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Title: In the Russian Ranks: A Soldier's Account of the Fighting in Poland

Author: John Morse

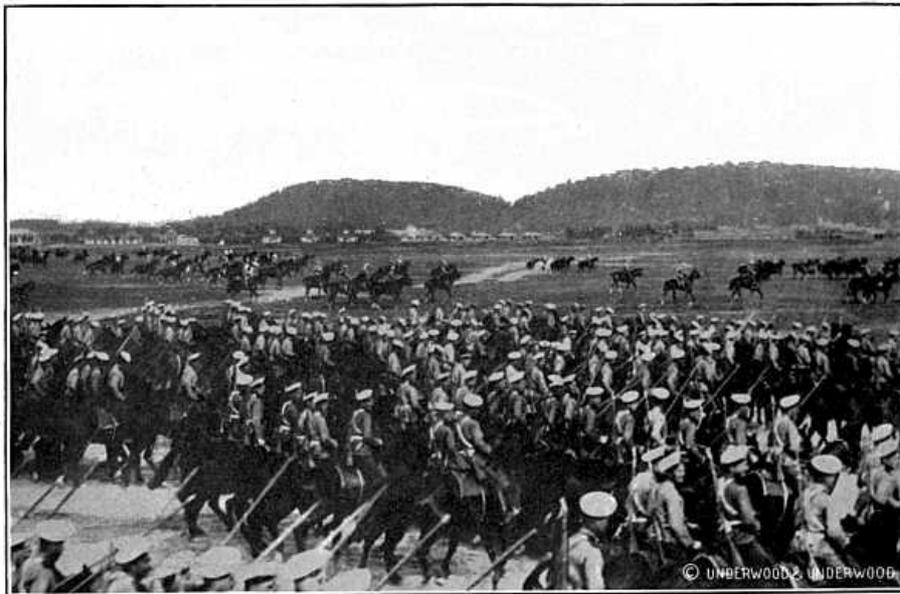
Release date: September 10, 2011 [EBook #37372]

Most recently updated: January 8, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Barbara Tozier, Bill Tozier, Matthew Wheaton
and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at
<https://www.pgdp.net>

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ACCOUNT OF THE FIGHTING IN POLAND ***



RUSSIA'S RENOWNED CALVARY ON THE MARCH

IN THE RUSSIAN RANKS

**A Soldier's Account of
the Fighting in Poland**

BY

JOHN MORSE

Englishman

**ILLUSTRATED WITH
REPRODUCTIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHS**

NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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AN ENGLISHMAN IN THE RUSSIAN RANKS

CHAPTER I

THE OUTBREAK OF THE GREAT WAR

On the 1st July, 1914, if I could have seen one step ahead in my life's course, this book would not have been written. On the day named I crossed the German frontier west of Metz; and, for the first time, beheld the territory of the Hun.

Always a student of military matters, at this hour I loved war, and all that pertained to war; now I loathe it with an ineradicable hate and disgust, and hope never again to see ground crimsoned with blood.

But at this time I had heard no hint of war in the centre of Europe and of civilization, and no thoughts were farther from my mind than those of martial contention.

My object in going to Germany was business; but also to spend a holiday in a country I had heard friends praise for its beauty and hospitality; and particularly I wished to visit places renowned in history, art and romance. Little I dreamed that I was to see a horrible blight, a foul leprosy, settle on much that had a hallowed past for every cultivated intellect.

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I arrived at Metz from Paris via Chalons and Verdun; and, as my time and means were both limited, I went on, after only two days' delay, to Mayence and Frankfort, and thence to Leipzig, where I had some business to transact. On the 16th July I was at Dresden; on the 20th at Breslau; and on the 22nd I arrived at Ostrovo, a small German town barely ten miles from the Russian frontier, and not more than twelve, English measurement, from Kalisz, which is the capital of a Polish province of the same name.

At Ostrovo I went, by previous invitation, to the house of a German friend, from whom I received the most kindly treatment, and to whom I owe my liberty and possibly my life. It will be obvious that I cannot reveal the name of this person, nor the nature of my business with him. It was my intention to remain a month at Ostrovo, which was a convenient place from whence to make excursions to some of the most interesting Prussian towns.

I loved the sight of armed men; and during my journey, as opportunities occurred, I watched the soldiers I saw in the various cities I passed through. I could not fail to notice the great difference in the military forces of the two countries—France and Germany. On the Continent one expects to see a more prominent display of soldiers than is usually the case in our own quiet island home; but there was no great parade of the military element in any of the French garrisons I passed through. In all the large towns a force of some kind was stationed; but in so important a place as Verdun there did not appear to be a stronger military garrison than one would see at such stations in England as Plymouth or Chatham. In the French fortress I saw a battalion marching to the music of bugles. The men did not exceed 600 in number. In another part of the town about 150 infantry were drilling; and many artillerymen were walking about; yet the numbers showed plainly that France was not mobilizing at this time.

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As soon as the frontier was passed I saw that quite a different state of things existed. As I left the railway-station at Metz three battalions marched by—two of a line regiment, and a battalion of riflemen, or jagers, distinguished by wearing shakos instead of the nearly universal *Pickelhaube*, or spiked helmet. These battalions were quite a thousand strong in each case. In other words, they had their full war complement of men. A regiment of hussars was 600 strong; and field-artillery, with fifty-six guns, besides machine-guns, extended about a mile and a half along one of the country roads. Everywhere in Germany the towns, large and small, were crowded with soldiers. Cavalry and artillery and long lines of waggons lined the country highways and byways. I remarked on this to a fellow-passenger who spoke English. His reply was that the troops were assembling for the autumn manœuvres. I was sufficiently surprised to exclaim:—

"What! Already?"

"It is rather early, but they are probably going to have preliminary exercises in the forest-lands," was the reply.

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After this I perceived the passenger was regarding me with a peculiar air; and, recollecting certain cautions I had received concerning the danger of making inquiries about the movements of troops on the Continent, I did not recur to the subject.

At Dresden a large number of troops, infantry and cavalry, were departing northward by rail and road. At Breslau at least 20,000 men of all arms were concentrated. These circumstances had no particular significance to my mind at the time, but a very great one a few days later.

Even when I arrived at Ostrovo and found the country-side crowded with troops, impending war did not occur to my thoughts, though I did ponder on the extraordinary precautions Germany seemed to be taking to insure the inviolability of her powerful domain. Now I know, of course, that the mendacious Hun, with the low cunning of a murderous maniac, was preparing for a blood-feast, before a taint of it was floating in the surrounding air; and if it is thought that I am putting the case strongly, I shall have that to relate shortly which would make it remarkable if I were not to use forcible language. Blood and lust: lust and blood—this is the awful and disgusting story I have to tell—a story set in military surroundings which, for skill and magnitude, have never previously been approached; but military ability and the hugeness of the operations have

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only intensified the hellish misery of this the vastest struggle the world has seen. And that it may never again see such must be the universal prayer to God.

In Germany it is the custom to billet soldiers on the people, and most of the houses at Ostrovo were full of men whose behaviour, even to their own countrymen, was sickening in its utter lack of decency. Complaints against soldiers have to be very strongly corroborated before their officers or the magistracy of the land take serious note of them.

In my friend's house some officers of the —th regiment were lodged. With these I speedily became on friendly terms, and, through them, with officers of other German corps, particularly with those of a Pomeranian artillery regiment, one of whom was a quiet and affable little gentleman. With him I thought I might venture to discuss military matters, and on the 28th July the following conversation took place between us. I should premise that I cannot read or speak German and that I had not seen an English newspaper for more than a week previously. Certain information had been communicated to me by my friend, but I had not been given to understand that war was imminent between Germany and Russia, or any other nation.

"All your units are very strong," I remarked. "Is it usual for you to embody your reserves for the manœuvres?"

"Our troops are not on manœuvre. We are going to fight," was the officer's reply.

"Fight!" I exclaimed, much astonished. "Whom are you going to fight?"

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"The Russians and the French."

"The two most powerful nations in the world! Are you strong enough to do that?" I said, amazed, and hardly able to believe that I had heard aright.

"The Austrians are going to join with us, and we shall be in Paris in a month."

I laughed—rather scornfully, I think.

"Are you joking? Is not what you say absurd?" I asked.

"Not in the least. You will see that what I say is correct."

"But is war declared? Has the matter been discussed in the Press?"

"In this country we do not permit the Press to make the announcement of such things. War is not declared yet, but it will be on Sunday next."

"Against Russia, you mean?" said I, astonished beyond degree of expression.

"Yes, and against France too," replied the officer.

"But why? I have not heard that France has given cause of offence to your country."

"She has been a standing menace to us for years, and will continue to be so until she is completely crushed."

This is how I heard that the Great War was about to begin. I hardly believed it, but my friend read me certain passages from German newspapers, and the following day I received a batch of journals from my own country, which, together, showed that the political situation of Europe was rapidly becoming serious.

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On the 30th I noticed a change of countenance on the part of most of the officers who had been friendly with me. The young artillery officer I have mentioned and a Colonel Swartz, who was, I believe, a Landwehr officer of the 99th regiment, continued their friendly behaviour towards me. Swartz was shortly afterwards killed near Turek, where his battalion was destroyed.

Early in the evening of the 31st, a lady came to my friend's house and strongly advised me to quit the country without delay. She gave as a reason that she had received a letter from her brother, an officer in the foot-guards at Berlin, in which he declared that it was well known that the Kaiser intended to send an ultimatum to England, and that a rupture with this country was the almost inevitable consequence. My friend backed the lady's advice, and my own opinion was that it would be wise of me to return home at once.

But later that night Swartz and the young officer came and declared that it was almost impossible for me to get out of Germany by any of the usual channels before war was declared, as nearly all the lines were required for the movements of troops and material. Swartz said that it would take at least four days for a civilian to reach France by railway. I suggested a motor-car, but he thought that all motors would immediately be confiscated—at any rate, those driven by foreigners.

The above circumstances and the date, of the correctness of which I am quite sure, show that the German Sovereign had preconceived war, not only with France and Russia, but also with England, before the actual declaration of hostilities.

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Down to this time, and until several days later, I did not hear Belgium mentioned in connection with the war, and for several reasons, not the least of which was my ignorance of the German and Russian languages, many facts relating to the operations of the Allies on the Western line of hostilities did not become known to me until some time after they had taken place. It must not be

forgotten that this book is in no sense a history of the Great War, but simply a narrative of my experiences with the Russian Army in certain areas of the Eastern line of operations. These experiences I purpose to give in diary form, and with little or no reference to the fighting in other parts of the war area, of which I knew almost nothing—or at any rate, nothing that was very reliable.

All day on the 31st July it was persistently declared at Ostrovo that war had been declared against Russia and against France, and that it would be declared against England on the morrow, which was Saturday, the 1st August. The persons who were responsible for these assertions were the Army officers with whom I came in contact, and the people generally of all classes. Not a word was said about Belgium.

On the afternoon of the 1st August the Kaiser is said to have ordered the mobilization of the German Army. The German Army was already mobilized so far as the Russian frontier was concerned, and had been so for eight or nine days. On the line between Neustadt-Baranow, a distance of about eighty English miles, there were concentrated five army corps, with three cavalry divisions, about 250,000 men. These were supported by two corps between Breslau and Glogau, two more at Posen, a large force at Oppeln, and other troops at Oels, Tarnowitz, and places which I need not name here. My calculation was that about 1,000,000 men were ready to act on the line Neustadt-Tchenstochow. There was another 2,000,000 on the line of frontier running northward through Thorn and East Prussia to the Baltic, and probably a fourth million in reserve to support any portion of the line indicated; and what was worth at least another 2,000,000 men to Germany was the fact that she *could move any portion of these troops ten times more quickly than Russia could move her forces*. It is officially stated that only 1,500,000 Germans were in line in August. I think that my estimate is correct.

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Meanwhile, conscious that I had not permitted myself to be over-cautious in acquiring a dangerous knowledge, I was particularly anxious to leave Germany as speedily as possible. Chance had brought me to what was to become one of the most important points of the operations between Prussia and Russia, and chance greatly favoured my escape from what I began to fear was an awkward trap. Had I known what a nation of fiends the Germans were going to prove themselves, my anxiety would have been greatly increased. Thank God there is no race on earth in which all are bad, all devoid of the attributes of humanity.

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Late on the night of the 1st August (after I was in bed, indeed) the young artillery officer I have several times mentioned came to my friend's house. I do not think it would be wise or kind on my part to mention his name, as he may still be alive. He was accompanied by Swartz and a servant, with two horses, and recommended that I should cross the Russian frontier immediately, as all Englishmen in Germany were in danger of being interned. War with England was assumed by everybody to be inevitable, insomuch that, being ignorant of the true state of affairs, I assumed that an ultimatum had been sent to Germany by the British Government. I was told that many leading German papers asserted that it had been so sent.

I consented to leave at once, with the object of trying to reach Kalisz, and from there taking train to Riga, where, it was thought, I should find no difficulty in getting a steamboat passage to England. It is only twelve miles by railway from Ostrovo to Kalisz, but the line was already occupied by troops, "and," said the officers, "our forces will occupy the Russian town before daybreak to-morrow."

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CHAPTER II

THE SCENE AT KALISZ ON THE 2ND AUGUST, 1914

Had I not been under military escort I could not possibly have got along any of the roads in the neighbourhood of Ostrovo—all were crowded by Prussian infantry. I did not see any other branches of the service, but I understood that the engineers were mining the railway-line, and about half an hour after we started my friends declared that it would be hopeless to try to reach Kalisz from the German side. They said they must leave me, as it was imperative that they should rejoin their regiments before the hour of parade. A road was pointed out to me as one that led straight to the frontier, and that frontier I was recommended to endeavour to cross. The horse was taken away, and, after shaking hands with the officers and receiving their wishes of good-luck, I proceeded across the fields on foot.

Pickets of cavalry and infantry were moving about the country, but I avoided them, and after a two-hours' walk reached the low bank which I knew marked the frontier-line. It was then after three o'clock, and daylight was beginning to break. As far as I could see, nobody was about. Some cows were in the field, and they followed me a short distance—a worry at the time, as I feared they would attract attention to my movements.

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I jumped over the boundary, and walked in the direction of Kalisz, the dome and spire and taller buildings of which were now visible some miles to the northward. The country is very flat here—typical Polish ground, without trees or bushes or hedges, the fields being generally separated by ditches. It is a wild and lonely district, and very thinly peopled. And I do not think there were any Russian troops in the town. If there were, it must have been a very slender detachment, which fell back at once; for if any firing had occurred, I must have seen and heard it. Not a sound of this description reached my ears, but when I reached Kalisz at 5.30 a.m. it was full of German soldiers, infantry and Uhlans—the first definite information I had that war was actually declared between the two countries, and the first intimation I received of how this war was likely to be conducted, for many of the Germans were mad drunk, and many more acting like wild beasts.

I passed through crowds of soldiers without being interfered with—a wonderful circumstance. None of the shops were opened at that early hour, but the Germans had smashed into some of them, and were helping themselves to eatables and other things. I saw one unter-officer cramming watches, rings, and other jewellery into his pockets. He was quickly joined by other wretches, who cleared the shop in a very few minutes.

Hardly knowing what to do, but realizing the danger of lurking about without an apparent object in view, I continued to walk through the streets in search of the railway-station, or a place where I could rest. A provost and a party of military policemen were closing the public-houses by nailing up the doors, and I saw a man only partly dressed, the proprietor of one of these houses, I supposed, murdered. He made an excited protest, and a soldier drove his bayonet into the poor man's chest. He uttered a terrible scream, and was instantly transfixed by a dozen bayonets. A woman, attracted by the fearful cry, came rushing out of the house screaming and crying. She had nothing on except a chemise, and the soldiers treated her with brutal indecency. I was impelled to interfere for her protection. At that moment an officer came up, and restored some order amongst the men, striking and pricking several of them with his sword. He said something to me which I did not understand, and, receiving no reply, struck me with his fist, and then arrogantly waved his hand for me to be gone. I had no alternative. I suppressed my wrath and moved away, but the horrible sight of the bleeding man and the weeping woman haunted me until I became used to such sights—and worse.

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As I walked through the streets I heard the screams of women and children on all sides, mingled with the coarse laughter and shouts of men, which told plainly enough what was taking place, though I could not understand a word of what was said. I was struck by drunken or excited soldiers more than once, and kicked, but to retaliate or use the weapon with which I was armed would, I could perceive, result in my instant destruction; so I smothered my wrath for the time.

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Many women rushed into the streets dressed in their night-clothes only, some of them stained with blood, as evidence of the ill-usage they had suffered; and I passed the dead bodies of two men lying in the road, one of which was that of a youth. These, there can be no doubt, were the first acts of war on the part of Germany against Russia—the slaughter of unarmed and defenceless people.

In one of the principal streets I found two hotels or large public-houses open. They were both full of German officers, some of whom were drunk. At an upper window one man was being held out by his legs, while a comrade playfully spanked him, and a wild orgy was going on in the room behind. Bottles and glasses were thrown into the street, and a party of German prostitutes vied in bestiality with the men. I saw the hellish scene. Had I read an account of it, I should at once have stamped the writer in my heart as a liar. I am not going to dwell on the filthy horrors of that day. I do little more than hint at what took place, and only remark that at this hour no act of war, no fair fight or military operation, had taken place on any of Germany's borders. She showed the bestiality of the cowardly hyena before a fang had been bared against her. This was the information I afterwards obtained from Russian sources. On the morning Kalisz was sacked, not a shot had been fired by the Russian soldiers.

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My needs compelled me to take risks. All the belongings I had with me were contained in a small bag which I carried in my hand. I had some German money in my pocket, and a number of English sovereigns. The remainder of my luggage I had been compelled to leave behind at Ostrovo. Entering the quietest of the two hotels, I found the proprietor and several of his servants or members of his family trembling in the basement. I was stopped at the door by a sentry, but he was a quiet sort of youth, accepted a few marks, and while he was putting them in his pouch permitted me to slip into the house.

I have already intimated that I am no linguist. I could not muster a dozen words of German, and not one of Russian; so, holding the proprietor to insure his attention (the poor man was almost in a state of collapse), I made motions that I wished to eat and drink. No doubt they took me for a German. One of the maids literally rushed to the cellar, and returned with two large bottles of champagne of the size which our great-grandfathers, I believe, called "magnums," containing about two quarts apiece.

But champagne was not what I wanted, so I looked round till I found a huge teapot. The face of the maid was expressionless, but she was not lacking in intelligence. The Russians are great tea-drinkers, and I soon had a good breakfast before me, with plenty of the refreshing beverage. A Russian breakfast differs much from an English early morning meal, but on this occasion I contrived to obtain bacon and eggs, which, in spite of all doctors and economists say to the contrary, is one of the best foods in existence for travelling or fighting on.

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Before I had well finished this meal one of the riotous officers came downstairs. He made a sudden stop when he saw me, and blinked and winked like an owl in sunlight, for he had had plenty of liquor. He asked some question, and as I could not very well sit like a speechless booby, I replied in my own language.

"Good-morning," rather dryly, I am afraid.

"An English pig!" he exclaimed.

"An Englishman," I corrected.

[At least 50 per cent. of German officers speak English quite fluently, and an even greater number French, learned in the native countries of these languages.]

"Bah-a-a-a!" he exclaimed, prolonging the interjection grotesquely. "Do you know that we have wrecked London, blown your wonderful Tower and Tower Bridge and your St. Paul's to dust, killed your King, and our Zeppelins are now wrecking Manchester and Liverpool and your other fine manufacturing towns?"

"Nonsense!" I said.

"It is true, I assure you," he replied.

The news sent a terrible thrill through my nerves, for I did not yet know what liars Germans could be, and I did not think a Prussian officer could stoop to be so mendacious a scoundrel as this fellow proved to be.

"Then there is war between England and Germany?" I asked, wondering at its sudden outbreak. "When was it declared?"

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"It is not declared. We have taken time by the forelock, as you British say—as we mean to take it with all who dare to oppose us. You are a stinking Englishman, and I'll have you shot!" he concluded furiously.

Going to the foot of the stairs, he began to call to his companions, reviling the English, and declaring that there was a spy below. As his drunken comrades did not hear him or immediately respond, he ascended the stairs, and I took the opportunity to put down some money for my breakfast, catch up my bag, and escape from the house.

At the top of the street the road broadened out into a kind of square or open space, and as I reached this spot a large number of soldiers brought eight prisoners into the centre of it. Three of them were dressed in what I took to be the uniforms of Russian officers, three others were gendarmes or policemen. The other two wore the dress of civilians. All were very pale and serious-looking, but all were firm except one of the civilians, who I could see was trembling, while his knees were shaking so that he could scarcely stand. A German officer of rank—I believe a Major-General—stood in front of them and interrogated one of the Russian officers, who looked at him sternly and did not reply. The German also read something from a paper he held in his hand, while six men were ranged before each one of the prisoners. I saw what was about to take place, but before I was prepared for it the German stood aside and waved his hand. Instantly the firing-parties raised their rifles and shot down the eight prisoners. They were not all killed outright. One man rolled about in dreadful agony, two others tried to rise after falling, and a fourth attempted to run away. A sickening fusillade ensued; at least a hundred shots were fired before all the victims lay stark and quiet. Nor were they the only victims. The officer in charge of the firing-party took no precautions, uttered no warnings, and several of the spectators were struck by the bullets, while there was a wild stampede of civilians from the square.

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Let it be noted that these ferocious murders took place before a shot had been fired, so far as I know, between the armed forces of the two nations.

I never heard who the slain men were, or why they were put to death; but from what I afterwards read in English newspapers I suppose that the Mayor of Kalisz was one of them.

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CHAPTER III

THE EVENTS PRECEDING ACTUAL HOSTILITIES

Why were there no Russian soldiers in the neighbourhood of Kalisz in the beginning of August, 1914? The answer is simple.

Kalisz is an open town, with a single line running to Warsaw, 140 miles, via Lodz and Lowicz. The nearest branch lines are the Warsaw-Tchenstochow on the south, with nearest point to Kalisz about ninety English miles away; and the Warsaw-Plock line to Thorn, with nearest point to

Kalisz, also about ninety miles. So far as transport was concerned, the Russians were not in it at all.

For on the German side of the frontier there is a complete and very elaborate network of railways, so that the Teuton could mass 1,000,000 men on Kalisz long before the Muscovite could transport 100,000 there. This is what harassed the last-named Power—want of railways. Wherever they tried to concentrate, the Germans were before them, and in overwhelming numbers. It is her elaborate railway system that has enabled Germany to get the utmost from her armies—to get the work of two or three corps, and in some cases even more, out of one. Her railways have practically doubled her armed force—this at least.

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The Germans are masters of the art of war, and have been so for fifty years; the Russians are hard fighters, but they are not scientific soldiers. The Germans have consolidated and perfected everything that relates to armed science; the Russians have trusted too much to their weight of numbers. Yet the Bear, though a slow and dull animal, has devilish long and strong claws; and, like another animal engaged in this contest for the existence of the world, has the habit so provoking to his enemies, of never knowing when he is beaten.

The reason, then, that there was no sufficient force, if any force at all, near Kalisz when the treacherous Teuton suddenly sprung hostilities upon her on the 1st August, 1914, was that the Muscovite, through apathy inherited from his Asiatic ancestors, combined with a paucity of money, had no railways, while his opponent had one of the most complete systems of locomotive transport for men and material that is to be found in the whole world.

It was its isolated situation and great distance from a base that made Kalisz the weak point on the Russian frontier, and the German Eagle saw this and swooped on it as a bird of prey on a damless lamb.

But the Russian base, if distant, was strong, and the force and material at Warsaw was powerful and great, and was in ponderous motion long before the Vulture had picked clean the bones of her first victim. Russia has no great fortress on the German frontier. This is another serious fault of defence. Railways and fortresses are the need of the Northern Power to enable her to control effectually the bird of ill omen which has so long hovered over Central Europe, unless that bird is to die for all time, which is what should be, and which is what will be, unless the folly of the nations is incurable.

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After witnessing the terrible scene described in the last chapter my feelings of insecurity and uncertainty were greatly increased. By means of a plan in my possession I found my way to the railway-station. It was in the hands of the German troops, thousands of whom crowded the building and its vicinity, and a glance was sufficient to show that I could not leave Kalisz by means of the railway. According to my plan, there were stations further up the line in an easterly direction, some of them at no great distance from Kalisz; but I felt sure these would be occupied by the Germans before I could reach them.

Personal safety required that I should make an immediate effort to escape. More than once I had noticed Teutonic eyes regarding me with suspicious glances—at least, so I thought—and I quite realized that delay would be dangerous.

Re-entering the town, which is a place of about 25,000 inhabitants, I reached the open country to the north through back streets, resolved to endeavour to reach Lodz by making a wide *détour* from the line, which was sure to be occupied by the hostile troops. What reception I should meet with from the hands of the Russian soldiers I could not tell, but I felt sure that it would not be worse than that I might expect from their foes.

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By this time it was past midday, and the streets of Kalisz were nearly deserted. I saw only one or two male fugitives hurrying along, apparently bent, like myself, on escape. As soon as I reached a retired spot I tore my maps and plans to shreds and threw them away. I had no doubt what it would mean to be caught with such things on me.

Patrols of cavalry, Uhlans and hussars, were scouring the country in all directions. Peasants in the fields were running together, and the hussars beat many of them with their sabres, but I do not think they killed any at this time. The Uhlans wounded some by tearing them down with the hooks with which the staves of their lances are furnished, and I saw a party of them amusing themselves by rending the clothes off a poor old woman who was working in one of the fields.

Perceiving that it would be impossible to avoid these cavalymen, I looked about for a hiding-place. There was a range of low buildings about a quarter of a mile from the ditch in which I was crouching. The place seemed to be a farm, with a number of barns or sheds on one side of it, some of which were scattered about irregularly. I reached the nearest of these without attracting notice, and found there a weeping woman and two men, one of whom was bleeding badly from wounds on the head and face. They looked at me, and the unhurt man said something which I did not understand. A party of hussars was riding towards the shed. As a forlorn chance of escape, I lay down on the floor and pulled some straw over me as well as I could. Apparently the men and woman ran away, and by so doing diverted the attention of the hussars from the shed. I lay there till dusk, when the unhurt man and the woman came back carrying a bowl of milk and some coarse bread, which they gave to me. I was very glad of it, having tasted nothing since the morning. They spoke, but chiefly together, as they perceived that I could not understand them.

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Soon afterwards, expressing my thanks as well as I could, I left the shed and proceeded on my

way towards Lodz. There was sufficient light to enable me to preserve a general direction and to avoid the numerous parties of German cavalry which were patrolling the country, but long before the night was over I had got beyond these. I do not think they extended more than ten or twelve miles beyond the points at which they had invaded Poland.

During the night I met with no adventures more serious than floundering into several water-courses and falling into a couple of ditches in endeavouring to jump them, for the ditches are very wide and deep in this country. To avoid such accidents, I afterwards kept to the roads. These are not bounded by hedges or fences of any kind, and there was nearly an entire absence of bridges. Arriving at a brook, the traveller might or might not find stepping-stones. In the absence of these, one had to wade through the water, which in one case I experienced at this time came nearly up to the knees.

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I could not know, of course, if the people knew that a state of war existed, but I saw no watchmen or police about the few hamlets and the villages I passed through. Once I was attacked by a couple of very fierce dogs, and was compelled to kill one of them to get free; but until after four o'clock the next morning no men appeared. A few of those who saluted me seemed surprised that I did not make a reply, but I could only raise my hat, and by doing so I perhaps occasioned greater astonishment than I would have done by entirely ignoring them.

There were hardly any trees in this country. The farms and isolated houses were usually marked by a poplar or two and a clump of willows, and there were some willows along the courses of the streams. The buildings, except the churches, were generally very low-pitched, and there was a singular paucity of chimneys, since stoves were the nearly universal means of warming the rooms; indeed, I saw stoves in this country which were almost rooms in themselves, with sleeping-places above the flues. Turf was the chief fuel used, and the dried droppings of horses and cattle.

There was a shower of rain during the night, but the morning broke clear and bright, and it was daylight long before I was as far beyond the reach of the Huns as I could have wished to be. The country seemed to be very sparsely peopled. The peasantry were early risers, and most of them seemed to be in the fields before five o'clock. The crops were to a great extent cut, and some were in process of cartage in heavy waggons. It was a very hot day.

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About ten o'clock I stopped at the door of a farm and made signs that I wanted food and drink. I was afraid to offer German money, though this would probably have been better understood than the tender of an English sovereign. The man took the coin, looked at it, bit it, and rubbed it, and handed it to a group of women and girls—his mother, wife and daughters, I thought. The image of His Majesty King George was evidently taken to be that of the Czar; but the denomination of the coin puzzled the farmer and excited great curiosity amongst the women. However, my wants were understood, and I obtained butter, bread, tea and cheese of a kind I had never previously eaten, and also some excellent honeycomb, but no kind of meat. The farmer wanted me to take back the sovereign, but it was so evidently coveted by his wife that I pressed it upon her until she pocketed it. In return I brought away as much provision as I could carry.

Before midday I thought I had walked about thirty miles, though not in a direct line. By this time I had arrived at a river which I knew must be the Warta. It was not very wide, but the banks where I struck it were deep, and crumbling away; and the stream was unfordable. Not knowing what else to do I turned southwards along its banks towards Sieradz, hoping to reach a village where I might be ferried across; but just as I was about to enter a small hamlet, I was confronted by two policemen. They jabbered at me and I jabbered at them; but if ever "No nonsense" were seen in a human countenance I saw it in that of policeman No. 1. I produced my passports. One of these gave me permission to cross the Russian frontier; but as it was obtained in Germany I would, under the circumstances, have gladly suppressed it. Unfortunately it was folded up with the English-German document, and I was not sharp enough to separate them before No. 1 sighted the document, and demanded it with an impatient gesture. This he could read, but the other puzzled him; not that this circumstance interfered with the promptitude of his action. I saw with half an eye that I had to go somewhere with this Russian policeman: and the "somewhere" proved to be the lock-up in a tiny hamlet the name of which I never learned.

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This wretched hole was three-parts under ground, about seven feet long, and scarcely four wide—a den evidently designed for torture: for one could not turn round in it without difficulty; and how to sleep in such a place puzzled me, though I was spared the ordeal of having to do so. For a few hours after I was incarcerated I was fetched out and handed over to the charge of five mounted cossacks, the leader seeming to be a corporal. I was handcuffed to the stirrups of this gentleman and one of his comrades, an arrangement which gave me the option of walking or being dragged along. All the party carried villainous-looking whips in addition to rifles, sabres and lances. But they did not force the pace, and when we had gone about five miles we overtook a light cart, which the corporal stopped, and placed me therein. We then travelled at the rate of eight or nine miles an hour, halting at a roadside inn for drink, which I paid for with another English sovereign. Again the coin excited much curiosity, but the corporal saw that I obtained a fair amount of change in Russian money and I was civilly treated on the whole.

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In less than two hours we arrived at the small town of Szadek, though I did not know the name of the place at the time. It is only twenty English miles (twenty-seven versts) from Lodz, and here for the first time since crossing the German frontier I saw Russian troops in force. I did not have the opportunity of seeing the strength of these troops; but Szadek was full of infantry, and we passed a great many tents before entering the town. It was nightfall when we arrived; but I was

immediately taken to an hotel and questioned by an officer of General rank. Finding that I could not speak Russian, he tried German, and I said, in the best French I could muster, that I was an Englishman. I am not sufficient master of the polite language of Europe to carry on a conversation in it, so the officer sent for a Russian Major, Polchow, who spoke English fluently, and he acted as interpreter.

My story was listened to with great interest, especially those parts of it which related to the movements and conduct of the German troops and the murder of citizens at Kalisz. I underwent a lengthened cross-examination, and, I suppose, the nature of my communications becoming known, the room was speedily crowded by officers, most of them evidently of high rank. It was after midnight before I was dismissed, having, I could see, made a favourable impression on all those who were present. It was then I learned, to my great relief, that the German accounts of the destruction of London, etc., were falsehoods. "As yet there is no war between Germany and England; but there will be in a few days," said the General.

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Speaking through Major Polchow, the General further said, "You have come to Russia for help and protection: you shall have them. What do you wish?" In reply I said that I desired to return to my own country as speedily as possible, but that if the Germans, being near at hand, came up before arrangements could be made for my departure, I should be glad to use a rifle against them.

It was then explained to me that all the inn accommodation in Szadek being taken up I could be offered only a tent lodging, but that every endeavour would be made to render me comfortable. Then Major Polchow offered to look after me, and I accompanied him to a private house where he was billeted.

I much regret that I have forgotten the name of this obliging officer before whom I was examined, which name, a very unpronounceable one, was only casually mentioned, and was forgotten in the excitement of the events which immediately followed.

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Polchow was an artillery officer, attached to a South Russian regiment, but afterwards to an East Russian regiment, which lost all its officers—with one or two exceptions at any rate. I was entertained by him most royally.

On the following day I underwent another long examination before an Adjutant of the Grand Duke Nicholas and a large number of Staff officers, and was much complimented on my adventures and the value of the information I was able to give. These matters I must ask to be excused for passing over with bare mention. I expected to have had an interview with the Grand Duke himself; but he departed that evening without my having seen him.

The offer was made to send me on to Riga or Libau, or any port I might choose; and to facilitate my departure to my own country; but I am an Englishman, thank God, and I was not inclined to turn my back on my country's foes until I had seen the whites of their eyes and let them see mine. For by this time we were beginning to learn something of German dirt, and German cruelty.

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CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST FIGHT

It became necessary to know what the Germans were doing, or appeared to be going to do. Fugitives from Kalisz and the country eastward of it reported that thousands of Germans were pouring over the border, and it was known to Headquarters that they were gradually pressing onwards to Lodz.

On the 6th, 7th, and 8th August, the 4th Cossacks of the Don, and five other cavalry regiments, with some light guns, were engaged in reconnaissance, and the result was to ascertain that the Germans were entrenching themselves on a line from Kalisz to Sieradz, covering the railway; and also extending their earthworks right and left along the banks of the Warta, thus forming a strong point, on Russian soil, for an advance on Warsaw. I was riding in the ranks of the 4th, and can say, from personal observation, that the works mentioned were of a formidable description, and armed with heavy guns.

On the 8th the Zeithen Hussars charged the 4th, which fell back; and the hussars were taken in hand by the 12th Russian Dragoons and very roughly handled. I counted forty dead bodies; but the Germans advanced some infantry and guns, and saved their wounded. Their total loss could not have been less than 140 men. The dragoons had two men killed and about a dozen wounded, mostly by the fire of infantry. The general idea that the Germans are good swordsmen is erroneous. They are very poor broadswordsmen; and the Russians are inferior to the French in the use of this weapon.

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I expected that the affair would develop into a general action, but it did not. The force of German cavalry was much inferior to that of the Russian, and they soon fell back, trying to lure our men under infantry and artillery fire. In this they did not succeed; but I believe that on our extreme right they did some execution with long-range shell fire. Why the Russians did not bring up infantry and artillery I am unable to conjecture. It is my opinion that there was something behind which did not appear to a spectator in my position. The Germans had certainly prepared something resembling a trap; and possibly the Russian commander saw, or suspected, more than was perceptible to the ordinary eye. At any rate he held his men back at a moment when I expected to see them advance and outflank the enemy. The fighting which followed was decidedly desultory and without important results. There was much artillery firing from guns which were, I think, four or five English miles from that part of the Russian position where I was. It did so very little execution that I considered it was a mere waste of ammunition.

In this combat the Russians seemed to be superior in strength of all three arms, which was the reason, I suppose, that the enemy did not make a decided advance. He was probably waiting for reinforcements, which did not arrive until late in the day, if they came up at all. On the other hand, there was a force of German infantry lying in wait, and this body of troops may have been stronger than appeared. [32]

I can only be responsible for what I saw, though I feel at liberty to repeat what I heard where probability of its truth may be inferred. I have also looked through files of English newspapers; and I cannot attempt to veil the fact that I must often be, or appear to be, in contradiction to accounts that were published about the time the narrated incidents were recorded to have taken place. Naturally, first records were imperfect, or needed explanations; but some things appeared in English papers which it is difficult to understand. For instance, it is said to be "officially reported from Petrograd" that the frontier was not crossed by the Germans in the neighbourhood of Kalisz, and that no fighting took place until the 14th or 15th August. (I am not sure which date is meant; or whether the old or new system is intended.) Both these assertions are incorrect, and could not have emanated from an "official" source. The Russians are our allies, and personally I received great kindness from the hands of many of them; but the only value of a narrative of the kind I am writing is its correctness, and I intend to record the truth without fear and without favour. I cannot perceive that it would be any advantage to them to make a misstatement. The assertion is probably an error. At any rate I can state, and do positively state, that the frontier was crossed by the Germans at Kalisz; and that fighting took place at several points before the 14th August. Possibly the accounts were published before correction. [33]

At this time I learned that there was a line of strong posts from Dabie to Petrikau, a distance of, roughly, eighty versts. These, probably, outflanked the Germans; and reinforcements were daily arriving in vast numbers, prolonging the line in the direction of the Vistula some seventy versts north of Dabie. The country between Dabie and the named river was patrolled by an enormous horde of cavalry—at least 20,000—and infantry and artillery were coming up by march route, there being no railway except the Kutno-Warsaw narrow-gauge line, which was used chiefly for the transport of ammunition and stores. This line runs direct to Thorn, one of Germany's strong frontier fortresses; and the Russians tried to push along it as far as possible; but the Germans sent flying parties into Russia as far as Wroclawick, fifty versts from Thorn, and completely destroyed the line. In doing this they suffered some losses, for a Russian force crossed the Vistula near Nieszawa and attacked one of the working-parties. They claimed to have killed and wounded 300 of the enemy, and they brought in ninety prisoners, four of whom were officers.

The only fighting I saw during these operations was between two cavalry pickets. There were thirty Cossacks on our side. I do not know how many Germans there were, but they were reinforced continually during the fight until they compelled us to fall back. They held the verge of a pine-wood, while the Cossacks sheltered themselves behind some scattered trees, fighting, of course, dismounted with their horses picketed a mile behind them and left in charge of a trumpeter. [34]

So far as I could see, the fight was a completely useless one. It resulted in the death of two men on our side, and six wounded. The firing lasted nearly three hours and would probably have gone on much longer had not our men run out of cartridges. In this little skirmish I shot off a hundred rounds myself, with what result must be left to the imagination; for, as the distance was 900 yards, I had not even the satisfaction of seeing the branches of the trees flying about. The German bullets cut off many twigs from our trees, and the trumpeter afterwards reported that several of their shots fell amongst the horses without doing any damage. It showed the great range of the German weapons, and also the very bad shooting of the men.

We drew off, and some of the hussars came out of the wood, mounted their horses, and looked after us; but they did not attempt to follow us. Enterprise was not a prominent attribute of the German cavalry, nor, indeed, of the mounted force of our own side, though the Cossacks sometimes showed considerable boldness. Often I longed for the presence of a few regiments of British or French cavalry, for some splendid opportunities were let slip by the Russian troopers; not from want of bravery, but simply from the lack of that daring dash which is a distinguishing feature of all good horsemanship. [35]

Yet, notwithstanding the want of energy on the part of the Russian mounted men, they were continually on the move, and, as I soon discovered for myself, were gradually moving to the north, apparently covering the advance of an ever-increasing mass of infantry and artillery. Polchow's battery was attached to the brigade of Cossacks of which the 4th was one of the units.

The reason that I connected myself with this particular corps was because one of its officers spoke a little English; but it was so little that we frequently had much difficulty in understanding each other. I soon learned the Russian words of command and the names of common things and objects, and I often acted as officer of a squadron (or "sotnia," as the men call it); but I felt that I would rather be with Polchow, and I soon became attached to his battery as a "cadet," though I was the oldest man in the unit.

It was a "horse" battery; but the horse artillery in the Russian service is not a separately organized body as it is in the British Army. The guns are simply well-horsed, and the limbers, waggons, etc., rendered as light and mobile as possible. The batteries have not the dash and go of English horse-artillery; and I should be very sorry to see a Russian battery attempt to gallop over a ditch or other troublesome obstacle, as I can foresee what the result would be. The Russian horse-artillery is a sort of advanced-guard of the gunnery arm and has no special training for its duties. In several important particulars its equipment and organization differs from ours. [36]

At this time there were said to be several Englishmen, two Frenchmen, and Swedes, Norwegians and Dutch, in the Russian service. I never met any of them, but I know there was a German, born and bred in Brandenburg, an officer in the 178th line, who was permitted to remain in the Muscovite Army; and who fought with invincible bravery and determination against his countrymen. There was a mystery about him, the actual nature of which I never learned; but it was said that he had received some injury which had implanted in his breast a fierce hatred of the land of his birth.

For two days after I had joined the artillery we were making forced marches to the north, and on the 16th we crossed the Vistula at Plock. The next day we were in front of the enemy between Biezun and Przasnysz, with our left flank resting on a marshy lake near the first-named place. Beyond the lake this flank was supported by a very large body of cavalry—twenty-four regiments I think, or not less than 14,000 men. This large force effectually kept off the much inferior German cavalry. It suffered a good deal from shell-fire, but our artillery prevented the Prussian infantry from inflicting any losses on it.

The country had been raided by the Germans before our arrival, and they had committed many atrocities. The young women had been abused, and the older ones cruelly ill-treated. The hamlets and isolated farms had been burnt down; in some cases the ruins were still smouldering; and what had become of the inhabitants did not appear. Some at least had been slain: for we found the body of one woman lying, head downwards, in a filthy gutter which drained a farmyard; and on the other side of the building, two men hanging from the same tree. The woman had been killed by a blow on the head which had smashed the skull, and her body had been treated with shameful irreverence. The gunners of the battery buried these three poor creatures in the same grave while we were waiting for orders to go into action. [37]

Afterwards, while searching the ruined house, the men found the body of a bed-ridden cripple who had been murdered by bayonet-thrusts; and, under the bed, were three young children half dead with fright and starvation. There was also a baby of a few months old, lying in its cot, dead from want of food and attention, we supposed, as there were no marks of grosser violence on the little mite.

These sights and others seen in the neighbourhood had a terrible effect on the usually phlegmatic Russian soldiers, and afterwards cost many Germans their lives: for I know that wounded men and prisoners were slain in retaliation, and civilians too, when portions of the frontier were crossed, as will be found recorded later on.

We were puzzled what to do with the children, for it would have been inhuman to leave them in a plundered and wrecked home; the oldest appearing to be not more than six years old. It was remembered that we had seen a woman at a cottage two miles to the rear, and so, accompanied by an orderly, I rode back with them. We found several women taking refuge in the house, and, though we could not understand one another, it was evident that we were leaving the poor little creatures amongst friends, as I could see by the attitude of the orderly. [38]

When we got back to the farm we found that the battery had been advanced, and we had some difficulty in finding it. I had to leave that work to the orderly, an old non-commissioned officer named Chouraski, who afterwards acted as my servant.

The battery, with the rest of the regiment, and several others, about 200 guns in all, was massed behind a sandbank—not a wise arrangement. Other batteries were bringing a cross-fire to bear from distances which I computed to be two and three miles from our position. The Germans were evidently suffering severely, and so were we. One of our batteries had all its guns dismounted or put out of action, and many other guns were destroyed, though in some cases the gunners got them on fresh wheels, or even limbers. All the men were cool and brave beyond praise, though the effects of the fire were very terrible. One shell burst as it hit the body of a gunner, who was literally blown to pieces. Another shot smashed away the head of a man standing close to me. He threw up his hands, and stood rigid so long that I thought he was not going to fall. The sight of the headless trunk standing there with blood streaming over the shoulders was so horrible that it was quite a relief to the nerves when he dropped. The gunners, who had stood still paralyzed by the sight, resumed their work; but they had not fired more than a round or two, when a shell smashed the gun-shield and wiped out the whole detachment. A piece of this shell entered the forehead of my horse and it fell like a pole-axed ox, dying with scarcely a quiver of the muscles. [39]

Although the shield was destroyed the gun was not put out of action, and I got a couple of men from another gun, and we continued to fire it. This went on hour after hour, until all the shells (shrapnel and common) were expended. Twice a fresh supply was brought up by the reserve ammunition column men, and altogether about 500 rounds per gun were shot off in this part of the field, or about 100,000 in all. As there were at least 600 guns in action it is probable that 500,000 shells were thrown against the enemy; an enormous number; and nobody will be surprised to learn that the slaughter was terrible. Many of our guns were cleared of men over and over again, reserve gunners being sent up from the rear as they were required, the men running up quite eager to be engaged, and, generally speaking, taking no notice of the casualties which were constantly occurring close to them.

I strove hard to draw the attention of every officer within reach to the faulty position of the guns; but all were very excited, and my unfortunate ignorance of their language prevented me from making myself understood. I did not know what had become of Major Polchow, but late in the afternoon he came up with a staff officer, and I pointed out to him the unnecessary slaughter which was taking place owing to the exposed position of the guns. He said that the error had been observed long before, but that it was considered to be unwise to retire them. Now, however, so many of the artillerymen had fallen that dozens of the guns were silenced, so an attempt was made to draw back the most exposed of the batteries. The horses had been sheltered in a hollow a hundred yards in the rear, yet even in their comparatively protected position so many of them had been killed and mangled that it was only possible to move back three guns at a time.

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The Germans observed the movement, with the result that men, guns, waggons, and horses, were smashed to pieces in a horrible and very nerve-trying confusion. Many of the incidents were almost too horrible to be described. The leg of one man was blown off by a bursting shell. He saved himself from falling by clutching a gun-carriage; but this was on the move and dragged him down. The bleeding was stopped by a roughly improvised tourniquet; he was laid on the ground with his coat under his head and left to his fate.

When the guns were drawn back to the new position very few casualties occurred; but at this time the Germans made a determined onset with huge masses of infantry in close columns of companies—an amazing formation, but one which I was prepared to see executed, knowing their general tactics as practised on peace manœuvres.

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At this moment we had only twelve shells per gun left. These twelve cut great lanes deep into the advancing masses, but did not stop them, and orders were given to retire. Two of our guns were drawn away by the prolonge (that is, by means of ropes manned by men on foot), and two were abandoned. We should certainly have been overtaken and destroyed; but about a thousand yards to the rear we found three regiments of infantry halted in a slight hollow of the ground. These 12,000 men suddenly rushed forward and opened a tremendous fusillade on the advancing masses, bringing them down so fast that the appearance of falling men was continuous and had a very extraordinary effect. But they were not stopped, and our infantry was compelled to fall back with the guns, losing heavily from the fire which the Germans kept up as they advanced.

Our infantry, like that of the Germans, kept much too close a formation, and the losses were therefore appalling. Thus, early in the war, all the Russian units were at full strength; infantry four battalions per regiment—fully 4,000 men. The three regiments behind us lost half their strength, equal to 6,000 men, in twenty minutes; and the remnant was saved only by reaching a pine-wood about a mile in length and some 300 yards in depth. This enabled them to check the Germans; and two batteries of artillery coming up, evidently sent from another division to support us, they were compelled to halt, lying down on the ground for such shelter as it afforded, to wait for their own artillery. This did not come up until it was nearly dusk. Before it opened fire we began to retreat and we were not pursued.

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We fell back on two small hamlets with a farm between them, and here we entrenched ourselves, putting the buildings into a state of defence. Distant firing was heard all night, and we received a fresh supply of ammunition, and heard that 150 of the guns were saved. As we had thirty with us it was estimated that about twenty had fallen into the hands of the enemy besides twenty or thirty machine-guns.

Outposts reporting that the German division which had pursued us had retired northwards, I proposed, as soon as it was light enough for us to see our way, that a party should go out to look for the wounded men of our battery. These brave fellows had done their duty as only heroes do it—without a moment's hesitation, or the least flinching at the most trying moments; and with scarcely a groan from the horribly wounded, whose sufferings must have been excruciating.

Although unable to understand a word I uttered, all who stood by, when informed by Polchow of what was proposed, volunteered to accompany me. I took about thirty men with stretchers, which were mostly made of hurdles obtained at the farm.

It was about three English miles to the spot where the batteries had been first posted and the whole distance was thickly littered with dead bodies of Germans and Russians intermingled. All the wounded except those desperately hurt had been removed, but none of the enemy were about. They appeared to be kept off by strong patrols of our cavalry, which could be seen in the distance; and, doubtless, the German horsemen were in view, as desultory shots were fired from time to time.

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RUSSIAN ARTILLERY GOING INTO ACTION

Dying men made piteous appeals for drink. One poor fellow expired while we were in the act of attending to him. The horribly inhuman nature of the Germans was evinced by the circumstance that they had made prisoners of all the wounded who would probably recover, and count in their lists of capture; but had left the mortal cases (even their own) unattended, to linger out a dreadful and agonized end. Their lack of feeling was fiendish. They had not even endeavoured to alleviate the sufferings of the men thus abandoned: for we found one German groaning, and seemingly praying for succour, pinned down under a dead horse. He was not even dangerously hurt, and would, I think, recover under the treatment he would receive from the Russians. For though these northern men were often barbarous enough on the field of battle, they were never cruel to their prisoners, or to injured men, unless these were known to have been guilty of atrocities.

The sights of that battlefield, and others which I afterwards witnessed, will be a nightmare to the end of life. I had often read of rivers "running red with blood," and thought this simply poetic exaggeration; but when we went to a brook to obtain water for some gasping men, I noticed that it was horribly tinged with dark red streaks, which seemed to be partly coagulated blood. Some light fragments which floated by were undoubtedly human brains; yet at their urgent entreaty we gave of this water to poor creatures to drink, for no other was available.

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This horror was not comparable to what we witnessed when we arrived at the spot where the artillery slaughter had taken place. The ground was covered with dark patches—blood blotches. Fragments of flesh, arms, legs, limbs of horses, and scattered intestines, lay everywhere about that horrible "first position." On the ground lay a human eye and within an inch or two of it, a cluster of teeth; all that remained of some poor head that had been dashed away. Where the body was that had owned these relics did not appear. The force of impact had probably driven them yards and yards; and it was a mere chance that they met my view. Close to one of our guns, too badly broken to be worth carrying away by the enemy, were two brawny hands, tightly clasping the handle of the sponge with which their owner had been cleaning the piece when they had been riven from his body. The man was close by, a mere mass of smashed flesh and bones, with thousands of beastly flies battenning on his gore, as they were on that of all the corpses. The sight was unbearable. Sick and nearly fainting, I had to lean against a broken waggon to recover myself.

Our wounded had been murdered. There could be no question of that. For we had not left any behind who were capable of fighting, yet a dozen had been finished off by bayonet wounds—and German bayonets make awful jagged wounds because their weapons have saw-backs.

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One bayoneted gunner was not quite dead. At long intervals—about a minute it seemed to me—he made desperate efforts to breathe; and every time he did so bubbles of blood welled from the wound in his breast, and a horrible gurgling sound came from both throat and breast. There were two doctors in our party, but they looked at each other, and shook their heads when they examined this miserable man. Nothing could be done for him except to place him in a more comfortable position. War is hellish.

We found another of our men alive. His plight was so terrible that it was hardly worth while to increase his suffering by carrying him away. We did so: but he died before we had gone two versts. On that part of the field which the Germans had been compelled to cross without waiting to carry out their fell work, we found more survivors, and took back a dozen, of whom three were Germans. There happened to be no Red Cross men with our division just then; but we sent them to the rear in empty provision waggons.

This is what I saw of the battle of Biezum, if this is its correct designation. According to Polchow the Russian centre was at Radnazovo, a town, or large village, eleven versts further east; and the

whole front extended more than thirty versts, though the hottest fighting was near Biezum. It was afterwards reported that 10,000 Russians were killed in this engagement, and 40,000 wounded. The Germans must have lost heavily too. I saw thousands of their dead lying on the ground near Biezum alone. The fight was not a victory for the Russians, and scarcely could be claimed as such by the Germans. The two forces remained in contact, and fighting continued with more or less intensity until it developed into what modern battles seem destined to be, a prolonged series of uninterrupted operations.

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CHAPTER V

THE FIGHTING UP TO THE 26TH AUGUST

There appeared to be nearly 300 men in Polchow's battery when we went into action: only fifty-nine remained with the four guns we saved at the close of the day, and not one of these escaped a more or less serious hurt, though some were merely scratched by small fragments of shell or bruised by shrapnel bullets. At least twenty of the men would have been justified in going to hospital; several ultimately had to do so, and one died. Even British soldiers could not have shown greater heroism. Chouraski, the non-commissioned officer who had attached himself to me, had a bullet through the fleshy part of the left arm, yet he brought me some hot soup and black bread after dark; whence obtained, or how prepared, I have no idea. I was much touched by the man's kindness. All the soldiers with whom I came in contact were equally kind: and I have noticed that the men of other armies with whom I have come in contact in the course of my life, even the Germans, seemed to see something in my personality which attracted them, and to desire to be friendly. Perhaps they instinctively realized that I am an admirer of the military man; or perhaps it was the *bonhomie* which is universal amongst soldiers. Certainly I got on well with them all, though some time elapsed before we could understand a simple sentence spoken on either side.

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For two days I was not fit for much: then I went to the front with a detachment of sixty gunners which had arrived from Petrograd via Warsaw. I found the battery and the rest of the regiment encamped to the westward of Przasnysz.

Heavy fighting was going on somewhere in front; but the contending troops were not in sight. The whole country was full of smoke, and the smell of burning wood and straw was nearly suffocating. The Germans had set fire to everything that would burn, including the woods. During the night heavy showers of rain fell, and these extinguished most of the fires and saved a vast quantity of timber.

I could see that the Germans had been driven back a considerable distance; and the Russians claimed to have won great victories in the neighbourhood of Stshutchen and Graevo, and to have already passed 500,000 men across the German border. That they were making progress was obvious; and on the 20th August I witnessed some desperate infantry fighting.

The Germans came on, as they always did, in immense columns, literally jammed together, so that their men were held under fire an unnecessarily long time. The usual newspaper phrase, "Falling in heaps," was quite justifiable in this case. Thousands fell in ten minutes; and the remainder broke and fled in spite of the efforts of their officers to stop them. I was well in front and saw what took place. The German officers struck their men with their swords and in several cases cut them down; and I saw one of them fire his revolver into the crowd. I did not actually see men fall, but he must have shot several.

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The Russians, too, adopted a much closer formation than was wise, and suffered severely in consequence, but they never wavered. The Germans came on again and again, nine times in all, and proved themselves wonderful troops. Four out of the nine charges they drove home, and there was some desperate bayonet fighting in which the Teutons proved to be no match for the Muscovites. The last named used the "weapon of victory" with terrible effect, disproving all the modern theories about the impossibility of opposing bodies being able to close, or to come into repeated action on the same day.

On the contrary, it may be taken as certainly proved that men's nerves are more steeled than ever they were, and that the same body of men can make repeated and successive attacks within very short periods of time. In the above attacks fresh bodies of troops were brought up each time, but the remnants of the battalions previously used were always driven on in front. I noticed this: on three occasions the 84th regiment (probably Landwehr) formed part of the attacking force.

"Driven on" is the correct term. The German officers invariably drove their men in front of them. Arriving in contact with their foes, the soldiers fought with fury. It was the preliminary advance that seemed to discompose them: and, indeed, their losses were dreadful. They certainly left at least 30,000 dead and wounded on the ground on the 20th. The greater number were dead,

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because those who lay helpless received a great part of the fire intended for their retreating comrades, and thus were riddled through and through.

The Russian artillery played on the masses both when they advanced and retreated; but the fight was chiefly an infantry one. The full effect of the guns could not be brought into play without danger of injury to our own men. In the end the Russians chased the enemy back and the artillery was advanced to support them. Considerable ground was gained; but four or five versts to the rear of their first position the Germans were found to be strongly entrenched. The day's fight was finished by a charge of a large body of Cossacks and Russian light cavalry. They swept away the force of German horsemen who ventured to oppose them, and also drove back several battalions of infantry. That part of the Russian Army which had been engaged bivouacked on the ground they had fought over.

The cries of the wounded during the night were terrible to hear, and came from many different points and distances. Hundreds must have died from want of attention, and hundreds more, on both sides, were murdered. The Germans, who were hovering about in small parties, persistently fired on the Red Cross men, so little could be done for the dying; and the cruelties which were perpetrated, and which were revealed (so I was told) by the shouts, entreaties and imprecations of the sufferers, aroused a nasty spirit in the Russians, and particularly in the Cossacks, and led to fearful reprisals, so that in one part of the field I know that not a German was left alive. I am bound to add that after I had seen two Russians brought in with their eyes gouged out, and another with his nose and ears cropped, and his lacerated tongue lolling from his mouth, I had not a word of protest to utter against these reprisals. The Germans were finished fiends, and deserved all they got from a body of men notorious for their fierceness; and they *did get it*. I will say this, though: that throughout the campaign no instance of a Russian injuring a woman or a child came under my notice; nor did I hear of any such cases. But I was told that three Prussian girls, who were seen to be on friendly terms with some Russian soldiers, were nearly flogged to death by their own people; and the horrible treatment the Polish women received from the hands of the Germans has already been mentioned, and was ever recurring during the whole of the time I spent with the Russian Army.

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I would here make mention of the quality of the Russian and German soldiery. Conscription sweeps into the ranks of an army numbers of men who are totally unfit for a military life and a still further number who abhor it. In the present war, hatred and vindictive feeling generally has run very high on the northern side of the fighting area; and this circumstance seems to have greatly increased the war-like instinct of the masses, and consequently decreased the number of what I may term the natural non-combatants. In the Russian ranks, and I believe in the German also, this class is weeded out as far as possible, and relegated to the organizations which have least to do with the fighting line—that is, the administrative services, and troops organized to maintain the lines of communication. But these fellows—the natural non-combatants, or haters of the soldier's life, I mean—are, when found in the fighting ranks, the most detestable scoundrels imaginable; and I believe the greater part of the atrocities committed may be laid to their charge. They lose no opportunity of indulging in lust and murder; and as in civil life they are mostly wastrels, thieves and would-be murderers, they find in war an opportunity to indulge in those vices which, practised in time of peace, would bring them to the prison and the noose. In other words, the scum of the big cities is brought into the army, and often proves as great a curse to its own administrative, as it does to that of the enemy. Not all the Germans were fiends—not all the Russians saints.

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Early in the war many of the German regiments were composed of exceedingly fine-looking men. There was a decided deterioration later on, but this was more in appearance than quality: they still fought with determined, or desperate, courage; I am inclined to think, often the last-named. They were taught that the only way to escape the brutality of their officers was to face the courage of their foes. They chose the latter. Often hundreds—whole companies together—rushed over to the Russians, threw down their arms, and surrendered themselves prisoners of war. No such instance ever occurred in the Russian ranks. The Russian soldier is a very pious man, and, like the North Aryan stock from which he has sprung, is a great worshipper of ancestry and his superiors. His commanding officer, like his Czar, is a Father, or a Little Father—a sacred being—his priest as well as his temporal master. The consequence is that officer and soldier are one, a conjunction that is of great value from the military standpoint.

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This is never the case in the German Army. The Teutonic officer is a brute and a slave-driver, and his soldiers fear him if they do not hate him. I doubt if any German soldier ever gets through his training without being repeatedly struck by all his superiors from the unter-officer upwards. Feathers show how the wind sets. A Prussian regiment (the Pomeranian Grenadiers) was route-marching. One of the musicians blew a false note: the bandmaster immediately turned and struck the man a stinging blow on the face. I believe the German Army is the only one in the world where such an incident could occur. Like master, like man. One brute breeds another.

Taken on the whole the old adage that "one volunteer is worth two pressed men" is true; but an army of ten or twelve millions could not be successfully met by one of a million or two. Numbers must count when they are excessive; though things militate against this rule sometimes. If an army has not its heart in a contest very inferior numbers may win. In the present case it soon became clear to me that both the great nations had their hearts in the war: the surprising thing is that Russia with her huge hordes has so far done so little—Germany hard pressed on all sides effected so much.

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These words will reveal that I do not take the general view that Russia is progressing as fast and as well as she might reasonably be expected to do.^[1] Yet I am unable to point out very clearly where her principal defect lies. She brought up troops very rapidly; and by the 20th August she had an enormous army in the field on the East Prussian frontier. At this time, and later on, I learned that her lines extended throughout the German border and far along that of Austria to the Bug; and she was said to have at least 5,000,000 men massed in these lines. The Germans had not nearly so many—probably not more than 2,500,000 or 3,000,000; but they had the power, by means of their railways, to concentrate on a given point very rapidly, and so equal, or more than equal, the Russians, who, being without adequate railway communication, could not take advantage of their superior numbers. If the last-named saw a weakness in any part of the German defensive and attempted to take advantage of it, before they could bring up an adequate number of troops the Germans had discovered their intentions and rushed up a sufficient force to secure the threatened point: and this they did by bringing men from positions so numerous, and so distant, that they nowhere materially weakened their line; or, if they did so, they were enabled to conceal the fact.

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[1] This paragraph was written four or five months ago.

Europe, Austria and Germany, is surrounded by a ring of armed men, extending, roughly, a distance of 1,500 miles, and defended by a force of about 14,000,000 men, or some five men to the linear yard. This is, in modern war, a sufficient number for effective attack or defence, on ordinary ground; but it is not too many, and in prolonged operation may prove to be too few on some descriptions of terre-plein. Yet, after ten months of the fiercest and most destructive fighting the world has ever seen, this ring of armed men has not been broken, though persistently attacked by three of the most powerful military nations on earth.

My estimate of the number of German and Austrian troops actually in the fighting-line at the beginning of the war is much in excess of the numbers stated in English newspapers. I note this; but do not think that 14,000,000 is an exaggeration. I have information, and am not merely guessing. Nor are the losses of the enemy overstated by me.

Down to the present date the losses of the Germans and Austrians amount to about 3,000,000 men; but it must be remembered that quite two-thirds of these would be wounded men who would recover, and go back to their respective fighting-lines; so that the actual number of men permanently put out of action is about 1,000,000, including those accounted for by the French, British, and Belgian armies. The losses of the Russians are nearly 2,000,000 men. Of these the greater part fell in the fighting I have described and am about to describe, fighting which may be called a prolonged battle for the possession of Warsaw on the one side and its defence on the other. The importance of this combat will be recognized when it is considered that the taking of Warsaw is the first necessary step towards the occupation of Petrograd.

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The vision of one man, especially in war, is limited; and I did not see everything that took place in the region in which I was. I heard a good deal, and was ever on the watch to learn and verify, but it could not be otherwise than impossible to be always sure—always correct; and without doubt there are many errors in my narration. What I saw, I saw, and this may be relied on: what I guessed, or was told, I have advanced with caution. Taken as a whole I think my account of the fighting in Poland and East Prussia is as reliable as that of any one man can be: and let it be remembered that I held no official position which could help me in gaining knowledge.

On the evening of the 20th, and morning of the 21st, many rumors reached our corps of Russian successes in the neighbourhoods of Gumbinnen and Suwalki, places which were said to be but little more than 100 versts from our position. The first-named is an open town in East Prussia twenty-five versts over the border; and the news gave great joy to our troops, as it proved that Germany was actually invaded. My informants of the details were Major Polchow and two or three officers who spoke a little English and French and were able to make themselves understood to me.

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There was said to have been desperate fighting, with heavy losses, the capture of many German prisoners, and the complete annihilation of a whole division of the enemy.

The occupation of Gumbinnen was of great importance because it is on the Prussian direct line to Vilna, one of the most important railway centres in this part of Russia and perhaps in the whole empire. Although the Russians could not maintain their hold of it, its temporary occupation, no doubt, had an important effect, and possibly helped more than seems to have been seen in saving Warsaw from the enemy's hands. For had they succeeded in seizing Vilna, the Russian force in Poland would have been deprived largely, if not entirely, of reinforcements and supplies in general. It was one of the peculiarities of the war in Poland and East Prussia that neither side seemed able to keep an important position for any length of time. Places were seized which had a telling effect for the moment, and which one would have thought would have greatly influenced the fate of the campaign; and yet they were soon retaken or rendered untenable and the advantages of their seizure lost. In fact the fighting swayed to and fro. Here to-day, there to-morrow, the battle was lost or won. It was all a question of railways.

On the 21st the Russians crossed the frontier between Janow and Chorzellen, and advanced towards Ortelsberg, driving in a force of Uhlans and smashing a battery.

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The next day they were met by a force of Villenberg, which partially outflanked us. Desperate fighting ensued, the Germans suffering terrible losses: but they had an object to effect—to hold

the Russians until reinforcements arrived. These were run down rapidly from Koenigsberg and the Russians outnumbered and forced back. The fight was lost because the Germans had a network of railways behind them, while the nearest Russian line was 45 versts away. These facts require no comment. A Russian railway at Chorzellen would have saved the day, and led to the investment and probable fall of Koenigsberg. It would have made the occupancy of Tilsit and Memel permanent, and would almost certainly have changed the results of the campaign in this region.

As it was, we had to fall back; but we did so fighting stubbornly, and giving ground very slowly, reinforcements hourly arriving by march-route. Finally we made a stand at Chorzellen, and the Prussians tried their usual tactics of repeated attacks in masses. They left 10,000 dead before the town (it is scarcely more than a big village), and then entrenched themselves at a hamlet called Straffenberg, several miles in a south-westerly direction towards Unterberg; and then a terrific artillery duel commenced. I calculated that 30,000 shots an hour were fired from both armies. The air, the ground, everywhere and everything, seemed to be alive with bursting shells. The roar of guns and explosions was incessant and quite drowned the sound of the infantry firing. Afterwards many men were deaf; I myself could hear no sounds for two days. [59]

I do not know how many guns were in action, nor the calibre of them. On our side only field guns were used, and if the Germans had any of larger size they were, at this time, few in number. Hundreds of machine-guns were used on both sides, and yet the slaughter was not at all in proportion to the amount of ammunition expended. As in all battles, according to my experience, the principal part of the destruction was due to infantry fire. Of course the loss of life was very great. I can only say the ground was heaped with dead and dying. At each successive assault the Germans mounted the heaps of corpses to get at our men and, falling on their comrades, caused the slain to lie in heaps and ridges in an extraordinary and dreadful way. The wounded in the underlying layers must have been suffocated; and the blood ran down the slopes in streams.

This fearful form of fighting went on from the 22nd to the 28th August without any intermission, except occasionally a few hours in the night-time, rarely even then. I, like others, sometimes slept the sleep of utter exhaustion; but during the waking hours I do not remember that the firing ever entirely ceased. Generally the sound of it was a continuous roar. The heavens were lit up by the reflections of discharged guns and bursting shells, and the pandemonium was dominated by a shrieking sound, probably occasioned by the rush of projectiles through the air. The terrific noise affected my brain so that for weeks afterwards I was afflicted with a head-noise resembling a loud hissing, almost intolerable to bear as it interfered with necessary rest. [60]

The front of this terrific battle was very extensive—200 versts I was told; and the Russians claimed to have had 3,000,000 men in action. At the same time fighting was going on in Galicia, and there were some isolated contests, south and west of our position. The fortune of the contending parties varied greatly; in some places the Prussians were forced back, in others the Russians. Neither side had a decided victory in any part of the field, and the ground lost or won never exceeded a verst or two in extent and was often less than a hundred yards. So it is proved that close and hand-to-hand fighting are not things of the past, as many have thought them to be. On the contrary, close fighting is more often and more extensively resorted to than ever it has been previously, even in the open field; and I think, more fiercely contested. At any rate I saw several battalions on each side so nearly destroyed that they were practically wiped out. A battalion of the 9th West Siberian regiment on our side, and a territorial battalion of the 59th Prussians met with such a fate. Not fifty of the Russians nor more than a dozen of the Germans came out of the scrimmages. They were greatly outnumbered, and some of those lost were probably taken prisoners; but I can say, from actual sight of the incidents, that in each case the men fought with desperate bravery and evinced no desire to surrender. [61]

There was some cavalry fighting too; but, generally, the Russians were numerically superior to their foes; and the Germans, more often than otherwise, avoided proffered battle. In a few instances squadrons and regiments charged one another, the Germans always getting the worst of it, and in one case at least being much cut up. The Russian cavalry even attacked infantry, but though they got away without serious loss, it is pretty evident that only in exceptional instances can cavalry now successfully contend with modernly armed foot soldiers. [62]

CHAPTER VI

THE CAVALRY FIGHTING BEFORE KOENIGSBERG

The battery to which I had attached myself was destroyed on the 26th. It was overwhelmed by an opposing fire which nothing could withstand, and an attempt was made to withdraw it. It was found impossible to limber up the guns: all the horses were killed, and only five or six of the drivers left. All the guns, too, were damaged; and Polchow, the commanding officer, gave the

order for the few men left to endeavour to save themselves. As the words were being spoken a shell burst full on him, and, riddled by shrapnel bullets, he dropped dead without a struggle. About 20 men only got away and no horses were saved. My own was shot the moment I mounted it, and pinned me to the ground by its weight. I was exposed to the full blast of the German guns for nearly two hours. Partly shielded by the carcass I escaped injury, though my clothes were torn to rags by shrapnel bullets. The escape was miraculous. By-and-by the Germans fell back, after suffering murderous losses; and I was rescued from my perilous position by some infantry soldiers of the 70th regiment.

The loss of Polchow was a serious one to me, although I had known him so short a time, to say nothing of the shock of losing a friend from whose hands I had received many kindnesses. Other friends, too, were lost in these terrible fights, but the non-com. Chouraski escaped, though he was standing near one of our ammunition-carts when it was struck by a shell and blown up. [63]

After dark a party went out to bring in the bodies of Major Polchow and two other artillery officers who had lost their lives during the day. It was raining heavily at the time; but the Germans heard us, and opened a sniping fire, by which we lost one man killed and another wounded.

We returned the fire, but had nothing to aim at except the occasional flash of a rifle; so we retired, carrying the bodies of our dead comrades with us, and buried them in the middle of a small pine-copse, with rough wooden crosses at the heads of the graves, on which we hung their caps and accoutrements after the custom prevailing during this campaign. The Russians always scrupulously revered German graves so marked: I am sorry to record that the Germans were not so humane, but hurt the feelings and aroused the ire of us all, men and officers alike, by their beastly indecencies on the graves of brave men, the very meanest of whom would have blushed to be so dirty-minded and cowardly.

The battery was ordered to be reformed, men, guns and horses being drawn from some reserves which, I believe, came via Petrograd; but as I would not have cared to serve under the officer appointed to command it, I sought and obtained from a Staff Officer a permit, signed by the Grand Duke Nicholas, enabling me to go practically where I liked. For a time I was with the 11th Corps, then with the 5th, and afterwards with several detachments and corps. It was a fortunate thing that I followed this course, as it enabled me to see much more and learn more than I could have done had I remained attached to a small unit. [64]

On the 27th and 28th there was very severe fighting in the direction of Villenberg, at which I was not present. At least 20,000 prisoners were brought to the rear, together with a number of horses, guns and waggons. There can be no doubt but that the Germans received a severe defeat on these two days and were compelled to retire a great distance in a disorganized condition.

During these two days enormous reinforcements came up on the Russian side, including four cavalry divisions. There was great enthusiasm in our ranks, because news came to hand that the Russians had the Austrian army in a trap, and we might expect to hear of great things before the week had run out.

On the 29th I rode with the 5th division of the Cossacks of the Don, and by midday we had arrived in front of Allenstein, which is a junction of five or six railway lines and is situated about 70 English miles from Koenigsberg.

The people flew before us terror-stricken, and a regiment of German hussars was destroyed. I am afraid there were some atrocities on the part of the Cossacks. Without defending them I must remark that the Prussians had set them a very bad example, and they were not slow to imitate it. Villages were burnt and some civilians slain, and there were some other lamentable occurrences. [65]

A German brigade of heavy cavalry fell back, and the railway-station together with a considerable part of the town of Allenstein were destroyed, partly by fire, partly by being blown up; while the lines were torn up in every direction; but this does not mean that the destruction was as great as it would be under similar circumstances in France or England, for the district is not a country of many culverts and bridges. The ground is marshy, with numerous pools and lakes of considerable size, which afforded good shelter to such German troops as were seen, and enabled them to retire without much loss; in fact there was scarcely any fighting on this day, and it became evident that they were waiting for reinforcements before venturing to attack the overwhelming mass of Russian cavalry, which was the largest body of horsemen I have ever heard of as acting in one huge corps. Probably they mustered 40,000 lances and sabres, and they covered the whole country on a front of quite 100 versts, extending from Allenstein to Goldapp near Suwalki.

The whole of this region is a swamp with a crescentic line of lakes and ponds—a difficult country for cavalry to act in; but the Cossacks crept in everywhere, and fire and lance did some fell work.

In some places there was fighting. On the 30th we came in contact with a division of Prussian infantry with 60 guns. Our men, consisting of dismounted Cossacks, dragoons and chasseurs, with 30 horse-artillery and machine guns, took cover amongst some reeds and scattered farm buildings and inflicted some loss on the enemy, who did not make a stand but soon withdrew behind a marshy lake, their guns taking a made road where they offered a good mark, so that a couple of them were knocked over, horses and all, though the enemy saved them under cover of darkness. [66]

At night the railway-station at Bischofsburg was destroyed and the line torn up for a distance of

four versts east and west of it; and we learned that our patrols had demolished the stations at Sensburg, Rastenburg, Latzen and Nordenburg, and had pulled up many versts of the line. We ourselves blew up the station at Seeburg, or Seeburg Road as it might be called, for the town is situated several versts from the railway. Altogether we seemed to be having a walk-over in this region, and when news arrived on the 2nd September that the Russians, after a week's fighting, had crushed the Austrian Army and occupied Lemberg, the excitement and joy in our division were such as I never before thought the phlegmatic Muscovites to be capable of, and I began to entertain the belief that the campaign would be a short one, and that the boast of the Russians that we should be in Berlin in two or three weeks' time was no vain one.

On this day our videttes were at Friedland, and we learned that the Prussians had come out of Koenigsburg in force, and that there had been severe fighting ending in the enemy retiring to the shelter of their forts. The Russian commanders, however, do not seem to have thought it advisable to pursue the foe to within range of their guns. On the 3rd we approached near enough to be able to see two of the outlying forts of the great stronghold. Many parties of Germans watched the dozen troopers composing our advanced guard; but there was no exchange of shots. We satisfied ourselves that certain dispositions of the enemy were intended as a lure to attract a considerable body of our troops within destructive range of their concealed parties. We smelt the trap and declined to be led into it, but one of our officers, Lieutenant Pitchchiff, with great temerity rode up to an eminence which gave him a great command of view and was less than 200 yards from a company of the enemy. He was not shot at, but a number of mounted men rode towards him, and to avoid being taken prisoner he had to come away at a hand gallop. I do not think the information he gleaned was of much importance.

The officer I came most in contact with was Captain Rudovka of the 16th Dragoons, but acting as intelligence officer to the commander of the 5th division of Cossacks. His bad English and my worse French enabled us to understand one another, and his duties, carrying him as they did over a great deal of ground, made him a very desirable companion. I had permission also to keep the artilleryman Chouraski with me. He was an excellent servant.

The Russian officer is usually a splendid fellow; jovial, polite, generous and frank in a high degree. He is not so well versed in the history and theory of his profession as the German officer, and not a patch on his British comrade, who, after all is said and done, is the finest officer in the world. As to pluck and courage, there is not an appreciable difference in any of the armies. I witnessed some magnificent instances of bravery in both Germans and Russians; and truth to tell, acts of devilish cruelty in both nations—acts which I do not believe it is possible either French or British officers could commit, however great the provocation.

There are peculiarities in all peoples; and one of those of the Russians is the number of females serving in their ranks, many of them as officers. Indeed, I heard that one lady commanded a regiment of Cossacks! This seems to me on a par with a General nursing a baby! But I never was "a lady's man," so perhaps I had better reserve my opinions. All I say is that I am glad the lady referred to was not the Colonel of any regiment under the wings of which I fought; and I should imagine that any "mere male" brought before a court-martial of Amazons would stand more danger of being spanked than shot.

I saw some of these female soldiers—quite a score in all. There was nothing particularly romantic in the appearance of any of them. Most of them had the appearance of big, lanky raw-boned boys; faces oval, features "puddeny," and complexions pale. One girl, said to be only eighteen years old, was quite six feet high, with limbs that would fit a grenadier. I noticed that all those I saw were dark-haired women. They are said to have been enlisted as men and to have remained in their regiments some time before their sex was discovered. When this event took place the woman was allowed to remain in the service. I was a little curious to know where these ladies lodged, as accommodation is always limited enough in the tented field. I found that, in the case I was so rude as to pry into, the girl slept amongst the soldiers, but was relegated to a tent occupied exclusively by married men. My admiration was great. The wisdom of the East still reigns in Muscovite brains. Where else would one find the wisdom of the serpent combined with the harmlessness of the dove but in a tent full of married men unless, indeed, it would be in a tent full of married ladies?

The Northern nations are not prudish in the matter of housing the sexes together. Men and women sleep promiscuously in one compartment in their cottage, farms, etc.

For some days the centre of fighting was in Austrian Poland and Galicia, of which we could see nothing. There was also a powerful advance across the German frontier in the direction of Breslau. More weight was given to these evolutions than they deserved. For a time the Russian attacks were irresistible, but the Germans invariably succeeded in stemming them. The reason lies in a nutshell. The enormous weight of millions forced the enemy back; but he always retired slowly, doggedly; and when he had collected a sufficient force made a determined counter-attack which never failed, because man for man the German is by far the better fighter. It may be unpleasant to many to hear this; but it is true; and no man is more sorry than I am that it is so. The German is, generally speaking, a ferocious brute, but he is possessed of the bestial courage of a tiger, and, like that fierce animal, has an insatiable taste for blood. To say that the German Army is an organized band of criminals, a trained body of thieves and murderers, may seem to be far-fetched and exaggerated to some persons; but if they had witnessed what I have witnessed they would not say so.

Young Polish girls were forced to drink until they were helplessly drunk, and in this dreadful

condition were outraged to death. The body of an aged female (no doubt a matron) was found hanging from a tree by the feet, disembowelled and trussed as a hog, with this notice pinned to her, "An old sow left to be salted." A whole company of Prussian infantry abused one poor woman who died in our camp. In one village about 150 men and male children, down to the age of nine or ten years, were burned alive. In another place, a small hamlet near Shiplishki, we heard the screams of burning people, and afterwards saw the charred remains of them. These are not isolated instances: they were of everyday occurrence, but I do not dwell on them for fear of exciting disgust. The murder and mutilation of the wounded was invariable when the enemy had time to effect it, and we became to some degree hardened to such commonplace occurrences.

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On the other hand, the Russians retaliated; and I say, what wonder that they did so? I believe in retaliation. It is a powerful weapon to fight with. It frightened the Germans and afterwards, to a very marked extent, put a check on their atrocities. I stood by and saw 10 officers and 100 soldiers hanged; and as I did so I remembered that the first murders I witnessed in this horrible war were those of Russian subjects by the Germans at Kalisz; and if by holding up a thumb I could have saved the life of any one of these 110 scoundrels, I would not have lifted it. These were all clearly guilty of murder, wounding, torturing, female abusing, and plundering. Still I must say, with regard to the Cossacks—they are terrible fellows.

I have mentioned as a peculiarity of the Russian forces the number of women found in their ranks and welcomed there. The great peculiarities of the German Army, apart from its fiendish brutality, are the prevalence of suicide and insanity in it. Some months later than the time I am writing of, a captured German officer, a Lieutenant, I believe, of a Landwehr regiment, told me that down to the end of February, 1915, at least a thousand men had destroyed themselves; and he mentioned it as a curious fact that hardly any of these miserable creatures belonged to the artillery branch of the service. The reasons for destroying themselves were rarely left behind by the victims of this terrible infatuation. Some of our prisoners destroyed themselves; and I saw one man shoot himself on the battlefield. But in this latter instance horror at the sights around him was the probable cause of the deed.

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Insanity is even more frequent amongst German soldiers than suicide. At the battle of Darkehmen a man, quite naked, foaming and gesticulating wildly, rushed towards us. The astonishment this excited caused a lull of the firing at the spot, and he dashed along for 500 yards at a tremendous speed, leaping and springing like a stag. He made straight for our ranks, where he was knocked down by a soldier and secured. He bit very badly several of his captors before being carried to the rear. I do not know what became of him; but hundreds of our prisoners were raving when captured.

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CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST INVASION OF EAST PRUSSIA, AND THE RETREAT

By the 4th or 5th September it was pretty generally known, in that part of the Russian Army where I was, that something was going wrong with us. Great masses of infantry and artillery were formed eastward, behind, and on the right flank of the cavalry; and yet we made no further advance or progress in any direction. Some thought that our commanders were afraid of the garrison of the Koenigsberg forts, which was believed to number 150,000 men. I, and others engaged on outpost and scouting work, knew that German reinforcements were coming up rapidly, and that a large army was collecting on the Vistula between Marienburg and Thorn. These reinforcements, we knew, were coming from Belgium and the Western theatre of war, and also from the interior of Germany.

On our side reinforcements were coming up in great numbers; but at this period the chief fighting was on the Austrian-Russian frontier; and daily, and often almost hourly, news came to hand of the great victories which were being gained. It was asserted that in one day as many as 130,000 Austrian and Prussian prisoners were taken. The truth of these reports I had no means of ascertaining: nor of the many other rumours of the crushing victories of the Allies in the West, where the Germans were said to be retreating on all parts, and in many places, in disorderly rout. Now, eight months later, are they retreating at any point? Evidently mistakes were made; and it was not realized that the enemy was preparing a ring of defences which it would take many months to force. It was also said that the Germans were beginning to run short of ammunition. We soon had painful evidence that the Germans were short of nothing.

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On the evening of the 5th September, they trapped one of our cavalry regiments and destroyed it, together with the greater part of a squadron of dragoons. Many of the men, including all the wounded, were taken prisoners.

On the 6th the enemy began to advance in force. The fighting consisted mostly of artillery duels at long ranges. While we were watching the action of some guns posted about two English miles

away, a shell smashed to atoms the head and shoulders of an officer in the midst of our group, and we were splashed all over with his blood and brains—not a pleasant experience. The man must have been killed instantly, yet his hands and feet continued to twitch for some minutes after he was struck. It is remarkable that only one man was hurt, as we were standing close together under some trees, where we felt sure we were quite safe.

On the same day we began to retire, but slowly, and with much stubborn fighting. Nearly all the cavalry was drawn back from the front, and much of it must have been sent right away, as I never saw it again. The 5th Cossack division, however, remained; and for a long time was engaged in covering a portion of the 11th Army Corps.

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RUSSIAN COSSACKS ON THE GERMAN FRONTIER

On the 7th the artillery fight continued without apparently decisive results on either side, though our retreat continued, as it did on the 8th when the bulk of the Cossacks (about 1,500 men) were at Deutsch Eylau, with orders to fall back on Soldau, a town seventy or eighty versts east of Thorn. There followed a number of movements which I did not understand, and about which I could glean no information. My difficulties were so great that it was not until this day that I learned we were under the direct command of General Rennenkampf, whom I had only seen on one occasion, and then had scarcely more than a glimpse of him.

The little I learned with certainty showed that the Russians were obtaining great and important victories over the Austrians, with whom were combined a considerable force of Germans, and that the Prussians were becoming exceedingly nervous about their progress. In consequence, they withdrew a great many units from our front; and the Russians, too, sent a great force to the south, including, I suspect, most of the cavalry that had suddenly departed. Both sides, also, but the Germans principally, began to form extensive systems of entrenchments; and two new devices came into use in modern warfare—viz., hand-grenades and armour breastplates.

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The grenades were peculiar things, not at all resembling the weapons which gave our Grenadiers their name; of a kind of elongated pear-shape, these were iron cases divided into segments, and attached to a stick which fitted the barrel of a rifle and enabled them to be shot, at an acute angle, into trenches. They were, also, thrown by hand, and were nasty viperish things, often doing a great deal of damage.

The shields were a kind of iron breastplate, roughly made, and held in the hand by means of metal handles; so that the men had to drop them when they fired their rifles, or used their bayonets: but afterwards they were attached to the body by means of straps. Except at short range they were bullet-proof. The method of use was for the front rank in a mass of close columns to hold them up, protecting themselves and comrades until they closed with the foe, when they were thrown down that their bearers might use the bayonet. Hundreds of them were taken by the Russians; but the contrivance was too clumsy, and was soon abandoned by both sides. Before the men could drop them and unsling their rifles they were heaps of corpses. The grenades, however, held their own, and were much used in trench warfare.

There was frequent and much rain at this time; which was a great inconvenience, and caused the ground to become in a very bad state for the passage of cavalry and artillery, not to mention the misery of bivouacking in drenching showers. The weather was often very hot; but there was a singular absence of disease amongst our troops, though one got to know that typhus and other fevers were appearing amongst the enemy's troops, though not spreading to any extent; and probably no campaign on a large scale was ever conducted with less loss to the troops from disease.

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Much of the scene of the operations I have been describing was very beautiful country, studded with homesteads and farms that, in normal times, must have been quiet and peaceful places, occupied by well-to-do yeomanry and peasantry, living happy and contented lives. Orchards were

numerous, but the fruit had entirely disappeared, either prematurely removed by its owners to make what they could of it, or plundered by the passing troops. Frequently we rode by cornfields that had been burned; and potato-fields had been dug up and wasted, thousands of potatoes the size of marbles lying on the ground. Our raiders got hold of many fowls and pigs; and for a week or two pork was always to be had at two or three meals per day.

Most of the people had fled from this country; those that remained seemed to fear their own countrymen as much as they did our Cossacks, and remained in hiding while we were passing. Generally speaking they were not ill-used when our men discovered them; but scant respect was shown to the rights of womanhood by the Germans themselves, who had become brutal. No doubt many of the German officers made great efforts to maintain order; but the license of war is notorious, and many opportunities for wrong-doing must necessarily arise in countries under its influence. [78]

Houses and whole villages were wrecked and burned. We were constantly passing through smouldering ruins, and at night the land resembled our "Black Country" for blazing fires, and reflections of fires. We saw bodies of civilians who appeared to have been executed by shooting; and in one wrecked and smoke-blackened street, a couple of our own Cossacks, and another Russian soldier, were seen hanging to lamp-posts—probably marauders who had wandered away from their ranks, and fallen amongst the Philistines—a fate such people often meet.

Acting on orders, the cavalry spread out into a vast screen, covering the movements of the infantry, and gradually fell back before the enemy. The movement was described as being strategical, for the purpose of drawing the Germans into a favourable position for attack; but this assertion was probably made to keep up the spirits of our troops.

The enemy fired at us a good deal; but as they could not bring their guns to bear on a group of men, very little execution was done. There were some charges between small parties, always much less than a squadron in strength: and in all these that I saw or heard of the Germans got the worst of the fight; and besides those cut down, in three or four days, our men captured more than 200 prisoners, half a dozen of whom were officers. I believe that the Germans claimed to have captured some of our soldiers, but I much doubt if they secured as many as a score. [79]

The Cossack has a strong disinclination to be taken prisoner; and I knew of several of them sacrificing their lives rather than fall into the hands of the Germans, who heartily detest these men, and usually murdered such as they succeeded in catching—and murdered them after preliminary tortures, according to reports which reached us. The country people certainly showed no mercy to stragglers falling into their hands. They usually pitch-forked them to death; and this lethal weapon was a favourite with the ladies on both sides of the border, many a fine Teuton meeting his end by thrusts from this implement. For in some of the fights the peasantry, including women of all ages, took part, and showed that farm instruments are as deadly as any kind of "arme blanche." ("Arme blanche" is the term used by military scientists to include bayonets, lances and swords of all descriptions. Perhaps the nearest English equivalent is "cold steel.")

Riding through a burnt village near Neidenburg, half a sotnia of our fellows fell into a Prussian trap and had a third of their saddles emptied in a few seconds. The survivors were equal to the occasion; and charged so vigorously that they completely routed their opponents—about 100 of a reservist corps with the figures 239 on their shoulder-straps.^[2] Two of these men were impaled on the same Cossack lance, an almost incredible circumstance. The Cossacks are in the habit of lowering their lances as they charge without removing them from the buckets. Holding them loosely by the lanyards they kick them into their enemies with such irresistible force, aided by the speed of the charging horse, that to parry the weapons is impossible. In the case mentioned, the men must have been standing one close behind the other, and the lance was driven right through bodies, packs and all. It was some time before one of the men died: in fact, not before the Cossack drew his sword and finished him off by a sabre cut. The soldier could not withdraw his lance, so firmly was it embedded in the bodies, a circumstance which much aroused his ire, for all Cossacks are much attached to their weapons. [80]

[2] 239 Reserve are said to have been in Flanders. There may be various explanations; but it is certain that this small party of men wore the number 239.

Having crossed the border, we fell back in the direction of Przasnysz, hearing that Soldau was evacuated; but I did not myself enter that town. We found that a long line of trenches had been made stretching towards Lomza and said to be extended quite up to that place. The lines were full of infantry; and redoubts were constructed at intervals in which heavy siege artillery was placed; an encouraging sight, as it seemed certain that these defences must effectually check the Germans.

We were not long left to ponder over the possible effects of an assault on our position. On the 14th the Germans opened fire with their field-guns, and at daybreak made a violent assault in their usual close formation. The result was horrible. Whole sections of them were blown away, the air being filled with showers of human fragments, dismembered by the big shells from the siege guns. At the same time they were subjected to a withering rifle fire and they soon broke and fled, suffering terribly as they rushed madly away. [81]

Perhaps the heavy guns were a surprise to them. They generally made repeated assaults, often as many as seven or eight in quick succession; but on this occasion they were fairly frightened: they

even suspended their artillery shooting until late in the afternoon, and made no demonstration against the parties which went out from our lines to examine the battlefield.

Of all the awful sights I had seen, or saw afterwards, none exceeded this. The enemy could not reach the guns, on account of the skilful way in which they were placed well in the rear, and protected by strong cross-fire; but they had succeeded by superhuman bravery in forcing the first line trenches. They held none of their gains longer than five minutes, at most; but in that time lost so heavily that the pits were filled with corpses flush with the ground outside of them. In some spots the dead and the dying were lying in heaps eight or nine deep. The shells which had been used appeared to weigh from 150 to 200 pounds (English weight) each; and hundreds of bodies were rent to pieces. Arms, heads, legs, entrails, pieces of flesh, were lying about in all directions; and the proportion of dead to injured was very high—more so, I think, than in any other action that had taken place, though in some instances nearly all the casualties were caused by artillery fire. [82]

We brought in about 7,000 wounded; and I calculated that at least 12,000 dead were left lying on the field. The Germans sent a flag of truce asking for permission to bury their dead. A reply was sent that we would do that job for them. But no attempt was made to bury the enemy's dead until the 16th. There was rain in the interval, followed by a hot morning: not more than half the bodies were disposed of until the 17th, and by that time the stench from the field was sickening.

During this interval there was no firing worth mentioning. The Germans were slyly waiting for their heavy guns to come up. However, on the night of the 17th they made an attempt to surprise us, but went home with a flea in their ear, leaving another 1,000 men behind them. At this time so many men had been withdrawn to the Austrian front, that, imitating the example of the British and French in the West, our cavalry were dismounted and fighting in the trenches. So I had full opportunity of seeing what was going on and taking a part in the operations. Often I wished that I could move about even more freely than I contrived to do. For the sounds of heavy firing miles away showed that our little hamlet was not the only centre of a fierce fight. The name of this hamlet, situated about twenty versts to the east of Przasnysz, by-the-by I never heard. It had endured the horror of a visit from the Germans, and was a heap of blackened ruins. It had occupied a slight eminence, and a battery was now placed in front of it. Further back were some gravel-pits and a scarp bank, where the Cossacks picketed their horses, and a reserve of ammunition was kept, though it was not altogether safe from the enemy's shells. [83]

All through the 18th there was very heavy artillery firing, in which the Germans got much the worst of it, as their guns were light; but on the 19th they had some heavy pieces in position which did us some damage, blowing in many yards of trenches, and destroying hundreds of men. We had, however, no experience of the terrible "Jack Johnsons," nor had we, so far, heard of those monstrous pieces of artillery.

General Jowmetstri, our immediate commander, did not care to sit still and endure this galling fire, which our guns were unable to subdue; and on the evening of the 20th he ordered a general advance with the bayonet. The Germans did not seem to be prepared for this, if they were not actually taken by surprise. Our charge was a very fierce one and the enemy was driven out of his trenches, and a large working-party which was busy cutting parallel lines of defence was annihilated. The enemy's troops at this point were evidently of inferior quality. Many of them threw down their arms, and some begged piteously for mercy. Their officers were furious, and cut and stabbed at their soldiers, as well as fired their revolvers at them. I saw one fellow throw his arms round his officer and literally howl for mercy, while the man of authority swore and struggled to free his sword arm. Both men were taken prisoners. The whole force was swept from its defences and compelled to retreat, closely followed by our men. A sharp rifle-fire was kept up all night. [84]

About ten o'clock in the morning the enemy joined a fresh force, and we were compelled to halt. We could hear that very heavy fighting was taking place to the right of our position, some of the sounds of artillery firing being distant, in the opinion of experienced soldiers, at least thirty versts; and the front of the battle must have extended a much greater distance than that.

I was much perturbed about my horse, and those of the Cossacks with me, numbering about fifty men, all that was left of the sotnia (or squadron). I had not seen Rudovka for three days; and, in fact, never saw him again, nor did I meet with anybody of whom I could make inquiries concerning him. Chouraski was still with me; but communication between us was chiefly by means of signs, though I was beginning to pick up the names of a few things in Russian; and Chouraski knew what I meant when I asked for "bread" (biscuit), "cheese," "water," "wash," "dress," etc.

Some of the articles indicated by these words were very different from what an Englishman would expect them to be. Bread was a species of "hard tack" compared with which dog-biscuits are fancy food: cheese was a wretched soft mess resembling wet putty, sour and peculiarly flavoured. Meat was plentiful and good, especially German pork, and fowls, many of which were large and fleshy. [85]

The fifty Cossacks had no officer left and only one corporal, and they looked to me for guidance. Assisted by Chouraski I contrived to lead them very well for five days, when they were taken charge of by a Staff Officer, and, I suppose, sent back to their regiment. Whether they regained their horses, or what became of mine, I never heard. I say "mine"; but really I do not know to whom the animal, or the one previously killed under me, belonged. Both had been found for me,

no explanations being asked for or given. I was lost without a horse, but had no money to buy one. At this time all the cash in my possession was £20 in English sovereigns, and I had nobody to whom I could apply for more. I wrote several letters to friends at home; but none of these reached their destination; nor did I receive a line from anyone during the whole time I was with the Russian Army.

Campaigning is rough work. I had come into the country with a small gladstone bag only; and now I wanted many things badly, including boots in particular. But just now I had fighting to attend to, and that under strange circumstances because, like George Washington, I seem to suffer from a natural inability to become a linguist. Most of the Russian officers are good French scholars; and I found the most facile way of communicating with them was to pencil down in French what I wished to say. "How was I to get a horse?" "Take one from the Deutschman," came the ready reply. I resolved I would if I could. Boots and shirts were another matter, and these were generously given me, together with an officer's uniform of the 80th regiment. [86]

The swaying backwards and forwards of the battle, so to speak, seemed to be occasioned by the necessity the Germans were under to rush their troops about to save the many threatened positions. They strove, often with success, to pin the Russian troops to one spot while they sent reinforcements to help their friends the Austrians. Their Allies set right, back came the relieving force, and a fresh attack was made on the Russians, too often with success, or partial success. I have already repeatedly said that it was their splendid system of railways that enabled the Germans to effect these rapid and confusing movements.

That the railways were the means by which they obtained their victories was proved by a curious fact. When the Russians were beaten back so far that the Germans could not command their railed lines of communication, and were thus placed on an equality with the Russians, they began to lose ground, and Russians to gain it. This accounts for the "swaying backwards and forwards" of the contending forces to which I have several times alluded.

In the present fight, however, I think they had a narrow escape of a serious disaster, and I was disappointed that the Russians did not evince more dash and push their enemies back on Berlin. They proved to be not strong enough to do this; nor do I think they will succeed in so doing, until the British and French make a decided turn in the Western campaign. It is in the West that the fate of the German Empire will be decided. [87]

Germany too is full of strong fortresses; and the Russians have been unable to threaten seriously any of these, and are, I feel sure, incapable of taking any of them. They lack the necessary artillery, for one thing; and I was never greatly impressed by the engineering skill of their sappers. The Germans are masters in this branch of the service; and that is a circumstance which is sure to tell both in field-works and in fortress warfare.

That there was much anxiety amongst the commanders of both armies at the end of September was betrayed by the movements of the troops, and the disinclination which was shown by both Russians and Germans to take a bold initiative before the arrival of strong reinforcements. There was firing every day, it is true, and sometimes heavy firing; but no attempts at those vigorous attacks in masses of columns which were so expensive in life; and, I might add, so ineffectual that it is amazing the Germans persisted in making them.

Attempts may have been made to conceal the arrival of reinforcements: they were not successful. We learned of every battery and battalion that arrived in the German line: and their prisoners, of whom we daily captured hundreds, could tell us all about the fresh arrivals in our camp. Something was learned through scouts and patrols; but there must have been numerous spies in both camps. None of them were discovered to my knowledge; but the Germans were continually hanging or shooting suspected persons. The slightest suspicion of a stranger in their lines was sufficient to insure his destruction. They shot first and inquired afterwards, if they inquired at all. [88]

Almost simultaneously it was announced in our camp that the Czar was coming to command us in person, and the Kaiser to place himself at the head of the enemy. The Germans were evidently most anxious to drive back our armies, in order to have the greater part of their force at liberty to deal with the French and British in the West: their prisoners admitted this, and were not at all reticent concerning details, often giving information which showed them to be little better than traitors to their country. The Saxons, particularly, were communicative, and many of them openly expressed their disgust at the war and the cruelties perpetrated by the Prussians, who, with the Bavarians and Württembergers, were undoubtedly the cruellest men amongst our foes, as they are the most brutal amongst themselves. The roughs from Wurzburg, Frankfort-on-the-Rhine, Berlin, and Hanover, were notorious for wickedness, even in their own ranks; and prisoners from the other States would often refuse to associate with them.

I moved about very freely amongst the German prisoners at the request of several of the Russian commanders, for the purpose of gleaning information. While at least 40 or 50 per cent. of the German officers could speak French and English fluently, hardly any of the Russians had a knowledge of the latter language, though they were nearly always good French scholars. On the other hand, German officers rarely understand Russian. The German rank and file contained hundreds of men who spoke English almost like natives of Britain; and no big batch of prisoners came under my notice which did not contain men who had resided in our Islands. Their officers were more reticent than the men; hence the use I could be to the Russian authorities; and though spying is not to my taste, I acted willingly enough on these occasions for what, I hope, are very obvious reasons. I have been told by some pious people that the meaning of the present universal [89]

imbroglio is that the end of the world is imminent. I am convinced that it would soon be so if the wretched Tyrant of Prussia won the day: and to prevent such a catastrophe I would willingly stoop to meaner work than spying.

Sometimes the prisoners mistook me for a German; and I did not always undeceive them. Many of them were miserably ignorant creatures; and I formed the opinion that State interference with the education of either the Classes or the Masses is not such a benefit to the people of a country as many meddlesome faddists would like us to believe. Probably there are very few Germans who cannot read and write; but these are qualifications which may be much perverted if they are not "founded upon a rock."

A great many of the prisoners taken by the Russians were men who would better be described as deserters than prisoners. Lots of them hated the military service, and had taken the earliest opportunity to run away from it—into the arms of their enemies. "I have a wife and six children in Magdeburg. If I'm killed who will look after them?" said one man. Another fellow remarked: "I was married about three months before I was called to the colours. I don't want my wife to be grabbed up by somebody else." These, and other remarks, show that all the people in Germany are not patriots. A soldier of the 54th regiment declared himself to be a Socialist, and said he did not like killing his fellow-men. Another declared that the only men he wished to kill were his officer and his sergeant-major, who had been cruel to him; and he added: "I came away to save myself from being killed by them." A large number of Jews surrendered because they would not fight against their fellow Jews, who, they had heard, were enlisting in large numbers in the French and English armies. [90]

The loss of men of these descriptions would not weaken the German Army; but many thousands of the genuine prisoners were inveterate in their hatred of Britain and everything British; and, strange as it seems, these were the men from whom I gained the most useful information. They were boastful and threatening: "Our Kaiser will be in your dirty country on such and such a day; and then you'll catch it!" "Nonsense," I would reply; "he hasn't got men enough to fight on this front, and invade England as well." "Oh yes, he has. All our best troops have gone to crush the English. Any men are good enough to defeat these red-snouted pigs. The Guard Corps has gone to destroy your Guards;" and then the fellow would go on to say where the various German corps were stationed, which was valuable information. In this way I first learned that the English Guards were in France; and many important details of the fighting there—details which it was troublesome to verify, but I did verify them: and so various and important was the information I gathered that I was, for a time, much employed in this work by the Russian staff. [91]

Much that I learned was at variance with what I afterwards read in English newspapers. Evidently Germany was not so short of foodstuffs and munitions of war as newspaper-men and politicians often fondly imagined they were. I obtained clear proof that, in the early stages of the war, and as late as February or March, both food and copper were sent in large quantities by neutrals through neutrals, and also metals and munitions. The Americans, I firmly believe, were generally antagonistic to Germany and her policy; but there is in the United States a very large body of people of Teutonic birth or descent, many of whom are rich and influential tradesmen, and no effectual steps were taken to prevent these persons from supplying their compatriots on the European Continent with stores of goods of every description. They even did so on credit and under promise of rich reward when that golden apple, Albion, had dropped into the Kaiser's maw. Items of interest which I gained from German prisoners were very numerous, and of intense interest. I heard much about the brutal treatment of our prisoners, and the destruction of our towns by airships; information which, I know, required to be accepted with caution; but I verified it by cross-questioning and other means, to the extent of learning certainly that places on our island had been wrecked by aeroplanes, and many lives lost. The circumstantial details given were too clear to leave a doubt on one's mind. Most of those from whom I gathered information were men who had resided in England. [92]

Concerning the food-supply of our enemies, I learned what steps they were taking to husband their stores, and I am satisfied that with what they have got, and what is still leaking into their country, they can probably hold out for two years at least. If they are beaten sooner it must be by force of arms, not by starvation, though this will be their ultimate fate if the war is much prolonged; for Germany is not self-supporting, and as her troops are driven back, the area from which she can draw supplies will be rapidly curtailed. [93]

CHAPTER VIII

THE KAISER NOT A SUCCESSFUL GENERAL

The movements of the German troops were amazing. Some of the men we took prisoners had been rushed up from Belgium, back again, sent into Austria, and brought back to East Prussia;

and all this in less than two months. I mean that the entire corps, or divisions, to which these men had belonged had been so shifted about. The Prussian Guards were smashed up at Ypres by our splendid "British Grenadiers" (we soon learned this), and then came and faced us, when they did not fare much better. Probably it was the recruits who replaced the first lot who came to make the acquaintance of the Russian bayonets. As to their Kaiser, he was reported to be in a dozen places at one and the same time. He was certainly at Soldau, or in its neighbourhood, during the last week of September; but I did not learn the exact date of his arrival in the East. Like most exalted potentates of his stamp—compounds of arrogance and blasphemy—he seemed to have some fears for his personal safety, and to be endeavouring to secure it by shrouding his movements in a certain amount of mystery. By the shouting and hymn-singing, we knew he was at Soldau on the 24th; but on the 27th we received definite information that he was at Suwalki, which is thirteen versts over the German border and in Russian territory. This was also the first intimation we had that our forces had evacuated the Spirding See, the Lake region; and it was not received as pleasant news, though anger rather than depression was the prevailing passion amongst us. Reports, confirmed by the admission of prisoners, stated that a quarter of a million men had been quietly collected at Koenigsberg and were now being rapidly drafted into Poland. Though the Kaiser was said to be in personal command of the new army, a General von Hindenburg was mentioned as being the real director of its movements. This was the first time we had heard of him.

[94]

At this period one of the gravest of Russia's mistakes was, in my opinion, an undue attention to the Austrian section of the big battle—for the fight really raged along the entire eastern and northern frontiers of Germany and Austria. Troops were massed in front of the Jaroslav-Lemberg line, who could have been more usefully employed in forcing back the invaders in East Poland. But Russia has had her eyes on Galicia for years, and, like a dog with a bone, has instincts for nothing but her prey. She and her friends thought her huge masses would swamp everything that attempted to oppose them. This has proved to be a mistaken opinion, just as Germany's idea that rushed masses would carry everything before them has turned out to be an error. In modern war huge masses mean appalling death lists and vast numbers of prisoners. An army such as even Napoleon hardly ever saw is now imprisoned in Russia; and another, scarcely inferior to it in numbers, is interned in Germany. Men deployed may fall back and escape; a mass of columns under direct artillery fire must surrender or be annihilated. This is the reason that troops have been captured in bodies of thousands on both sides. It is also the chief reason that the slaughter has been so excessive.

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On the night of the 28th, at about 10.30, we were aroused and paraded. I was excessively tired at the time, hardly able to keep my eyes open, and was under the impression that fighting was about to take place in our immediate neighbourhood; but after standing in a drenching rain for about half an hour we were marched off—I could not tell where or in what direction.

The night was dark, the rain falling in torrents, and the ground a quagmire; but the men marched quickly and in perfect silence. They were not permitted to smoke, an indulgence which was usual on marches.

I marched with an East Russian regiment from Perm, which had already seen such hard service that it was reduced in strength from 4,000 to less than 2,000 men. There were other regiments in the division which had suffered even more severely. The men were cheerful, recent accounts of great victories on the Austrian frontier having much raised their spirits.

We plodded on till eight o'clock the next morning, when we were halted, and each man, including officers, was handed a mug of coffee and two large biscuits, commissariat carts passing down the ranks for this purpose. It was still raining. During the night we had passed through two towns and two villages, but I had no idea where we then were. After waiting two hours till about 10 a.m., we resumed our march, and after proceeding four or five versts arrived at Ostrolenka railway-station. Troops were leaving this place by train, and we were placed in carriages about noon, and departed eastward. I shared a compartment with six officers and was able to hold a little communication with them. Their opinion was that we were going to Grodno, about 150 versts from Ostrolenka. After smoking a cigar or two they all went to sleep and within a few minutes I had followed their example, and was so dog-tired that I did not awake until I was aroused at Grodno, where we arrived at six o'clock in the evening. The sound of heavy artillery firing was heard as we stood on the platform; but no information could be gleaned about what was going on, and in a short time we were placed in another train and sent off in the direction of Suwalki, the capital town of a province of the same name. At ten o'clock we were detained on the line near to a large sheet of water, probably at Otschauka.

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A big battle was going on some eight or ten versts away. We could hear a tremendous sound of firing, and could see the red reflection in the sky for many miles on either hand. Without delay we were marched towards this scene of conflict, and at once began to meet long lines of wounded men and prisoners. The Germans were reported to be getting the worst of the fight, but the Russians stood in need of reinforcements.

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We hurried on, the men marching at a very quick step, but often floundering through slush and mud. The ground was very soft and marshy, and full of ponds and streams with steep banks. Troops were in front of us, and others behind; and judging from a spluttering rifle-fire, I thought our flank was being protected by a cavalry skirmishing line. It was the first serious night-fight in which I had been engaged. As we advanced it became more and more evident that it was a battle of an extensive and desperate description; and enough could be seen to show that its front

extended at least twenty versts, and probably much more.

At length we were halted and deployed into line; and I thought other infantry regiments were coming up on both flanks; but the night was too dark to enable one to make sure of much. While we were thus engaged a cavalry regiment rode into us—it cannot be said that it charged—and I have always been of opinion that they made a mistake of some kind. Half of them were killed, the rest surrendered; and I tried to gain possession of one of their horses, as I had been recommended to do. I was disappointed. Some unmannerly rascal took it from me just as I was trying to get into the saddle, and time and circumstances made an argument both difficult and dangerous.

We were within long range of artillery fire, and stray shells burst over our heads and fell amongst our ranks; and an order was passed that we were to lie down. The ground was sodden, and most of us were very damp if not wet through; but there we lay for two hours until about 1.30 a.m., when we were suddenly ordered to advance. [98]

We had not gone 1,000 yards when there was some wild shooting in front of us, and to my astonishment I found that we were close upon the enemy. It must have been a surprise to them, or they would never have permitted us to close without riddling us with rifle and cannon shot according to their usual tactics; and either desperation lent them energy, or they were getting used to the handling of their weapons, for I never saw a fiercer bayonet fight on the part of the Germans. They burnt flares, or a similar contrivance, which threw a lurid light over the fiercely struggling mass of human furies, and benefited us as much as it did themselves; and that was a good thing, for otherwise it would have been almost impossible to distinguish friend from foe, and accidents must have been of frequent occurrence.

The enemy appeared to have made some shallow rifle trenches, but many of them fought on open, flat ground; and their losses were terrible. The fight lasted, furiously, desperately, for about a quarter of an hour; then the Germans gave way and ran for their lives, closely followed by their foes. As they ran they unbuckled their knapsacks and let them fall to the ground. Many fell on their knees and held their hands up, not always with success in obtaining mercy, though hundreds of prisoners were taken and secured by the reserves which were following us in support. Some threw themselves flat on the ground and thus often escaped immediate death. [99]

The officers on both sides lost control of their men. I could hear the Germans shouting and threatening and saw some of them throw themselves before the soldiers in a vain attempt to stop the headlong flight; while our men were so excited that the commands of their officers were quite ignored—a very unusual thing amongst Russian soldiers, whose reverence for their commanders resembles that of saints for their priests.

I believe the Germans suffered something from their own artillery fire, their shells bursting amongst friends and foes alike. One fell close in front of me and the explosion made me shiver; but though it killed at least half a dozen men I escaped without so much as a scratch, though I afterwards found my clothes torn by projectiles of some kind.

The pursuit went on for hours. When daylight broke it had not diminished in vigour, and, the country being an open marsh, the enemy, deprived of the trenches in which they love to fight, could find no point of support and were kept on the run. Many of them, far too heavily accoutred, fell from exhaustion, and soon they began to surrender in squads and companies.

Cavalry on our left front made a demonstration, but the ground was so rotten that they could not charge; and we soon began to come up with guns embedded in the mud. Gunners and horses were bayoneted, and the guns afterwards fell into our hands. I was told that hundreds were taken; certainly whole batteries were left behind, the majority of the horses having been worked to death in an endeavour to drag them away. I saw them lying dead harnessed to guns and waggons. Some were still dying, groaning pitifully, and not a few were put out of their misery by men whom the fiercest passion could not deprive of some sense of compassion for innocent suffering. I came upon a German gunner engaged in this praiseworthy work, and gave him a friendly nod. He returned the nod with equal friendliness before hopping after his comrades with a couple of pounds of mud clinging to each boot. Ah! war is a sad, sad business. It must be bred of the devil: for one would rather lose his soul than fail to sabre or stab the foe in front of him; and yet when the fierce rage of the fight is over, one would give the whole world not to have done such a thing. [100]

The Prussians must have had reserves in the field, but we saw nothing of them. Either they were dealt with by other bodies of our troops, or, seeing that the day was lost, took the hint and did not wait. Our men kept up the pursuit until nearly noon the next morning, when the majority of them were so exhausted that they threw themselves on the ground and slept where they lay, with the rain pelting down upon them.

This action was known to the Russians as the "Battle of Suvalki," and was the nearest approach to an old-fashioned fight that had taken place. It was a tremendous affair, fought on a front of nearly thirty English miles; and was a complete, unqualified German defeat. They lost about 30,000 killed and wounded, and nearly as many more taken prisoners. The Kaiser was in personal command throughout the action; and is responsible for the precious mess made of it. About 300 field-guns were captured, but some of them were so firmly embedded in the mud that they could not be dragged off, horses being scarce. According to my estimate at least 8,000 of these poor beasts perished in the fight. There is no exaggeration in these estimations. One column of [101]

prisoners alone which I passed on its way to the interior of Russia was five miles long, the men marching without a break, in double file, or six abreast, according to German formation. (The German file is usually three men deep, and not two, as it is in most other European armies.)

Both sides were thoroughly exhausted by this tremendous struggle; and there was no fighting on the latter part of the 1st and the whole of the 2nd of October; at any rate by the troops which had been engaged in the main battle. On the 3rd we resumed our advance into Prussia, but late in the afternoon were ordered to halt, and the remainder of the day was spent in taking up an alignment facing due north towards Tilsit. The object of this movement was not clear to me; but there can be no doubt that our position was sometimes almost critical. The force which fought the Battle of Suwalki was outflanked both to the north and to the south, and had we suffered defeat the disaster would have been a terrible one. The Russians had not only a huge marsh in their rear, but also a large and deep river (the Niemen), and what that might have meant may be gathered from the fearful losses of the Germans when they were forced, as a part of the movement I have been describing, over it to the north of Suwalki. Not much about this disaster seems to have leaked out as yet, but it cost the Germans at least another 20,000 men, nearly all of whom perished by drowning; in fact, the passage of the Niemen is second only, as a military *débâcle*, to that of the Beresina in Napoleon's days. Eye-witnesses, whose veracity cannot be questioned, amongst them being General Rennenkampf, asserted that whole companies, and batteries of artillery, were swept away, the heavy rains having greatly increased the current of the river. Heavy siege guns, destined for the bombardment of Warsaw, were lost; and several of the bridges constructed by the German engineers collapsed under the excessive weight forced upon them; while two of these structures were demolished by the Russian shell fire, being crowded with men at the time. In fact, whatever the outcome of the campaign, the Germans will never forget the dressing they got at the passage of the Niemen below Tilsit.

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The effect of the battle of Suwalki was very great. The German objective had been Warsaw, and they tried to seize it, as they tried to seize Paris, by a rapid and impetuous advance. They had reached Suwalki and Rovno in the north, and their advanced parties were on their way to Wilna, the capture of which would have cut the communications of Warsaw; while southwards they had reached Radom, 140 miles over the border, and two-thirds of the way to Warsaw. Suwalki saved Warsaw; for it compelled the Germans to fall back north and south and evacuate West Poland. It is beyond all measure the most important victory the Russians have gained; for though the loss of Warsaw would not necessarily mean the loss of the war, it would be a nasty blow to the Muscovite prestige, and might entail the loss of Petrograd. As one of their most fervent well-wishers I heartily rejoice that they won Suwalki. It must have been a knock-down blow for Wilhelm der Grosse, as it showed conclusively that if he is a Napoleonic tyrant he is not a Napoleonic genius. Like the little man with the large head he is a big scoundrel; but, unlike the Corsican, he is not a great soldier.

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A wonderful army, though, is this German Army. After suffering a crushing defeat and losing, with those drowned in the Niemen, from 70,000 to 80,000 men, they drew off in fairly good order, and in a few days were again a formidable host. They did not sustain a "rout." No fair, impartial account of what really occurred can go so far as to say that. A crushing defeat it was, but not a rout.

These operations cost the Germans, in addition to their loss of men, about 700 guns of various descriptions and 18,000 horses. About 850 waggons and carts fell into the Russian hands.

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CHAPTER IX

CHIEFLY PERSONAL MATTER

The Russian soldier is a splendid fellow: I do not go so far as to say that he is a first-class fighter. It is really difficult to describe him correctly. He has been represented repeatedly as a dogged being; so he is. His courage, too, is unimpeachable; but it is not a very intelligent courage. The Russian soldier must be led, and the better led he is the better he will fight. He has, as I have already hinted, an almost religious reverence for his acknowledged superiors; and he is a religious man. Perhaps it would be better to say, a superstitiously religious man. He nearly always carries a relic or a little ikon of some kind, and to this he frequently prays, kissing it at the same time. He has an intense reverence for the Holy Virgin, and a common form of greeting is, "Brother, Christ is risen," to which the comrade addressed replies, "He is risen, indeed." Faithful, true-hearted and generous, he never forsakes a friend; and, on the other hand, I am afraid he never forgives an enemy. He can be dreadfully cruel to those he hates; yet, in his ordinary mood, it would be difficult to find a man who has a stronger natural dislike to shedding blood. He makes a good husband, is passionately fond of children; but is not a merciful man in his dealing with dumb animals. He is pudding-headed, but not obstinate in the usual acceptance of the word; and his friend, or his officer, can lead him anywhere. In a fight he dies like a Roman, and never

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abandons his leader. It is difficult to imagine him a revolutionist or a King-killer, though history has recorded that he can be either; and some terrible things have occurred even in the reign of the present Czar.

That part of the Russian Army with which I was mostly in contact was composed almost entirely of Siberians, people who retain very markedly the features of their Mongolian origin. They are Asiatics, as, indeed, are many Russians. At any rate, this seemed to be perfectly clear, judging from their features and other indications; though, I must confess, I am not learned on the subject of the origin of nations. Their habits, too, are largely Asiatic, and there was a considerable admixture of Tartar blood in some of the regiments; and in others many of the men would easily have passed as Chinese. Some of the regiments were composed of Kirghiz; and one, at least, of Mongolians pure and simple.

I fell into some confusion concerning the numbering and naming of the regiments, because there seem to be several distinct armies in the Russian services. The Siberian is one of these armies: and some of the regiments were only known by their territorial designation, while others had both name and number. The army from "All the Russias" seems to be considered the élite troops; but in my opinion the Siberians are not in any way inferior to them, and the Tiflis Rifles is one of the finest bodies of light infantry I have ever seen.

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The physique of the men, generally, is magnificent, and their powers of endurance unsurpassed by that of any soldiers in the world. They can march and fight, too, on rations so scanty and coarse that I much doubt if any other European soldiers would tolerate such food. Many of the regiments for days had no better diet than tea and biscuit. Milk was not drunk in the tea, but sugar was used when it could be obtained. The troops were supposed to have a ration of sugar, and also salt. Some years ago the sugar ration was abolished, but the health of the men deteriorated so much that it was again served out to them with beneficial results; so it would seem that sugar is necessary to human health. "How did people do when there was no sugar?" "When was that?" "Before sugar honey was universally used; and honey is certainly a natural sugar." The faddist is a very tiresome person anywhere; above all things he should be kept away from armies and navies, where he may do much mischief. Now the non-alcoholic idiot is getting the sway. What a pass things are coming to! Waterloo was fought on beer, and Trafalgar on rum; but I remember at the "Battle of Dorking" a Staff-Officer "came between a poor cove and his grub," who nearly got himself shot for complaining—the "poor cove" I mean, not the Staff-Officer.

The victory at Suvalki had far-reaching effects. Even at the few posts where the Germans were not forced back they were compelled to retire. Some of their cavalry made an effort to check the pursuit, but it was unavailing. What appeared to be parts of two regiments, hussars and dragoons, had the temerity to charge a battalion of our regiment. The greater part of them went down in a heap, men and horses together. On our side a regiment of Cossacks (said to be the 3rd of the Don) charged a battalion of Prussians and dispersed them, taking 100 prisoners, including a colonel. During the retreat of the Germans many small fights occurred which had no particular results on the campaign. By the 3rd October whole corps of Russians were on Prussian soil.

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RUSSIANS HURRYING AMMUNITION TO OPERATING LINES

It was unfortunate that heavy rains again began to fall, as they prevented so close a pursuit as would otherwise have harassed the enemy. The country west of Suvalki, naturally a marsh, was rendered a huge lake. The water was not deep enough to prevent the advance of cavalry and infantry; but guns could not be dragged through the mud, and without them it would have been unsafe to advance very far. Many of those captured from the Germans were lost owing to the state of the ground, but I do not think they were recovered by the enemy. They sank into the morass and so disappeared.

I was very glad when a halt was called and we were ordered to find what shelter we could, the

regiment being far in advance of the main body. The Germans had sadly devastated the country. We passed over many miles of country in which scarcely so much as the shell of a house was left standing: all were charred and blackened; and men, women and children were found murdered. The bodies of two young boys under twelve years of age lay on the roof of a low outhouse. They had been bayoneted and thrown there, nobody could surmise why. Some bodies were burnt to cinders, and others had been torn and partly eaten by swine and dogs. The dogs, by-the-by, were numerous, and very fierce brutes.

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In some spots, where the Germans had bivouacked, the heads and offal of pigs showed that they had shot some of these animals, and also killed ducks and fowls, for food, and cooked them at open-air fires made of the belongings of the peasantry. Chairs and tables were left outside, just in the positions in which they had evidently been used. A dish-cover was left on one table, and when it was raised it revealed two pairs of human hands severed at the wrists. The men to whom these hands had belonged, and a woman, were found shot in the farm-house. All were old people, as nearly all the murdered persons were, except some young women and children. Besides the two boys already mentioned, a younger child and a little girl of about fourteen years were seen lying on the ground. The cause of the death of the girl did not appear, and it was probably caused by fright. A woman clasping her baby had been shot. The bodies had, in many cases, been treated with disgusting irreverence. Even a hunchbacked man had been shot, and a poor old fellow with beard and hair as white as snow. One sturdy dame seemed to have attempted to fight for her life, for she held a hoe in her dead hands. Her body was riddled by bullets.

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To escape the rain I climbed up the half-burnt rafters of a cottage to a room in which a portion of the floor and a corner of the roof were still in position—I cannot say intact. Here, in imminent danger of a fall, I slept the instant I stretched myself on the boards. Below were a score of exhausted soldiers, too utterly weary to care a rap for danger from falling walls: and long and soundly we all slept.

No food had been served out for two days, and when a commissariat waggon came up only about half the men obtained biscuits. I was thinking of cooking a pig's head left behind by the Germans when a soldier generously gave me half a biscuit. Others followed his example, and in this way I obtained a breakfast. The pigs which had escaped the Prussians had all run away, but later in the day one was found and killed, and about two pounds of its flesh found its way into my hands. We resumed our march at 11 a.m., the enemy being known to be not far off. During the afternoon we came up with one of their abandoned waggons. It was full of champagne and hock! I am glad there were no teetotallers about to witness the capture. What King Jamie meant by being "fu" I do not presume to know; but I am quite sure some of us were "tight" before that waggon was done with, and I should like to see the teetotaller, of exalted or humble rank, who would resist the temptation of a good "swig" after forty-eight hours of such misery as we had just gone through.

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Apparently the Germans observed this capture; for they fired two shells at us from a range of about three miles. One shot fell 200 yards from us, the other came a little nearer, but neither interrupted the interesting work in hand.

Notwithstanding the preconceived opinions of book strategists, long-range firing does not seem to be productive of very destructive results, even with heavy artillery. It was certainly not much resorted to in this campaign. Even rifle shooting seldom took place at a longer range than 1,000 yards; and much oftener at not more than half that distance; while firing at point-blank range was frequent. The bayonet did as much work as in any war that ever took place; in some fights half the casualties were caused by its use. Cavalry, too, faced infantry fire boldly and successfully. We were to have no more charges of masses of cavalry according to the theorists. But on at least half-a-dozen occasions bodies of over 4,000 horsemen made most telling charges. In one case at least 10,000 cavalry took part in a charge, riding over the Prussian infantry as they might have ridden over stubble. The Cossacks, like the Uhlans, have hooks attached to the butts of their lances; and with these they whipped officers from their horses, and men from the ground in the most extraordinary way, sometimes pulling them up into their own saddles and bringing them in prisoners. How they liked the humiliation of this treatment may be gathered from the remark of one officer made to me in English, "D—n it! I would rather have been killed"; but he joined in the general laugh at his accident.

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Perhaps I have no right to record mere impressions and ideas; and I intend to avoid doing so generally; but there are some opinions and beliefs which had a general bearing on what I did, and especially on what I recorded; and I think I may be excused if I sometimes refer to these.

As a case in point, I was generally very ignorant of what was taking place in other areas of the war. German newspapers were pretty plentiful in all our camps; but very few French or British found their way into our hands. German accounts were not reliable in my opinion, but some of their statements could hardly be altogether untrue. The news of the loss by submarine torpedoes of the three battleships, *Aboukir*, *Hogue* and *Cressy*, perturbed me greatly. The reports in German newspapers, combined with other rumours which reached us, made it clear enough that the British Navy had met with a great disaster, though I was compelled to rely on the translations of Russian comrades of these German reports.

The Russian cavalry made some attempts to penetrate East Prussia, and get at the trains which were conveying troops from Koenigsberg southwards; but none of these attempts were successful so far as I have heard. A few isolated patrols got a long way into Prussia, but, I think, in no case did they succeed in wrecking a train.

For a time I was out of action, though I tried to reach the scenes of fighting I heard was in progress. The East Prussian frontier is a very difficult country for military operations, especially those of an offensive description. The marsh lands are very extensive, and there are numerous lakes and ponds which greatly aid the defending force, while much hindering those engaged in the attack. Lakes and marshes enable an army on the defensive greatly to extend its front; which those engaged in the assault cannot do without at any rate incurring great risks. The Germans often threw up batteries between two lakes, or a lake and a marsh situated near each other. As these could be approached only on a narrow neck of land, they could be defended by a mere handful of men, while the attacking force was not only compelled to advance a strong party, but had, also, to keep others in hand to prevent being outflanked.

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Something of this kind of fighting I saw; but much of it occurred further south, near the Vistula river, in a district where I was not engaged at the time it took place.

These marshes and lakes greatly assisted the Germans and probably saved them from the rout which they are supposed by some people to have sustained. I do not know of any instance where they were forced to evacuate such a defensive position as that I have described. In fact the marshes of East Prussia saved the country from a serious invasion, and certainly checked the Russian advance into the heart of the country. If heavy siege guns could have been brought up they might have effected something; but as it was, not even light field artillery could be moved over the ground in any quantity. The amount of rain which fell was quite abnormal, and was often almost incessant for days together. Then there would be some signs of a clear up; but long before more than the surface of the ground was dry it would begin to pour down again. I never saw so much mud in any other country, nor such deep, tenacious stuff. Even men sometimes stuck fast in it and had to be hauled out of quagmires with the aid of ropes. I have recorded that the Germans lost many guns owing to their sinking into it; some also were lost by the Russians, even when they were not under fire; and the destruction of horses through being smothered to death or by exhaustion was deplorable. In fact the mud sometimes troubled the Russians far more than the foe did. It prevented the commissariat and reserve ammunition waggons from coming up; but, on the whole, lying in it, and being subjected to a continuous downpour of rain, did not seem to adversely affect the health of the men. The field hospitals were always crowded by wounded, but the sick from disease were singularly few in number.

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Amongst other things about which there were rumours in our army was the destruction that airships and aeroplanes were causing. The Russians had aeroplanes; but they were not strong in this kind of military force, and we seldom saw one. The Germans, however, occasionally sent a few over our lines, and on the 5th October I saw one shot down. It swerved a good deal, and I expected to see it turn over and drop, but it came down slowly enough to prevent the airmen from sustaining much hurt. The "navigator" was one of the most irritable and arrogant rascals I ever met. He was very angry at his accident, and fumed and swore incessantly and had not the least fear of consequences before his eyes. He shook his fist in the faces of the Cossacks and officers who first came up to his wrecked machine, beat and kicked his unfortunate mechanic, and raved like a lunatic. Even his captors seemed to be in considerable awe of him. Some hours afterwards I saw this fellow eating a meal outside a tent. He was devouring the food like what he probably was—a human hog.

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Another astonishing trait in the German Army was the remarkable way in which it frequently recovered lost ground. The Battle of Suwalki, and the operations further south, had the effect of causing a general retirement of the enemy's line; and amongst other places they abandoned was Radom; but in a week or ten days they were back in this place, and had even pushed much nearer to Warsaw. Our scouts ascertained that they were in force along the Vistula from Ivangorod to Varko; and their Uhlan patrols were seen at the hamlet of Vistikar, near Gora, not twenty versts from Warsaw. Whether they ever got nearer to the ancient city I do not know, but for a time we all expected and feared that it would fall. Nobody believed that the old capital of Poland could long stand against an investment by our powerful and cunning foes.

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But, while recovering themselves in the south, the Germans did not, at this time, do so in the Suwalki district, or in those parts near the Spirding See where the recent severe fighting had taken place: Russian soldiers still remained on German soil.

The weather grew worse, and seriously affected most of our important operations. Gloom began to settle on the troops; especially when accounts of adversity to our forces in Galicia reached us. These generally came from German sources; but some of our own officers brought news that progress was being stopped by floods, and the enormous reinforcement the enemy had succeeded in bringing up. Often we did not know what to believe; the reports were so contradictory that it was evident one side or another was telling deliberate lies. A comical side was once or twice given to the matter, owing to German, Austrian and Russian "unofficial sources" giving diametrically opposite accounts of the same circumstances. Willing as we were to believe our own side to be the most truthful, it was not always possible to ignore the circumstantiality of our opponents. It became evident that all three sides were a little given to exaggeration—not to give it a harsher designation.

The dreadful weather was more than I could endure, and I was obliged to fall out. I was taken by rail to a convent hospital at Grodno, and there so well and carefully nursed by the sisters, with whom were associated many of the ladies of the town, that I quite recovered and was fit for service again in less than a week.

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I could not find my old regiment, however, and my adventures with the Russians might have terminated at this point had I not happened to run up against an officer with whom I had some acquaintance. Captain Shalkotoff belonged to the commissariat department; and as he was going south with a convoy he invited me to accompany him as far as Ostrolenka, his first destination; and I accepted his kind proposal.

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CHAPTER X

THE FIGHTING ON THE VISTULA IN THE MONTH OF OCTOBER, 1914

Shalkotoff had about eighty waggons and carts under his command, all loaded with provisions which had come from Vilna, where there was a magazine. He was travelling by march-route, the railway-lines being fully occupied by troop trains, and in the conveyance of wounded men and prisoners. Every night we camped in the mud by the roadside, unless buildings or houses were available, which was not often the case. For the Germans had destroyed so many of these that what were left were crowded by homeless people herded together in dreadful misery, starving, and possessed of nothing but what they stood in. We passed through some districts, however, in which a German had not been seen; and in others they had not been so brutal as the generality of their countrymen. Nor are all Germans equally cruel. At a place called Mirno, near Jedwabno, we met a band of 200 prisoners being marched to the railway-station at Setshutchin for conveyance into the interior. Several of them were officers, and one, a captain, expressed his disgust at the brutality of his countrymen. He said it came to him as a terrible revelation that Germans could be so cruel and wicked, and he was as much astonished at it as any person in the world. Others, of all ranks, at different times, expressed much the same opinion.

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Perhaps nothing hurt Russian feeling more than the desecration of their churches. The Germans too often evinced a bigotry and irreverence for things that most people consider sacred similar to that which disgraced our own Cromwellians three centuries ago. They stabled their horses in the churches, littered the floors of the sacred edifices with filth, and broke the images. Such conduct is deplorable; nothing can be more revolting than to hurt a people through its religion, whatever we may think of its bigotry and idolatry. Besides, the indomitable bravery of the Greek and Romish priesthood in this deplorable war must ever command the admiration of all right-thinking men; and this alone should have protected them from insult.

It is about 120 miles from Grodno to Ostrolenka, and it took us nine days to march this distance, so defective was the state of the roads. During this time we fared pretty sumptuously; for the drivers and officers helped themselves liberally to the provisions under their charge. In addition to the coarse biscuit, cheese, tea, sugar and coffee, which form the bulk of the Russian soldiers' daily food, there was salt pork, rancid butter, potatoes, and a number of hampers destined for officers whom they never reached. The broaching of such goods is indefensible, but it is pretty general in all armies, not even excepting the British: those who have been soldiers know what "old soldiers" are; and, no doubt, I ought to admit that I require a brushful of white-wash myself. For a dish of bacon, or a cup of wine, being placed in front of one, what is one to do but relieve the craving of nature? The only defence I can make is that we all do it, as circumstances occasion.

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At Ostrolenka we were ordered on to Pultusk; and here we found a division of infantry and another of Cossacks—about 14,000 men in all, the units being reduced by the ravages of war. Among the Cossacks was the celebrated 5th of the Don, with its woman colonel, who seemed to be not more than thirty years of age. She had adopted male costume, and rode astride like her troopers. She was a pleasant-faced woman, but not a beauty, in my opinion; and there was nothing fierce or commanding in her appearance. She was said to be of unflinching courage under any circumstances, and to be almost worshipped by her soldiers. So it may be surmised that her rule is gentle and just.

At Pultusk I had my first, and almost only, trouble with the people whom I was trying to serve. A fussy officer wanted to know, rather too minutely, who I was, and how the non-commissioned officer, Chouraski, came to be travelling with me. I had certificates, and Chouraski a permit, signed by a Staff Officer, and countersigned by General Rennenkampf himself; but it was a long time before the interfering colonel could be persuaded. He sent for a captain of the 40th Siberian regiment named Lofe who could speak English, and ultimately was persuaded to permit me to join the captain's company, and to retain Chouraski as a servant. I was given no position in the regiment, but simply served as a volunteer.

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The same night, the 14th October, we made a forced march to the railway, a distance, I computed, of at least twenty-four English miles. We arrived at a spot where there was no station, and found troops entraining and going off in the direction of Warsaw. There seemed to be miles of trains by the roadside, and we got into one at a level-crossing and immediately steamed away

south, as the others had done.

A drizzling rain was falling, the day was close, and a grey mist enveloped everything so that one could see nothing twenty yards beyond the side of the line. In two hours we arrived at Praga, a suburb of Warsaw, and found the line held strongly by infantry and field artillery. We heard that heavy fighting was going on beyond Milosna, and our train crawling on for another twenty miles, we could hear the sounds of the battle ourselves. We were ordered to alight by the side of the line, all the stations having been put into a state of defence and turned into small fortresses.

The Staff Officer who posted us happened to be a friend of Lofe's, and he told us that the Germans were making a strong effort to break through to the line for a distance of at least ninety versts; and he believed that fighting was going on at other points as far as Lublin. The troops actually posted on the line were reserves; the fighting was taking place at the passages of the Vistula sixteen versts away. [121]

During the night the fog was so thick that one could not see the man standing beside him. We bivouacked by the side of the line, which here was laid on perfectly level ground. The next morning the weather was no better; but when the rain began to fall faster the atmosphere cleared a little, and we were ordered to advance about six versts and dig trenches. We were engaged in this work all day, being assisted by 800 country people, half of whom were women, who displayed the utmost anxiety to help us in resisting a hated enemy, from whose hands many of them had received the deepest insult.

We saw nothing of the enemy, but heard the distant sound of battle; and some carts bore a few badly wounded men past us. We were engaged in the work of digging trenches and making emplacements for guns until the 20th, being assisted during this time by the peasantry: and fighting went on continuously at the front. I was anxious to see something of it, but loth to leave the side of Lofe, owing to the difficulty I had in making myself understood by strangers; and after my dispute with the officer at Pultusk I was a little nervous, being afraid I might be seized and sent away.

Lofe was a very amiable fellow and I got on well with him, as I did with all the Russians with whom I became well acquainted. Life in the trenches was not to our taste. We applied for permission to go down to the front to witness the fighting, but it was refused. So we had to remain where we were and elaborate our defences. How many hundreds of miles of wire we used in our entanglements I should not like to guess; but if the Germans had ever reached them, I think they would have left a good many dead in front of them. With the barbed wire "crow-nets," as we called them, we intermixed a great many staked pits, and other amiable devices for shortening the days of our enemies. [122]

The battle was clearly for the possession of Warsaw; and more than once rumours reached us that the foe had carried the city at the point of the bayonet; but I do not think they ever got within sight of any part of it, though many of their newspapers claim that they did, and even occupied its suburbs. The last-named claim was evidently false; but the place had a narrow escape of falling. The fight seems to have worn itself out; or the Germans fell back: for all was quiet on the 21st, though neither side had obtained a victory.

This was too frequently the sequence to a prolonged fight or series of fights. The opposing force seemed to get tired out, and a lull ensued, during which one would scarcely hear a stray rifle shot. On the 21st, however, some of our troops at the front captured a German band! It consisted of about forty musicians, though they said there had been eighty of them when they first came to the front. Asked to give us some music they played willingly enough, and very well. The Russian regiments have bands, but I heard and saw very little of them during this war; they seemed to have been sent to the rear to attend to wounded men. Some of the Siberian regiments, and the foot Cossacks, have dancing men who march at the head of the battalions, and dance, sing, and clash cymbals, when moving from place to place. [123]

It is hardly necessary to record that the Germans made desperate attempts to cross the river during the fighting referred to just now. I did not actually witness any of the fighting at this stage, but I know that it all failed. I was told that they tried to pontoon the stream at a place called Viegrod, abreast of Garvolin station. The pontoons were smashed to pieces, and several hundreds of the enemy drowned. Small detachments got over at various places, some in boats, others by means of flying bridges; but they were all destroyed or captured. They did not succeed in forcing any of the permanent bridges, which were defended by *têtes-de-pont*. The Russians claimed that they completely wiped out some of these detachments. I saw bodies lying together within very narrow spaces of ground; and I have no doubt that the peasantry avenged themselves by killing the wounded: and I know that the Russian infantry bayoneted every man of one detachment of about 300. Still a good many prisoners were taken, and sent by train to Warsaw.

The Germans used some aeroplanes for observation work; but on being fired at these machines went out of range and kept there. It would have been a great advantage to the Russians to have had some of these things; but that they had few, or none, in this part of the field, shows that aircraft cannot materially affect a foe who is without them. No doubt aeroplanes have done splendid work for the Allies, and inflicted serious losses on the enemy; but they do not often seem to be able to face an army in the field. [124]

It may give some idea of what is meant by "casualties" if I mention that about 40,000 recovered wounded rejoined the Russian Army while we were on the line of the Vistula. So a heavy list of

losses does not necessarily mean that a vast number of men are permanently disabled from taking part in their country's services. Recoveries, too, are very rapid when the men are attended by good surgeons and good nurses.

I obtained one glimpse of the enemy's position. Not a German was to be seen; but puffs of smoke showed where their guns were placed. Smokeless powder was used by both sides for their rifle cartridges; but not for artillery; or at any rate, it was not efficacious when fired from heavy guns.

Both sides entrenched themselves, according to reports, for a distance of more than 300 versts. Afterwards I heard that trenches and earthworks were made along the whole of the German and Austrian frontiers, a result of both sides finding it impossible to make any material headway into each other's territory. The battle degenerated into an artillery engagement. The Russians brought up some heavy guns of about 6-inch calibre, and a few that were a little larger, and with these bombarded the German positions. The enemy, on their part, were similarly provided; and so the see-saw went on—banging at each other without noticeable results. Generally speaking, an artillery duel is the tamest of all kinds of fighting from a spectator's point of view. The only time when it becomes a little lively is when a shell happens to drop just behind one. It usually causes a sudden start forward, or an Eastern position of adoration, which is by far the safest to assume. The wonderful "Jack Johnsons," of which I have heard and read so much, were not used by the Germans in this region, though the nickname seems to have been given to any large shell. The "Jack Johnsons," however, were huge shells which appeared to have weighed from 1,600 to 2,000 pounds each, when charged. It was useless waste to fire them against anything but forts, and I much doubt if the Germans used them for any other purpose. The guns, being howitzers, could fire about 100 of these before needing retubing: so the shooting-power of the huge weapons was limited. Every shot must have cost about £200, and it is not likely that the Germans would waste them by shooting at trenches and small parties, where the effect would be comparatively of little moment. Very high explosives were used by the Germans, and some of their projectiles made very large holes in the ground.

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Watching the firing, I could not perceive that ours was doing much harm; while that of the enemy certainly was not. Occasionally a few yards of our trenches was blown in, and a man or two destroyed; but the impression left on my mind was that trench warfare would go on for ever, unless some more effective force than mere artillery fire were brought to bear on an army so protected: and shelling a position is a very expensive mode of warfare. I afterwards saw that to destroy a hundred yards of trench cost 4,000 or 5,000 shells; and even then the defending force nearly always contrived to make good a retreat to a second, or third, line of defence. To shell an enemy out of a good defensive position is, I believe, an impossibility; therefore permanent fortresses should be constructed on the lines of a system of trenches, the guns being placed in Moncrieff pits or other specially constructed emplacements. I am quite convinced that unless guns are hidden, their destruction is assured. Modern gunfire is as accurate as that of rifle-shooting: it will, therefore, easily hit any mark which the gunners can locate.

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Everybody knows that patience is a virtue, and that it generally obtains a reward. Our turn came. The 40th Siberians, better known to the men by an unpronounceable name, which, never having seen it in print, I cannot pretend to spell, were ordered to cross the Vistula on the morning of the 20th October.

I expected that there would have been some fighting; but there was not. The rain was falling in a steady downpour; and we could not see the opposite bank of the river. Perhaps the wet damped the ardour of the Germans. Certainly I should think that the autumn and winter of 1914-15 was the wettest ever known. The right bank of the river was bad enough, but the left was the softest marsh we had so far experienced. No wonder the Germans could no longer make much resistance: their trenches were full of water. I slipped into one, and thought I was going to be drowned. Fortunately for me a couple of the men stopped to assist me; for there was six or seven feet of water in the wretched trench. Many of our men met with similar accidents, and I am not sure that some of them did not lose their lives. I saw the bodies of Germans floating in their ditches, but these may have been men killed previously to the flooding.

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It was entirely an infantry fight. We had crossed the river on rafts towed by boats, and could bring no guns; while those of the enemy which could be moved they were anxiously striving to save, and did not stop to fire. Many of their heavy guns they destroyed to render them useless to us, but a number of machine-guns were brought into action on each side.

For many miles the left bank of the Vistula is a deep morass, with extensive woods, and a few scattered houses and hamlets. The inhabitants of these were all gone, fled or murdered; and the Germans had pierced the walls of their homes with loop-holes, and piled the furniture, carts and farm implements together to form barricades. They failed, however, to stop our advance. Position after position was carried, sometimes by a withering rifle-fire, sometimes at the point of the bayonet. Brave as he is, the German soldier is not ashamed to plead abjectly for his life when he is driven into a corner. I saw men clinging to the bayonets that were about to terminate their existences; and many actually screamed for mercy. It was not much use making such petitions; the women and old men who had been driven in, leaving a toll of murdered behind, had stories to tell which inflamed the fiercest passions of the soldiers. I contrived to save the lives of one or two of these wretched Germans; but my own safety required that I should not interfere too strenuously; and though, I hope, I should not fear to give my life in a just cause, or to save a just person, I was not prepared to throw it away on behalf of ravishers and child-stabbers.

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In this fight I crossed swords with a German officer of the 2/94th regiment (probably Landwehr),

a portly gentleman who thought fit to finish the encounter by an unconditional surrender. He took advantage of my remissness in watching him, and tried to escape back to his own men. Some of our fellows noticed this, and—well, he had not time to suffer much. Dishonourable acts, and breaches of word, were very common amongst the Germans; but it often got severely punished.

The enemy suffered most, I heard, at places called Sandomir and Kozyniece. The latter place is close to Ivangorod, which was, for some days, our headquarters, and the centre of our line. Further north, near Bloni, and Vishgo, and at Novogeorgevsk, they suffered more severely, and gave way sooner. By the evening of the 21st they were retiring at many places along the entire line; but at some spots they stood firm with remarkable tenacity, and suffered themselves to be almost surrounded. [129]

We passed the night in a hamlet of a dozen houses which had been defended by a company of jagers (riflemen). Only forty-eight of them survived our attack with the bayonet; and these we captured. They slept in the same rooms with their captors, played cards with them, and sang jovial-sounding songs, apparently quite unmoved by the fact that 120 dead bodies of their comrades lay in the gardens and courtyards outside. Both the Germans and Russians are great card-players and inveterate gamblers.

In the morning, before it was daylight, we made our prisoners dig graves and bury the dead—129 of theirs, sixty-two of ours: we then sent them to the rear under an escort, while we advanced towards Chinlin, and began skirmishing with the enemy, who were only 600 or 700 yards in front of us.

Both sides took shelter behind pine-trees; and very little execution was done, though the firing went on nearly all day. At last the Germans took post in a thick wood, and it became clear they had been playing with us all these hours while their sappers placed this copse in a state of defence. The discovery was rather humiliating; but these things occur in war, and it was not the only occasion on which our cunning opponents "came the old soldier" over their denser, slow-thinking foes. But in spite of their slyness they were beaten. Some Russian battalions got behind the wood, and its defenders were compelled to run for their lives. They ran very well, but most of them were captured; and we passed the second night in the nice, nest-like little hovels they had prepared for their own accommodation. [130]

The German dearly loves his comfort and good cheer. They never seemed to be short of food, and we took carts laden with wine that had been made in France and must have been sent hither at much trouble and expense only to find its way down Russian throats in spite of the Czar's teetotal proclamation. I think the German troops must be taught to make bivouacks and huts, they are such adepts at the work; and render their dens so comfortable by a hundred little devices that show they have previously studied the art of adapting everything to their own welfare and ease. Needless to say, the plunder of houses and cottages was utilized for furnishing these temporary abodes.

There was now no doubt that the Germans were retreating; but they were doing so in that leisurely way which indicated that their retirement was anything but a rout; and I foresaw that it would not be long before they turned again with renewed ferocity. I do not think that the troops we had been opposed to were some of the best that Germany could put in the field. In some battalions there did not appear to be a man under forty years of age: in others they were all boys: and these last named were amongst the best fighters. I passed over ground strewn with the dead of one of these battalions, and not a lad of them seemed to be much over twenty years; some were not more than sixteen or seventeen. [131]

Many stories were brought to us of what had taken place in other districts. All agreed that the Germans had not succeeded in entering Warsaw; but it was reported that a fleet of aeroplanes had sailed over the city and dropped bombs. Only private houses had been wrecked; not much damage done, and the "hostile aircraft" had soon been driven away. As nothing was said about the bringing down of any of these aeroplanes, I felt pretty sure that they had all escaped the Russian fire. The Germans had not left much for them to destroy in their retreat; and I never learned from whence they had come, or whither they went when they had completed their fell work. We saw nothing of them in our district.

On the 23rd we still continued to follow the enemy, keeping in touch with them, and exchanging shots. About the middle of the day we were joined by a large force of artillery and cavalry. Where these troops came from I cannot tell. They were a welcome reinforcement; but as we were moving through a wooded country they could not make much impression on the enemy, except when the latter attempted to make a stand. The trees were mostly pines, and the ground beneath them free of undergrowth; and the destruction of them, after a few hours' cannonade, was enormous. Whole forests looked as if they had been blighted, or blasted by lightning.

The German jagers often took post in the trees, as affording a favourable place for marksmanship; but when our gunners discovered them we had an extraordinary sight as a small crowd of arms and legs came tumbling through the air in every imaginable position. Those of the men who were not killed by the shrapnel usually lost their lives by the shock of the fall. Sometimes big trees were snapped clean in two when the shell had made a direct hit before bursting. More generally the branches were ripped to shreds by the flying shower of bullets. I saw the dead body of one rifleman lodged amongst the boughs of a large pine. He must have been killed instantly, for he was still clasping his rifle in his hands. [132]

There were some painful scenes. We came across a fine, handsome young fellow raving over the body of another boy. It was ascertained that they were brothers, and, "What will mother do? This will kill her," was all he could say. I never saw a man more grief-stricken. A few hours afterwards we found a man shot through the body. Blood was bubbling from his mouth and nose, and he was dying fast; but he had struggled to his knees, and leaning against a tree-trunk was praying—not for himself, but for his wife and four little children. By chance I discovered that this man could speak English. He had been a clerk in Liverpool. He was distressingly anxious about his family, and begged we would not destroy a letter addressed to his wife which he had in his pocket. "For," he said, "I knew I should not come through this"—the war, I suppose, he meant.

I assured him that nothing found upon him should be disturbed, and that the letter should be sent to the German commander on the first opportunity. We did what we could to relieve his suffering, and sent a man back for the Red Cross men who were following behind; but the poor fellow died before they arrived. War is a curse.

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The rain ceased only for a few hours at a time. It generally commenced to fall as evening came on, and continued to pour down steadily the greater part of the night. Sometimes it rained night and day without cessation, and the thickest overcoats became saturated with wet. I made a kind of cloak from the remains of a rick-cloth which I found in the outhouse of a burnt farm; and this was a great protection.

The country we were passing through was deserted. The Polish peasantry are very poor, and what would become of the miserable people, who, like the Irish of a former day, depended on their pigs, fowls and potato-crops, it was painful to think. We supposed they had fled to the towns; but every now and then we came across the bodies of some of them, and it is certain that hundreds had been wantonly destroyed by their cruel enemies.

For many miles we marched through a flooded country, and passed the Pilica River by means of a bridge which was partly under water, the reason, perhaps, that the Prussians missed it. We were guided to it by an old peasant who had been in hiding; but the banks of the river were quite hidden under water, and on this account many of our men, as well as Germans, floundered into it and were drowned. Horses and waggons were swept away, and some guns captured. Our own guns were forced to go higher up the stream and were, I believe, passed over a pontoon bridge. Hundreds of Cossacks swam their horses across, and gathered up some prisoners. They sent a far greater number to their long account, and seized an immense booty in food, stores, etc. For the Germans always stripped the country they passed through of everything that was worth carrying away. That which was too cumbersome to be moved they destroyed.

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I never actually heard who commanded the Germans, or our own force. At one time rumour asserted that the Kaiser himself was chief of our enemies, and was personally directing their movements. When this surmise exploded, we were repeatedly told that the Crown Prince was the Commander-in-Chief. All that was known with certainty was that we were immediately opposed, for a week at least, by a divisional commander named Swartzenberg. On our own side Major Beke was the battalion commander under whom I served. He was killed soon after we crossed the Vistula, and was succeeded by an officer who was wounded and sent to the rear on the same day he was appointed. His successor only held the command two days when he was blinded by a piece of wood driven into his face by the explosion of a shell. Krischelcamsk then became our leader. Colonel Tunreshka was the regimental commandant. He disappeared the night after we crossed the Pilica. The general opinion was that he was drowned in the river; but he may have been taken prisoner.

One reason of the unusually rapid retreat of the Germans on this occasion was that they had expended nearly all their ammunition, and were unable to bring up more on account of the dreadful state of the country—knee-deep in mud, and covered with water. It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good; and the rain, which hampered the Russian on one hand, helped to save Warsaw on the other.

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We reached Skyermevice on the 24th. It is a town of some size, and the people had not abandoned it. They crowded the streets to see us pass through, and loudly cheered us. Flags sprang from somewhere, and decorated all the windows and shop doors; and the women brought us food and drink, which had been hid away. The inhabitants of the town had suffered a good deal, and had been compelled, as usual when the Germans occupied a place, to pay a heavy war-tax, or fine. A number of the principal men had been dragged away as hostages; I never learned their fate. Everywhere the Germans behaved like a band of brigands and murderers. One instance of their paltry-mindedness may be recorded. At a house where Captain Lofe and I spent the night, and from which some billeted Germans had run away on our approach, these miserable creatures had killed the little girl's canary, and she was inconsolable for the loss of her pet. It was not the only occasion on which birds, cats and pet dogs were wantonly and cruelly destroyed to vex their owners.

On the 25th while we were marching towards Lowvitz we encountered a Prussian battalion which had been driven towards us by three sotnias of Cossacks. They could not escape, and we charged them with the bayonet. I must give them the credit due to them: on this occasion the Germans fought well and determinedly. But our men had become very expert in the use of the bayonet, and when the enemy had lost half their number the remainder broke and fled. The Cossacks were waiting for them, and I do not think that any of them escaped. No prisoners were taken: and this often happened during the campaign. Both sides were equally guilty of this cruelty—if cruelty it was. But really the Germans were so fiendishly brutal, that, as I have previously said, I think

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reprisals were justifiably resorted to. Be this so or not, and whatever may be thought of the act, it is certain that, on many occasions, bodies of both Germans and Russians were exterminated when they had the mischance to become isolated and surrounded.

There was a great deal of bayonet work during this campaign. It is a favourite weapon of the Russians; and proportionately disliked by the Germans. The bayonet of the Russian soldier is never unfixed, except for cleaning purposes. He marches with it, eats, works and sleeps with it always ready for instant action. The German soldier is not so particular; and I saw more dirty weapons amongst our prisoners than I ever thought existed in any army in the world. Wounds from German bayonets are peculiarly fatal, as the backs of them are serrated to enable them to be used as cutting implements. For this reason the soldier often has great difficulty in withdrawing his weapon after stabbing a victim: and we found that in some cases, where the point of the bayonet was forced through the body and embedded in the backbone, it had been unfixed and left sticking in the wound.

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As we approached the Prussian frontier the German resistance became sterner, and they made more frequent attempts to rally. As I have said, their retreat never assumed the character of a rout—very far from it. Only straggling or isolated parties ever fell into disorder. Their retirement was steady and orderly as far as their military movements were concerned; but in the towns and villages they behaved like beasts. We had plenty of evidence that nearly all their junior officers, and thousands of their men, never lost an opportunity of getting drunk. The Kaiser was said to be a teetotaler: the Crown Prince was often as drunk as a lord—a German lord; and it is said that when in this condition he beat his wife so badly that she left the palace, and took refuge in the house of a nobleman. The story was told on excellent authority; otherwise I should not run the risk of being thought a gossip-monger by repeating it. I have, myself, seen the man in the company of courtesans; and, apparently, under the influence of drink.

Though the Germans made attempts to beat back our pursuit, and to some extent checked it, they could not altogether stop it; and I think the gradual slackening of our endeavours to beat them quite out of Poland was the outcome of the men's exhaustion.

The country was in a terrible state. The Germans had no time or opportunity to bury many of their dead, and the whole district, for hundreds of miles, was strewn with the bodies of men and horses, sometimes half covered by water, often floating in it. Though the weather was changing, and becoming colder, especially at night-time, portions of the days were hot, close, or muggy. Consequently the corpses soon began to decay, and the whole land stank revoltingly; and the men kept their pipes constantly alight to counteract the offensiveness. Owing to the state of the ground it was scarcely possible to bury many of these bodies, and they were left to rot away where they lay, or floated. Our own dead were conveyed to the cemeteries and burying-grounds; but the people would not tolerate the desecrating Germans in "God's acre." Amongst the enemy's dead were some Austrians, showing that the troops of their nation had been engaged in this region.

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On the afternoon of the 26th we came to a standstill near the River Warta. The headquarters of the 40th were at a small village the name of which I never clearly heard. Very few people were left in it; but others arrived when they heard that it was in our hands. All those who had most to fear from the enemy (that is, all those who possessed a rouble's worth of property) had been in hiding in the woods, where some of them had been living in underground burrows wherever they could find a spot dry enough to construct them in.

Of the 40th not 800 effectives remained; and as the regiment had commenced the war with a strength of 4,000 men, it will be seen how terribly it had suffered. I heard the band of the regiment for the first time in our bivouac on the 26th. It consisted of twenty-seven musicians: three months previously there had been eighty of them. They had been under fire many times, collecting and assisting the wounded, the chief work of the bandsmen during fighting. The Russian bands of music, like the Prussian, are much stronger than ours, and are formed on German lines, as far as numbers and instruments are concerned. I cannot give much praise to their style of playing.

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RUSSIAN OFFICERS NOTING MOVES OF THE ENEMY

On the 27th and 28th the enemy appeared to be massing on our front, and the regiment was ordered to fall back towards Lodz. We were halted again on the 29th, and joined by the Preobujensky regiment, at nearly full strength, and the Troizki rifle battalion. With them came a battery of eight field guns, which had been got through the marshes in our rear.

It would seem that our regiment, and a body of Cossacks, had been pushed too far to the front, and had to be drawn back. As far as I could understand the position, the Russian troops formed a crescent with the horns at, or near, Radom and Lowicz. Beyond these points the lines continued for hundreds of versts, right and left, but were, more or less, thrown back. It was very difficult to learn the exact position, because the enemy so frequently regained the ground he had lost only a few hours previously. The Russians showed great bravery and considerable dash; but they did not carry things before them quite so rapidly or decisively as they sometimes claimed to have done. In the fighting described in these October days, the Germans got very much the worst of it. I am not sure that it would be safe to say much more than this. Their losses were heavy, and their retreat beyond a doubt; but it is ridiculous to talk of routs, as some newspapers seem to have done. I did not see these accounts until after my return to England; and I have not read very many of them. I am afraid a good deal of error was fallen into by a too ready acceptance of first accounts.

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I would also note that owing to the immense extension of the fronts of the two armies, a victory in one place was often quite independent of operations going on at a distance on either flank, and often led to a dangerous advance, exposing the wings of the victorious force: and I am surprised that neither side seems to have, on any occasion, taken advantage of these too rapid advances and pursuits.

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CHAPTER XI

THE RETREAT OF THE GERMANS FROM THE VISTULA

As is usual after severe fighting, a lull supervened; and we remained quiet in camp for some days. "Camp," I say. It was almost the first time since I had been with the Russian Army that I had slept in a tent; but the time was coming when men could no longer spend night after night bivouacked in the open air. Already the weather was becoming chilly, and often very cold after sunset. There was less rain; but it still fell long and steadily at intervals, and sometimes for a whole day without a break.

About 1,900 recruits joined our regiment; and many other units had their terrible losses made good; indeed, I heard that between 600,000 and 700,000 reservists and others joined the armies on the German and Austrian frontiers; and yet they were not brought up to their full establishments; a telling revelation of the fearful losses that had been sustained; although according to Prussian accounts, they had taken nearly a quarter of a million of prisoners from us. I am satisfied that they captured a good many: as we also had done.

November came upon us in a typical way—damp and foggy, so that it was impossible to see the face of the country. As surprises are peculiarly liable to be attempted in such weather, we were much harassed by outpost work; at least five times the usual number of men being engaged on this duty. Fortunately we had a large body of Cossacks; and these rascals are never surprised; and no kind of experience comes amiss to them, so long as they have a chance of plunder and rapine. That is the truth, and it may as well be told. During the November fogs they caught a good many German patrols, who were attempting to play the game of hide-and-seek; and very few prisoners were made. Many of the Russian troops were becoming fierce-tempered; and none more so than the Cossacks. One of these men displayed a bag full of watches and rings which he had taken from slain Prussian officers. He was reported to have slain more than fifty of the enemy with his own sword and lance; and he was notorious for spearing wounded men as he rode over the battlefield, such crimes, and plundering, not being punished as they are in most armies—the German excepted, where murder and theft are rewarded with iron crosses, and commendation from commanding officers. But these Cossacks are very useful fellows; they fairly frightened our enemies; and in this way probably saved us from a good deal of trouble and loss: and they certainly always hampered the movements of the foe much more than regular cavalry could have done. Probably they sometimes saved us from disaster.

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For it leaked out that, in our recent advance to the Warta, we actually had a large force of Germans on our rear: and it is more than likely that the Cossacks had the principal share in driving them back from several impending attacks, of which we knew nothing at the time; and which would probably have ended in our making the acquaintanceship of a Prussian prison; or a still narrower place of confinement.

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The rain ceased for a time, and both sides continued to entrench themselves, the Germans in front of us being not more than a mile distant, with their advanced posts much closer. They had contrived to get up heavy guns; and there was a good deal of artillery shooting every day, which blew in trenches, destroyed wire-entanglements, and did lots of other damage, but did not kill many men. Sometimes an enormous shell blew a poor fellow to pieces, sometimes wiped out half-a-dozen at once; but I do not think we lost more than a score a day all along the line. The freaks played by shells were sometimes extraordinary. One went just over the head of an officer, killed a boy who was standing behind him, went over the head of another man, and then sprang high into the air before exploding. It is as impossible to give a probable explanation of such strange action, as it is to say why a fragment of shell bursting fifty yards away should kill three men, while one exploding right in the midst of a group of twenty gunners should leave them all unscathed. It is the law of chance—if chance has laws.

I should also mention (though I did not learn the circumstances until some time afterwards) that the Germans had fortified several villages and towns on the left bank of the Vistula, with first, second and third lines of defence; and that the Russians, unable to take these in their general advance, had masked them, and left them on their rear. The garrisons could not have been strong enough to take advantage of this circumstance; but it does not seem to be so dangerous to leave fortresses behind in these latter days of the strange development of war, as it formerly was.

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Having little to do we amused ourselves, and one another, by repeating, and studying, the various rumours and bits of news we heard. Russian newspapers, of course, and a good many German ones, reached our trenches; and a few French publications; but I never saw an English paper of any kind. Those we obtained were generally illustrated; but the pictures, as far as they related to the Russian seat of war, were mere inventions; and I am afraid the same remark must be made with regard to the news; though some of the papers had a fairly good notion of the general progress of events. It was when they came to details that their novelists got to work.

The unimpeachable items of news that were of most interest to us were that the Grand Duke Nicolas was directing the operations against Przemyśl, and that the fall of that important place was imminent. It seems, however, that the celebrated fortress proved a tougher nut to crack than it was generally thought it would be. Personally, I am of opinion that the Russians went the wrong way to work in invading Austria; and Silesia, not Galicia, should have been their first objective. I need not enter into details, or reasons, here, because I am at variance with most critics on the conduct of the whole war. There are people who would think it presumptuous on my part to presume to think differently from the conductors of the Russian, French and English forces: but I do think differently from them: and whatever the ultimate issues of this gigantic war, the most titanic the world has seen, I do not hesitate to say that not one of the contending parties has produced a really great General—a Napoleon, or a Moltke. At the moment of writing this paragraph the war has lasted nine months; and during that time it has simply been a game of see-saw, a swaying backwards and forwards, without one decisive, or even very important, action on any side. The war might easily have been ended by this time: if it is allowed to degenerate into a war of trenches it will end when the Germans have spent all their money, and not sooner.

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On the 5th November we suddenly received orders to occupy again the line of the Warta. We advanced by forced marches, finding that the Germans had abandoned their trenches during the night; and they were reported by our Cossacks to be drawing off in the direction of Kutno, evidently with the intention of falling back on Thorn, distant about four marches.

The next day we learned that there had been sharp fighting on the Prussian frontier near the often-mentioned town of Kalisz; and that the Russian troops had entered German territory. They were also said to have invaded Prussia in the north, at Virballen; not far from which place I had seen some heavy fighting, as narrated in a previous chapter. What I subsequently saw and heard

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led me to entertain some uncertainty as to the extent and actuality of these important claims. I do not know, but I think it is probable, that these actions were little more than Cossack raids. Villages and railway-stations were burnt, and the lines destroyed in places. The results were not permanent, and it seems likely that the Germans gave ground for the time, because they thought it necessary to withdraw at least three corps to put against their French and British opponents.

There must be considerable monotony in describing such a war as this I am treating of. To a great extent land-fighting, like naval encounters, has lost its picturesqueness, and has become little more than a disgusting slaughter. A good deal of the action is similar to the fighting of rats in a ditch. Trench warfare is horrible, with its villainous grenades and bombs, which are quite different from these devices in former days, and are no better than tools in the hands of a butcher. It is useless to argue that a bomb is a bomb, and that it cannot matter whether a man is blown to pieces by one of the ancient, or one of the modern, type. It does matter a good deal—to the survivors, at any rate. The effect of modern shell-fire is hellish, its destructiveness is so great, its effects on its victims so awful, compared with anything of the kind that was formerly in vogue. Where one man died formerly from artillery fire, 500 go down now; and nearly all of them are mutilated most horribly.

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The advance of the Russians seems to have shown the Germans that they made a mistake in withdrawing troops from their Eastern frontiers. They came rushing back to Poland from somewhere, either France and Belgium, or the interior of Germany. On the 8th November they were still in great force to the north of the Warta; and our cavalry reported that they were receiving strong reinforcements via Bromberg and Thorn. Afterwards I found that this information was correct in most of its details; but it must be remembered that I laboured in great disadvantage and difficulties, especially in obtaining information from places far distant from the spot where I happened to be at any given time. I frequently applied for permission to go on scouting parties, or to join the Cossacks in their raids; but this was not often given to me, or very willingly conceded on the few occasions when I was successful in obtaining it. I cannot tell why. The very few newspaper correspondents I met with did not seem to have much more liberty of action than I had: and when they learned that I was not a correspondent they gave me but scant aid, if any at all.

I did not come much in contact with the commanding officers of my division, and was unfortunate in the fact that many of those that I became most friendly with were speedily killed, or wounded and sent back. At this time an officer named Martel was in temporary command of the division, Major-General Alexis Sporowsky having been taken prisoner, and his immediate successor killed. General Martel was one of the best officers I served under, and he willingly gave me permission to join a cavalry reconnaissance in force which was made by four dragoon and hussar regiments, and six sotnias of Cossacks.

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We proceeded in the direction of Choczi, and met the enemy about sixteen versts west of that town, which is situated on the frontier line. They consisted of two regiments of cuirassiers (without their cuirasses) and two of Uhlans. None of these regiments were of the same numerical strength as ours. I put the German force at 1,800 men, and six light guns. The Russians had 3,000, but no guns: and soon after we came into action we discovered that the enemy was covering a battalion of jagers (riflemen): so really they were much the stronger party.

The Cossacks spread themselves out like a fan, a movement which is as old as the force itself, and was used with great effect against the troops of Napoleon Buonaparte in 1812. They then rushed in on the jagers, and, though suffering severely, occupied the attention of those men, while we tackled the dragoons and the guns. The latter did not do so very much execution, but the cuirassiers, big, heavy men, broke through our dragoons, who are classed as light cavalry. The Germans, however, are not good swordsmen, as I have previously stated, and while they were in some disorder, occasioned by the shock of their first charge, our hussars got amongst them and sabred them right and left in fine style. I can say that the edge of the sword was mostly used, not the point: while the Germans did use the point most, a mistake in cavalry actions, as it often leads to the trooper breaking his weapon, or losing it through being unable to withdraw it after stabbing an enemy; besides, a "point" is easily parried, and is intended to be mostly used against men lying on the ground, or against infantry.

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The Uhlans remained in support of the guns, another mistake of theirs: for before they could come to the rescue of the cuirassiers our dragoons had rallied, and met them in a charge that badly routed them. They fled right off the field, leaving behind about 200 of their number in killed, wounded and prisoners. The Cossacks were equally successful. They nearly annihilated the jagers, and the six guns fell into our hands. The cuirassiers, too, were nearly all destroyed: for on account of their weight they could not escape from our light horsemen; the Cossacks, in particular, showing them no mercy. Man for man the German cavalry are inferior to the Russian troopers, chiefly because they are bad swordsmen, and are lacking of that enterprise and dash which are essential to the making of good troopers.

The guns could not be taken with us, and we were afraid to send them to the rear lest they should be recaptured: so they were destroyed by smashing the breech-blocks and exploding charges of gun-cotton in the muzzles. The caissons, also, were blown up.

The remnant of the enemy were pursued until our horses were too much exhausted to follow them further, which was not until we had crossed the German border. Those of the jagers who were not destroyed surrendered as prisoners; but most of them afterwards escaped. Altogether this was a brilliant affair. It cost the enemy more than 1,000 men; with a loss on our side of

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between 300 and 400. We lost 150 horses, but we captured 400 of those of the enemy, without counting the artillery draught teams. We rode some distance into Germany, giving the people a cruel lesson in war in retaliation of the wickedness of their own fiendish troops. I was sorry for them: but really I do not see how the sin of warfare is to be stamped out, unless we make it so dreadful that the people of a land will no longer tolerate it—the policy, I believe, of one of their own hard-hearted statesmen: and I imagine the people of East Prussia will not be anxious to see the Cossacks again. They came upon the miserable people fresh from sights they ought never to have seen, and fierce with an anger that ought not to have been provoked. Those that sow the wind reap the whirlwind.

On the 9th and 10th we were in contact with a weak force of the enemy's infantry, supported by two or three batteries and some remnants of cavalry regiments. The batteries had been a good deal knocked about, and had not their full complement of guns, unless two batteries were split up into three, for the purpose of deceiving us. As they did not fire we guessed they had no ammunition left. Skirmishing went on, but was productive of no material results. Some prisoners who fell into our hands were without boots, and had been marching with bare feet: the uniforms of others were very ragged. But on the 11th we were opposed by fresh troops, well clothed, and evidently well fed; and it became clear that reinforcements were arriving with food and supplies. Such a force of artillery opened fire on us that we were compelled to fall back rather hastily, and we took advantage of the smoke of some burning houses to cover our retreat. As we passed near these houses some civilians shot at us with fowling-pieces from the windows of a large building, and blinded a Cossack. His comrades dismounted, stormed the house, and hanged the men to telegraph-posts. There was a painful scene when their women interfered to prevent the execution; and one man fought desperately for his life; while the screaming of children added to the horror of the surroundings. Only the men were punished: it was one of the dreadful, but necessary, acts of war. No troops in the world would tolerate to be fired on under such circumstances. The Cossack died a lingering death.

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We drew out of range of the infantry with slight loss; some of our men, who had their horses killed, running by the side of their comrades, and occasionally, in moments of great danger, riding behind them; but most of these men were ultimately taken prisoners. Two squadrons of the enemy's hussars had the temerity to charge our rear-guard. The Cossacks made sad work of them; especially as they thought they could not be burdened with prisoners during their retreat. Some three or four of these hussars and their horses were knocked over by a shell from one of their own guns—I presume accidentally.

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When we had got out of range of gun and rifle we retired more slowly, meeting hundreds of people fleeing towards the interior of the country, evidently in fear of a general invasion by the Russians. They were driving all sorts of conveyances, from motors to dog-carts: the latter kind of vehicle, illegal in England, being very common in Russia and Germany; and, I think, in all Continental countries. These people were carrying what goods they thought they could save; but some of them got overhauled by the Cossacks, and would have done better to have remained at home, where, generally, they were not much interfered with.

Before we got back to the Warta we were joined by some more Cossacks, and other cavalry, who had been reconnoitring in the direction of Poweedtz and Piotrikow: and I may here say generally that I obtained pretty clear information that the Russians nowhere penetrated German territory more than from ten to twenty, or at most twenty-five, versts. Sorry I am that I cannot make a better report. I saw clearly enough that a revulsion, if not a reverse, was impending. Where the enemy's troops came from I cannot always certainly tell; but come they did. Probably a strong contingent was sent from Belgium and North-West France; and still more probably the bulk of the reinforcements were newly embodied troops. It must be remembered that nearly every man in Germany is a well-trained soldier; therefore it is easy to raise new armies from the civilian element.

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Unfortunately, at this interesting moment I was put out of action for a month. On the morning of the 16th November I was struck in the back by a piece of shell fired at our position on the Warta, and was sent into hospital at Warsaw. I was much vexed at the accident; but as I could not stand, a temporary absence from the front was inevitable.

At the time I was incapacitated the Germans had at least partially reoccupied the country west of the Warta, though not, perhaps, in force. We were not there in any great numbers ourselves, and kept a position further to the north than formerly. Both sides were again entrenching themselves.

My life in the hospital was a very monotonous one, as I could not maintain a conversation with anybody. About 300 badly wounded men lay in a building which seemed to have been a school, or public institution. There were only three or four doctors and about twenty attendants to look after this lot, and the nurses seemed to be nuns. They were most kind and attentive, but too few in number, as nearly all the cases were those of desperately injured men, an average of nine or ten dying every day. Their beds were immediately occupied by fresh arrivals, probably brought from temporary resting-places. The sights and sounds were of the most depressing description, especially when relatives or friends were present to receive the last sighs of expiring men.

My servant Chouraski was not with me when I was struck down, and possibly did not know what had become of me, or whether I was killed or taken prisoner. I was not taken back to my billet, eight versts from the spot where I was hurt, but was sent on at once to Warsaw in an ambulance. I never saw Chouraski again, or heard what had become of him: indeed, I met very few old friends when I returned to the front.

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Semi-starvation, and a strenuous life in the open air, are good preparations for hard knocks. No bones being broken, nor other serious hurts incurred, my wounds healed rapidly; and in three weeks I could get up and lend a hand to less fortunate comrades. By this time I could speak a few words of Russian, sufficient to make my wants known; and the medical men spoke French. The nuns, however, did not seem to be so well educated as their class usually is in other countries.

However, I could make it understood that I wished to be discharged at the earliest possible moment, and in spite of the persuasions of the doctors, I left on the 18th December, having obtained a permit from the commandant to return to the front. I was still rather weak, and was disappointed in my endeavours to obtain a horse; but had very little money left. In the first instance I went, with twenty other recovered wounded, belonging to a dozen different corps, to Lovicz, there to await orders.

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CHAPTER XII

AN INFANTRY RECONNAISSANCE

Once more I must refer to Germany's railways. A line runs parallel with the entire borderland at an average distance of about twenty versts—that is, one day's march for an army. This parallel line is connected with a highly elaborated railway system, extending to every part of the German Empire: and there are scores of short lines, running to towns on the actual frontier, where they terminate; with the very few exceptions where they run on into Russia. Of course, these short lines have a commercial importance; but their real value to Germany is that they permit a fighting battle-line to be rapidly reinforced at many points simultaneously. The Russians never successfully passed this parallel border railway: that is, they never held it in force, and for a considerable distance. It had, for Germany, a precisely similar value as a defensive line that the Vistula had for Warsaw and the interior of Russia. The railway-line stopped the Russian advance, as the Vistula did that of the Germans, yet in different ways. The actual railway could not stop the Russians; but the power of concentration it gave her opponents did. On the other hand, the River Vistula did stop the Germans. They could not force it, strongly held as it was by the Muscovite troops and their heavy artillery. The contributory streams, with their deep, steep banks, also hindered the attack, and greatly assisted the defence.

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When I reached Lovicz I found the state of affairs much what it had been two months previously, when the Russians were defending the course of the great river against the Germans entrenched on the ground between it and the Pilica. What extent of country was now reoccupied by the enemy I had no means of learning with much exactitude; but it was certain that they were again on the left bank of the Vistula, on the Pilica: and were renewing their determined efforts to reach Warsaw. Lovicz was threatened; but as this place is a railway junction, and of great importance to Russia, preparations were in progress to defend the place as long as possible.

I was in something of a predicament. At Lovicz I could find nobody who knew me. The 40th Siberian regiment was said to be now in front of Przemyśl; and the Cossacks with whom I had been most frequently in contact were departed, nobody knew whither. I could not see my way to trying to rejoin the 40th; but it was necessary that I should have some sort of official recognition, as it was contrary to regulation to have loiterers about camp, to say nothing of the danger one would run of being thought a spy and being dealt with accordingly. My friends, the Cossacks, would probably put a wrong interpretation upon my inability to give prompt and clear answers in their mother-tongue; and I should have a similar difficulty with any officer who should happen to interrogate me, besides running the risk of trouble with any civil officials I might chance to meet.

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So I began to look about me. I had papers, testimonials and a permit. How could I utilize these?

Among the comrades with whom I had returned to the front was an officer of the Tomski regiment. I applied to him, and he introduced me to a Staff Captain named Muller. Muller, as we all know, is a very common German name; but many Russians are of German stock. Muller, in spite of his name, was a thorough Russian: and he stated my case to another Staff Officer, Colonel Simmelchok, who proposed that I should apply for recognition as a newspaper correspondent. The difficulty was that I could not name any paper to which I was a contributor, or potential contributor. Finally, the General commanding the troops at Lovicz was applied to. Having expressed the opinion that I had better go home, he refused to give me permission to join any Russian corps, and said that if I remained at headquarters I must do so at my own risk. In view of the excellent recommendations which I possessed from several Russian commanders he would not positively order my departure: and in view of my ignorance of the Russian language, he could not advise that I should be given a commission in any Russian unit. I might enlist as a private if I liked.

I saw at once that if I enlisted in a Russian regiment, my liberty of action would be stopped

immediately; and I should see no more of the war than what the tip of my own bayonet could show: and I had serious thoughts of departing, and trying some other commander. Colonel Simmelchok came to the rescue. I might remain at my own risk. Very well: Colonel Krastnovitz, commanding the 2nd battalion of the Vladimir regiment was a friend of his, and would make me a member of their mess. Nothing could have met my views better, except a remittance of ready cash: but I was generously told that I need not trouble my head about that: we were soldiers on campaign, and would mostly enjoy campaign fare only; and so it proved. For we had few luxuries, except an occasional fowl, or duck, obtained from the country-people, a batch of eggs or a joint of pork. We never ran short of tobacco; but wine was almost unknown in the mess.

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There was a very decided change in the weather. The mud had disappeared and the ground was frozen hard: the trees sparkled with frost particles, and the ground was coated, every morning, with rime. The air was "shrewd and biting," and we had some boisterous north winds which chilled me to the marrow. Meanwhile desperate fighting was going on, and the Russians seemed to be giving ground in several places. The ground was becoming so hard that trench-making became difficult, and a good deal of the fighting was in the open under old-fashioned conditions: the losses, therefore, were exceptionally heavy, especially in killed and wounded. More prisoners are taken in trench warfare than in any other form of military action owing to the fact that if the men do not escape before an assault takes place they have no chance of doing so when the enemy is actually amongst them. The broad hind-quarters of a Deutschman crawling over the crest of a trench affords a remarkably fine butt for a bayonet thrust: and Huns usually prefer surrender to cold steel.

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For several days we were left in doubt of what was taking place in our neighbourhood, though daily glowing accounts reached us of the progress of Russian arms in the Austrian area of the war. The general impression seemed to be that matters were not going on so well in the West Polish district as they should be.

On the 20th we made a night march to a village, the name of which did not transpire. It was deserted, with the exception perhaps of a dozen miserable starving creatures, and had been partly burnt down. We arrived about four o'clock in the morning, at which time it had been snowing heavily for two hours.

We remained hiding in the village all day, fires and even smoking being strictly forbidden. There were about 800 of us: and I do not know if there were other infantry detachments near us, but I heard from the Colonel that a force of Cossacks was reconnoitring some eight or nine versts in front of us; and we could hear the distant booming of heavy guns, a sure sign that the contending parties were in contact, as artillery do not fire at nothing.

The greater part of the day snow was falling, and though it cleared up in the evening it was only for a few hours. We had brought three days' rations in our haversacks. The food consisted of biscuit, and fat boiled mutton, which is excellent diet for marching men. Our drink was water only, which we had to procure where we could find it; not an easy task, as the rivers were full of putrid bodies and carcasses of horses, and the Germans had polluted many of the wells.

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On the 21st we made another night march over an open plain on which were many small pine-woods. We kept under cover as much as possible, and finally halted in a pine-wood, where we hid ourselves all day, not seeing a soul of any kind. In the afternoon a Cossack arrived, and delivered a written message to the Colonel, the contents of which he did not divulge; but at night he called for a dozen volunteers who, he said, must be men of enterprise, not afraid to sacrifice themselves if necessary. These men were placed under the command of a young officer, Captain Folstoffle, and proceeded along the bed of a frozen brook, our feet being muffled with pieces of sheep's skin. Naturally I supposed that we were near the enemy; but Folstoffle spoke not a word of either French or English, and no communication of any kind was made to me or to the men: we were left to glean information from the "march of events."

The booming of the guns continued, at intervals, all night, and to the north-west the sky was crimson with the reflection of a large fire—a burning town, I imagined. The only sign of life I saw was a large animal (a wild boar, I think), which rushed out of the cover of some rushes when disturbed by our approach.

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The whole country was covered with snow, which was loose, and about a foot deep. This was a drawback, as we must have shown up darkly to an enemy: at the same time it increased our chances of seeing the approach of persons or soldiers, not clothed in white, though this hue was often used by the Germans to conceal themselves when the country was snow-clad. We had left our bivouac at about nine o'clock, and marched on until 2 a.m., when Folstoffle decided to halt for a rest. The spot chosen for this purpose was a clump of bushes with a small two-storied farmhouse about 300 yards distant. It was necessary to examine this house, and I volunteered for the service, making myself understood by signs and the few words of Russian I was now master of. I started alone, but one of the men followed close behind me, holding his rifle at the "Present," ready to fire instantly if need should require it, though it seemed improbable that any of the enemy were in the house. As we approached, however, I was astonished to see a man hanging out of one of the windows, and another leaning over him from behind. Both were partly covered with snow, and it hardly required more than a glance to show that they were dead. A few yards nearer, and I could see that their clothing was in tatters, and fluttering in the night breeze.

The weather had cleared up, and was now bright; and the reflection from the snow enabled one to see objects with considerable distinctness, though some distance away; and I noticed several

curious-looking heaps, or mounds, near the house, from which a horrible stink emanated, as it did from the building itself.

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The place had been subjected to a bombardment; all the windows were smashed out, and one door lay flat on the ground; the other hung by a single hinge only, and we had no difficulty in entering. The soldier had a pocket-lamp, and he struck a light by means of flint and tinder, a contrivance which is still in use in Russia. The body of a huge man lay at the foot of the stairs. He was nearly naked, and much decayed; and we could not tell if he had been friend or foe. The whole place was in much confusion. There had evidently been hand to hand fighting in all the rooms; and upstairs there were the remains of about a dozen men heaped together in the apartment where the two corpses first noticed were hanging out of the window. All were in an advanced state of decay, and must have been dead weeks, if not months. The horrible fetor of the place was unendurable, and we were glad to return into the fresh air, the soldier being greatly upset. I thought it advisable to return and report before making a further search of the house and its environs; and Folstoffle decided to wait until the morning before examining the neighbourhood.

The spot where this discovery was made was between Klodava and Krasuyvice. No doubt there had been fighting all over this district, but none of those composing our party had taken a part in it. In the morning we found nearly a hundred bodies scattered about, and lying in two heaps in what appeared to have been the garden and orchard of the farm: but the place was completely wrecked. The sight was, on a small scale, as dreadful as any I witnessed during the war. Many of the dead were skeletons, or nearly so: animals, probably dogs and pigs, had been at work on others; and all were pretty well in the last stage of putridity. Many retained the positions in which they had died and stiffened. One man, with no eyes left in the sockets of his skull, was holding one arm straight up in the air; another had both arms and legs raised as he lay on his back—a position which would have been comical if it had not been so dreadful and tragical. In one heap were two men clasping each other in what had evidently been a death struggle. Another still grasped the bayonet with which he had killed a foe: and an officer had his sword raised and his mouth wide open as if giving an order at the instant of his death. The appearance of all was so extremely ghastly that it cannot be described. Though mostly covered with snow I saw many faces which were blue, green, black in hue, and had lost all resemblance to human features. Russians and Germans lay there in about equal proportions; and there we were compelled to leave them: for we had no tools, nor was the ground in a condition for rapid grave-digging. There may have been more bodies in some of the neighbouring ravines and woods; but we had no time to look for them. From what I afterwards saw, I have no doubt that the dead were often left unburied; a dreadful thing, for there is always a host of ravenous dogs in Russian villages; and as many of these were now ownerless, they had run wild. Besides these there were wild boars and wolves, always ready to take toll of the battlefield; to say nothing of the crow and the raven.

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Folstoffle's orders had been to return before midday on the 23rd; but it was after that hour before we turned to rejoin our main body. About four o'clock we met a section coming to look for us, as Colonel Krastnovitz had become anxious.

The object of the reconnaissance was said to be accomplished; we had found that there were no enemies in that district; or, at any rate, in our immediate neighbourhood; and this information was corroborated by that of half a sotnia of Cossacks, who, it seems, had been acting in conjunction with us, though we had seen nothing of them since starting on our little expedition.

But our leaders must have had a belief that the enemy was at hand: for we received orders to fall back on our deserted village, and put it into a state of defence, which we did by loopholing what remained of the walls, and digging trenches round the outskirts.

In cases like this the trenches are held and defended while the enemy is using his artillery; but when the actual assault takes place, and he can no longer use his guns for fear of injuring his own troops, the defenders retire to the loop-holes as a second line of defence; and as they can fire into the trenches, these are seldom tenable by the enemy.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE BUTCHER'S BILL TO THE END OF 1914

We were strictly kept within our lines: I had no opportunity, therefore, of ascertaining what other troops were in our neighbourhood. I took it for granted that we were supported, as it was quite clear that our battalion was acting as an advanced post. A battery of eight guns was sent to strengthen our position; but no other troops showed themselves; and the battery commander declared that he had come a distance of forty versts by march-route without seeing more than a few detachments of infantry and cavalry, the last named chiefly Cossacks.

Writing of numbers recalls certain remarks which I heard about this time concerning the force, or supposed force, of ourselves and our enemies. The Germans on the East Prussian front were put by our commander at 1,600,000 men, with another 250,000 or 300,000 in Austria. I am inclined to think that these figures are an under estimation; though, on account of the speed with which the Germans moved their troops about by rail, it was very difficult to arrive at correct conclusions concerning their numbers. At one time, however, when they considered there was a serious fear of Germany being rapidly overrun by their ponderous foe, I am sure there was more than 2,000,000 German soldiers on the Eastern front with not less than 3,500 field-guns, and 1,000 guns of position, not including machine-guns of rifle-calibre.

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To oppose this vast force the Russians had about 3,000,000 men in Poland, and West and South Russia, with 3,000 field-guns, and about 400 guns of position and siege-guns. They claimed to have another 3,000,000 mobilizing, and already on the move; and I do not think this was an exaggeration. Russia could easily raise 12,000,000 *good troops*, if she had the material and money to furnish them. That money is the sinews of war is not a trite saying—it is an absolute fact. Without gold armies cannot exist, any more than they can subsist without food. The output of Russian soldiers is limited by the financial resources of the country. She had 3,000,000 men at the front. When a quarter of a million of these was wiped out, they were replaced by another quarter of a million; and so on. The reason that no more than the 3,000,000 was ever present at the front at one and the same time seemed to be that the number stated was all she could supply in the field: and these were serving, practically, without pay; and often on food that was scanty in quantity, and coarse in quality. After the close of the year 1914 the Russians, seeing that it was a stern necessity, made almost superhuman efforts to bring up more artillery; and they increased the number of their heavy siege-guns; and, in a lesser degree, those of the field and machine classes of ordnance.

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The Russians were always very strong in cavalry. I believe their mounted Cossacks alone exceeded 60,000 men; and there was, probably, 40,000 line cavalry in Poland—cuirassiers, dragoons, lancers, hussars, chasseurs, etc.—to oppose which the Germans had certainly no more than 20,000 inferior horsemen. The Russian cavalry are not comparable to those of England and France; but they are far superior to those of Germany: yet, I must admit, the latter Power had to contend against superior numbers in this arm. I believe that in every cavalry encounter which took place the Russians had a numerical, as well as a tactical, superiority.

In reference to losses: the Russians put those of their enemies on this front at about 1,000,000 men at the close of the first five months of the war. This includes prisoners. It is said that 50,000 Austrians were captured in the first fortnight of December. I was an eye-witness to the awful slaughter which took place on many occasions; but, as I have pointed out, the majority of the wounded men soon return to the ranks. Still, I think the Germans had at least 400,000 men put out of action in this region, not including prisoners.

The loss of the Russians I believe to have been quite as heavy as that of the Germans, perhaps even more so. Their chief strength lay in the fact that they could speedily replace every man they lost, which the Germans could not do.

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CHAPTER XIV

"DO NOT FIRE ON YOUR COMRADES"

Day after day we passed in our miserable bivouac, short of food, short of news, short of everything. When news did come it was rather disquieting: Germany was said to have a fleet of armed river boats on the Vistula some thirty to thirty-five English miles to our right rear. It would be rather awkward if these gunboats landed a force behind us, specially as it seemed as if we were not supported in this direction, except by a few sotnias of Cossacks. Our forces seemed to be very quiet and unprogressive everywhere, except on the Austrian and Turkish frontiers. We had the weather, perhaps, in part, to thank for this state of things. It was simply atrocious. Near the end of the year there was a partial thaw, followed by heavy rain, which quickly turned to a blinding sleet. Then there came a dull, heavy day, with black, lowering clouds, and bitter cold. The snow recommenced, and fell as one might expect it to fall, in Russia and Poland. With a few intervals it continued to float down in big feathery flakes for an entire week, and it drifted round us as high as the roofs of the houses, or the charred eaves where those roofs had once rested; and we could not leave the environs of the village until we had cut a way through. Buried beneath the snow we did not feel the icy wind so keenly as those did who were unavoidably exposed to it when on outpost duty; of which, however, we all had our share. There were, also, occasional reconnaissances on a small scale—a dozen men, or so, in a party. I was always glad to accompany these, as the monotony of life in a ruin, without sufficient food, and no recreation except card-playing, was unendurable.

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The object of these little expeditions was to ascertain if we were likely to be attacked; or if the enemy was moving in our neighbourhood. The whole country was deserted, except by pigs and dogs, and a few wild animals. The pigs had been turned loose, I supposed, to get their own living as best they could; and I am afraid that a good many of them were carnivorous, as the dogs certainly were. These brutes were vagabonds by choice, and it was a wonder to me that so many of them were tolerated in the towns and villages of all parts of Russia and Poland I visited.

It was shocking to see the number of empty and destroyed houses, some isolated and standing alone, others in clusters forming small hamlets and villages. In the rooms of some, or in the courtyards, and sometimes in the open fields, we came across the bodies of peasants and soldiers who had not been buried. The remains of one man were hanging from a tree. He was little more than a skeleton, and the eyeless sockets of his skull had an inexpressibly horrid appearance. There were also the carcasses of domestic animals lying about, wantonly killed. It is really difficult to understand the state of mind of men who could be guilty of such cowardly and monstrous cruelty. Isolated acts of wickedness occur in all wars; but here we seemed to have a whole people, multitudinous in numbers, afflicted with the madness of blood-lust.

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Very little information was gleaned from these reconnaissances. The few miserables who still lurked about the ruins of their former homes said that no soldiers had been in their neighbourhood since the fighting which led to the destruction of the country. One old fellow, with mattock and spade, and accompanied by a faithful dog, was making it his business to bury the abandoned bodies of his dead countrymen. He said he had made graves for forty-five of them, and he was still very busy and complained that he had to lose much time while he was looking for food. We gave him all we had with us. He had been living chiefly on hares which he tracked down in the snow. We had discovered, ourselves, that this was an easy way of capturing them; and they often made an agreeable addition to our poor fare. We also caught an odd sheep or two, pretty lean for want of a shepherd's care; and pork was plentiful enough for those who cared to partake of it, who became fewer every day, as it became more and more evident that these omnivorous creatures were living on carrion and the bodies of the unburied slain.

We gained some important bits of information, amongst them the fact that we were not supported by other troops; and that reinforcements were passing through Warsaw, day and night, in an unbroken stream. They were proceeding mostly towards the Austrian frontier, and to the scene of the fighting on the Vistula, or rather on its tributaries, the Pilica, Bzura, Bug, and the Narew; a region extensively entrenched.

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The fact that no troops appeared to be supporting our outpost greatly disturbed the mind of Colonel Krastnovitz, who even expressed the opinion that he was either forgotten, or cut off; and it really looked as if something of this sort had occurred, as the officer had received no orders, or supplies, for ten days; and the men were almost starving. We sent out foraging parties every day; but the country had been cleared of provisions to such a degree that it was almost a desert. In our extremity we applied to a Cossack officer, and thenceforth he sent us in a cart or two of food every day, consisting of bread (in biscuit form), bacon, wheat, flour and oats. Where he obtained these supplies he did not say; and nobody made it his business to inquire. Cossacks are free and easy fellows; and they never starve. There is no instance in their history of their ever having done so. If they cannot find enemies to rob, they borrow from friends; and failing this, ten to one they take toll of their own convoys. Do they get into trouble for such playful pranks? All I can say is that I have never seen a dead donkey, nor a court-martialled Cossack. The beggars may live on thistles, but they do live.

I suggested to Colonel Krastnovitz that it was necessary we should get into communication with the commander, as it was impossible for him either to maintain his position or vacate it without orders. He quite agreed: and twenty men under Captain Folstoffle were detailed to search for the remaining battalions of the regiment. Our obliging Cossack commander placed half a dozen of his men at our disposal, and was good enough to give us a couple of old horses which he had picked up, and which were worth, I suppose, their weight in—cat's meat. Still, the snow was deep, the way was long, and the pilgrim not too young or strong, and I was glad to throw my leg over the craziest old crock I ever mounted.

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Our Cossack friends were of a party having a roving commission, and reporting direct to Warsaw, which was now encircled by trenches and earthworks, the permanent forts being old and not to be depended on; and I may add, on my own responsibility, woefully short of heavy artillery. As far as the Cossacks knew there were no Russian troops nearer to our position than the trenches at Skyermevice, where they were in pretty close contact with the enemy. We heard that there had been fighting quite recently; and daily we heard the reports of artillery in that direction, the distance being less than thirty versts.

The Russians are marchers as well as fighters; but the roads were so blocked with snow that we could rarely discern them, and we took a direct route straight across the country. This was very well; but the men sank in to the knee at every step, and progress was very slow, while concealment was impossible. If only a small body of the enemy had appeared we should have had no alternative but unconditional surrender—not a pleasant lookout, especially for me, who could not hope to pass for a Russian. In spite of strenuous exertion we could not advance faster than two versts an hour (less than a mile and a half). When, therefore, we came to a gentleman's house, we decided to remain there and send on two of the Cossacks with a written message to the nearest commanding officer they could find.

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These men did not return until late the following day, bringing orders for the battalion to proceed

to a village called Samitz, near Skyermevice. Captain Folstoffle decided to remain where he was and send on the message to the Colonel.

We were in very good quarters at the house mentioned above. The family had fled to a place of greater safety, leaving an old couple to look after the mansion, and answer all German inquiries. Strange to say, and very fortunately for us, the Germans had not visited this house; and everything being intact we had plenty of food and wine, and good beds to sleep in. There was a poultry yard with abundance of fowls, ducks and geese; and a piggery full of fine porkers with no suspicion attached to their recent diet, and—well, the Cossacks looked after this department, not forgetting the respect due to their superiors when the roast was ready: and I am afraid that the poor old woman had some doubts which was most preferable—a visit from the Germans, or a self-invitation from her compatriots; and I am not sure she did not say as much. She certainly had a good deal to say; and I did not need to understand Russian to perceive the temper and tone in which her speech was delivered. But her protests were received with sublime indifference, and she was calmly presented with receipts and bills which she was informed the Russian Government would honour in due course.

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The next day, the 8th January, 1915, the battalion arrived at this pleasant halting-place, and cleared up the remnants of the poultry-yard and piggery. It took us all day on the 9th to reach Samitz, which the enemy was shelling vigorously. The village was a small place originally; and half of it had already been reduced to something very like dust. The only civilian I saw in the place was a woman, who was crying bitterly as she sat on the threshold of a shattered cottage, quite oblivious, in her terrible grief, of such trifling dangers as bursting shells. These are the sights that upset men, even soldiers born, and cause them to hate war. Even the dogs and the pigs had deserted this place.

The headquarters, and the other battalions of the Vladimir regiment, were not at Samitz; and nobody could tell us where they were. We were politely told not to bother our heads about our comrades, but to get into the trenches at once. Fortunately we were with "goodly capon lined"; for they had not the good manners here to give us a ration before sending us on duty. But the service was pressing just then, as we soon discovered.

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Night was closing in when we became aware that a heavy mass of the enemy was making straight for the trench we occupied. They were shouting loudly something I did not understand; and orders were passed along the trench that we were to lie quiet, and not fire until the foe was quite close. I thought this a foolish order, but of course obeyed it, like the rest of the men.

I afterwards read in an English newspaper of a dodge practised by the Germans of running up dressed in English uniform, and shouting something like this: "Ve vos not Shermans; we vos Royal Vest Surreys!"

A similar trick was played on us at this time. It appears the Germans shouted: "We are a reinforcement of Russians; do not fire on your comrades!"

We did not fire until they reached the wire entanglement which protected the front of the trench: and then— Well, they went down as if blasted by a wind from Hades. Point-blank, quick-firing: and then, while the groan of fright and horror was still issuing from their lips, came the order, "Upon them with the bayonet—Charge."

There was no fighting: it was simply slaughter amidst yells, curses, and abject screams for mercy. For the first time in this campaign I saw German soldiers fairly and unmistakably routed. There was no mistake about it this time. Old Jack Falstaff never carried his paunch as nimbly as these Germans carried theirs in their run for their lives.

We took no prisoners: or, if any, only one or two odd ones; and we scarcely lost a man, except afterwards, by artillery fire. For the Germans, absolutely routed, sought vengeance by opening as heavy an artillery shelling as they could; but it was little better than a waste of ammunition, and killed more of their own wounded than it did of our men.

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When morning came, I calculated that 2,000 German bodies lay on half a verst of our front. The groans and cries of the wounded were awful to hear; but nobody could help them. Their own people made no overtures to do so; and when our Red Cross men attempted to go to their assistance they were fired on by the enemy in the most cowardly way. None of our wounded lay outside the trench.

When darkness set in Captain Folstoffle, and an officer called Skidal, with Drs. Wolnoff and Falovki, myself and a dozen stretcher-bearers of the Red Cross Service, went out to try to be of some service to the suffering and dying. It was a dark night; but the snow rendered objects visible; and the miserable wail of the injured guided us to where they lay thickest. Nothing could be more awful: one man with the top of his skull blown off, and the brains exposed, was still alive, and most anxious to be saved. He begged piteously to be first attended to; but what could be done for such a case? We made him as comfortable as we could under such dreadful circumstances, and left him: though his cries to be taken away, or at least have somebody remain with him, haunted my mind for many days afterwards.

It was puzzling to know where to commence work when so many required attention. We gave first aid to a great many, and sent some to the rear of our trenches; but it was obviously of no use to treat hopeless cases. We removed them to more sheltered positions, and made them more comfortable. One or two were groaning under heaps of their slain comrades: we released these,

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and dressed their wounds. Some were very grateful for the aid rendered. One man kissed the hand of the attendant helping him; and another was very profuse in his thanks. Others were cursing their Kaiser and their country, and even the Almighty, for entailing so much misery upon them. One man was insane, probably as a result of his fears rather than his sufferings.

Many corpses were broken to pieces, probably as a result of the German's own shell-fire. When the arms of a dead man were taken hold of to release another soldier pinned down beneath him, they both came away at the first pull, owing to the body being completely shattered. Several dissevered limbs lay about; and also headless bodies: and we discovered one dead man, who had died in the act of holding his bowels in, the outside of the stomach having been shot away. While we were attending to these miserable men, a shell came from the enemy's line and killed Lieutenant Skidal and two of the men, and so severely wounded Dr. Wolnoff that he died a few days afterwards. Of course we abandoned our work, and returned to the shelter of our trenches. In a similar way the Germans often put a stop to the would-be good work our people attempted to perform.

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CHAPTER XV

SMALL AFFAIRS AND PERSONAL ADVENTURES

Throughout the night there was cannonading at intervals, some of the shells weighing about 100 pounds. We had no guns so heavy in our lines; and I attribute the fact that the Russians were never able to fully push home their attacks to this cause. Their artillery, of all classes, was decidedly inferior to that of their foes, and there was a sad lacking of large pieces of siege ordnance, without which a modern army can hardly hope to beat its foes out of well-constructed trenches.

On the following day the Germans did not make a direct attack on our position; but they sent out a host of snipers and skirmishers, who fired on us, causing many casualties, from snow-pits, and heaps of the same material. At first sight it would seem that snow would not prove a very efficacious defence; nevertheless pits and trenches made of it afford splendid protection to infantry, and even to field-guns. We found it impossible to dislodge these skirmishers by artillery fire alone; and individually they offered no mark to our riflemen.

On the 14th January we attempted an assault of the German position, but were stopped at their wire entanglement and shot down in such numbers that we were compelled to retreat, leaving 1,000 men behind, mostly dead and dying, but a few of them prisoners of war. In this attempted assault we discovered that the enemy were using their iron shields, fixed upright in the ground, as a protection behind which to shoot from. At long range our rifle-bullets could not penetrate them; but they were an indescribably clumsy contrivance to carry about in the way the Germans first used them. They discovered that themselves, and abandoned their use, except in trenches; nor were they of much use at close quarters; for bullets would pierce them, sometimes at as great a range as 500 yards.

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Several little adventures happened to us while we were in these trenches. For instance, one night I thought I saw several small pyramids of snow moving about; and watching carefully I presently saw a man clothed in white come right up to our trenches. He knew, or discovered, the spaces left in the wire entanglements to enable us to sally out. His movements were so regular and bold that I was afraid to shoot him, thinking he might be one of our men, but went at once to Colonel Krastnovitz's hut, and reported what I had seen. None of our men were, at this time, clothed in white, or furnished with white cloaks, and the Colonel at once went with me to the spot where I had seen the mysterious figure. It had disappeared; but in about ten minutes several men, scarcely distinguishable from the snow, were dimly discerned moving about, and evidently examining our network of barbed wire. One of them seemed to be looking for something among the dead (all the wounded were very quiet by this time), and was seen to turn a corpse over.

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Our men, dead beaten with excessive fatigue, were asleep in the trench, a couple of sentries excepted; but several men were aroused, and the Colonel whispered his orders to them. Several angry spurts of fire, accompanied by sharp reports, and our prying Germans clothed in white raiment were hurrying away across the plain, leaving two of their number behind stretched on the ground. We went out to examine these fallen heroes. One was past help: the other was only wounded, and that not very seriously. He said he was willing to surrender, and hoped we would not murder him: rather comical, I thought; but the Russian mind is slow in perceiving a joke; and so his captors devoted all their attention to examining his white cloak, or overall, and making notes of the same. The young prisoner (he appeared to be no more than twenty years) was not "murdered," had his wounds seen to, and was sent to the rear. We saw no more of "the dashing white sergeants" that night, but afterwards became well acquainted with them, and imitated their tactics, for whole divisions of Russians wore white gaberdines when there was snow on the

ground.

On the night of the 15th a regiment of infantry, with our battalion attached, and supported by a strong division of Cossacks, made an attack of the German trenches on our right. We captured one of their advanced positions, but were soon driven out by a shower of hand-grenades, not the first time I had seen these very destructive missiles used, though I never expected that they would be resorted to in modern warfare. That their use should have died out is remarkable; for they are a most effective weapon at close quarters. The poison-gas, of which, I am thankful to say, I saw nothing, is a diabolical development of the ancient "stink-pot," a contrivance to suffocate an enemy; but one that was not particularly cruel, or effective.

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In this second sortie, which cost us 400 men, we captured several of the iron shields, before mentioned; and the Russian commanders thought it worth while to have some made of the same pattern; but as I have already stated, their use was soon considered to be a mistake and a failure, and they were set up as a kind of bulwark in the trenches. They were of some use in making barricades in narrow spaces where there was not room enough for an earthen parapet.

We were not so discouraged by these little reverses as we might have been had we not enjoyed a continual stream of good news. Great things were reported to be occurring on the Austrian front; and the cavalry in our own neighbourhood had several skirmishes with the enemy, in which the Germans, as usual, had the worst of it.

The weather was again very bad; though, really, there had not been much improvement in it for several weeks. Snow fell in immense quantities, in the form in which the Americans call blizzards: that is, as I understand the term, accompanied by storms of icy-cold wind. The snow lying on the ground, however, was frozen hard, and therefore more easily passed over. We could march with tolerable ease and rapidity. We were often moved from one part of the trenches and back again, for no perceivable reason; and on one occasion we were marched forty versts in the direction of Plock, probably because a great battle was expected. There was heavy fighting in this direction; but it was all over before we arrived. By the pronoun I mean the body of infantry to which the Vladimir battalion was attached, and which consisted of a division under General Berenstoff. It was made up largely of battalions and detachments which had lost a part of their effective force, or got separated from their regiments.

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Except perhaps in Austria, with which I have nothing to do, as my experiences did not extend to that area of the war, there was little progress made, and but slight reverses suffered, during the early part of the year. The weather and the state of the ground may have had something to do with this; but I think both sides were suffering considerably from exhaustion. The men had been worked incessantly and unmercifully, yet no great numbers had fallen out on account of breakdown. Frostbites are not common amongst Russian troops, even in the severest weather; but I had some trouble from this complaint myself. The soldiers were provided with good warm clothing; but furs were not in general use; and a few regiments, which had seen a great deal of hard service, were almost in rags; yet their sufferings did not seem to be greater than those of their comrades. The Russian soldier never grumbles, by-the-by. Boots are the great desideratum of an army in the field. Nothing will break an army up sooner than a lack of foot-wear: and in respect of this necessary the Russians were generally well provided, though I occasionally met detachments, if not larger bodies, who had completely worn out their boots, and resorted to tying their feet up in pieces of hide, or sheep's skin. These cases were so rare that they scarcely deserve notice; but as the winter wore on the clothing of the troops certainly began to show signs of wear.

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Personally I had some difficulty in providing necessaries. Boots were given to me; but underclothing was both difficult to obtain and to keep clean. No article was scarcer than soap in the Russian camp—it never found its way to the trenches, which were in a shockingly insanitary condition. It could not be otherwise: for once in our position we could not leave it, even for a few moments, until regularly relieved at the appointed hour. In some instances the troops were in the trenches for a week without intermission. There are said to be no fleas in Russia. There are abundance of another kind of vermin, which revels in dirt; and mice were so numerous in the fields that things had to be closely watched to prevent them from being destroyed. The knapsacks of the Russians, like those of the Germans, are made of undressed sheep's skins; and these, and other leather articles, were often nibbled by the mice; while food was sure to be spoiled if left in a tent, or hut, for a few hours. Winter did not rid us of these pestiferous little rodents, which lived, and prospered, in the snow.

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I usually did my own washing and mending, taking advantage of the facilities to be found in some of the deserted houses, where tubs and pails and many other things had been left behind on the flight of the inhabitants, and hot water was easily procurable, though I never found any soap.

Baths are much in use in Russia, but more as luxuries and sources of enjoyment than as means of cleanliness. The so-called "Turkish bath" seems to be of Russian origin. It was made extemporaneously by the soldiers in various ways. Sometimes they closed up a small room of a house, and filled it with steam by sprinkling water on stones previously heated to a white heat; but the favourite way was to make a small hut with branches, and render this impervious by covering it with turf. In such a hovel a soldier could pretty nearly suffocate himself in ten minutes, the stones being heated in a wood fire outside. When a man had parboiled himself to the hue of a lobster, he would rush out and roll about, naked as he was, in the snow; the operation being finished off by a good rub down.

The steam once raised, an occasional hot stone would keep it up for any length of time; and man after man would use the same "bath." I tried this curious operation myself, and found it both refreshing and strengthening; and it is a fine remover of the pain and exhaustion occasioned by excess of physical exertion. The snow, by-the-by, at this time of year is what is called in Russia "dry snow." That is, it is frozen so intensely that it does not readily thaw, may be brushed from the clothing, does not cling to anything, and blows about with the breeze like dust. I preferred this state of things to the fogs, which in the autumn and early part of the winter were very troublesome, and prejudicial to the general health.

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During the latter part of January there was not much downfall of snow, but the cold was intense, and the winds such as, to use a common expression, "cut through one." The snow that was on the ground got a crust that would easily have borne a man on snow-shoes; but these useful inventions were not employed by the Russian troops.

Sometimes, when there were blizzards, the trenches were nearly filled with drifted snow; and more than once, the men were buried above their waists. This was an inconvenience from the military point of view; but the men did not object to it as it kept them warm; and snow-huts were much used during the winter, both because they were difficult to be discerned by a distant enemy, and because they make remarkably warm sleeping-places. The only inconvenience is that the heat of the body causes the snow on the inside of the hut to melt and drip on the sleeper until he is, sometimes, pretty well wet through, the Russian, as a rule, being a sound sleeper.

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The Germans, also, adopted these snow-huts, and their reconnoitring-parties must have discovered ours; for one fine morning, just as the sun was rising clear and bright, they opened fire on a small village of these hovels which we had constructed behind our trenches. The result was not pleasant; and I saw several poor fellows blown clean into the air amidst clouds of frozen snow. On the evening of that day we trotted out for a retaliatory expedition; but nothing much came of it. We found the German position too strong to be meddled with; and after the exchange of a few rifle-shots we fell back, and retired to our own position. Fortunately for us, the Germans did not follow us; and we lost only two men killed, and a dozen wounded, which we carried away with us.

We often displayed great temerity in attacking with small bodies of infantry, and were seldom counter-attacked on these occasions, because, we supposed, the enemy feared a trap. They had some grounds for these fears. On one occasion, two companies of the 189th regiment, believing that a trench of the enemy's was weakly manned, made an attack on it. They caught a Tartar, and were chased by about 2,000 Germans, who, fully believing that they were about to penetrate our lines, followed the fugitives right up to the edge of the trench. It chanced, however, that the officer commanding that section had his doubts about the wisdom of the rash attack, and had moved up a full regiment to meet a possible accident. So when the Germans arrived they were received with an unexpected fusillade, which killed the greater number of them, and terrified the others so much that they surrendered at once. Two men only ran back; and, strange to say, they both escaped, though hundreds of shots were sent after them. But in war I have noticed that temerity and cowardice are often self-punished, and bravery rewarded. Not always so, alas! I hate the Germans like sin; but I was not sorry to see these two plucky fellows escape.

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CHAPTER XVI

A NIGHT ATTACK ON A BRIDGE-HEAD

During the last few days in January we received strong reinforcements, mostly recruits and reservists to bring up the regiments to their normal strength, the losses of some of which had been very heavy: in fact, with a fairly good knowledge of military history, I cannot recall that in any previous war there have been so many instances of whole battalions, batteries, and other units, being completely "wiped out," to use the modern expressive phrase. In several cases it is said that entire regiments of four battalions each (over 4,000 men at full war strength) have disappeared. The 66th (probably Ersatz), and their 41st of the regular line, are said to have met this fate: and many complete battalions on both sides have been destroyed, or taken prisoners wholesale. The first Russian unit to which I was attached, a battery of horse artillery, was practically rendered non-existent; and other batteries were lost on the actual field of battle, every man being shot down, and the guns smashed, or taken by the enemy. Many Russian batteries met such a fate as that described, as they were often subjected to the fire of guns much heavier than their own; and, indeed, it is useless to withhold the fact that the German artillery is altogether superior to that of the Russians.

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To return to the subject of the Muscovite losses. How terrible these were may be guessed from the returns made by many regiments. I do not purpose to give the names, or regimental numbers, of units, for reasons which are more or less obvious. Taking twenty-three regiments, contiguous

in station to the position occupied by my division in the middle of January, 1915, and having, at the commencement of the war, a total combatant strength of 92,000 men, there were eight regiments which could not parade 1,000 men each—that is, had lost three-fourths of their strength. In the case of five of these regiments the bulk of the missing men were known to be prisoners of war. One regiment could send only 638 men to the trenches—less than two-thirds of a battalion. The four regiments which had been most fortunate were each more than 1,000 men short of their proper complement; and to bring up the twenty-three regiments to their original war strength 50,000 men were required! They got 40,000 men; and at least 250,000 were sent to the Austrian area, and to the district of East Prussia near Suwalki. Many of these recruits came to the front without arms, and received those which had belonged to the killed and to men in hospital. There was so great a shortage of arms that some battalions were actually furnished with rifles and cartridges taken from the Germans. I suspect that Russia would have much vaster armies in the field if she could find rifles and cannon for them. It is a very unpleasant fact, but still a fact, that Russia is outgunned by her enemy to so great an extent that the Germans can place *five* cannon against her *three*; and that on any part of the front where the titanic struggle is going on.

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In one thing only is Russia the stronger of the two Powers, and that is in her cavalry: and this force has not, to my knowledge, suffered a disaster, even on a small scale. Not one of her mounted regiments has been cut up, or even sustained abnormal losses; but they have certainly destroyed more than one of Germany's cavalry regiments; and that in fair open fight. The Russian cavalry has charged, successfully, all classes of troops—mounted men, infantry and artillery. So much for the paper tacticians who have asserted that the days of cavalry charges and hand-to-hand fighting are over. They are clearly mistaken, as has been shown East and West in this war, which I suppose all will admit is the War of Wars.

Cavalry actions in the East have been almost purely cavalry actions. The mounted rifleman, who played so important a part in the Boer War, was singularly absent in all the actions I witnessed. It is true that the cavalry was armed like the ancient dragoons, with a long fire-arm (the "dragoon" soon gave place to the musket); but in all their charges they relied on the lance and the sabre; and it was with these weapons that the fights were decided. In some battles the German infantry was sabred in hundreds; and the lances of the Cossacks accounted for thousands. The Kaiser's men learned to dread both these instruments of death.

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The receiving, and shaking into their places, of recruits occupied a good deal of our time in January: and the Germans, on their side, evidently received, not only a great many recruits, but entire divisions of infantry, with immense numbers of guns, many of these being siege pieces. Both sides had practically new armies in the field before the end of the month; but while on the part of the Russians the men were fine strong fellows of full military age (none of them seemed to be under twenty years of age), hundreds of the Germans were immature lads of very boyish appearance. We often got near enough together to see the whites of one another's eyes—that is how I know what they were like. These boys, however, fought like little vipers; and were, moreover, amongst the cruellest scoundrels in a cruel army. Where boys fail in an army is that they cannot bear prolonged physical strain.

It was reported that there was fighting on every part of our front, from Caucasia to the Baltic; but I could not hear that any great battle had been fought, or any important results obtained. The fighting with which I was immediately concerned was a number of small affairs designed to destroy the enemy's posts and advanced positions. They were pushing forward a good many small parties, probably with an ulterior object; and it was thought advisable to give them a check.

The first action was an artillery duel, which commenced at a longer range than was usual. The Germans opened fire with a dozen or fourteen guns at a distance of seven versts. The projectiles they used weighed about 60 pounds, and annoyed us a good deal. They blew in about 30 yards of trench, killing a score of men: and did much other damage. Our field pieces failed to reduce their fire, and we sent to the rear for some 6-in guns, which were supposed to have been bought from a European Power: they were certainly not of Russian make. We had also a very old Krupp gun of about 7-inch calibre, which probably spoiled the beauty of its old masters.

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While these guns were being brought up and got into position, which took some time, six batteries of field-guns made a gallant dash forward, and got to within about 2,500 to 3,000 yards of the Germans, and galled them so much that they were fain to turn some of their heavy pieces upon them; by which a great many of the gunners were killed and three of the guns knocked over. Other batteries, however, were pushed forward; and when our heavy guns were brought into action the Germans began to suffer visibly. Through glasses we saw one of their big pieces knocked up so that the muzzle pointed to the sky. It remained in this position for some time, but ultimately fell over on its side. Three other guns were so badly damaged that they could not be fired; while the gunners flew right and left, and upwards, a mass of smashed bodies and dismembered limbs. In less than an hour we had put the whole battery completely out of action: but we on our side had suffered severely. Horses, guns and a great many men were destroyed.

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The next day we received warning by field telephone that aeroplanes were hovering over the Russian lines. One appeared in front of us at three o'clock in the afternoon, and was repeatedly shot at. It braved the fire in an impudent manner, and dropped some bombs which did no damage. Our gunners cut away a ditch-bank, so that the breech of the gun could be lowered until the muzzle was elevated fully 60 degrees, and sent a shot very near the aircraft. It was amusing to see how quickly it bolted when it found itself in danger. A great many rifle-shots were fired at

it; but it was too far away, and if it were struck at all, it was not injured.

Considering how much these machines were used in the West (according to the old newspapers which I have looked up) it is surprising that we saw so little of them in Poland. After this time I heard that the Russians had many aeroplanes, including some of the largest that have been made; and I saw one of these huge things. It seemed to me to be very unwieldy; but that might have been owing to the awkwardness of the navigators, who never seemed to be so skilful as those of France, England and Germany. I never heard of, far less saw, them doing much with this species of war engine. They never, I think, bombarded any German fortresses or towns, nor did the Germans do more in this quarter than occasionally drop bombs on troops, and transports. The only exception I can recollect was a visit of a number of machines to Warsaw.

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Of course the rivers and streams in Russia are bridged; but not to the extent the waterways of more highly developed countries usually are. Many of the rivers are shallow, and fords are common, and more relied on than bridges. Where bridges did exist, those of wood were frequently destroyed by both armies; but the more elaborate structures of brick and stone were sometimes defended by "bridge-heads."

A "bridge-head" in the old days of military engineering consisted of a lunette, or a redan with flanks, constructed on the near side of the stream, unless some peculiar features of the ground necessitated the holding of the far side: and this form of construction was generally followed by the Russians, with the addition of trenches and wire entanglements and flanking works.

There were frequent desperate fights for these field-works; and more than one of those engagements which may be denominated "battles" commenced in attempts to capture a bridge-head, or endeavours to establish one. I use the word "battles" advisedly, because battles in this war have generally been prolonged struggles for the possession of trenches, often lasting many days, and sometimes weeks. A battle, in the sense of two armies meeting in the open field, and deciding the action within the limits of a day or two, is a thing almost unknown, so far, in this war.

Most of the bridge-heads were constructed by the Russians. A few, generally small ones, were made by the Germans; and some were captured by them, and the defences afterwards elaborated. In this last-named case, they proved a decided annoyance, if not danger, to the Russians: and, about this time, we had orders to destroy, or recapture, a number of them. Most of these were situated on the rivers Vistula, Warta, Pilica and Bzura. The numerous tributaries of these great streams had many fords: bridge-heads were, therefore, useless on brooks and rivulets, as they could be easily turned. The most important works of this class were on the two first-mentioned rivers; and detachments were generally sent out to make simultaneous attacks on a number of them, as this method greatly interfered with, if it did not entirely stop, the enemy sending supporting parties to any one point of the offensive line.

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On the 27th of the month a number of detachments went out at night to destroy as many of the enemy's posts as possible. These parties, in our district, each consisted of a battalion at reduced strength (600 or 700 men), and about fifty sappers with hand charges of explosives. We had been moved out the previous day, and destroyed a number of temporary bridges for infantry on a stream the name of which did not transpire. We were directed, when retiring, to break the ice behind us: for the streams were all frozen over, though the larger rivers were not, having only a fringe of ice on either bank. The real objective of our expedition was three bridge-heads on the Warta protecting three bridges constructed for the passage of infantry, cavalry and artillery. These bridges were known to be not much in use at the time; but they were likely to greatly benefit the enemy later on.

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Though some snow had fallen during the day the night was clear and bright, and there was more moonlight than we wanted; but the Germans were evidently off their guard. The plank-bridges on the brooks had not even been watched by a few videttes; and nothing seemed to show that they knew we had been engaged in tearing them down. There was an outpost near the first bridge-head on the Warta, beyond the village of Nishkinova, and half a section was sent to try and get between it and the bridge. The enemy must have taken this party for one of their own patrols, for they took no notice of it.

The half-section found two sentinels on the bridge who were completely surprised. One fellow dropped his rifle and held up his hands: the other began to cry out, but was promptly stopped by a bayonet-thrust, and his body put in the shadow under the parapet. The first man begged his life, and was told that it would be granted him if he shut his mouth, otherwise— He took the hint: and we listened to hear if an alarm had been given. Apparently it had not been, for we could hear men singing a rousing chorus: and the white sheet of snow between us and the outwork was unbroken by any perceptible object. To the right we could just perceive the second division of the bridge-head: the third section was further up the stream.

There had been no previous reconnoitring by any member of our detachment, at any rate—and we had no knowledge of the numbers or disposition of the enemy. Judging by appearances there would be at least 400 men in each work; and there might be 4,000 in reserve, somewhere behind. I could see that we were taking a good deal on trust; and how we were to pass the wire entanglements without great loss puzzled me. We had no artillery to pave the way.

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It had been arranged that the firing of a rocket should be the signal for the simultaneous attack on the bridge-head, or three sections of the head: for they were connected by an entrenched line.

The bridge on the left, the one we first reached, was an old stone structure; the other two were made of planks supported by boats in place of pontoons. A battalion, and a section of engineers, was detailed to attack each bridge; but the arrival of the three divisions was not well timed, and we had a long and anxious wait, being, I must admit, more fortunate than skilful.

We observed that the German patrol we had evaded walked right up to the main body of our battalion, and were quietly made prisoners of. They evidently mistook our men for some of their own body.

It was not until two o'clock a.m. that we saw the rocket shoot upward and heard the dull explosion of its head; and immediately we rushed towards the earthwork in front of us, the apex of which was only about 200 yards from the foot of the bridge.

The surprise of the enemy must have been complete: for although we heard rapid firing to the right of us, where the other two sections were operating, we were suffered to rush right up to the wire entanglement before a shot was fired at us, and we passed the obstruction and entered the trench before a man of us dropped. [198]

There were not many men in the trench, and these were all bayoneted in less than a minute: but even in this short time the enemy in the earthwork behind the trench recovered themselves, and opened fire on us with both rifles and ordnance. Fortunately we were well spread out, and our losses were not great; the chief, and most regrettable of them being Colonel Krastnovitz, whose head was blown off. He was a very brave man, and excellent officer; and his death was a great personal loss to us all—to none more than to myself. I did not see him fall; but I soon became aware that he was down. The Major was not with us, having been previously wounded, and the command of the battalion devolved on a Captain, quite a young man, but energetic and brave, and well acquainted with his work.

The bridge-head, considering its strength, and the numerous supporting works, fell into our hands with astonishing ease. Its capture did not cost us more than 100 men. We killed 200, captured eighty, and about 1,000 ran away. The pontoon on the extreme right was also captured, but with some difficulty and loss; while the defenders of the centre bridge drove back its assaulters with the loss of nearly half their strength: and it becoming certain that there was a strong supporting body in the German rear which was fast coming up, we received orders to destroy all we could, and retire. [199]

There was not much time for destruction. We perceived at least four battalions of the enemy close upon us; and their artillery began to fire into the gorge of the work. So we destroyed the breach-blocks of some of the guns we had captured, and ran for it, taking our prisoners with us, though most of them afterwards escaped.

Our engineers had discovered that the bridge was mined; and they blew it up so quickly after we had passed, that I am not sure one or two of our men did not go up with it. I know that I had an unpleasantly narrow escape myself, besides being half suffocated with dust and smoke. I afterwards learned that one of the wooden pontoons was destroyed; but on the whole the expedition was not as successful as it should have been. It had been undertaken with too weak a force; and should have been accompanied by artillery. We got away with a total loss to the three columns of about 800 men, or more than a third of their number.

It was a night of curious adventures, and singular mistakes on the part of the enemy. For we had not retreated more than four versts when a squad of thirty Prussian hussars rode up to us, mistaking us for a battalion of their own countrymen. When they discovered their mistake they tried to escape by spreading out, and galloping away full tilt. Twenty of them and a dozen horses went down before our fire: the rest got away. [200]

I understood that the Russian commander was not well pleased with the results of this expedition; but nobody was so much to blame as himself for not sending a stronger detachment, and for not adequately supporting what he did send. The whole force was a flying detachment, and as such ought to have been differently constituted. For instance we ought to have had a strong body of Cossacks with us; and that very useful corps ought to have linked us up with headquarters.

As it was we had to make a forced march well into the next day, bivouac in the snow on short commons, and continue our march before we were half rested. We passed through several towns and villages, in which we saw groups of starving people. Many of them followed us, in dread of the Germans whom they believed were closely pursuing us; but I think those acute gentlemen were far behind, probably suspecting a trap; and I have firmly believed that it was only the daring presumption and impudence of our proceedings that saved us. Had the Germans known how weak we were, and at so great a distance from our base, it is probable that we should have tasted the delights of a German military prison. [201]

CHAPTER XVII

THE FIGHTING NEAR SKYERMEVICE ON THE 3RD, 4TH, AND 5TH FEBRUARY

We rejoined headquarters in the early morning of the 30th, all much exhausted for lack of food and rest; but there was no respite. News was to hand that the Germans were closing in on us on all sides, and that we must fall back on Lovicz without a moment's delay. At the same time I learned that Lodz was in the hands of the Germans, had been for some time, and was called Neu-Breslau by them. This, and other items of information, tended to confirm what for some time I had suspected, that our division had been nearly surrounded by the enemy: and that, for some reason which did not appear, we had been kept in a position of grave danger for several weeks.

The old horse I had obtained from a Cossack, as related on a previous page, had disappeared—boiled down to soup by the men, I imagine; in which case I had my share of him, and can bear witness to his gamy flavour. In consequence of this little accident (or incident) of war, I was again numbered amongst the footmen, and had to trudge with the others to Lovicz. I started exhausted, and arrived nearly dead. All I can remember of that dreadful march was that the road was crowded with troops of all arms, and the snow which covered it was trampled and churned into a thick sludge of a nearly black hue; marching through which was a tormenting misery.

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When we arrived in the vicinity of the town we were halted near a group of barns, and told we might billet in them. I entered one with about a hundred of the men, dropped on some dirty wet straw, and fell asleep on the instant. How long I slumbered I do not clearly know. I was awakened by the rough shaking and prodding of a soldier, who had a basin of steaming hot coffee in his hand, and a great hunch of coarse bread, which he offered to me. I swallowed them quite eagerly, for I was nearly starved, and went outside, where the men were falling in.

The battalion was now so reduced that there were only about 300 men on parade. What had become of the others I do not know; but I think that a good many prisoners were taken during our retreat. There was only one officer left with whom I could communicate, Lieutenant Sawmine; and only two other subalterns that were with the battalion when I joined it. A stranger, a Major in rank, had been put in command. He had been, I believe, a Staff Officer. We were still attached to a regiment which had lost one of its battalions *en masse*—as prisoners I heard.

Before we marched off the companies were equalized; which brought us up to a little over 400 per battalion, or about 1,700 for the regiment, so the losses had been terrible. Then another ration of bread, and 120 cartridges, were served out to each man, and we were marched to a railway-station on the outskirts of the town and entrained. Sawmine said that nobody in the regiment had the least idea where we were going; but one of those vague notions which seem to instinctively invade the minds of soldiers led the men to believe that they were destined for some great enterprise.

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A FIELD OF BAYONETS ON THE POLISH FRONTIER

I was still so tired that I was no sooner in the train than I went to sleep again, as I believe most of the men did. When I awoke the train was merely crawling along, and the sound of heavy artillery firing came in through the open windows. For we were packed in so tightly that the men were compelled to keep the windows open for air, though the wind was icy cold. Almost immediately the train began to run back; and often it went on a few versts, stopped for half an hour, and then went on again. Sawmine who sat beside me said that the train had been going thus for many hours, sometimes advancing, then halting, retiring, and so on. He had been asleep himself, and did not know how far we had come, or where we were. Looking out of the windows we could see

four long trains ahead of us, and one about half a verst behind us. There were also two pilot engines on the line, one of which had a large signal flag attached to it.

The distant firing was heavy enough to shake the train; but we could see nothing of the fighting. It was drawing towards dusk on the evening of the 2nd February when we saw the men in the trains ahead of us getting out: and presently our turn came. There was more than 1,000 men in each train, the officers riding with their men. We soon discovered that we all belonged to the same division; and we were formed up in the open fields beside the line. Before this manœuvre was completed it was nearly dark; though as the moon was about the full it gave considerable light through the clouds—at least when it was quite up; and we could see dimly over the country across which we were marched.

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We were kept on the march all night, with other columns ahead of us, a circumstance which led to many short halts, and a good deal of "tailing off." About four o'clock in the morning we were brought up into what seemed to be a line of battalion columns at deploying intervals. We could now see the bright red flashes of the guns; and occasionally a shell fell in front of us. An officer who was known to Sawmine passed along, and stopped to have a minute or two's chat with the Lieutenant; and thus I learned that we were near the town of Skyermevice, and on ground I knew something of. The Germans were said to be massing in vast columns; but so far the fight was confined to the artillery; and this, which we had supposed was on our front, was really on the left flank. We were ordered to lie down and wait.

About six o'clock we were again ordered to advance; and after marching six versts occupied a line of shallow trenches. These trenches had recently been held by other troops—there could be no mistaking the nature of the dull stain-patches on the snow: and though our dead and wounded had been removed, there were hundreds of the enemy's slain lying in front, as far as the eye could see them, when daylight came.

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And when light did come the Germans were not long in discovering us; nor were we in perceiving that there was a strong line of entrenchments in front of us occupied by our forces. No doubt the men whose places we had taken had gone forward to strengthen this line. The enemy was shelling it vigorously, and devoting no small part of their attention to us; and some of the projectiles which fell amongst us were enormous in size, and terrific in sound when they exploded; but they did not cause very appalling casualties. Sometimes a huge cloud of dust and black smoke rose to a great height, and obscured the view; but when it cleared away, though there might be a large hole in the ground, or 20 yards of trench blown clean away, there were never more than two or three dead and wounded. Once or twice an unfortunate man disappeared entirely, blown to atoms. I should scarcely have realized what the fate of these men was had not one of them stood close to me; and I noticed, directly after the explosion, that I was covered with minute spots of blood, none of them bigger than a pin's head. This man's body acted as a shield to me and saved my life. The hot blast of the shell momentarily stopped my breathing, and gave me a tremendous shock; but I was not much hurt. Two men on the other side were instantly killed, one of them being shockingly mutilated. Strange how these things are ordained! If I had not been bending at the moment to insert a cartridge in my rifle, I should probably have made a fourth victim.

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These big shells were certainly more than a foot in diameter. One which fell outside the trench, and did not explode, appeared to be about 15 inches in diameter, and a yard long. A good many of these big shells were fired at us; but most of the projectiles were from field artillery, each weighing 16 or 18 pounds only.

On the side of the Russians I did not see any gun bigger than a 6-inch; but our artillery was well served, did great execution, and put many of the German guns out of action. Motor-driven batteries were used on both sides; and from what I saw of the action of guns so mounted, I think they must soon largely supplant horse-drawn batteries, in open, flat countries at least. People who love horses will be glad of this: for artillery horses suffer frightfully in action; and it is not always possible to put them out of their misery quickly.

When men are in trenches they see little of one another except their immediate neighbours; but one gets to know the signs which indicate anything unusual, even in these rat-burrows; and about ten o'clock we became aware that the men in the advanced trenches were on the alert. We could see nothing; but the terrific rifle-fire told its own story; and above the almost deafening rattle of the musketry we could hear the shouts of the Germans, and the counter-cheers of our own men as the enemy retired. The firing did not last longer than ten minutes. In the excitement of the moment many of the men in the second line crowded out of their trenches to endeavour to see what was going on; and the officers (much reduced in number, as I have already hinted) had great difficulty in getting them to return to cover. The Russian soldier is usually a most docile and obedient creature; but I never saw him in a state of so great excitement as on this day. Rumour travelled from rank to rank, that on the issue of the fight depended the fate of Warsaw: and Warsaw is to the Poles, of whom there were thousands in this part of the field, almost a sacred place. But Pole, or Russ, all were alike in their eagerness to save the capital of Poland from the humiliation of the hated German's tread. I do not know if the fact is quite realized in England; but the Russian (including the Pole, and, especially, the Cossack) is Asiatic in everything except his birth; and, like all Asiatics, is extremely devout and extremely bigoted: therefore he is a fanatic: and this present war, affecting, as it does, the liberty of his country, is to him a sacred war—a contest for the safety of his religion, and sanctified by the blessings of his priests. I emphasize this point: so far as the Russian is concerned the war now devastating

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Europe is a religious war. He will fight till he wins: and I am confident that the victory will greatly strengthen and consolidate the Muscovite Empire. Never before have the Pole and the Russ stood side by side as they are standing now: never before have they fought for a common cause and bled together for it; never before stood up to face a danger as brethren. This war will make Russian and Pole *one people*. I am quite convinced of it. Fifty years ago Polish women stood up with the men to fight the Russian oppressor: in this present desperate struggle they have fought side by side with the former oppressor. Not twenty yards from me, in the trenches before Skyermevice, two sturdy Amazons handled rifle and bayonet (weapons dropped by dead soldiers) with the strength and skill of old soldiers; and others in the rear attended Russian wounded with the same care and attention they lavished upon their fathers and brothers.

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About an hour after the first attack, a second was made on our position by the Germans: and this was even more fierce and determined than the previous affair. Forced on by pressure from the rear, the first ranks of the enemy were actually precipitated into the trenches, and promptly bayoneted by our men. So great was the number thus destroyed that the trench was actually filled up in several places, a thing that occurred more than once on previous occasions.

This was one of the most determined efforts the Germans made to break the Russian line by sheer weight of numbers. The rear columns of the enemy determinedly forced the leading companies on. I saw several entire companies absolutely forced on to the Russian bayonets where they perished to the last man. As on other similar occasions, it was not a fight, but a massacre. The imprisoned Germans, sandwiched between their own men and ours, and unable to escape, threw down their arms in sections and begged for mercy. They put their hands above their heads; went down on their knees, in some cases flung themselves prostrate, and in others clung convulsively to the legs of their destroyers; but in every case met the same fate: they were stabbed through and through. Some few of them, including most of the officers, fought madly for their lives: it only delayed their fate a few moments.

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The first company down, that which had forced it forward was compelled to take its place, and meet a similar tragical end. At least three companies of one battalion were destroyed one after another in this way: and I think the fourth company was very nearly annihilated; but I had my own affairs to look after just at that moment, and did not see the finish of that particular fight. The Germans were successful for a few minutes; and hurried men so fast into the gap they had made that we of the second line had to rush forward in parties without waiting for orders; and we saved the day by a hair's-breadth only.

I had kept close to Lieutenant Sawmine from the moment of our leaving Lovicz. As we closed with the enemy one of them forced the officer down, and was only prevented from bayoneting him by his clinging to the man's rifle. I sprang forward to save him, and was at once knocked down by a big German. I saw the point of the bayonet poised over me as he kept me down with his foot: my teeth closed tightly to meet the impending death: then suddenly I was free of that iron foot, and for the fifth time during this war covered with blood and brains which were not my own. One of the Russian soldiers who had followed us very closely had blown out the fellow's brains in the very nick of time. There really must be a little cherub who sits up aloft!

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Sawmine was badly bruised, but not dangerously hurt; and together we pressed forward with seven or eight of our most devoted soldiers. There are always some men in a company who have more heart in their work than the others; and these are generally found close to their officers at critical moments: indeed, these are the men who do most of the hand-to-hand fighting, and to whom the victory is really due. One of the heroic fellows who formed our little band slew at least twenty of the enemy, I know; and very possibly double that number. I am sorry that I cannot record the name of this brave man, an honour to his country; nor that of others not his inferiors in bravery and self-sacrifice. Alas! none of them answered the roll-call when the three days desperate fighting was over. The bravest and the best—this is the treasure that war costs a country.

An English officer I am not going to name—I have the greatest respect for his name and his memory—wrote that two armed bodies of hostile men cannot remain on the same ground longer than sixty seconds at most. He made a mistake. Russians and Germans, on the occasion I am recording, fought like bulldogs for two solid hours without a break: and it was all bayonet work, scarcely a shot being fired. Then the Germans broke and fled, as I had seen them fly on previous defeats. There was no equivocation about it: they broke and ran, "bellowing like bull-calves."

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Every nation, I suppose, has its peculiarities. I do not depreciate the Germans. They can fight, and fight bravely—but not with the generous bravery that most soldiers exercise one to another. They are cruel in their desperation, vicious in the moment of victory; and they yell for mercy in the hour of their defeat; the only soldiers I have known to exercise this form of—I will not call it cowardice—Hudibrastic caution.

In this battle the wonderful iron shields reappeared; and about 700 of them were taken by the Russians, and used to form a breastwork; which the next day was knocked to pieces by the German artillery.

The enemy was followed half-way to their own lines, and many of them killed as they ran. Unfortunately no Cossacks were at hand, as there was here a fine opening for their peculiar form of ability, which I have no doubt they would have exerted to the utmost.

The number of killed in proportion to wounded was very great: I should think quite one in every

three, which is more than double the normal number, even when many casualties are caused by artillery fire; but bayonet work is the most deadly form of military execution.

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The prisoners taken are not worth mentioning: the total of German casualties was about 8,000 on a front that did not exceed two versts (2,333 yards English measurement). They lay thickest in and about the trenches. In the bottom of the advanced trenches there was a foot depth of blood which had drained from the corpses. The holes dug at measured intervals for the convenience of the troops (latrines) were full of it; and the men occupying the position were compelled to stand in it half-leg deep for several days until an opportunity came to clean the trenches, when the congealed horror was removed in the camp tumbrels, and buried by the ton in holes dug for the purpose. In one part of the trench I helped to remove a heap of sixty-nine corpses, lying eleven deep in the middle. No one of them had a breath of life left, though some were not mortally wounded. They had been smothered under the weight of their dead comrades, or trampled to death. Outside the trenches there lay heaps of dead bodies, six or seven deep, and innumerable scattered dead and wounded.

All the fighting that day was over before 2 p.m., and our Red Cross men, and hundreds of volunteers, went out to succour the wounded. They were immediately fired on by the German artillery and about twenty of them killed or injured. A flag of truce was then sent out to inform the enemy our sole object was to alleviate the sufferings of the wounded; and that the German injured were receiving the same attention as our own men. The flag was received at a farm used as an outpost by the Germans; and the commander, a big, swarthy-faced man, declared he did not care a curse what our intentions were, he would fire on anybody he saw walking about the field of battle. I inquired the name of this officer and was told it, and that he was a chief Staff Officer to Field-Marshal von Hindenburg, who, it was declared, had personally directed the day's fighting.

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I believe a protest was lodged with this military churl, but, of course, nothing could be done under his threat. After nightfall volunteers again went out, and nearly a thousand wounded were brought in to the surgeons, quite two-thirds of them being Germans. The total Russian losses were, I should think, about 6,000 men.

While accompanying the flag of truce I used my eyes. About thirty officers were receiving first-aid, or undergoing what seemed to be preliminary operations, in the farm-house and yard; and I heard very pitiful groans in some barns and outhouses, while down the road a string of twenty Red Cross waggons was coming up. I concluded therefore that the enemy had carried back a number of his wounded when he retreated. There were pools of blood everywhere on the road: for the snow had been trampled down so hard that it could not soak away; and it speedily coagulated into great clots. Many horrible mementoes of the fight lay about. Seeing what I thought was a good sound boot lying on the road, I picked it up. There was a foot in it. I could fill pages with such little stories. There were some collections lying about suggestive of the Germans turning out their dead comrades' pockets. Several letters, the photograph of a woman nursing a baby, and an elder child leaning against her knee; a lock of fair hair—a little girl's, I thought—and less pathetic objects: a pack of cards, a broken pipe, a bent spoon, and some disgusting pictures, suggested many men of many minds—some of them none too clean.

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The night of the 4th February was very quiet until about four o'clock a.m., when the steady rush of thousands of feet alarmed all who were awake. The Germans were attempting a surprise. A few straggling shots from the sentries along our front, accompanied by shouts of warning; a blaze of rifle fire; the heavy booming of artillery, and, in one minute from the alarm being given, the hell of battle was again in full fury. Our engineers threw search-lights over the trenches and in front of them, so that we could see what we were doing. The effect was very weird, and heightened the horror of the scene; but it helped the enemy as much as it did us.

The Germans used hand-grenades, or trench bombs, as I understand they call them on the Eastern front of the war, but we were not provided with these troublesome and destructive little weapons. However, there was again much bayonet fighting, a species of combat which the Germans did not relish, and in which they always got the worst of it. The Russians had the advantage in the length of their bayonets—a trifle, but trifles are not trifles in close fighting. Moreover, our men have a genius for bayonet-fighting, and keep these weapons always ready for use: that is, they are never unfixed, as I have previously explained, except to be cleaned, and not always for that purpose. The Russian soldier shoots with his bayonet fixed, which is not conducive to first-class marksmanship; but then the German also is not a good rifle-shot. Still, I wish I could induce the Russians to adopt the practice of unfixing bayonets when shooting at long ranges.

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This night fight was short and sharp. It cost the Germans another 2,000 men, and a good licking; and our men about half that number of casualties, and the increased confidence engendered of another victory.

The Germans had no sooner run back to their own lines than their artillery sought to inflict on us the punishment which their infantry could not do. They opened a tremendous cannonade; it being calculated that 500 guns were playing on our trenches for nearly six hours. Shells were exploding twenty or thirty at a time, and sometimes quite in showers. The effect was terrific. The air was full of smoke, and clouds of dirt and mud from the trenches blown to pieces; but the loss of life was not great. The section of trench which the enemy had made their objective did not, as I have said, exceed a breadth of two versts; and on this narrow front they concentrated all their efforts and all their fire, though some of the last-named came from flanking batteries situated a long way

off. Each gun fired, on an average, a shot a minute: consequently a shell fell on every seven linear yards of our position sixty times an hour. Of course some fell short, others went over the trenches, and some burst high in the air; but still the fact remains that every minute a shell came in a section of our lines which was less than seven yards wide. During the six hours that the bombardment lasted the scene was like that of an inferno: and the noise so great that the men were glad to stop up their ears with any substance they could find. Many pulled grass from beneath the snow and used it for this purpose. The wire entanglement was pretty well blown to pieces, curled up and rolled into heaps which were knocked right over the trenches, and sometimes into them, where it entangled our own men, and gave them much trouble. The number of men killed by this apparently terrible bombardment was fifty, and twice that number wounded.

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An hour before dawn the Germans attempted an assault, rushing towards us in great strength, and in their usual close formation; but they were stopped by our artillery fire, and turned before they reached the edge of the first trench, and fled in a panic. I saw our guns cutting great lanes in the wavering masses; but they were soon out of sight, and the dimness of the light probably saved them from more considerable losses.

We had reasons for thinking that the commanders of this host were unable to get their men to make a second assault, and were obliged to send to another part of their line for fresh troops. There was some commotion in their ranks; and afterwards we could hear their bands playing merry tunes, probably to keep up the spirits of the men.

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It was after noon when they made their second advance; and our troops finding they could not stop them with a withering fire, sprang from their trenches, and met them with the bayonet. The fight was a short one. At least ten thousand of the Germans were destroyed, and a thousand prisoners were taken. We followed them right up to their lines; and for a short time some portions of their positions were in our hands: but they brought such a devastating artillery fire to bear on us that our gains could not be maintained, and we had to retire; but we did so slowly and stubbornly and with parade-like precision, the men firing in alternate skirmishing lines, and completely stopping an attempted pursuit. The Germans made two more assaults in the course of the day, but could not drive either of them home; nor had they the pluck to stand up to another bayonet fight. Their losses were appalling, and greatly in excess of those of the two previous days: and certainly exceeded 20,000 men, besides nearly 3,000 unwounded prisoners. It was reported at the time that no fewer than thirteen of their General Officers were killed or badly injured.

The total losses of the Russians on this day alone was 7,000 men: 8,000 of the enemy's wounded, and all our own, were brought in after nightfall, and many more were removed by the Germans; for this day they admitted, and respected, a flag of truce. But the dead on both sides, except in the case of officers, and a few others, were left to rot where they fell. Some regiments buried their own dead, but only under the snow; for the ground was frozen so hard, that it was most difficult to dig graves. A number of bodies were burnt in pine-wood fires; but an officer of high rank was so disgusted with the ghastly sight, that he gave orders that no more were to be disposed of in this way; yet it would have been better than leaving them to be mutilated and partly devoured by the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air. Amongst these dreadful creatures were large numbers of those savage and semi-wild dogs which infest all the Polish villages, and flocks of crows and ravens; also wolves and wild swine. All these animals must have scented the carrion from a great distance: and nobody could tell precisely where they came from. The firing frightened them away for a time; but an hour's quietude would always be followed by their reappearance. In the early grey dawn, and in the twilight of evening, I have seen the birds of prey pulling out the eyes of the slain men, or contending for the entrails which the dogs had torn from the rotting bodies. It is hardly credible that such horrid scenes should be witnessed on a modern battlefield; but my own eyes were witnesses to it; and I shot several wolves and many dogs that were engaged in such dreadful repasts. All these animals became so used to the noises of battle, even to the thunderous discharges of artillery, that they never retired very far, though how they contrived to hide themselves is a puzzle. I never saw more than a few odd ones in the woods and forests we passed through; but the dogs harboured in the ruined villages where once they had been owned by masters of some sort.

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I have painted these scenes very faintly, for fear of exciting too much horror and disgust; but how people professing to believe in a righteous and sin-punishing God can tolerate the wickedness of war is astounding to a thinking man. A God-fearing (!) ruler goes on his knees, prays to God for the blessings of peace, and the honest prosperity of his people; then goes forth and issues an edict which causes the marring of God's image in hundreds of thousands! Perhaps he doesn't really believe that man is made in the image of God. I hope he does not. Better be an infidel than a wholesale murderer of the similitude of the Lord. I dwell not on the misery of widows and orphans and aged parents.

Walking over the field one evening I came upon a raven perched upon the face of what had once been a man. It had picked his eyes from their sockets, and torn away his lips, and portions of the flesh of his face, and turned leisurely as I approached, but did not fly away until I was quite close to it. Then it flapped off slowly, with a sullen croak.

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CHAPTER XVIII

CHIEFLY GOSSIP

The 5th February, 1915, closed with the heavy booming of siege artillery used as field-pieces. What the artillery of the future will be we may foresee from the experiences of the present war. It will be limited in the size of the guns only by the endurance of the pieces, and the power of man to move them. The howitzers used to throw the "Jack Johnsons" are said to be pieces of 23-1/2-inch calibre: if they are so it is not likely that they can throw more than fifty or sixty shells before it is necessary to reline them. Huge guns are very speedily worn out, and are not, therefore, of much value except for particular purposes—chiefly the smashing of forts in siege operations. But 6-inch, and even 8-inch, guns have been freely used in this campaign; and before such ordnance, driven by mechanical means, no field-guns can stand, no field-batteries exist. It is probable, therefore, that this is the last great war in which horsed batteries will take a part. It will be one of the "lessons of the war" that only heavy guns are of much use on the field of battle.

I am digressing a little. At first we thought the night cannonade of the 5th was a prelude to another attack; but about ten o'clock at night it ceased; and save for the groans and cries of the wounded the night was almost quiet. Our Red Cross men were out all night; and the German men until a couple of hours before daybreak. We removed all our wounded that we could find: the enemy left their worst cases to die on the field. The Russians saved all they could; but strict orders were given to our men not to approach near the German lines.

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I should note, perhaps, that while in the West the Allies' and the German trenches are said to often be within a few yards of each other, this was seldom the case in the East. There was generally a considerable space between the two lines: here near Skyermevice it amounted to 3,000 yards; but the Germans had advanced trenches in which they massed their men when about to make an assault. Evidently trench warfare is not so highly developed or so much resorted to in the East as it appears to be in the West. The vast numbers of the Russians, and the circumstance that the scene of actual fighting is constantly shifting over a very long front, are the probable causes of this. Another cause was the extreme hardness of the earth, which made it impossible to dig fresh trenches during the winter-time.

It has been said that there is no such word as "impossible" in the military vocabulary; but the forces of Nature are frequently not to be overcome, even by military pluck and perseverance. Not even a soldier can dig holes in solid steel; and the ground in Poland was hardly less solid and difficult to work: hence trenches were not made after the early days of December, nor the dead buried as a rule.

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Field-works were made in various ways. Abattis, covered with barbed wire, were very common; and batteries formed of sand-bags; but neither were very successful. High explosive shells dashed the trees of the abattis to atoms, and drove the fragments back on the defenders, causing many casualties; and something similar occurred in the case of the sand-bags, which were torn to pieces, and dashed right and left, blinding many men. So during the winter, the rule was to stick to the old trenches; or occupy those naturally formed by hollows of the ground, or the deep banks of water-courses, the streams of which were usually firmly frozen. As wet could not soak away through the frozen ground the condition at the bottoms of those trenches which had been occupied for any length of time was filthy in the extreme. Dirty water, blood and refuse, was being continually added to the loathsomeness already existing, and this, and the constant trampling of the men, prevented the freezing of the mass; and I consider it simply wonderful that there was no serious outbreak of sickness amongst us. But Russian doctors and Russian officers are becoming fully conscious of the value of sanitation amongst troops; and the soldiers were kept as clean and well looked after as circumstances would permit. Moreover, the huge numbers of men admitted of frequent changes of those serving in the trenches; and they were never in these miserable burrows for any great length of time.

As the fighting seemed to be over for a time, I went to the rear with the intention of obtaining some rest. The tiring nature of the work in which we had been engaged may be inferred from the circumstance that in rear of the trenches I found an entire regiment bivouacked, lying on the snow fast asleep to a man, with their knapsacks for pillows. As they were huddled close together they probably enjoyed an amount of mutual warmth, though the day was a bitterly cold one.

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I sought more comfortable quarters, and found them in an old broken-down waggon and a handful of straw. Here I slept as only the utterly weary can sleep, and did not awake until twenty-one hours had passed away. When I did open my eyes I found myself wedged in between three soldiers who had not seen letting me enjoy such splendid accommodation all to myself.

I got up, shook myself together, and went in search of the battalion and breakfast. Sawmine, not knowing what had become of me, had thought I must be killed. He was rather downhearted: for the loss of the best men and officers had been enormous; the survivors, however, were generally cheering themselves with the hope that the Czar would shortly pay us a visit, and distribute rewards to those who thought they had earned them. He was known to be journeying along the front; and it was confidently expected that he would appear amongst us within the space of a few days.

The scenes behind the trenches were simply awful. Transport was much congested, and the majority of the wounded were still unremoved to hospital. The field-tents were crowded to

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excess, the surgeons hardly able to move about, and much impeded in their operations. Outside one tent a great heap of arms and legs which had been amputated lay on the ground; and I saw several men carried away who had died under the operator's knife. Many of the injured men lay on straw in the open air; others were stretched on the bare ground. These were considered to be the milder cases, the most badly injured being allotted the first attention and the best accommodation. But many of these mild cases were bad enough to shock anybody with a tender heart; and I particularly noted the great number of men who were suffering from injuries to the head and eyes. Several had both eyes shot out, and scores had lost one. These had received temporary dressing; but were mostly in great pain. Of course I did what I could for them; but that was not much, as I was without materials and instruments. Fortunately, in one of the tents there was a doctor whom I knew by sight. I made motions to indicate what I required, and he did not raise any objection to my taking a quantity of bandages and other things. With the aid of these I succeeded in making some of the waiting men more comfortable, being greatly assisted by two countrywomen who were also helping these unfortunate men.

It evidently puzzled these people that a foreigner, who could not speak their language, should be amongst them; but they soon decided that I was an Englishman; I had acquired Russian enough to understand that; and they were all very grateful, those that did not require attention not the least so: for they all realized that what was done was done for their beloved Russia—a holy land in the opinion of every true Muscovite.

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Some days elapsed before all the wounded could be removed, and sent back to base hospitals. All, Russians and Germans, received precisely similar treatment, and were seen to as they came to hand, without any preference, national or otherwise.

One of the surprising events of this time was that several Russian aeroplanes appeared over our lines, and troubled the minds (though, I am afraid, not the bodies) of the enemy a good deal. They were useful for two reasons, if for no other—they distracted the Germans, and caused them a great waste of ammunition. I am sure tens of thousands of rifle-cartridges were fired at them, and hundreds of rounds of big-gun shells. They all missed the pigeon, and did not even hit the crow! It is fair to add that I do not think that our dropped bombs did much hurt. It is true we heard a good deal about wrecked troop-trains, blown-up tumbrels, and half-annihilated battalions; but all these incidents occurred at such great distances from our trenches that I was unable to verify them.

For some days little occurred near our position, except a daily bombardment at long range, mostly by the heavier guns on both sides. What the object was I cannot tell: it seemed to me to be a mere waste of big shells. If any advantage was derived from it, it was certainly on the side of Russia, whose artillerymen made much the best practice. The shooting was slow and the aim deliberate; but we lost only two men: while a heavy explosion in the German lines seemed to show that we had blown up one of their magazines. I watched their position long and carefully through a good glass, but saw nothing except puffs of smoke and an occasional flash of fire.

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I was out several nights with reconnoitring parties; but the enemy was well on the alert, and we gained no information; while a well-directed volley from some hidden jagers knocked half a dozen of our men off the roster. On the night of the 8th we captured a miserable old Polish hag, busily engaged in robbing the dead who lay unburied. She had an apron full of watches, rings and money, and was, I believe, shot in the morning. I cannot say she did not deserve her fate; but I thought at the time that not much good could come of terminating the existence of such a wretched old creature. She could say, in her defence, that the Germans had robbed her and destroyed her home, and perhaps murdered her relatives.

The 10th was an exciting day for us. We received certain information that a large force of the enemy was nearly surrounded by our troops; and we were ordered to get ready to march immediately to an unknown destination: but everybody was satisfied that it was intended that we should take a part in the encircling operation; and it seemed like it: for we marched off at two o'clock in the afternoon, a very unusual hour in which to commence such a movement.

The force thus detailed was about 40,000 infantry and 150 guns; and there was probably cavalry and more artillery on our right flank: but of this I know nothing with certainty.

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The enemy on our front was so quiet that in all probability he had detached a strong force in aid of the threatened troops, and possibly had vacated his position.

In my opinion, however, there were indications that the Russian Commander was being out-generalled, or was rushing his troops into a precarious position.

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CHAPTER XIX

THE FIGHTING BEFORE PLOCK

On the second day of the march I ascertained that we were falling back on Warsaw; and Sawmine, who had been made a Captain, agreed with me that something must be wrong in the North. There were no Germans near us. Trenches and earthworks in the neighbourhood were strongly held; but I noticed that none of the guns of position appeared to exceed 6-inch calibre, which was not heavy enough to resist successfully the huge siege-guns which the Germans were sure to bring up if they invaded this district.

No news reached us, and we were kept marching almost incessantly. We had no tents, and seldom slept under cover, though the cold seemed to freeze one's marrow. Sometimes the officers, and a few favoured men, slept in beds in houses on the route; and sometimes hay and straw was thrown down by the side of the road, and we rested on this in the best way we could. Most of the troops we passed had tents, and some were huddled in hovels made of pine-boughs, thatched with the leaves or twigs of those trees.

We did not enter Warsaw. About four versts outside the town we were halted in two long ranks on either side of a road, and served out with new boots, which we were sadly in need of. My own feet, like those of many of the men, were nearly bare, and cut, frostbitten and bleeding. I had not possessed socks or stockings for many weeks; and these were not in general use in the Russian Army. At this halt I obtained a quantity of tallow, which is an excellent thing with which to anoint the feet, chilblains, cuts, or wounds, and bruises of any kind. [229]

Biscuits and raw fish were here also served out. The fish was not cooked in the least, but seemed to have been preserved in wet salt. So far from being a revolting food, it was quite tasty, and I became very fond of it. We had to eat this meal as we marched along; and that without any other drink than water; and we were kept on the tramp until far into the night. It was too dark to read a watch, and we were strictly forbidden to strike matches or to smoke; but I suppose it was two or three o'clock in the morning when we received permission to lie down in the streets of a village. The people gladly received us into their houses; but we were ordered not to undress, and to be ready to fall in at a moment's notice. I lay down on the outside of a bed which a woman pointed out to me, and immediately went to sleep; but I suppose she soon aroused me, and presented a bowl containing about three pints of strong tea without milk and sugar. I was almost too sleepy to drink it, badly as I wanted a refresher; and the large parcel of food she gave me I put into my haversack: then dropped asleep again.

It was scarcely daylight when I was again aroused. A military band was playing noisily in the street, and the battalion was falling in outside the door. The band did not belong to our regiment; but as it marched not far behind, we had the benefit of its music, such as it was, consisting principally of brass instruments and drums, with plenty of tinkling cymbals. [230]

Soon after midday we crossed the Vistula by the bridge at Novogeorgevsk, and went along a road running, for a long distance, almost parallel with the right bank of that river. The people in the town, and in the villages we passed through, were in a state of extreme excitement, and Sawmine said they were asserting that severe fighting had occurred at Plock, and the Russians had got the worst of it, and were retreating.

Plock is a large town on the right bank of the Vistula, seventy-three versts from Novogeorgevsk. There is no railway running between the two towns, nor between Plock and the Prussian frontier, distant another 100 versts. Nothing can show the poverty of Russia more than this want of railways: for the nearest station to Plock is Vroclavick on the left bank of the Vistula, and distant fully fifty versts (two days' long marches); yet Plock is in the centre of an important district on the main road from Warsaw to the Prussian fortress of Thorn, a place of such strength that the Russians have not dared to approach it.

On the 15th we met many thousands of Russians in retreat. They were in good order, and under the perfect control of their officers; but still they were defeated troops, and showed by their sullen demeanour that they knew it. We were drawn up in quarter-column to let them pass, which they took three hours to do. Towards the close of the day we came up with 7000 Cossacks who were covering their retreat. [231]

Up to now we had heard no sounds of battle; but on the 16th, at dawn, the noise of heavy firing was audible a long way ahead. By order of a Staff Officer, we hurried along in the direction of this sound; but by nightfall it was not perceptibly nearer, though we met many small detachments of cavalry and infantry, who had evidently passed through a rough experience. Many were wounded and bandaged; many more had undressed hurts which were still bleeding. Several were being led, or carried, on the backs of comrades; and soon we began to pass long strings of waggons full of injured, which left long trails of blood on the road.

Then we came to a village where artillery were halted, and were ordered to assist in putting the houses into a state of defence. The poor people of the place had already fled, probably long previously. I never heard the name of this village; none of our people knew it: and there was a sad lack of maps. Few, except officers of rank and those on the Staff, possessed them; and the few I saw in the possession of subaltern officers were very defective, and did not give the names of more than a third of the places we found on the ground. A good map which I obtained with much trouble at Skyermevice was taken from me; and, acting on the advice of a friend, I did not attempt to obtain another. The possession of such papers was liable to be misinterpreted; and the spy-fever was a complaint not altogether unknown in the Russian Army. [232]

During the night we learned that it was the Russian Tenth Army which had been very roughly

handled by the foe. There was said to have been more than a week's incessant fighting; and the exhausted appearance of the retreating troops bore out the truth of the statement. They had with them a great many wounded; and their general aspect showed that their losses must have been terrible. Their depleted ranks proved that. Probably a third of the entire army had perished, or been captured. The defeat was the more galling, as it was asserted that the Germans who had inflicted it were boys, and a scratch lot of invalids who were supposed to have been finally discharged from service in the Prussian Army: and this rabble lot was commanded by the Kaiser himself. I could hardly believe this last assertion, as I did not believe William had got a victory in him.

Some of the retreating troops, who had been in reserve, and were not much shaken, stopped to share in the defence of the position we had taken up. We got well under cover in spite of the hard frost; but there was not much barbed wire available for the outer defences.

No Germans appeared near us until the 18th, when two regiments of infantry and two of cavalry came and had a look at us, though they took care not to afford much of a mark for our guns. It was the advanced guard of a much larger force, though I am unable to state the numbers. At least sixty guns opened on our village alone; and other artillery could be heard in every direction for many miles around.

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Nor do I know our own numbers. I heard that the entire Eighth Army was in line, with the left flank resting on the Vistula. The village we were defending was about thirteen versts from the river; and I can say that the ground between us and the right bank of the Vistula was very strongly held, its weak point being that effective trenches could not be made in the time at our disposal; but this was a circumstance that hurt the Germans as much as it did us, and perhaps more, as we shall see presently. How far the line of battle extended to the right I do not know. It stretched as far as a hamlet called Vilstick, and from thence to Biatzun, seventy versts from the river bank. There must, therefore, have been at least 300,000 men on this alignment; and more likely there were nearly double that number. Circumstances occurred which rendered it desirable that I should not be too precise in inquiring about numbers, distances and names of places. These were often only known to officers of rank and those high in command. Regimental officers were as ignorant as I was, and, like me, had to rely on guessing, surmising and the use of their own sharp eyes. More than once my "inquiring mind" would have placed me in an awkward fix had not my hatred of Germany and things German been beyond a doubt.

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As to the Germans, I learned from prisoners, corroborated by other evidence, that multitudes of them came over the frontiers through Inowraklow, Golloob, Lauten, and particularly from Thorn. Their strength was put at 500,000, and I am convinced that it was not under that number. All these were new troops. It contained a corps of what were called "Guards"; but the old guards were destroyed long before this time; and though their ranks had been recruited they were not in this part of the war area.^[3] The new Guards were mostly students from universities and schools, with a sprinkling of veterans who had been from ten to thirty years out of the service, even as Landwehr. There were regiments of old men, regiments of boys under twenty years; and of these the lads were viperish little wretches, as thirsty for blood as any of the older Huns.

[3] They were probably the "Guard Reserve Corps." They wore the distinctive uniform of "Guards" when in parade dress.

The advanced guard of Germans having fallen back, we (in the village, I mean) were subjected to a cannonade, the object of which seemed to be to ascertain the range, or induce us to show our strength in artillery by making a reply. A couple of hundred shells were thrown at us, and knocked down a few houses, and set fire to two.

Our Cossacks seem to have discovered that these guns were not well supported; for they charged them, and captured four, besides spearing, or sabring, a lot of the gunners. That gave us peace for the rest of the night.

There was a scarcity of water in the village, and we were compelled to let the two houses burn out. It was with difficulty we prevented the fire from spreading, and with still greater difficulty rescued a bed-ridden cripple from one of the blazing houses. He had been left behind when the inhabitants fled, and declared that there were three or four children hiding in the house. If so they were burnt to death, poor little creatures: not the only instance of the kind that came under my notice during this horrid war.

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Just before dawn, their favourite hour for delivering an assault, the enemy rushed up to the village in great numbers; and, of course, in closely formed masses. It was a surprise to our troops: for the Germans were upon our outposts before they were discovered. The pickets fired on them; and those that escaped ran in behind the barricades we had formed. Hundreds of men were sleeping in the loop-holed houses; and these saved the day: for the enemy could not get at them, and they were shot down in great numbers by rifle and machine-gun fire, and from a building in the centre of the hamlet (a public hall of some kind) which commanded the cross-streets, and was admirably placed for defence. But the fight was a long and stubborn one, lasting nearly three hours; and thousands of the enemy came up to support their first line of assault. It was this really that undid them: for the Russian Commander, perceiving that the hamlet was becoming of great importance, and that its loss would probably mean a defeat of the Russians, sent very strong reinforcements, as well as opened a heavy artillery fire on the German supports. Finally, about 8,000 infantry charged through the place, killing most of the enemy who had got into the streets, and driving off the whole herd of them, with a loss of 10,000 in killed and

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wounded, and about 400 unhurt prisoners.

As the enemy retired, the Cossacks, with a regiment of dragoons, again charged them; and destroyed some hundreds more. They went too far, however, got under a fire of case-shot, and lost a considerable number of men and horses.

The close of the day was devoted to a tremendous fire of artillery on both sides, and not a house was left standing in our hamlet; and as we had no trenches to take shelter in, our losses were severe. We were ordered to fall back about a verst, though without breaking the line; and took post behind a wood, the trees of which we felled to form an abattis. In this we left a strong support, while at dawn we tried the German tactics, and advanced to make an assault on their position.

We had, however, three versts to cover, and we found their outposts well advanced; so that we did not succeed in surprising them. The alarm was soon given; and they opened fire with shrapnel and case, sweeping the plain with a storm of metal, and causing us great loss, though we did not follow their foolish tactics of advancing in close columns. On the contrary, we spread out fan-wise, in imitation of the Cossacks, closing in gradually as we ran. Most of the enemy's outposts were overtaken, and bayoneted to a man, notwithstanding their appeals for mercy. But when we came to their lines, we found that they had piled up snow, and beaten it down hard, to make a breastwork; and hidden a network of barbed wire under loose snow in front of their position. We got on this before we discovered it, and the results were terrible. It was impossible to do anything, or to live under such a fire as was poured upon us. The brigade, formed of the two regiments to which we were attached, broke and fled, leaving two-thirds of their number behind. When we got back to our own position, and saw how many friends, and familiar faces, were missing, many of the men broke down and wept bitterly. Captain Sawmine was wounded in three places; but he kept on his feet, and refused to quit his company.

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A great gloom settled on our division: for it became known, somehow or other, that a great disaster had overtaken the Tenth Army (not *army corps*); and that one entire corps of it had been cut to pieces. It was said that a great gap had been made in our line, and that the Germans were rushing forward to cut off 100,000 men. The news did not alarm us so much as create anger. Nobody doubted the correctness of the rumour; especially when the Germans shouted it to our outposts; and dropped messages, containing the information, from aeroplanes.

It was further confirmed the next day by the orders which we received to fall back as rapidly as was consistent with the safety of the division. Four batteries of artillery and 1,500 Cossacks came to cover our retreat; but the Germans pressed us so hard that we turned and fought a desperate rear-guard battle. The foe had to meet "angry fellows" with a vengeance; and they got such a lesson that towards evening they permitted us to march off in parade order without daring to follow us one yard. They had more than doubled us in numbers and guns; and it must seem incredible to people who did not actually witness the operations that such tremendous and frequent losses could be sustained by any army which continued to exist in the field. I can only give my assurance that I fully believe all I state; and think I understate, rather than exaggerate, the given numbers of killed, wounded and prisoners. That such terrible losses should not incapacitate the armies engaged shows the enormous resources they had in men and material: and, so far as concerns Germany, I am convinced, in money too.

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From the first I considered it a pity that Russia could not put more men in the field. She might have placed 12,000,000 young and vigorous men on the Russian-Austrian frontiers; but she was quite incapable of finding transport, food and material, or the proper proportion of artillery, for such a vast host: and this is where she failed. More money, and a better system of railways, and the end of Germany would have come within six months of the outbreak of the war.

Nor is much to be said in favour of my own country. The wealth, and the best blood of England, are being frittered away in partial operations. We can effect no real progress with 250,000 or 300,000 men. At least 2,000,000 should be in the field—3,000,000 would be better. How are the men to be got without conscription? Restore the old militia, which ought never to have been abolished; and ballot for it. Press-gangs, if necessary. Better do this than perish as a nation, which is what we are in imminent danger of doing. The people who cannot see this will not see it until, perhaps, they are forced to see it—a trifle too late.

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England is not a military nation in the usual sense of the words. Nowadays a first-class Power *must be a military nation*, or go to the wall. What makes a military nation? Having millions of men, *fully armed and equipped*, ready for action at *one hour's notice*. England will not have this! Then some bad day she will go to the wall, and go there pretty quickly. This is how nations will cease to be nations in future. Ten billion shells, a hundred billion cartridges. "All dead stock," says the financier. "What dreadful wickedness to waste so much money on munitions!" says the economist. But when war comes on a large scale the shells and cartridges have to be found at double and treble cost. It is a sad way of spending huge sums of money; but it is the only real "National Insurance": the only way of securing real peace and liberty. And whatever happens, and whatever is the consequence, I, for one, will not live under the régime of such a scoundrel as the Hell-Hound of Berlin—a wretch who, while posing as a God-fearing man, has brought heart-torment on millions of better men than himself. And these are not the words of passion. I am not a fiery boy. I am an old man, a grey-haired veteran. Read it with shame you young and able-bodied who have failed your country in her hour of peril. Your best excuse is that you do not realize how real and how near the danger is. Isolated acts of heroism are not victories. Our little army is a splendid little army, but it is a little army. One serious disaster to it, and in a week this

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CHAPTER XX

HARD MARCHING AND DESULTORY FIGHTING

We had no rest for thirty hours. During this time we marched and fought incessantly, falling back about sixty versts to Novogeorgevsk, where we were joined by the 233rd Reserve Regiment from Warsaw, where they had arrived from Novgorod only a few hours previously. Other divisions also received strong reinforcements, which were of great value to us, not only by reason of their physical aid, but also because they greatly revived the spirits of our worn-out fighting-men, many of whom dropped from exhaustion the moment we were out of reach of the enemy and a halt was called. I did myself; and believe I should have died had not a soldier given me half a bottle of rum, and a loaf of rye bread. Where he obtained them I do not know; but many of the men got food at Novogeorgevsk which was not served out by the commissariat.

It was seldom that any spirits were obtainable other than vodka, which is frightful stuff and has more than once fetched the skin off my gums and lips. Rum, therefore, was simply nectar. Touching this subject: the Russian soldier, and the Russian peasant, are often represented as great drunkards. It is simply a libel on an abstemious and frugal people. The whole of the time I was in Russia I did not see more than fifty drunken people; and they were German officers and soldiers, who, occasionally, when captured, were as drunk as lords.

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During the retreat of thirty hours most of the men fired about 500 cartridges. These were brought to the firing-line by light carts, which galloped along, and threw the packets on the ground for the men to pick up.

The Germans sometimes pressed us pretty closely; but a bear robbed of her whelps is an awkward customer to deal with; and notwithstanding their superior numbers, they soon learned a great respect for us. Our losses were heavy; theirs were not light. A pretty good sprinkling of bodies was left on the road Novogeorgevsk; and when the artillery got a chance they added heaps to the sprinkling.

Captain Sawmine was badly, but not dangerously, wounded. Red Cross men, doctors and officers tried to induce him to get into a cart, and go to the rear; but he would not. "I mean to die with my men," was all he would say; and, indeed, I thought it was coming to that. He fainted twice; and sometimes we were compelled to carry him a verst or two; but as soon as he gained a little strength he insisted on marching like the rest of us. We all carried rifles; and he shot off nearly as many rounds as the men, and shot them well, too. It was not until we reached Novogeorgevsk that his hurts were properly dressed.

We went back to our old lodgings, where we enjoyed the refreshment of a good meal and a long sleep. Large bodies of troops were massed along the Vistula, and away towards Pultusk, on the River Narew, a great part of the garrison of Warsaw having come out to meet the danger. The Germans were effectually checked by these fresh troops, which gave the exhausted men a chance to recoup.

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Also thousands of men were hourly arriving by train from Vilna and other northern garrisons. Everybody knew that the enemy must be beaten back immediately, or they would be in Warsaw in a few hours, although the defences of the city were being daily strengthened.

At first a good deal of the fighting was skirmishing along the banks of the rivers and streams, of which there are many small ones in this region which are fringed with willows, and in summer half-hidden in beds of thick rushes. Of course the rushes were now dead, or lying low, a mass of withered vegetation; but the willows and bushes afforded sufficient concealment to the marksmen to enable them to keep up a continual skirmish. I am not sure that this kind of fighting is of much use. It costs a number of lives on both sides, but really effects nothing, unless it is used as a screen to more important movements.

Though some of the streams were fordable, and all the smaller ones frozen over, the enemy made no attempt to cross any of them. They appeared to fear a turning movement from the direction of Pultusk, and retired in a way that was inexplicable to us at the time. We soon learned, however, that they had been forced back from the line of the Narew with great loss; and were in full and disorderly retreat. The pressure must have been great: for the large forces in front of Novogeorgevsk suddenly began to retire; and our artillery cut them up cruelly. They had not a sufficient number of guns to make an effectual reply, which seems to show that they had sent the bulk of their batteries to the Narew. It is a common movement of the Germans when they are hard pressed at any point, and also when they are gaining an advantage, to bring up every gun

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they can move from other corps. This sometimes gives them the victory; but occasionally brings disaster upon them. The Germans are the gamblers of war. They seem ready to throw away men and guns on the bare chance of winning—and losing, care not, but hope for "better luck next time." Their officers certainly do not care twopence for the lives of their men.

About this time, too, I noticed some deterioration in the quality of the German troops. In the first part of the campaign they never sustained a rout, as I have several times stated; but as the winter wore on their retreats were often disorderly, as I have mentioned above.

Our division took no part in this fighting. Probably those in supreme command thought we had had enough of it recently; and they were about right. If ever a division deserved the name of "fighting division," it was ours: and yet, strange as it may seem, I do not know precisely what we were. At one time we were known as the Seventh Division of the Ninth Army; and after a time on detached duty, as the Thirteenth of the Eighth Army. Then again we were unattached. There is little doubt that the division was made up of odd battalions and regiments, the remnants of corps which had been practically wiped out. There was always a disinclination to give me much information on the subject; and I thought it unwise to be too persistent in my inquiries. It is certain that we were made up, afterwards, of reservists, and were used to temporarily strengthen other corps. Of the Vladimirs not a dozen of the original men remained; and two of these were officers; and the battalion, though still retaining its designation, was numbered the 3rd of the second regiment. From time to time we received recruits, generally the remnants of corps which had become "wiped out," a very frequent occurrence in this war, when whole regiments were often destroyed, perhaps a company, or a part of one, escaping. While we were at Novogeorgevsk a number of cavalrymen who had lost their horses were sent to us, bringing the battalion up to about 500 men. The whole division was under 3,000. Such are the losses of war.

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When the enemy showed signs of wavering, the fresh troops in our neighbourhood made a vigorous attack upon them, with the result that they gave way almost at once. Evidently their reverses further north had demoralized them.

On the 26th, at night, we heard that the enemy had been crushed at Przasnysz. The enemy must have heard it too: for they drew back their right wing towards the north-west; and when our men pressed them hard, retreated with more precipitation than I had ever seen them do on any previous occasion.

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Our division was following in support, and we had little or no fighting. The ground over which we marched was chiefly fields and frozen marshes. The artillery used the roads where they could discern them; but this was no easy task, the country being one flat sheet of snow, with few trees, and only ruins of houses: in fact, the country had been rendered desolate, and the people had fled to the towns.

We passed by thousands of dead and wounded, scattered in all directions; for there had been no defence of positions here, but a retiring fight in the open. The Red Cross men picked up the hurt: the dead were left where they lay; the usual custom in this campaign. Every now and then we met parties of Cossacks and infantry, escorting prisoners to the rear. The total losses of the enemy appeared to be at least three to one of ours.

There was no halt at night; and cavalry of all kinds—dragoons, hussars, lancers, chasseurs, and the ubiquitous Cossacks—were constantly overtaking us, and pressing to the front in pursuit of the flying enemy: for flying they were. These German boys, who had fought so well in their first onset, when tired out and exhausted by continuous exertion, broke down completely: and there were some pitiful scenes: as, for instance, when some twenty or thirty of them were discovered hidden in the cellars of a wrecked house. One of them had the courage to fire his rifle up the stairs and kill a Cossack as he sat eating his ration. This was considered to be a murder by the Cossack's comrades, and notwithstanding that the Germans immediately surrendered, the whole party was hanged to the fruit-trees in the garden of the house—the only ones in the neighbourhood.

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I do not think any of these boys were more than twenty years old; half of them certainly were not more than sixteen or seventeen; and they made a terrible fuss over their fate, screaming and crying like small children; and one or two grovelling in the snow, and begging for mercy in the most piteous way. In vain. They were all strung up; and as no drop was given to break their necks, some were a long time dying. I saw one still struggling after he had been suspended twenty minutes; and others were apparently not quite dead until a bystander put an end to their suffering with revolver-shots. It is probable that these lads would not have been discovered had not one of them shot the Cossack.

The hiding in cellars of small parties of the enemy was a frequent occurrence. They would probably have often escaped detection had it not been for their own folly. They did not seem to be able to resist the temptation to fire on any of our men who chanced to enter the houses where they lay concealed, probably thinking they were isolated squads, and unsupported by stronger bodies.

Amongst other strange incidents was that of a motor-car which was taken past us on the 28th. It was a closed carriage, and contained three ladies, and a large quantity of articles of dress, jewellery, and plate. The women were said to be officers' wives; and the goods, plunder: and there were many stories prevailing amongst our troops of robberies of houses by Prussian women of considerable social rank. It was quite a common incident for us to recover cars and carts full of

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spoil which had been taken from the houses of the Polish nobility of the district. What became of the thieves I do not know; but in the case of women I believe they escaped unpunished.

Other things we captured were carts, waggons, and conveyances laden with provisions and clothing materials, which had been stolen from Polish towns, villages and private houses. It was commonly reported that the Germans were in great straits for food; and whether this was so or not, they stripped those tracts of country which were overrun by them of everything eatable. They even dug up the potatoes and turnips (in the autumn, of course); and when they got the chance, reaped the cornfields, sending this produce to Germany, unless we were fortunate enough to intercept it. This action may have been dictated by want, but was more likely to have been the outcome of economical provision for the future, combined with their acknowledged policy of making war as frightful as possible to the civil population of their foe's country. It entailed terrible misery on the poor people, and was the cause of the towns and villages of whole regions being abandoned by the inhabitants, many of whom were said to have died of starvation. Others had to apply to relief committees.

I have read descriptions of the state of Germany after the Thirty Years' War. I should think it could not have been worse than many parts of Poland now are. The enemy has turned whole districts into a desert, destitute of everything that is necessary to the existence of man. They have even wantonly cut down the fruit-trees, and filled the wells with filth. Barns and storehouses have been burnt, as well as dwellings, in many cases whole villages having been given to the flames. As a rule, however, the towns have been spared, though I passed through a few that had suffered severely, if they were not quite ruined. The enemy had frequently emulated the "crop-ears" of our Cromwellian period, and stabled their horses in the churches. Still more frequently they had desecrated and wrecked the sacred edifices—one of the most unwise things they could do: for to provoke a people through their religion is equal to losing a battle, and a big battle too, to say nothing of what the Most High may possibly think of it. This does not count with the Germans; but it may possibly count in favour of their enemies, when the day of reckoning comes!

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The peasantry, rendered homeless and desperate, and enraged at the violation of things they held to be in the highest degree sacred, were a thorn in the side of Russia's foes. Living in the wood, prowling about their burnt homes in the dead of night, they often came upon the enemy's videttes and pickets, and made them prisoners. I do not think they imitated the Cossacks, and often took the lives of the men they surprised; but they did so occasionally. They made splendid scouts, and helped the Russian Army immensely in this way, supplying information which it would have been difficult, or rather impossible, for organized parties of armed men to have obtained. The women, especially, were useful in this way: for with that cunning and subterfuge which nobody condemns in the female character, they often ingratiated themselves with the German officers and soldiers, and so obtained access to knowledge of their movements and circumstances which no amount of duplicity or skill would have enabled a man to acquire. And a day or two afterwards the hussies, perhaps, would be stabbing their "friends" with pitchforks, their favourite weapons, next to their tongues, which they often used with great effect; for it was quite a usual circumstance for women to join in any fighting that took place in their neighbourhood. The men, also, joined the soldiers on the battlefield, and used any weapon they could obtain, but chiefly the instruments with which, in normal times, they tilled the ground.

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To take up again the thread of this narrative. A great deal of fighting went on in our front, but the weakness of our division kept us out of it. We were still further reduced in numbers by being called on to furnish many detachments to guard prisoners to the rear. Under these circumstances I had to amuse myself with such rumours, and small items of news, as came in my way. From these I gathered that the onward movements of the enemy were completely checked; and it was even asserted that the Russian troops were again on German soil. This rumour was not satisfactorily confirmed; but I cannot doubt that the enemy was forced back to the frontier line in the neighbourhood of Mlawa and Chorzellen. The latter place is a small Russian town actually on the frontier, and more than thirty versts from a railway-station. Mlawa is also a Russian town five versts from the border, with a station on the Praga (suburb of Warsaw) German railway, which was held by the enemy. The two places are about thirty versts distant from each other: so it was evident the foe had fallen back on a pretty wide front.

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PERSONAL BLESSING BY A PRIEST IS CONSIDERED A GREATER HONOR BY A
RUSSIAN SOLDIER THAN A WAR DECORATION

One of the most striking episodes of this period was my first sight of the Russian Commander-in-Chief, the Grand Duke Nicholas. I had, of course, heard frequent mention of him; but it was never very clear to me where he was—I mean at what particular spot. Though not such a galloper (to use a military term) as the Kaiser, he still seemed to be here, there and everywhere. One week he was asserted to be in direct personal command of our corps: the next he was reported to be in Galicia. But the Duke is anything but a limelight gentleman; the German is nothing unless he is one. The Duke is a great commander, and no mean soldier: the Kaiser is also a great commander, but no soldier at all. The first can say what he wants, and can do it: the second can say what he wants, but cannot do it; he has to rely on his subordinates.

The Grand Duke Nicholas is a big man, yet not stout. He appears to stand considerably more than six feet high—I should think about six feet six inches. He is very straight and upright in carriage, but scarcely with the bearing of a soldier. He looks more like an athletic priest than a military man, especially as he has a grave countenance, and seldom, or never, smiles. He is an affable man, though; and seemingly quite devoid of pride. He wears a plain uniform, devoid of ornament, and carries a stick in place of a sword. Apparently he does not look about him; but nothing escapes his eye; and, like all great men, he is not above dealing with details even minute ones.

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He does very little writing, however, but likes to sit on a chair and explain his wishes to an audience of officers. Those whom they concern make notes of his orders, which he afterwards looks over, but, I am told, does not sign. If I were one of his subordinates I should think this method had its drawbacks. What if a misunderstanding occurred? Everything would favour the commander, and all would necessarily go against the commanded. But perhaps this would not matter in a country like Russia.

One thing is certain: that if the Grand Duke is not one of the greatest commanders this war has produced, the Germans, at any rate, have not been able to catch him napping. His fault seems to be precisely similar to those which afflict the other Generals of the War: they do not get effectively driven back; but they cannot get forward. The trench business is one too many for them; and the art of outflanking has clearly not been sufficiently studied; while the art of effectual retaliation seems to be utterly unknown.

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CHAPTER XXI

RECONNAISSANCE AND TRENCH FIGHTING

I have not yet mentioned the Bactrian camels which are used in thousands for Russian transport. During the winter the snow was so deep that the usual indications of the roadways were completely buried; and even in the few cases where they could be discerned, it was most difficult to traverse them with either horse-waggons or motor-cars; indeed, the last mentioned are useless in snow when it lies beyond a certain depth (though much depends on the power of the car); and guns, also, are impeded by the same cause.

Many persons think that the foot of a camel is peculiarly suited to traversing deserts, and is unfitted for progress over other kinds of ground. This may be true of the dromedary, or African one-humped camel; but it is not correct of the Bactrian, or two-humped camel, the species used by the Russians. This animal can keep its footing on the most slippery ground, and travel with facility over the deepest snow without sinking in to an appreciable depth. The Russians say that it will also go with speed over sand, rock and grass land, but founders in bogs and morasses. It carries a weight of 400 to 500 pounds, English; and proved to be very useful throughout the winter, until the thaw came, and three feet of mud succeeded six feet of snow; and then nothing on earth could drag itself through the miserable mire at a greater rate than a funeral pace.

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But all the camels in the country were not enough to bring up the necessaries of the army; and the men, though fed and kept supplied with ammunition, were compelled to lack many things that would have increased both their comfort and their efficiency. Boots especially, and other wearing articles, were often badly wanted; and many of the men suffered greatly from frostbites. My own feet were becoming very tender by the month of March, when the sun sometimes shone with sufficient strength to make the surface of the snow wet: and this added greatly to our troubles. It is essential to the welfare of troops that after marches they should have dry socks and a change of boots; otherwise they are almost sure to suffer from sore feet. It was the habit of the Russian infantry to take their socks off at night and dry them at the camp fires; but when in the presence of the enemy we were often forbidden to make fires; and at other times there was not sufficient fuel obtainable to supply the whole of our vast hosts: nor was there always a full supply of food, though it was the custom of the Russian soldiers to eat those horses and camels which were killed. There is but little difference between horseflesh and beef, and I have eaten it at scores of meals. I have also tasted camel's flesh; and have nothing to say in its favour. It is coarse, tough and flavourless.

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The Germans having retired to carefully entrenched positions, from which we found it impossible to force them, a lull ensued; although occasionally attempts were made to surprise and assault some of the enemy's positions.

On the 5th March the Germans squirted liquid fire over one of these surprise parties which had got close up to their entrenchments, and was endeavouring to remove the wire-entanglements. It was the first time such a device had been reported; and there was some mystery concerning its nature. Some thought that boiling pitch had been used; others called it Greek fire. I do not think it was pitch, although I did not actually see it thrown. I examined the clothing of some of the men, who reported that the holes which were burnt smouldered, and were not easily put out. The fire came over them in a shower of sparks, and was not thrown by hand; but squirted out of a tube of some kind. The only actual injury that I could discover it did was in the case of one man who was badly burned about the face and probably blinded. It is astonishing what a number of devilish contrivances these dastardly Germans have invented and used in this war; and it is clear that they would resort to the foulest possible means, if this would give them the victory.

The holes burnt in the coats of the men were mostly small; but, where they were close together, quite destroyed the garment, appearing to have rotted the material. In my opinion the substance of this fire was some kind of melted metal, mixed with waxy matter. It was tenacious, and could not be wiped off; and left a light grey residuum on the cloth. It did not burn its way through to the flesh in those cases which I examined.

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About this time I heard mentioned the poisonous gas which has since become notorious. The Germans, I believe, had not yet resorted to sending the horrid stuff in clouds against a position; but they fired shells which emitted it in considerable quantities, and caused some deaths, and many disablements, amongst the Russian troops. I saw some of the shells burst; and the gas, which gradually expanded to a small cloud with a diameter of about 30 feet, looked like a thick, dirty yellow smoke. The odour of it was horrible and peculiar and very pungent; and it seemed to be a very heavy vapour, for it never rose high above the ground—not more than 20 feet. It dispersed slowly. In my opinion the best way to avoid it would be to rush rapidly through it towards the point from which it had been discharged. Doubtless some of it lurks in the air; but not sufficient, I think, to have deleterious effects. The bulk of it rolls on in a low, dense cloud. That which was shot at us came from *percussion* shells, which do not explode in the air. These projectiles were usually fired at us in salvos; so as to form a cloud of gas on the ground.

I went to see the bodies of two men who had been killed by one of these poison-shells. They looked as if they had been rolled in flour of sulphur, being completely covered, flesh and clothes, with a yellowish deposit. Some wounded men, and others who had first gone to their assistance, were similarly encrusted. Some of these were insensible; others were gasping for breath, and discharging froth from their mouths. The two men who were dead had been killed by pieces of shell and not by the gas, though this may have helped to destroy them.

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On the 8th March I was watching an aeroplane when the petrol tank appeared to burst. There was a puff of smoke, and then the machine dropped like a stone. It must have fallen a mile from the spot where I was standing: but of its further fate I know nothing. It was a German aircraft, and was, I suppose, hit by a lucky Russian bullet.

It is astonishing what a riddling these aeroplanes will stand. I have seen them with from forty to sixty bullet holes in different parts of them, and yet they were not forced to come down by their injuries of this character.

Between the 8th and the 14th March I saw more aircraft of various kinds than at any other time

during the period I was with the Russian Army. On the 9th six of ours hovered over the German positions for a long time, and dropped many bombs. A tremendous fire was opened upon them by the enemy, but not one of them was seriously damaged.

During the first fortnight in March we were moved very gradually towards Ostrolenka. On the 14th we were at Roshan on the Narew, which is here a small river with fords in the neighbourhood. It had been frozen over; but the troops had broken up the ice for defensive purposes, as they had on many other streams. It was also beginning to thaw. [258]

Enormous numbers of Germans, fresh troops, were assembling in front of Ostrolenka and Lomza; and, according to reports, on a line extending 400 versts north and west of these places. It was evidently the prelude to a renewed attempt on Warsaw.

The persistence of the enemy to take the old capital of Poland is a parallel to his perseverance in the endeavour to break through to Calais in the Western area of the war. Will he do it? He has been within a very few versts of the place, and made repeated efforts to gain his object; but so far the Russians have been able to beat him back.

The capture of Warsaw by the enemy would be a great calamity to the Russians, and have an immensely depreciatory moral effect on her troops, scarcely less so than the fall of Petrograd would have. Some critics have, I fear, attempted to show that the capture of Warsaw would not be so very heavy a blow to the Russians. These persons do not know much about it, I think. Warsaw is the chief railway centre in Poland, and a place of immense commercial importance. It is really the Russian headquarters, which, if it falls into German hands, will have to be removed to Bialystok, or even Vilna, and will compel a complete change of the Russian front.

On the day we arrived at Roshan, Captain Sawmine, who had been compelled to go to hospital, rejoined us; and also a number of reserves, and others, came up, bringing the division to a strength of 6,000 infantry. About 500 Cossacks, and two batteries of field-guns were also attached to us, making the total strength a little under 7,000 men. [259]

I had some thought of going into hospital myself, as my feet were badly frostbitten; and I was generally much run down by the hardships I had undergone; but the prospect of a big fight was a pleasure I could not forego. So I patched up my hurts as well as I could, and got as much rest as possible. If I could have obtained a horse! I was in very low water in all ways. My English sovereigns had gone one at a time, and very few of them were now left: so few of them that it was becoming an anxiety to me to know how I should get on in future, and finally leave the country.

The big fight did not come off very quickly, at least in our neighbourhood. We heard so many reports of the great things taking place in other districts that I began to think it was about time the German Army was smashed up. The resources of the Teutonic countries, which I had always thought to be poor, must be enormous; and it seems to be no vain boast of the Kaiser's that he could "lose 3,500 men per day, and still keep up the numbers of my army corps."

As I heard that there was daily fighting taking place near Przasnysz, distant forty versts from Roshan, I obtained leave to make a reconnaissance in that direction, and got Sawmine to borrow a horse for me from one of his brother officers. The animal I thus obtained the loan of was not a very manageable creature. It had notions of its own, which I combated with difficulty; and I foresaw that if I ran against any of those particularly smart gentlemen, the Uhlans, I should probably taste the sweets of a German prison—or worse. [260]

However, my steed improved on acquaintanceship; and when he discovered that I intended to be master—if I could—he gave in, and behaved himself fairly well; but I could get no great pace out of him. He had been a bat horse, not a charger; and could not forget his low breeding.

I made for Makow first, and arrived there in about three hours. There was no direct road that I could discover, and the country did not seem to have suffered so much as most districts round about. There were many people in many of the cottages and farms who came out to look at me, and I even succeeded in procuring a little milk and some eggs; but my inability to speak more than a few words puzzled the good peasants, and evidently aroused the suspicion of some of them. For by-and-by a patrol of Cossacks came galloping up to me, with very fierce expressions and words.

I had taken the precaution to obtain a permit, with a description of me written upon it; and also an explanatory note from Captain Sawmine. I suppose this kind gentleman had written something eulogistic concerning me, for the Cossacks could not make enough of me, and I was given as much food and vodka as I could carry; the provisions including cold boiled bacon, mutton fat, chicken and the local cheese, besides rye, or barley bread, and a quantity of clothing, which, though clearly enough plunder, was not German. Probably the Cossacks, who are born without consciences and morals, had obtained these articles from abandoned houses. I was sadly in need of all they gave me, and in no mood to be too particular, and by the end of that day I was better clothed and better fed than I had been for many long weeks. [261]

I made these men understand where I wished to go; and Makow seemed to be their destination also. At any rate they accompanied me thither, and introduced me to the commander of their sotnia, who was as kind and affable as his men, and took me to the inn where he and another officer was quartered, and gave me excellent entertainment, apparently without cost to anybody but the host of the inn, who seemed to be willing enough to supply all our needs.

There did not appear to be more than half a sotnia of Cossacks in the town, which is a similar place to Roshan—places which in England, we should call small market towns with a prominent agricultural interest.

There had been hostile visits to Makow; houses, and, in one part, nearly an entire street, had been demolished by artillery fire. Some of the poor people were living in the partly exposed cellars; for an underground apartment, or cellar, is almost invariably found in Polish and Russian dwellings, no matter how small and poor they may be.

Fighting was going on not far off; for the occasional booming of guns and an almost incessant rattle of rifle-fire could be plainly heard until darkness set in when these sounds gradually ceased. Przasnysz is only twenty-two versts from Makow; and I began to suspect that the larger place was in the hands of the Germans. It is pronounced "Prer-zhast-nitz," as nearly as I can frame it: and I may say that, in the course of this narrative, I have followed the spelling of names as they appear on maps, when I could find them there: otherwise I have written them as they seem to be pronounced; hence I dare say I have fallen into some eccentricities in this matter, which, I hope, will be excused.

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Tired out, and far from well, I slept till late the next day, my breakfast being brought to bed to me by a woman of the house, the usual custom of the country.

In the afternoon I rode out and took what I supposed was the road to Przasnysz; but the ground was still so deeply covered with snow that there were no beaten tracks visible. However, the firing which was still going on was a good guide, and after riding about eight versts I came on a line of trenches occupied by Russian riflemen.

Two bullets came unpleasantly near me, and one actually went under my arm, tearing the breast of my coat. I had not realized that I was in full sight of the enemy; but I was not long in remedying that. I rode straight into a scarped ditch and dismounted. The position was not a safe or pleasant one; but there was no help for it. I had to remain there until dusk; and from time to time bullets fell close to me. I think the enemy could see part of the head of my horse, which was a guide to their aiming, and it was only the slope of the bank which saved me.

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There was an ammunition hand-cart, half full of packages of cartridges, in the ditch, but nobody came near it before nightfall. The riflemen continued their firing as long as they could see, and the enemy replied without intermission; apparently with small results on either side. There was big gun shooting as well; but the cannon were so well hidden that I could not locate them. Sometimes shells came screaming a few feet only above the trench, and burst just behind. One piece flew back and buried itself in the bank not more than a foot above the horse's back, and close enough to my head to make me wince. More often the shells burst high in the air, the Germans showing some very bad gunnery. The Russian soldiers, like soldiers and boys all the world over where snow is to be found, had amused themselves by making snow figures in rear of the trench, mostly those of the Emperors, Saints and Generals. A shot struck one of these and threw the well-beaten, frozen snow to an immense height in the air. The shell did not burst, a circumstance of frequent occurrence, which seemed to show that the fuses were badly made, or fitted badly to the projectile.

When the riflemen at last came out of the trench for a fresh supply of ammunition, they were amazed to find me and my horse standing by their cart. They at first mistook me for an officer and saluted very respectfully; but my awkward replies to their salutations caused them to raise their lantern and examine me more closely. Then I was seized, and an officer began to interrogate me, and I produced my papers; but the officer was not so easily satisfied as my Cossack friends; and I was taken to the trench, and thrust into what the British call a "funk-hole," or small excavated resting-place. My belongings were overhauled, and the supply of food received from the Cossacks at once appropriated by the soldiers, who seemed to be very hungry. They were good enough to give me some of the tallow, and a piece of fat bacon. Fortunately I am as fond of grease as any Russian, and I fortified myself for what might happen by making a plentiful meal: indeed, I ate all they gave me, and drank a full measure of vodka on top of it. Bad things are good things under adverse circumstances.

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The men had bales of straw in the trenches, and on them they stretched themselves to sleep—at least those close to me did so; but it was too dark to see much. I obtained some of the straw, and slept very soundly in my "funk-hole," though I had a suspicion that I might have very good cause to funk in the morning.

The soldiers were not unkind, whatever they thought of me. One of them awoke me in the morning by pulling me out of my hole by the legs. I thought this was a preliminary to shooting or hanging, but nothing so drastic happened. I was given a pint of strong tea without sugar and milk, but it was hot, and that was a great deal on a bitterly cold morning. With the tea I received a piece of the dirtiest bread I have ever eaten; and shortly afterwards a gun boomed from the enemy's position, and a shell fell in the advanced trenches. As it caused no commotion I suppose it did no harm. It gave the signal that it was getting light enough for the enemy to see; and our men stood to their arms; and soon afterwards began to "snipe," as the modern phrase has it.

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Sometimes I took a peep along the little gutter-like cuts where the men rested their rifles when shooting over the edge of the trench. I did this with impunity so frequently that I grew bold, until a bullet came and knocked the snow and dirt over me. A few minutes later a rifleman was aiming along this very cut when a bullet struck his head and killed him instantly. It entered in the centre

of his forehead, and came out behind, carrying away a large piece of the skull and letting his brains out. I was becoming used to such painful sights; and in two moments I had his rifle in hand and his pouch strapped round me, and was watching at the death-cut to avenge his fall.

I had brought my own rifle with me; but this and my cartridges were taken from me the previous night. My revolver was concealed in a pocket, and I thought it wise to keep it there for the present.

I could not see much to shoot at. Some of the enemy's trenches were a long way back; others, salient points, ran up to within fifty yards of our position. Occasionally I saw the spike of a helmet; but it generally disappeared before I could bring the sight of the rifle to bear upon it. [266]

The Germans usually wore their spiked helmets, jocosely called "*Pickelhaubes*," which much betrayed them when aiming from the trenches. Afterwards they became more cunning and wore their muffin-shaped caps when on duty of a dangerous character.

If I could not see the enemy they appeared to see me; for several bullets came unpleasantly close, and another man at my side was struck and badly wounded in the head. Then my chance came. I saw the spike of a helmet and about an inch of the top of it. It remained so still that I concluded the man was taking careful aim, an example which I followed, and fired. I saw the dirt fly up where the bullet struck the parapet, and the spike disappeared. I do not know if the bullet found its billet—probably not; I fired about twenty rounds at similar marks, sometimes seeing just the top of a spike, sometimes nearly the whole helmet; and then, turning rather quickly, I saw the officer who had arrested me the previous night watching me. He nodded approval; and I felt that I had "saved my bacon" if nothing else; and so it proved. I was no longer treated as a prisoner, and had evidently won the respect and goodwill of those who had witnessed my endeavours to trouble the enemy.

It seemed to me a rule that nobody should leave the trench until night came round; but several passages were cut to the rear which permitted the soldiers to come or go without exposing themselves to the enemy's fire. I did not attempt to go out myself until dusk, and then it came quite as a shock to find my horse gone. I searched all round, but there was not a sign of him anywhere; and I thought I heard some of the soldiers laughing. It was in vain to make inquiries: nobody could understand what I said, though they knew very well what I wanted. For there is a universal language which all understand. All the pretty girls, from pole to pole, know how to spell "kiss," and to let you know what they mean by it. [267]

Soldiers, of all people, must not cry over spilt milk, so I sat down and greased my frostbites; while a friendly corporal brought me another drink of vodka. For whatever the edicts of the Czar, this fiery liquor was always plentiful enough amongst the soldiers and the peasants, from whom, I suppose, the military obtained it. Whatever its vices it has some virtues, and is not bad stuff to give to a man who is frozen inside and out.

The next morning I found my rifle and bandolier resting against the side of the trench at the aiming-cut I had used the previous day. I quite understood the hint; and after my pint of hot tea and hunk of dirty bread, I again joined in the sniping, potting at *Pickelhaubes* and arms and legs, when I got a chance. The enemy returned our compliments; and the number of narrow escapes our men had was extraordinary; but very few of them were killed or injured, and I suppose our fire was equally ineffectual. Field artillery was also used on both sides; and this did more damage, chiefly to the trenches, which were blown in at many points, though, as usual, with but little loss of life. [268]

I think more lives are lost in trenches through carelessness than from any other cause. One gets so used to the eternal potting that in time he hardly notices it. Then some unlucky day he forgets himself, and shows enough of his precious person to bury a bullet in. The result is death, or injury, according to where the projectile strikes him; for most of the men in the advanced trenches, on both sides, are picked marksmen, who are ever on the alert to distinguish themselves. They make a good many bets, too, on the results of their shots. This is done more to relieve the monotony of the duty than from hardness of heart, I think. It is very trying to spend day after day in taking chance shots, the results of which are seldom perceptible to the shooter.

I spent several days in this uncongenial work, with anything except benefit to my general condition. The bottom of the trench was wet, which did not improve the state of my frostbites; and the nights were bitterly cold, yet no fires were allowed.

I much desired to return to Roshan; but the officer in charge of the trench either did not, or would not, understand my wishes, and I was never out of the trench for fifteen consecutive minutes, and never more than once in twenty-four hours. [269]

FROM THE TRENCHES OF PRZASNYSZ TO THE CAMP OF MAKOW

I was in a very unpleasant fix. I could not obtain leave to go back to my old comrades: if I went without permission I ran grave risk of being considered a spy or a traitor and being treated as one. Life had become so very joyless and unpleasant, that I felt I could quit it without much regret; but I was not quite prepared to be sent out of it with the contumely due to a spy, or dishonourable man, to say nothing of the misgivings I entertained concerning hanging or shooting by a provost's squad.

I wrote a letter or two, and tried to get them forwarded to Captain Sawmine. The trench officer (a Major, I think) took the first of these notes, and examined it; poised it at every possible angle; turning it this way and that, and upside down; and unable to make anything of it, put it in his pocket. I hoped he intended to send it on to its destination: but several days elapsed, and I received no reply, so I wrote another, and with a respectful salute, handed it to the gentleman. He took it from my hand, shook his head, and tore it to fragments, which he cast to the wind.

I was not at much trouble to conceal my annoyance and contempt of this conduct, whereupon he got very angry; and I perceived that I should have to be cautious how I behaved before him: so I went back to my *pickelhaube*-sniping, and thought the matter out. [270]

That night the enemy made an attack upon us, and there was some hand-to-hand fighting. It was soon over, and the Germans driven back to their own trench, with a loss of fifty or sixty men, and eight or ten prisoners. It was rather a trifling affair; but our people hankered after revenge, as I could very well see.

The second night afterwards we made a counter-attack with about two battalions, not counting the supports. The Germans evidently expected it: for they had kept up an almost incessant rain of shells, great and small. Our guns had replied, and done some damage. Particularly, they had cut away the wire entanglements of the enemy's trenches, and prevented him from repairing it.

The intervening space we had to rush across was about fifty yards; but my feet were now so bad that I could only hobble forward. The first line that got into the trench made very short work of the foe. When I dropped into it, the bottom was covered with dead and dying men. Others were rushing away through tunnelled traverses; but they suffered very severely, and in less than five minutes the work was in our hands.

The Germans made three determined attempts to retake it, but they all failed, with loss to them; though the affair was on a comparatively small scale. At last, about five o'clock in the morning, they exploded two mines simultaneously. These mines must have been prepared beforehand in anticipation of the capture of the salient of the trench, on the faces of which they were concealed. They cost us about twenty men, several of whom were buried and had to be dug out. Unfortunately they were dead when recovered, as were nearly all who happened to be in the vicinity of the explosions. [271]

Another mine, fired lower down the trench, in the apparent belief that we had reached the point, killed some of their own men, who were crowding the spot in a wild endeavour to escape from the bayonets of our men.

The moral effect caused by these explosions was very great, and was, I have no doubt, the reason the Russian leaders decided to abandon the trench. The men were drawn off in the darkness, unperceived by the enemy, who continued to bombard the position very furiously, and must have wasted at least 1,000 shells, many of which were of much larger size than those used in ordinary field-guns. They blew to pieces a great part of their own salient, and did our trenches a lot of damage. The Russian losses in this second combat amounted altogether to about 300 men.

During the fight I had been an object of particular attention to a big German, who made more ragged my already too dilapidated coat. The saw-back bayonets of our foes were very destructive to everything they were thrust through—coats as well as bodies. The gentleman I refer to had a bundle in a handkerchief attached to his belt. This I brought away, and found it to contain a small but choice assortment of viands. There were several Frankfort sausages of the genuine kind, a very toothsome pasty, and some bread that was a degree or two better than the ordinary "ammunition" sort. A touch of pathos was given to a commonplace incident by a letter, and the photograph of a pretty woman, which the bundle contained. This was probably the man's sweetheart, who had sent him a few choice snacks. Poor girl! If only she had known who was destined to devour them I expect she would have sung "Gott straffe England" in a very high key. The Fortunes of war are sometimes curious. [272]

The starving (?) Germans seemed to be pretty well provided in this trench. Many of our men brought back dainties—sausages, cakes, pies and even eggs, which reached our own trenches uncracked; and plenty of tobacco. The "War Lord" is a slyer dog than many people think, and it looks as if he did not forget the commissariat when furnishing the other "War Departments." It may have happened, however, that the detachment manning this trench had just received a consignment of good things from their friends.

The day after the trench fights there was great rejoicing in our lines, which I had no difficulty in ascertaining was caused by the fall of Przemysl. After months of effort this great fortress was taken by the Russians. I know nothing of the fighting on the Austrian frontier, or within her territories, but what I heard from time to time; and this I do not repeat. But I may say that the capture of the place had an immensely cheering effect on the Russian troops, and did the [273]

Germans more harm, from a moral point, than the loss of a battle would have done.

I had hoped to have found an opportunity to escape during the operations mentioned above; but I found it impossible to go off except under circumstances that could only be called desertion. A day or two after the fighting a couple of Cossacks came, bearing a letter from Captain Sawmine, and making inquiries about me. Their arrival gave me joy of soul in no uncertain measure: for I was heartily tired of trench warfare.

The letter, written in French, enclosed a request that any officer or person being shown it would do his utmost to forward my return to the battalion, which, it was stated, was now moving on Kulaki, described as a town east of Przasnysz. The letter instructed me, if found, to accompany the two Cossacks, who had orders not to leave me until I was in safety again with the battalion.

It was afternoon when the Cossacks arrived, and it was decided that they should rest in rear of the trenches before departing the next morning. It seemed to me to be one of the longest nights I had ever spent, I was so anxious to get back to my old comrades. This anxiety was provoked by the terrible monotony, and no less abominable dirtiness, of life in the trenches. The Russian soldier, blessed, or otherwise, with that remarkable patience which is characteristic of all Asiatics, and persons descended from them, is yet a great sufferer if he is not regularly relieved from the trenches for rest: and it has been found necessary throughout the Russian Army to organize regular relays for service in these miserable living graves. This is what they really are. Soldiers posted in them are compelled to stand in their allotted places: they cannot move to the left hand or the right, nor change places with a comrade. If a man is wounded during the day it is seldom possible to remove him until darkness sets in, for the Germans fire on anybody—Red Cross workers, the wounded, and the dying. So the injured man is taken into a funk-hole, where the surgeon and the Red Cross man do what they can for him until it is safe to lift him out and convey him to hospital.

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Those killed outright lie where they fall, in the mire and the filth, trodden under foot, unless a lull in the firing gives time to bury them in the bottom of the trench; and even this is only done to get the body out of the way. As a rule the dead were buried at night, at the rear of the trench and close to it. Even then the Germans often heard the sound of pick and shovel at work, and in their usual dastardly way opened fire on the fatigue-parties engaged in this necessary and charitable work, leaving it to chance whether or not they killed a man or two, as they often did.

I have mentioned the patience of the Russian nature. It is in curious contrast to the petulance and cowardice of the Germans, who yell and scream when in danger or suffering much pain. The Russian never does this. Even the dying Muscovite scarcely groans. I have seen men brought out of the trenches, or from the front, practically smashed, hurt beyond the wildest hope of recovery, yet calm and patient, and grateful for the least help, not one sound of complaint or pain passing their brave lips. Even those rascals the Cossacks invariably met suffering and death with the invincible courage of heroes. I never saw an exception.

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At daybreak the following morning we started for Kulaki, taking a route through country that was quite unknown to me.

At this time thaws had set in, generally commencing about 11 a.m. and continuing until 2 p.m. They rendered the ground very bad for travelling, although the snow was far from being melted through, except in a few places, which had been partially cleared by drifts before the frost had come. Large pools of water collected, and stood on the hard snow, which was really ice, rendering the surface not only slushy, but exceedingly slippery. The Cossacks partly remedied this by tying pieces of raw hide over the horses' hoofs; but nothing could render the footing of the animals quite safe, and we had one or two nasty falls. These generally happened towards the close of day, when the temperature was falling and the freezing was sharper than ever, or at all events the surface of the snow seemed to be more glassy.

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We had not got more than a dozen versts on our way when we came up to half a battalion of the 30th Siberian regiment, which was skirmishing with a much stronger body of German infantry, which had tried to dig itself in—*i.e.*, entrench itself under fire. This the Russians had prevented, and they suddenly made a determined bayonet charge and closed with their foes.

The two Cossacks and I followed close behind; and in the *mêlée* which ensued one of the men speared a German running him completely through from side to side, at least a foot of steel coming out under the victim's left arm. The fighting, though it hardly lasted two minutes, was very fierce, the Germans seeming to realize that they had no alternative but to fight or surrender in a body, in spite of their excess of numbers. This is really what happened. The Russians killed about 150 of them, with a loss to themselves of not more than sixty. The remainder of the Germans, about 600 in number, surrendered unconditionally, and were marched away in an easterly direction, the dead and wounded being left lying on the snow. I presume they were attended to later by the Red Cross men and removed to the field-hospitals.

Unfortunately I could not make myself distinctly understood by the Cossacks; and my two guides, after a consultation together, seemed to make up their minds to partly retrace their steps. They may have had good grounds for this resolution; and I myself strongly suspected that numerous small parties of the enemy were prowling about. The reason for this opinion was that I saw several patrols or squads join the enemy's battalion during the fight. We also passed a small wood, amongst the trees of which a dozen bivouac fires were still smouldering, and these, I saw at a glance, were not made by Russian soldiers. I likewise saw a single horseman watching us; he

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was soon joined by another; and the two followed us some distance, until one of the Cossacks fired his rifle at them, when they galloped away.

But my escort was decidedly nervous. They were both young men—under twenty-five, I thought—and appeared to consider me something of a prisoner. I was surprised at this; but not sufficiently master of the language to protest or ask for an explanation. The men frequently changed their direction, and if they did not bewilder themselves, at any rate fairly perplexed me, so that I could not tell in which direction we ought to be travelling.

We passed that night in a cottage which was but little better than a hut, the owner of which did not seem to be much pleased at being compelled to entertain us, almost the only occasion on which I noticed such a disposition in any person of the country, whatever his rank or position.

There was hardly any food in the house, and that little was coarse and dirty-looking, so that even the Cossacks turned up their noses at it. One of them went out, and after an absence of more than an hour returned with two fowls, some potatoes and bread, and a stone jar of vodka. They then brought in a lot of wood from the yard of the cottage, and made the stove nearly red-hot, at which action the proprietor protested loudly and became very angry, while a woman I at first thought was his wife wept. The fowls having been prepared by the speedy method of burning off the feathers were put in a saucepan to boil. The woman and I skinned some of the potatoes, but others were cooked with the skin on.

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While waiting for supper the vodka was very liberally served out, the man and woman taking their share; and the behaviour of the lady with one of the Cossacks was such as to convince me I had been mistaken in thinking that she was the wife of the peasant.

By the time the meal was cooked and eaten the woman and myself were the only sober persons there; and I am not sure that she had not taken too much of the fiery vodka. With the two Cossacks as partners she executed some extraordinary figures in what I suppose I must call a polka. It ended in the whole party falling to the floor, where they went to sleep.

Being left to look after myself I blew out the lamp, which was smoking abominably, and got into a bed at the corner of the room—clothes, boots and all, that I might be ready for eventualities. Nobody disturbed me, however, until daylight, when the Cossacks aroused themselves, and the woman made us plenty of tea, which we drank, as usual, without sugar and milk.

The Cossacks had stabled the horses in an outhouse, which was quite unfitted for the purpose. The poor animals had very little straw, and, as the place was draughty, they must have been very cold.

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I have forgotten to mention that before leaving the trenches the Cossacks obtained, by either borrowing or begging, a horse on which to mount me; and this animal, though nothing to boast of, was a much better horse than the one I had lost.

As I saw the wisdom of propitiating the Cossacks, I helped them as much as I could; and they were friendly enough, though I perceived that they watched me pretty closely.

While we were engaged in saddling the horses, the peasant came to the shed and said something to the soldiers which caused them to mount very hastily. They motioned to me to do the same; and as we dashed at a gallop out of the little yard I saw about twenty German hussars approaching the cottage. They perceived us, too, and gave a hot pursuit, firing their rifles at random. We returned the fire, and I saw one man fall from his horse. This casualty was sufficient to bring them to a halt, though they continued to shoot at us.

We got into safety behind a clump of trees and bushes; and one of the Cossacks dismounted and crept forward to reconnoitre. I went with him, and searched the country with my glass, which the man borrowed by gesture. The hussars had not followed us; and in the direction of the cottage, which must have been three miles away, I saw a column of smoke rising slowly in the calm air and guessed what had happened. The cruel enemy was burning the home of the peasant in which we had passed the previous night.

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The Cossacks continued to ride in a north-easterly direction across a district that appeared to be a very poor one at the best of times. The widely scattered cottages and huts were of a mean description even for this land, and I saw only two or three houses that could have been occupied by persons in a fairly well-to-do condition. In the course of a ride of about twenty versts (say fifteen miles, English measurement) we passed through only three collections of cottages which could be called hamlets. Two of them consisted of less than thirty hovels, and were not half inhabited.

The land may have been cultivated, but was more likely to be grazing-ground: it was covered with snow, so one could not tell its characteristics. We went through an extensive wood of pine-trees, and smaller growths of timber were frequent; as also scattered clumps, and single trees, yet the country was distinctly different from an English landscape.

Burnt homesteads told the enemy's story as plainly as words could have done; and bones that the dogs were gnawing I am pretty sure were human. On a bush a German top-boot was stuck, sole upwards. Perhaps there had been an act of revenge; or the intention of some peasant might have been to insult, and show his contempt for, his country's enemies—rather a dangerous thing to do; especially as retaliation would probably be, German fashion, inflicted on the heads of the innocent.

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I think there must have previously been a fight near this spot: for I saw lots of rags lying about, or sticking in the bushes; the remnants of uniforms; and also some rotting straps that had once been harness.

From time to time the Cossacks had conversations with the few peasants we met, the results of which were almost invariably to cause them to change the direction of our journey. I concluded that the enemy's scouts and patrols were still prowling about the neighbourhood. Finally, the Cossacks turned and rode southwards until late in the day, when we halted at a roadside inn, near which there was a small church, and a dozen miserable cottages. Here we passed the second night, the cheer being no better than that at the peasant's cottage; but during the day one of my escort had captured an unfortunate duck, which was found swimming in a hole broken in the ice of a pool. Its companions contrived to escape by flying; and they were probably all as lean and skinny as the one I can hardly say we ate at night: sucked the bones, would be the correct phrase.

If a picture suspended over the door of the house was its sign, the name of the inn was "The Virgin and Child." There seemed to be no vodka in this hostelry, as the landlord put only a kind of black beer before the Cossacks. They drank it freely enough, but I could not swallow it, the flavour was so offensive: and I could not prevail on the man to serve some tea, which we did not get until the next morning.

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The beds were very rough, stuffed with straw, and not clean; but they seemed to be free of vermin. I never saw a flea in Poland, and the other form of bed-pest was also absent; but more offensive creatures are very prevalent in this country; and so are rats and mice, which often harbour in the beds, and do great harm to a traveller's clothes and belongings. They have even gnawed my rough leather boots while I slept.

Again we resumed our journey at daybreak, still riding south; and I thought my escort must have lost their way. I drew forth my papers, and pointed to the letter I had received from Captain Sawmine, trying to make them understand I wished to rejoin him as speedily as possible; but they only shook their heads. They either did not comprehend, or would not forego their own method of going to work.

In the morning we passed through a small town, the name of which did not transpire. In the afternoon we came up with a patrol of Cossacks, not belonging to the same regiment as my escort. My two men had a long conference with the officer commanding them, who made me understand that he wished to examine my papers. I produced them; but he was evidently not a brilliant scholar, and those written in French and German he clearly did not understand. He gave rather lengthy instructions to the two Cossacks, and appeared to order them to take a certain road, which he pointed out. He was very polite, as far as a man could be without the use of direct oral communication, offered me cigarettes (these things have become universal in use), and saluted when we parted.

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From a southward road we now turned to an eastward, and in about an hour reached a town which I recognized as Makow; but my guides, escort, or whatever they were, would not stop here. The place was full of Russian troops; and the escort had several conversations with officers, to whom I showed my papers. They always nodded, and we went on. That night I was lodged in the field-prison of a company of military police, and I began to fear that all was not quite as right as I could wish it to be. In the morning I was visited by several officers, one of whom was a Staff Officer who could speak French and several other languages, but not English. I do not speak French; but I can read and write simple sentences in that language, so I could communicate with him. He got all he could out of me, but gave no information himself. I asked to be allowed to rejoin the corps in which Sawmine was serving, but he said he did not know where it was. This may or may not have been the truth. He then asked whether, if I were permitted to move about the camp, I would give my parole not to go without its bounds without special permission. Prisons of any kind are not nice places, and rather than be caged up I gave the required promise, but protested as well as I could and begged to be allowed to do duty with some regiment at Makow, if I might not go on to Kulaki. I understood him to say that my request would be considered; then he went away, and I never saw him again.

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I noticed that I was carefully watched; and about the middle of the day a policeman beckoned to me, and I was taken to a tent where a plentiful, though coarse, meal was given me. Again at retreat I was fed, and lodged at night in a tent belonging to the police company. This sort of thing went on for a week, during which no officer spoke to me, or took any notice of me, the commander of the police excepted. I was daily fed in sufficient quantity, a new pair of boots and a coat given to me; but practically I was a watched prisoner.

I was quite unable to guess why I was treated in this way, nor can I now give any explanation of my change of position, except that the troops I was now with were all strangers to me: I had never met any of them before, and it may have been thought that my papers were forgeries, especially as I could not speak, read or understand the Russian language. I do not know what troops these were, distinguishing marks being very obscure when regiments are in the field. I found out, however, that the force had only recently arrived at the front—consisted of what we term territorial regiments, was destined to form part of the Twelfth Army Corps, and comprised two infantry regiments, numerically numbered the 198th and 199th. With them were several batteries of artillery, and a cavalry regiment, the whole mustering 10,000 or 11,000 men. The cavalry were not Cossacks, and I do not know what became of the two men who brought me hither.

On the eighth day after my arrival in the camp of Makow the force crossed the river (a tributary of the Narew), and marched along the Ostrolenka road a distance of fifteen versts, when they again encamped, and remained in this position until the 9th April, daily drilling and manoeuvring, very industriously. All this time I lived the monotonous, aimless life I have described above.

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Once or twice I accosted officers who appeared to be of some rank, and showed my papers, striving to make my wishes known. I also wrote three times to Captain Sawmine, putting the letters in the field-post; but no reply reached me. I am sure that officer would have replied had my letters reached him; but his replies may have been withheld from me. It is possible, too, that Sawmine was killed, I do not know, but I have not heard anything from or about him and my other old friends. I would have recalled my parole and endeavoured to have escaped; but I could not find anybody whom I could make understand, or who did not wilfully ignore my wishes.

The police commissary (a Captain) was apparently not a bad sort of fellow, and treated me well. When he found he could trust me, he did not have me watched with offensive closeness; and he fed and lodged me as well as he could, and as well as he himself fared. He much resembled a burly English sergeant, and possessed a similar gruff honesty of tone and purpose; and we used to pass the time away by talking at each other by the hour at a time, though neither understood a dozen words of what was said. He always had cigars (he eschewed cigarettes) which he generously shared with me; and any little luxury which his men brought in was sure to find its way to my plate—I cannot say table, for this was an article of furniture I never saw; and the platters were of wood—not a nice substance for such a purpose; at least until dirt has become a second nature.

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What do I term luxuries? Here is a sample:

Three of the policemen went out one day with their rifles. I saw they were going on a little shooting expedition, and I took the liberty of following them, although they went several versts beyond the bounds of the camp. No objection was raised to my doing this; and the men sometimes lent me a rifle that I might have a shot or two. My own rifle, together with everything I possessed, except the clothes in which I stood, had disappeared; and also the horse on which I had arrived. But that could hardly be claimed as my property.

We shot everything we could see that could be hit by a bullet, fowls, ducks, geese; and, on this occasion, a fat porker. How fattened does not matter: your true "old soldier" does not trouble himself about such trifles as the fattening of pigs in the war area. One of the policemen put a bullet through its head, and chuggy bit the dust without being properly bled in the orthodox way. We cut off its legs, its shoulders and the thickest part of the loin; and left the rest for the ravens, the dogs or piggy's own relatives—whichever came up first.

Dogs, peculiarly cantankerous curs, ravens, crows and pigs, were numerous in all parts of Poland that I visited. I suppose the dogs and swine were tame until the war rendered them homeless and masterless, when they became semi-wild. By swine I do not mean wild boars. These last named were found in the woods and forests, and may have been originally of the same stock as the domestic animal; but they are quite easily recognized as distinct now. There are also wolves in this region; and they sometimes visited the battlefields; but I do not think they are very numerous.

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While we were dismembering the pig I noticed an old long-bearded stolid-looking peasant, closely watching us. I believe he claimed to be the owner of the pig. At any rate he was back in camp before we were, and we found him talking like a lawyer to the provost and police commissary. Our three policemen also had a great deal to say—I would have given something to know on what subject. I do not know what was the outcome of the confab; but we had roast pork for supper that night; and very delicious pork it was—Hun fed, or otherwise. I may add that the soldiers were constantly on the alert to secure these stray pigs, which were very much appreciated as an agreeable addition to black bread and blacker soup.

The weather had fairly broken now: the thaw had set in all over the country, and the ground was in a dreadful condition, and scarcely passable for troops, and especially waggons and artillery. In the summer I thought I had never seen such dust as the dust of Poland: in the winter I knew I had never known such horrible mud as the mud of these wide plains. To see infantry marching through it was a sight of sights. They seemed to lift their knees to their chins before bringing their feet clear of it to take a step forward. The German goose-step was not in it as a funny sight.

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CHAPTER XXIII

A RIDE TOWARDS OSTROLENKA

During the time I was in what I suppose I may call the Camp of Makow, the troops stationed

there had no fighting; and I do not think much went on in the neighbourhood, though every day or two I heard the distant booming of artillery, and sometimes the rattle of rifle-firing. These were probably skirmishes of no great importance, such as occur in every great war: and in this region there was a constant tension all along the frontier line. The Germans, I think, were continually pressing, and seeking for a weak spot in the Russian defensive; and when they thought they had found such a place, they rushed troops thither by means of their "strategic railways." It was actions of this kind that brought on all the big fights that I witnessed. Just at this time, however, the Teutonic exertions were calming down a little. The energetic enemy had slightly over-exerted himself, and was taking a fretful sort of rest, something like that of old Jack Falstaff when his little expeditions had not been marked successes. There might be a great action any day—a good many days passed without one in the Przasnysz district. Meanwhile I began to despair.

Time hung heavily on my hands; though I was working hard to learn the Russian language, with some little success. I had learned a good many words and a few short and easy sentences: so that I could now make myself understood, and could understand a portion at least of what was addressed to me. I even learned to say, "I want to go"; which made the men laugh. "Why am I detained?" which made them laugh louder. [290]

However, the commissary at last contrived to make me understand that there was nothing charged against me; but that it was necessary to make inquiries. When these were completed, then—well, he could not say exactly what would happen then: but he made it plain to me that I had need of patience, and an acquiescence in the things that be: which, like all wise advice, it is something difficult to follow.

The interference with my freedom of movement was not the only trouble I had to endure. I have referred to the circumstance that I suffered much from frostbites during the winter. Standing all day in dirty trenches, where it was impossible to observe necessary cleanliness, did not improve the condition of my hurts; and by the middle of April I saw that I could not hope to do much more marching and fighting, on foot at any rate: and I saw no chance of obtaining a mount. I was nearly without money, away from home and friends: and when I add that I am sixty-four years of age, perhaps it will not be thought inexcusable that I began to feel I could not remain to see the end of a war that may yet last a considerable time. So I got my friend the police commissary to draw up a petition to the commanding officer asking to be allowed to join a Russian cavalry regiment, or go home to England. [291]

The commissary, Captain Blodshvoshki, was not in favour of my petitioning the Commander directly, as he appeared to have some misgivings concerning the irascibility and generally adverse disposition of that gentleman; which, considering what I had myself seen and heard, I thought were not altogether without grounds. So a Staff Officer, Colonel Vilkovski, who had shown me some kindness, was applied to. He said that he had never heard of a foreigner being permitted to join the Russian Army except by express permission of the Czar; and he was much surprised to learn of my experiences with the Muscovite forces. He promised to forward my wishes as far as it was in his power to do so.

It was on the 13th April that this conversation took place. On the 15th a surgeon came to my quarters and desired to examine me. When he saw the state of my feet he shook his head; and I understood, through Captain Blodshvoshki, that he had pronounced me "no good."

On the 18th a passport and a railway voucher were handed to me by a police orderly, and I was told to go home; that is the simplest way of putting it. Arrangements were made for me to leave the camp the same evening. I make no comment on the seemingly cool and off-hand manner in which I was dismissed; but I resolved if ever again I do any fighting it shall be in the ranks of the British Army. But the resolution is superfluous: it is pretty clear that I have ridden Nature to the last lap. [292]

Ostrolenka was the nearest station to the camp, and I was advised by Colonel Vilkovski to proceed to Riga via Vilna, and from thence to obtain a ship to England. The good gentleman shook hands with me, and took his departure.

Captain Blodshvoshki wished to accompany me, but he was not permitted to do so. He also shook hands, with the hearty warmth of a true friend. A horse was lent me to carry me to Ostrolenka; and a police trooper accompanied me to take back the horse when I had done with it.

Ostrolenka was distant about twenty-five versts (a verst is 1,166 yards), and there was a straight road to it, though it was in a truly dreadful state—cut to pieces by heavy traffic and more than knee-deep in tenacious mud. Moreover, we soon discovered that it was obliterated in some places by the fighting that had at one period of the war been very frequent over it. Whole versts of it had been torn up by shell fire and the passage of heavy guns, so that we had to make wide détours to avoid the large mudholes, which were the craters of shells, and some of which contained six or eight feet of water, drained from the melting snow.

The sun set a couple of hours after we started, and it happened to be a very dark night, much clouded and overcast, with an occasional shower of rain; though this is scarcely worth mentioning, except that it added to the already excessively bad condition of the road, and was probably one of the causes that led to my becoming quite bewildered. [293]

I ought not to have been sent away until the morning, when there would have been ample time for me to reach Ostrolenka; and a man with whom I had been to some extent acquainted should

have been sent with me. A man to whom one has got accustomed understands a nod or a wave of the hand; but the trooper I had with me was a miserable specimen of humanity. He was stupid, almost an imbecile, and I had never seen him before; in fact, it was clear he had been sent with me because he was not of much use in the camp, and I had to look after him, or he would very soon have been floundering in the bog which extended over miles of the country on either side of the road.

There are not many villages or hamlets on this road; but there are a few houses occupied by gentry and people of substance; and perceiving a twinkling light in one of them, I determined to seek a night's lodging therein. It was not far off, but there was something like a river of mud in front of it. One horse fell, and we both had narrow escapes of coming to grief. After much difficulty we found the gate of the yard. It was locked. I felt my way round to the front-door, to reach which I had to climb a second gate. At my first knock the light was put out; and in vain I continued to hammer at the door. Nobody answered my knock, nor could I hear any movement in the house. I was compelled to return to my companion, who was far too stupid to understand the situation. Unfortunately I could not remember the Russian words for "knock" and "door," but I could say "come"; and by dint of pulling, pushing and shouting I got the man round to the door, almost throwing him over the second gate. Then I resumed my knocking, telling the man "to call." I am sure we spent more than half an hour in this uninteresting occupation: quite in vain, and I became convinced that the people of the house were determined not to admit us.

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We had no alternative except to return to the yard where we had left our horses. By great good fortune I happened to have a box of matches in my pocket, though these useful things were scarce at the front; and by striking a few of them I ascertained that the yard was of good size, and surrounded on two sides by rows of stables. There was also a hayrick, and in one corner a pile of wood: and two open sheds with carts in them.

I determined to pass the night in the yard if I could get the horses into it. We had left them outside, tied to posts; and one of them kept up a continual neighing which was answered by another horse in one of the stables. No doubt these sounds were heard by the inmates of the house, who probably mistook us for a German cavalry patrol.

Our first work was to open the gate; no easy task. I first tried to force back the lock, and broke two pitchforks in the attempt. Then the trooper found a kind of crowbar, and with this I wrenched the lock clean off. So we were enabled to bring the horses in, and removing one of the carts from the shed, bed them on hay. A fire was made in the yard, the wood being liberally used for this purpose; but the only food we had was a couple of ammunition biscuits. Before lying down, we made another attempt to arouse the people of the house. In vain: we appeared to have thoroughly frightened them.

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Away across the country I perceived the sullen red glare of a burning house, and I wondered if the reflection of our own fire would bring danger upon us: for I had become convinced that the enemy was not far off. However, I determined to keep in the fire as the night was a bitterly cold one, considering that the risk of freezing was more imminent than the danger of capture.

Old campaigners know how to make a warm and comfortable bed out of a truss of hay or straw; and we slept snugly and soundly till daylight, when the trooper went, on his own initiative, round to the house again, and I soon heard his thunderous knocks and kicks, accompanied by stentorian shouts. He was beginning to comprehend what was wanted of him; and if I could only have clearly conveyed ideas to his dull intellect I have no doubt he would have made a very obedient and useful animal. As it was I did not even know the man's name; but I took to calling him "Bill"; and he grinned, and learned his new designation as readily as a faithful dog. Poor Bill! I saw, all through our short acquaintanceship, that he was doing his best, and I am glad that I never felt the least anger or irritation against him.

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Somehow he contrived to bring somebody to the door: daylight makes a lot of difference. People can see the innocence of the dove! and the helplessness of the crow! and we all (I do not mind confessing it) are much pluckier at midday than at midnight.

I suppose Bill made explanations: for he returned with a gentleman and a lady—and a gaping maid behind them. The gentleman looked at his broken pitchforks and gate, his scattered hay, and burning wood, and his glance was not a pleasant one. He did not notice my best bow and propitiatory smile; but the lady did—with a stolid stare that made me very uncomfortable; and dumbfounded Bill, whose mouth opened to the widest extent, while he fidgeted from one leg to the other, and made one painfully aware that he did not know what to do with his hands.

Then the gentleman spoke, and likewise the lady; and the maid became abusive—no one who saw her attitude and heard her voice could have doubted that. I would have given a small world to explain matters: and in fact I did so, in my mother tongue; which had these good effects—it convinced the people that I was very humble and contrite, and induced Bill to close his mouth sufficiently to enable him to speak—with that kind of eloquence (this was my impression) which consists in repeating over and over again, "I am sure I couldn't help it"; which is far more effective than carefully prepared excuses—sometimes at least: and on this occasion most certainly.

The gentleman stalked away, and the lady followed, lingering to cast upon us about the most viperish flash of the eyes that I have ever seen disfigure a pretty face.

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The maid remained to fire a final withering volley; and then took herself off, further discomfiting

us with a sharp, dropping fire as she retired. You see, we had probably much upset the nerves of these people, and frightened them, as well as taken an enemy-like series of liberties with their property. I have related these incidents in a light and amusing strain; but really I was a good deal upset at the time, and rather ashamed of myself, though perhaps such proceedings are justifiable when war lowers over a land.

But Bill may not have been such a booby as he looked and acted on ordinary occasions: for he followed the girl, and soon afterwards came and beckoned me to accompany him; and I was quite surprised to be led up the front-door steps and into a very decently furnished breakfast-room, on the table of which there was an excellent meal ready spread.

The lady and gentleman were there, and there was a complete change in their demeanour. Now they could not be affable enough; and motioning me to be seated, handed me coffee and bacon and eggs, with several other luxuries I had not tasted for a long time. The lady herself waited upon me, and did so with a kindness and grace that was in strong contrast to her previous truculent looks. What story had the astute Bill preached to her and her husband to occasion this change of behaviour?

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What these people thought of me I cannot guess; but they must have seen, from the way in which I ate, that I was famished. They gave no outward indication that they noticed anything unusual about me.

The trooper, I suppose, was entertained in the lower part of the house. That he was faring very well I knew from the occasional outbursts of his merry laughter. Doubtless he was also making himself agreeable to the maid, oblivious of the tragedy that was soon to occur: but such is a soldier's lot. Often have I known men to be laughing, joking, or playing cards, two minutes before their heads were smashed from their shoulders, or a bullet sent whizzing through their hearts.

It was ten o'clock before breakfast was finished, and I rose to go, expressing my thanks for the kind entertainment I had received as best I could; and I had the pleasure of seeing that I was understood. My host and his wife (I assume this was their relationship) accompanied me to the stable-yard, where I found the horses had been saddled by two of their own men; and the trooper was already astride his mount. We rode away with many expressions of thanks on my part and many flourishes of the hand from us all. I looked back for the last time when we were half a verst along the road. I could see the lady still standing outside the gate, and just detect the flutter of her white handkerchief. It was very satisfactory to feel we were freely forgiven.

The country was now pretty open to view, and I have seldom seen a wilder landscape, or one which had a more depressing effect on the spirits. Dark pines were scattered about, and we passed an occasional wood; otherwise the country might be described as a lake of mud, with here and there a plot covered with half-melted snow, which increased the general dirty and unwholesome appearance of the whole district. We could see for about a dozen versts in most directions, and yet only four or five small farmhouses, and as many isolated cottages, were in sight. A solitary worker in the fields was the only man we saw for an hour. A great black patch in the distance proved to be, when we came up to it, a burnt village. The destruction was complete. Not a wall was left, nor a heap of bricks that one could not easily step over. What had become of the inhabitants of this collection of wrecked homes? Not a soul was there when we went by. Then for a long way we passed bones, skulls and parts of skeletons still intact; not lying in lines and heaps as I had seen them doing in places where great battles had been fought, but scattered along the side of the road, singly, or two or three together. I thought they might be the remains of the village people, slain as they were running away; but on dismounting to examine them more closely I satisfied myself that some of them, at least, had once been German soldiers, and others Russians. A few had rusty rifles lying beneath them, and leather cartridge pouches were still strapped round the bones. In many cases the flesh had not disappeared, but was shrunken. The bodies must have been rotting when the snow fell and covered them, which prevented further decay. Crows and ravens were flitting about the fields, as well as a few dogs and pigs: the invariable haunters of the neglected battlefields. These horrible relics of "the glories of war" extended for a linear distance of ten versts along the sides of the roads—how far across the fields I cannot say. They numbered many hundreds, if not thousands: and probably a great many had been buried or removed.

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RUSSIAN TRENCH NEAR BREST-LITOVSK. AS THE RUSSIANS LEFT IT

We rode on several hours, and I wondered that the town of Ostrolenka did not appear in sight. It was vexatious that I could not question my companion. My first suspicion that he had taken the wrong road was aroused by his stopping to call to a man in the fields. The replies he got were evidently not satisfactory; and he seemed to be at a loss to know what course to pursue. After a further consultation with the man, and much pointing and gesticulation, the trooper took a branch road. I was very loth to follow this, but could not make the man understand my meaning; and I really did not know which way to turn myself. I was compelled, in a way, to follow him.

We had ridden along the fresh road about six versts when, on rounding a small wood, we saw a weak squadron of Uhlans in front of us, and not more than 300 yards away. They perceived us too, and shouted an order for us to halt. I turned on the instant, and put the wood between myself and the enemy, but there was nowhere to go except along the road, or across the open fields.

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Cavalry now carry rifles, not carbines, and the seventy men behind us would almost certainly shoot us down at short range. I thought I should prefer that fate to lingering in a German prison, subjected to the arrogance and brutality of Hun gaolers; and so I put spurs to my horse, and forced him to his utmost pace. In a few minutes I looked back, anxiously. The Uhlans were in full cry after us. The trooper was twenty yards behind me, urging on his horse.

What to do I did not know. At one moment I thought to return to the house where we had passed the night; but a moment's reflection convinced me of the folly of doing this. It could not possibly save us, and would most certainly lead to the destruction of persons who had been friendly to us.

We were better mounted than the majority of the Uhlans, and gradually gained ground away from them. Seeing this they tried shooting; but it is difficult to hit even a large mark when going at a gallop; and after wasting fifty or sixty cartridges they gave it up, and about a dozen of their best mounted men pushed to the front; and I soon saw that we had much to fear from them. We could not get away from them, and they began to gain on us.

Then I perceived a low ridge of ground which was not so marshy as the fields, and dashed across it, the trooper following my lead. The Uhlans also came on with unabated speed, and I saw that it was a question of horse-endurance.

Ahead, a black smoke, slowly curling upwards, was, I thought, the place we had seen burning the previous night. We seemed to be going directly towards it; and I feared that there might be more Germans directly in front of us, or that the road might be blocked and impassable.

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From time to time I looked back at our pursuers. At the end of an hour the foremost of them were not 200 yards behind, the rest had trailed out into a straggling line. Still they were near enough to support one another if we turned on the leaders: a thing I had half a mind to do.

It was now late in the afternoon, and if we could keep away for another hour it would be dark, and there would be a chance of escape; but my horse was getting blown, and several of the Uhlans had fallen out, unable to keep up the pace. Then the wretches resumed their firing: and in a few minutes the trooper swerved in his saddle, groaning badly. He rode on a few yards farther, and then fell with a cry I could not resist; I reined in, and jumped to his assistance; but he died just as the Uhlans came up and surrounded me. I shall not attempt to describe the shock it gave me to realize that I was a prisoner. I looked towards my horse, but a sturdy unter-officer had secured it, and my captors began to laugh and jeer.

I was not allowed to remount my horse; but, fastened to one fellow's stirrup, was compelled to walk, limping sadly, for my feet were now very bad.

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CHAPTER XXIV

A PRISONER IN GERMAN HANDS

A prisoner: and to the Germans! The very thought was a horror. And these people treated me badly from the first, as they appear to treat all their prisoners. Twice I fell on account of the state of my feet, and was dragged along the ground. The clothes were nearly torn from my back; and my revolver, which I had hitherto contrived to keep, was discovered and confiscated. Very fortunately I had hidden my money, and this was not found by the men, though they carefully turned out all my pockets. When they had done with me I was left with a comb, my rags, and the last few of my English sovereigns.

At dusk we arrived at the still-smoking ruins of a hamlet. One or two houses near by were still intact, and occupied by a dismounted party of the Uhlans, some twenty men in number.

I was taken to the top of the house, and locked in a room with eight other prisoners, six Russian soldiers belonging to the artillery and 98th regiment; and two peasants. There was some straw on the floor on which the soldiers were lying. They made room for me, and spoke to me; but when they found I could not speak more than a few sentences of their language, I seemed to become an object of suspicion to them.

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I was tired, and my feet gave me great pain, so that I was glad to lie down and remain quiet. Sleep I could not; partly because of my misery, partly because the two countrymen prayed continually and frantically all through the night. Strange; but I did not guess the reason till daybreak, when they were fetched out by a Uhlan guard; and the other prisoners crowded to the two windows. I got a place at one of them to see what was going on.

I saw the two peasants brought into the courtyard of the house and blindfolded. They were then placed against a wall, where one of them fell to his knees. He was brutally kicked until he stood up again, when he leaned against the wall, rocking himself in agony of spirit. The other man stood stolid, like a statue, probably paralyzed by fear. Only three soldiers to each man formed the firing-party, and neither of the prisoners was killed outright. One of them screamed horribly, the other tried to rise to his feet. A non-commissioned officer stepped forward very deliberately, and blew their brains out one after the other. The whole terrible scene affected me so greatly that I could not forbear hissing, in which I was joined by the soldiers. There was no glass in the windows, so the Germans plainly heard us; and shortly afterwards a party of them came into the room, and beat us with sticks until I thought they meant to murder us. I used my fists pretty freely, until I was knocked senseless.

When I came to, I found that breakfast had been served, consisting of a can of dirty water for each man, and about half a pound of black bread of the consistence of putty. We were not allowed to leave the room all day; and the place stank abominably. Another meal was served in the afternoon, it consisted, like the former one, of half a pound of wet bread, and a few ounces of fat mutton. The drink was water of so filthy an appearance that only dire necessity compelled me to swallow a few mouthfuls of it. We were granted no facilities for personal cleanliness.

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Early the next morning we were fetched out and paraded, and I saw that the Uhlans were ready for a march. An officer began to question me in Russian. I said, in French, that I could not speak Russian. "Are you French?" he asked in surprise. "No." "What are you then?" I blurted out that I was an Englishman; and expected that I had committed myself. It was an agreeable surprise when the officer said that he had spent twelve years in England, and had always been well treated there. He immediately became very friendly, gave me cigars, sent into the house for the remains of a sausage and some good bread, was sorry that they had no tea or coffee, but gave me half a bottle of champagne instead. Again I had met with one of those lucky chances that have, from time to time, lightened the burden of life.

When I explained to Captain Eshricke (this is how he pronounced his name) the condition of my feet, he very kindly ordered that I should be permitted to ride my horse; but he first exacted a promise that I would not attempt to escape. I was compelled to give this promise, though I did so with some reluctance. I also persuaded him to permit my fellow-prisoners to ride in a country cart, as they were in a very tired condition, and it is difficult for infantry to keep up with cavalry even when going at a foot pace.

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I made no reference to the shooting of the two prisoners, but later the Captain himself adverted to it. "You saw those two fellows shot this morning? They deserved it. They set fire to those buildings to burn us out, and were caught red-handed."

I do not know if this were true; but it could hardly justify the terrible beating to which we had been subjected, and some of the effects of which I felt for many weeks afterwards. But one cannot argue with kings and Germans; and I had cause to think that "All's well that ends well," although I received no apology.

In war, and in this war in particular, a still tongue makes a safe head, and I did not think it wise to be too inquisitive, considering that I might find it difficult to establish my position if I were

asked who and what I was, and what had brought me to Poland. I had seen that morning that even a Captain of Uhlans could make short work of people he chose to consider offenders. But I did venture to ask Eshricke if he had any objection to tell me where he was going to take me. "Not far," was his laconic reply.

We travelled northward: I had little doubt then that we were making for the Prussian frontier, which, I calculated, could not be many miles away. So far as I could see, the Uhlans were a flying-party on observation duty, with no immediate supports in the neighbourhood; although I was sufficiently acquainted with German military tactics to be quite sure the Captain knew where to find reinforcements when he required them. The squadron was not nearly at war strength, consisting of less than seventy mounted men and eighteen who had lost their horses, and followed us in three military carts. That their losses had occurred in recent fighting was shown by the thirteen or fourteen wounded men amongst them, as well as by the absence of their horses. Many of the men were repulsive-looking ruffians; and what their dispositions were like was shown by more than one unpleasant incident during the march. Here is one example of German playfulness:

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We entered a small village (Prajashzhol, according to Eshricke), rather as a surprise, I think; for the inhabitants had not fled, or hidden themselves. It seemed to be market-day here, and there were carts and stalls in the little square. Some of these began to depart hastily on sight of the Uhlans; but the soldiers dismounted, and made purchases, for which they paid in German coin. There was nothing to comment on in this act; for, I believe, Russian and German money is interchangeable on the border lands, and is freely accepted, and tendered, by the peoples of the two countries. But there was there a young Polish girl selling cakes. The day was warm, and she had no cloak or cape on; and her hair hung down her back, plaited into two thick tresses. While two of the Uhlans were buying cakes, a third went behind, and suddenly seized her tresses, and giving them a sharp tug, pulled her down backwards so that she lay flat on the ground, half-dazed by the shock. This unmanly act caused much merriment amongst the soldiers, who laughed heartily, though the poor girl (she was about twenty) was hurt, and cried when she was helped up. This was considered a joke—what a Uhlan in temper is like may be surmised. The young girls and women seemed to know; for they disappeared very speedily, but not before several of them had been grossly insulted. Nor did the men fare any better. Disputes soon occurred, and I saw two of the peasants knocked down, and a third cut across the face with a whip. Another was chased into a house by a Uhlan with a drawn sword, and perhaps killed: I do not know.

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Nearly all the soldiers were soon drunk: their proper state, perhaps, as a tipsy German is generally less irritable and arrogant than a sober one, and certainly less mischievous. On the whole I think less harm was done at Prajashzhol than the Germans usually inflicted on places that had the misfortune to receive a visit from them. There were no cases of incendiarism, and the women were not subjected to the worst forms of insult. There was some violence, and plundering was rife; though many of the men paid for what they took.

About this time I noticed that there was a great increase in the number of aeroplanes and airships hovering over the country. I usually saw one or two every day, mostly German craft; on this 21st April I saw no fewer than six, and one Zeppelin. They were making an attack on a Russian position about five miles away; but it was not successful—few such attacks are. One of the aeroplanes dropped no doubt within the Russian lines; and another soon after it had retired and flown over our heads. Both machines came down slowly. I saw the two men who worked the one that fell near us. The aviator was badly knocked about, and his face much cut; but I do not think that he was dangerously hurt. The mechanic was not so much injured: the aeroplane was wrecked.

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The Zeppelin seemed to be injured; but she got away and sailed out of sight. We distinctly heard the reports of the exploding bombs dropped by these craft, and explosions of the Russian guns fired at them. I rejoiced to learn my friends were so near, and hoped that I might be released by some lucky chance, but this did not occur.

There was plenty of food at Prajashzhol—pork, fowls, ducks, bread, beef and mutton, and vodka; but vegetables were scarce, even potatoes; and wine there was none. I filled my haversack with sufficient food to last three or four days, and procured a new coat of rough material.

While we were bivouacking in the market-place, a vidette galloped in with some news which caused Captain Eshricke to mount in hot haste, and we literally bolted from the village. The dismounted men and the six Russian prisoners were left behind with their carts, and were, no doubt, retaken by the pursuing Russians, the first of whom appeared as we passed the last houses of the village street. I tried to lag behind, but the Captain swore he would shoot me if I did not urge my horse forward; and one of the Uhlans pricked the animal with his lance, causing it to rear and dash forward wildly. I would have fallen off, but there were too many men behind me. I should have been trampled to death, and probably speared into the bargain. For they are nasty-tempered fellows are the Germans when things are running counter to them; and the first Cossacks that appeared were only half a dozen men, and they held back until they were reinforced: indeed, they did not make a very energetic pursuit. They probably knew that there was a strong force of the enemy at hand, and feared they would be trapped.

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I soon learned that the Uhlans in whose hands I was, and who belonged to the 12th regiment, formed part of the advanced guard of a whole army corps. At nightfall we came to a force of infantry, whose numbers I could not estimate, it was so considerable, and covered so wide a range of country.

The Captain handed me over to the first outpost we reached, and I was sent to the rear under escort of an infantry file. My horse was taken from me, and my feet were so painful that I could scarcely hobble along. But no mercy was shown me. I was compelled to walk a distance of about four English miles. Then we came to a small cottage which was being used as a guard-house. Here I was blindfolded, and again marched on, I could not tell in what direction, for quite an hour, when we arrived at another house. I then found, from the sounds, that I was in the presence of several officers who were interrogating my captors. [311]

Then the bandage was taken from my eyes, and I was searched. The officers carefully examined my papers, and the one who seemed to be the chief spat out, rather than spoke, so great was his venom:

"So you are an English spy, you dog!"

I said I was not a spy; but had been honourably fighting with the Russians, and was captured in company with a Russian soldier who was killed at the time.

"Don't you know that foreigners are not permitted to fight in the Russian Army?" asked the officer.

I said that I did not know anything of the kind; but I had been fighting in the Russian ranks.

"Spying in the Russian ranks," said this man, who spoke perfect English. "Have you any defence to make?"

"I do not admit that a true charge has been made against me, or that I have need to make a defence. I am, practically, a Russian soldier," I replied.

"Oh!" said the officer, very sarcastically. "Have you any evidence that you were regularly enlisted in the Russian ranks, which we know to be impossible?"

"I do not say I was 'enlisted.' The papers you have taken from me prove that I held honourable relations with the Russian Army, and that I have fought with it for a period of nine months." [312]

The man looked through my papers again. Those written in Russian he evidently could not read; but he sent for a soldier, having the appearance of an orderly-room clerk, who translated them to the officers.

"Bah! They are only passports to enable you to carry on your nefarious business. You are a spy," he said; and deliberately tore the whole of the papers to shreds, which he cast on the floor.

My indignation was so hot that I exclaimed: "You scoundrel!"

"What!" he shouted. "You d——d Englishman! You shall be shot to-morrow morning. Take him away."

"You are a cowardly murderer!" I replied fiercely.

I did not get an opportunity to say more; for my guards hauled me away with great roughness, and took me to a house which seemed to be used as a prison; for at least a hundred persons were crowded into it. Two-thirds of these were Russian soldiers; the remainder were civilians of various grades, including one woman, a lady of mature years; and one man was nursing a young child.

Was there ever a more horrible way of conducting war? Women, children, harmless citizens and honourable soldiers, treated as felons! Is there to be a retribution for this cruelty and wickedness?

It would be waste of time to pause and inquire what were the probable charges against these civilians. What are the charges against a bandit's victims? The revolutionists of '93 splashed blood on the walls of their cities: BLOOD should be splashed on the brows of the German monsters who have deluged Europe with it. [313]

I believed that my last day had come. I had seen too much of the German method with prisoners to entertain the least hope of escape. I need not trouble to record my feelings: they were not pleasant emotions.

Those in the room were passing their time in various ways. Some were asleep on chairs, or lying on the floor in corners. So many were smoking that the place was full of blue, hazy smoke. The woman, with bowed head, seemed dazed with wretchedness, the child was whimpering. From the way in which many of the men stared at me, I thought that they knew that I was appointed to die. One party devoted as much attention to me as they did to the cards they were playing. The guard numbered a dozen men, who occupied an ante-room, were laughing, talking noisily, and singing beastly songs; a circumstance that convinced me that the house occupied an isolated position, not near any body of troops commanded by an officer above subaltern rank, who would soon have put a stop to the ribaldry. These things did not occur to me just at the moment; but they flashed on my mind later, when a certain incident occurred.

I suppose it was about midnight; but there was no means of telling the time. Many of the guard-soldiers were dozing; the rest had quieted down, but were talking together, and not taking particular notice of the prisoners. [314]

Two of the men who were playing cards got up, and came and stood in front of me. One of them, first looking round to see that the soldiers were not observing him, pointed his thumb at them, and winked; then he made a gesture of striking a terrific blow. He looked at me inquiringly; and I thought I comprehended what he meant, and nodded acquiescence. He replied by a nod of satisfaction; and he and his companion retired to the far end of the room.

What they seemed to propose to do was a desperate act. They appeared to intend to rush past the guards, knocking down any who attempted to oppose them, and so get away. I made up my mind that, since death must come, I would rather die making a desperate effort for my life than wait an hour or two longer to be led out in the grey dawn, tied up and shot like a dog. At that moment I was strung up to such a pitch of nerve that no action could be too desperate for me to attempt.

There was a yard attached to the house, which the prisoners were permitted to use, as occasion required. It was approached by a short passage from the guardroom; and a sentry was posted in the yard to prevent prisoners escaping over the wall, which was nine or ten feet high. [315]

Presently the two men I have mentioned, both of them soldiers of the Russian artillery, went out, one of them raising his hand slightly as he passed through the door. I nodded to intimate that I would come. I was beginning to perceive more clearly what was intended. I followed at once. As I entered the yard one of the prisoners quietly shut the door behind me. The sentry began to speak, probably protesting, as I think only one or two prisoners at a time were permitted to enter the yard. Before he had well opened his mouth one of the prisoners sprang on him from behind and clasped his throat; the other threw himself on him in front and tore his rifle out of his hands. He was lifted off his feet and held across the knees of one of the prisoners. He could not utter any sound except a smothered gurgle, but he kicked desperately. I saw what was wanted of me, and clasped his legs with all my strength. So we held him till he died.

Then the prisoners acted with the nimbleness of monkeys. One of them gave me a leg up the wall; I did not wait to see how they got up; it was a matter of life or death to act quickly. The three of us were over the wall and in the street in three seconds. I noticed that my companions had taken off their boots. I followed their example, and rushed up the street after them. It led out into the open country; and as there was some moonlight I rushed towards a patch of trees and bushes—a copse, I suppose. As I entered it I saw that one of the prisoners was already there. He immediately hid himself, and I did not see him or his companion again; nor do I know what became of them. [316]

It was a very small wood; of some length, but not more than twenty or thirty yards wide. It will be inferred, though I have forgotten to actually say so, that there were lights in the prison-house. I could see these lights dimly showing through two of the blinded windows: and farther back I could see a single bright light. Probably this was in the town; and the town, I suppose, was Janow, which is Prussian, and situated on the frontier between that country and Poland. But this is merely a guess, based on the direction my captors had taken, and the situation in which I afterwards found myself. It may have been some large village, of the existence and name of which I was ignorant.

Although at the moment all was quiet, and there were no signs of movement behind, I could not hope that the discovery of our escape would be long delayed, and I saw the necessity of putting as great a distance as possible between myself and the enemy without a moment's delay.

I turned to the left, because that seemed the darkest part of the country, and ran as fast as I could; but even with the prospect of escape to urge me on, I could not run very fast owing to the crippled and painful state of my feet. In about half an hour I was compelled to sit down for a rest; and I tried to put my boots on. Owing to the swollen condition of my feet, occasioned by running rapidly over some stony ground, I found that I could not do this; and I bound up the injured members in tufts of grass which I gathered in one of the fields I passed across; and in this plight continued to walk until daylight. [317]

The country I travelled over was fields and open ground. I crossed several roads and pathways, but was afraid to keep on them as I expected that pursuing parties would use them. The fields were exposed; and when light broke I dodged from bush to bush, or along the ditches. There are no hedges or fences in this country, the partitions of the ground being made by ditches. Trees or bushes, except in the woods, are very scarce; but there are a few along the courses of the brooks, which are numerous and often serve as boundaries to the fields. As they have deep banks, I often ran along their beds, especially as the water was grateful to my hot and painful feet; but I am not sure that I did wisely to resort to this method of obtaining ease; for afterwards I suffered so severely that I almost despaired of being able to continue my journey.

In this district farms and peasants' houses were tolerably numerous, and though I strove to avoid it, a woman at one of the cottages saw me, and beckoned with her hand. I thought it would be wise to stop, especially as her gestures were friendly. She took me by the sleeve and led me into the cottage, where two men were seated on benches at a rough table, eating their breakfast. A large jug of milk and some bread and meat were given to me, food I was much in need of, and while I was eating it the woman bathed my feet in warm water, and bound them in rags. They seemed so little taken by surprise at my appearance, that I fancied I was expected; and I am pretty sure that one, or both, of my fellow-prisoners had been there before me, and kindly put these people on the alert to assist me. [318]

When I had finished eating, the woman pointed to a ladder leading to a loft, and motioned that I

should ascend it, evidently intending that I should rest; but I preferred to put a greater distance between myself and the Germans; though I think it is unlikely that they would pursue a fugitive far into an enemy's country. So I thanked these kind people as well as I could, and went on my way. The men walked about two English miles with me, and pointed out a road I should take, leading to Przasnysz. I understood that well enough; and also that they blessed me in the name of the Trinity when we parted.

When I had gone some distance I looked back. The men were standing by some mounds which I guessed covered the remains of slain Russians, and were bareheaded and silently praying—a common custom in this country, where people more often address themselves to the Almighty in the open air than they do in houses.

The road was over an undulating plain, with a few willow-trees along the courses of the streams, but practically no cover for a person wishing to hide himself. I hurried on as fast as I could walk. By the time the sun was well up I was so tired that I was glad to creep into a fairly dry ditch, where I slept soundly until nearly evening time. Before resuming my journey I ate a small loaf which the woman had put in my pocket when I left the cottage in the morning. Then I took a road running eastwards to Ostrolenka, with the object of reaching the railway, and also in the hope that I should find Russian soldiers to whom I was known. There is no railway at Przasnysz: and though I believed that the last-named place was still in the hands of the Russians, I was not sure of it, and feared that, in any case, I should run great danger of meeting parties of the enemy in that direction. It so happened, however, that I saw patrols or scouts of the enemy on the road I had decided to take. They consisted of small bands of Uhlans and dragoons, the strongest of them not more than twenty troopers in number. They were probably flying parties, at a great distance from a base; but that circumstance made them none the less dangerous to me; and I spent the greater part of the day lurking in cover. It is a fortunate event some of these men did not discover me; for I was compelled to be content with very incomplete concealment. I escaped notice, but I had several very narrow escapes; and if the soldiers had been as alert as they ought to have been I should have been discovered. One man nearly rode over me as I lay crouching in a patch of sedge by the side of a tiny brook; and a squad of eight dragoons passed within four or five yards of me, giving me a very unpleasant shock, as I had no weapon for defence, except a stick I had broken from a tree. The Germans had stripped me of everything I carried, my money excepted; and that, fortunately, I had successfully hidden by stitching it, sovereign by sovereign, under a black braid stripe down the seam of my trousers.

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CHAPTER XXV

ADVENTURES DURING THE EFFORT TO ESCAPE

I soon decided that it was necessary to ensure my final escape by hiding during the day, and travelling only at night. The country was full of small mounted parties of the enemy, who were prying into every hole and corner of the land. During a week that I was travelling towards Ostrolenka (which could not be farther than thirty English miles), I saw enough to show what my fate would be if I had the misfortune to fall into the hands of the fiends who were ravishing the country. I saw several peasants dragged from their hovels and shot, and the women treated with unnameable barbarity. I heard children screaming in fright at the murder of their parents, and saw homesteads set on fire and burnt to the ground. Outrages of all kinds were committed by small squads of men who were commanded by unter-officers (that is, corporals), if commanded at all; and in saying this I do not intend, in any degree, to exonerate the commissioned officers. As I lay hidden on the roof of a barn I saw a young beast, who did not seem to be more than twenty years of age, ill-use a woman, while one of the devils he commanded kicked away her children, as they undoubtedly were. He afterwards threw the woman to his men, half of whom abused her in turn; while their commander shot a white-haired old man who interfered, and who was probably her father. Other men on the farm had been previously shot. I am half-ashamed to narrate the incident, and have to admit that I did not interfere—I could not. Starving, crippled and ill, and unarmed, any interposition on my part would only have added another drop to the horrible pool of blood that lay in front of the doorstep.

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Afterwards the house was set on fire; and being old and built mostly of timber, it burned out in about half an hour. While it was in full blaze the hussars, a dozen in number, rode away. One of them was badly hurt, having been shot, I think, by one of the men the Germans afterwards murdered.

I came down from my perch amongst the bundles of sticks on the barn-roof as soon as the murderers left the yard. The woman had thrown herself on the body of one of the men, and was moaning piteously: the children hiding their faces in her dress, and sobbing bitterly. There were three of the little mites, the eldest about twelve years, the youngest four or five. I afterwards found a boy of eight, who had hidden himself, and was paralyzed with fright.

At this time I was faint with hunger; and finding it impossible to arouse the woman, who was nearly dead, or comfort the children, I entered the smouldering house in search of food, if any had escaped the flames. I knew it was the Polish custom to build the pantry of stone, and projecting beyond the house; and I hoped that some fragments of bread at least were still to be found. But the Germans had cleared the place: not a crumb was to be seen; and as I was exploring one of the rooms, I broke through the floor into a heap of ashes at white-heat. I extricated myself pretty quickly, but nevertheless my already frostbitten feet and legs were burned; it is surprising that I continued to stand and walk for days after this occurrence.

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Meeting with no success indoors, I searched about the outhouses, and tried to knock down a fowl. The Germans had killed all those that were tame enough to be caught; but in the barn, on the roof of which I had lain hid, I found a quantity of wheat, stored in bulk, and of this I ate as much as I could; and filled my pockets for future occasions; and when the fowls went to roost at evening I wrung the necks of several of them and cooked them on the still glowing embers of the house. I also found a saucepan or two, and boiled a quantity of the wheat, which enabled me to give the children a meal. By this time the little ones had gained full confidence in me, the youngest one particularly so, who toddled about, chatting to me, no doubt wondering why I did not reply in a language she could understand. The boy was terribly unnerved, and the woman I could do nothing with, until towards night, when I made her get up from the body on which she had lain all day, and pulled her into the barn, where we slept all that night, lying on old sacks—at least the children and I slept. The poor woman was moaning when I dropped off, and still moaning when I awoke in the morning.

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Before retiring I dragged the bodies of the three men into an outhouse, and covered them over with sacking, of which there was plenty stored in the barn. I then closed the door to prevent the dogs getting at them, and looked round the place, which had been, I should think, the home of a well-to-do small farmer.

In the morning I thought the best thing I could do would be to take the children to a house I could see about two miles across the country, and which seemed, so far, to be intact. I contrived to make the woman understand what I intended to do, and we all started together, she carrying the boy, and I the little girl. It took us quite an hour to reach the place, on account of the infirmities from which we suffered; and one of the elder girls was lame from the kicking she had received the previous day. I saw that she had a bruise the size of a tea-saucer on her little body. When the day of Peace comes, will the Great British Nation treat as a man the author of all this cruelty and wickedness? I shall blush to be an Englishman if it does; or if British soldiers are brought out to salute the Villain when he is forced to surrender.

At last we reached the house, which I found occupied by six females, three of them young girls, and two lads. The woman I had brought with me suppressed her moans and sobs to explain matters to these people; and some hot tea and bread and butter were given to me; but the women, who were evidently in a terrified condition, pushed me out of the house, and made it plain that they wished me to go. They were afraid of the consequences of the Germans coming and finding me on their premises. So I kissed the little girls and went.

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As I passed on to the road I saw the hussars (I believe it was the same party) riding over the country about a verst away; and I lost no time in getting into some hollow ground, which was a marsh, with a brook running through it.

I had with me about a peck of boiled wheat, which I carried in a roughly made bag; and a bill-hook, which I thought might come in handy if I had any more personal encounters with William Hohenzollern's murderers. I would at least spare myself the fate of being shot like a dog by these wretches.

I was compelled to walk some distance over an open country this day, until I reached some stone quarries, in which I hid, and where I remained several days on account of the pain I suffered, which rendered walking impossible. During this time I lived on the boiled corn I had brought, and the remains of a fowl, cooked at the burnt farm.

On the second day I passed in this quarry I saw six Cossacks, and began, joyfully, to make my way towards them, endeavouring to attract their attention. I had not got a hundred yards, when I saw nearly twenty German cavalymen ride out from behind some buildings and charge the Cossacks. For some reason, which I could not perceive, the Cossacks seemed unable to escape. They made a gallant fight, but were soon exterminated. The Germans made no attempt to take prisoners: they butchered the six Russians, losing two dead and two wounded of their own number. I distinctly saw them plunder the dead; and then, after helping their injured men on horseback, ride away.

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At nightfall I crept out and visited the dead bodies in the hope that life might be left in some of them. It was useless. They were all fine men; but had been fearfully disfigured. One man's face was slashed to pieces; another had his skull split down to the eyes. Both the Germans had been slain by lance thrusts. There was also a dead horse lying by one of the men.

I hoped that some of the firearms had been left behind. In vain I searched: not even a pinch of tobacco remained in the pockets of any of the men. Even the ear-rings had been torn from the Cossacks. Many of these, and other Russian soldiers, wear golden ear-rings.

I went on to the buildings from which the Germans had ridden out. The house was deserted; and although it was not burnt, the brutal invaders had completely wrecked the interior, smashing

furniture, glass and pictures. The place had been occupied by persons of a superior class to the peasant-farmers; and I noticed some female fancy-work lying on the floor of one corner of a room.

The whole of this district, though not deserted by the people, was in a cowed state; the peasantry, and especially the well-to-do classes, were afraid to show themselves during daylight. Many had fled to the towns and villages, and a good many had been wantonly murdered. The Poles are a brave, generous people, and my heart often bled for them. Their sorrows, eclipsed by those of the equally brave Belgians, and dimmed by being more remote in point of distance, are not, I think, fully realized in England; especially as they are defended by one of the largest armies in the world. But that army, large and powerful as it is, has not been able to defend them from the tigerish brutality of their foes. They have suffered terribly—the word is not strong enough. The wanton miseries inflicted upon them have been hellish. I have long known the Germans as an arrogant and extremely sensual people, and their learned scientists as the most determined modern opponents of Christianity; but it is one of the surprises of my life to see them sink so low in the scale of humanity—to use a hackneyed but expressive phrase. I could not have believed that the German nation would bathe itself in blood.

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At this house I scraped together a few fragments of food, and got a couple of blankets, which I much needed: for the nights, though generally clear and bright, were frosty and bitterly cold. I returned to the stone-quarry, for I was afraid to sleep in the house.

The moon was now about full; and when the sky was not cloudy, it was so light at night-time that I could see for miles across the country; and I noticed that there were more people moving about than I saw in the daytime. I could not guess at their business, as there were no shops near that I could discover. Some, in one or two hamlets I had approached, were looted and wrecked; and the proprietors were gone. Probably the people about at night were on the prowl for anything they could pick up: for although I obtained a little food at some farms, as I have mentioned, such population as remained in the country was starving.

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I remained in the quarry until the 30th of April in the hope that the condition of my feet would improve. I was forced at last, by starvation, to make another move forward. I waited until night, and then hobbled along the road with the aid of a rough crutch I had contrived out of a forked stick. I was so exhausted and pain-racked that I had to sit down and rest every few hundred yards, and probably I did not travel more than five miles during the whole night. During this time I passed through a small village, in the street of which I met the night-watchman: for this antiquated institution still survives in Russian rural districts. He stopped and questioned me; but he was a silly, good-humoured old soul, much too old for his work, and though I did not understand a tenth of what he said, and could not reply to a twentieth of it, I had no difficulty in getting away from him.

I was more fearful of the soldiers. Besides a few cavalry scouts, I saw a company of infantry marching along the road. I kept out of their way, as I could not tell whether they were Germans or Russians; and it was too risky a business to approach near enough to make sure. The fact that they had several prisoners with them made me think they were more likely to be foes than friends. That some small military movements were taking place in the neighbourhood was proved by the occasional sound of rifle-firing which I heard in the distance.

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The snow had now entirely melted; but there was ice every morning, which thawed as the sun gained power. In the middle of the day the weather was often quite hot; but the ground dried very slowly, and there were often dense fogs which troubled me greatly, as they came up from the ground at night, just the time I wanted to be moving: and on one occasion I lost my way, and went miles astray. I had not much difficulty, though, in getting set right when such accidents happened. I would repeat the name of the place I wanted to the first peasant I met, and he would point in the direction I was to take. Some of the country-people would readily communicate with me; others would avoid me as if frightened.

All through the 1st May I lay in a hole which I excavated in the bank of a brook, and hid with bushes when I was in it. I saw nobody at all on this day, and the only sounds I heard were the ringing of some bells and a few distant shots.

Most of the fields I passed over were sown with corn; but sometimes I came to grassland; and there were extensive stretches of marshy ground, which was often already covered with sedge high enough to completely hide a man. As, however, it was growing in several inches of water, under which there was an unlimited quantity of mud, taking cover in it was attended with much discomfort. I was forced into it, perhaps a dozen times a day, by the appearance of cavalry scouts and suspicious-looking individuals. If I found a brook running in the direction I wished to take I generally followed its course for the sake of the cover its bushes afforded. Once I passed five or six hours hiding in a hollow willow-stump.

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There was a lot of wild-fowl sheltering in the sedge, chiefly wild ducks, and water-hens. I succeeded in catching a few of the water-hens; but the ducks eluded the stones I was continually throwing at them; and though I saw a hundred rabbits and hares, I succeeded in knocking over only one hare. I required these animals for food; but having obtained them I was for a time puzzled how to dress them, as I was afraid to make a fire in the open. At last I cooked them at the stove of a deserted house. Bread I had literally to beg; and I entered six or seven farms and cottages before I obtained a small supply.

I used to show a few kopecs and point to my mouth, an antic, or pantomime, that was at once

understood. The people would shake their heads to intimate they had no food to spare; and one woman held up a poor little pinched baby to show how hardly pressed they were. In some cases I believe the people thought I was a German, as I could not speak more than a few disjointed sentences of their language. Finally, however, I obtained about a pound of unleavened bread, for which the money was refused.

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In this way I ultimately arrived near Ostrolenka, in such a state of exhaustion and suffering that I could scarcely drag myself over the ground. I was found, and made a prisoner of, by some Russian cavalry, and taken into the city, which is, also, a third-class or, at most, second-class fortress. Here I was handed over to the civil police and promptly put in prison. That night, however, a medical man examined my feet, which were afterwards dressed by a male nurse.

The next morning I was taken before a magistrate, and while trying to explain to him the cause of my plight a Cossack officer came forward, and at once put matters right. I had only a dim recollection of having seen this man before; but he did me the honour of having a better remembrance. Unfortunately, I could not understand all that he said to the magistrate; but the effect was magical. Everybody in the court had an immediate interest in me, and I was at once taken to a hospital where wounded soldiers were being attended to, and treated in every respect as an officer. By this time I was quite ill.

Two or three days afterwards a doctor who could speak English was brought to my bedside, and to him I gave a detailed account of the recent experiences I had passed through, and begged him to apply to the proper persons to have me sent home, as I was unfit for further service. He promised that he would do this; and I was vexed at the delay that ensued, as every day I seemed to grow worse. I do not say that I was not well nursed and looked after; but I must admit that I have no great confidence in Russian doctors—nor, indeed, in any foreign medical men.

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Ostrolenka was full of troops, but I did not learn to what corps they belonged. The forts which defend it would require a considerable number of men to man them properly; and I do not think the place could hold out many *hours* before such artillery as the Germans use in their siege operations. The old "carronades" of Nelson's days were sometimes called "smashers"; much more appropriate is such a name to the monster howitzers which the Germans use to smash up their opponent's defensive works; and yet I am not one of those who are appalled by the destruction effected by huge guns. Modern forts are not strong enough, and are not constructed on the principle which is best calculated to withstand the battering of Krupp's huge ordnance; but they may be made of sufficient strength to defy any guns. In a competition between forts and guns, forts if properly constructed and defended must win. By "defended" I mean so placed that they cannot be subjected to direct fire. This can always be done. For if they cannot be placed on elevated ground, they can be sunk in it; and my experience is that a gun sunk in a pit is the most difficult of all marks for an artillerist to hit. In fact, I do not think it can be done, except by a chance shot, and chance shots do not win, or lose, fortresses.

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CHAPTER XXVI

MY LAST DAYS IN RUSSIA

The suggestion was made that I should remain at Ostrolenka until I was cured; and as it was obvious that this would mean a long time I declined the intended kindness, and begged to be sent home at once. Accordingly I was furnished with passes, and a free permit to travel, and sent to Bialystok on the 10th May. Although this place is only eighty versts from Ostrolenka, it took the train a whole day to reach it. We were continually being run into sidings to permit troop-and store-trains to pass. Troops were being hurried to the front in thousands; and Bialystok was crowded with what appeared to be a whole army corps.

The authorities were too busy to attend to me, and I lay in the station all night. The next morning a police official took me to some barracks, where I was well fed and my injuries attended to. On the 12th I was taken in an ambulance to the Grodno-Vilno terminus (there are five railway termini in Bialystok) and put into a train full of wounded soldiers bound for Petrograd. The distance to Vilna from Bialystok is about 170 versts: it took us thirty-nine hours to perform it.

I left the train at Vilna; but there was nobody there to help me in any way. Officials looked at my paper and pointed this way and that, but gave me no real help. I had to go into the town to purchase food and a few necessaries. The city was even more crowded by troops than Bialystok. It is another great railway centre; and to all appearance soldiers were arriving from all parts of the vast empire. Many of the regiments were Siberians.

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While in the streets I was interfered with a good deal by the police; but my papers were always found to be satisfactory. English gold created much amazement among the tradesmen; but I succeeded in passing several sovereigns.

On the 15th I bought my own ticket to Riga; but I did not succeed in finding a train to that place until the morning of the 16th. From Vilna to Riga is about 200 English miles. I entered the train early in the morning. There were only four passenger-cars: the remainder, a dozen, or fourteen, in number, were goods vans and trucks. In the carriage I selected, the only passengers were three men and a woman.

I was so tired that I went to sleep soon after I had sat down, and when I awoke the train was just starting. It was then nearly evening, so we had been standing outside the station nearly all day. I dozed at frequent intervals: and so did the train: that is, it stopped, on an average, about every half-hour; but very seldom at a station.

When morning broke I eagerly looked out of the carriage-window. The prospect was a wide plain, with only odd trees on it, and houses scattered about between two villages. I had no idea of our locality, but had hoped we were nearing Riga. Of this, however, there were no signs, and I muttered my disappointment. My fellow-passengers looked at me curiously, but did not speak. So far I had not heard the sounds of their voices, and I have noticed that foreigners on a journey, as a rule, are not more talkative than English people. [335]

Two hours later we arrived at Dunaburg, which is a large town and a considerable railway centre. It was crowded by soldiers; and field artillery were entraining in large numbers. Two passengers got out of the carriage here, and six others entered; but when we started again I do not think there were more than twenty people in the whole train. The population of the country was evidently not fleeing coastwise.

We were backed into a siding and kept there six hours. During the night we were more often stationary than moving, and at daybreak on the morning of the 18th were still only crawling along the line. At several small stations the train was stopped to be overhauled by police officials. They closely questioned all the passengers. When it was discovered that I could not speak much Russian, I was at once, and very roughly and rudely, hauled on to the platform; and my papers read and reread several times; and vised by a police officer. Then I was permitted to re-enter the train, and proceed on my journey.

As we ran slowly onward I saw several large encampments of troops in the fields by the side of the line; and hundreds of men were being drilled and exercised. Many of them had so awkward a bearing as to suggest that they had had no previous training: and I saw sufficient, during my stay in Russia, to show that the State is too poor to embody and instruct the whole of her male population. I do not believe, indeed, that more than half the conscripts are trained. This would not be an unmixed evil if the men were selected, as they are supposed to be, and the most fit draughted to military service; but I think there is a great deal of substitution, rich men finding substitutes. This cannot be otherwise than bad for the service. [336]

We arrived at Riga at midnight on the 18th, and I was again subjected to the usual police examination and cross-questioning. Here, however, I found several officials who could speak English quite fluently, and so I had no difficulty in making my wishes known, but was given the disquieting assurance that there was no prospect whatever of my being able to leave the Baltic.

It was rapidly becoming a matter of life or death for me to get home. I was so ill and exhausted that I could only stand with difficulty; and my funds were running so short that I could bear the expenses of living at an hotel for only a few days. Having received permission, therefore, I went down to the wharves with a policeman to look for a boat, the regular packets having ceased running.

I do not think that my further movements can have much interest; but I may just state that all I could do at Riga was to persuade a fisherman to run me over to Gothland for the sum of twenty roubles. The little voyage of about 200 miles was commenced on Thursday the 20th May, and was performed in much trepidation for fear of the German cruisers, several of which were reported to be in this part of the Baltic—I do not know on what grounds. We saw nothing of them; and arrived at Slitehaum soon after daybreak on the 23rd, the winds having been against us during a great part of the voyage. [337]

At Slitehaum I took the train to Wisby, after some trouble with the local officials, the inevitable thing, it seems to me, in all Continental travel. My papers, contrary to my wishes, had been retained by the Russian police at Riga; and they had given me a passport which did not seem to be quite satisfactory to the Custom-house officer at Gothland. He was much exercised in mind by the lack of the usual impedimenta of a traveller, and accepted my explanations with palpable suspicion. After a delay of four hours, he permitted me to proceed; and on reaching Wisby I took the Swedish packet-boat to Stockholm.

At Riga I had persuaded the police to enter me on the passport as an American: not quite a straight-forward thing to do, perhaps, but a *ruse de guerre* which, I think, the circumstances in which I was placed fully justified.

I am not a prophet, nor am I going to set myself up as one. I do not know how long the war is going to last—it depends on circumstances. If the Germans get the run of corn-growing Russia, and the Allies generally do not materially increase their *go* and their *forces*, it will last for years. Properly set about, it might end with this year. It is not being properly set about. I do not presume to say what military action should be taken; but the supply of Germany with food and material is of the first importance to her, and should be put a peremptory stop to. There are those who will argue that, because Germany sinks neutral ships, it follows that the neutrals who suffer [338]

must necessarily be Germany's enemies. This is a mistake. The idea entertained is that "accidents will happen," and the sufferers believe that in the end, Germany, or Britain, will recompense them. I exempt the United States from this attitude; but their case is peculiar. In the first place, they are very anxious to keep out of European complications: they have also a large German population, including those of Teutonic extraction; and some of those highly placed in America have Germanic tendencies and sympathies.

I will not enter further into the political aspect of this Great War: and concerning the military outlook I have but to note that the British losses alone amount to a far greater number than the entire English Army consisted of on the day war broke out, to convince every thinking man that we are in a very serious position: and that the fate of this vast empire cannot be left to weak drafts erratically raised, which, however heroic their bravery, are not powerful enough to meet the situation with a full assurance of that victory without which no sane Englishman ought to be satisfied. To put 500,000 men into the field, and keep their numbers up to 500,000, cannot possibly have the same effect as putting 1,000,000 face to face with the enemy in the first place: and 1,000,000 cannot have a *fourth* of the striking-power 2,000,000 would have. There is a progressive ratio in the numbers of a military force: a fact that is too often overlooked: and bringing them up in dribblets can only result in their being beaten in detail. One strong blow has more real efficacy than a dozen weak ones; and in military affairs the full force should be used at the very commencement of hostilities.

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At the moment of writing Germany is gaining ground, not losing it: and her own territory is absolutely free of invaders. While this state of things exists, no man, expert or otherwise, can predict the ultimate end of the war. A single *accident* might have very wide-reaching and very terrible effects.

From Stockholm I went to Gothenburg; and there decided that my best way of reaching England was to take a passage on a Swedish ice-ship which I found to be on the point of sailing for Gravesend. However, when we got off the Dogger Bank we ran amongst a fleet of Hull trawlers; and I forsook the Swede for a British fishing-boat, which landed me at Hull, "stone-broke," in more ways than one. I was almost too ill to stand; and when I arrived home I found my house empty. Not one letter of the many I wrote while in Poland reached my family; and one I posted in Sweden did not reach England until three days after my own arrival in my native land. My wife supposed that I was a prisoner in Germany, or dead; and few of my friends expected to see me again. One of the first I went to in search of my wife did not know me, so ragged and woebegone was my appearance. A little rest has done wonders towards restoring my usual health and strength; but I am given to understand that it will be a long time before I am able to use my feet; and some sharp twinges of rheumatism from which I suffer indicate that old boys are not quite so fit for campaigning as young ones. I hope many of the youngsters will take the hint.

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There has been some suppression of the names of places and localities in this book, and a few other precautions have been taken in its construction. It must be remembered that the war is far from over yet, and that there is an obligation on all writers to be careful not to deal too freely with facts and incidents of some kinds. It may be scarcely necessary to mention this; but in case a certain amount of reticence may be noticed in a few places, it is as well to give a reason for it. I am not a practised writer; and I have, in some matters, followed the advice of those who are better qualified to judge what should, and what should not, be put into a book. But I have told my own tale, and told it in my own way; and I hope it will be found to merit some attention as the unvarnished story of an eye-witness.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN THE RUSSIAN RANKS: A SOLDIER'S
ACCOUNT OF THE FIGHTING IN POLAND ***

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