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**The Operations of the British  
Army in the Present War**

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**I**

**THE RETREAT FROM MONS**



*The Operations of the British  
Army in the Present War*

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THE RETREAT  
FROM MONS

WITH A PREFACE BY  
FIELD MARSHAL LORD FRENCH

*George Stuart Gordon*



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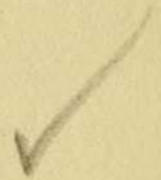
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## PREFACE

I AM told that it has been thought advisable to publish short accounts in pamphlet form of prominent and important operations which have been carried on during the course of the war which is still raging.

Such war stories may undoubtedly be beneficial, and in the belief that such "propaganda" is productive of more good than harm I have consented to indite this very brief preface to *The Retreat from Mons*.

Any hesitation I may have felt arises from my profound conviction that no history of a war or any part of a war can be worth any-

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thing until some period after peace has been made and the full facts are known and understood.

This pamphlet however, is not so much a "history" as an interesting summary or a chronology of leading events, and the writer carefully avoids according praise or blame in connection with any event or group of events which can ever become the subject of controversy.

In a Preface to so brief and so unpretentious a military work as this, it is impossible to put before the reader more than a glimpse of the situation in regard to which plans had to be conceived and put into execution as suddenly and speedily as the demand for them was unexpected.



That it is the "unexpected" which generally happens in war, and that it is the "unexpected" for which we must be ever ready, has of late years been deeply instilled in the mind of the British officer. A cardinal axiom in his military creed is that he must never be taken by surprise.

When, therefore, the Germans, on the same principle as they subsequently used poison-gas, sank hospital ships, and disregarded every known rule of civilized war, suddenly and quite unexpectedly overran a neutral country in such a drastic manner as to nullify all preconceived plans and possibilities, and the British Army found itself on the outer flank of the threatened line exposed to the full

weight of the German menace, it was this previous careful training which formed the sure foundation upon which to plan and conduct the inevitable retreat and carry it to a successful conclusion.

When men are told to retire without fighting, when they see no reason for it, when they remain full of ardour and longing to get at the enemy, and are not allowed to, demoralization is very apt to be the result. Why was such a feature of the Retreat conspicuous by its complete non-existence? Because of another result of British military training, namely, the absolute confidence of the men in their leaders and officers and the wonderful mutual understanding which existed between them.

The magnificent spirit which animated the British Expeditionary Force was seen at every phase of these operations; in the skilful handling and moral superiority of the cavalry which covered the Retreat; in the able conduct by the respective leaders of the several battles and encounters which local circumstances rendered necessary; and lastly, in the extraordinary marching powers and capability of endurance which animated all ranks.

Controversies loud and bitter will certainly rage in regard to all the dispositions and plans under which this war has been conducted; as to the operations of the first three weeks, perhaps, more than as to those of any other period.

But I venture to hope and believe that no sane person can dispute in the smallest particular the claims which I make in this very short Preface on behalf of the forces which it is the great pride and glory of my life to have commanded.

FRENCH

*F. M.*

WHITEHALL

*April 23, 1917.*

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**The Operations of the British  
Army in the Present War**

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**INTRODUCTORY**



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# The Operations of the British Army in the Present War

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## INTRODUCTORY

THE first quality of British military operations in the present war — and so it will strike the future historian — is their astonishing variety and range. Beginning on the ancient battlefields of France and Flanders, they have spread, in a series of expanding and apparently inevitable waves, over a good part of three continents, so that, wherever the enemy was to be found, — whether in Europe, or Asia, or Africa, or in the islands

#### 4 OPERATIONS OF BRITISH ARMY

of the high seas, — there also, sooner or later, were the British arms. There was a time when one or two campaigns were thought amply sufficient for the military energies of the most warlike nation. We have never pretended to be warlike, meeting our emergencies always, with a certain reluctance, as they arose; but in the present war we have seldom had fewer than six considerable campaigns on our hands at one time, and these in areas separated often by thousands of miles from one another and from us. It is one of the obligations of a great empire at war that it should be so; it is one of the privileges of a great maritime empire that it should be possible. It is undoubtedly the grand characteristic of the



operations of the British Army in this war, and gives the only true perspective of our military effort in the field. To our share in the Allied front must always be added the fighting frontiers of the Empire.

The British Army, now grown out of all recognition, was small, and known to be small, when the war began. It was a voluntary army, numbering approximately 700,000 men, of whom about 450,000 (including reservists) were trained soldiers, liable for service abroad, and the remainder, a half-trained Territorial Force, enrolled for service at home. Besides being small, it was, from the nature of its duties, widely scattered. Over 100,000 of our best troops were

## 6 OPERATIONS OF BRITISH ARMY

serving at the time in India or on foreign stations. For all purposes, therefore, when war broke out, we had in this country a mobilizable army of something under 600,000 trained and half-trained men, 250,000 of whom were liable only for service at home. The striking or Expeditionary Force of this army was a fully equipped and highly professional body of six infantry divisions and one division of cavalry, and with this force we entered the war. Intended primarily, as its name implied, for protective or punitive operations within the Empire, it was on a scale proportionate to its purpose and to the size of our army. Our army, judged by a European standard, being small, our Expeditionary Force, judged

by that standard, was diminutive; and the chief problem which confronted the Government, when it was decided to send this force to France, was how to support and supplement it. The story of how this problem was faced and overcome, of how "Home Service" men became "Foreign Service" in a day, and our little army of 700,000, by a gigantic effort of British determination and Imperial good-will, was expanded into an army of millions — all this is a separate narrative, to be related elsewhere; but we cannot afford to overlook it as we follow the fortunes of the Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders. It is the military background of all their triumphs and vicissitudes, and had

## 8 OPERATIONS OF BRITISH ARMY

an effect upon the tone of the war almost from the first. Even to our Expeditionary Force itself, with all its cheerful self-confidence and efficiency, it meant something to know that the country was in earnest; that as early as August 23, while they were still fighting among the coal-pits of Mons, the first 100,000 volunteers had been enrolled, and were already deep in the mysteries of forming fours.

**THE RETREAT FROM MONS**



## THE RETREAT FROM MONS

WHEN a country goes to war the first test of its military efficiency is the mobilization of its army. This is a stage in the history of wars which the public is apt to overlook, because the arrangements are necessarily secret and complex, and are carried out in that first hush which precedes *communiqués* and great conflicts in the field. It is nevertheless true that every war starts in the Department of the Quartermaster General, and that by the nature of this start the issue of a war may be decided. We started well. From August 5, when mobilization began, — in spite of bank holidays and Territorials *en route*

for summer camps, — the whole scheme of concentration and despatch was carried out almost exactly to schedule, and without a hitch. It is calculated that, during the busiest period, the railway companies, now under Government control and brilliantly directed by an executive committee of general managers, were able to run as many as eighteen hundred special trains in five days, an average of three hundred and sixty trains a day, and all up to time. The concentration of the Home Forces and of the Expeditionary Force proceeded concurrently. On August 9 the first elements of the Force embarked, and nine days later the greater part of it had been landed in France, and was



moving by way of Amiens to its unknown fortunes. The smoothness, rapidity, above all the secrecy with which the transportation was carried out, made a great impression at the time, and will always be admired. The question of how it was done excited, characteristically enough, less interest. We are a people accustomed to happy improvisations, and it was generally assumed that this national talent had once more come to our rescue; the truth being that in these matters improvisation can seldom be happy, and that for instant and complete success the only method is long and careful preparation in time of peace. For several years the military, naval, and civilian authorities concerned

had been engaged upon such a scheme of preparation, and had, indeed, concluded their labours not many months before war broke out. When the day came all railway and naval transport officers were at their posts, and the Railway Executive Committee, in its offices in Parliament Street, was calmly carrying out a time-table with every detail of which it had long been familiar. Such perfect preparedness is rare in our history, and worthy of note. Amidst the vast unreadiness of the nation for war the despatch of the Expeditionary Force, and the magnificent readiness of the fleet which made it possible, stand out in grand relief, not to be lost sight of or forgotten.

The Expeditionary Force was

commanded by Field Marshal Sir John French, and consisted, up to August 23, of four complete divisions of infantry (the First, Second, Third, and Fifth) and five brigades of cavalry; that is to say, about 80,000 men. On August 24 it was joined by the Nineteenth Infantry Brigade, which added 4000 more; and on August 25 by the Fourth Division, which added another 17,000. Our total strength, therefore, during the fighting at Mons and in the Retreat, varied from 80,000 to a little over 100,000 men. It was a small force, but of a quality rarely seen. No finer fighting unit ever entered the field. In physique and equipment, in professional training and experience of war, in that quality of skilful

and cheerful tenacity against odds which distinguishes the veteran, it was probably unrivalled by any body of troops of its time. The French, who gave our men a warm welcome, dwell always on their youth and good spirits, their wonderful cleanness and healthiness, the excellence of their equipment, and their universal courtesy.

“À Argenteuil-Triage,” writes a French infantryman who fought in the Retreat and on the Marne, “nous croisons un train de fantassins anglais; figures rasées, ouvertes, enfantines, riant de toutes leurs dents. Ils sont reluisants de propreté. Nous nous acclamons réciproquement.” (Sept. 2/14: Carnet de Route; Roujons.)

At Bucy-le-long the French re-

lieve the English. It is a matter of outposts. "De deux cents mètres en deux cents mètres, un groupe de six Anglais est couché à plat ventre dans les betteraves, en bordure d'un chemin. Ils se dressent et nous allons prendre leurs places en admirant ces beaux soldats, bien équipés, silencieux, et qui ont des couvertures." (*Ibid.*, Oct. 6/14.)

Such opinions were worth much. For though it is a great thing to be welcomed, as our men were welcomed, by a whole people, to have the hearty professional approval of its soldiers is a greater thing still.

The Expeditionary Force, thus landed in France, was organized in two army corps — the First, consisting of the First and Second

## 18 OPERATIONS OF BRITISH ARMY

Divisions, under Lieutenant-General Sir Douglas Haig; the second, consisting of the Third and Fifth Divisions, under Lieutenant-General Sir James Grierson, who was succeeded, on his sudden and much lamented death, by General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien. General Allenby commanded the cavalry division, consisting of the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Cavalry Brigades, and the Fifth Cavalry Brigade was commanded independently by Brigadier-General Sir Philip Chetwode. By the evening of Friday, August 21, the concentration was practically complete, and during Saturday the 22d the Force moved up to its position on the left or western extremity of the French line. (Plan 1.)

The general situation in this region, as it was known at the moment to the leaders of the Allies, may be briefly stated. It was at last plain, after much uncertainty, that the first great shock and collision of forces was destined to take place in this northern area. It was plain, also, that Belgium, for some time to come, was out of the scheme. Liège had fallen, and with it how many hopes and predictions of the engineer! Brussels was occupied; and the Belgian field army was retiring to shelter under the ramparts of Antwerp. Except for Namur, there was nothing in Belgium north of the Allied line to stop the German advance. Von Kluck and Von Buelow, with the First and Second German Armies,

were marching without opposition towards the French frontier — Von Kluck towards the southwest and Von Buelow towards the crossings of the Sambre. By the evening of the 20th, Von Buelow's guns were bombarding Namur. So much was known to the leaders of the Allies: of the strength of the advancing armies they knew little.

To oppose these two armies — for of the seven German armies already in position we shall consider only these two — the Allies were disposed as follows: Directly in the route of Von Buelow's army, should he pass Namur, lay the Fifth French Army, under General Lanrezac, with its left resting on the river Sambre at Charleroi, and its right in the fork of the Meuse



and the Sambre. This army, it should be noted, made a junction in the river fork with another French Army, the Fourth, under General Ruffey, which lay off to the south along the Middle Meuse, watching the Ardennes. On the left of the Fifth French Army, along a line presently to be defined, lay the British Expeditionary Force, facing, as it seemed, with equal directness, the line of advance of the army of Von Kluck. Subsidiary to the Fifth French Army and the British Force were two formations, available for support: a cavalry corps of three divisions under General Sordet, stationed to the south of Maubeuge, and, out to the west, with its base at Arras, a corps of two reserve

divisions under General D'Amade. Both these formations will be heard of during the subsequent operations, and it is important to remark that General D'Amade's two divisions were at this time, and throughout the first days of the fighting, the only considerable body of Allied troops in the eighty miles of territory between the British and the sea.

The line occupied by the British ran due east from the neighbourhood of Condé along the straight of the Condé-Mons Canal, round the loop which the canal makes north of Mons, and then, with a break, patrolled by cavalry, turned back at almost a right angle towards the southeast of the direction of the Mons-Beaumont road. The

whole of the canal line, including the loop round Mons, — a front of nearly twenty miles, — was held by the Second Army Corps, and the First Army Corps lay off to its right, holding the southeastern line to a point about nine miles from Mons. There being no infantry reserves available in this small force, General Allenby's cavalry division was employed to act on the flank or in support of any threatened part of the line. The forward reconnaissance was entrusted to the Fifth Cavalry Brigade, assisted by some squadrons from General Allenby's division, and some of its detachments penetrated as far north as Soignies, nine miles on the way to Brussels. In the occasional encounters which

took place with the enemy's Uhlans, to the north and east, our cavalry had always the best of it; then, as always in this war, when the opportunity has occurred, mounted or dismounted, they have proved themselves the better arm. Their reconnoissance was more than supplemented by four squadrons of the Royal Flying Corps under the direction of Major-General Sir David Henderson.

Throughout the Saturday our men entrenched themselves, the North-Countrymen among them finding in the chimney-stacks and slag-heaps of this mining district much to remind them of home. The line they held was clearly not an easy line to defend. No salient ever is, and a glance at the map

will show that this was no common salient. To the sharp apex of Mons was added, as an aggravation, the loop of the canal. It was nevertheless the best line available, and, once adopted, had been occupied with that double view both to defence and to attack which a good commander has always before him. The first object, when an enemy of unknown strength attacks, is to hold him and gain time; the line of the canal supplies just the obstacle required; it was therefore held, in spite of the salient, and arrangements made for a withdrawal of the Second Corps should the salient become untenable. If, on the other hand, the enemy should be beaten back, the Second Corps, pivoting northeast on Mons, could cross

the canal and move forward in line with the First Corps, already in position for such an advance. If, finally, — for a commander, like a good parent, must provide for everything, — a general retirement should become necessary, the British Commander-in-Chief had decided to rest his right flank on Maubeuge, twelve miles south of Mons: and here was his First Corps ready for it, clustered about the roads that lead towards Maubeuge, and able, from this advantage, to cover the retirement of the Second Corps, which had fewer facilities in this way, and would have farther to travel. Tactically the arrangements were as good as could be made.

When we come to the strength

and direction of the enemy's attack, we are on more doubtful ground. His strength on the British front was estimated at the time, according to all the available information, both French and English, to be at most two army corps, with perhaps one cavalry division, which would have made an equal battle; and it was not unnaturally supposed that he would attack in the general direction of his advance; that is, from the northeast. From an attack in this strength and from this direction we had nothing to fear. As it turned out, however, both the estimate of strength and the supposition of direction were inaccurate. The enemy, making full use of the wooded country in these parts, which gave excellent

concealment, and strong enough to throw his forces wide, was, as we shall see, engaged on something much more ambitious; a movement which, had it succeeded (as against any other troops it might well have succeeded), would have brought disaster on the whole Allied army.

At what hour precisely the Germans began their attack on the Mons position is uncertain. Some say at dawn, others just after noon. What is certain is that between 12 and 1 P.M. on Sunday the 23d, some of the men of the Royal West Kents, in support on the outskirts of Mons, were having a sing-song and watching the people home from church, and, feeling quite at their ease, had sent their shirts and



socks out to wash, for all the world as if on manoeuvres. It is an interesting little scene, and one which would have seemed incomprehensible to the Germans, who by this time pictured our little army cowering in its positions. The abruptness with which the scene changed is no less characteristic. When it was reported that the enemy had turned up "at last" and that "A" company was hard-pressed at the canal, there was no more thought of sing-songs nor even of the dinner "which the orderlies had just gone to fetch"; socks and shirts appeared as if by miracle; and when the "fall-in" went, every man was there, equipped and ready for anything. It is an ordinary incident, and for that reason important; in

any institution, whether it be an army or a household, it is the ordinary incidents that count. It is typical of the spirit of an army which has puzzled many even of its admirers by its strange combination of qualities: boyish ease and hilarity coupled with manly fortitude and discipline, and a most perfect and unassailable confidence in its weapons, its leaders, and itself.

The attack had most certainly begun; and it began, as was expected, at the weakest and most critical point of the line, the canal loop, which was held by the Third Division. This division had the heaviest share of the fighting throughout the day, maintaining, longer than seemed humanly pos-

sible, a hopeless position against hopeless odds, the Second Royal Irish and Fourth Middlesex of the Eighth Brigade, and the Fourth Royal Fusiliers of the Ninth Brigade, particularly distinguishing themselves. The bridges over the canal, which our men held, after some preliminary shelling, were attacked by infantry debouching from the low woods which at this point came down to within three hundred or four hundred yards of the canal. These woods were of great assistance to the enemy, both here and at other points of the canal, in providing cover for their infantry and machine-guns. The odds were very heavy. One company of the Royal Fusiliers, holding the Nimy Bridge, was

attacked at one time by as many as four battalions. The enemy at first came on in masses, and suffered severely in consequence. It was their first experience of the British "fifteen rounds a minute," and it told. They went down in bundles — our men delighting in a form of musketry never contemplated in the Regulations. To men accustomed to hitting bobbing heads at eight hundred yards there was something monstrous and incredible in the German advance. They could scarcely believe their eyes; such targets had never appeared to them even in their dreams. Nor were our machine-guns idle. In this, as in many other actions that day and in the days that followed, our ma-

chine-guns were handled with a skill and devotion which no one appreciated more than the enemy. Two of the first Victoria Crosses of the war were won by machine-gunners in this action of the bridges: Lieutenant Dease, of the Royal Fusiliers, who, though five times wounded, — and, as it turned out, mortally wounded, — continued to work his gun on the Nimy Bridge until the order came for retirement, and he was carried off; and Private Godley, of the Royal Scots Fusiliers, who, lower down the loop, at the Ghlin Bridge, in the face of repeated assaults, kept his gun in action throughout.

The attack had now spread along the whole line of the canal; but except at the loop the enemy could

make no impression. There, however, numbers told at last, and about the middle of the afternoon the Third Division was ordered to retire from the salient, and the Fifth Division on its left directed to conform. Bridges were blown up — the Royal Engineers vying with the other services in the race for glory: and by the night of the 23d, after various vicissitudes, the Second Army Corps had fallen back as far as the line Montreuil-Wasmes-Paturages-Frameries. That the retirement, though successful, was expensive, is not to be wondered at, when it is remembered that throughout this action, as we now know, the Second Army Corps was outnumbered by three to one. All ranks, however, were

in excellent spirits. Allowing for handicaps, they felt that they had proved themselves the better men.

It was a feeling which was to be severely tried in the next few days. At 5 P.M. on Sunday the 23d, as the Second Corps was withdrawing from the canal, the British Commander-in-Chief received a most unexpected telegraph from General Joffre, the Generalissimo of the Allied armies, to the effect that at least three German army corps were moving against the British front, and that a fourth corps was endeavouring to outflank him from the west. He was also informed that the Germans had on the previous day captured the crossings of the Sambre between Charleroi and Namur, and that the French on his

right were retiring. In other words, Namur, the defensive pivot of the Anglo-French line, on the resistance of which — if only for a few days — the Allied strategy had depended, had fallen almost at a blow. By Saturday the Germans had left Namur behind, and in numbers far exceeding French predictions had seized the crossings of the Sambre and Middle Meuse and were hammering at the junction of the Fifth and Fourth French Armies in the river-fork. The junction was pierced, and the French, unexpectedly and overwhelmingly assaulted both in front and flank, could do nothing but retire. By 5 P.M. on the Sunday, when the message was received at British Headquarters, the French



had been retiring for anywhere from ten to twelve hours. The British Army was for the moment isolated. Standing forward a day's march from the French on its right, faced and engaged by three German corps in front, and already threatened by a fourth corps on its left, it seemed a force marked out for destruction.

In the British Higher Command, however, there was no flurry. There is a thing called British phlegm.

The facts of the case, though unwelcome, were laconically accepted. Over General Headquarters brooded a clubroom calm. Airmen were sent up to confirm the French report, in the usual manner, and arrangements were quietly and methodically made for a retirement

towards the prearranged Maubeuge-Valenciennes line. The hard-pressed Second Corps, which had farther to march, was the first to move. Early on the 24th it was marching south towards Dour and Quarouble, covered by the First Corps, which had been much less taxed, and was favourably placed to threaten the German left. This covering demonstration was well carried out by the Second Division, supported by the massed artillery of the corps. The retirement of the Second Corps, however, even with this assistance, was not made without much difficulty. By the night of the 23d the enemy were already crossing the canal, and pouring down on the villages to the south. Several rear-guard actions were

fought here on the morning of the 24th, in which infantry and artillery equally distinguished themselves at Wasmes with notable success and much loss to the enemy; but, as every hour passed, the intention of the enemy to outflank from the northwest became more evident. Desperate fighting took place, the First Norfolks, First Cheshires, and One Hundred and Nineteenth Battery, R.F.A., detached as a flank guard under Colonel Ballard, of the Norfolks, holding the ridge from Audregnies to Flouges for several hours in the teeth of overwhelming opposition. To this little band, which cheerfully sacrificed itself, belongs the principal credit for holding up the turning movement of the enemy during the re-

tirement of the 24th. They made a splendid stand, and six hundred of the Cheshires never got away. Our cavalry, fortunately, were able to help also, and at once; for by an act of great foresight, long before the news arrived of a turning movement, Sir John French had transferred his cavalry division from the right flank to the left. They were in position there by the Sunday morning, and in the subsequent retirement did everything that men and horses could do to relieve the pressure. The dramatic action of General de Lisle's cavalry brigade at Audregnies, where the Fifth Division was hard-pressed, is one of the best-known incidents of this day's fighting, not only because it succeeded, though at a

heavy cost, in delaying the enemy, but because it gave occasion to one of the most heroic performances of the Retreat.

When the action was drawing to a close, and men, horses, and batteries were being withdrawn, Captain Francis Grenfell, of the Ninth Lancers, observed that the One Hundred and Nineteenth Battery, R.F.A., was in difficulties. All the horses of the battery had been killed, most of its personnel had been killed or wounded, and it looked as if the guns would have to be left. Captain Grenfell, though himself wounded, determined to help, and rode out to look for a way of retreat for the guns. Having found it, to show how little a cavalryman need care for death, he

rode his horse back, under a tempest of fire, at a walk, and called for volunteers from the Lancers, reminding them that "the Ninth had never failed the gunners." After such an example the response could be nothing but brisk. He returned with his volunteers ("eleven officers and some forty men"), and under a fierce and incessant fire the guns were manhandled into safety. For this fine action Captain Grenfell and the battery commander—Major Alexander—were each awarded the Victoria Cross. It is one of many illustrations furnished by the Retreat of the *camaraderie* of the various arms.

After a short halt and partial entrenchment on the line Dour-

Quarouble, to enable the First Corps to break off its demonstrations, the retreat of the Second Corps was resumed; and by the evening of the 24th the whole army had reached the prearranged line Jenlain-Bavai-Maubeuge — the Second Corps to the west of Bavai, and the First Corps to the right. The right was protected by the fortress of Maubeuge, the left by the cavalry, operating outwards, and by the Nineteenth Infantry Brigade, which had been brought up in the nick of time from the lines of communication, and had acted throughout the day in support of the exposed flank of the Second Corps.

It had been intended by the British Commander-in-Chief to

make a stand on the Maubeuge line, and if the first calculations of the enemy's strength and intentions had proved correct, it is possible that a great battle might have been fought here, and continued by the French armies along the whole fortress line of northern France. Even as it was, the temptation to linger at Maubeuge must have been strong; it offered such an inviting buttress to our right flank, and filled so comfortably that dangerous gap between our line and the French. The temptation, to which a weaker commander might have succumbed, was resisted. "The French were still retreating," says the despatch, "and I had no support except such as was afforded by the fortress of Mau-



beuge; and the determined attempts of the enemy to get round my left flank assured me that it was his intention to hem me against that place and surround me. I felt that not a moment must be lost in retiring to another position."

Early on the 25th, accordingly, the whole British Army set out on the next stage of its retreat. Its function in the general Allied strategy was now becoming clear. It was not merely fighting its own battles. Situated as it was on the left flank of the retiring French Armies, it had become in effect the left flank-guard of the Allied line, committed to its retirement, and to the protection of that retirement, to the end. The turning movement from the west, at first local and

partial, had suddenly acquired a strategic significance. It threatened not merely the British Army, but the whole Allied strategy of the Retreat. Could the British resist it? Could they, at the least, delay it? These were the questions which the French leaders asked themselves, with some anxiety, as they retired with their armies from day to day, and waited for the counter-turn which was to come. For, as we now know, behind the retiring and still intact French Armies, to the south and east of Paris, movements were shaping, forces were forming, which were to change the face of things in this western corner. Could the British hold out till these movements were ripe? It was a momentous ques-

tion. No more momentous question has been asked for a hundred years. The answer, so far, had been affirmative.

On this day, the 25th, from very early in the morning, the two corps marched south on each side of the great Forest of Mormal, the First Corps to the right and the Second to the left, as one faces the enemy. The position chosen for the next stand was in the neighbourhood of Le Cateau, on the line Cambrai-Le Cateau-Landrecies, and while the army was marching towards it, civilian labour was employed to prepare and entrench the ground. On this morning, also, the infantry of the Fourth Division, which had arrived at Le Cateau on the 23d and 24th, became available for

service, bringing a welcome addition to our strength of eleven battalions. They were immediately sent forward, and, facing north-west between Solesmes and the Cambrai-Le Cateau road, materially assisted the retirement of the Second Corps. For both corps it was a day of terrible marching, along roads crowded with transport and — particularly on the eastern route — packed with refugees. For marching in a retreat has this fundamental disadvantage, that the men move behind their transport, and (in friendly country) with all the civilians of the countryside about their feet. In such conditions a steady pace is the last thing to be hoped for. Checking — the curse of tired men — from

being the exception becomes the rule; while the hours crawl on, and the boots tell, and the packs tell, and the eye grows glazed with staring at the men in front, and even the rifle, that "best friend," seems duller and heavier than a friend should be — the heaviest nine pounds in the world. It is calculated that on the 25th the various units of the Second Corps marched, under these most trying conditions, anything from twenty to thirty-five miles. By this time, also, the continual retirement was having its effect on the men's spirits. To the rank and file, who necessarily know nothing of high strategy, and see only what is before their eyes, the Retreat carried little of that high significance which

we attach to it, but much of weariness and distaste. Some glimmering of an idea that we were "leading the Germans into a trap" cheered men up here and there; some rumours of Russian victories raised the old jokes about "Berlin"; but for the most part they marched and fought uncomprehending, welcoming their turn of rear guard as a relief, because it gave some chance of fighting and turned their faces to the north.

The Second Corps reached their appointed line on the Cambrai-Le Cateau road as night was falling, and, under a cold, steady rain, which had succeeded the blazing heat of the day, proceeded to improve the trenches which they found there. They had had an ex-

hausting march, but little fighting or interruption. The First Corps was delayed and did not reach the allotted position; but was scattered by the evening over an area at some points as many as thirty miles from the Second Corps, and nowhere nearer than Landrecies, eight miles from Le Cateau. The difficulty of movement had been increased by the convergence of French troops retiring from the Sambre, who cut across our line of march. The enemy pressure was continued by fresh troops well into the night. The engagement of the Second Division south and east of Maroilles, and the fight of the Fourth (Guards') Brigade at Landrecies, are the two main incidents in this difficult night's work.

About the fighting near Maroilles we have little information except that it seemed serious enough to justify the British Commander-in-Chief in asking for help from the French. In response to his urgent request two French reserve divisions attached to the Fifth French Army on our right eventually came up, and by diverting the attention of the enemy enabled Sir Douglas Haig to effect a skilful extrication from an awkward position made still more awkward by the darkness of night. One incident of the fighting near Maroilles has, indeed, slipped into the light of day with regard to a unit of the Second Division: a little rear-guard action of the First Berks, near a bridge over the Petit Helpe



which it was important to hold. They were on their way back to it, stumbling in the dark along a greasy, narrow causeway, with a deep ditch on each side, which led to the bridge. "The Germans, as it turned out, had already forced the bridge and were in the act of advancing along the causeway; and in the pitch darkness of the night the two forces suddenly bumped one into the other. Neither side had fixed bayonets, for fear of accidents in the dark, and in the scrimmage which followed it was chiefly a case of rifle-butts and fists. At this game the Germans proved no match for our men, and were gradually forced back to the bridgehead, where they were held for the remainder of the night."

Early in the morning the Germans withdrew, and the First Berks fell back on the rest of the Second Division, along the road to Guise. It was a very complete and satisfactory little affair.

The fight at Landrecies by the Fourth (Guards') Brigade is better known. They had arrived there, very weary, and had got into billets; so weary, indeed, that the Commander-in-Chief could not order them farther west, to fill up the gap between Le Cateau and Landrecies. "The men were exhausted, and could not get farther in without rest." The enemy, however, would not allow them this rest. At 8.30 in the evening came news that Germans in motor-lorries were coming through the

Forest of Mormal in great numbers, and bearing down upon the town. The town, fortunately, had already been put into a hasty state of defence: houses loopholed, machine-guns installed, barricades erected, and a company detailed to each of the many exits. It is said that the Germans advanced singing French songs, and that the leading ranks wore French uniforms, for a moment deceiving the defenders. This would explain the suddenness of the collision, for the Germans and British were fighting hand to hand almost at once. It was a fierce fight while it lasted, and, with short respites, went on till the early hours of the morning; but eventually the enemy were beaten off with great loss. It is

estimated that they lost in this action from 700 to 1000 men. It must be allowed, nevertheless, in the light of later knowledge that the tactics of the Germans at Maroilles and Landrecies were good. A few battalions — for it is unlikely that they amounted to more — attacking at various points under cover of darkness with a great show of vigour, though beaten off, succeeded in conveying the impression to the British commanders in this part of the field that they were engaged with a considerable force. This impression once conveyed, the main object of the manoeuvre had been attained, for the First Corps was kept on the alert all night, and effectually prevented either from

obtaining rest or from reaching its appointed destination in the British line. If our assumption of the enemy numbers is correct, it was a clever piece of work, well conceived and well executed.

The crisis of the Retreat was now approaching. There is a limit to what men can do, and it seemed for a moment as if this limit might be reached too soon. The Commander-in-Chief, seriously considering the accumulating strength of the enemy, the continued retirement of the French, his exposed left flank, the tendency of the enemy's western corps to envelop him, and above all, the exhausted and dispersed condition of his troops, decided to abandon the Le Cateau position, and to press on

the Retreat till he could put some substantial obstacle, such as the Somme or the Oise, between his men and the enemy, behind which they might reorganize and rest. He therefore ordered his corps commanders to break off whatever action they might have in hand, and continue their retreat as soon as possible towards the new St. Quentin line.

The First Corps was by this time terribly exhausted, but, on receiving the order, set out from its scattered halting-places in the early hours of the 26th.

By dawn on that day the whole corps, including the Fourth Brigade at Landrecies, was moving south towards St. Quentin.

The order to retire at daybreak,

on which the First Corps was now acting, had been duly received by the Second Corps. The commander had been informed that the retirement of the First Corps was to continue simultaneously and that three divisions of French cavalry under General Sordet were moving towards his left flank, in pursuance of an agreement arrived at in a personal interview between the French cavalry commander and the British Commander-in-Chief.

Sir H. Smith-Dorrien was also informed that two French Territorial Divisions under General D'Amade were moving up to support Sordet.

There was no reason to suppose that the Second Corps, which had not been so much harassed by the

enemy on its march south as the First Corps, was not equally well able to obey the order to retreat.

The corps commander, however, judged that his men were too tired and the enemy too strong to effect such a retirement as he was directed to carry out.

The General's reply was duly received at Headquarters. The Commander-in-Chief was deeply engaged in concerting plans with the French Commander-in-Chief, his Chief of the Staff, and General Lanzerac (the commander of the Fifth French Army). Orders were immediately sent to the Second Corps, informing the General that any delay in retiring would seriously compromise the plan of the Allied operations, and, in view of



the general situation, might entail fatal results. He was directed to resume his retirement forthwith, and, to assist him, the cavalry and Fourth Division were placed under his orders.

At the conclusion of the conference, no positive information having been received of the commencement of the retirement, the Commander-in-Chief himself set out for Le Cateau; but the congestion of the roads with Belgian refugees, etc., made progress so slow that he had not accomplished half the distance before he found that his orders had been carried out and the retirement was in progress.

During the early part of the day, however, Sir H. Smith-Dorrien had, for the reason given above,

waited at the Le Cateau position to engage the pursuing Germans. Of the three divisions of infantry thus engaged, the Fifth lay on the right, the Third in the centre, and the Fourth faced outwards on the left: the whole occupying the ridge south of the Cambrai-Le Cateau road, on the line Haucourt-Caudry-Beaumont-Le Cateau. The Nineteenth Infantry Brigade was in reserve and the cavalry operated on the flanks. With both flanks exposed, with three divisions of infantry to the enemy's seven, and faced by the massed artillery of four army corps, — an odds of four or five to one, — the Second Corps and Fourth Division prepared to make a stand. A few hours' sleep, and at dawn, with a roar of guns, the battle opened.

That the day was critical, that it was all or nothing, was realized by all ranks. Everything was thrown into the scale; nothing was held back. Regiments and batteries, with complete self-abandonment, faced hopeless duels at impossible ranges; brigades of cavalry on the flanks boldly threatened divisions; and in the half-shelter of their trenches the infantry, withering but never budging, grimly dwindled before the German guns. It was our first experience on a large scale of modern artillery in mass. For the first six hours the guns never stopped. To our infantry it was a time of stubborn and almost stupefied endurance, broken by lucid intervals of that deadly musketry which had

played such havoc with the Germans at Mons. To our artillery it was a duel, and perhaps of all the displays of constancy and devotion in a battle where every man in every arm of the service did his best, the display of the gunners was the finest. For they accepted the duel quite cheerfully, and made such sport with the enemy's infantry that even their masses shivered and recoiled. By midday, however, many of our batteries were out of action, and the enemy infantry had advanced almost to the main Cambrai-Le Cateau road, behind which our men, in their pathetic civilian trenches, were quietly waiting.

The enemy attacked on the right of the Fifth Division, and were in

the act of turning it when the order came to retire. This necessary order, for a gradual retirement from the right, was issued a little before 3 P.M., and was with great difficulty conveyed to all parts of the line. In the Fifth Division several companies, in covering the retirement, were practically wiped out. The story of "B" Company of the Second K.O.Y.L.I. charging the enemy with its nineteen remaining men, headed by its commander, is typical of the spirit which inspired the British regiments.

The Third Division had suffered comparatively little when the order reached them, and were justly priding themselves on having successfully repulsed a determined at-

tack on Caudry, the apex of the position.

On the left of the line was posted the Fourth Division which had come in by train the previous day, and was personally placed by the Commander-in-Chief in the position he thought best to cover the retirement of the Second Corps.

Owing to the unexpected turn of events at Mons, and the unfortunate delay in the despatch of this division from England, the troops had to be pushed into action without a moment's delay, and before the detrainment of their artillery and other services was practically complete.

On the morning of the 26th they found themselves on the extreme western flank of the Allied forces,

and splendidly did General Snow and his gallant men carry out the difficult and dangerous task assigned them.

The conduct of their retirement was no less efficient than their gallant fighting. Parts of this division, however, shared the fate of other units in the line engaged in covering the retirement, and, holding on into the night, either retired in the darkness (some to the British lines, others through the German lines to the sea) or, less fortunate, were cut off, captured, or destroyed. Many adventures befell them, and some tragedies, but none to equal the tragedy of the First Gordons, who marched in the darkness into a German division in bivouac some miles south of the battle-ground,

and were shot or taken prisoners almost to a man.

The infantry retirement, though thus partial and irregular, was progressively carried out according to orders, and by four o'clock in the afternoon most of the line had been cleared. The retirement was covered by the artillery, still in action with the same unruffled courage and devotion which they had shown throughout the day, and there is no doubt that the reluctance of the enemy to engage in an energetic pursuit was partly due to this splendid opposition of our gunners, as well as to the undoubtedly heavy losses which they had suffered from our rifle and shell fire earlier in the day. At any rate, the pursuit was not pressed, and by



nightfall, after another long and weary march, — how weary, after such a day, can scarcely be expressed, — the remains of the Second Corps and the Fourth Division halted and bivouacked. It was pouring with rain, but many slept where they halted, by the roadside, too utterly worn to think of shelter.

There is a pendant to this great action of the 26th which until recently has been missing from its place; and it has been a matter of much wonder, in consequence, how it was that things fell out as they did after the battle of Le Cateau, the weary British retiring before a numerous and victorious enemy which did not pursue. It was pointed out, indeed, that the enemy had suffered heavy losses; that

they were tired and shaken by the unexpected violence of the British defence; but when every allowance had been made for the effect of weariness and loss, it was plain that some other reason must still be found to account for a decision so repugnant to the German temper and the German plans. Reference has already been made to the promise made by Generals Sordet and D'Amade to the British Commander-in-Chief. If history has been slow to record it, let the delay be put down to the exigencies of war. The enemy were not only tired and shaken. They were also threatened, and threatened, as they very quickly discovered, in the most sensitive tentacles of their advance. It was about 4.30 on the

afternoon of the 26th (so the story runs), when the British retirement had been in progress about an hour, that a furious cannonading was heard out towards the west. This was Sordet's cavalry, tired horses and all, arrived and engaging the German right. The explanation was confirmed by airmen later in the day, who reported having seen large bodies of French cavalry, with horse artillery and some battalions of infantry, driving back the Germans out towards Cambrai. General Sordet and his cavalry, aided by General D'Amade's battalions, which had moved out from their station at Arras, were able to inflict upon the outflanking German right a blow which recoiled upon the whole of

the First German Army, and by its threatened significance more than by its actual strength dominated the policy of that army for several days to come. The German advance wavered and paused, and for nearly twenty-four hours the British continued their retirement almost unmolested.

Whether on the early morning of the 26th the left of the British line could have followed the example of the First Corps and continued its retreat, is a question which cannot be satisfactorily settled until the whole history of the war is laid bare. But there can be no doubt that both troops and commander richly deserved the high tribute paid them in the despatch of the British Commander-in-Chief, who,

after praising the behaviour of various arms, says: —

“I cannot close this brief account of the glorious stand of the British troops without putting on record my deep appreciation of the valuable services rendered by Sir H. Smith-Dorrien.

“I say without hesitation that the saving of the left wing of the army under my command on the morning of the 26th August could never have been accomplished unless a commander of rare and unusual coolness, intrepidity, and determination had been present to personally conduct the operations.”

It is impossible to close the story of this, the most critical time of the great Retreat, without making mention of the inestimable services

performed by the British cavalry under General Allenby. The moral superiority which they had so effectually established over the hostile horsemen during the enemy's first advance on Mons, was maintained and increased by every one of the many trials of strength which occurred all along the line between smaller and greater units of the two opposing cavalries. Invariably in all these encounters the German cavalry were driven behind the protection of their infantry and, thus hampering the latter's advance, assisted our troops to make good their retreat. The quality of the horses and equipment of the British, their unrivalled efficiency in dismounted fighting and in knowledge of ground,

coupled with their intrepidity and dash whenever the smallest opportunity for mounted attack presented itself, enabled them effectually to prevent that which is most dreaded by a retreating army — the enterprises of hostile horsemen.

No praise can be too great for the British cavalry throughout this drastic initiation into the splendid work which they have invariably performed throughout the campaign.

It was in the early hours of the morning of the 27th that the commander of the Second Corps personally reported himself at Headquarters. He informed the Commander-in-Chief that the Second Corps and Fourth Division had suffered heavily and were very

tired, but were now rapidly regaining order and cohesion. By dawn every available staff officer was *en route* for St. Quentin, and hour after hour, at their posts on the line of the Retreat, shepherded the troops towards their units, and the longed-for luxuries of food and drink and news. All through the morning detachments of every size and every conceivable composition kept filing past — some with officers, most with none — some hobbling and silent, others whistling and in step — but all with one accord most thoroughly persuaded (such are the fallacies of a retreat) that they were the last and only survivors of their respective commands. Many, after a brief halt, had marched all night, and up to



one o'clock in the afternoon they were still coming in. A brief rest, some bread and coffee, and they were off once more, their troubles almost forgotten in the pleasure of rejoining their regiments and recovering their friends.

The general Retreat, which the battle of Le Cateau had so dangerously interrupted, resumed once more its normal tenor. Of the behaviour of the men during this trying period it is difficult to speak with moderation. They had passed through an ordeal, both physical and mental, such as few troops have ever had to face in their first week of war; and had displayed throughout a nobility of bearing and demeanour of which none who observed them can speak even now

without emotion. Such courage and patience, such humorous resignation and cheerfulness in adversity, are to be paralleled only in the finest armies of history.

The resumption of the general Retreat and the restoration of march routine among the forces of the British left had one immediate and important consequence. It became possible to deal with the chief remaining weakness caused by the inability of the First Corps, as already pointed out, to reach its allotted position on the evening of the 25th. The First Corps had not been idle while the Second Corps fought; though never heavily engaged, it had been perpetually harassed, and was still, on August 27, suffering from the wide dis-

persion of its forces on the 25th. It was now moving south as best it could — keeping direction, but otherwise marching and bivouacking by brigades. On both flanks, indeed, throughout these early days of the Retreat, such was the imminence of the enemy, and such the variety of fortunes of the different brigades — and even battalions and companies — of the same division during any one day, that no strict uniformity of march or of line could be looked for. It speaks well for the commanders of brigade and regimental units that so unusually high a discretionary power was exercised so well, and with so little miscarriage either of individual units or of the general scheme. Some mishaps, of course,

there were, of companies and battalions overtaken, cut off, or surprised. The capture of the greater part of the Second Munster Fusiliers at Bergues on the 26th is one of these incidents, to be set beside the destruction of the First Gordons, as part of the tragic waste inevitable in any continuous retreat before superior numbers. It is memorable, not only because, like the First Gordons, the regiment involved carried a famous name, but because it gave occasion to our cavalry to show once more in their Retreat their devotion to duty. It was entirely due to the skilful and audacious dismounted action of two troops of the Fifteenth Hussars that the battered remnant of the Munsters — about

one hundred and fifty men — was saved from annihilation or surrender.

The Second Corps was still, on August 27, in advance of the First; but in both corps the Retreat continued incessantly. Sleep was cut down to a minimum; men fed, drank, and slept as they could, and always, when they rose from the roadside and stretched themselves to a new dawn, the word was "March." Their chief enemy now was not the Germans, but the road, the blazing sun, and the limits of their own flesh and blood. The worst, however, was over. By August 27/28 movement by divisions began to be possible; and by August 28 movement by corps. By August 28/29 the whole Army

was in touch once more on the line Noyon-La Fère, and on Sunday the 29th, for the first time for eight days, the Army actually rested. It is a day they are never likely to forget. While the men rested, their commanders took stock; and before the march was resumed, brigades and divisions had been reorganized, stragglers restored, and deficiencies of men and material ascertained and noted. The reorganization was completed by the arrival of Major-General Pulteney, and the constitution of the Fourth Division and Nineteenth Infantry Brigade as a Third Army Corps under his command.

The reorganization of the British Force coincided with a gratifying change in the Allied dispositions.

The British Army was not only in touch within itself, but in touch, also, on both its flanks, with the French; on the right, with the Fifth French Army, now, after many vicissitudes and much hard fighting, lying behind the Oise from La Fère to Guise; and on the left with a new French Army, still in process of formation, of which the nucleus was those same two divisions of infantry and three divisions of cavalry which General D'Amade and General Sordet had handled so much to our advantage on the afternoon of the 26th, and throughout the subsequent retirement. This Army (to be called henceforth, the Sixth) conscious of some mission above the ordinary, and daily increasing in strength,

lay off, on the 29th, to the northwest of the British line, facing northeast with its right on Roye. It was a welcome change, removing none too soon that fear of isolation which had haunted all our movements. The situation of the British, scars and bruises notwithstanding, seemed suddenly almost promising, and with their flanks secured, for the first time since the Retreat began, they enjoyed a genuine feeling of relaxation. It was a feeling, happily, which the enemy at the moment was unable to disturb. His strength was diverted to the two French Armies, and except for some cavalry actions, in which our troops as usual were completely successful, there was little activity on the British front. On the morn-



ing of the 29th, while our men were resting behind the Oise, the main body of the pursuit was still engaged in crossing the Somme.

It was amazing to see how quickly the Army recovered during these days from the first strain of the Retreat. Even on the 28th the improvement was notable. A general cheerfulness pervaded the ranks, whence derived no one seemed to care, but splendid and infectious. Men toughened and hardened; the limpers grew fewer, and already battalions were to be met marching with the old swing to the old song. By the 29th — for always we come back to this crucial date — the first hard apprenticeship was over; and when the Army rose from its sleep to take

the road once more, it looked and felt an army of veterans. Officers smiled as they watched their men, and speculated happily on the day to come.

The chief difficulty now was to replace wastage in equipment, etc., which had been enormous. For in the strain and confusion of the Retreat everything detachable had been lost or thrown away, and whole companies were found, perfectly fitted out eight days before, which had now scarcely a single greatcoat, waterproof sheet, or change of clothing left. The deficiency of entrenching tools — to take only one article of equipment, though that, perhaps, the most easily lost — amounted, in the troops which had fought at Le Ca-

teau, to over eighty per cent. It was much easier, unfortunately, to tabulate these deficiencies than to supply them. The stores existed, indeed, but they were not to be had. They were lying for the fetching on the quays and in the dépôts of Havre and Rouen and Boulogne, but every day's march took us farther away from them and increased their exposure to the German advance. With Amiens already in the enemy's hands, and the Channel ports uncovered, we were, for a moment, that portent of the textbooks, an army without a base. It was a case for prompt measures, and prompt measures were taken. On August 29, while the Army was recounting deficiencies on the Oise, the Inspector

General of the lines of communication, by order of the Commander-in-Chief, was arranging a grand removal to the mouth of the Loire, and on August 30, the new British base was temporarily established at St. Nazaire and Nantes, with Le Mans as advanced base in place of Amiens. It was a great achievement, but an unwelcome change, for both by sea and by land the distances were greater, and it had the inevitable consequence of delaying the arrival of everything on which the Army depended for replenishment. The infantry went without their great-coats and entrenching tools; and though reinforcements of men continued to arrive at stated intervals, — the first reinforcement on Sep-

tember 5, and the second on September 7 and 8, — the guns which should have come on August 29 were not actually received till September 19. It was not until October 11, when the British Army was setting out for Flanders, that St. Nazaire was at last definitely closed down, and Havre and Boulogne reopened in its place. It was a difficult period for the administrative departments of the Army, and had its own triumphs.

The lull in operations on the British front during the 29th, and the restoration of contact with the French, were turned to good account by the Allied leaders, whose opportunities for meeting and exchanging views had hitherto been rare. A conference was held in

the early afternoon at British Headquarters in Compiègne, which was attended not only by General Joffre and Sir John French, but by the three British corps commanders and General Allenby. The conference was presided over by the French Commander-in-Chief, who showed himself, then as always, where the British were concerned, "most kind, cordial, and sympathetic." "He told me," says Sir John French, "that he had directed the Fifth French Army on the Oise to move forward and attack the Germans on the Somme, with a view to checking pursuit. He also told me of the formation of the Sixth French Army on my left flank, composed of the Seventh Army Corps, four reserve divisions,

and Sordet's corps of cavalry." In conclusion, having dealt with the immediate necessities of the British, he outlined once more his strategic conception, to draw on the enemy at all points until a favourable situation should be created for the desired offensive, and in conformity with that conception directed the Retreat to proceed. The bridges over the Oise were promptly destroyed, and at various hours between mid-afternoon of the 29th and early morning of the 30th the British forces set out on a twenty-mile march to the Aisne, through beautiful country which they were no longer too tired to enjoy. By the afternoon of August 30, the whole Army was in position a few miles north of the line Compiègne-

Soissons, and at the same time the Germans occupied La Fère. On the morning of August 31 the Retreat was resumed, and from this date until September 4 continued practically from day to day in conformity with the movements of the French, our men becoming daily fitter and more war-hardened. Rumours, however, of successful French actions on our flanks, and, amidst much that was vague and wearisome, a growing sense of combination and ulterior purpose in their movements, encouraged all ranks.

The country now was much more difficult, for after the Forest of Compiègne is passed the land plunges into deep wooded ravines and break-neck roads, very trying



for guns and transport, and for all manner of manœuvres. The heat was intense, and, to make matters worse, the enemy pursuit, which had unaccountably languished, was becoming closer and more insistent. The British, bivouacked that night between Crépy-en-Valois and Villers-Cotteret, found themselves committed, on the morning of September 1, to two of the hottest skirmishes of the Retreat; one at Villers-Cotteret, where the Fourth (Guards') Brigade was covering the retirement of the Second Division, the other on the left at Néry, in the area of the Third Corps.

The action at Villers-Cotteret began about nine o'clock, in very difficult forest country, and continued until after midday, the

Guards' Brigade maintaining its ground, despite heavy losses, with a steadiness and determination worthy of the heroes of Landrecies. It was an action easily described. The attack had been expected, and was repulsed. In this action the Irish Guards, who had only been under distant shell fire at Mons and had had little to do at Landrecies, received their full baptism of fire. It was their first real fight, and their commanding officer headed the casualty list. The action at Néry was quite unlike the action at Villers-Cotteret, for it came as a surprise, and at one time looked like becoming a tragedy. The first indication of danger had reached the Headquarters of the Second Corps at three o'clock

in the morning, when a Frenchman reported having seen "forty German guns and a large force of Uhlans" moving in the direction of the Third Corps, and more particularly in the direction of Néry, where the First Cavalry Brigade with L Battery, R.H.A., was billeted, on the left front of the British line. Except as regards the number of the guns the report proved to be true. The Germans, concealed from the British by a thick mist, — six regiments of cavalry with two batteries of six guns each, — were in position by day-break on the steep ridge which overlooks the village, when an officer's patrol of the Eleventh Hussars bumped suddenly into them out of the mist. It is possi-

ble that they were as much surprised as the British, for a mist works both ways; but they had the advantage in numbers, armament, and position. The alarm was scarcely given when their guns opened on the village, and by five o'clock, when the sun rose, the fight was in full swing.

It was a singular action, for though our cavalry, dismounted and hastily disposed, soon recovered from their surprise, nothing could alter the situation of L Battery. Thanks to the mist, it had been caught in a position as unsuitable for action as could well be conceived. Unlimbered in an orchard only four hundred yards off, and perfectly commanded by the German guns, it was throughout

the fight a mere target for the enemy. A tornado of shell, machine-gun, and rifle fire was directed upon it, the battery meanwhile boldly replying, though its case was hopeless, and known to be hopeless, from the first. Soon only one of its guns was left in action, and on the serving of this one gun the attention of every surviving officer and man was concentrated, one after another falling killed or wounded under the fire of the now exasperated enemy. Captain Bradbury, loading, lost a leg; continued to direct, and lost the other, and was carried away to die so that, as he said, his men should not see his agony and be discouraged. When all the officers had fallen, Sergeant-Major Dorrell took command, and

aided by the machine-guns of the Eleventh Hussars, was still maintaining the hopeless duel when about eight o'clock the Fourth Cavalry Brigade arrived, and not long after the First Middlesex leading the Nineteenth Infantry Brigade. The balance was reversed, and the enemy, with, it is said, the one gun of L Battery still firing at them, retired in disorder towards Verrines, leaving eight of their twelve guns on the field. Whatever their mission, it remained unfulfilled. In this action, in which a serious disaster was so successfully averted, the heroic performance of L Battery will always be memorable. It had lost, during the engagement, all its officers and eighty per cent of its gun detachments

killed or wounded, without betraying by so much as a sign either discouragement or defeat. Distinctions were showered upon it, and Captain Bradbury, Sergeant-Major Dorrell, and Sergeant Nelson were awarded the Victoria Cross.

There is a sequel to this fight too exhilarating to be omitted. As the First and Fourth Cavalry Brigades were moving south next morning through the rides of the Forest of Ermenonville, they came on the tracks of horses and sent a troop to follow them up. "They found the ride strewn with German kit of all kinds, lame horses, etc., showing a hurried retreat. They had gone by five hours before, and turned out to be our Néry friends, the cavalry

division, who had bumped into one of our columns and retreated rapidly, leaving their four remaining guns." It was a very satisfactory finish, and had a fine effect on the whole Army. The story of the capture of the twelve guns ran like wildfire through the ranks, and was recorded with pleasure by the French in their *communiqué*.

On September 2, very early in the morning, the Army was once more on the move. September 1 had been a hard day, and at one time something like a general engagement was threatened on the left and left centre of the British line, the Fifth and Fourth Divisions fighting model rear-guard actions which had much to do with the inactivity of the enemy on the fol-



lowing day. For on September 2 the pursuit once more relaxed, and by the evening the British had reached the north bank of the Marne, and were already arranging for the crossing on the following day. Both the march and the crossing had been contemplated with considerable misgiving by the Commander-in-Chief, for on September 2 the Army was no longer retiring, as it had hitherto retired, in the direction of Paris, but, owing to the position of the bridges, had swung southeast and was now executing what was in effect almost a flank march in the face of the enemy. The crossing of the Marne was an even more delicate operation, for it involved, in circumstances of comparative immobility,

the same dangerous exposure to the enemy. The enemy, however, did nothing to interrupt our operations, and was, indeed, reported by our airmen to have swung south-east also, and to be moving in the direction of Château-Thierry, towards the front of the Fifth French Army. By the night of September 3 the whole of the British troops were safely across the river and all the bridges blown up. The left of the British Army was now actually in sight of the outlying forts of Paris, and there was much excitement among all ranks as to our ultimate destination. Should we, after all, enter Paris, and sleep in the beds of *la ville lumière*? It was not to be. A position was occupied between Lagny and Signy-Signets,

and on the following day, while the enemy was bridging the Marne, the British Army made the last stage of the Retreat, finishing up, in the cool of the evening, on the line Lagny-Courtagon. This was their "farthest south," and on September 5, while they rested, the great news spread through the Army that the Retreat was over, and that next day the Advance would begin. It would be difficult to exaggerate the effect of the news. For though the Army had grown outwardly fitter and more cheerful during the last seven days, the profound distaste which was felt by all ranks for the perpetual retirement poisoned every activity. Was it never to end, this Retreat? Were we retiring, then, to the Pyrenees?

With such bitter questions and mock-humorous answers, they beguiled the march. When the news came it was as if a great sickness had been lifted from their minds, and for the first time, perhaps, they realized fully, as men do when they rise from sickness, how infinitely tired and weary they had been. They could scarcely believe the news; but it came from quarters not to be denied. The "favourable situation" for which General Joffre had been waiting so patiently had come at last.

THE END





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