Feeling the cold?"

The boy looked down at Captain Thorley. The captain and he were great friends.

"Cold," said Spud, through chattering teeth. "It's not warm 'ere, is it, sir? I feel as cold as if I was 'andcuffed to a ghost."

"I hear that you're not feeling well," said the captain.

"I'm orlright, sir. Was a bit dicky a minute back, but the cold air 'asn't 'arf bucked me up."

"Well, you know that Bowdy will do your job for you if you're feeling queer," said Thorley.

"I know that, sir, but I'm orlright," said Bubb. "Besides, I wouldn't rob a man of 'is sleep."

Bubb finished his hour, but when his next turn as sentry came round he was unable to perform his duty. He looked helplessly at his mate.

"Bowdy," he said, in a low, apologetic voice. "I've no guts for anuvver hour's sentry-go. I'm washed out. I will go down to the M.O. not to-morrow mornin' but now. If I stay 'ere any longer, I'll 'ave to be carried out o't. But didn't I stick it to the last, Bowdy?"

"Of course, you did. I'm damned if I'd stick it so long."

"Clear out of it at once, Spudhole," said Billy Hurd. "Ye're like a ghost, somethin' like what a cat would take in on a wet day."

"Ye think I'm sick enough to leave 'ere then?" asked Bubb. "I don't want any o' the fellers to say, arter I go, that I was swingin' the lead."

"If ye stop 'ere any longer, they'll say that ye're stayin' here, hopin' that ye'll be so bad when ye leave that ye'll never be sent back again."

"Then I'm off out't," said Bubb, decision in his voice. "I'll try and be back as soon as I can."

He went outside and made his way to the dressing station. Dawn found him snug in a motor ambulance on his way to hospital.

CHAPTER X

LOST TO THE WIDE

There's a rum jar in the dug-out and a parcel in the post—
Fol ol the diddle ol the dee!
And I couldn't be much colder were I handcuffed to a ghost—
Fol ol the diddle ol the dee!
There's a quartermaster-sergeant and the dug-out's his abode—
Fol ol the diddle ol the dee!
And a shell has hit the mail-bag and it's scattered on the road—
Fol ol the diddle ol the dee!

(From "The Strafed Mail-bag.")

IT was past eight o'clock of a January evening and the soldiers in "Home Sweet Home" dug-out sat down late to tea. The dug-out was situated at the bottom of a chalk-pit near Vimy Ridge and was occupied by officers' servants, company runners, signallers and others who generally kept in close touch with battalion headquarters. The chalk pit was more or less immune from shell fire, for, being narrow and deep, it was difficult for a shell to reach the bottom, round which a ring of spacious dug-outs circled. Over the top and five hundred yards

eastwards ran the communication trench which wound its way discreetly up to the British front line.

Lights gleamed in the dug-outs and sounds of laughter and singing could be heard from "Home Sweet Home." It was a capacious shelter, originally fashioned by the French, and capable of holding thirty men. At the present moment it contained some fifteen British soldiers engaged in the pleasant task of eating a substantial meal. Rations as well as the post had just come up from the railhead, rum was issued, and the parcels from home had been bulky. The meal was proceeding merrily. Some of the men were laughing and chatting, sitting on the ground, their knees crossed and mess-tins of steaming tea in their hands. Two or three were stripped and their wet clothes were hung over the fire in the brazier. All were so cool and happy that it was difficult to believe that the German shells were just dropping outside the door. . . . Suddenly the waterproof sheet that covered the door was raised and a newcomer entered. He stood for a moment looking round, then he approached an up-ended ammunition box which stood in the centre of the dug-out and sat down on it.

"Oh, it's old Fitzgerald," exclaimed Flana-

gan, now of the signalling section, who was endeavouring, with the aid of a bayonet, to draw the cork from a rum jar. "How are things going on up at Vimy?" he asked.

"Not so bad," Fitzgerald answered. "There's plenty of shells flying across, and now and again we get a Minnie, saucy devil. We do get more than is good for our health. Vimy is not the most pleasant place on our front. I've helped to take a prisoner down."

"A prisoner?" Flanagan exclaimed, handing Fitzgerald a drop of rum in a mess-tin. "A German?"

"Yes, a youngster," Fitzgerald answered, lifting the rum reverently to his lips and rolling it round in his mouth. "He was caught on a listening patrol. Wounded and unconscious. I've got to wait here until he recovers, hear what he has to say, and report back to Captain Thorley with any information. You know we fear a mine going up at the sap, for all day and night we can hear tapping under the ground."

Fitzgerald held out his mess-tin again and received another tot of rum. Then he lit a cigarette.

"There's nothing like a drop of rum," he re-

marked. "It's 'health to the navel and marrow to the bones,' as the Scripture has it."

The hut laughed.

"What about a song, Fitz?" Flanagan asked. "An old Irish one; a come-all-you."

"Nell Flaherty's Drake?" said Fitz in a tone of enquiry. The rum had put him in gay good humour.

"Spit it out," Flanagan yelled.

Fitzgerald commenced the song.

"My name it is Nell, the truth for to tell,
I live near Coothill, which I'll never deny,
I had a fine drake, the truth for to spake,
Which my grandmother left me before she did die.

"He was wholesome and sound and could weigh forty pound,
The wide world round I would roam for his sake,
But bad luck to the robber be he drunk or sober,
Who murdered Nell Flaherty's beautiful drake.

"May his temples wear horns and all his toes corns,
May he always be fed on lobcourse and fish-oil,
May he ne'er go to bed till the moment he's dead,
May his cow never milk, may his kettle never boil."

"That's the supreme curse, I think," Fitzgerald remarked, smiling lazily. "'May his kettle never boil'! Think of that—in Ireland, where the teapot's as greedy as the grave."

"Is that the end of the song?" a soldier asked from the corner.

"Only the first three verses," Fitzgerald replied. "There are forty verses in the song, but I forget the rest. My memory!" he exclaimed, rising to his feet. "Good God! I forget everything, my memory is my curse . . . . Who has got a cigarette to spare?"

At that moment an orderly came to the door and shouted out: "D Company runner."

"I'm D Company runner," Fitzgerald remarked.

"Report to headquarters immediately," said the orderly. "Also Rifleman Flanagan to report. Two men must take the message."

"I'm there," said Fitzgerald, turning to Flanagan and asking: "Can I have another cigarette before we go?"

He got another cigarette, placed it in his cap and accompanied by Flanagan went out into the open and across to headquarters dug-out. The adjutant was inside sitting at a table, a cup of tea and a box of cigarettes in front of him. He knew Fitzgerald very well, having met him in civil life.

"I want you to go to the Ridge as quickly as you know how," said the adjutant, fixing his eyes on the runner. "The young German has regained consciousness and he tells us that the

enemy are going to blow up three mines under our front to-morrow morning at six. The men must withdraw to the second trench until further orders. I've tried to 'phone up, but can get no answer to my calls. The wire must be broken. Hand the message over to Captain Thorley or any other officer whom you may encounter. You do the same, Flanagan, and both report back here when you've done this . . . ."

He handed a sealed envelope to Fitzgerald and the runner went out into the night, the final words of the adjutant ringing in his ears.

"Very important, remember; very important."

Fitzgerald clambered up the side of the pit with difficulty, the chalk was frittering away and the man had very insecure purchase of his feet. Flanagan followed keeping a hundred yards to rear. At headquarters another runner was receiving a similar message. One would certainly deliver it safely.

When Fitzgerald crossed the rim of the chalk pit he could see the line of battle, the starshells flaring in the heavens and the lurid flames of bursting explosives lighting up the darkness. In front a spinney where the trees were riven and shattered took on strange shapes, the lifeless ruined branches stretched outwards, as it were,

in reproach and despair; the fallen trees lay on the ground like rotting corpses.

War's earthquake had rent the whole country. Dark, sepulchral chasms yawned in the ground and the whole earth seemed to have been gutted to its core. A little red-brick cottage was smashed to smithereens; the machinery of a mill stood suspended over nothing, and shapeless walls, jagged and lacerated, quivered in air, ready to fall at the first gust of wind. Where the pits were dug in the earth, shapeless heaps of white chalk were flung up, and beside one of these heaps lay a battery of field guns jumbled in inextricable confusion. The rusty steel muzzles of the guns looked grotesque and distorted; the ruined dug-out in which the gunners once lived, breathed tragedy from every broken beam and torn sand-bag. Dead men lay all over the place, shamelessly exposed in the most unlikely situations. On the field of war Death is denied its privileged privacy.

Fitzgerald entered the communication trench and hurried along, panting as he ran. Two shells swooped over his head, bursting with a vicious clatter on the field behind him. Others followed, pounding at the parapet like drunken gods. He could hear the splinters hitting the parados with a

dull thud to the accompaniment of a thousand rifle bullets which tore at the suffering sandbags.

Fitzgerald passed through one trench crossing, then another. "I'll do it in five minutes now," he said, changing his rifle from one shoulder to the other. "I hope the mine doesn't go up before I get there. Five minutes," he muttered, "I'll be there in five minutes."

But Fitzgerald miscalculated. At the end of five minutes he found himself in a deserted trench, all alone, and then decided that it was time to turn back. Probably he had taken the wrong trench at the last crossing. He went back for a short distance and came to a junction. Several trenches crossed at this point, but the locality seemed new to him. He had not been there before.

"Well, I'm damned," he said, and then added, "I'm lost as well." He realised the danger of his plight and felt uncomfortable. Stories were often told over braziers in the dim trench traverse, and many of these stories spoke of men who went astray in the trenches and never returned. Sometimes the lost soldiers found themselves in the enemy's lines, and on other occasions they wandered up to their home parapets to fall a victim to the rifle of a nervous sentry. Fitzger-

ald had heard many of these stories and he recollected them now.

Much fighting had recently taken place on Vimy Ridge and the English and German trenches criss-crossed in several localities; in some places both parties occupied the same trenches.

Fitzgerald, alone and astray, had no definite idea of his position; he only knew that he was lost at the cross-trenches and did not know which trench led to safety. Perhaps he had passed beyond the British front. He peered over the top. The night was quiet, scarcely a rifle spoke, though many star shells were ablaze in the heavens and dropping petals of flame to the dark earth . . . . Right in front of Fitzgerald was a ghastly heap, jumbled and confused, a heap of dead men. And round this heap lay other dead things, rejected from the more composite and bulky distortion of war. The solitary figures lay—some face downwards, arms spread out, others curled up like sleeping dogs.

"Well, where am I?" asked Fitzgerald. "Whose starshell is that, ours or theirs? . . . . Where's our line?"

He looked at a dead thing near him and shud-

dered. Then, shouldering his rifle, he made his way up the trench on his right.

"This is all right!" he muttered, passing a projecting beam of a fallen dug-out. "I passed this a minute ago . . . . but not this."

He detached himself awkwardly from the heap of limp bodies into which he had fallen and hurriedly retraced his steps to the junction where the dark trenches opened up to unknown mysteries.

Fitzgerald leant wearily against the wall and puzzled over many things.

"If I go over the top, what happens?" he asked himself. "Run into a German patrol, maybe, or into one of our own covering parties and they'll shoot me on sight. If I go along a trench, I'll probably get into the German lines. That won't do, either. I'm like a rat in a trap . . . . But I must get out of it. Yes, I must get out of it . . . . But how?"

The question caused a queer sensation to run down the innermost parts of his body and the sensation was one of fear. He mumbled many things to himself in a thick, quick undertone. Then, without realising the risks he ran, Fitzgerald crawled over the parapet and went out into the open, taking his rifle with him.

It was a man lying face downwards on the ground that attracted his attention first. He could have sworn that the man moved and brought a rifle to bear upon him. Fitzgerald stood upright and fired at the man twice, only to find that he was riddling a corpse with bullets. He flung himself flat to avoid the machine gun that opened fire and waited till it ceased its play. A galaxy of starshells lit up the heavens and a big shell of another pattern whirled across the open and burst with a dizzy clatter. In the distance could be heard the transports of war clattering along the roads, the clank of rails unleaded at some far-off railway siding, and gleaming luridly against the darkness could be seen the flames of a building on fire some dozen miles away. Near Fitzgerald lay a dead man, further off another, looking like an empty sack flung on the ground.

The maxim fire stammered into silence and the youth got to his feet, looked round and listened with strained ears. Somewhere near he could hear the sound of hammers and the creaking of shovels and he concluded that a working party was busy at its toil. It was impossible to determine to what side the party belonged. It might be German. The lines of trenches were very con-

fused and salients projected out like ducks' bills in places, and at other points they receded some five hundred yards from the opposite front. No man was ever more solitary than poor, mud-stained Rifleman Fitzgerald at that moment.

And the night was full of mysterious whispers, sounds, creakings and rustlings. Spirits seemed to lurk on the vacant face of the earth and uncanny spirits hovered over the world. In the near distance all objects took on strange, undefined shapes, well in keeping with the grotesque fantasy of war . . . . Suddenly Fitzgerald fancied that he heard somewhere near him the sharp snap of a rifle bolt. He turned round and scurried back to the trench which he had just left. It seemed quite a distance to traverse and he slipped over the parapet and flopped down into the mud. But not a soul was to be seen, the trench was deserted. Neither was it the trench which he had left. Here the slush reached his hips. "Well, I'm damned!" he said, and leant against the parapet. "What am I going to do? I'm going to stick here, stick well in."

Shadow and silence brooded over the place, he had descended into the stagnation of the tomb. The clammy slush ran down his top boots and settled round his heels. He advanced one step,

then another, touching both walls of the alley with his outstretched hands. He looked up and saw that the walls were very steep. It was impossible to climb up; the clay was too soft, it came away in the hands, and his feet were so weighty. Besides now he was sticking. Every time he moved the mud gripped him with greater vehemence. It seemed as if his feet were slipping down the throat of a voracious monster which was endeavouring to swallow him. The floor of the trench was a treacherous quicksand, as greedy as the grave. For a moment, Fitzgerald fought madly against the embrace of this soft, elusive terror, he gripped at the walls, the mud came away in his hands, he pulled one foot out, the other sank deeper. To move was ghastly, to remain still was deadly.

"I must move," he muttered. "If I don't I'll die; if I make a struggle, my fate will rest on the knees of the gods and they may save me."

The mud was reaching his waist. To pull out one leg he had to reach forward until his face touched the mucky floor, raise his hind foot clear, bring it round with a circular motion and place it down in the slush again. The same operation had to be performed at each remove. Once, he placed his hands in the muck and tried to crawl.

But the effort was futile; his hands sunk in to the shoulder and the earth rose greedily, as if wanting to clutch him.

Fitzgerald came to a halt and looked hopelessly round. Nothing was to be seen but the darkness; the night was a cavern in which he had got lost. He gripped at the wall of the trench with furious fingers and part of the parapet came away in his hands, almost burying him.

"It's no good. I'm going to peg out here," he said, as he tried to shake himself clear. "If I only had a starshell over my head I'd look for a spot to die. I would select a better spot than this, anyway, if I had choice. But they've stopped sending up starshells now . . . . And I should have a parcel by the post to-night," he muttered. "And another drop of rum will be going round now I think . . . . But is that all I've to think about? . . . ."

He shouted at the top of his voice, but there was no reply. He yelled again and then became silent. "What's the good of it?" he asked himself in a whisper. "I don't know where I am. Maybe I'm near the German trenches. If they find me here what will they do? Tread me in, probably . . . . And the mine, what about it? I've still got the message in my pocket. I wish

this had happened after I had delivered the thing. But I'll go on a bit. I'll get to somewhere."

He moved forward. The first step was difficult, the next was easier, the subsoil had lost its birdlime tenacity and the slush was not as dense. A few steps further and Fitzgerald breathed. He was going up an incline, getting out of it his head was almost parallel with the rim of the trench. He burst into song:

"Four stick standers,
Four lilly wanders,
A hooker
And a crooker
And a swing about.
Three sheep sharahan,
Owned by Eamon Garahan,
A ribag
And a thonag
And a coat of bawnagh brockagh."

The song suddenly stopped. A heavy shell swept over his head and burst very near. Another followed and another and Fitzgerald noticed that he had reached a junction where a number of trenches criss-crossed.

"Another damned labyrinth," he muttered. "Out you get, on to the top, Rifleman Fitzgerald," he ordered, apostrophising himself. And out he did get. It was now he discovered that his rifle

had vanished. "Oh, I suppose it's in the mud," he muttered. "Lucky I'm not."

A trench showed some distance away. He made for it, slipped over the parapet and landed on something soft which moved.

"Gawd Orlmighty! Wot the —— are yer —— up ter," said a soldier, rising from the mud.

"They're shelling us," said Fitzgerald. "You'd better rouse up. What trench is this?"

"The support," said the man. "We're waitin' for a mine to go up or somefing."

The rest of the men were standing at their posts, alert and ready. The enemy had become nasty and were using an exceptionally heavy shell on the sector, but as yet it was bursting wide.

"A nine-point-two," somebody remarked to Fitzgerald, adding: "And Gawd! it doesn't 'arf send the dirt flyin' about. They'll attack, maybe."

"Any officers near here, Spudhole?" Fitzgerald asked, for he had recognised the voice of his comrade Bubb.

" 'Orficers," said Spudhole. "Yes, Cap'n Thorley was about 'ere a minute ago; 'e . . . . Gor blimey, there's the shell again!"

Fitzgerald listened and heard "her" coming,

crooning out the unknown. It was the big shell. Gathering volume it approached, an inevitable terror, a messenger of death. There was a hurried stampede to a near dug-out and Fitzgerald found himself in the crush and carried forward into the dark recess of a deep shelter. In the next few moments he was conscious of many things, of a sudden fall to the soft, muddy floor, of a choking sensation in the throat, a monstrously futile effort to drag himself clear of the man who fell on top of him, of nervous laughter and fierce imprecations. Then he sank into forgetfulness. The shell had blown the dug-out in on its occupants.

CHAPTER XI

A SCRAP

We're well in the doin's. No more to be said—
The orficer wounded; the sergeant is dead.
If somethin' don't 'appen and that very soon,
We'll not have a man in the blurry platoon—
Blurry platoon,
Pore ole platoon,
Always it's for it; this blurry platoon.

(From "A Soldier's Song.")

IT was not yet dawn, and the rain dropped sullenly into the wet trench where the soldiers stood to arms on the banquette, yawning and shivering with the cold. The bayonets showed clear cut and ominous when the blazing star-shell caught them. The men on watch shook themselves, rubbed their eyes with clay-encrusted fingers, and hummed monotonous tunes. All was very quiet. The dawn was oppressive, the dark, mysterious levels had an ominous threat in their incomprehensible silence. The support trench into which the soldiers had come was a great mysterious alley filled with spectres as impalpable as air. . . . The dawn came imperceptibly, men stood down and spoke of breakfast. But there

was no fire; the loaves and biscuits were sodden with rain. Spudhole, who tried to open a tin of bully-beef with his clasp knife, cut his finger and swore dreadfully. His mates stared at him and nodded their heads, but did not speak. . . . .

Captain Thorley came along the trench speaking to the men on sentry-go.

"Cut your finger, Spudhole?" he asked when he came into the bay in which Bowdy and Bubb were stationed. The captain knew every man by nickname.

"Cut it," said Bubb. "Course I've cut it, sir. My fingers are so damn cold. Wot about this 'ere mine, sir?"

"It may go up now at any moment," said Captain Thorley. "You've all got to keep a good look-out. When it goes up every man cross the top and man the crater. Just as you did on Christmas morning. Bowdy will go with us this time. On the last occasion he was away, making love to some dear French girl."

Bowdy blushed.

"Pore ole Fitz 'as gone west," said Bubb. " 'E's under the ground wiv a dozen tons o' muck on top o' 'im. There are five or six o' our boys buried wiv 'im. Round the corner in the next bay."

"I was looking at the dug-out that fell in," said Bowdy. "They're buried deep enough anyhow. It's no good digging them out."

"We've no time for that," said Thorley. "It's a long day's work for a big squad if it's ever attempted. Of course there's not a soul alive. Fitzgerald was coming with a message too. But it's all right, Flanagan brought the message in."

"Did you see a bay'net stickin' up froo the roof?" asked Bubb. "The dug-out fell down round it, and there it's stickin' up as if it wanted to stab somebody."

At that moment the earth trembled like a windshaken leaf. The men rushed to the parapet and looked over. Out in front a great lump rose on the level like a whale breaking up from the sea, and a livid flash lit the world. The soldiers sank into cover, mute, pale, hesitating. The roar of an earthquake filled their ears, and a million flying fragments filled the sky. . . . . An almost incoherent order passed along the trench, and on the right men clambered over the sandbags into the open field. . . . . They had to take possession of the mine crater. Snogger, Bowdy Benners and Bubb were across and in the next minute they were conscious of many things. Bubb slipped twice in getting over the top, and panted wearily

as he rushed towards the spot where the earth was lumped up black and raw. Other men rushed along at his side, shouting and yelling. Rifles were discharged wildly at no particular objective, and a group of voluble guns chorused in dizzy harmony.

The men clambered down the steep sides of the newly-formed valley, a hundred feet deep or more, and up the crest again, where it looked over the enemy's trenches. The Germans were already advancing in extended order several hundred strong. The advance was done at the double through the lurid flashes of curtain fire which the English guns had opened. The Germans were falling, and the sight steadied the men somewhat, and they trained their rifles with precision and a certain amount of calmness on the oncomers.

The English guns were now speaking with furious vehemence and the shrapnel hissed at the grey forms which were still rising over the rim of the trench in front. Bubb and Benners lay down with their mates on the slope of the parapet and fired, a bit wildly perhaps, but it was impossible to miss. A machine-gun, already in position, swayed its snout from side to side, snapped viciously, and extracted its toll from the attackers.

They came forward, rushing wildly, their bayonets in air, their legs clumsily cutting off the distance between their trench and the crater. Many in the first line of attackers were falling and several were crawling back to their own lines on their bellies. Our bombers stood waiting, fingering their bombs nervously. The stench of explosives was suffocating. Several who were overcome with the gases dropped to the ground and rolled down the slope into the bottom of the pit. Bill Hurd stood up on the verge of the crater, where the wet, glistening machine-gun peeped forth.

"Steady, boys, steady!" he cried. "Take careful aim! Don't waste a round! Make every bullet tell! We'll beat them off! We'll beat them back, back, well back! Begorrah we'll show them."

He looked enormous, standing there, shouting vehemently and waving his arms.

"Beat them back!" he yelled, repeating the same remark over and over again. His rifle lay against the rim of the crater; the bayonet, rusty and grim, peered over the top as if in waiting.

"Take good aim," he shouted, running along the rim of the crater. "Be sure of your min . . . . Don't get flurried . . . . We'll bate thim

back easily! . . . . Keep cool and don't get flurried. If ye do you'll be damned unlucky. Don't get excited," he shouted. "If you do it won't be no good."

He held his peace then and Bubb looked round to see where he had sought cover. He was lying on his face and a very tiny red scar showed on his forehead.

Although the enemy advanced at the double, the time dragged slowly for the men on the parapet. They waited in agonised suspense for closer combat; somehow the firing seemed to have very little effect on the attackers. Hundreds fell and hundreds took the place of the fallen. The rim of the foemen's parapet was like the lip of a waterfall; the men came across in waves, got dashed to pieces, and waves followed only to meet with a similar fate. The successive lines of men were endless, eternal as a running brook.

The German first line drew nearer; the English could almost see the expressions of the men's faces; felt that the soul of the attackers was not in their work. It was impossible to miss them now. The attacking lines withered like waves on a beach. One man who came in front flung down his rifle, raced towards the crater with his

hands in air and jumped in on top of Bill Hurd's bayonet, a ludicrous fixture.

"Pull it out!" he yelled in agony, speaking in good English. "Pull it out, for Gott's sake!"

But there was no time to spare at that moment; the English were fighting to save their own skins. The German rolled down to the bottom of the crater with the bayonet on which he had sat still stuck in his body.

A second and a third wave of attack followed; but the concentrated fire of the defenders cut great gaps in the attackers' lines, which became merged one with the other, when half way across. The men had no heart for further movement; they drew themselves to earth, and dug holes in the ground for safety. The English artillery fire prevented them from going back, the rifles would not allow them to come forward; they were caught between two fires.

Now and again an entrenching tool could be seen rising in air, and it was fired at. When a figure in grey moved, a questing bullet reminded it forcibly of the indiscretion. At times one would rise and walk around in an unconcerned and indifferent manner, probably he had gone insane, or perhaps the pain of a wound put

death out of reckoning. The end was in all cases the same, the bullet found the man, and the ghastly fury of destruction held its sway.

On the right they reached the wires and the boys went out and met them: there the bayonet was at work.

They came up in big droves and some fumbled through. The defenders rushed out and gave fight. . . . . An excited machine gunner played for a minute on the crush of friend and foe. . . . .

The Germans lost heart, retreated and were followed with bayonet, bludgeon and bomb. Tripping on the wires and stepping in flesh and blood, they went back, tramping on dead and wounded. The latter groaned piteously and shrieked for mercy.

The retreat became general, the front wave of attackers receded, those which followed stood still undecided. Here and there isolated parties made great fight, holding out until the last men fell. . . . .

Some of the Irish followed them across: a large party of prisoners were surrounded near the hostile trench. The German gunners had shortened their range and were now shelling the ground between the lines.

Fighting was even more severe on the right.

There a confused and struggling mass reeled round the wires in a last wild effort, and the German artillery dealt death impartially to friend and foe alike. On all sides the wounded covered the field, lying in huddled heaps, in rows, singly and in pairs. In front of the mine a German moved on his stomach, then rose to his feet and flung a bomb at a party which went out to succour the wounded. A youngster, a boy newly out, named Ryan, rushed forward with his rifle, fired and missed. Still advancing, he slid a round into the breach of his weapon, shoved the rifle close to the German's forehead and pulled the trigger. The upper part of the man's head was blown off. . . . .

All day long the men stopped in the crater, always on the alert, and in front of them a long line of earth gradually took shape on the field, which showed that the enemy worked hard digging himself in. Towards dusk the dark line took on a whitish colour; the diggers had reached the chalk and were well under cover. When darkness fell the trench was raided and the occupants taken prisoners. Then graves were dug and the dead were buried.

CHAPTER XII

THE DAY'S WORK

It's bloomin' well still the same,
Ever and always the same,
  Right in the thick of it,
  Not feelin' sick of it,
Naw! but it's always the same, the same.

I like the 'ole bisness, not 'alf,
Son of the Empire, not 'alf!
  Le guerre never finny,
  It's whizzbang and Minnie,
And always the usual strafe, strafe, strafe.

For ever and ever the same,
Bloomin' well always the same;
  If the guns for a change
  Would just lengthen their range,
But naw! they just strafe us the same.

(From Trench Doggerel.)

THE winter was over, the birds were singing again on the barbed wire entanglements, the green grasses peeped out between the cobbles of the deserted village streets, and the flowers showed in the open spaces between the lines. The trenches were becoming dry; the parapets no longer crumbled down; it was possible to climb over the parados at night

without flinging half the structure into the muddy alleys, where the soldiers kept eternal watch on the lines across the way. Sheepskin jackets were handed in; top boots were worn no more; a man could sleep at ease in a dug-out now, for the roofs, no longer weighted by the rain, had ceased falling in on the hapless sleepers. The tottering walls gathered strength; tottering spirits were braced up; men saw the sun and were pleased. The winter was over.

For one who has not experienced them, it is difficult to realise the hardships of the front line between the months of October and April. The trenches are deep ditches filled with mud and water that reach the waist. Now and again the heavy top-boots are useless protection against wet, the water rises over the tops of the boots and runs down the legs of the men. The boots stick in the mud, and often the men have to climb out of them; clamber from cells into a quagmire. In the days following the first trench winter when the earth got dry soldiers who had died in their top-boots were dug from the floors of the trenches. Weary with their efforts to get free from the deadly embrace of the muddy quagmire, they fell asleep and succumbed to exposure,

died in their graves. And in spring they were dug out and buried anew.

The dug-out is as treacherous as the trench. The shaky construction, the lodge of fear, is always built in a hurry. Weak props hold a crazy roof in place; sandbags filled with earth serve the purpose of tiles. In dry weather a dug-out serves its purpose well, but in the rainy weather the sandbags becoming saturated finally weigh the rafters and props down to earth. Time and again the weary sleepers never wake, their shelter becomes their grave.

The trenches in the summer nights have a charm peculiarly their own when the starshells riot in the heavens and the air is full of the languorous scent of sleeping flowers. If the guns of war are silent, there is a genial atmosphere pervading the whole place, and men go about their work in a light-hearted manner.

One can smell tea brewing in the sheltered bay where a brazier glows cosily in the lee of the traverse. A game of cards is in progress in a dug-out, and a youth may be seen writing a letter by the light of a timid candle stuck on the wall. At that moment one does not feel far removed from home. But what a contrast in the cheerless winter. All the cosy comfort is a thing

of the past. Men plough through muck and mire, dragging their feet and legs through water and mud, or sleep in the open, shivering with cold. The fingers are chilled to the bone, all feeling has gone away from the feet; for all one knows, the feet may have gone. No fires are lit, there is no wood, nothing that will burn.

The long night marches have lost all their romance. Clothes are seldom dry, they cling to the body like the rags of a drowned man, scourging and scaling the flesh. The cold rain stings the flesh, the snow freezes the fingers. Marching is difficult, the roads are thick with mud, and all roads lead to the firing line, the line of red agony, of desolation. The soldier is a mute, impotent figure, a blind pawn in the game of war. The billets are cold and cheerless. The broken roof, which allowed the winds of night to play round the sleepers in the hot summer weather, now lets in the cold and wet. Sleep is hardly a rest, it is a moment of forgetfulness similar to the solace which a sick man finds in a drug.

Spring was well on its way now; the boys in the trenches were happy again. Bubb and Flanagan were up to any sort of mischief or deed of daring. The persistent sniper who kept potting at their bay annoyed them however. Bubb,

back from hospital and full of vitality, vowed that it was up to him to put the sniper out of action.

"I'm goin' up on this 'ere caboosh at the rear," said Bubb pointing to the slag-heap behind the British front line. "I'll maybe get a sight on the Boche."

"I'm with you in the game," said Flanagan.

Both men went out in the early dawn and took their places close to the crest of the mammoth slag-heap. Noon found them still there lying prone on the surface of the coal-mines' off-scour, their heads close to the rim of the heap, their eyes fixed on the enemy's trench which wound slyly as a snake through the levels some seven hundred yards away. A spit down from the two boys lay the English line. Out in front of it dozens of bundles in khaki lay limp and lifeless, waiting for the summer to cover them up with her flowers.

"There's a 'undred or more, out there," said Bubb. "Gawd, it's a funny bisness, killin' and killin'. One would think we enjoys it by the fuss the pypers in England makes o' it. Anyway, it's a blurry rotten way of fightin'," he continued as he changed his position by the fraction of an inch without removing his eye from the tip

of the rifle foresight. "Gawd," he whispered, "I 'ave 'im now. I saw somefin' move just like a bird. I'll give 'im a round."

"Don't," muttered Flanagan, under his breath. "It's no good firing if you're not sure of your man. One shot will give us away, and that's the twentieth time you've seen him; each time in a different spot. He's not like a bird; he can't be in two places at one time. . . . . What the hell! Don't move!"

"A cramp in my guts!" groaned Bubb, wriggling a little. "Gawd, it isn't 'arf giving me gyp! Ooh—whooh!"

The youth kicked out with both legs, raised his head an inch or two, then brought it down again to the level of the earth. Flanagan swore under his breath and cursed Bubb with vehemence.

"I can't 'elp it," said Bubb. "I must move. I'd rather 'ave a bullet in the 'ead than a cramp in my belly. Wooh! It'll twist me up like a 'edge 'og!"

"Matey," whispered Flanagan, turning half left and fixing his eyes on Spudhole.

"Wot!"

"You know that if you're seen moving you'll get a bullet across here——"

"I don't care a damn," said Bubb.

"But I do," muttered Flanagan. "Next time I come out sniping I'm going to take a man with me; one that won't give a position away when he has got a sore tummy——"

"I'm not going to move no more," said Bubb. "I'm going to be as quiet as a sandbag. Ooh-wooh!"

"How's your cramp now?" asked Flanagan, when Bubb had kept quiet for a good ten minutes. "Gone, is it?"

"It's 'opped it," said Spudhole with a laugh. "Blimey!"

Both men cowered to earth giggling nervously as the bomb burst, scattering a cloud of dust over them. A second shell burst, and a third.

"They must have spotted us," said Flanagan, frowning at the fields.

"If they have it's all up."

But the shelling ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and the youngsters breathed freely again.

"Cleaning out their guns, I suppose," said Flanagan. "Lucky they didn't clean us out of existence. . . . . I'm tired of waiting here."

"I'm tired an' 'ungry an' 'ot," said Bubb. "But

we can't get out of this damned place till night . . . . they won't 'arf 'ave the laugh on us when we go back."

"Not half," said Flanagan absently.

"And I bet Captain Thorley a bob I'd lay the sniper by the 'eels," said Bubb. "But it's no go."

"Well, where can the fellow be?" asked Flanagan, removing a speck of dust from the backsight of his rifle with a cautious hand. "No man can fire at us from the German trench. It's behind a rise, and even if one of the Boches looks over the parapet he can't see our trench. But still the fact remains that no sooner does one of our boys look over than a bullet zipps past his ear. Where does the bullet come from? The sniper *must* be between the lines. He must, but where?"

Spudhole shrugged his shoulders helplessly and muttered: "We was fools comin' out 'ere. But 'e 'as done for four of our fellers an' 'e must die. If 'e doesn't . . . ."

He shook a cautious little head and became silent. The sun sank down the sky, and its sight slid along the barrels of the rifles from hand-guard to muzzle whenever the weapons were moved. Flanagan crunched a biscuit with zeal-

ous teeth; Bubb traced furrows in the ground with his trigger finger, but all the time kept his eyes fixed on the front.

"Our boys are makin' tea now," he said. "It's about four o'clock, I suppose . . . that damned sun's in no 'urry neither. There!" he ejaculated suddenly. "One of our boys 'as put 'is 'ead over the trench! Wait."

Both men heard it, a smothered shriek like the sound of a drowning puppy.

" 'E 'as got it in the 'ead," said Bubb in a fierce voice. "The bloody fool! Flan!"

"What is it, Bubb?"

"I saw smoke," said Bubb, speaking calmly. "Just look over. See a little holler near the German lines? Yes? Well, there's a dead man there wiv 'is knees curled up. Got im? That's the place. I saw a puff of smoke and somefing moved. Look, Flan, see somefing shining?"

"I see it," said Flanagan.

"The sun's catchin' the sniper's 'ipe."

Both the youngsters drew their weapons taut to their shoulders and adjusted their sights.

"Four-fifty?" inquired Bubb, adjusting his sight to four hundred and fifty yards.

"A little lower, a little lower," said Flana-

gan. "Make it four and you'll not be far out . . . . It'll be hard to judge . . . . if we hit the dead man. He'll not raise a dust. You aim first, Bubb."

Bubb's left cheek twitched, and his eye took in the objective. He pulled the trigger. A spurt of dust flew into air a little to the rear of the dead man.

"Aim low, and we'll get him next time," said Flanagan.

Both rifles spoke together. A figure detached itself from the limp lump which lay in the hollow near the enemy's lines, rose to a standing position, and beat the air with agitated arms.

Thus for a moment, then the Thing collapsed in an abject heap on the ground.

"That's all," said Bubb. "The boys in the trench are firin' now. They'll finish 'im off if 'e's not done in already."

The rifles cracked spitefully in the trench which rimmed the base of the slag-heap, the sun sank lower and the shadows lengthened. The two youngsters broke biscuits, gnawed vigorously and waited for the darkness to fall.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TRENCHES

All the night the frogs go chuckle; all the day the birds are singing,
In the pond beside the meadow; by the roadway poplar-lined;
In the field between the trenches are a million blossoms springing
'Twixt the grass of silver bayonets where the lines of battle wind;
Where man has manned the trenches for the maiming of his kind.

(From "Soldier Songs.")

THE trench is a world within itself, having customs, joys and griefs peculiar to its limitations. The inmates can only claim for the most part a short existence; they have degrees of opulence and poverty, but the former is far removed from those who are legally heirs to it, and all the dwellers in the trench commune share their poverty in common. The word "ours" is on all lips; save for a few relics of outside civilisation there is nothing which a man claims as "mine." Food and drink and clothing are "ours," as also are the parcels from

home, though the men to whom they are addressed have generally the privilege of opening them. Money has lost all its value: for the time being food is not sold here, and all men have to work at the same job, and they work well, for the safety of their bodies depends upon the labour of their hands. Again, in the carping times of peace a soldier may depend upon the sweat of others for his daily needs; here in the trenches he is a Socialist in the highest sense of the much-abused word.

The life of the Commune is seldom monotonous, its uncertainty makes it interesting, its novelty never wanes. The trench has its history, every dug-out a legend, and the shell-riven alleys of war are steeped in tradition. The narratives of the trench are handed on from regiment to regiment, a word or two on the fire-step while the battalion just going out changes places with the relieving battalion, and the legend of an adjacent dug-out is made plain.

Such scraps of conversation as these may be heard. "That dug-out on the left got a 'ole in the roof the other night. A time-expired man who was going off to Blighty the next day went in there and lay down to kip. A whizz-bang 'it the roof, and the poor bloke went west."

"The Germans occupied these trenches at one time; the Guards charged them, and not a man escaped. You'll see their dug-outs all along here."

"A sniper used to play 'ell with this bay a month ago. 'E used to send the bullets into the trench. It took the men some time to discover 'im. Then they got 'im. 'E was up on the top of a chimney-stack in the village behind the German trench. 'E could see right down the trench. Our artillery brought the chimney down and the sniper with it."

So the stories are told and retold, and passed from one set of soldiers to the next who occupy the trenches.

No doubt stories become distorted and enlarged in the course of time, but always there is a grain of truth in the most exaggerated trench story; and every tale gives an added interest and a subtle touch of romance to the locality. The mean, primitive trench, the home of the Brown Brethren, is not without certain features of grandeur, and an atmosphere of mystery pervades the whole place, due, no doubt, to its close association with death.

It was yet dark in the trenches of the Cologne sector, a much be-shelled locality on Vimy

Ridge, but a faint subdued flush showed on the Eastern sky far away behind the enemy's line. Stars were twinkling coldly clear overhead and a keen wind rustled along the floor of the trench. Vague mutterings and rumblings could be heard in the dug-outs; the men already warned to stand to arms on the banquette were snatching a few moments' extra repose; hugging with miserly desire at an additional minute's rest. Sergeant Snogger came running along the trench shouting. "Stand to! Stand to!" he called. There was no particular hurry for the sector was then a comparatively quiet one. But the sergeant merely ran because a brisk race was a most effective means of driving away the sleepy feeling which was fostered by the narcotic odours of the dug-out.

The men turned out yawning and swearing, then broke into a brisk run round a near traverse and back again to their posts by the dew-besprinkled bayonets. One man looked across the parapet, fixed an indifferent eye on the Ridge, then burst into a rag-time chorus which a mate took up with vigour.

The Zouave Wood, the shell-scarred spinney where the trees were flung broadcast by high concussion shells, lay on the left, wrapped in

shadow and hiding many mysteries. In it was many a little grave where the kindly earth covered friend and foe alike. It was a place of many secrets, of strange and vague whispering. There, in the dawn, the spirits of the dead men seemed to hold converse. But by day the earth could not hide them, the weapons of the quick dug them again from the graves and flung them out on the riven spaces of the restless earth.

The air was cold and keen. The men covered their chins with the collars of their khaki coats, lit their cigarettes and leant against the parapet. They dozed for a moment and then woke guiltily with a start. Nobody had noticed them, they dozed again . . . . The east flushed crimson, the German trench to the left showed dark against the glow and stood out distinctly. A sniper's bullet ripped a sandbag and a shower of fine white dust dropped into the trench. No one paid any heed . . . . The birds were out hopping from prop to prop of the barbed wire entanglements. A lark soared into air pouring out an ecstatic song . . . . The dead men on the levels could now be seen lying close to the earth in limp and ghastly attitudes, the birds singing above them . . . . The sun was up; a million dewdrops sparkled in a glorious jewelled disarray

on the wires . . . . The field had taken on a greener hue and in many places the daisies peeped timidly up from the soft grasses . . . . A white mist circled round the spinney and the gashes in the trees became more distinct. Looking southwards down on to the level lands one could see the Double Crassier tailing out on one side to the village of Loos and on the other side to the mining hamlet of Maroc . . . . Away down on the left, twelve kilometres away, lay Lens with its many chimneys, and a number of the chimneys smoking. The enemy were probably working the mines. The terra-cotta houses stood out very distinct and seemed nearer to us than they really were. The air was very clear and a perfect flood of brilliant sunshine lit the town, the enemy's trench and the dead men lying out on the field.

The order to stand down had long since been given and the men were now busy preparing their breakfasts. Braziers were alight in the dug-outs and the red glow of flaming coke stood out in vivid contrast to the dark interiors. Little wreaths of pale smoke curled up over the trench and the air was full of the odour of frying bacon. Spudhole was frying his bread in the grease and to judge by the expression on his face he was very

interested in his work. Nothing else seemed to trouble him. The sniper's bullet hit the sandbag again and a spurt of chalk was whisked into the frying-pan. The youth looked up, obviously annoyed, and swore whole-heartedly; then he bent to his work again.

Breakfast ready, Bubb, Bowdy and Flanagan sat on the fire-step and ate.

"I've an appetite like the war Casualty List," said Flanagan. "It's always crying for 'More! More!' and is never satisfied. It's almost as bad as Bubb when he came back from hospital."

"I'd ravver be 'ere than in the 'orsp," said Bubb. "This breakfast is not to be larfed at."

The fare was indeed excellent and every man did it justice. Each had a mess-tin of tea, a thick slice of buttered bread and a rasher of bacon. Tongues were loosened and the talk became general for there were so many things to talk about. The week-old papers which came by last night's post were read and comments passed on the contents. A full page advertisement in a leading daily came in for a fair share of sarcasm. This advertisement told of the virtues of a wonderful beauty cream just discovered. It gave a most delightfully delicate pink flush to the skin and took away the effects of twenty or thirty

years' wear from a woman's face. It was the talk of London. All the society women were using it. Lady So-and-So said so-and-so about it; the celebrated actress A—— vowed that it was the one thing which England had waited for since the early part of the last century, etc.

"For my own part I wish they invented somethin' to take away the crawlers off my clothes," Spudhole remarked as he finished his tea. "I'm goin' to 'ave a coot."

He got to his feet, took off his tunic and donned his equipment over his shirt. Bowdy went into the dug-out to have a few hours' sleep; Flanagan sat down on the fire-step and lit a cigarette.

"It's getting quite hot, Spudhole," he said.

"'Ot as 'ell," Spudhole replied.

At that moment a shell burst amidst the poppy flowers on the open in front of the sector and Spudhole, who was making his way towards the dug-out door clapped his hand to his neck and exclaimed: "I've copped one this time; it's givin' me gyp!"

Flanagan shouted "Stretcher bearers!" Then he turned to help his mate but even as he did so he felt a sudden penetrating pain pierce his own chin, and the wasp which was responsible for the

sting flew off to a safe distance and poised itself in the air over the dug-out. Fitzgerald, knowing that it was contemplating another attack, prepared to retreat.

"It's wasps, Spudhole!" he yelled. "We'll clear off round the corner."

But before they moved Bowdy Benners rushed out of the dug-out, festooned with angry wasps.

"Good God!" he yelled, striking out with both hands. "I'm stung to death. My pillow was a nest of the swine! Git out, you vermin! . . . . Got that one! Did I? He's stung my finger. . . . Oh! blast! . . . ."

The three retreated at the double round the traverse and into the next bay. The occupants were just sitting down to breakfast, a good breakfast, for the post had come and parcels were bulky.

"Wot the blazes is this?" one of them exclaimed as the crush of men rounded the corner waving their arms about their heads. "These 'ere blokes are working their tickets, I suppose!"

He finished his remark with a yell, for an enterprising wasp had flown the rout and stung the speaker on the nose. Then the insect made the round of the breakfast party. A few fled instantly and escaped, others took to their heels at

the first sting, but the man who waited to pick up the sultana cake and the tin of sardines had all the colours of a Board School map on his face for weeks afterwards.

A narrow, crooked trench infested by furious wasps is not a healthy locality. The insects outmanœuvred the soldiers at every turn. The men turned the third buttress feeling that they had escaped their persecutors only to find that the insects had crossed the top of the traverse and were in waiting round the corner. As a man runs a trench is a weary pathway, as a wasp flies it presents no difficulties.

The place was in an uproar. The wasps had attacked on both sides, some drove the men left, others flew after them on the right. In every bay their numbers seemed to have increased; at the traverse turning the soldiers eluded them for a moment only to encounter them in the next bay. A number of men sought safety in the dugouts; the wasps followed and drove them out into the perilous trench again. When the first officer was met he stood for a moment with one foot in the trench, one on the firestep, and stared in astonishment. His wonderment was short-lived. A wasp announced itself when it alighted on his

ear, and immediately the subaltern became one with the rout.

Spudhole was now wounded in several places. The morning had been fine, and like the rest of his mates, he was in shirt-sleeves fighting order.

"I've copped a sting again," he yelled. "That's umpty eleven times. I always said that I didn't 'old with a war like this un. Bombs and bullets, whizz-bangs and pip-squeaks and now these 'ere God-forsaken wopses . . . . That's anuver one, a blurry Boche. 'E sniped me from the rim of me cap . . . . God! Platoons of 'em . . . . Oh! damn! That un took me at the rear where I should 'ave a patch on me trousers . . . ."

Again a bay was entered where another merry party was sitting down to breakfast; a gargantuan spread of fried bacon, toast and trench tea. A platoon officer was sharing in the meal. He was a stout good-natured man with a bald head, baby-pink and shiny. The advance party of wasps could not miss the head; the pests came to a halt on it, and being nasty, they stung when they alighted. The officer yelled several words which the men had never noticed in his vocabulary before. Groping frantically for his hat, which, as often happens in a crisis, was nowhere to be found, he overturned the brazier, the toast-

rack, and several canteens of tea, scalding the feet of a number of men who were seated on the firestep . . . . The soldiers were up in an instant and raced off along the trench. Rifles, equipment and ammunition were flung down on the floor and trampled into the clay and rubble.

At this point, Spudhole was seized with a happy thought. A newspaper had fallen on the fire and was bursting into flame. Spudhole, seizing the lighted paper, held it close to his face and kept the wasps away for a moment.

"But wot is the good of it," he grumbled as the flames died down. "I'm getting stung be'ind and burned in front. I'm off!" and, throwing the paper down, he fled.

Struggling, shoving and waving their arms about, the men hustled along the narrow alley. Two soldiers scrambled up over the top out into the open, but, being seen by the enemy, a brisk rifle fire was opened on them and they fled back into their wasp-infested shelter again.

At this point Sergeant Snogger was heard. Seeing two men rushing out into the open field waving their arms over their heads, he stared at them open-mouthed and rubbed his eyes with both hands. A hidden sniper had been potting at the parapet for days! . . . . The action was

not in keeping with trench discipline; in fact if the men did not return immediately they'd "be damned unlucky!"

"Back! Ye fools, come back!" he yelled. "Wot the blazes—was that!"

The wasp swept past his face like a spent bullet, swung back again and stung him on the forehead. A second caught him on the neck, a third on the arm. He turned and ran.

For Flanagan, he was unlucky enough to have his puttees off when the stampede started, and in a few moments a wasp had got up the leg of his trousers. It stung him half-a-dozen times before he squashed it to pulp . . . .

What happened when the Irish rushed into a Highland regiment on the right must be left to the reader's imagination. Never before had the Gael been so conscious of the nakedness of his knees. He gave vent to his wrath in vehement words and it was found difficult to ascertain whether his anger was directed against the wasps or the men who were responsible for their coming.

Was it at the hundredth traverse or the thousandth that the effectives of the besetting force lost an appreciable amount of intensity? That was a matter for conjecture, but this alone is

known. A jar of marmalade which got overthrown in a bay enticed the insects, and many stopped to feast on the disbanded treasure. But a few followed with unabated ardour; these were counter-attacked and destroyed, and afterwards the soldiers bombed the "Bay of the Broken Jar" with a certain amount of success.

The Irish strode back defiant and alert, ready for anything. But the wasps gave no further trouble; here and there one or two were seen poised in air over a line of sandbags, but these fled at the approach of the men.

The dug-out in which they had originally entrenched was left in complete seclusion for the rest of the day, and at night Bowdy and his two mates approached the place in slow, methodical order. They found the wasps' nest in a corner of the wall and poured two mess-tins of boiling water on it. A third mess-tin remained but it was not needed.

"We'll 'ave a drop of char now," said Bubb. "The evenin's gettin' cold now and we want somefing 'ot."

"Righto!" said Bowdy. "I'll light a fire in here now that the wasps are gone."

He lit a fire, boiled the water and made the tea. Outside a sniper was potting at the roof

of the dug-out. He had been sniping all day, from where, none could determine.

"Wonder what he's doing it for," Bowdy asked as he sat down and reached for the mess-tin which was bubbling merrily on the brazier. "He'll never pot one of us."

Even as he touched the mess-tin a bullet ricochetted off the parapet outside, hissed into the dug-out and pierced the bottom of the mess-tin. The tea poured out and extinguished the fire.

"Well, that's past a joke," Bowdy muttered. "Blow me blind if I'm not going out to-night to let daylight through that boundering Boche."

CHAPTER XIV

THE SNIPER

I'll teach you, you bounder, to snipe,
  For I'm nosing around,
  With my face to the ground,
And a round in the breach of my hipe.
  You'd best keep a blurry look-out,
  For there's no end of trouble about—
  With a round in the breach,
  I am going to teach
You, you impudent sniper, to snipe.
(From "The Deadly Breach.")

HAVING blackened his face with a burnt cork, Bowdy Benners fixed his sword on his rifle and clambered over the parapet into No Man's Land. The hour was midnight; the darkness had settled on the firing line and the starshells were rioting in the skies. Although the day had been hot and bright the sky was now covered with clouds, not a star was visible and objects quite near at hand could scarcely be distinguished. The air was warm and still and not a blade of grass was moving. The only sound which Bowdy Benners could hear was the dull rustle of his own clothes as he crawled across

the level ground on all fours making his way towards the German lines.

Bowdy was out on a great project, an adventure after his own heart. For many days the German had been potting at Cologne sector, but none had been able to locate the position of the sniper. One thing, however, was evident: he was stationed somewhere in No Man's Land. The German trenches were hidden behind a hillock and the English trenches were immune from observation from that quarter.

Bowdy crawled carefully forward, his eyes alert and his ears strained for any untoward sound. Now and again a flash would light up the levels in front and he could hear a bullet sing past his ears towards the sector which he had just left. But the flash was deceptive and lights were very misleading in the darkness. The sniper took care to fire only when a starshell held the sky above him. In this way, the flash of the rifle, merging as it did into the flare of the starshell, could hardly lay claim to a separate existence.

"I'm not going to find him," muttered Bowdy Benners under his breath. "It's like looking for a needle in . . . . Blimey! That was a near go."

A bullet swept past Bowdy's head with such a vicious hiss that he put up his hand to feel if it had touched him. But he was unharmed.

"Blow me blind!" he muttered, and crawled forward hurriedly. "Blow me stone blind if that wasn't a near go. The bounder can't see me," he thought. "I haven't blackened my face for nothing."

He continued crawling stealthily on his stomach, dragging his rifle after him. Every movement was made softly, but to Benners the sound of his trousers rubbing on the grass seemed to carry out as far as the German trenches. Now and again, as he lay still and stared at the level in front, he thought he could discern something moving. Then he would remain absolutely motionless for a few minutes, listening and watching. But all was quiet; nothing to be heard save the wind rustling and a stray mouse running through a little clump of bracken ahead.

The sniper had become very quiet now; his rifle had not spoken for several minutes.

"He'll be having a kip," Bowdy thought, and got to his feet.

The long crawl had made his knees sore and his feet felt numb. Standing upright, he placed his rifle between his knees and stretched his arms.

The light of the last starshell had died away, the circle of horizon had grown smaller and in the near distance objects stood out weirdly silhouetted with a blurred, though definite outline. It was then that several starshells went up together and the open was lit with the brilliance of day. In the glaring light Benners saw the sniper. He was standing barely a dozen yards away, his hand resting on his rifle. Benners could see that he had his sword fixed and the steel shone brightly.

"I'll make him a prisoner," Benners said in a loud voice, and made at the man as a hawk swoops on a lark.

The sniper heard Benners approach, turned his eyes and sprang up to a position of defence.

"Has he a round in the breech?" Benners asked himself. "Shall I fire at him or not?"

Even as he approached, Bowdy saw the German raise his rifle to his shoulder and a sharp report rang out. Bowdy blinked at the flash, but the bullet went wide.

"I'll settle you," he said in a loud voice, and, rushing up, he thrust his bayonet forward. The sniper parried it and for a moment there was a brisk duel, then Bowdy saw an opening for a left point, a favourite of his, which had never failed. Now, however, it did not work. The sniper

stepped to the right; by a deft move brought his own bayonet point downwards to the ground and Bowdy tripped across it in the rush forward and went to earth.

"Blow me blind!" muttered Bowdy as he fell, and made a wild effort to secure his own rifle which had slipped out of his hands. But in this he was unsuccessful; the darkness had fallen and the weapon had disappeared. No doubt it was lying quite near, but there was little time at Bowdy's command to scrutinise the field around him.

One hope, however, remained. As Bowdy fell his legs had managed to close around the German's rifle and the barrel of the weapon was held in a vice-like grip. Bowdy was the strongest man in the regiment; he was a grand man on the march, and on the mat a wrestler second to none. On march or mat he had no equal. He held the rifle taut for a moment, and in war the moment is often of supreme importance. As the German endeavoured to pull the bayonet clear, Bowdy let go his hold, got to his feet and gripped the man by the shoulders. For a second both wrestled fiercely and as they panted and strained the weapon dropped to the ground. Neither bent to lift it. A starshell rose into the heavens and the

Englishman had a clear view of the sniper. He could see that he was deep-chested, unshapely, bearded. . . . .

He glared at Benners with malignant eyes, and his lips twisted into a snarl that almost reached his heavy brows. "You haf no chance with me," he grunted. "I am wrestler on English music halls." Then, with a yell, he struck out with both fists for Benners' head, and Bowdy, wise with the wisdom born of a thousand aching contests, ducked and dodged, just in time to evade the blow to the head and the kick which the sniper aimed for his stomach. Followed a mad tussle of flying fists and swiftly moving bodies. Then came an instant's lull, and the fighters clutched one another in a tense embrace; Benners' hand resting on the sniper's face, the sniper's fist on Benners' stomach.

Breaking from the clinch, Benners stepped backwards only to return again with a heavy left-handed blow which took his opponent full on the jowl; the German never winced.

"A damned professional wrestler!" muttered Benners and instinctively he knew that he had met a man who would take any amount of beating.

Benners crouched, his left foot a trifle ad-

vanced; his head drawn down well between his shoulders and shielded by one of his hands. The other hand covered his stomach. The sniper paused irresolute for a moment, then, with tiger-like fury, he swung into his man, striking out rapidly with both fists. Guarding his body carefully, Benners waited, ready for an opening, and when he saw his way he drove heavily with both hands for the sniper's mouth. The two blows went home; the German stepped back several paces, his mouth dripping with blood. Both had now forgotten about their bayonets. . . . . Rage took possession of the sniper, a terrible, murderous rage, and he was upon Benners, striking out with his knees, fists and boots. Benners crouched, holding his body compactly together and covered his face and stomach with his hands. For two minutes he struggled to endure. His enemy was well-nigh resistless, and all the rage and cunning of the tiger were loose in the man. Benners went to the ground and was twice kicked as he curled over in an endeavour to rise, but seizing a chance he gripped his opponent's ankle, and brought him heavily to the ground.

They fastened on to one another as they lay and still in embrace they got to their feet. As they stood Bowdy got his hand free and hit the

sniper across the mouth. As if by mutual consent they broke apart and the sniper devoted the fraction of a second to wipe his mouth. Then he rushed in again and Benners backed round to save himself from a furious onslaught of stinging blows. The German, vital and overwhelming, seemed to be in his element. All the essence of passion, hate and elemental madness found expression in this onslaught. Thrice a twelve yard circle of ground was covered, Bowdy fighting gamely but ever giving backwards. His body and face were now covered with blood; and his hands went up, not in battle, but almost in mute protest against a crushing fatalism. The terrible charges of the sniper, the lightning thrusts of the man's fists were wearing Bowdy down. Suddenly the German, over-confident, struck out for his opponent's head, leaving his stomach unguarded, and Bowdy saw his chance and took it. A heavy swing of his left fist landed on the space between the ribs that fork outwards from the breastbone, and the sniper curled up and dropped like a wet rag to the ground. Bowdy fell beside him and the two men lay together, quiet as sleeping children.

Bowdy turned over on his back and breathed deeply for a space, then stumbled to his feet.

"I wish I had my bayonet," he muttered, rubbing his hand over his brow. "It's a fight between two of us, a fight to death . . . . By God! he can fight, too. But no wonder; he's a wrestler. And I feel done up."

Bowdy felt very weary. His head was spinning and he had great difficulty in standing upright. He had one consolation, however. The sniper was in as bad a state as he was. He looked down with vague eyes at the man and saw that he was recovering from his blow and the fighting devil was still strong within him. Groping his way to his feet, the sniper assumed an attitude of defence.

"Come on!" said Bowdy in an energetic tone. "I have no time to waste and I cannot strike ye when ye're sickly like that. Man! Ye should be ashamed of yerself. Fighter indeed!"

"English pig-dog" grunted the sniper and sweltering into a tornado of incoherent threats which the Englishman could not understand, he swept Bowdy round in a ring and landed lightning blows several times in quick succession. All the man's enormous vitality seemed to have been rekindled, a million beasts of prey were loose in his body. Benners, struggling fiercely in an endeavour to live through the tempest of his

enemy's wrath, groped for a clinch and swept into its embrace. Here he was safe for a moment and hoped that the German would consume his strength. In this anticipated waste of the opponent's strength lay Benners' hope of success. Leaning his chin on the German's shoulder he had a moment to look round.

Unreality and ghostliness lay over No Man's Land and an uncanny atmosphere settled on the levels. Away down by Loos a bombardment had commenced and the red flashes of the guns lit up the restless salient. Near at hand could be seen a barbed wire entanglement, probably the enemy's.

Benners saw the flashes of the shells and asked himself what the time was. He felt that he had been fighting for hours and it appeared to him that he could never get the business to an end. The sniper seemed stronger than ever now; the man was surging with life and mad with hatred. He was a fiend, incarnate, terrible. Bowdy wondered vaguely as he snuggled his head over the sniper's shoulders if the man was tired, if he felt that the contest had lasted long enough.

As in answer to the unspoken thought, the German ducked and caught his man by the ankles and tried to raise him to his shoulders.

Vaguely it drifted into Benners' mind that the German intended to throw him head foremost into the wires and he shuddered slightly and bent to resist the efforts which his opponent made to grip him.

For fully ten minutes both men swayed unsteadily as Benners disputed every inch of the ground on the way towards the entanglement. The sniper was irresistible, and step by step he urged his man nearer and nearer to the horrible barbs. Bowdy now knew what the man's intentions were and he summoned up all his strength. The blood from a gashed eyebrow was blinding him, but instinctively he did his utmost to press forward in an opposite way to that by which the sniper was taking him. Clutching and straining, he resisted gamely until suddenly he felt himself lifted clean from the ground and resting on the German's shoulders. There was a hurried rush towards the wires, the sniper holding on with all his strength and Bowdy struggling to break free. One of his hands stretched over the German's shoulders and Bowdy closed his fist and began to thump the man on the back. With a yell of rage, the sniper bent down, then straightened his back quickly and flung Bowdy from him. But he had miscalculated his throw and Bowdy, landing

on his feet, had escaped from the danger that threatened him. But only for a moment. His man was upon him again and the Englishman was flung with a crash into the barbed contraption of war. Bowdy was up in a flash; his clothes torn and his body aching, and he was upon the sniper striking out fiercely for his stomach, landing four lightning blows. His opponent went down, falling like a log, and lay still.

Benners, maimed, sore and bleeding, fixed an imperturbable stare on a rising starshell and the stare slowly resolved itself into a weary smile. For fully two minutes he stood thus, silent, with one eye (the other had been bunged up) fixed on the scene in front, the barbed wire entanglements, and the enemy's trench which showed clearly, barely eighty yards away.

"God, it was a fight!" he muttered. "A damned hard fight. I suppose I must have a look around for my bayonet now. And a professional wrestler too."

At that moment half a dozen dark forms took shape on Bowdy's right. An enemy patrol probably! Bowdy lay down quietly, rubbed his eyes and listened. Nothing could be seen now and nothing could be heard save the deep breathing of the sniper. "I hope he doesn't come to and

kick up a row," said Bowdy in a whisper. "I can't fight a dozen with my fists; one was enough."

Something rustled on the ground near him and a head appeared rising over the dark grass. Then a second head came into view and a third. The men were crawling towards Bowdy and were now very near.

Then a voice spoke in a low whisper.

"Blimey!" it said; "there's nuffink 'ere. I think there's the German wires."

"That you, Spudhole?" Benners whispered.

"Oo's that?" came the answer. "You, Bowdy?"

"That's right," said Benners, getting to his feet. "Don't make a noise. Where are you coming to?"

"We're looking for your body," said Spudhole, standing upright. "Gawd! We thought ye wor dead. Wot 'ave ye been doin'?"

"I've been fighting," said Bowdy. "Had a bit of a row with this man lying here."

" 'E looks as if 'e's been in the wars," said Snogger, who was leading the search party. "By Gawd, ye 'ave been knockin' 'im about . . . . I suppose we'll 'ave to carry 'im back."

"Do whatever you like with him," said Bowdy.

"I'll not be able to help. It'll be as much as I can do to carry myself in."

The party got back to the trench an hour later. The sniper was searched and in his pockets was found in addition to other things, his own photograph taken when he had appeared on the English music halls as a professional wrestler.

He was carried down to the dressing-station on a stretcher; Bowdy Benners walked down, and both men were treated by the same M.O.

A month later Bowdy got a clasp to his D.C.M.

CHAPTER XV

TATERS AND VASELINE

Rations enough to go round;
Rations enough to go round;
  Gawd, it's enough!
  And it's horrible stuff;
But still there's enough to go round.
(From "The Song of the Best Fed Army.")

IN the village the houses were fractured by high explosive shells, the windows were paneless and the doors latchless, chimneys had been hurled to the ground and pounded to dust. Now in the Summer it was sad to see the fallen homes of the little people, especially in these days soft with sunshine, glorious days when men whispered to themselves secretly: "How good, how very good it is to be alive." The mad vitality of life exulted itself amidst scenes of demolition and decay; young blood pulsed warmly, the quick walked through the barren streets of the village, young men pleased with their vigour and their calling. Man values ex-

istence in haunts where he holds insecure purchase of life.

A solitary violet peeped coyly out from between two bricks which topped a heap of rubble by the roadway near the church. The heap of rubble had once been a home. The cataclysm of continents, the hatred of kings, the mustering of armies, the thunder of guns, were all needed in the making of this—a mean little nook on a rubble heap where a modest violet blossomed.

Like cats to their accustomed haunts the natives clung to their village and braved danger and death in preference to exile. But now in the day of big things the authorities removed the villagers and sent them back to localities further away from the firing line.

The villagers left the place without a moan; placid fatalists who had lived and died midst the thunder of a thousand guns; they accepted the change mutely and left in silence their native place when ordered to do so. They took away much of their portable property and left much of it behind. On the eve of Lammas Day Spudhole Bubb caught two homeless chickens fluttering despairing wings outside the estaminet La Concorde in the village.

"'Ow am I to kill these 'ere h'animals?" he

asked Bowdy Benners, who accompanied him. Bowdy's face still bore the marks of his encounter with the German sniper.

"Put a bullet through them," answered Bowdy, looking at the chickens.

"That'll blow 'em to blazes," said Bubb.

"Then wring their necks."

"'Ow?"

"Like this," said Bowdy getting hold of a water-bottle by the neck and swinging it round his head.

"I've a better plan," said Bubb gazing at the door of the estaminet. "You open that there door and I'll 'old the neck of the 'en against the jamb. I'll say 'One! two! free!' And at the word 'free' you swings the door wiv a bang against the post an' you'll snick the neck of a 'en like winkin'."

The operation was performed with great success, the chickens were decapitated and Bubb's thumb was bashed into an ugly purple.

"That's a go," he muttered. "Not much of a gyme killin' chickens like this."

"Not much of a gyme indeed," said Bowdy. "But they'll make a good meal, these fowl."

"An' there's a bloomin' dawg too as was left

behind," said Bubb, pointing his finger at the top window of the estaminet.

It was looking down at the two soldiers, a lean dog with plaintive eyes and a queer crooning cry which said as plainly as any doggie can say: "Take me away from this place."

"Why doesn't it come down the stairs?" asked Bowdy Benners.

"Why?" said Bubb. "'Cos there ain't no stairs; they've been blown away by a shell."

"Then we've got to get the poor thing down," said Bowdy.

"'Ow?" asked Bubb, then without giving Benners time to answer, he said: "Oh, I knows 'ow. There's a ladder round the corner. We put it up and take the beggar down."

Raising the ladder they placed it against the window sill, clambered up and rescued the dog which they placed on the street. Then Bowdy and Bubb went up the ladder again and entered the room.

"What's that thing under the bed?" asked Bowdy who had noticed a dark bundle on the ground.

Bubb peeped under and drew back his head as suddenly as if somebody had given him a blow on the face.

"It's a dead bloke," he said. "Let's get out."

They reached the street to find the dog lying on the pavement wagging its tail.

"It's so pleased with us," said Bowdy. "It might have died with hunger up there."

"Pleased!" echoed Bubb. "The damned ungrateful swine! Take that, and that!"

The two kicks were neatly delivered on the animal's hindquarters and it rushed off, howling.

"Ate our two blurry chickens and us rescuin' 'im. Anyway we've the taters. We'll get back to the trench and cook 'em."

"I'll be back as soon as you," said Bowdy. "But I'll run down to Rentoul and get a bottle of champagne. I've a few francs to spare."

On reaching the trenches Bubb found Flanagan just finishing a good dinner of fried potatoes and onions.

"Blimey, I've taters, lots of 'em and if you give me some h'onions I'll make myself a bit of a feed," said Bubb to Flanagan. "I do feel empty inside."

"Yes, I've got some onions to spare," said Flanagan. "Are you going to cook now?"

"I'm goin' to cook now," said Bubb, "but I want some lard or something greasy for fryin'."

"Good idea," said Flanagan.

"What did you fry the taters in?" asked Bubb.

"Oh, I fried them in—vaseline," was Flanagan's reply.

"Git out!"

"Yes, I did."

"Truth?"

"Oh, it's quite true," Flanagan lied, "you should try it."

"So I will," said the simple Bubb, and so he did. He used a whole box of vaseline, frying his taters on a mess-tin lid placed over a little fire at the base of a traverse. He ate his portion with great zest, vowing that he never had had a better repast in all his life. Part of the feed he kept for Bowdy.

Flanagan, delighted with the little joke, told Sergeant Snogger how Spudhole Bubb had used vaseline in frying potatoes. Snogger came up to Bubb as the latter sat smoking a Woodbine in the corner of the dug-out.

"Spudhole Bubb," he said, "what's wrong with ye?"

"Wiv me?" asked Bubb. "There's nuffink wrong wiv me."

"Ye're lookin' very pale," said Snogger. "I never saw a man look as bad. Have ye had no dinner?"

"No dinner!" exclaimed Bubb. "I 'ad the best meal ever I 'ad."

"It can't have agreed with you," said Snogger. "You look as white as a ghost."

The sergeant walked away and Flanagan poked his head through the door.

"Good God, Bubb!" he exclaimed, "what has happened to you?"

"'Appened to me!" said Bubb. "Nuffink, man. Wot gyme are yer up to?"

"No game at all," said Flanagan. "But you look bad. You should go and see the doctor this evening."

Bubb looked in the little mirror which he always carried about with him (he was really a devil for the girls), and he thought that he was looking white.

"But I don't feel bad," he said to Flanagan.

"You mayn't feel bad," said the Irishman, "but by heaven! you look bad. Is it yer nerves that are givin' way?"

"I've no nerves," said Bubb.

Bowdy, who had just returned, was the next to pass a remark on Bubb's condition.

"What has happened to you, matey?" he asked. "You look like a dead hen."

"I'm orl right," said Bubb, but there was a

note of concern in his voice. "I 'ad the best dinner ever I 'ad a moment ago. There's some left for you."

"Has it disagreed with you?" asked Bowdy. "What kind of dinner was it?"

"Taters and h'onions fried in vaseline," was Bubb's reply. "The same taters that we got . . . ."

"Vaseline!" Bowdy repeated, "Vaseline! Vaseline!"

"Wot's wrong wiv vaseline?" Bubb enquired.

"What's wrong with it, man," said Bowdy, "everything's wrong with it. Devil blow me blind, it's poison, pure poison. No wonder you're looking white."

Bubb cast an imploring look on Bowdy. He was now evidently frightened.

"I do feel something wrong with me inside," he said.

"I will see the M.O. this evening."

. . . . . .

Bubb had a temperature that evening, whether due to fright or the ill effects of potatoes fried in vaseline it was impossible to say. The doctor sent him back to the hospital at ———, a shell-stricken town where the wounded were con-

fined to cellars before going further back from the firing line.

Wrapped in blankets, Bubb went to sleep on the floor, and about one o'clock in the morning he woke up and looked around him. A candle stuck on the cold ground burned timidly and big black shadows lurked in the corners of the apartment. Opposite Bubb an R.A.M.C. orderly sat on a biscuit box dozing, the unlighted stump of a cigarette between his fingers. Near Bubb another patient lay asleep, his mouth wide open, and his knees hunched up so that they formed a little hill that dominated the cold clammy floor of the cellar.

Spudhole looked up at the roof where the light played in little ghostly ripples. As he watched, a spider slipped out of a hole directly overhead and dropped slowly down towards his face. In the half light the spider looked an immense size and its legs spread out as if endeavouring to clutch something. Fascinated Bubb watched it draw nearer, nearer, until it almost touched his face.

"Git out ye lobster!"

He raised his hand as he spoke and aimed a blow at the insect and missed. The spider clambered up again and disappeared.

"Blast the bloomin' thing!" he muttered and turned on his side. "Oh, blimey! . . . . Good mornin'!"

A large toad was sitting on the corner of his blanket, a mere hand's breadth away, and looking at him with a pair of big glistening eyes. For a moment the man and the toad looked fixedly at one another, then the toad hopped away and disappeared round the corner of the bed.

"Well, blimey," said Bubb, cuddling up in the clothes and trying to sleep. He was unsuccessful for his mind followed the toad. "Where 'as it gone?" he muttered. "Spiders as big as lobsters, and toads as big as helephants. This 'ere place is 'aunted. Now where 'as that 'ere vermin gone?"

He turned round on his side and again his gaze fell on the toad. The thing had ascended the hill formed by the knees of Bubb's mate, and there on the eminence it sat, its eyes fixed on the open mouth of the sleeper.

"Blimey! It's goin' to jump in," said Bubb. "Raise the foresight a little you bounder and 'op! . . . . Ten to one that you miss it."

Moodily contemplative, the toad sat silent, its big shining eyes fixed on the cavern in front.

"Jump, you beggar!" yelled Bubb, shouting at

the top of his voice. "One good 'op and you'll score a bull."

He fell into a paroxysm of mirth; the R.A.M.C. orderly awoke, rubbed his eyes, lifted the cigarette end which had fallen to the floor, put it in his mouth, and came across to Bubb.

"What's amusin' you, chummy?" he asked.

"The spider and the toad," said Bubb. "A big lobster of a spider and then the toad. It's tryin' to jump into the man's mouth. Look there! Ten to one it misses!"

"That's all right," said the orderly with a bland smile of understanding. "You just lie down quietly and try and have a little sleep."

"But the toad," Bubb remonstrated. "It's just goin' to jump."

"I know, I know," said the orderly. "I see it myself. But try and compose yourself, chummy."

"But, man, it's real," said Bubb sitting up. "Look yourself and you'll see it. Don't think I'm off my napper."

"I don't think anything of the sort," said the orderly still smiling. "I often see things 'ere, myself. You lie down again and you'll be as right as rain in the morning."

He put his fingers on Bubb's pulse, held them

there for a moment, then pressed the boy gently back into the blankets.

"I tell you there's a toad," said Bubb, struggling to get up again. "Look at that man lyin' there and see the toad on 'is knees. It's goin' to 'op into the bloke's mouth in a minute."

To humour the patient, the orderly looked as he was directed and sure enough there was the toad, a real one, not a phantom originating from the disordered imagination of a sick man, perched on the knees of the sleeping patient.

"So there is," said the orderly. "I thought you were delirious, matey. Well, we'll put the thing out," he said and shoved it off the blanket on to the floor.

"Ye're not a sport," said Bubb and his voice was charged with contempt. "Why didn't you let it 'op? I was bettin' on it. Now my bloomin' toad 'as gone. Bet yer it'll not come in again either," said Bubb sadly.

"I'll bet you it doesn't," said the orderly, but in a different tone.

Bubb returned to his regiment three days later, a healthy and wiser man. Afterwards he would never take part in a conversation wherein vaseline was mentioned, but the sight of a frog al-

ways brought memories of toads to his mind, and all conversation had to be cut dead until Bubb had narrated for the hundredth time the tale of a toad in a cellar.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ROOKY

What awaits you, boy, out yonder, where the great guns rip and thunder,
There's a menace in their message, guns that called you from afar,
But where'er your fortune guide you may no woe or ill betide you—
Heaven speed you, little soldier, gaily going to the war.

(From "Soldier Songs.")

THE stifling heat of the summer day had given place to the coolness of night and a big moon rode gallantly amidst the stars of the dark blue eastern sky. A search-light felt the country with a long, pale arm, lighting up the road, village and wood for miles around; a galaxy of starshells stood over the firing line where the meteoric flashes of bursting shells rioted along the horizon of war.

Back in a village by La Bassée canal lights shone in the windows of houses and through the chinks of shutters. The poplars which lined the village streets showed black and solitary against the red-brick cottages, their shadows stretched

straight along the pavement spreading out to an intricate tracery of tremulous boughs which moved backwards and forwards as the soft night breeze caught them . . . . The moonlight rippled over the roofs, the walls, and the grey, dusty road; the canal lapped sleepily against its banks; soldiers walked up and down the streets smoking, laughing and chatting; women came out from the cottages bearing pails which they placed under the pumps and filled with water. All was peaceful here, only twice had the village been struck by shells and then the roofs of two houses had been shattered. In twenty-four hours, however, the willing hands of the villagers had made the roofs whole again.

In the attic of a dwelling that stood by the riverside, a party of soldiers, three in all, were billeted. The boys were in a gay, good humour, for the day had been pay day and two bottles of champagne had been bought and the second bottle had just been opened.

Bowdy Benners was there, sitting on a bundle of straw under the niche in which a candle was placed, surveying the newly-drawn cork with a lazy smile, his hands under his thighs and his short, powerful legs stretched out in front to their fullest extent. He was dressed in shirt,

trousers and socks, his braces were tied round his waist, his hairy chest was bare, and his identity disc tied round his massive neck with a piece of twine was almost hidden in the hair.

Opposite him sat Harry Bubb, nothing the worse after his tater and vaseline meal. A bright sparkle was in his alert eyes, his legs were crossed and the fingers of his left hand kept strumming idly on the floor. His right hand gripped a mess-tin which he pushed towards the champagne bottle in a slow, guileless manner as if he was doing it knowingly.

Flanagan was there, stripped to the waist and rubbing his body with a towel. He had been out through the village and had just come back, sweating profusely. He had eaten at a café round the corner and made a study of "the movements of masticating jaws" as he expressed it.

"It's damned interesting to watch people eat," he said. "Some eat slowly as if deliberating whether they should swallow the food or spit it out, some eat quickly, trippingly as it were, and some gorge. Those who eat slowly keep their mouths shut, those who eat quickly show their teeth all the time, and those who gorge simply gorge. We were sitting at a long table and I was at the end of the seat. I had a look along

the line of moving jaws rising and falling, at the man next to me having a canter . . . ."

"A canter?" queried Bubb.

"Yes, a canter round his teeth with his tongue," said Flanagan; "and at the man opposite whose moving jaw shook his ears until I thought they would fall off!"

Flanagan got no further with his chatter. The door opened, Sergeant Snogger entered followed by a stranger, and glanced keenly about him.

"Watch that candle," he said; "it will fall down on the straw and burn the whole damned place out if you are not careful. And that window, what about it? The light's showing froo and you'll have a shell across 'ere if you're not careful. You're not at 'ome now, boys."

" 'Aven't been in Blighty for eighteen months, sarg," said Bubb blandly.

"I've got a new mate for you fellows," said the sergeant, paying no heed to Bubb's remark. " 'E 'as just come out an 'e's for this 'ere section . . . . And another thing," he said, "I s'pose you think yourselves lucky gettin' your pay to-day and gettin' a good night's sleep tonight after fillin' your guts with grub and fizz. Don't you, now?"

"Yes, of course," Bubb assented.

"Well, you're damned unlucky," said the sergeant. "We've got ter go up ter the trenches ter-night."

"Blimey!" "Damn!" "Curse it!" Three voices yelled.

"We're startin' off as soon as we can, so get ready," said the sergeant. "Every man wipe 'is wifle wiv a woily wag 'fore 'e goes, for 'e may need it 'fore 'e comes back . . . . Buck to when you give me a wet and get ready."

They gave the sergeant a drink and started to pack up their things. Only when they had finished and sat down to wait for the call to move had they time to pay any attention to the new mate, the boy who had just come out from home.

He had helped them at the making up of their kits, oiled their rifles and rushed out to the baker's shop near at hand and bought two loaves to take up to the trenches. When he returned, the others were sitting on the floor waiting for him.

He came in with a brisk step, placed the loaves on the floor and looked at his mates. In carriage he had a certain individual grace, and his face, good-looking and youthful, wore an expression of intense expectation. A traveller within sight of a long-sought objective might look as that boy did. His age might be about nineteen, he

looked seventeen. When he saw the men looking at him, he smiled awkwardly and blushed as if he had been found guilty of a mean action.

"Well, wot d'yer fink of it?" asked Bubb.

"Of this place?" asked the boy.

"No, not of this place, but the 'ole blurry business," said Bubb; "o' this 'ere war."

"I don't know what to think of the war, but I love being out here," said the boy, putting his hand in his pocket and bringing out a packet of cigarettes. "I couldn't get out before; my mother spoke to the authorities back in England, and I couldn't get away until I was nineteen."

"And ye're glad to be out 'ere?" asked Bubb in an incredulous voice, then added: "Of course you are. I was dyin' ter get out 'ere myself . . . But I know where I'd like ter get now . . . Thanks, matey."

Spudhole put the cigarette in his mouth and the newcomer lit it with a match. He gave the others cigarettes also and lit the last three with the same match; the stranger was the third smoker. This was not discovered until it was done.

"Devil blow me blind!" exclaimed Bowdy Benners. "He lit his cig——" Then he stopped, and a moment's silence ensued.

"It's always unlucky," said Spudhole. "D'ye mind old Stumpy . . . ."

"Hold your row, you old woman!" Benners exclaimed.

"The superstition is a modern one," said Flanagan, blowing the smoke of a cigarette through his nostrils. "Invented, I suppose, by Bryant and May's to increase the output of matches."

"But wot about old Stumpy?" asked Bubb.

"Stumpy be damned!" exclaimed Benners, who was seldom moved to such a state of excitement. "Hold your jaw, Spudhole."

"So we're going up to the trenches to-night," said the newcomer in an eager voice.

"Yes, we're going up," said Flanagan moodily. "It's always going up. I suppose you'll be quite pleased going into action for the first time."

"Delighted," said the boy, and his hearers chuckled at the frank admission.

"It's young blood and not knowin' things that makes you say that," said Bubb, shaking his head with an air of wisdom at which his mates would have laughed if their rest had been assured for another week. But now as they sat there waiting for the signal to move up to the fighting line

which they knew so well, it was a different matter. . . . .

The talk turned to England; the newcomer, whose name was Frank Reynolds, had much to tell about home, his people, his life at school, and above all, about his life in the Army. He was the only child of a head clerk in a London Bank, his father had died recently, and now only the mother remained at home. She lived in Hampstead, and was rather well to do, having money left to her by a rich relative. She was very fond of her boy and would send him parcels twice a week.

"No cigarettes, though," said Reynolds. "She doesn't know that I smoke, and I daren't tell. It would hurt her. . . . . I learned to smoke since I joined the Army; just about three cigarettes a day."

"I could smoke that many when drinking my tea," said Bubb.

Conversation ceased at that moment, for the whistle was blown in the street and the soldiers were forming up preparatory to moving off to the trenches.

The battalion set off and marched along the road by the river, company after company, with little connecting files in between. Not the slight-

est breeze was awake, the river was silent, and the tall, graceful poplars which lined their route looked blacker and straighter than usual. They seemed to have gone to sleep even as they stood. The whole world was in repose, the battalion's movement was a sacrilege against the gods of the still night.

The very trenches were quiet now, the artillery riot had died down and only a few starshells rose into the mysterious heights of the eastern sky. The company in front set up a brisk pace which required long, quick strides to follow. Benners' section turned off from the river and marched up a steep incline to the top of a low hill opening out on a wide, far-reaching plain, which under the pale moonlight, looked more immense, and merged as it seemed into the distant sky.

Here and there a tall chimney stack stood high in air, dark shadows clinging to its base in startling contrast to the moonlight which rippled like molten silver over the top. A thin, white mist trailed across the meadows in long, formless streaks, bunching in the hollows and breaking away on the open. The air was full of the smell of water and mist and growing grass, in short, of the atmosphere of a summer night.

Smoking was not allowed. The enemy's

trenches, miles away though they were, looked down on the road, and the glowing cigarette ends might be noticed. Then the road would be shelled. . . .

Spudhole and Reynolds marched side by side, with Flanagan and Bowdy Benners immediately in front. From time to time they spoke of one thing and another, more especially about their hard luck in not getting a month's rest which had been promised to them for some time. They had expected to go back on the following morning, but instead it looked as if they were going to spend the morrow and a few other morrows in the trenches.

"Just our luck," said Flanagan. "It's always the same, always and eternally the same damned grind."

"Why do they send up green lights?" asked Reynolds in a whisper, and added, "They do look pretty."

"Pretty!" laughed Bubb. "If you was up in the trenches now you'd 'ear some pretty langwidge. They're signals for the artillery to bust up a dug-out or two, them green lights."

"Who's sending them up?" asked Reynolds.

"Us, maybe," said Bubb, "and again maybe

it's not us. No one ever knows wot's wot in this 'ere job. It's always a muddle."

"But it's quiet enough now," said Reynolds. "How far are we from the trenches?"

"About three miles."

The battalion entered a village and marched up a wide street towards the full moon. The companies in front looked like dark, compact, heavy masses which did not seem to move but which could not be overtaken. A pump on the pavement was running and the water glittered like burnished silver as it fell to the cobbles. A shutter hung loose on a window and a woman came out and tried to fasten it, moving quietly as if afraid to make a noise. Reynolds was surprised to find a woman up so late; it was almost midnight now. . . . .

"This place is quiet enough," said Reynolds, speaking to Bubb. "One wouldn't think that the place was so near the trenches. . . . . Do they ever fire at this village?"

"Sometimes," said Bubb, "at the other end. There!"

The deep, bass note of a bursting explosive swept through the village, awaking myriad long-drawn echoes, and died away.

"Shelling in front," said Flanagan in a trenchant whisper.

"I hope it's not the road," said Bubb.

"I don't think it's the road," said Bowdy Benners. "It sounded to the left a bit. But you can't tell with the echoes."

But further conversation was then impossible; the battalion formed into two files and plodded ahead. . . . . Round the next corner Frank Reynolds came in touch with the war. A limber lay in the middle of the street shattered to pieces, the two ponies and the driver dead, and a sluggish trail of something dark crawling away from the scene of the wreck. Instinctively the boy knew that he was looking on blood and a queer sensation gripped the pit of his stomach. At the same moment he thought of the woman who was trying to close the shutters two hundred yards away and a feeling of shame swept through his heart.

"Am I afraid?" he asked himself. "And a woman going on with her work beside me just as if nothing was happening."

The R.A.M.C. were already at work, not in the vicinity of the limber, for there all help was useless, but on the pavement under the shadow of the poplars where four or five men were lying down, wounded and groaning.

Here the village had suffered, the houses were crumpled and shattered, the tiles had been flung off the rafters, the walls were smashed, the trees on the pavement were cut to splinters. Big holes showed in the streets and over all the ruin and destruction the moon shone calmly and the stars glimmered. But the atmosphere of the night had changed; a strange pungent odour filled the air, and Reynolds knew that he was smelling the battlefield.

"I must not tell mother about this," he said. "If she knew she couldn't sleep a wink at night. . . . . I never thought. . . . . I suppose there will be worse sights"

CHAPTER XVII

YOUNG BLOOD

Over the top is cold, matey;
You lie on the field alone—
Didn't I love you of old, matey,
Dearer than blood of my own?
You were my dearest chum, matey,
(Gawd, but your face is white)
And now, though reliefs have come, matey,
I'm going alone to-night.

(From "Soldier Songs.")

AT one o'clock in the morning the London Irish were in occupation of the trenches; the battalion which they had relieved were just moving away. Reynolds' section were lucky enough to find a dug-out, and here they threw down their loaves and other luxuries which the Government had not supplied.

"Now we must make ourselves as comfortable as we can," said Flanagan as he lit a cigarette. "I'm for a sleep until it's my turn for sentry."

Snogger, who came to the dug-out door at that moment, heard the remark and chuckled. Having some work to do which needed volun-

teers, he saw scope for his peculiar type of humour.

"Goin' to 'ave a kip, Flanagan?" he asked in a gentle voice. "Turnin' in fer a spell?"

"Just for a while," said Flanagan; "an hour or two."

"Well ye're damned unlucky," said the sergeant with a chuckle. "We're goin' ter raid the henemy's trenches. We want to see what they're doin'. Indefication purposes ye know. They're too damned quiet 'ere. And you know when the German is keepin' quiet ye've got to oil yer hipe."

The section was up and alert in an instant; anticipation flushed every face.

"I'm in this 'ere game," said Bubb in a vehement voice. "Larst time I was out o' it."

"All's in it, that is, every man in this platoon 'cept them just out," said the sergeant. "They'll stay 'ere an' mind the 'ouse while we're away."

"I'm going out in the raid," said Reynolds in an eager voice. "I want to be in the fun."

"Yer do, do yer?" asked the sergeant, scratching his head. "Ye never do wot ye want in this 'ere crush, my boy," he bellowed. "Ye just do wot I tell you; an' you'll find that quite enuff, 'fore ye're 'ere very long. If ye do wot I tell

you and do it well ye're all right. I'll make it easy for you. That's me, Snogger."

Reynolds lay back against the wall of the dug-out, his fair, youthful face lit by the glow of the candle which Flanagan had just placed in a niche of the wall. The boy was bitterly disappointed; the others were going over the top and he was to be left alone. He opened his lips to say something and his voice faltered; he was on the verge of tears.

"Is there any means of getting out with you?" he asked. "Couldn't somebody stay back and let me go in his place?"

"The bloke as doesn't want ter go isn't in this 'ere regiment," said Bubb.

The sergeant, who had just gone outside, returned carrying a tin filled with a substance black and soft like soot.

"Now boys," he said, as he placed the tin on the floor; "cover yer faces over with this an' be like niggers. A white face can be seen a good distance on a moonlight night, an' if ye're seen on this 'ere job, it'll be all up with the party—they'll be damned unlucky.

"An' when ye've done that, get arf a dozen bombs apiece and bring 'em wiv you," the sergeant continued. "Also, get some brushwood—

ye'll find it out 'ere ready for yer—and ye'll g'over disguised as a shrubbery. We'll crawl across, get up to the German trench and fling the bombs in. Then we'll come back again, the 'ole lot of us, if we're lucky. . . . . What the devil's that?"

The stretcher-bearers brought him in from the trench, a rifleman with a wound showing in his shoulder, and placed him on the floor.

"One of the party that was to cross," said the sergeant; then asked: "Much 'urt, old man?"

"Not much wrong," was the reply of the wounded man. "I'm sorry I'm not in the raid. . . . . I looked across and then my shoulder burned. . . . ."

"Well, I must get another man," said the sergeant. "You'll do, Reynolds. Get yer face blacked and get some bombs."

The men set to work in the dug-out and blackened their faces, procured their bombs and branches, and got into raiding order. In ten minutes' time they were out on the open, thirty men making towards the German trenches.

Flanagan lit a cigarette, put his hands in his trousers pockets and leant his back against the wall of the dug-out. Bubb looked at him.

"Yer bloomin' old phizz is sooty enough,

Flan," he said; "but yer teeth don't arf look white; they'll be seen miles away."

"I suppose I should black them," said Flanagan. "It would be for my own good. Natural selection has not fashioned me for this war environment. Raiding by night is a job for chimney sweeps. They could walk over to the German trenches and they would not be seen in the darkness. Darwin would be very interested in these raids. If he saw one he would write a treatise on Artificial Selection and call it The Survival of the Fittest Disguised. We are disguised; we're one with the night. We accommodate ourselves to our environment like the fox that changes its coat to white when the snow comes."

"These 'ere branches ain't arf a barney," said Bubb, who understood only a little of what Flanagan was saying.

"Birnam Wood! Copied from Macbeth," said Flanagan with an air of scorn. "There's nothing new in the world. There were trenches and dug-outs at the siege of Sebastopol."

Sergeant Snogger came in at that moment, his body festooned with bombs, his face the colour of ebony. He looked at his men.

"Wot are yer waitin' for?" he asked. "Gawd,

ye are slummicky. Come on, we've got to get across to-night. To-morrow won't do for this 'ere job."

The party went out, crossed the parapet into No Man's Land and advanced in open order, six yards' interval between each man and his neighbour. Reynolds near the centre of the line, had Flanagan on his right, Bowdy Benners on his left, whilst the sergeant, who led the party, moved warily along, a few yards in advance. From time to time he halted and waited for those who followed to come abreast and issued orders which were passed from the centre to the flanks in whispers. He used the words "damned unlucky" whenever he spoke.

"Spread out from the centre," he cautioned. "The whole party's bunchin' up. If the henemy flings some dirt across, yer'll be damned unlucky."

Again he gave the order "Close in in the centre! You're losing touch. Some of yer'll be goin' in to the German trench all alone; then yer'll be damned unlucky."

Whenever a star-shell rose in air, the raiders flung themselves flat to the ground and waited for the flare to die out. As they went down, they placed the branches over their heads and held

them there until the order to advance was given. Lying thus, they were immune from discovery, for an enemy patrol ten yards away would mistake the prone bundles under their covering of branches for derelict bushes which the fury of incessant shell fire had spared.

Star-shells rose at frequent intervals from the enemy lines; the British sent up very few. This was the case all along the line. The enemy, in eternal dread of raids, kept up a continual watch over No Man's Land.

The party, now half way across, lay down, for a starshell rose from the German trench, stood high and lit the derelict levels with the brilliance of day. Then oscillating sleepily from side to side, it dropped a myriad petals of flame and sank lazily to earth.

"They're getting the wind up," said Bowdy Benners, whispering across to Reynolds. "We'll have some dirty work 'fore we come back."

The boy made no answer. Lying prone, he listened to the silence. How calm it was under the great, glorious moon. The levels were in a dream, a dream of Fairyland, and everything save the starshells and the glint of light that played on his rifle barrel was as motionless as though in a realm of frozen enchantment. The

night drew closer to the boy; it seemed caressing his young head and body. He even felt sleepy. It would be good to lie there and rest.

His eyes looked out in front on a dead man who lay there, scarcely a yard away. The boy did not feel afraid. That a dead soldier should be there seemed quite natural, in keeping with the new life which the youth had entered.

"I suppose he was killed on a raid," he thought. "I wonder if he was going out or coming back . . . What would mother . . . ." He looked at the dead soldier with a fresh interest and his eyes filled with tears.

He saw that the man was dressed in khaki and he lay on his back, his knees up and his bayonet pointing in air. From the bayonet standard to the man's head stretched an unfinished cobweb on which the spider was still busily working, fashioning circle and line. Under the moonlight the web was a brilliant and beautiful dream. . . . .

"Come out o' it, Reynold," said the sergeant, who was annoyed because the boy had not heard the first order to advance. "Spread out a little on both sides, for we've got to keep a look-out for a henemy patrol. We're not out on a six months' tour now," he added. "If yer ——— think so, ye're damned unlucky."

The men spread out at the double and lay down again, leaving an interval of some twelve yards between each man and his neighbour. Reynolds lay flat, his hand gripping his rifle. Now and then a breeze rustled across the levels, set the poppy flowers nodding to one another, and died away again. The smell of the wet grasses and the damp earth was in his nostrils, and the narcotic odour of the soil almost lulled him into slumber.

A mouse rustled along the ground in front, in and out amongst the nodding poppy flowers and disappeared. Near him somebody stifled a cough, but the sound struck harshly on his ears. Apart from that, silence and suspense.

He lay flat, his face on his hands, his legs stretched out to their full extent, and listened. Well to the left a mate whistled; something had aroused his suspicions, probably the enemy patrol. A bird rose from the grass, shrieking as if in pain, and flew away. The lights died out; the level fields looked deathlike.

A starshell rose up to the sky and settled over Reynolds' head. Under its light the country seemed to become more immense, it stretched out on all sides into endless distances. . . . . He lost consciousness for an instant.

"Well, the night is very long in passing," he said in an audible voice, opening his eyes for a moment. "I am very sleepy, but if I doze off something may happen."

He had a desire for something exciting to take place, something that would keep him awake. He even felt hungry, and did not particularly want to fight. Even a sleepy boy does not like fighting at two o'clock in the morning on an empty stomach when there was so much to eat near at hand. . . . How strange that he had not noticed it before. Probably he had been looking in the wrong direction. But there out in front in the midst of the poppies stood a house with the windows brilliantly lighted up and a girl standing at the door. From the way she laughed when he approached he knew that she was glad to see him. She made way and he entered the dining-room, where the table was spread out for dinner. The food was not laid yet, but on a table in the corner he could see a grand array of steaming dishes.

"It's splendid," he said. "Not like army stuff. It's . . . ."

The girl whom he met at the door came into the room, approached the table in the corner, and brought over a plate of soup, which she placed in

front of him. He looked for a spoon, but could not find one.

"You've forgotten," he said to the girl. "I haven't got a spoon."

"How stupid of me," she replied. "I'm awfully sorry. I was thinking of something else. But now I'll get a spoon. I always carry a spoon no matter where I go."

"So do I," was Reynolds' answer. "I always carry a knife, fork and spoon in my pack. They're gone now."

The girl disappeared for a moment. When she came into the boy's world again she carried a spoon in her hand.

"This is for you," she laughed. "It's silver-plated with a monogram—your own monogram."

As she spoke she lifted his soup and rushed off with it.

"Come back with the plate," cried Reynolds, rising to his feet. "I haven't eaten yet."

"Don't get excited," she called back over her shoulder, "I'll pass it along in a moment. I'll pass it along, pass it along."

A strange harshness had crept into her voice, and the youth swept back into reality. The man on his right was calling to him.

"Pass it along," he called out in a loud whisper. "Pass it along."

"What's the message?" Reynolds asked.

"The right flank reports seeing an enemy patrol," was the answer.

The boy passed the message to the left but got no acknowledgment.

"I suppose the man there is asleep," he muttered. "I'll go along and see him."

He lifted his rifle and stumbled along through the gloom. When a light went up he stood still and waited for the darkness to resume his journey.

"Yes, here he is," he said, when a flare lit up the night and showed him a figure in khaki lying flat on the ground. "Asleep, of course."

"Wake up, man," he shouted, when he reached the motionless figure, bringing his hand down with a smack on the man's back. The shoulders gave way beneath the force of the blow. His hand seemed to sink into the soldier.

"Good God!" he gasped. "It's a dead man."

He left the poor thing hurriedly, found a man asleep, woke him up, delivered the message and made his way back to his post.

The strange experience had unnerved him and he lay down again, feeling that a huge dark form

was standing behind him watching every movement on his part. A breeze had risen and the waving grasses wailed a dirge in dismal unison. From somewhere far away a dog whined mournfully. . . . . The order to advance was given.

The men went forward at the double for a space and flung themselves down flat when they reached the enemy's barbed wire entanglements. Those in the centre of the party could not get across; the wires in front of them stood sturdily, untouched by artillery fire.

"Lie low," the sergeant whispered to Bowdy Benners, "and pass the word along to the left. Ask them if there's an openin'. The same message to the right."

The seconds crawled by until the answer came back from the left. "Opening here. Shall we go through?"

"Pass the message to the right and tell them to close up," said the sergeant to Benners. "Also, those on the left, get through and lie down on the other side of the wires until we join them. Pass it along."

The message went its way and the men in the centre followed it, stumbling and crouching low to avoid the eyes of the enemy sentinels. Reaching the opening, they lay down, their heads under

the branches, and waited for the party to close in.

Reynolds had a good view of the enemy's trench as he lay on the ground a dozen yards away from the reverse slope of the parapet. He saw the sandbags tilted at strange angles looking for all the world like dead men huddled together in heaps. Immediately in front lay an unexploded shell perched on the rim of a small crater, and near it was a wooden box and a heap of tins. Somebody in the trench was singing a song in a low but clear voice. The night was full of the smell of burning wood; probably the Germans were cooking a meal. . . . . Bowdy Benners and the sergeant lay in front of Reynolds, immovable as statues,—both might have been dead. . . . . Benners turned slowly round and crawled back again with a message.

"When the sergeant lifts his branch and holds it over his head, prepare to advance," he whispered. "Get your bombs ready to throw. . . . . Pass it along to right and left."

Fascinated Reynolds watched the sergeant, saw him lie still as ever for a full minute, then he raised the branch and held it over his head for an instant, brought it down again and got to his feet. As one man the party rushed forward to the rim

of the trench and began to fling their bombs in on the occupants. There was one explosion, then a second, a third and a fourth. . . . . The Germans, taken unawares, raced from one bay to another, but the bombers waited for them at every turning. In their eyes the attack might have been delivered by an army corps. Death had crept up in the night out of the unknown. Men fell, yelled in agony, and became silent, their white faces showing ghastly on the floor of the trench when the smoke of the explosions died away.

"Damned good work! Keep at it, boys!" yelled the sergeant, standing on the parapet and drawing a pin from the shoulders of a bomb. "They're damned unlucky this 'ere time."

He threw his missile at a German who was trying to enter the door of a dug-out, and stepped back to avoid the explosion.

"Blimey, it's a barney!" said Bubb, looking down in the trench. He had come to his last bomb, and wanting to "make it tell," he threw it into a dug-out door which showed in the wall of the parados. Followed an explosion accompanied by agonised yelling. . . . .

Twenty yards away Reynolds stood on a sandbag, a bomb in his hand, his eyes fixed upon a boy about his own age who, crouching against the

wall of the trench, was looking up at him. Reynolds, full of military ardour, had rushed up to the attack when the order was given, and was on the point of flinging the bomb into the trench when he noticed the young German standing motionless, paralysed with fear. Reynolds raised the bomb with the intention of throwing it, then brought it down again. The terrified foe frightened him. In the heat of passion, Reynolds would have killed him, but to take away the life of that shivering, terrified creature was not a job for the youngish newly-out. He gazed at the German, the German returned the gaze, perplexity looked at dread and became horrified. Killing was not an easy matter.

Reynolds drew back a pace, his eyes still fixed on the foe. The battle raged around him; the flash of the bursting bombs almost blinded him, the explosions shook the ground . . . . the flying splinters sang through the air.

Suddenly the order to retire came down the line; a brown figure rushed up to Reynolds shouting something about "getting out o't," seized the bomb which the youngster held and flung it into the trench on the youthful German.

The party retired hurriedly; their work was completed. "The sooner back the safer," the

sergeant yelled. "They'll open up a machine gun now and we'll be damned unlucky if we don't grease back."

Already the enemy's rifles were speaking and bullets swept by with a vicious hiss. The men stumbled through the opening in the barbed wires and rushed into the levels. Benners and Reynolds ran out together chuckling, pleased, no doubt, at the success of their enterprise. Bubb and Flanagan followed; the latter had lost his rifle and vowed that he was always unlucky.

Suddenly Reynolds fell headlong to the ground. He was on his feet immediately and rushing forward again.

"It's the damned wires," said Flanagan. "They're scattered all over the place."

As he spoke, Reynolds went down for the second time, but did not rise again. Benners came to a halt and stooped over him.

"Are you hit, chummy?" he asked.

"I got it through the breast," the boy replied. "It was that which brought me down the last time, not the wires."

Reynolds was surrounded now by his comrades. He was sitting half upright, his head sinking towards his knees, the martial elation of a few minutes ago utterly gone.

"Well, chummy, you'll be all right in time for breakfast," said Bubb, who expected that these words would buoy up the youngster's courage. But Reynolds seemed to pay no heed, a cold and sorrowful expression settled on his white face, which looked strange and unearthly in the light of the moon. The sergeant cut open the youth's tunic and looked at the wound, which showed red over the heart. There was very little bleeding.

"Oh! you'll be all right in no time," said the sergeant in a voice which was strangely soft and kind.

"No, no," said the boy, in a scarcely audible whisper. "Leave me to myself, please. . . . . I'll not live very long. . . . . It's too near the heart."

These were the last words which the men heard him speak. Ten minutes later he had passed away.

. . . . . .

"I knowed it would pan out that way," said Bubb, as he sat in his dug-out two hours later drinking hot tea from his sooty messtin.

It was dawn, the sun came up red in the east and the dewdrops glittered like diamonds on the levels.

"'Twas the same wiv old Stumpy. 'E was the third man to light 'is fag wiv the same match," said Bill. "Then 'e went up to the trenches an' 'e was shot dead."

"It's all damned rot," said Flanagan. "I knew men getting killed who never smoked a fag."

"I had a feeling that Reynolds was going under, anyway," said Benners. "And he was such a good boy, too."

"I liked him better than I cared to say," said Flanagan. "He was as eager as hell. And he's dead. He didn't have much of a run for his money."

"Takin' it all in all, we're not so blurry badly off," said Bubb. "I wunner if we're goin' ter get relieved soon. I 'ope so, anyway."

CHAPTER XVIII

BATHING

We labour in the trenches with rifle, maul and spade,
We're soldiers, cooks and carpenters, and everything to trade;
We stand on sentry-go all night and turn to kip at dawn,
But when we're dropping off to sleep it's "Up and carry on"—
For it's carry on and carry on and carry on all day;
They'll make us carry on until they carry us away;
It's carry on the whole day through, at dusk as well as dawn—
Oh blimey! will they never stop their blooming Carry On!

(From "Carry On.")

THE road by La Bassée Canal was gritty and dry and shone like a thread of gold in the afternoon sunlight. The Canal, dark and oily, was broken by hundreds of little petulant ripples; its banks were red with poppy flowers. Quiet reigned in the village of Gorre, where the London Irish were quartered. They had been out digging trenches at Cambrin the night before. Having been relieved from the fighting line, two nights after Reynolds' death, they were now supplying working parties to the trenches near La Bassée. In the present

war the pick and shovel are as important as the rifle and bayonet.

Bubb, Flanagan and Bowdy had just got up from the straw on which they had been lying.

"Let's have a bloomin' dip in the briny," said Bubb.

"Let's," said Bowdy and Flanagan.

The trio made their way out into the village. It was a glorious day. The sky was a tender blue, the green branches of the poplars which lined the street waved sleepily, the shadows of many little clouds glided across the cobbled pavement. To eastward other little clouds formed suddenly and as suddenly paled away, and the men knew that an artillery duel of slight intensity was in progress by Cuinchy.

"This ain't a bad place for a billet," said Bubb. "I could stick 'ere for duration."

"We'll soon be out of it now," said Flanagan, handing round a packet of cigarettes. "Captain Thorley said this morning that we are going to trek to the Somme. Big doings down that way."

"We're always in it when there's a row on," said Bubb. "It's no sooner see and like a place 'ere than you're out't next day. There are some fine birds in this 'ere place too. . . . . Look there

are the cooks gettin' dinner ready. Gawd they're sweatin' at the job too."

A field kitchen stood in the church square and the smoke curled up from the sooty funnel and paled away in the clear air. Here the company cooks were busy preparing dinner. Facing the Canal was a row of red-roofed houses, with a wealth of summer flowers round the doors, the windows looked out coquettishly through roses, and green ivy clambered up the walls.

To the left of the church was a snug little graveyard hidden in a spinney, and here a number of English soldiers were buried. Under a large tree stood a broken and rusty pump which was out of action. A large shell had fallen there and after the explosion some soldiers found a robin, dead. They buried it and were moved to poetry in inscribing the little bird's epitaph. The epitaph, written in large black letters, hung from the handle of the pump. This was the verse:—

> "Cock Robin lies beside this pump,
> A coal-box hit him such a thump,
> And this is all we've got to tell,
> We'll lick the swine that fired the shell."

Bubb looked at the epitaph.

"Mind the one over Sergeant Slade at Maroc?" he remarked.

"'Ere lies the remains of Sergeant Slade,
As was slow at frowin' a 'and grenade."

"Not as good as the one at the Cabaret Rouge up at Souchez," said Flanagan, and quoted:—

"This marks the fallen dug-out
Where seven heroes fell,
Strafed in a bomb-proof shelter
By a high velocity shell."

"Well, we'll go into the café and have a drink," said Bowdy. "Bubb won't refuse to go in, I know. He wants to see Emily."

"It's yourself as wants to see the bird," said Spudhole. "I don't mind sayin' that I kind o' like 'er. She's not bad lookin', almost as nice as Fifi. Mind Fifi, Bowdy?"

"Poor old Fifi," said Bowdy. "Fitz was fond of her. I remember one night seeing him kissing her over the window."

"Git out."

"True," said Bowdy. "That was when we were at Y—— Farm, and I was lying in the straw up in the barn. Snogger and Fitz and Spud and myself came in from the café and all went to bed, except my bold Fitz. He sat up and I watched him. After a while he thought everyone was sleeping and up he gets and goes downstairs. I waited for ten minutes, but he didn't

come back, so out I goes and down to see what he was up to. And what would it be but Fitz at the back of the farmhouse speaking to Fifi and kissing her. Well, it wasn't my business to spy on him, so back I comes to my roost and I was asleep before he came back."

"I always knew that 'e was a devil," said Bubb. "Pity that 'e went west. . . . . 'Ere, can yer smell the roses."

They came to the door of the café and entered. Emilie was inside sitting at a table writing a letter. She smiled at the soldiers and went on with her work. Bubb lit a cigarette, sat on a chair and mumbled a song.

"Woola woo donna maw,
Siv woo play,
Pan ay burr
Ay cawfee ah lay."

The girl raised her head and laughed, disclosing her pearly white teeth and red lips. Emilie was a well-made girl with dark hair, white brow, thick, strongly arched eyebrows, a charming chin and a full throat. She was of medium height, full of vitality and fun, a coquette every inch of her. Bubb was in love with her, just as he had been in love with dozens of other French girls. A billet and a bird, and no man

out of the trench area could be happier than Bubb.

Having drunk their coffee, the soldiers made their way to the Canal.

Bubb's face was brimming over with good nature and vitality. Now and again he would jump into the air, cut a caper with his feet, hop to earth as gracefully as a bird, kick a pebble along the roadway, and afterwards lift the pebble in his hand and fling it into the water.

A boy, wearing a pair of English puttees drove two lean cows along the Canal bank and stopped for a moment to speak to an elderly female who was washing her household linen in the cool water. Heedless of the woman's presence, Bowdy and Flanagan undressed and flung themselves into the Canal. The swim from bank to bank was very exhilarating, the coolness warmed the heart and imparted a strange exhilaration to the body. A swim in the cold water always gave the two men the same sensation as good news that is unexpected. Bubb sat on the bank looking at the swimmers.

"Come into the water, my man," they shouted. "It's glorious."

"'Twon't be so glorious when yer get out again," said Bubb.

"Why?" Flanagan enquired.

"'Cos yer clo'es are right top o' a hant-'eap."

"An ant-heap!" ejaculated Flanagan. "Oh, my God!"

"I'm not goin' ter leave my clo'es wiv yours," said Bubb. "I'm goin' ter leave 'em where there's no bloomin' hants."

"We'll get stung to death," Bowdy said. "Bubb, put our clothes along with yours," he called.

"No blurry fear," shouted Bubb, who was undressing further along. "I don't want to get no hants."

The swimmers only ceased in their endeavours to drench him when he flung half-a-dozen bricks into the water perilously close to their heads, but it was only Bubb's trudgeon stroke that saved him from a combined attack when he dived into the Canal. Bubb was a graceful swimmer.

Bowdy was just clambering up on the bank when he heard it coming, rumbling in from the Unknown. He was back in the water immediately, beating it with his hands as he waited. The shell burst near the bank and a hundred splinters whizzed into the Canal. A second shell followed, and a third. Then it was that Bubb's clothes, caught fair, were blown in pieces. . . .

For ten minutes the men kept in the water, but when no further shells came across from the Germans, they clambered out on to the bank.

"All hail, thou twentieth century Adam!" said Flanagan, looking at Bubb and shaking the ants from the bundle of khaki clothing. "It will be splendid to see you march through Gorre on your way back. . . . . And all the young girls. . . . ."

Bubb looked round in agony; Bowdy shook with laughter.

"And French girls, too," said Flanagan. "They're very rude sometimes."

"We'll have a little procession," Bowdy suggested. "Bubb leading."

"It's a sad plight for a bashful man," said Flanagan. "An exhibition in the nude."

Bubb opened his mouth and shut it again. Bowdy and Flanagan put their boots on.

"If only I 'ad a sandbag," said Bubb.

"We'll get back now," Bowdy said. "Come along, Spudhole."

"No blurry fear," said the Cockney. "I'd drown myself 'fore I'd go back through Gorre like this. I'm not a girl in a revue. I'm a soldier, not a hactress. Will one o' you run

back and get a pair o' trousers and a shirt for me?"

"No."

"No-o!"

"Callin' yerselves mates!" shrieked Bubb. Then his voice became coaxing. "Look 'ere, Flan, you go back and get me even a shirt; or Bowdy. . . . . Any of you. Be pals."

"Who stood by and let the ants run over our clothes?" asked Flanagan.

"Bubb," Bowdy replied. "Our pal, Spud-hole."

"That was a joke," said Bubb, "but this is past a joke. It's 'ell 'avin' no clothes."

"But you wouldn't wear clothes with ants running over them, would you?" asked Bowdy.

"I must go on in front," said Flanagan. "I'll ask Emilie to come down and have a look at you. She's up to any kind of devilment, that same girl."

"Flan-a-gan," said Bubb in a slow voice, hoarse with decision, "if you'd do a thing like that, I'd cut yer blurry froat." Then he stooped down, picked up a pebble and flung it into the water.

"'Ere, wot's this?" he exclaimed suddenly. "This, in the Canal."

They looked in. A stretcher, to which a ground sheet was bound by a leathern thong, drifted slowly down the Canal. Quick as a flash, Bubb dived in and brought the stretcher to the bank.

"Carry me 'ome on this," he said. "Put the ground sheet over me."

He lay down on the wet stretcher and his mates covered him over with the sheet and raised the burden to their shoulders. Spudhole regained his good humour and began to sing. He was in the throes of a rag-time chorus when Flanagan and Bowdy halted opposite the Café Calomphie and placed the stretcher on the pavement.

Flanagan knocked at the door. Emilie came out. Bubb sweated terror from every pore.

"Take me away!" he yelled, wrapping himself very tightly in his sheet. "For Gawd's sake take me back to the billet!"

Agitation and confusion distorted his countenance; at that moment he longed for the ground to open and swallow him. Flanagan, who knew French like a native, was speaking to the girl.

"What are you saying?" Spudhole called.

"She wants the ground sheet," said Flana-

gan. "I'm going to make her a present of it."

"For Gawd's sake——"

"She's going to take it off herself, with her own two hands," Flanagan remarked.

"Oh, blimey!" groaned Bubb; then, in an excess of rage, "I'll kill 'er if she comes near me. I'll strangle 'er, then I'll strangle you."

But Bubb's violent gestures did not deter Emilie from approaching the stretcher. She knew all about Bubb's mishap. Flanagan had explained his mate's woeful plight. Emilie bent down and raised the lower part of the ground sheet, disclosing Bubb's toes.

Spudhole curled up like a hedgehog. The girl gave the sheet a slight tug.

"Pour moi!" she said.

"Git out!" yelled Bubb. "Clear off ter 'ell. Damn yer, don't yer know wot shame is! Ally voos ong."

"Pull it off, Emilie," roared Flanagan, holding his sides.

The girl gave the sheet another tug. She did not want to take it off, but Bubb's terror amused her.

The boy could stand it no longer. He got to his feet, wrapped the sheet round his waist and

fled up the street. The village came out to see him careering along; all laughed at the escapade but few were surprised at the spectacle.

"It's only the mad English," the old women said. "They are always up to mischief."

That night the London Irish set out on their trek to the Somme.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SOMME

There's a shell as 'as fell in the mud,
A bloomin' big shell in the mud,
  A bloomin' big shell,
  An' it might give us 'ell.
As it would if it wasn't a dud.

I was watching and saw where it goed,
Exactly the spot where it goed,
  In a sweat o' a funk,
  I watched where it sunk,
And I'm thankful it didn't explode.

(From "The Dud.")

THE trench was quite a good one for the Somme, about six foot deep with here and there a few dug-outs where men could sleep and eat.

There, on a certain autumn morning, we find the men of the London Irish again, waiting to cross No Man's Land and attack the Germans. A month has passed since they left Gorre and during that time they have seen much fighting in which they have earned great renown.

"We're too well known," Bubb often remarked bitterly, but beneath all his grumbling

it could be seen that he was more than a little proud of his regiment. "We're too well known that's wot it is," he would continue. "If there's anything to be done oo's to do it? Us. We're always in the thick o' it. If the 'eads 'ear that there's a stiff job to be done and it wants an army corps to do it, wot do the 'eads say. They say: 'Put the London Irish, the footballers of Loos on the job. They'll soon do it.' "

On this morning Bubb was preparing breakfast in a dug-out while Bowdy Benners was sleeping in a corner and Flanagan was out on the parapet watching for Tanks. These monsters were going to cross presently, but as yet they were not to be seen. In front, the self-sown crops were waving in the breeze, and the barbed wire entanglements showed red and rusty over the meadows. Nothing of the German wires remained; they had been blown to bits. The German trenches could be seen in front, dipping out of sight into a natural valley on the left and losing all outline amongst the tree stumps on the right. The stumps were all that remained of the well-known High Wood; the locality was pitted with shell-holes and littered with dead, friend and foe, who lay together in silent

communion. The Germans still held the wood.

Bubb, having prepared breakfast, went to the door and called Flanagan in, then he turned round and kicked Bowdy on the shins.

"Git out 't," he said. "Ye're not going to fight on an empty tummy, are yer?"

Flanagan came into the dug-out. "That smells A.1." he remarked. "But the Tanks," he said. "I can't see them yet. I hope they're not late."

"I hope they're not," Bowdy replied, and yawned. The arrival of the Tanks did not interest him apparently. He reached out his hand for the mess-tin of tea and drank.

"We're givin' them 'ell wiv our guns," said Bubb. "Blowin' the place to 'ell. . . . . That's a good drop o' tea, ain't it?"

"Indeed, it's damned good," Flanagan replied. "I'm out for a V.C. this time, anyhow. . . . . Where's Snogger?"

"He's outside, somewhere," said Bowdy. "He thinks that he'll not come through this scrap. He is quite nervy."

"I wouldn't mind 'avin' a job at these 'ere tanks," said Bubb. "It'd be damn good

sport. . . . . 'Ave another piece of bacon, Bowdy?"

"Thank you," Bowdy replied, taking the half rasher which Bubb handed to him. "I'm damned hungry. . . . . Here, did you see Captain Thorley this morning. He was giving cigarettes away. Turkish they were; must have cost a penny apiece. Fat ones, like a cigar almost."

" 'E's a good bloke, old Thorley," said Bubb.

"I wonder if the tanks are in sight yet," said Flanagan. "They're goin' to make a clean sweep of all the High Wood. . . . . What's the time now?"

"A quarter to seven," Bowdy replied, looking at his wrist watch. "It'll all be over at ten o'clock one way or the other. . . . . The Guards and Northumberland Fusiliers are round one side of the wood and it's almost closed in."

Having finished their breakfast, the men went outside into the trench. The shells could be heard bursting on the German lines, and the enemy were replying. The machine guns were going pit-pit, and bullets were ripping the English sandbags.

"There, look!" shouted Bowdy Benners, pointing at the sky overhead. His two mates

looked up to see an aeroplane making its way across to the enemy's lines. It was followed by two, three, half-a-dozen, flying low.

"There, the tanks!" somebody shouted, and a line of faces peeped over the sandbags. One man in Benners' bay got hit through the head and fell to the floor of the trench. The remainder drew back discreetly and kept their heads under cover. Sergeant Snogger appeared suddenly, smoking a cigarette and paring his nails with a clasp-knife. He leant his back against the parados and looked at the trio.

"Cheero, sarg," said Bubb. "Fancy yer chance?"

"Not 'arf," said Snogger. "It'll be a walk-over."

"Pass the word along for Sergeant Snogger," came the message up the trench.

The sergeant closed his knife, put it in his pocket and rushed round the traverse.

"I didn't see the tanks," said Bubb. "There are none 's far as I could see."

"I saw one," Bowdy said. "Over on the right."

"There were two," said Flanagan. "Crawlin' along as if they were pickin' up worms. Big, ugly lookin' brutes they were. God! they'll

make the Germans sit up. . . . . You have yer helmet twisted round, Bubb."

Bubb adjusted his helmet, lit a cigarette, pulled his rifle towards him, cleaned a speck of dirt from his bayonet, then put his rifle back to its original place. Bowdy and Flanagan followed the movement with intent eyes. From their look it might seem as if their very existence depended on the job which Bubb had done.

"Yes, it's some strafing," said Bowdy. "The Germans are getting enough to go on with, anyway. Phew!"

The three men crouched to avoid the fragments from a shell which burst on the parapet to the left. Somebody called out for stretcher-bearers and the message sped along the trench.

"It'll be quite easy getting across here," said Bowdy. "One whistle and up you go and the best of luck. Here, I haven't got a cigarette. . . . . Oh, yes, I have, here they are, I put them into the wrong pocket. Have one, Flanagan—one Bubb?"

Bubb took the cigarette, placed it behind his ear and continued smoking the one which he had in his mouth. "I'll keep this'n to smoke when we get across there," he said.

"It's about time to move now," said Bowdy,

and he raised his head cautiously and looked over.

"There!" he said. "They're making headway. No damned stopping them. Bravo! the tanks! Good old tanks!"

"Bravo!" said Bubb, sticking his head over. But he pulled it back quickly, for a bullet ripped a sandbag beside him, and a handful of clay and chalk was slapped into his face.

"Gawd, that's a bloomin' poultice," he muttered, ducking down and wiping the grit from his eyes. "It 'asn't knocked my 'ead off, but I feels as if it 'as. . . . . I'm not goin' to look over again till the whistle's blown."

Bowdy Benners placed a mirror on a bayonet and held it over the trench. Looking in it he could see the field in front, the barbed wire entanglements, the shell-holes, the German trench on which the shells were falling, gouging out the occupants. And the tanks. Yes, he could see them crossing, mammoths moving forward with irrevocable decision, serious minded leviathans which knew their business and went about it in a deliberate manner. Bullets rattled on their hides, struck sparks out of their scaly armour, but had no effect on the air of detachment with which the great monsters in steel pursued their

inexorable way. Nosing complacently forward, they crawled down into shell-craters, hiccoughed up again, straightened themselves out, and stealthily pursued their way towards the enemy trench.

"They're getting on," said Bowdy. "We'll soon be over, too." He detached the mirror from its rest and placed it in his pocket. "I never knew a better one for shaving; it's so handy."

Sergeant Snogger came into the bay again frantic with anger.

"I would like to know oo sent that bloody message up," he thundered. "Gawd, I'll find out, and then someone will be damned unlucky."

He stopped, then gave an inarticulate cry and collapsed in a heap. Bubb's jaw dropped and he stared at Snogger with dilated eyes. The sergeant lay silent and motionless, death was instantaneous for a shrapnel bullet had smashed his spine.

Bowdy and Flanagan lifted the dead man in their arms and placed him on the firestep.

"I never seed anybody knocked out so sudden," said Bubb in a nervous voice. "One minute speakin' and then. . . ."

"Don't think of it," said Flanagan. "The

tanks are well on now. What a funny thing—tanks. They are as old as the hills. Montaigne speaks about them. He calls them coaches. Listen."

He fumbled in his haversack, brought out a dilapidated volume—Florio's translation of Montaigne and read:—

> "Were my memory sufficiently informed of them I would not think my time lost, heere to set down the infinite variety which histories present to us of the use of coaches in the service of warre: divers according to the nations and different according to the ages: to my seeming of great effect and necessity. . . . Even lately in our fathers' time, the Hungarians did very availefully bring them into fashion and profitably set them a work against the Turks; every one of them containing a Targattier and a Muskettier, with a certain number of harquebuses or calivers, ready charged; and so ranged that they might make good use of them: and all over covered with a pavesado, after the manner of a Galliotte. They made the front of their battaile with three thousand such coaches: and after the Canon had playd, caused them to discharge and

> shoote of a volie of small shott upon their enemies, before they should know or feel, what the rest of the forces could doe: which was no small advancement; or if not this, they mainely drove those coaches amidde the thickest of their enemies' squadrons, with purpose to breake, disroute and make waie through them. Besides the benefit and helpe they might make of them, in any suspicious or dangerous place to flanke their troupe marching from place to place: or in hast to encompasse, to embarricade, to cover or fortifie any lodgment or quarter."

Captain Thorley appeared round the corner, his hand bandaged. A splinter of shell had caught him a few minutes before.

"Getting ready, boys?" he asked. "You'll have no difficulty in crossing here. . . . Another two minutes . . . . Snogger dead? . . . . What a pity!"

He disappeared.

"I wish we did get across," said Bubb. "I'm fed up wiv this waitin': I want to get at 'em."

Then a whistle was blown; another. The men scrambled up the parapet and tumbled out on to the levels.

The bombardment seemed to increase; the German trenches were hidden by smoke, flying dirt and logs. Their dug-outs were going sky-high. Over it all, two aeroplanes glided gracefully through the air. The tanks were still going forward. A platoon on the right had started too soon and the men were half-way across. Bowdy Benners and Bubb walked abreast, chatting leisurely. Flanagan had disappeared.

The air was alive with bullets, men were falling all round, groaning and screaming. In front the tanks had both stopped, one in a shell-crater, the other in a sap. The artillery lengthened its range and the shells were falling behind the first line and the High Wood. But the enemy machine guns had not been silenced, the High Wood was yet as venomous as a wasps' nest.

"Forward!" The men advanced at a steady pace, their bayonets in air. One man had his entrenching fool fastened over his stomach as a bullet shield. Bowdy saw him get hit in the head. . . . . The machine gun fire was deadly; dozens fell and lay writhing. A tall youngster with a long neck came to a dead stop, dropped his bayonet to the ground, put his hand inside

the waist of his trousers and groped around as if trying to catch a flea. "I've copped a packet this time," he said and lay down.

The flanks of the marching line converged on the centre despite the orders of the officers to the men. "Keep your distance!" "Spread out a bit there!" etc. But the men felt inclined to huddle together, like frightened children. . . . . The machine guns seemed to intensify their fire, the bullets struck the earth in a steady and incessant stream. On the left a party of men advanced steadily. A shell dropped in the middle of them. . . . .

Captain Thorley, who was leading his platoon, turned round.

"Under cover," he shouted. "It's no good going ahead yet. It's murder."

The men disappeared into adjacent shell-holes, others brought in the wounded. The machine-guns swept the field with insistent vehemence.

Bowdy and Bubb joined themselves together in a deep crater.

"Couldn't 'ave a more swagger shell-'ole than this'n," said Spudhole. "We're in luck's way. Flanagan got 'it," he continued. "I saw 'im cop it. Right froo the 'ead. 'E didn't say nuffin', just fell and stiffened."

He placed his back against the sloping wall of the swagger shell-hole and drawing his cigarette from his mouth with a graceful swan-like motion of the arm, he turned to Bowdy Benners.

"Blimey, I don't feel 'arf a swell 'ere," he said. "Wouldn't mind stickin' it in this 'ere place for duration. . . . . Eh, wot's that, Bowdy?"

A German shell came out from the unknown humming like a gigantic beetle. Nearer it came and nearer.

"It's going to fall wide," said Bowdy, although he instinctively guessed that it would fall very near.

It swept over the two men's heads with a vicious swish and dived into the opposite wall of the shell-hole. Bowdy went red in the face, Bubb's jaw dropped, his eyes protruded as if they were going to spring out of his head. The shock paralysed the two boys for a second; they were so unnerved that the feeling of fear was momentarily denied them. They stared blankly at the shell which had only entered about a foot into the ground. The base of the projectile was showing, it might explode at any moment. They were in a position similar to that of a patient to

whose body a local anæsthetic is applied and who sees the surgeon at work but does not feel the knife. Bowdy was the first to recover his composure.

"Clear out of it, Spudhole!" he yelled, and both clambered across the rim of the crater into the open.

They lay out there for a few minutes and as the shell did not go off they went back again. Outside the machine-gun bullets were ripping up the ground. The two men lay down quietly without speaking a word. Bubb put the stump of his cigarette back in his mouth and relit it.

"There! See the aeroplanes?" said Bowdy. "They're flying damned low over the enemy trench. Hear their horns going? Signalling to the artillery, I suppose."

"S'pose so," said Bubb, flattening out in the bottom of the shell-crater and drawing his cigarette from behind his ear. He put it in his mouth and lit it. "I knew it would be wanted," he said.

Ten minutes passed. The tanks were still stuck and showed no sign of movement. The English artillery opened on the High Wood again. All guns within range had apparently chosen it for their objective now. The oft-

lacerated tree-stumps were broken like glass, they were dragged out by the roots and hurled broadcast; the wood was disgorging its entrails. The unfortunate wretches who held it were in a ghastly situation. To remain in their dug-outs was death. Their manner of dying was left to their choice. They could come out into the hurricane and be blown to bits, they could stay in their lairs and be buried alive. They were confronted by two evils, one as bad as the other. The machine-guns were silent now; probably they were all out of action.

Bowdy put up his head and looked across towards the German lines.

"God, they're getting it!" he said. "And the tanks are still stuck. . . . . There! There're hundreds of the Germans coming across with their hands up. . . . . One batch is unlucky; a shell has dropped in the middle of them."

"Far as I can see, we'll 'ave nuffink to do when this strafin' is over, bar go over an' take the trenches," said Bubb, who was looking at the nerve-shaken Germans as they came rushing towards the craters. "I 'ope we get relieved to-night after we've finished."

"'Course we'll get relieved," said Bowdy.

"We've been in four days now. . . . . Here, what the devil's wrong with you?"

A wild-eyed German, armed with a rifle and bayonet, came to the rim of the crater and lunged at Bubb. The Cockney, elusive as an eel, slipped out of reach, seized his own rifle and fired at the man. The German fell forward, dead, the bullet had gone through his neck and pierced the jugular vein.

"Funny bloke, that feller," said Bubb.

"I think he had gone mad," said Bowdy, changing his position and getting clear of the prostrate form which had fallen into the crater.

At this moment the artillery fire ceased ravaging the German front line, the range was lengthened and the guns devoted their attention to the enemy's support trenches.

A whistle was blown. . . . .

The men went forward, Captain Thorley leading. The bandage on his hand was very dirty now. . . . . The enemy trenches were very quiet, not a rifle spoke. Parties of Germans came out with their hands in air, muttering "Kamerad! Kamerad!" They were taken prisoners.

"It's a damned tame endin'," said Bubb. "After all that strafing."

"It's like a grand overture without a performance following," said Captain Thorley who overheard Bubb's remark.

"Yes, sir," Bubb replied. "'Ave yer a match to spare, sir. I forgot mine. Left them in the last dug-out, sir."

Every move augmented the number of prisoners, they rose from the ground and from shell-holes and gave themselves up. Now and again an apparently dead German was tickled with the point of a bayonet and he came to life with startling suddenness. Bubb discovered a helmet, put it on and put up his hands in imitation of the Germans who were surrendering . . . . Bowdy discovered a box of cigars somewhere and lit up, then he handed the box round.

"Have a smoke, boys," said Captain Thorley. "Just to celebrate the taking of the High Wood. . . . ."

At that moment a shrapnel shell burst over the captain's head and he fell to the ground mortally wounded. A bullet had hit him on the temple. A few men rushed in to his assistance, Bubb leading. But nothing could be done. His brains were oozing out. . . . . Consciousness was lost, death would come in a few moments. A stretcher-bearer appeared, then another, and

they carried the captain away. He died before reaching the dressing-station.

The London Irish now set about consolidating their position and spent long hours of spade-work on the job. Next night the men were relieved.

CHAPTER XX

BACK FROM BATTLE

And as we left the trench to-night,
  Each weary 'neath his load,
Grey silent ghosts as light as air
  Came with us down the road.

And as we sat us down to drink,
  They sat beside us too,
And drank red wine at Nouex les Mines,
  As once they used to do.

(From "Soldier Songs.")

A SOFT rain was falling; a low wind swept across the levels, and the leaves of a near birch copse rustled in the breeze, faltering timidly as they shook the rain from their shining fringes. A soft, bluish haze surrounded the tops of the birches, the trunks were engirt with a pale mist which gave an eerie atmosphere to the whole wood.

The London Irish had just left the trenches and were following a sunken road on their way back to billets and a month's rest. The men were in a gay good humour, "Charlotte the Harlot," the Rabelaisian song was sung with great

gusto. The faces of sweet French maidens, almost forgotten, were recalled again. The men's fancies rushed hither and thither, painting rosy pictures of snug farmhouses and good cafés. A month's rest away from the ructions of war; how splendid!

Where the wood grew thinner a brushwood screen had been improvised so as to hide the road. In front lay an unlucky red brick village, one which had suffered much from the guns of war. Every third house had been hit by shell fire and many of the homes were levelled to the ground. A heavy wall of cloud, ragged of front crawled across the sky; the sun was overcast, but far up, shooting through the advancing layers of black, a long, golden ray of sunshine streamed out and lit up the firing line.

Save for the crunch of marching feet there was quiet. The shower went by and the soft rustle of the rain falling on the grass by the roadside had ceased. All around the country lay in ruins, the self-sown crops in the wide meadows drooped abjectly to earth as if in mourning for the reaper who visited the place no more. The men passed a house which stood in the fields, a little red-brick cottage with its chimney thrown down, its doors latchless and its windows broken.

Once a home of thrifty, toiling people; now the clear sun, which succeeded the shower, saw no housewife at work, no children playing, no man out in the fields storing up the harvest crops. Nothing there now save the guns which lurked privily and kept for the moment a decorous silence. A big shell was following the men along, bursting at intervals some five hundred yards behind. The Germans were sweeping the road, trusting that the projectile would drop on any troops who might be marching along there. The shell followed steadily, keeping its distance and doing no harm. But the range might be lengthened at any moment and then trouble would ensue. The men marched rapidly, hardly daring to breathe.

"Gawd, I don't like that 'ere coal-box," said Bubb, as he heard an explosion behind. "That blurry one was nearer, I fink."

"Further off, I should say," Bowdy Benners replied. "Light a fag, Spudhole, it will do you all the good in the world."

He burst into song:—

> "Give me a lucifer to light my fag,
> And laugh, boys, that's the style,
> Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag,
> And smile, boys, smile."

"Come, boys, sing up," he called. "Come on, let go!"

The chorus was repeated and the men joined in singing, roaring at the tops of their voices. Bubb straightened his back, expanded his chest and looked at his mate. Bowdy, with his cigarette in his mouth, was bellowing out the chorus, the cigarette moving up and down as if keeping time with the measure.

Spudhole swept into a fresh song, a well-known favourite. The men joined in the singing:—

"There's a soldier out on picket
Over there,
There's a soldier out on picket
Over there,
There's a soldier out on picket,
And 'e wants 'is bloomin' ticket,
But the beggar's got to stick it
Over there.
'E don't mind the dug-outs' stenches
And the God-forsaken trenches
When 'e's thinkin' o' the wenches
Over there."

The voices died away as a shell burst in the road very close at hand.

"Nearer that time," said Bubb. "I wish we were in the trenches."

They sighted the village to find the shells bursting all through the place and the buildings

flying about the streets. The children were in hiding, not a civilian was to be seen save a pale, thin woman of forty who stood at the door of a ruined estaminet. This had no doubt been her home; probably she was still living in the cellar.

The men stared at the woman, saw her bowed head, her ragged clothes, her queer, weedy form. In her eyes was a look such as the men had seldom seen. The poor creature reminded Bowdy of a dog which he once had seen prowling round a pond in which its young had been drowned.

"Wot's she doin' standin' out in the street like that?" said Bubb. "She'll stop a packet if she's not careful."

"Eyes right," came an order from an officer in front, and the men turned their eyes towards the woman at the door.

"Salutin' 'er. I wonder wot for," said Bubb.

"'Er four children were killed yesterday by a shell," said somebody in the ranks.

The woman raised her head and looked stolidly at the soldiers. Her expression did not change; perhaps feeling was dead within her.

At the other end of the village stood a ruined convent from which the nuns had not yet departed. They educated the village children.

The little ones went to school daily, their books and respirators under their arms. The class-room was in the cellar of the Convent. As the men passed the Convent, they saw a nun, dressed in blue homespun, white frontlet and black veil, standing at the door throwing crumbs to the doves which fluttered about her feet. In one hand she held a rosary; no doubt she was saying her prayers. There was France personified, France great and fearless, a martyr unsubdued! The sight was a tonic to the men. Unable to resist the impulse, they gave vent to a rousing cheer. A look of perplexity overspread the woman's face, she gazed at the soldiers for a moment, then throwing the remaining crumbs to the birds she retreated hurriedly into the Convent.

"Wot a fine woman that one is," said Spudhole. "Gawd, there's somefin' in 'em, you know. An' they don't do it for show, neither. Well, we'll 'ave another song now, one respectable like. Not one that we wouldn't want good people to 'ear. 'Ow about 'Little Grey 'Ome in the West'?"

In the late afternoon the men arrived at the village in which they were to biilet. The battalion marched down the main street dog-tired and

glad that the march was at an end. The wine-shops were open and soldiers could be seen sitting on the wine barrels, smoking and drinking. At the corner of one side street, a cook was washing his face at a pump and half-a-dozen merry little children were flinging pebbles at him. When a pebble hit him, he would bend down, raise a mess-tin of water and fling it at the mischievous rascals. A party of soldiers came out from an alley, bearing between them three dixies of hot, steaming tea. They were indulging in idle banter and seemed very pleased with themselves—their eyes glowed with happiness.

At the door of an estaminet stood the patronne gossiping with a neighbour and laughing heartily over something. Another party of children were hopping over lines marked with chalk on the pavement and chanting in unison a song of which Bowdy could catch a few lines:—

"A l'école dans le ville,
A l'école dans le ville,
A l'école,
A l'école,
A l'école dans le ville."

Bowdy's platoon came to a halt in the square, the company cook who came there long in advance of the battalion, was pouring fistfuls of

tea in a dixie which stood on a field kitchen. He was red of face as a lobster, and a smile of satisfaction lit up his genial countenance when he saw the men.

"You look pleased with yourself," Bowdy said.

"So will you be pleased," said the man, "when you get your tea after a little. I've made it well, extra strong, and Spudhole has just received a parcel from home."

"The post is up?" Bubb asked.

"There's a letter for you, as well as a parcel," said the cook. "And we are going back for a rest to-morrow night, for a month or six weeks."

"Are we really?" Bowdy enquired.

"Of course we are," was the answer. "And we're going to get paid, too, this evening. . . ."

They were going back for a rest, probably to Cassel, and they knew such a delightful billet there, the Y—— Farm. . . .

Bowdy breathed in the fresh air. Away behind the firing line the sun was sinking and a soft, luminous glow settled on the roofs of the houses near.

"We should have a bit of a spree to-night," said the cook, raising the dixie of the waggon, placing it on the ground, and stirring it with a

long ladle. "At the café round the corner. A champagne supper, a song, and an all-round entertainment. Are you game for it?"

"Blimey, of course we're game for it," said Spudhole. "Wot time will it start?"

" 'Arf past seven."

"Righto," said Bubb and Bowdy in one voice. "We'll be there."

CHAPTER XXI

RESTING

The night breeze sweeps La Bassée Road, the night dews wet the hay,
The boys are coming back again; a straggling crowd are they;
The column lines are broken, there are gaps in the platoon,
They'll not need many billets now for soldiers in Bethune,
For lusty lads, good, hearty lads, who marched away so fine,
Have now got little homes of clay, beside the firing line.
Good luck to them, God-speed to them, the boys who march away,
A-swinging up La Bassée Road each sunny, Summer day.

(From "Soldier Songs.")

"GORBLIMEY! This ain't arf a blurry march," said Bubb, changing his rifle from one shoulder to the other and straightening himself up. "I'm feelin' my feet, my 'eels are rubbin' against sandpaper."

"We'll soon be there now," said Bowdy Benners. "Another half hour. I remember the place well. We haven't been here for—how long? Almost a year and a half. Then there were some good fellows with us. Old Fitz

and Snogger and Flanagan and Captain Thorley and Billy Hurd. Gone west, the poor devils."

"I wish I 'ad gone west," said Bubb, whose head was sinking forward. "This ain't worth living for, this damned march. If I did go west I wouldn't mind; there's a lot of good men waitin' to welcome us there. We'll never drink beer with better blokes again."

"True for you, Bubb," said Bowdy. "Brave boys, the whole lot of them. Here, Spudhole, I'll carry your rifle for you. You look done up."

Bubb straightened himself.

"Thanks, Bowdy, but I'd rather carry me 'ipe myself. Wot would these draft men think if they see me gettin' 'elped along? I'm not a rooky, Bowdy."

"Righto," said Bowdy, with a laugh. "Your independence will be the death of you one day."

A halt was called at this juncture and the men threw themselves down by the roadside. The dusk of an October evening was settling on the poplar-lined roadway. The spinneys on either side were wrapped in shadow and a cold wind swept across the fields. In a farm somewhere

near a dog barked and a cart rumbled along a lane. The chiming of a church bell could be heard calling the faithful to prayer.

Bowdy took off his pack, lit a cigarette, and sat on a milestone which bore the inscription: "A Cassel 5 kilo." The milestone, which indicated the wrong direction, had been reversed by the peasantry when war broke out in hopes of turning the German Army in a wrong direction. Bubb lay flat on his back, his feet cocked up, his tunic open.

"Wunner if Fifi is kickin' about now," he said. "She wasn't 'arf a bird. Ole Snogger was fair gone on 'er, so was pore Fitz. Bet yer, she'll be lookin' for a new Tommy this time. Why don't ye go in an' say things to 'er, Bowdy? Ye're a devil for fightin', a devil for drinkin', and ye're no damned good at all when a wench is about. If I 'adn't me own bird back off Walworth Road wiv 'er barrer, I'd lead Fifi a dance."

"Wot about the girl at Gorre," said Bowdy Benners. "You forgot all about Walworth Road when you went to see her on a stretcher with a ground-sheet for a uniform."

Bubb never wanted to be reminded of this in-

cident, but at the present time he was too tired to pay any heed to Bowdy's remarks.

At seven o'clock the platoon arrived at Y—— Farm and the men were conducted to the old barn in which a few of them had billeted before. Bowdy and Bubb sat down on the straw and took off their puttees, lit their cigarettes and fumbled in their pockets for money. Fifi, of course, would give them soup and coffee free; but they felt it becoming to them to offer money, even though it was not accepted.

"Come along," said Bowdy, lighting a fresh cigarette. "Fifi will be waiting for us."

They went down the crazy stairs and across the farmyard towards the house. Everything about the place was the same as of old, the midden, the sloughy pools, the up-ended waggons, the grunting of the pigs in the stye, the restless movement of cattle in the byre and the noisy growling of the dog. Bubb recalled the night of his return from the café of Jean Lacroix.

"The same blurry dawg," he said to Bowdy.

"The same."

"Look!" whispered Bubb, as the two got near the door. "There's Fifi. Gawd! She 'asn't 'arf changed. . . . . Stout. . . . . She must be married."

They entered. Fifi rushed forward to meet them, and clasping Bubb with both arms she kissed him on the lips. Then she kissed Bowdy, who blushed as red as a beetroot.

"Well, I'm damned," said Bubb. "Ye're not 'arf a giddy one, Fifi."

She must have been working hard during the day, for her hair was all untidy, her linen soiled and stained, her skirts in the same condition.

"Back from the trenches?" she asked.

"Back again," said Bubb who could follow the remark, though spoken in French. "Trenches no bong," he said. "Ploosier mon camerads mort, more blissée. Guerre never fini."

"The sergen, is zee dead?" asked Fifi, speaking in English. "The bon sergen."

"'E's dead," said Bubb. "Also Flanagan; also Captain Thorley. . . . ."

"Mon père mort," said the girl, and her eyes filled with tears. "Mort à Verdun."

There was a long silence. The two soldiers sat down near the stove. Fifi put a basin of soup over the fire. Madame Babette came in from the byre, her heavy shoes covered with cow-dung, and placed a pail of milk on the

dresser. She shook hands with Bubb and Bowdy.

"Back from the trenches?" she enquired.

"Back for a month's rest," Bowdy replied.

"I s'pose you're married now, Fifi?" Bubb remarked, fixing his eyes on the girl. She did indeed look like a married woman; the old sprightly manner was gone; her face was pale and quiet now, and a tinge of sadness had crept into her voice. The old Fifi, the full-throated coquette of eighteen months ago, had given place to a prudent housewife whose interests did not extend beyond the marches of the farm.

"I am married," she replied.

"A good husband?" asked Bubb.

"Très bon," said Fifi. "He will be in from his work directly."

"Ye've forgotten Fitzgerald, the Irishman," said Bubb. "'E was a good man. 'E's dead now; killed by an oboo grand."

Fifi chuckled. Bubb looked at Bowdy and could not resist giving expression to the thoughts which came into his mind.

"It's just like these 'ere French birds," he muttered. "They'll 'ave their bit of fun wiv a bloke an' then when 'e goes away it's 'Good-

bye and be damned t'yer, and we don't care wot 'appens t'yer.' "

Fifi, who seemed to have made great progress in her knowledge of English, laughly loudly at Bubb's remarks. Then she raised a warning finger. Somebody had come to the door and this somebody was rubbing heavy boots on the cobbles in an endeavour to get the dirt from the soles.

"My husband," said Fifi.

He came in, stood for a moment, and gazed awkwardly at the two soldiers. Bubb stared open-mouthed at the man, Bowdy contracted his eyebrows and rubbed one eye with a miry finger, then the other.

"Bon soir, m'soo," said Bubb. "Ye're damned like a mate as we 'ad, old Fitz."

"I'm not surprised at that, Spudhole," said the man, coming forward and gripping both the men's hands and shaking them as if they were pump handles. "Not a bit surprised, for I am ole Fitz."

"But ye're dead," said Bubb.

"Almost had been . . . . but luck was with me," said Fitzgerald, still pump-handling. "And you. I heard you two were killed, Bowdy and Bubb . . . I never expected . . .

It's damned strange what does happen . . . We've no end of things to talk about . . . Fifi, get a meal ready, the best bottle of wine . . . we have much to say . . . It's all gushing out . . . God! it's good to see you two here."

Fitzgerald sat down, crossed his legs, felt in his pockets and brought out a packet of English cigarettes.

"Have a fag, Bubb—Bowdy," he said, laughing boyishly. "I've left England, but I can't resist these . . . Oh! damn it! . . . Isn't it good to see you two here . . . . Old Snogger . . . I know, I saw it in the press. Thorley, too, and Flanagan . . . We'll go into the corner and have a talk . . . We won't be disturbed and rations will be ready in no time. I'm excited, Bowdy. Bubb, I'm off my head. I'm so glad, so damned glad that I could give you a punch right on the tip of your nose . . . But you'll not understand the feelings which give rise to a manifestation of gladness such as that, Spudhole."

Bubb laughed.

"Blimey! Ye're just the same ole Fitz, same as ever," he said.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MARRIED MAN

Come, all you true-born country lads, I'll sing a song to you,
You'll like to hear it one and all, for what I say is true;
The turf is wet upon the bog, the snow is on the farm,
You'd better take a wife to bed, she's sure to keep you warm;
She will not want for golden chains from any pedlar's pack,
When she will have your two strong arms clasped tight around her neck;
Believe me, all who hear these words, believe me young and old,
'Tis snug and warm to have a wife when Winter days are cold.

(From an old "Come all ye.")

"WHERE can I begin and tell everything?" said Fitzgerald, breaking a piece of bread and bringing it up to within an inch of his mouth. "I suppose that night when I was buried in the dug-out will do to start with. 'Twas the devil's own night. I got lost first of all, and me going up with a message to Captain Thorley. 'Twas very important, a mine going up in the morning. So the young German prisoner whom we had taken said.

Therefore, our men holding the front line had to retire for safety to the support trenches. So up I goes from Headquarters, running like hell (I'm getting ungrammatically excited, Spudhole) and gets lost. Took the wrong turning, flops into a trench that was full of muck. I stuck there for goodness knows how long, holding on to the piece of paper on which the message was scrawled. I thought I was a permanent fixture, stuck in that trench for duration. But somehow I did get free and eventually found myself in our front line. How I got there I don't know. I mind seeing you, Spudhole."

"There was some dirt coming along our way at that time," said Bubb.

"'Twas that shell that did it," said Fitzgerald, gazing absently at his piece of bread, which he still held between finger and thumb. "Someone said 'Whoo! There she comes!' and there was a rush for the dug-out. I got mixed up in the scramble and was carried in with the rest. But I still clung on to my message. Then the shell came down on the dug-out and I was out of the doings, just like a gutted sprat.

"As far as I can judge I was underground that night, the next day, the night after, and got pulled out the day following at twelve o'clock. Some

men of the regiment that relieved us saw a bayonet that stuck up through the roof of the fallen dug-out move as if someone was shaking it."

"I saw that 'ere bay'net," said Bubb. "Stickin' up over the roof."

"Well, these fellows, when they saw the bayonet wobbling, guessed that someone was alive under the ground, and they began to dig like hell," said Fitzgerald.

"Eventually they reached me, still alive, with a wound on the back of my head, and they pulled me out. The air had got in somehow, I suppose. . . . . Well, I came to my senses in hospital in Versailles, and I got up, so I was told, and rushed along the ward like hell, with a nurse or two clinging to my shirt tail. 'Where are you running?' they asked me. 'I'm going on a message to Captain Thorley,' I told them. 'There's a mine going up at dawn.' 'Oh, that's all right,' said the nurses. 'Captain Thorley has got the message and everything's all right.' And they wheedled me and coaxed me until I went back to bed.

"So I was told; but I didn't remember anything about it. Even now my mind gets mazed at times when I'm excited, and queer ideas come into my head."

"You haven't eaten one bite yet," said Bowdy Benners. "That bit of bread hasn't gone into your mouth, and we've been sitting here for the last ten minutes."

"Well, I'm not hungry," said Fitzgerald. "I'm feeding on the pleasure of seeing you two here. Fifi, the wine!" he called to his wife.

The woman brought a large bottle, placed it on the table, and patted her husband on the head with an affectionate hand.

"She's a divine creature," said Fitzgerald, when Fifi went. "How did it happen that the gods were so good to me? I don't know . . . . But to get on with my story," he continued. "After a while I found myself in England. I don't even remember crossing the Channel. I was in a muddle all the while. Sometimes I would think I was in the trenches and I would wake up from my sleep, jump out on the floor and stand against the wall, thinking that I was on the fire-step on guard. I must have been a troublesome patient. . . . . And then one night when I was in a big bed in a big house in England I thought that somebody put a cold hand over my forehead. I shouted out 'Who's there?' I opened my eyes, looked up and saw a man with a black beard standing at my bed.

" 'Who are you?' I asked.

" 'Your sergeant-major,' said the man. 'I want you to present arms,' he said. 'At the word "one" you give the rifle a sharp cant up to the right side, gripping it at the small of the butt with the right hand and at the outer band with the left. . . . .' I stared at the fellow and this seemed to annoy him. 'Dumb contempt!' he yelled. 'You'll be for it!' and he raised his fist and made one smash at my face. I dodged the blow and then a man in a warder's uniform rushed in and pulled the sergeant-major away.

"Good God, Bowdy, where was I? Guess. I was in a lunatic asylum. . . . . 'Twas enough to turn my brain. And it's a difficult job to prove that you're sane when you're in a madhouse. They won't believe you, for some damned reason or another. I used to go up to the warder and say: 'Look here, matey, I'm as right as rain,' and he would nod his head and say: 'Oh, yes, of course you are.' But 'twas easy enough to see that he didn't believe you. God! I often felt like strangling the man. . . . . It wouldn't do me any good, I knew, to kick up a ruction; so I kept very quiet and well-behaved.

"At the end of six weeks I was discharged and sent to a convalescent camp; not as good as the one that Flanagan had been in when he got wounded. Impossible to swing the lead there. I got sick of it in no time, so I applied for a transfer to the B.E.F., Somewhere in France.

" 'Do you really want to go out there again?' my mates asked me.

" 'Of course I do,' I told them.

" 'Then you must be mad,' they said.

"But I had no luck with my application. 'Out to the trenches again,' said the M.O. Tut, tut, man! I'll bring you before a Board and see what it says.'

"The Board said 'Discharge' and I was discharged with a pension. So there I was out on my own, a wash-out. Patrick Fitzgerald, pensioner, non bon, one that had done his bit, who had been through the thick of it, in the doings, a brave boy, lion-hearted, and so on. My friends took me into their arms and made no end of a fuss of me. England had reason to be proud of her sons, they said, and took me about to swell dinners."

"Just like ole Flan when 'e was at 'ome," said Bubb.

"I hobnobbed with big bugs," Fitzgerald

continued, "grand old men who were in the know and who knew everything, having inside information; well-dressed women who preached economy to the masses, who denied themselves luxuries which they were healthier without, who rode on common buses and advertised the fact, and who travelled by tube as an example to those who always travel by tube. Nobody paid much heed to them as far as I could see. The people with whom I stopped denied themselves the services of a butler and took in his place an extra female servant. They were very rich, and self-denial was their greatest craze. In furthering their country's cause they displayed as much ingenuity as a cautious billiard player who just misses the balls. I grew tired of it all, wearied to death," said Fitzgerald, placing his bread on the table and pulling the wine bottle towards him. He pulled out the cork, filled his mates' glasses, but took no notice of his own.

"It doesn't do for me to take any now," he said, in an apologetic voice. "It goes to here." He tapped his head with his fingers.

"There was once," said Bubb . . . .

"Yes, but that's a thing of the past," said Fitzgerald. "I did go into a pub when I was in London. I wanted to have a yarn with the

Old Sweats who frequented the taproom. I made them merry and they carried me home. 'Twasn't honey after that. Old Fitz, the boy who had been through the thick of it and who had done his bit, was rather a burden to his friends. He had wild ways; his manners were unbecoming, he had said dreadful things when under the influence of alcohol. My friends took me aside, lectured me and suggested that if I was placed in a little cottage somewhere out of sight, given a few pounds in addition to my pension, I would be much happier. . . . .

"I left them; the brave boy who had done his bit and who went through the thick of it vamoosed. I didn't even wait for the additional few pounds. . . . . Then an uncle of mine died and left me six hundred pounds. I collared this, wrote to Fifi, whom I had not forgotten. . . . . She remembered me. . . . . Her father was killed at Verdun. What could I do but come over and see her? 'Twas an easy matter then. I had some money, I loved her; so we got married. She's a grand woman, Bowdy. I didn't understand her when we were billeted here; I don't even understand her yet. . . . . Oh, how she misses her father, but she bears it as a Frenchwoman can. I tried to console her at

first, but I say nothing about her loss now. First she used to say, when we spoke about her father's death: 'C'est la guerre,' but now it's different. It's now: 'He died for France and it's an honour to die for one's country.' "

Bubb filled his glass, Bowdy did the same. The two soldiers looked at one another, then at Fitzgerald. Fifi came up to the table.

Bowdy raised his glass in the air, Bubb followed suit.

"Here's to Fitzgerald," said Bowdy.

"And to Fifi," said Spudhole.

"Long life and happiness——"

"And no end of 'appy children——"

"Victory for the Allies!"

"And 'ell for the Boche!" said Spudhole, bringing the glass of wine to his lips.

THE END

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