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Henry Bordeaux**

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Author: Henry Bordeaux

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THE LAST DAYS OF FORT VAUX

THE LAST DAYS OF
FORT VAUX

MARCH 9-JUNE 7, 1916

BY
HENRY BORDEAUX

AUTHOR OF 'LA CROISÉE DES CHEMINS,'
'LES ROQUEVILLARD,' ETC.

TRANSLATED BY PAUL V. COHN, B.A.

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AUX
SOLDATS
DE
VERDUN

The Author of "THE LAST DAYS OF FORT VAUX," M. Henry Bordeaux, is a native of Savoy who has distinguished himself in more than one department of letters before performing his duty manfully in the field, and then as official historian of the Great War. Apart from his reputation in France, M. Bordeaux has probably more readers in this country than any other French novelist of the day. Born in 1870 at Thonon-les-Bains, in Haute-Savoie, he began his career, like so many literary men, by reading law at Paris. He was called to the bar, and duly performed his military service. Then he attracted attention by a series of admirable critical essays, speedily republished in a book, and by an historical romance. He did not, however, forsake law altogether on this first success; but, after the death of his father in 1896, took his place for four years as a practising barrister in his native town, where he also held various municipal posts. Then he could no longer resist the call of art, and from the publication of his novel, *Le Pays Natal*, in 1900 to the outbreak of war, he has divided his life between Paris and Savoy, devoting himself entirely to writing. Besides novels such as *La Peur de vivre*, *Les Roquevillard*, *La Robe de laine*, *La Neige sur les pas*, which bid fair to attain classic rank, M. Bordeaux has worked as a dramatic critic and one of the most sensitive and discerning judges of literature in the leading French reviews.

M. Bordeaux is one of those who keep evergreen by a life of physical as well as mental activity. He is a cyclist and a motorist; one of his favourite sports is fencing; and he is a devotee of that special recreation of the intellectual, Alpine climbing.

Being an impassioned lover of his own beautiful country of Savoy, he is one of the many modern novelists who have identified themselves with a particular region, and invested their books with local colour. At the same time he is a brilliant chronicler of Parisian life. Above all, M. Bordeaux belongs to the school of writers who have raised the tone of French fiction, and freed it from the old reproach of cynicism, frivolity, and immorality. A keen analyst of the modern spirit, he represents all the sterling qualities that have placed France in the front rank among civilized nations. Says one of his countrymen, "Henry Bordeaux has the soul of a poet, a thinker, and a soldier, a soul ardently in love with beautiful rhythms and with noble efforts, a soul firm as a rock and luxuriant as the valleys of its birthplace." His writings are of peculiar interest at the present moment, when France, in her glorious struggle against a brutal invader, is showing the world how sorely her enemies, and even some of her friends, had misjudged her, when they thought she was a prey to decadence. He typifies the reaction from the morbid introspection and ferocious egotism that have marred the work of so many poets and dramatists. A passage in *Les Roquevillard* strikes the keynote of his philosophy. "There is no fine individual destiny. There is no greatness but in service. We serve our family, our country, science, an ideal, God. Shame to those who only serve themselves." This is the teaching of his novel, *La Peur de vivre*, which illustrates the healing influence of self-sacrifice carried to a well-nigh superhuman extreme; of that powerful study of family solidarity, *The Roquevillards*, and of his tragedy of forgiveness, *La Neige sur les pas*. Another touching story of Dauphiné, *La Croisée des Chemins*, resumes the theme of *Les Roquevillard*, and *La Robe de laine* portrays the mind of a simple girl whose personality cannot be crushed by the juggernaut of modern society or fall a victim to worldly success. These are but a few of the novels and short stories in which M. Bordeaux has painted lofty ideals in the colours of life, and not only touched us with their beauty, but also convinced us of their truth.

In August 1914, as a captain in the reserves, M. Bordeaux at once left for the front in command of a company of territorial infantry, and in due course took part in the desperate fighting of which this book is a record.

In the Battle of Verdun, which broke the back of the German invasion and completed the work that the victories of the Marne and the Yser had begun, two out of the thirty forts which defended the fortress were lost: Fort Douaumont on the evening of February 25, 1916, and Fort Vaux on the morning of June 7.

On October 24, however, Fort Douaumont was regained by the French troops, acting with irresistible dash; and on November 2, All Saints' Day, the enemy was compelled to abandon Fort Vaux. Thus, by the recapture of these two forts, the Battle of Verdun was turned into a victory.

The present work deals with the admirable defence of Fort Vaux from March 9 to June 7, 1916. This defence gave the world an opportunity of gauging the stamina of the French soldier and his powers of resistance. Yet it must not lead us to forget that a little later our troops re-entered the fort as victors.

M. Henry Bordeaux, the novelist of *Les Roquevillard* and *Les Yeux qui s'ouvrent*, was peculiarly entitled to write *The Last Days of Fort Vaux*. He followed the Battle of Verdun as a captain on the Staff, and was mentioned in dispatches in the following terms: "An officer who under all circumstances has displayed the highest military qualities. He volunteered on March 9, 1916, to perform, in our first line, an exceptionally dangerous mission, and carried it out under a furious bombardment."

M. Bordeaux afterwards went on the staff of General Nivelle, now commander-in-chief of the French armies. On September 23, 1916, he was decorated with the Legion of Honour and the War Cross. He has also filled a post in the Press section of the great General Staff, and was, in February 1917, attached to the Historical Archives department of the French War Office. In *The Last Days of Fort Vaux* we thus enjoy the advantage of reading the account of one who is a master both in the art of letters and in the technicalities of war. The successive phases of the heroic defence are presented with a carefulness of detail that must satisfy the military expert and a dramatic force that must impress the general reader. The book is a worthy chronicle of a great episode in the greatest epic of modern days.

PREFACE

VERDUN—those two syllables that have already become historic ring out to-day like the brazen tones of a trumpet. In France, no one can hear them without a thrill of pride. In England, in America, if any speaker utters them, the whole audience rises as one man...

Of the battle, of the victory of Verdun, here is a single episode: that of Fort Vaux, beleaguered for three months and lost for a brief space on June 7.

Its defence takes us back past centuries emblazoned with military renown, and recalls our heroic poems of the Middle Ages. It is a Song of Roland in which the protagonist, unseen yet ever present, is the honour of France.

Even as Roland, blowing his horn, recounted from afar the drama of Roncevaux to Charlemagne as he went back across the mountains, so the fort, up to the last moment, kept the supreme command informed of its life and its death-throes by means of signals and carrier-pigeons.

I was able to realize the wounds it had suffered and its powers of resistance in the month of March, before the final conflicts of the early days of June. I examined its defenders at almost every shift. I heard its appeals for help and its last words. Hence I have sought to set down the records of its glory. x

In spite of my studious efforts, which chance has favoured, I have been unable to collect all these records. Moreover, they lack that essential element which is the secret of the supreme command and without which one can present merely a pale shadow of history, not history itself. The war through which we are living is like the endless roll of the sea; we catch the rhythm, but we cannot count the waves. I crave forgiveness from all those forgotten heroes whose deeds I have been unable to rescue from the night of oblivion.

I have had the opportunity of following the various phases of the Verdun battle. I have snatched every spare moment—and they were none too many—to put together these fragmentary notes, which I have received sanction to publish. How can we resist the demon who drives us to write when such a theme lies ready to our hand? In the ordinary course of things I should have needed more time for doing it justice. But to-day time is doled out to each of us in scanty measure!

In point of fact, no episode of this war can be regarded as standing apart from the rest. A close brotherhood in arms links the warriors of Verdun with those of the Bukovina, of Galicia, of the Trentino, and of the Somme. What happened at Vaux was not a matter of indifference to any of the belligerents, or even to any nation on earth. xi

Whenever we speak of the victory of the Marne, our hearts swell with joy, and a hymn of deliverance rises inevitably to our lips. The departures for Champagne and the Somme have all the blitheness of a summer morning. The beauty of Verdun is more grim and austere. It is a struggle of patience and sacrifice, one in which the watchword is "Hold and keep." The question here is not merely one of barring the road to a foe who may pierce our line, but also of pinning him down to the spot while the Allies draw up and carry out their plan of a general offensive. That is why the resistance of Fort Vaux serves a higher purpose than the defence of a mere scrap of territory. It is bound up with a victory, it forms part of a victory, if victory be measured by the thwarting of the enemy's will and design.

There is beauty in that victory, a beauty born of necessity and endurance. May a reflection of it illumine the epic of Fort Vaux!

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THE LAST DAYS OF FORT VAUX

BOOK I

I

THE FORT

In the great squadron of forts which shield Verdun from a distance, like a fleet marshalled on the open sea in front of a harbour, Fort Vaux might claim the rank of a cruiser. More modern than Souville and Tavannes, which are caponier forts, not so vast or so fully equipped as Douaumont, whose girdle contains a vast quantity of turrets, cupolas, casemates, barracks, and strongholds, it plants its levelled walls more firmly in the soil.

Built of masonry about 1880, it was reconstructed in concrete after the invention of the torpedo-shaped shell (1885), then in reinforced concrete, and was not finished till 1911.

To the north of the main road from Verdun to Metz, *via* Étain, it mounts guard over the fortress, facing Thionville. At one end of a tableland which is framed by the Douaumont range and the wooded knolls of La Laufée, and is Sundered from them by narrow dales, it seems to emerge from the mouth of a river fringed with hills, to cleave with its prow the Woevre plain. The sea of Woevre washes its north-eastern slopes, these being at first precipitous and making dead ground, then they change to a gentle gradient up to the ditch bordered by its transverse galleries. 2

Two villages built along the bottom, Vaux-devant-Damloup in the north and Damloup in the south, escort it as merchantmen escort a great battleship.

Accordingly, Vaux-devant-Damloup commands the entrance to a valley: this valley is the ravine of Le Bazil, which a little farther on passes by a pool preceded by a dyke—the pool of Vaux. The road (from Verdun to Vaux) and the railway (from Fleury to Vaux) follow the course of this ravine. It receives as tributaries, from the tableland on which the fort is situated, the ravine of Les Fontaines, which cuts across the Vaux-Chapître forest in the direction of Souville; and from the Douaumont range the ravines of La Caillette and La Fausse-Côte, which pierce the forests of La Caillette and Hardaumont. These are the natural trenches, the routes of approach which lead from one break in the ground to another. A soil so well-wooded and so uneven is eminently suited to a war of surprises, of traps, of ambushades, of bold strokes, of slow and treacherous penetration. It lends itself admirably to the ebb and flow of hand-grenade duels. The forests of La Caillette and Hardaumont, the ravines of La Caillette, of La Fausse-Côte, of Le Bazil—those dark, half-savage retreats where the summer holiday-maker once loved to lose himself, although now they have been drawn from their obscurity and are bathed in a blood-red splendour—the destiny of that fort whose advanced works their form is linked with their lot. 3

II

WHAT THE FORT SAW

(BEFORE FEBRUARY 21, 1916)

From the earliest days of that blazing month of August, 1914, when the clash of nations began, Fort Vaux, plying with its questions the Woevre plain on the Thionville and Metz side, was awaiting on tenter-hooks the results of the first collision. At night it saw the long glittering arms of the Verdun searchlights rake the skies above its head, scanning the stars for Zeppelins or Taubes. Several regiments, marching past it, had taken up their station farther eastward, in front of Jeandelize or Conflans. The hours of waiting dragged on. It heard the firing of guns, but not from the quarter where it was keeping vigil. The sound was coming from Longwy, or perhaps from Longuyon. The storm, whirling along the Lorraine border, seemed to be swooping down upon the Ardennes.

On August 20 and 21 the fort saw troops defiling past it, with laughter and song on their lips. They were marching towards Longuyon by the Ornes road. They knew nothing as yet of the rigours of this new war. With light hearts they went to it, as lovers go to a trysting-place. The Third Army, massed at Verdun, was making for Virton. On the 22nd it had already come to grips with the Crown Prince's Army. 5

On the 25th, the garrison was cheered by a stroke of good fortune of which it was at once informed. A German motor-car, which was carrying the General Staff orders, while running along the Étain road, went astray over the distances, and on the evening of the 24th came into our lines and was there captured. Our command, into whose hands the enemy's plans had so luckily fallen, gave orders for a surprise assault on the left flank of the 35th Division of the Landwehr and of the 16th Corps, which formed the left wing of the Crown Prince's Army. The former, throwing down their rifles, fled as far as St. Privat, and the latter beat a hasty retreat to Bouvillers. It is possible that this Étain fight, a little-known episode of the first battles, checkmated a rush attack upon Verdun.

Nevertheless it was necessary to give up the pursuit on the night of August 25-26, in order to remain in close co-ordination with the movements of the neighbouring army and to pass along the left bank of the Meuse, leaving reserve divisions to guard the right bank on the line Ornes-Fromezey-Herméville.

What Fort Vaux then saw go by at the foot of its slopes is a sight which those who witnessed it will never forget. In after years they will tell it to their children and their children's children, that the memory may be kept green in each generation. 6

Along the road from Étain to Verdun, seeking a haven of refuge in the old fortress which, more than once in the course of centuries, must have sheltered the inhabitants of the Meuse valley against the onrush of Germanic hordes, came a hurried throng of two-wheeled and four-wheeled vehicles, of cyclists wheeling the machines which they had no room to mount, of wheelbarrows, of pushcarts, of pedestrians, of dogs, of cattle. Each took with him his most treasured possessions or what he had hastily snatched up in his house. On the carriages many had piled mattresses, trunks, quilts, provisions, furniture, and on the top of all these were the old people, the sick, and the children. Yet these three classes could not always find room on the vehicles. Among those who trudged on foot were the blind and the halt, women carrying their babies, little ones with a doll or a bird-cage in their hands. Some of them, their legs being shaky or not long enough, were too weary to drag themselves along. Behind these terror-stricken fugitives, the villages were in flames. They turned night into day over the whole countryside. Little by little the fire drew nearer. Now it is Rouvre that flares up, now Étain.

A woman stops by the roadside and sits down; she has bared her breast to suckle a round, rosy baby which already has crisp curls and looks like those infant Jesuses of wax that are placed in mangers at Christmastide. Around her is a group of three youngsters. A soldier comes up and questions her. He is already well on in years, a Territorial. The rapt look in his eyes, as he gazes at the children, is so tender that one feels he must have left a similar brood of his own at home. 7

"Where do you come from, my poor woman?"

"From Rouvres; they have set fire to it."

"How pretty they are!" His "they" and hers are not the same, but his meaning is not lost on her.

"One is missing," says the woman. And she begins to cry.

"What has happened to it?"

"They killed her. She was eight years old. They fired on her as she was running in the street. This one also they tried to take from me. I pressed him to me hard enough to drive him into my flesh. One of them was going to plunge his bayonet into the poor mite, but one of his comrades turned it aside."

The child has had its fill. The group goes on again.

This is the new war, the war of frightfulness preached by Bernhardt. There was an epoch when truces were patched up for burying the dead and picking up the wounded. There was an epoch when a certain war-time chivalry held sway, to protect the weak and the innocent. That period was the barbarous Middle Ages. But civilization and culture came into being, and we now have war without pity, without quarter. One of the two opponents, tearing up the scraps of paper which regulate the treaties and the duties of nations, turning its plighted word into a sham, and crushing the innocent and the weak, has compelled the other to put him into a strait-waistcoat, as if he were a madman. It is a war that opens unbridgeable gulfs and leaves behind it indelible memories. It is a war of Hell, which demands the sanction of God. 8

Fort Vaux, from its hilltop, saw all this. It felt that its own stones were less hard than the hearts of the men

who had flooded the earth with this torrent of suffering.

At last the procession came to an end. The road now resembled one of those ancient river-beds which leave a white track amid the pale foliage of the willows.

The fort, on its lonely perch, was ruminating. "My turn will come. I bide my time. That mighty Douaumont that overlooks me, will it defend itself longer than I? It has a greater need of shells. As to Souville and Tavannes, if the enemy comes from the north, I am in front of them, I shall screen them."

An important personage, no less than the Governor of Verdun himself, came to examine its resources, to look into its physical and moral condition, to test its strength.

"Are your eyes well guarded, and can they see far enough? Are your arms and your shields tough? Have you enough ammunition, food, drink? Do you know all your instructions, above all the one that is common to all the forts: to die rather than surrender?" 9

With such questions as these he visited the observing stations, the transverse galleries, the casemates, the turret, the armoury, the provision stores, the cisterns, and inspected the garrison.

He had already come once before, at the beginning of August. This second visit foreboded an early attack. The enemy was not far off: he was known to be at Étain, at Billy-sous-Mangiennes, at Romagne-sous-les-Côtes, not in great masses but in small detachments. From the north, he was passing above Verdun and turning off to the Argonne. Verdun, well defended, served the French Army as a pivotal point for the immortal struggle of the Marne.

One of the neutral historians of the war, Gottlov Egelhaaf (quoted by M. Hanotaux), has written: "If the Crown Princes of Bavaria and Prussia had been in a position to seize Verdun in August-September 1914, and accordingly to force the line of the Meuse, the German armies would have burst upon Paris at one fell swoop. The two Princes, however, were held up at Verdun, and thus the German supreme command was forced to take the decision of leading back the right wing of their army. Verdun could not be captured, and for this reason it seemed essential to change the plan of campaign." A very lame explanation of our victory on the Marne, but one that at least emphasizes the importance of the part played by Verdun in September 1914. Fate decreed that Verdun should twice attract and twice wear out or shatter the German forces. 10

Only by hearing the roar of the guns could Fort Vaux follow the battle fought on the left bank of the Meuse, before Rambercourt-aux-Pots, Beauzée, La Vaux-Marie. From the roar of the guns it could convince itself of the enemy's retreat, of his withdrawal to the north.

Suddenly, however, on September 17, it hears the guns farther to the south. The enemy hurls himself at Hattonchâtel and the Meuse Heights, bombards the Roman camp above St. Mihiel, fights in the barracks of Chauvencourt. He has not yet abandoned the quarry that he covets. After trying to invest Verdun on the left bank, he returns by way of the right bank, but the front is fixed at Spada, Lamorville, and Combres.

It is fixed at three and a half to five miles in front of Fort Vaux on the line Trésauvaux-Boinville-Fromezey-Ornes-Caures Wood. On February 18, 1915, a red-letter day, the fort is pounded with 420 mm. shells. Douaumont has been favoured with some on the 15th and 17th, and it was only right that Vaux should follow Douaumont. The fort examines its wounds and is happy.

"The engineers have worked well. Only my superstructure has suffered. My casemates are of good material." 11

And it will rejoice exceedingly to learn next day that the range of that famous 420 mm. battery has been found, that it has been shelled in its turn and destroyed. The giants have been silenced, and that promptly.

April and May were months of hope. Would they bring victory with the spring? The guns thundered daily at Marcheville and at Les Épargés, which had been gained. The Woevre was smoking as if weeds had been heaped up there for burning. Then the cannonade slackened off. Decidedly the war would be a long one against an enemy who stuck to our countryside like a leech. It needed patience, staying-power, will, organization, munitions. All these would be forthcoming.

So the troops got accustomed to war as well as to garrison life. The Territorials billeted in the villages of Vaux and Damloup, when they were off duty, played games of chance in the street or used the cemetery as a place for sleeping. They helped the countryfolk in their haymaking. They looked for mushrooms or strawberries in the woods of Vaux-Chapître and Hardaumont, after first looking for lilies of the valley. In the trenches their life, so full of thrills the previous winter, glided along in a calm that was no doubt relative—but what is there that is not relative?—and in monotony. On the summer evenings, on the escarp of the fort, the little garrison sat down with legs dangling, and watched night rising from the Woevre plain. Now and then a distant rocket would end in a shower of stars. 12

All this went on till one day, at the end of August 1915, the fort was sharply taken to task:

"You are not so important as you make out—or rather the whole land of France is as important as you. Did she not open out lines from one end of the country to another to shelter her defenders? It can no longer be denied that the enemy may be made to respect us at any point whatsoever of the national soil. Berry-au-Bac is an isolated salient on the right bank of the Aisne, and Berry-au-Bac has not yielded. It can no longer be denied that with artillery and determination one can capture any redoubt. Les Épargés formed a natural fortress, and we have taken Les Épargés. The fortified places have been unlucky during this war. They offer too easy a target for the big howitzers. Antwerp, Maubeuge, Warsaw, Lemberg, Przemysl, surrendered with their war material, their magazines, their troops. Verdun will no longer be a fortified place. Verdun will offer no resources, no booty to the enemy. Verdun will be nothing but a pivotal point for an army. You will no longer be anything but a look-out post and a shelter...."

"That may be," the fort admitted. "In any case, I am only a soldier, and it is my business to obey. But my loins are strong. It will need much steel to crush them. You will see what I am capable of, if ever I am attacked." 13

The fort, now shrunken, became enveloped in the mists of winter. It heard less and less of the guns. Its

diminished garrison grew bored in the almost deserted corridors. The news which came from the rear contained mysterious hints of a great Allied offensive which was slowly preparing and would develop when the time was ripe, perhaps not before the summer of 1916: England would methodically complete her gigantic new military machine, and Russia would need time to heal the wounds inflicted on her during the 1915 campaign. It is flattering, when one lives on the border of the Woevre, to have such distant and important friends, even if they need a certain amount of time for settling their affairs.

In January and February 1916 the fort felt certain qualms:

"I don't like being left so quiet as this. We know nothing here, but we have intuitions. Things are moving on the other side. Surely something is brewing."

Things were moving indeed in the forest of Spincourt and in that of Mangiennes. Our aviators must have some inkling of it, for they make more and more frequent flights. But the soil is ill-fitted for observation, with its countless dips and its undergrowth. Even where there are no leaves, the brushwood defends itself against aerial photographers.

Information comes that the railway of Spincourt, Muzeray, Billy-sous-Mangiennes, is working in unaccustomed fashion. It seems that the big calibre guns have been detained. 14

We are assured that new German corps have been brought into the district, among them the 3rd, which is returning from Serbia.

Finally, the belfries of Rouvres, Mangiennes, Grémilly, Foameix—how had they been spared till then?—were overthrown by the Germans: no doubt they might have served as guiding marks for our artillery!

Whence come these vague rumours and these definite reports? There is no chance of finding out for certain. The soldiers who come back from Verdun bring them back and retail them. Silence is not a French virtue. There is uneasiness in the air. Yet the weather is so appalling—squalls of wind and snowstorms—that the attack seems unlikely, or at any rate postponed.

"To-morrow," thinks the fort, which has faith in the strength of its walls. "Or the day after."

On February 20 the weather takes a turn for the better. On the 21st, at seven o'clock in the morning, the first shell falls on Verdun, near the cathedral. The greatest battle of the greatest war is beginning.

BOOK II

THE BATTLE

I

THE FLIGHT OF THE RAVENS

The observers on aeroplanes or balloons who saw the volcano burst into flame declared that they could not mark on their maps all the batteries that were in action. The woods of Consenvoye, Moirey, Hingry, and Grémilly, the forests of Spincourt and Mangiennes, the hillsides of Romagne and Mormont, breathed fire like myriads of monstrous dragons.

The commander of a company of light infantry, who was wounded in the foot in Caures Wood, stated: "The intensity of the firing was such that when we came out into the open we no longer recognised the country which we had known for four months. There was scarcely a tree left standing. It was very difficult to walk about, because the ground was so broken up with the holes made by the shells. The defences were very much damaged, but there was such an entangled mass of barbed wire and broken branches that the whole still formed a serious obstacle to the offensive. The communication trenches no longer existed. The main trenches, on the other hand, had been badly knocked about, but were still serviceable; they were instantly manned."

16

"They were instantly manned"—this remark proves the superiority of the human will to all the mechanical forces that science can let loose. The supreme command drew from it this deduction: "What the artillery achieves is the weakening of the material resources of the defence and the wearing down of its morale, not its complete overthrow."

Of this hurricane of fire the fort received its full share.

"Those are 150 mm. shells. Here come some 210 mm. Ah, these are surely 380 mm. My vaults are ringing. My vaults are still sound. How are my transverse galleries? They're resisting. And my turret? It is still standing. The observing stations? One has been touched. I can see quite well with one eye. Besides, the damage can perhaps still be made good. A breach in the counterscarp? They'll make it firmer when they stop it up. My big neighbour, Douaumont, has come off even worse than I. He attracts the lightning like some stately oak on a hilltop. I should like to know what is going on. My telephones are no longer working. I am cut off from the rest of the world. Such a storm cannot last. Let us wait for the end."

The end does not come, the storm continues to roar and rumble, but bad news comes up the hillsides, no one knows how. On both banks of the Meuse villages are burning, forests crackling, stones crumbling.

17

The nearer one is to things that are happening, the less information one can glean about them. The ration fatigue parties are still the best source of news. But these cooks certainly draw the long bow; they tell some alarming tales.

"Caures Wood was lost the second day."

"Caures Wood? Impossible! Driant is there!—unless Driant is dead."

"They don't know what has become of him. And if it were only Caures Wood that was lost!"

If they are to be believed, Herbebois and Chaume Wood, the village of Ornes and, in the Woevre, Fromezay and Herméville—the last two abandoned intentionally, in order to gain support on the Meuse Heights—are in the enemy's hands. Confound those croakers! They are trying to sow the seeds of panic. Their work is certainly carried on under great difficulties. There is no job like it, except that of the scouts. And even the scouts have no load to bear: they jump lightly from shell-hole to shell-hole; they lie down, burrow themselves in, disappear, get up again, dart off like arrows, and again lay themselves out flat when the hail of bullets cuts off their road. You cannot get along very fast with twenty bowls on your back and water-bottles slung across your shoulders, or a whole grocer's shop of tinned food, or bags filled with every kind of provender, and, to crown it all, a mask on your face which half stifles you. (The mask is worn because of all the poison-gases which linger long in the ravines and rifts in the ground, and lie in wait for you, like footpads to seize you by the throat.) The bottoms of the valleys are all but impassable. The enemy have got the range of all the roads and have battered them. The second and third lines have suffered as badly from "Jack Johnsons" as the first. Never, within the memory of men who went out on the first day of the war and have come back, Heaven knows how, from the Marne and the Yser, from Artois and Champagne, have we had to face such a deluge of fire and steel. So a cook here is a soldier who comes from the back to the front with honour as well as his burden.

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On the fourth day a liaison officer assures us that Les Fosses Wood and Les Caurières Wood have been lost.

"They are already in the La Vauche ravine."

"In the La Vauche ravine? Then Douaumont will see them."

And now the news grows more abundant, with more men coming and going: reliefs, wounded, stragglers, fatigue parties meet on the hillsides, under the never-ending shower of shells which is aimed particularly at the fort and its immediate approaches. One needs a sober head to extract a certain measure of truth from these alarming and often contradictory reports. *They* have been seen at Dieppe, *they* have been seen quite near Damloup. In the end, *they* are seen everywhere. The fort, which cheerfully digests its daily ration of projectiles,

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listens philosophically to these unsettling rumours. It now knows how solid its walls are. What interests it more than anything is the fate of Douaumont.

Well, on the evening of February 25, a Friday, an evening when all who go out are soaked with snow and numbed with cold, comes a wounded man looking for his way. He has hobbled up the hill, the blood from his thigh-wound staining the hasty dressing, and reaches the postern, red-eyed and spattered with blood and mud. He dares to announce that they have entered Fort Douaumont. Now, really, that is hard to believe. However much you may want your neighbour to get a few hard knocks, you cannot hear of his sudden death without a protest! A fort is not swallowed up like that. And a fort is not a place of refuge. It does not receive any guest without question. Go your way, you trafficker in bad tidings! Still, before you go, give some details, if you have any to give.

"They were seen on the banquettes. It was even thought that they were Zouaves. Zouaves in their khaki uniforms."

"Why, it *was* the Zouaves. They passed here yesterday to go and take up their position."

"Zouaves would not have fired at us with their rifles."

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"They mistook you for Boches."

Night is a bad time for clearing up a mystery. It is better to count on to-morrow. But our hopes are doomed to be shattered. Next day some riflemen who have drifted back confirm the news. The Germans are at Douaumont.

Vaux no longer dreams of talking lightly about the misfortunes of an old comrade. For years they had mounted guard together before Verdun. They lived the same life, a life that was rather sad and lonely. They saw each other at a distance, they signalled to each other. One relied on the other in battle as on a trench-mate. If one is dying, the other is in danger. And from the observing-station which is still intact the fort inspects the slopes of Hardaumont and La Caillette, the treacherous ravines and the bare plain of the Woevre.

On Sunday, February 27, its little garrison is strengthened. The reinforcements, Territorials from Verdun, bring us no end of rumours. Are they laying on the colours too thick? We shall know later on or never. They say that the Boche has flung himself at Verdun with Hell's own artillery (that we knew already, and besides, consider the country round the fort!); that he expected to smash, kill, destroy everything and to advance, shouldering arms, over a cleared terrain; that he has found his match instead of the dead whom he hoped to trample on, and that now fresh troops of ours are coming up: the stroke has failed, the road is blocked. Joffre has been watching and waiting, to strike at a time and place of his own choosing. What is more, Castelnau has come, and Pétain is there, getting ready to take over command. If Castelnau has come and Pétain is in command, all will be well.

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"And Douaumont? Tell me about Douaumont."

"The fort is taken. Didn't you know?"

"I knew, but I wouldn't believe it."

"They won't be left in possession. We are preparing to retake it from them."

"That'll be a tough job. Those birds like to settle in strange nests. Before you can look round, they have dug themselves in. Tell me anything else you know."

The fort whispers to itself, "And even what you don't know." For stones have experience, and therefore irony.

"Well, the Iron Division is there. Others, too, which are unfamiliar to me. At Douaumont village there is a colonel who says, 'So long as I have breath in my body, the Boche won't get in.'"

"It's always risky to say things like that."

"The Boches have not got in. They were stopped in front of the village. Our machine-guns mowed them down there by hundreds."

"And that colonel is still alive?"

"Yes. He was picked up, and I met him. He has a calm face and fiery eyes. He never raises his voice, yet you hear that voice inside you, controlling you and making you march. It was in his regiment that in Brulé Wood, towards St. Mihiel, an adjutant shouted, 'Arise, ye dead!'"

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"And did the dead answer?"

"What would you expect them to answer?"

"The dead always answer when they are called. The dead have made the nation which the living carry on. It is the dead who have built me. And the dead are bone of thy bone and flesh of thy flesh, as they are stone of my stone."

The sentries, however, have been doubled. Since the enemy is at Douaumont, since he has descended into the Woevre, he is likely to attempt the assault any day. On March 8 he attacks Vaux village; on the 9th and 10th he hurls himself against both village and fort.

The fort, on its hill, resists the storm, like a ship battered by the waves.

Above the battlefield, in the plains of the air, electric waves started from afar are recorded in signs at the receivers and by wireless telegraphy transmit the war news to headquarters, to the nation, to the whole world. They cross each other like flocks of migrant birds, and engage in mysterious conflicts.

On February 26 Germany lets loose a first raven, bearing this message:

"To the east of the Meuse, in the presence of His Majesty the Emperor and King, we achieved some notable

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gains. Our gallant troops seized the heights to the south-east of Louvemont, the village of Louvemont and the fortified position farther to the east. With a vigorous push forward some Brandenburg regiments reached the village and the armoured fort of Douaumont, which they took by storm. In the Woëvre, the enemy's resistance was shattered on the whole front in the Marchéville district (to the south of the Paris-Metz road). Our troops are pressing hard upon the enemy in his retreat."

No assault was made upon Fort Douaumont; it was taken by surprise. All the German attacks on Douaumont village were a complete failure. The Woëvre was evacuated by a strategic manoeuvre, and the enemy, in a distrustful mood, only ventured upon it with considerable qualms, had to stop in front of Manheulles on February 27, and was unable to enter Fresnes until March 7. But how much better it looks in a communiqué to represent those worthy Brandenburgers as scaling the glacis of a fort under fire, putting ladders to the counterscarp, climbing to the assault, crossing the ditches, happy to conquer or die under the benign gaze of His Majesty the Emperor and King, who was no doubt present at the ceremony with a golden helmet on his head and a golden sword in his hand! A taste for romantic visions prevails in the German Great General Staff.

The second raven is more daring. It is sent forth on March 9 and announces to an eagerly listening world the capture of Fort Vaux. It is the pendant to Douaumont: a diptych offered to the nations. 24

"To the east of the river (Meuse), in order to shorten the connections to the south of Douaumont with our Woëvre lines, the village, the armoured fort of Vaux, and the numerous neighbouring fortifications belonging to the enemy were seized after the way had been vigorously cleared by our artillery, in a brilliant night attack by the Posen reserve regiments, Nos. 6 and 19, under the direction of Infantry General von Guretsky-Cornitz, Commander of the 9th Reserve Division."

How could the attentive world dare to cast doubts on the veracity of a wireless message so definite and so inspiring? The day and hour are given, the numbers of the regiments, the name and title of the General who held command. Such details cannot be invented. Detail is the strong point of the German method. Learning is nothing but a knowledge of details. History? Details or a series of detailed statements.

Has Fort Vaux been taken? How should it not have been, seeing that it is General von Guretsky-Cornitz, commanding the 6th and 19th Posen regiments, who took it? Obviously, on the one side, there is the General with his two regiments, and on the other there is Fort Vaux. How could Fort Vaux fail to lodge the General and his two regiments with him? "Is that trunk ours?" asked Robert Macaire of the faithful Bertrand. And he at once concluded: "It must be ours." "Is the fort ours?" the Boche asks himself. "It must be ours." And he at once announces the fact. 25

The only drawback is that the fort is not his. It takes this liberty on March 8, and again on March 9, and again on the 10th. General von Guretsky-Cornitz, Commander of the 9th Reserve Division, gains nothing by vigorously clearing the way with his artillery and by making a brilliant night attack. Yet the German supreme command dares not confess to the world that the haughty General von Guretsky-Cornitz has befooled it. Hastily, on March 10, it sends out a third raven, with this message under his wing:

"The French have made violent counter-attacks on our new front to the east and south of the village, as well as near Fort Vaux. In the course of these engagements the enemy managed to regain a footing in the armoured fort itself. Everywhere else the enemy were repulsed with heavy losses."

That is how the game is played. "Let us give back the fort to the French, since they are there and have always been there. Let us give it back, for we are honest and loyal: we give back what we haven't got. What ground have the French for complaint? We have given them back a fort by a counter-attack. We credit them with a counter-attack which they have never made. We ascribe to them a success which they have not obtained. The world will admire us. The world will say: 'There is true Teutonic frankness. The Germans had taken Fort Vaux. It was a splendid gain. Next day they lost it. Well, they don't hesitate to proclaim the fact. We can certainly rely on the German communiqués. They confess the truth when things go against them. They play the game.'" 26

But lying requires a continuity of effort of which the most cunning impostors are rarely capable. It is only the man who tells the truth that never burns his fingers. Three months later—measure those three months later: exactly eighty-eight days, in other words the whole interval between the announcement of March 9 and the real fall of the fort, June 7 in the early morning, eighty-eight days of heat and cold, of weariness, of thirst and lack of sleep, of bombardments and assaults—three months later Fort Vaux is really taken. The German High Command knows what the cost is. It proudly announces the news. It forgets its wireless message of March 9. It says, "The armoured fort Vaux is occupied by us...." It does not say, it does not dare to say, "The armoured fort of Vaux is reoccupied by us...."

II

THE ROAD

(MARCH 11)

Here is Verdun, like a Florence of the North in the midst of its amphitheatre of hills. After days of frost and snow, so pitiless to our men in the demolished trenches which are now mere conglomerations of shell-holes, a soft spring air has suddenly come to relax the numbed limbs and the frozen earth. The surprise is so great that it brings to unaccustomed lips that charming and unexpected name of Florence. It is the hour of sunset, a sunset that bathes the undulating line of the hills in gold and mauve, and lights up the dismal waters of the flooded Meuse.

At the foot of the gloomy cathedral, so different from the graceful Sainte-Marie-des-Fleurs with its coloured marble, one crosses a passage under half-ruined walls and reaches a terrace which looks out over all the tragedy of Verdun: gutted houses stripped of their outer wall and with their furniture hanging loose like the inwards of slaughtered cattle; crumbled façades, doors opening on the void, slashed and jagged fragments of walls, often topped by tall, useless chimneys. All this, which is now a mere shapeless mass of rubbish, was once the Rue Mazel, the busiest, gayest, and liveliest quarter of Verdun, and of that war-time Verdun which was far more bright, animated, and amusing than the Verdun of peaceful days. The bombardment has brought into prominence the ancient ramparts, dating, no doubt, from the time of the prince-bishops, which girdle the upper city and around which the ruins of the new city now group themselves. A stray dog, the sole living creature that wanders through the deserted streets, utters plaintive barks. Shells fall on Jardin-Fontaine. Right above the city one aeroplane is chasing another. You hear the tick-tack of their machine-guns; the German hastily makes his way back to his own lines....

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I am living in a whitewashed cell in a Verdun barracks. Rolled up in a blanket, I am sleeping on a camp-bed, when Major P— rushes in like a whirlwind and, flashing his little electric lamp, wakes me up with a start. At the outset of the campaign he had offered me a more sumptuous hospitality in the cellars of Berry-au-Bac. The cellars of Berry-au-Bac were replete with carpets, armchairs, mirrors, and art bronzes. We ate from patterned china, and drank from fine glass. Even if the tableware was an odd set, it gave one an impression of wealth and luxury.

We took a boat down the Aisne. At times the bullets accompanied us like a swarm of bees, and the water seemed to prolong their mournful whistle. When we went down, in order to get shelter, into those famous vaulted cellars, decorated like drawing-rooms, whose mirrors double the perspective, we basked in unexpected comfort.

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"Do you want to go to Fort Vaux?" the major asks me, point-blank. "It's the chance of a lifetime. Three officers are needed to-night—one at the fort, the other at Vaux village, the third at Damloup. We start in a quarter of an hour."

I had expressed a wish to make this pilgrimage. My wish is now to be granted; the order is immediately given.

"It is essential," he adds, "to start at night, so as to explore the ground in the early morning."

A quarter of an hour later we get into a motor-car—Captain L— of the Army Corps Staff and I. On the way we pick up Captain H— of the Divisional Staff.

We follow the Étain road, then leave the car to scramble up a wooded slope and reach the divisional headquarters. The zone of death begins. The road which we have just left is bordered by an inextricable mass of fragments of waggons, open sacks, dirty harness, rifles, and distended bodies of horses, their legs in the air, their bellies ripped open. In the wood, our route is sometimes obstructed by broken branches, and our feet catch on tree-stumps or stumble in the craters. When the shells plough up the soil in our vicinity, a column of black smoke, like sooty dust, poisons the clear night air.

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For the night is perfectly clear. Between the trees the moon sheds a bluish light, a sort of softened day, delicate and modest, as if she refused to let us probe the wounds of the earth.

We now go down into a ravine by a path that winds like a mountain track. The gradient is steep, and it is best to go quickly; the enemy have obtained the range of the place, and it is shelled without respite. A corpse is there, and has to be strode over. Lower down, in front of headquarters, there is another that seems to sleep under its helmet. A pious hand has put the helmet back over the mangled face.

We enter the dug-out. After a passage, where the liaison officers lie sleeping close together, comes a wainscoted room, with a chair and a table and, at the back, an iron bedstead. The chief, General de B—, is poring over his map. He sits up in his chair when he sees us. He is young and cheerful, with clear eyes and an incisive manner of speech. Only one sign of weariness: the hollows under his eyes. How many such leaders I have seen in action! Surmounting physical ordeals and dangers, bearing without a murmur the weight of all the lives entrusted to their charge, when their most loyal aides were succumbing to sleep or anxiety, they quietly bent their brains to the study of a plan of campaign and carefully arranged, without the dangerous counsels of feverish haste, the minutest details of some operation.

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The Germans are at the foot of the Fort Vaux and even half-way up. The slopes descend gently at first, in front of the fort, for a space of three or four hundred yards at most, then they rush down abruptly to the Woevre plain. This rapid descent makes a right angle which our artillery cannot touch because of its trajectories. The Germans are established there. It is important that they should be dislodged. What line do they follow below Hardaumont, past the village, and, farther to the east, near Damloup? Before action is taken, this point must be

accurately determined. There has been fighting these last few days, and the position remains slightly confused. Our caravan, then, will split up into three: each of us will have his objective—Vaux, the fort, and Damloup—and each his guide.

I recall those confabulations on the mountains before undertaking a climb which offered some difficulty or other, or, in Lovitel's hut in Dauphiné, those little councils of war on the eve of a chamois hunt: one would take this path, another that couloir; another speaks of a dangerous place, and thinks it best to use a rope. After this, at daybreak, we shake hands and set off, each by his own route, to meet at the appointed place.

We go up the side of the ravine again and come to a wood that grows sparser and sparser. Yes, it is indeed the beginning of a difficult climb. The air is keen, and so bright is the moon that the stars are scarcely visible. As we climb higher the vegetation becomes more scanty; the trees are now stunted—a few hardy larches, with twisted roots, persist in growing; then comes the zone of sickly shrubs; finally there is nothing left but the bare ground. The same order is found here; around me there are a large number of trees, but they are in fragments, the branches broken, the trunks battered, the roots protruding from the riven soil, and soon they are nothing but miserable broomsticks. The summit, where lies the region of ice and desolation, cannot be far off.

Yet the mountain has the unrivalled advantage of silence. We accustom ourselves so quickly to the murmur of the torrents that roll at the bottom., and even that murmur is like the hidden refrain that accompanies a day-dream. Here we are obsessed by that continual, sharp, menacing, formidable whistle which precedes the bursting of a shell. And sometimes we have to stop, to lie down or to plunge into a crater—there are only too many places to choose from—and wait until the storm has passed over. When the curtain fire breaks off for a while, we resume our journey. The ground is riddled like a sieve; at the cross-roads the corpses, men or horses, lie in piles. The light of the moon covers them with a mysterious winding sheet.

We stop at the stone quarry which forms the brigade headquarters. There, too, a chief is still awake, and finishing a plan of operations. Tall, very youthful-looking, with a ringing voice and a hearty manner, he too appears one of those born trainers of men who know how to unite method with dash. What a clearness they all show in their reports and anticipations! What importance they attach to the sparing of lives! What frankness in their tone, what an art of going straight to the point! Here there is no longer any toadying or vanity or desire to please. A sort of moral elevation, the result of their leadership, has come to mark their character. When one is acquainted with the matter in hand, a simple telephone conversation is a model of clear language and logical reasoning.

Thus, from one post to another, the dialogue is prolonged into the night. One seems to visit a series of catacombs where a rite is performed by the dim light of the sanctuary lamp. One goes away with a sense of religious reverence.

"Good luck!" says the colonel to me, as he escorts me out over the threshold. "I am going to rest for a few hours."

It is two o'clock in the morning.

The worst part of the journey is still to come; fifteen to eighteen hundred yards over a tableland, which by day is here and there vaguely guarded from sight by copses—what copses!—but for the greater part of the time is quite devoid of cover. By moonlight our outlines will scarcely stand out above the road over the ridge; the return journey, if we set out again after sunrise, will be a little more complicated.

We walk in Indian file, the guide, Captain P— of the Brigade Staff, who wished to accompany me, and myself. The shells fall like hail. The earth which they have churned up has crumbled to such an extent that it looks like a mass of cinders. Fifteen to eighteen hundred yards is much farther than one thinks. One has time to make a rapid mental survey of one's whole career.

Again it is mountaineering memories that surge up in my brain. This time it is the journey through a gorge, the Neuweisthor, between the valley of Fée and that of Zermatt in the Valais Alps. We had taken an unfamiliar path; we had to follow a ridge, which on either side looked out over a precipice; on the right, we could make out a very uninviting crevasse; on the left, right at the bottom, the little Italian village of Macugagna appeared at such a sheer drop beneath us that we had the feeling that, if we were to stumble, we should certainly roll down to it, two or three thousand feet below. The ridge was so narrow that we could not place one foot alongside of the other, and we did not know where to pitch our ice-axes. To make matters worse, while the guide was a level-headed man, the porter who brought up the rear of our roped party had fuddled himself with drink before starting. We were at the mercy of a false step on the part of this tippler. But his professional honour had passed into his legs. The ridge ends in a sort of stone tower where one may gain a really firm foothold and breathe freely. There, on turning round, I saw my man, streaming with sweat and his eyes starting out of his head; he had worked all the alcohol out of his system and had fully recovered his faculties as guide.

The track that we are now pursuing is not so hard to follow, but in other ways it is beset with terrors. Every moment we have to walk across bodies flung across it. At every ten or twelve yards, soon at every five or six paces, we are compelled to stride over a corpse, or even bunches of corpses, some slashed and torn, others in a running posture as if they had been overtaken while in full activity. The light of the moon softens the horror of their wounds without altogether veiling it. Many of them belong to the scouts who ensure connections, carry orders, show routes to be followed. In this war, where men vie with one another in every kind of heroism, we must pay a special tribute to those soldiers who, while their comrades dig themselves in as best they can under the hurricane of fire, run about in the open in order to make up for signalling difficulties or for the breaking of telephone wires. Thanks to these men, efforts are co-ordinated and an understanding is maintained at all points of the front, so that the chain of unity holds together. If one falls, there is at once another to take his place. The remainder are always ready; they even offer their services before their turn comes. Prepared to go upon the most perilous errands, they form a mobile guard round their chief; they are the projecting rays of his brain, which, through them, directs men's wills from afar and draws up or corrects the plans of an operation. Those who have fallen there, or at any rate some of them, seem to have assumed in death the attitude of those antique youths who handed on to each other the sacred torch in the race. Is it the moon that helps me to see these

broken statues? Shall I once more find such marble visions by daylight? The crude light of day does not do justice to the beauty of death.

The soldier who acts as our guide marches at a good rate. He gives the signal to stop when a shell falls too close to us, or when the cadence of the explosions points to a systematic curtain fire. He does not pick out the places for halting, and makes us come to a standstill suddenly with corpses under our very noses, lucky indeed if our faces are not splashed with fragments of flesh crushed once more by that ghastly pestle.

But why does he stop at this moment? Just now the tempo seems to be slackening. Surely we ought to take advantage of this respite. Ah, there he is, stripping a dead soldier! He half-raises him and takes off one by one the straps which the man wears in *banderole*. In this way he unfastens four or five water-bottles, each holding four pints. These he unscrews and sniffs at in turn, not without anxiety on account of the shells which might interrupt him at his task. His face lights up: the water is drinkable. The man whom he has stripped so methodically carried a supply of water for replenishment, and water on this dried-up tableland is as precious as in the desert. The place from which it is drawn is at the foot of the hillside: you are not sure of getting there or of coming back. At the fort, so many lips are thirsty for fresh water!

The guide, with his water-bottle straps round his waist, hastily resumes his journey, drawing us after him as a roebuck draws a pack of hounds.

At this pace we pass a caravan of porters loaded with a consignment of grenades. They are marching as fast as their burden allows them, under the rain of steel. The only means of transport here is the human back. Poor little men, whose heart is still the greatest of all military forces! "It is a scientific war," people have declared. "Victory lies with munitions. It is the munitions that crush and destroy everything." Well, when the artillery thinks to have destroyed everything, the human will still offers a wall of flesh as a resistance: men have endured everything—fire, hunger, cold, and thirst—and still they rise out of the shattered soil. No war will be found to have given such examples of the superiority of man to the machine.

The countryside looks all scorched and burnt. The lava of a volcano, the shocks of an earthquake, all the cataclysms of nature would not have flayed it more unmercifully. It is a chaos without a name, a circle in Dante's *Inferno*. I rack my memory for parallel scenes; perhaps certain Alpine solitudes where the glaciers have withdrawn or the moraines alternate with precipices—solitudes that have never heard the song of a bird or felt the contact of a living creature.

The craters meet and open like the yawning mouths of volcanoes. Broken branches, scattered boulders, detritus of all kinds and shreds of human flesh are mingled. A nameless stench rises from the tortured soil.

In front of us rises a wall covered with earth. There are gashes in it, and through these cracks the stones have fallen into the ditch. On the whole, however, it has borne the avalanche without flinching. Three-quarters of the vaulted door is masked by a mass of concrete dislodged by a 380 or 420 mm. shell. It is like the cave of the Cyclops, which had a rock for its door and which received Ulysses and his companions. Past the open space we scurry along quickly, for it is specially favoured by the enemy's artillery, as the corpses, more numerous here, bear witness. Even so did the Cyclops kill all strangers.

What is my surprise at finding the interior of the fort undamaged! It must have been built of solid materials to resist such a hammering. The staircase, the passages, the rooms are crammed. A curious sight is the swarm of men under the electric lights: sleepers lying in every conceivable pose, some stretched out anywhere, others curled up so as to occupy the least possible space, all impervious to noises, refusing to wake up, enjoying the delicious relaxation of sleep removed from danger; fatigue parties making their way with difficulty through the crush; guards going on or returning from duty; wounded men with white bandages on their wounds; isolated squads looking for their company. One guesses the cause of this confusion, which will have to be remedied. The fort, on its tableland, plays the part of those mountain refuges where lost caravans come to find shelter from the storm. It is a haven of safety; he who succeeds in crossing the danger-zone can breathe freely under the arched vaults.

Little by little the march past becomes more orderly, and organization is introduced into the mob. The right is reserved for those coming in, the left for those going out. Here is the ambulance, there is the guard-room, there is the orderly-room.

On our arrival our guide is received with enthusiasm. His array of water-bottles earns him an ovation. Thirst is working havoc here. The nearest source of water is in the Fontaines ravine, and that ravine is constantly peppered with shot. Yet men risk their skins to go and get a drink. Water creates such pitiful mirages. In the shapeless furrows which serve them as shelters, the troops, with parched lips, wait for water with feverish impatience; they are reduced sometimes to drinking the tainted water that stagnates in the shell-holes, and to other strange expedients. Who will ever tell of all the horrors endured for Verdun and for that France which is behind Verdun?

A soldier, somewhat elderly, no doubt a Territorial, comes in with rolls of bread on his back. He is near collapsing; he pants, the sweat pours off him in big drops, his face is white as chalk.

"You are alone?" asks the sergeant of the guard. "Where is the rest of the fatigue?"

The man makes a vague gesture. The rest of the fatigue has not followed, will never get here. Still, the rations it was bringing must be looked for. Where will they be found? Far from here? Another gesture of weariness, of indifference, of ignorance—one cannot guess which.

"Well, do explain yourself!"

The soldier lays down his load and stands up straight.

"I'll go back," is all he says. And he crosses the threshold again, followed by two men whom the sergeant has told off.

The commandant of the fort made me visit his domain, the casemates of Bourges, the observing stations, of

which one is still fit for use, the cupola deprived of its 75-mm. gun. We run across the commander of the 3rd Battalion of Light Infantry, who holds the sector in front of the fort up to the village, and the battalion chaplain, the Abbé C—, who, under his helmet, with his weather-beaten features and his long beard, looks like a crusader rather than a monk. The latter comes from the neighbouring redoubt, a little earthwork where he had set up a dressing station, which he has had to remove.

"Yesterday," he told me, "our riflemen brought in a prisoner, groaning loudly and constantly repeating in a piteous tone, 'Vier Kinder! Vier Kinder!' (Four children!)" For the benefit of those who knew no German, he made gestures illustrating a row of figures of different heights and counted up to four on his fingers. Our men put him in a corner of the redoubt, which is very narrow, while they themselves, for want of room, remained in the doorway, exposed to the bursting shells. The commandant, as he passed by, ordered them to abandon this Quixotic arrangement.

Stroking his beard, he adds philosophically: "After all, whatever comes here comes from the prisoner's lines. It is only fair that he should be able to appreciate its quality." 42

The commandant of the fort leads me out on to the parapets, which are continually being demolished and continually repaired.

"Be careful; in order to get there we have to cross as quickly as possible a zone which is under fire from an enemy machine-gun!"

More treacherous than the whistling of shells, the bullets pass above our heads, but he himself does not hurry in the least. Here are posted, in the hollowed-out earth, finding places as best they can, the look-out men, and in shelters very little safer, our machine-guns.

Dawn begins to appear, eclipsing the light of the moon. Half lying on the parapet, I see a glorious spring sunrise. It awakens the plains of the Woevre, lighting up the rivulets and pools. Here is Vaux village on the right, and Damloup village on the left. Farther on, that large cluster of ruined houses must be Étain. In the rising sun they form a white lace*-work of stone, recalling the cities of the East. And yonder are the frowning hillsides of Hardaumont. Douaumont towers above, Douaumont still swathed in darkness, like an evil spirit.

More efficiently than the enemy, the sunshine climbs the slopes of the fort. It is light and airy, like a bearer of good tidings. Smiling, it shows me, in front, two or three hundred yards beyond the counterscarp, on the sloping turf, several greenish lumps almost dressed in line. They are the bodies of Germans mown down in the onslaughts of March 9. They have fallen in front of the barbed wire. One could count them. Already their numbers are diminished. At night their comrades draw them into their lines by means of hooks or ropes. 43

The sun has left the rim of the earth and is speedily mounting the horizon. The morning is of an exquisite softness that contrasts strangely with the tragic scene. Behind me is chaos, in front a charnel-heap. Yet up above a lark is singing. His wings flap and his claws quiver, but he does not change his place in the rose-tinted heavens. I watch this sweet songster fluttering overhead, as if it were pecking at the light. A look-out man raises his eyes to catch sight of it. He looks at it tenderly for a moment, then resumes his watching. The passing shells do not disturb it in the slightest.

What is happening down there, among the corpses in green uniforms? One of them has made a movement; he glides through the grass like a snake. The enemy uses his dead as a screen or a blind, and is coming in this way to spy out the land. A look-out man has also observed this uncanny resurrection. He fires. Nothing moves. We must have been mistaken. A long time afterwards, a little below the suspected point, a body jumps up and abruptly disappears at a spot where the gradient is very steep and forms dead ground.

As in the mountains, I sweep the horizon with my gaze and give names to the valleys and hills. Douaumont, on my right, is the loftiest summit (1200 feet); only Souville, at the back, makes any approach to this. It seems like some incubus weighing upon the whole surrounding country. I am separated from it by the wooded slopes of Vaux-Chapître, by the ravine of Le Bazil, whose existence I guess at, and by the rising wood of La Caillette. Above the Woevre, Hardaumont rears its head like a cliff. The Woevre stretches out as far as the eye can see, broken up with undergrowth and villages and streaked with roads. In broad daylight I get a better idea of its bareness, which was veiled by the kindly dawn. Its untilled soil resembles a vast marsh. On the right my eyes rest on the dark blur of Herméville Wood. The outlying spurs of the Meuse Heights hide a portion of it from view. 44

It is there, towards the village, over against those hillsides, over against Damloup, that the enemy's onslaught was shattered. And the fort, on its plateau, with its superstructure half crushed, with breaches in its double wall, seems like the formidable hulk of an ironclad which still floats upon the waters, not yet abandoned by its crew. The storm thought to overwhelm it, and it has vanquished the storm.

We stayed very late, in order to see everything, in accordance with our instructions. Nine o'clock in the morning; the sun is already high in the heavens. The sky is clear, the day is a good one for observations, and the Boche balloons are watching us. The crossing of the ridge threatens to be difficult. 45

As a matter of fact, it is difficult to go out at all. We are at once encircled. Life hangs by a thread. The corpses, now indiscreet, display ghastly wounds. Only a few are intact; it is hard to find the broken statues I saw in the moonlight. And the realization of death, in the revolt of one's whole being, is invested with a special horror—that of being crushed and pulverized, of being not even a dead man, but a nameless heap, a handful of fleshly dust. Then, too, there is the thought of remaining unburied.

This idea did not come spontaneously. We walked across two corpses: a little soldier, very young, quite beardless, no doubt of the 1915 class, covered with a little earth, two or three shovelfuls which did not suffice to hide him; and, quite near him, a stretcher-bearer, identified by his Red Cross armband, his head split open, still clasping a spade in his hand. The stretcher-bearer was killed while trying to carry out his pious duty of interment. Here the stricken must be left uncared for. We must let Death bury the dead.

There is a legend which says that the souls of those who have not been laid in consecrated ground wander in

space without ever finding rest. But the soil of our invaded country is consecrated ground. May those who have fallen there in defending it rest in peace! For the appeal of the Church, *Memento quia pulvis es*—"Remember, because thou art dust"—which accompanies the placing of the ashes on the brows of the faithful—could I ever have thought out a more eloquent paraphrase? 46

A last rationing party meets us. It has not been able to reach its goal during the night. By day it is not usual to go to the fort.

"Are you going as far as the fort?"

"We'll have a try."

"Good luck!..."

III

THE MASTER OF THE HOUR

(MARCH 14)

In the courtyard of those Verdun barracks where I spent such a brief night, there is a slightly larger crowd than usual. And every one follows with his eyes two Generals who are walking at a leisurely pace.

One is dressed in a sky-blue uniform, like the rank and file, like every one. His tanned face, every expression of which I know well—it combines great kindness with an intellect always in search of certainty and precision—betrays the secret that racks him. He is in command of the most exposed, the most frequently attacked, the most difficult sector of the whole front of the army which covers Verdun, and, at this moment, of the entire front of the French Army. It touches Fort Douaumont and guards Fort Vaux. He lives heart and soul with his men, who are down there in the whirlwind of steel, holding out against all odds. He shares the burden of their hardships and their exertions. He is consumed with anxiety to know. The desire to conquer is fretting his body. His features bear ample witness to the fire that burns within. 48

The other, tall and massively built, wears the old-fashioned uniform, to whose colours the eye is unaccustomed: red trousers, black tunic, red cap, with a double band of oak leaves.¹ He seems to be gazing at an invisible point above the head of the person whom he is addressing. While listening, he seems to be under the spell of some inner dream. He wears a thick white moustache. His eyes have a far-away look. Are the realities of the present enough for them, or do they need a map of the world to satisfy them?

¹ In the French Army a double band of oak leaves round the cap denotes a General commanding a division.—
Translator's Note.

The two have stopped near our group. The senior General says to his companion, as if putting an end to their conversation—a conversation in which up to now he has scarcely uttered a word:

“All is well, and now you need feel no uneasiness.”

The other seems to be surprised. He is in a state of deadly anxiety, and he is urged to be calm! He is apparently waiting for something more, but this is really the end of the discussion. A motor-car has been summoned. He salutes and goes off.

“You need feel no uneasiness.” One of my comrades, who in his brief leisure moments is rereading Tolstoi’s *War and Peace*, and is blessed with a portentous memory, reminds me of the passage where Prince André Bolkonsky, aide-de-camp to General Bagration, comes to report to his chief what he has been able to find out about the forces that are threatening the Russian Army: 49

“While listening to him, Prince Bagration stared in front of him, and Prince André, while studying the strongly marked features of that face whose eyes were half-closed, wandering, and sleepy, asked himself, with an uneasy curiosity, what thoughts, what feelings were hidden behind that impenetrable mask?”

(The eyes, here, are also staring, but at some point far away, as if to see beyond the horizon of Verdun.)

“All is well,” says Bagration simply, as if what he has just heard had been anticipated by him.

And what he has just heard is the menace that weighs upon his army.

What our General has just heard has caused him no anxiety. He has answered, “All is well,” as if the menace could in no way alter his plans. Later on this recollection, throwing light on the phrase which had almost shocked me, was to assume a singularly precise outline in my mind, and to widen like those ripples which are formed in water when a stone is flung in and grow larger and larger until they reach the banks....

IV

THE FIRST FIGHTS ROUND VAUX

(MARCH 9, 10, 11)

From the road, I see soldiers stretched out on the grass, basking in the spring sun, fishing in the river, or playing ball like schoolboys. Motor-omnibuses picked them up suddenly, not far from the Verdun battlefield, to carry them to this abode of rustic peace. They do not even hear the guns any longer. It is strange to contrast this bucolic scene with the fiery furnace of Vaux.

Among the valleys of the Meuse region, which are generally rather grim and gloomy, the valley of La Saulx is the most smiling, the richest in flowers, the most attractive. A crystal-clear brook waters its meadows and seems, with all its meanderings, to run an endless course. Here is Montiers-sur-Saulx, where the 303rd Brigade is billeted for a few days. The Sire de Joinville lived there; in the archives of the town hall one may read the charter by which he allowed the villagers the use of a part of his forest. Jeanne d'Arc went through it, dreaming of her mission. The troops in blue-grey caps who stroll round the central square where the military band plays are not so very different, in their bright uniforms, from the men-at-arms of bygone days. 51

In little groups the men walk about, light their pipes, and chat with the natives. The whole scene looks like a day of peace-time manœuvres, and the very gait of the men is so brisk that one might fancy them to be fresh troops recently detrained here and ready to proceed again to the front.

Yet the sentry who is mounting guard at the town hall wears a cap that has been pierced by a bullet. Other caps are indented or knocked out of shape. More than one of these peaceful ramblers has his head bandaged or shows some scar on his face. The colonel in command of the brigade has on his cheek a sabre-cut on which the blood has just dried—a trifling wound which has not been deemed worthy of dressing.

These are the men who broke the back of the German assaults on the village and fort of Vaux on March 8, 9, and 10. They can scarcely remember that they forced the enemy to retreat; they are too much occupied with forgetting their miseries—the cold, the snow, the lack of sleep, the long hours they spent crouching down in rifle-pits, their lost comrades, the continual presence of death during the bombardment which shatters men's nerves and stuns their brains.

None of them of his own accord makes any allusion to his recent experiences: merely a word or two here and there, which cannot be understood save by those who have been through the mill. Later on, at home, or in some other theatre of war, when the events are really buried in the past, they will tell the story after their own fashion. Nor will they hesitate to weave into the tale other episodes drawn from earlier or later combats. For the moment they content themselves with saying that Verdun beats everything—the Argonne, Artois, Champagne, Ailly Wood, Le Prêtre Wood. These comparisons by men who know give a correct order of merit. They find no satisfaction in raking up what is past and done with, except to say that the Boches will not break through, in spite of their confounded heavy artillery. They revel in the joy of living quietly and without danger. They are almost inclined to pinch themselves so as to make sure that they are still alive. The nightmare visions that haunt them yet might leave them in doubt on the point. One must associate for a long time with officers and men in order to unravel the truth little by little and reconstruct the earlier Vaux engagements. 52

Properly speaking, there were no earlier Vaux engagements. The series of operations forms an unbroken chain. Masters of Douaumont on February 25, the Germans at once tried to profit by their success. Douaumont could not be of any real use to them unless they succeeded in debouching from it to march on the line formed before Verdun by the hill of Froideterre, the village of Fleury on the other side of the ridge, Fort Souville, and Fort Tavannes. With this aim in view they will try to make progress to the east, in Nawé Wood, which is intersected by a series of ravines favourable to an offensive, going down from the slopes of Douaumont towards the Meuse (the ravines of Helly, La Coulevre, and La Dame) to reach the earthwork of Thiaumont, and from there that of Froideterre. Their manœuvres will be the same to the east, in the wood of La Caillette and that of Gardaumont, which are also split up by ravines (those of La Caillette and La Fausse Côte) to descend into the ravine of Le Bazil and to climb up again by Vaux-Chapître Wood in the direction of Souville. On both sides they will find the road blocked, and they will fall tooth and nail upon the village and fort of Vaux, to the east, positions whose capture is equally essential to the realization of their scheme. Driven back from La Caillette Wood, they will approach, by way of Hardaumont Wood, the village which gives the key to the ravines of Le Bazil and Les Fontaines. They will make a frontal attack on the fort by its north-eastern slopes, aided by the formation of the ground which, once the foot of the slopes is occupied, enables them to advance, out of sight and out of artillery range, on account of the angle of descent, to within three or four hundred yards of the counterscarp wall. 53

Our 303rd Brigade (408th and 409th Regiments) occupies, during the night of March 1 and 2, the section from La Caillette to Damloup; a battalion of the 408th holds the slopes of the fort, and two battalions of the 409th hold the cemetery and the village. The fort itself has for a garrison two companies of the 71st Territorial Regiment, composed of worthy natives of Anjou, level-headed and hard-working. But let not the reader imagine a line of continuous, fully-equipped trenches, with communication passages, dug-outs, store depots, and so forth! The violence of the German attack launched on February 21 against Verdun has for the time being substituted field fighting for siege warfare. The lines of defence have been carried back to the rear, and the artillery has swept the terrain to such an extent that it has destroyed all the existing defences. Nothing is left but shell-holes and rubbish heaps. It was imperative to hold fast to this devastated soil, to hang on it, to break it up with the pickaxe and, failing pickaxes, with the bayonet, with finger-nails, to live on top when one could not get below ground, to keep awake and watchful, to shoot, to kill, to die without accepting defeat. 54

During the early days of its occupation of the sector the brigade makes a little progress in Hardaumont

Wood. A company seizes the southern earthwork and entrenches itself there. But on March 5, 6, and 7, the bombardment is so violent that it is impossible to consolidate the position. Replenishing is done with difficulty. An attack is imminent. It takes place on the 8th about eleven o'clock in the morning, towards the village. It is led by the famous Guretsky-Cornitz Brigade (6th and 19th Regiments), which was destined next day to be immortalized in the German wireless. It debouches partly from Hardaumont Wood, where our earthwork is lost, partly from the railway embankment which skirts it and has served as a screen. The waves of enemy infantry succeed in outflanking our first line and swamping an entire battalion. Our machine-guns bring them to a halt at the entrance to the village, which they have succeeded in reaching; they even occupy a few houses. Before our fire the breakers recoil, but with the prisoners taken from our outflanked first line.

55

A little later, when a fresh assault is launched farther to the east, between the cemetery and the slopes of the fort, the enemy grenadiers who precede it are clothed in uniforms and caps taken from the prisoners, and they shout in French, with a heavy Teutonic accent: "Don't shoot!" adding even the number of the regiment (409th) whose facings they are wearing, although the numerals have been torn off. Already, in the morning, in order to approach the ravine, the enemy has made use of another ruse which he has employed more than once. Stretcher-bearers, ostentatiously displaying their Red Cross armlets, seem to be carrying a stretcher or digging a grave: the stretcher contains a machine-gun, the grave is an embryo trench.

56

For all that, this series of assaults has brought the enemy up to the approaches to the village and cemetery of Vaux. Through what defect in co-ordination does he fancy it to be already within his grasp? Has his half-success of the previous day turned his head? On the morning of March 9 he sends two or three companies of the 19th Regiment to occupy his vaunted gain. The companies quietly enter Vaux, in columns, without previous reconnaissances. Now a battalion of ours has just come up to reinforce us, during the night of 8th-9th, under the command of Major Delattre. It celebrates its arrival by a furious fire, at once counter-attacks with the bayonet and throws the enemy back to the ravine of Hardaumont. Major Delattre, rifle in hand, goes at the head of his men. He is past fifty; his age and the hardships of the campaign have earned him retirement, but he has refused it—a son and a brother of his have fallen in the war, and he is thus tied to his post by sacred bonds. He knows, by the way, what will befall him. The evening before he confided his presentiments, in quite a cheerful spirit, to a comrade:

"There are families marked out for the salvation of the country. It is an honour. I shall follow in the footsteps of my son and my brother."

And so it turned out; he was killed on the ground that had been regained.

57

On the 9th, during the day, the enemy renews his onslaught and manages to establish himself in the eastern portion of Vaux village and in the cemetery. He tries to reach the fort by its northern side, but cannot get near; our fire brings him to a halt at the trench dug behind the barbed wire, two or three hundred yards from the earthwork.

The day of the 10th will be still more of an ordeal. The Germans have to justify the lying communiqué which told the world of the capture of Fort Vaux. Throughout the night of March 9-10 and the day of the 10th, the artillery, in clearing the way, overwhelms the fort with projectiles of every calibre, and tries to isolate it by a curtain fire which makes a special mark of the lower end of La Horgne on the Damloup side, the ravine of Les Fontaines in Vaux-Chapître Wood, and the advanced works of Souville. Accordingly the fort and that part of the village which remains in our hands form an islet swept from end to end by gunfire, where the infantry, when it marches, thinks that it will find nothing but débris of war-stores and a garrison either wiped out or so much reduced and dispirited that it will be incapable of defence.

But the reinforcements have come in spite of all. The 3rd Battalion of light infantry is in reserve, ready to lend its aid to the brigade which is fighting. The Territorials of the 71st are still sending out fatigue parties for water, food, and munitions. The scouts have not abandoned their duties. This is the continual miracle of Verdun. Under an unprecedented bombardment everything is done as before—reliefs, replenishing, the linking up of connections. A sense of order directs the whole, and the work gets done.

58

Major Belleculet is in command at the fort. Besides the two companies of Territorials, he has at his disposal a battalion of Regulars. He has organized his defence in front of the fort, on the slopes already approached the previous evening, protected by two rows of barbed wire. The enemy pays less attention to these slopes than to the fort itself, either because he believes his own lines to be nearer, or because, in order to bring his troops close to their objective, he wishes to profit by the more rapid descent from the tableland on to the plains of the Woevre after the two or three hundred yards of gentle incline in front of the counterscarp.

From eight o'clock in the morning, on the observing station which remains intact, the commandant sees small groups of men go down the slopes of Hardaumont and mass themselves to the left of the railway. He calculates the forces whose range he has got to be three battalions. No doubt the reserves, out of sight, are more numerous.

At noon the bombardment increases in force. At six o'clock in the evening it breaks off abruptly. The village and fort are both attacked at once. This is the sudden frontal attack, daring, almost foolhardy, which the enemy pursued with success at the outset of the Verdun battle, relying on his artillery superiority and on surprise or loss of nerve in the ranks of his opponents. He is not master of La Caillette Wood or of Damloup, he has no grip either on our right or on our left. He confines operations to a stubborn obstacle whose possession would ensure him a salient in our lines, and he dashes against it as hard as he can, like a battering-ram against a door.

59

On the fort the assault is delivered in successive waves, not in a cordon but in small columns, now directly in front of the parapets, now slantwise on our left, between the cemetery and the fort, where he finds a battalion of the 408th. In the barbed wire there are gaps that our men have been unable to repair, dating from previous bombardments. No doubt the enemy, from photographs by his airmen, imagines them to be more important than they really are. He is faced by our machine-guns and rifles along the whole line. From six to eight in the evening he returns to the charge with a tenacity and vigour which it is only fair to acknowledge. He wants to break through at all costs. All his efforts are in vain. Our gallant lads' rifles grow so hot that they have to be

relieved. The Territorials ask, as a favour, to be allowed to undertake this shift. They acquit themselves even better than their young comrades. They remember their lying in wait for game and their fine marksmanship, on Sundays, on the borders of the forests of Anjou. To be a good shot, one needs a steady nerve and one must never be in a hurry. 60

Inside the fort the soldiers of the Regular battalion have finished cleaning and greasing their rifles. They feel comparatively comfortable. One of them, however, makes a suggestion:

“The old ‘uns are still down there. Are they to be left there, they in front and we behind?”

No one looks reluctant. The officers have no need to insist. But the “old ‘uns” will not hear of giving up the position, which they consider a good one, since the field of fire is perfect but for that confounded drop in the ground where the Boches vanish as if through a trap-door.

The 75-gun plays its part in the affray. Its curtain fire, at the foot of Hardaumont, works wonders. From the parapets one sees legs and arms flying in the air. The reinforcements will not come. They are urgently needed.

Night has fallen. A second lieutenant attached to the Brigade Staff and dispatched to this part of the battlefield comes down from the fort at a run. In spite of the cold, he is perspiring when he reaches headquarters.

“A drink!” he shouts, like Gargantua at his birth. He is surrounded, importuned, plied with eager questions; every one wants to know. The main part of the village has held out, but the fort? The assault must have been terrific. Who holds the fort? 61

“It’s all over,” answers the officer laconically, snatching up a water-bottle.

“What do you mean—it’s all over? The fort has been captured?”

“No, the Boche is beaten.”

And he finishes his drink in peace.

ROUND THE WASHING-PLACE

(MARCH 18)

In the inner courtyard of a Verdun barracks, around a vast washing-place, there is a swarm of dark-blue riflemen and light-blue infantrymen who have just been fighting side by side, fraternally, and who seem ready to come to blows in order to gain a place and draw near to the delicious stream of running water. Will a regular system of shifts have to be established? The line regiment (158th) and the battalion of light infantry (3rd) were relieved together last night. They went on firing up to the moment of going off, for they were defending the fort and village of Vaux, which the enemy is attacking so desperately.

The battle is, for the time being, ancient history, since they have come back from it. After so many rough nights, they open their shirts and bare their arms, to let their skins grow warm in the spring sun. No doubt the guns continue to rumble and the columns of smoke rise from bombarded Jardin-Fontaine; aeroplanes flit about in the sky, encircled by the white wreaths of smoke which the shell-bursts send up to them. But no one takes any notice; there is water to wash oneself with and to drink.

Imagine what the sight of water—and running water to boot!—must be for these lads who for ten days have been unable to sluice themselves down or to refresh their parched lips properly. They enjoy in advance its cool wholesome touch, and those who have plunged their dusty faces right into it, faces still worn with the noise and terror of battle, withdraw them all streaming, with a boisterous laugh of delight. It is their weariness that is falling away from them. The drawn, livid, mournful faces grow young again in a few moments. Each man would like to go on longer, but thinks of his neighbour who is waiting his turn and goes away to give up his place to the next man. Later on he may be able to come back.

Some, apart from the rest, in the twinkling of an eye, set up a mirror on a window-sill or a tub, bring out a piece of soap, and begin to shave. The barber of one company is already working with the speed of a juggler, and his customers quietly wait in single file. Why on earth do civilians call them *les poilus* (“the hairy ones”)? Here, no one likes the word. They are hairy when they cannot be anything else, on bad days, on the cruel and tragic days which afterwards become days of heroic grandeur. But as soon as they are off duty they ask for nothing better than to resume their pleasant everyday faces, in no way terrifying or hirsute. It is a nation of worthy citizens who fight for their hearths, for their invaded territory, for their rights and their freedom, for all the past of which they are the heirs, for all the future of which they are the trustees, and not a horde of half-savage gipsies, ill-conditioned, without house or home. The youngest classes are nearly always beardless, and the oldest, in order to fix their gas-masks better, have given up wearing beards.

Almost the only exception I can see is the chaplain. He has a great black beard, here and there flecked with grey. He persists in driving a comb through it, for he is anxious not to appear less careful of his person than that group of trim young lieutenants who are already here, shaved, their hair brushed, in bright new uniforms, their moustaches turned up, their eyes sparkling, transformed by the stroke of a magic wand into garrison dandies. As well-informed as a staff-officer, Father C—, whom I have already met at Fort Vaux, speaks with admiration, nay, with affection, of his dear light infantry battalion, his “blue devils,” with whom he has been from Artois and Notre-Dame-de-Lorette. He takes out of his pocket the precious notebook in which he records his impressions of army life.

“I should like to read one of the days in your diary.”

“Just let me put down the last two, the 16th and 17th.”

The 3rd Battalion of Light Infantry will give its historian trouble. It has fought on every front. On August 10, in Lorraine, it repulsed by itself, at Provençères, four German attacks, four battalions strong. On the 14th it is in the Saint Blaize combat. On the 19th it is in action at Valerysthal, where it is subjected to furious assaults. From August 29 to September 5 it holds La Chipotte Wood. Then it is recalled to take part in the Battle of the Marne. At the beginning of October it is sent to Artois. It is the first to enter the first house of Ablain-St.-Nazaire. It is then sent farther north, to the long and stubborn battle of Ypres. The men thought they would never go through anything worse, but Verdun is to come. In December it returns to Artois, to the Lorette region. On May 8, 1915, it attacks the White Earthworks with superb dash; in June, the Square Wood and the Hollow Way; in October, the Wood of the Axe. And Verdun comes to crown all these memories like a bunch of flowers decorating a housetop. It is a Homeric catalogue, but how many of our regiments could tell a similar story!

It has lost two of its commanding officers, Major Renaud at Bréménil on August 19, 1914, and in Artois, on May 8, 1915, after the attack on the White Earthworks, that young Major Madelin, who was the most finished type of an officer, cool-headed, yet always inspiring his men, well-groomed, genial, brilliant, and cultured, a brother of my dear comrade in letters and in arms, the historian, now Second Lieutenant Louis Madelin, whom the fortune of war has suddenly thrown into my company, and who offers me a refuge in his plank-built hut. Major Madelin was succeeded in Artois by my friend Major Pineau, whom I find again with the Staff; then by Major Tournes, who has just come down from the Vaux sector, where I met him preparing an attack.

Suddenly there is bustle in the courtyard. A company, whose losses I can guess, is gathering in a circle round the Captain and the Sergeant-Major. To judge by their craning necks and the gleam in their eyes, the report is of peculiar interest. Very likely it is a question of rest billets or, perhaps, of furlough. Furlough, the mirage in which a man's house and loved ones appear before him! I draw near. The Sergeant-Major is reading the order of the day addressed on March 10 by the Commander-in-Chief to the soldiers of Verdun!

“Soldiers of the Army of Verdun!

“For three weeks you have endured the most formidable assault that the enemy has yet attempted against

us.

"Germany counted on the success of this offensive, which she thought irresistible and to which she had devoted her best troops and her most powerful artillery.

"She hoped that the capture of Verdun would encourage her allies and convince neutral countries of German superiority. 67

"She had reckoned without you!

"Night and day, in spite of an unparalleled bombardment, you have withstood all attacks and held your positions.

"The struggle is not yet at an end, for the Germans need a victory. You will be able to rob them of that victory.

"We have munitions in plenty and numerous reserves.

"But above all you have your indomitable courage and your faith in the destiny of the Republic.

"The eyes of the country are upon you. You will be among those of whom it will be said: 'They stopped the Germans from getting to Verdun!'"

The Sergeant-Major, himself deeply moved by what he reads, leaves a pause between the last sentence and the official "Dismiss!" which sets his hearers free.

And the company breaks up slowly, as if with regret. The men understand better what they have done, and the hardships they have undergone take on a new lustre in their eyes. That sense of loneliness which in long conflicts leads each man, little by little, to complain of his individual trials, and to imagine that his leaders and the community as a whole are indifferent, suddenly vanishes: down there, when they were in the jaws of hell, their Commander and their countrymen saw everything. 68

And in the silence which for a moment seals their lips, makes their features grave and motionless, and combines all those stray thoughts into one supreme idea, a historic thrill passes through them. Individual destinies grow wider; nothing counts any longer but the collective task.

Then they disperse into groups, and tongues are loosened. For the first time since the relief they consent to speak of the ten days spent in the Vaux sector. Their scattered impressions may be summed up in the proud boast:

"At any rate, *they* have decamped for to-night."

The fierce, uninterrupted bombardment, so hard to endure for those who are out of action, gives rise to protests. The veterans of the Artois campaign compare notes and agree that they have never seen such an orgy of firing.

"It ought not to be allowed," declares a new hand.

Modestly, as if it were an everyday incident, a Corporal of the 158th tells some light infantrymen of his share in the last engagement, that of the evening of March 16 in Vaux village, which is half French, half German, and is intersected by barricades and trenches:

"I was in the village, near the barricade. After the Jack Johnsons, the look-out men told us that *they* were coming in masses. The parapets are manned. The Lieutenant says: 'Don't hurry, my lads, let them come up.' When *they* are within easy range, our men open fire. The Boches were seen to fall like ninepins. Still they came on again, and yet again. They have plenty of self-confidence." 69

And now the talk flies to and fro like the crackling of musketry fire. The names of dead and wounded are mentioned, but there is no sadness, no lingering over them: it is a matter of Fate, who chooses those whom it pleases her to strike. The praises of the stretcher-bearers are sung: guided by cries or by instinct, they bring in the wounded, even that blind man who, erect between the lines, walked with his hands in front of him, without knowing where, haggard and howling. As for the dead, burying them was out of the question. Gratitude is expressed towards the cooks, who roll about their field-kitchens under shell-fire and carry rations to the troops. A burly Swiss who has enrolled himself for the duration of the war, "without any idea that it would last so long," he adds, "otherwise—," receives these grateful words as a personal compliment:

"Well, you can't run with a great load on your back."

The Colonel whom I met at the Carrières headquarters—a thin face with clear-cut outlines, blue eyes, usually soft, but now and then showing a glint of steel, slight build, keen nerves, with an unswerving ascendancy over his men, whom he knows how to inspire with his hatred of the Boches (hatred dies down so quickly in our race)—can speak of nothing but his regiment. 70

"Hunger, thirst, lack of sleep, and all the time that din and that menace of big shells crashing, they bore it all without a murmur. You pass down the lines; every man follows you with his eyes, centres his hopes in you, believes in you. You acquire such a feeling of confidence. You cannot help leading them well."

Thus from the close union of hearts he makes leadership spring as the wheat springs from the fertilized soil.

The chaplain has finished writing, and with the best grace in the world he hands me the notes in which he has just been describing his stay in Fort Vaux and the immediate surroundings from March 6 to 17. They are moving pages, at once picturesque, sincere, and gently ironical; they take me once more over the road I have travelled, and recall the assault of March 10 on the slopes of the fort as the actors in the drama had recounted it to me on the spot. On the following day, our command prepares in its turn a little expedition in order to gain possession of the foot of those hillsides where the Germans are invisible and our 75's cannot find their mark. Here is the account of this attack on the 16th and 17th: 71

Extract from the Diary of the Abbé C—, Chaplain to the 3rd Battalion of Light Infantry.

"Thursday the 16th.—Great activity during the night. The enemy shows obvious signs of anxiety and nervousness. Numerous rockets, constant work at their auxiliary defences.

"All this delights our men. So they are afraid! So that irresistible dash which was to reach its climax at Verdun, and to lead to a triumphal entry at the Champs Élysées, is being frittered away in dug-outs! Feverishly each man burrows himself in. The bayonet is abandoned for the pickaxe, and instead of those miraculous marches there are only monotonous shifts.

"Yet the task is not yet ended. Verdun has seventeen forts, I believe. You hold only one, my dear Brandenburgers. Hardly enough!

"1 o'clock P.M.—The bombardment increases in violence. The blows grow more and more resounding. It is clear that the earth of our roof has been carried away and that the concrete has been laid bare in several places. There is a talk of stopping up the gaps with sandbags; but when? A walk on our terrace is not to be recommended, even by moonlight.

"2 o'clock P.M.—The trench mortar which is to destroy the barbed wire and the auxiliary defences cannot be fired from the fort; three artillerymen who were trying to set up the mortar have been wounded. An attempt is made elsewhere, but with still slighter success. Nor can our heavy artillery do anything. The attack, which was fixed for this evening, has been put off until five o'clock to-morrow. We are going to attempt a surprise stroke.

* * * * *

"11.30 P.M.—To arms! This cry, uttered by the look-out men, re-echoes from end to end of the dark corridors. At this hour, and during this crisis, when every moment is fraught with tragedy, it sounds peculiarly mournful. At once there is a stir among the poor numbed bodies, which were snatching an uneasy slumber on the floor; each man fastens on his equipment and makes sure that his rifle is in its place. After the first few minutes of stupor, a discussion arises in low tones. What is going to happen?...

"Some look-out men have seen—or think they have seen, say some—a working party digging trenches quite near the auxiliary defences of the fort. Shadows? Boches? Stray patrols?... When nerves are on edge, the pale moonlight, streaked with a few clouds, seems to make for hallucinations. The machine-gun of the parapet sweeps the terrain. Nothing moves. Day will throw light upon the mystery.

"Obviously, the enemy is still more uneasy than on previous nights; his artillery thunders furiously all over the place, somewhat at random, particularly on the fort and its approaches. All the fatigues that arrive announce losses. The men are streaming with sweat after the desperate rush they have had to make for four hundred yards across a bewildering mass of craters....

"Friday, March 17, 2 A.M.—Our patrols are returning. They have searched the approaches thoroughly. No signs of the enemy, at any rate of live Boches.

"In the morning, the sun brings us knowledge. There, a little in front of the barbed wire, we can see the earth recently turned up; at the side some dozen diggers, their tools in their hands or at their feet, their bodies stiff and stark, still bent over their unfinished task....

"They are the Boches we saw yesterday evening, caught in the midst of their work by our machine-gun. They had not even time to dig their ditch!

"But for the vigilance of our machine-gun officer, we should have found there, at daybreak, a nest of Boches whom it would have been very difficult to get rid of, in view of the lie of the land. A dangerous vigilance indeed! On the evening before, at the same place, not far from him, my left-hand neighbour was killed outright and my right-hand neighbour seriously wounded.

"At last we know what to do. A brief rest before the little performance. At five o'clock, the hour fixed, the Commandant goes up to the observing station. I crouch down, with my eye at the loophole.

"It is early dawn. The field of vision is very limited. We listen anxiously in the half-silence. It continues. So much the better. The plot is not discovered. After ten minutes comes a violent interchange of hand-grenades. We see the bluish smoke rise from the ground, the machine-guns cough. Then nothing more!... What agony! Twenty minutes later the Captain who was directing the attack arrives. He is a brisk young officer of the Algerian cavalry who, at his own request, has doffed the scarlet jacket for the dark tunic of the Light Infantry. He has prepared his attack as a labour of love, working day and night. Two days ago it would have been an interesting *coup-de-main*, but after three days of countermanding orders, the conditions have entirely changed. He tells us what has happened: the eight bomb-throwers have cleverly crept up to the enemy's wire entanglements and discharged the contents of their haversacks, ready to hurl themselves into the barbed wire and jump further. But the Germans are numerous: their slightly curved line begins to encircle our light infantry. They defend themselves. The interchange of hand-grenades proceeds. Our bombs begin to tell; the Boches howl. Their bombs go much too far; they never dreamt that our 'blue-devils' were so near them.... At the same time, their machine-guns are brought into action, and with their infernal tempo mow down all that is in their way! Under this shower of bombs and this sheet-lightning of bullets, our men slip into the holes and, a few minutes later, come back unscathed, with smiles on their lips, delighted at their escapade; two scratches, that is all, in a run of more than eighty yards across the battlefield. Almost a miracle!

"The sortie, by the way, is far from useless. Thanks to this diversion, the neighbouring detachment was able to gain a footing in a long line of enemy trenches, to see the occupants take to flight, and thus to make a still further improvement, to some extent, in our situation.

"And when night has stretched its protecting veil over us, we start off.... Weakened, worn, feverish, dirty, physically at the end of our tether, but splendid so far as morale is concerned! One sees that by the sparkling eyes, the lively talk, the whole manner, which clearly shows the absolute control that these valiant souls maintain over their utterly exhausted bodies.

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“More or less confusedly, but none the less genuinely for that, each man realizes that he has just lived through some glorious hours. Few in number, weary, isolated, they have held enormous masses in check; with their moral force they have confronted a display of material power such as the world has never seen before. A few bodies have been broken. Victory has remained with the *idea*, with the human will, with cool, unyielding valour, with these children, the new knights-errant of a France whose existence no one suspected. They, too, are struggling under the eye of God, as their forbears have done so often, for right and justice, and for nearly two years have never ceased to offer an astonished world the wondrous spectacle of their self-denial and their heroism.”

Yet no one sees anything but his own little corner of the war, and this applies even to the above eye-witness, who has a clear vision and a fluent pen. He limits the fighting of March 16-17 to our attack, a comparatively petty affair. But on March 16, in the evening, there was an attempted German offensive which lasted throughout the night, between the village and the fort. A battalion of the 7th German Regiment of Reserve (121st Division) suffered cruel losses. A large number of prisoners captured to the south-east of the village admitted these losses and emphasized the seriousness of the set-back.

Beside us, the water of the washing-place goes on streaming over the men's faces, necks, and hands. It wipes out the memory of their efforts and their hardships. These men, who, when they came in, thought that they were done up, feel a fresh strength, the strength that the future expects of them....

VI

REFLECTIONS ON DEATH

The same day.

It is five o'clock in the evening. I go up to the top of a hill which overlooks Verdun. It is a glorious spring evening. The curves of the Meuse gleam in the setting sun and form a trail of fire on the dim plain, like a line of motor-transport rushing through the night. The air is warm with caresses. And in this peaceful countryside nothing moves that is not for use in battle, nothing exists save for war.

Towards Froideterre and Souville, the shells as they burst raise dense pillars of black smoke. In the sky, a fleet of our aeroplanes is coming back to harbour. The captive balloons complete their observations while the light lasts. On the rising road there is a never-ending procession of artillery waggons, travelling field-kitchens, and troops. All this mass of men and war-material is making for the lines, in order to deliver stores or to take up positions in a few hours' time under cover of darkness.

I stretch myself out on the grass in order to forget this contrast and merely enjoy the evening air. A little further on there is some one who has had the same idea as I. He lies at full length, and does not notice my presence. I should have preferred to be alone. I take another look at him: his face is one great wound. I go up to him: he is dead. One does not come here to cut oneself off from one's fellows and to dream. Nothing is done here save under the mantle of death.

But with the War, death has lost much of its importance. We have grown familiar with it. Under the form in which it appears as a rule, not glorious, not choosing its victims in the full glow of their martial ardour, but crafty and terrible, in the shape of a mass of iron hurled from some miles off, it inspires a deep disgust, it is true, but we submit to it as we submit to an old servant who rules the household. If we do not rebel against it, if we even consent to accept it, then it transforms itself after the manner of sorcerers in the old-time fairy tales. The hideous skeleton is covered with young flesh that has a fragrance of flowers. The face that it shows is one of dazzling beauty. The kiss that it gives has something of the affection of France for her children.

Yes, we have all become reconciled to the idea of death. What is there left for me if I outlive the War? From my remotest past to the present moment, all the years that I can take into account stay in my memory as a little water stays in the hollow of my hand. If I open my fingers, the water runs away. The past, which seems to me so short, far exceeds in length all the future that I can anticipate. How trifling a thing, then, is that future! Death does nothing more than open the fingers of Time, who bears in his hand our days that are to come. And our days, as they fall, trickle noiselessly like drops of water.

A dangerous detachment this, a lethargic calm against which we must be on our guard. Death should merely annihilate our will to live, not weaken it beforehand. This lesson was unconsciously taught us by one of our comrades, Captain D—, who was twice wounded and twice went back to the front, as he told us one evening at Verdun the story of his second wound. He was lying on the ground with his chest bared; his *bâtm*an, who would not leave him, had also been wounded, but slightly, in the shoulder. Both were Bretons, both religious, and they had been to Communion together in the morning before starting off for the battle.

"We were there, side by side," he said, "and the rifle-shots were growing more distant. I thought that I was going to die, and a great exultation came over me. My love for my wife and child, who, I felt, were soon to lose me, was in no way altered. I don't know how to explain it to you: nothing weighed upon my mind any longer, and I seemed to be set free from my closest ties. How should I ever again meet with such an opportunity of dying? Everything within me and around me was light and easy as the flight of a bird. I was no longer in pain. Even the difficulty I felt in breathing gave me a sort of happiness. I seemed to be lifted up to God, as a leaf is lifted by the wind. Then I said to my *bâtm*an: 'You are going away. You are not seriously hurt. I will stay here, I am quite ready to die.' He would not listen to me, he wanted to help me to rise, and, being unable to do so, tried to carry me, in spite of the pain in his shoulder. I would not allow him to lift me: 'Leave me, I tell you, I want to die here.' He stopped and looked at me as if he did not quite understand, and then, a little timidly at first, but soon growing bolder, he rebuked me: 'I beg pardon, sir, but what you are doing is not a Christian thing to do.' I was shocked, I admit, I who thought myself so near to God. He went on: 'Not Christian at all. God has nothing to give you but life. You are not going to offend Him.'—'But when it is He that is calling me?'—'If He calls you, you will hear Him plainly. Meanwhile you are still alive. And the life that He gives us is for us to enjoy as long as we can—for His sake, of course. You are not going to affront Him.' And I let myself be carried away in order not to affront God."

Night has now fallen over Verdun. Here are the stretcher-bearers come to look for my neighbour. The town is already shrouded in darkness, while its girdle of hills seems still to float like a streamer in the light. It is time to go down again. The realization of death at this moment demands action of us, not reflection....

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VII

THE ENEMY'S EVIDENCE

I have spoken, without hiding anything, of the hard life led by our soldiers in the region of Vaux, the terrific assaults and the appalling bombardment that they had to endure, the difficulty of obtaining rations and reliefs, the lack of shelter, the lack of water, the lack of sleep. But in war it is not enough to suffer, to resist, to hold out. One must strike the enemy and drive him back. The task of the army of Verdun is to wear out the German Army before Verdun. Does our artillery fire work serious havoc in his ranks? Does it interfere with his replenishing and reliefs, even more than ours are hampered? Does our infantry lay his foot-soldiers low when it marches to the assault? Do our counter-attacks throw them back with losses? What sort of existence do we compel the Boche to lead opposite our lines? We want to know. We must know. Our efforts must not be in vain. Our sacrifices must not be fruitless.

The enemy is going to give us his evidence. He will tell us whether we are able to defend ourselves and to attack, and whether we allow him any respite. 83

A few examinations of prisoners and some extracts from letters found on prisoners and dead, solely in the region of Vaux, during the months of March and April, will furnish us with all the information that we need. It is the most trustworthy source. I have collected the most significant records, but all tell a similar story. It is not to detract from an adversary that we make him confess what he has undergone and what losses he has suffered, but it is to show up more vividly the strength of our fighting forces and the successes gained by the soldiers of Verdun.

* * * * *

The prisoners of the 9th and 13th Companies of the 19th Regiment (9th Reserve Division, 5th Corps of Reserves) taken at Vaux on March 9, give the following account of the engagement of March 9:

"On the morning of March 9 the 1st Battalion received orders to occupy Vaux village, whose capture had already been announced. The 13th Company was the first to enter the village, in column of fours, without any scouts or advanced guard to screen it. Suddenly it was assailed by a violent machine-gun fire, followed up by a bayonet charge. Our men made off and defended themselves in the houses, where the French slaughtered them with bombs. The prisoners are under the impression that the whole of the 13th Company was wiped out.

"The 3rd Battalion attacked on the northern slope of the fort. The 9th Company led the way, and joined battle in succession of platoons. The platoon to which the prisoners belong hurled itself at an enemy trench and was mown down by our machine-guns: twenty-five men were killed, three were taken prisoner, the rest took to flight." 84

* * * * *

The prisoners of the 9th Company of the 7th Regiment of Reserves (121st Division) taken on March 17, to the south-east of Vaux village, give the following details of the combat of March 16-17:

"The 3rd Battalion of the 7th Regiment of Reserves was to attack towards the northern slopes of Fort Vaux. More than half the battalion was cut down by the French machine-guns. Some twenty men, at most, of the 9th Company reached the enemy trenches, where they were captured. The rest must have been annihilated, for the curtain fire prevented them from escaping and getting back to the trenches from which they started.

"The revictualling of the first-line troops is almost impossible. The troops are reduced to consuming their emergency rations."

A soldier of the same regiment records a scene described to him by a comrade who has just come back from special leave. The latter saw a convoy of prisoners pass at a station in Germany: women were jeering at them and insulting them. One of the Frenchmen called out in German: "Women of Germany, don't jeer at us! We are prisoners, that's true, but in front of Verdun the Germans are lying in heaps as high as this." After that the German women said no more. 85

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Here are some extracts from letters found on prisoners or dead in the Vaux Sector.

Private E—, of the 6th Leib. Gren. Regt., writes:

"*Before Verdun, March 10.*—Since yesterday morning there has been a heavy snowfall: it stops everything and interferes with the operations before Verdun. We can't get away from the cold, the rain, the snow, and the mud, and we camp out in the open. Each man digs himself in as best he can, wraps himself up in his coat and his canvas bag, and freezes all night. To make matters worse, we are constantly under an artillery fire which claims a large number of victims every evening, for we have no trenches or shelter; up to the present we have been in the second line. To-night we pass into the first line. We no longer have any confidence in our heavy artillery; yesterday morning our division captured Vaux fort and village, but had to evacuate them because our artillery fired into the place without a break."

Private E— believed what he had been told of the capture of the fort. The lieutenant of the 7th Regiment of Reserves, which is on the slopes of Vaux, knows the real truth:

"*March 11.*—At three o'clock we start off for the position in front of Fort Vaux. At sunrise, we occupy the position which was held by the 6th Regiment. The fort is two hundred yards in front of this line. The position consists of shell-holes which have no longer any spaces left between them." 86

"Two hundred yards": he seems to be a little short-sighted. At three hundred yards from the fort, on March 11, one saw nothing but corpses.

Some days later, a soldier whose name is illegible scribbled this note on the hillsides of Vaux:

"*March 24, 1916, before Fort Vaux.*—There is no need for me to write any more. All the rest may be left to the imagination. Still I want to be hopeful. It's hard, very hard! I am still so young. What's the use? What's the good of prayer and entreaty? The shells! The shells!"

The next letter was found on a wounded German of the 56th Regiment of Reserves (121st Division) captured on April 2. It bears no date. It mingles religion with the food question. The writer had no doubt just finished it and had had no time to send it off:

"MY DEAR SISTER AND BROTHER-IN-LAW—This is to let you know I am in good health, although half dead from fatigue and fright. I cannot describe to you all I have lived through here, it goes far beyond anything we had had to put up with before. In about three days the company has lost more than a hundred men. Several times I didn't know whether I was alive or already dead. We have not yet had to face the enemy; we shall do so to-morrow, and the affair will be on a pretty big scale. I have already given up all hope of ever seeing you again. Whoever comes out of this without a scratch may well thank the Lord. I received your parcel, as I have already told you in my post card, and I ate the food at once, for I didn't know whether I should have a chance of eating it later. I have sent my pay home, because we cannot find anything to buy here...."

87

On April 3, Lieutenant E—, of the 6th Regiment of Reserves (9th Division), writes to Second Lieutenant L—, of the 202nd Regiment of Reserves:

"*April 3.*—You can get some idea of how things are with us from the fact that the corps of officers has been entirely renewed. The losses of the regiment are rather heavy, for its position (Vaux tableland) is a rather unpleasant one. Our battalions relieve each other, but the rest-stations are shelled quite as much as the first line, apart from a very few exceptions."

The following letter from Private S—, of the 20th Regiment of Reserves, is undated:

"You cannot realize how utterly sick of life I feel at times.... Yesterday the weather was still abominable, and we were once more drenched to the skin. Then some one said, 'Why don't they sing to-day?' And in the midst of all our misery we had to sing...."

Private S—, of the 80th Regiment, writes on April 11, 1916:

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"We are here in a pit of Hell, with artillery fire day and night. I never thought that it would be like this. Yesterday a shell fell quite near the church; three men were killed on the spot, and nine wounded. You should have seen us bolt! If only this wretched war would end! No one who has any sense can justify such a butchery of men...."

"At present we are to the north-east of Verdun, certainly in a very ticklish situation...."

"Although we have not been stationed here long, we have all had enough of it, and are simply longing for peace. We should like to send to the front all those gentry who are responsible for the war and still take an interest in it. If only that could have been managed we should have had peace long ago...."

Finally, here is a letter that gives fuller details as to the effect of our artillery and machine-guns. It is written by Lieutenant H—, of the 81st Regiment, and was found upon him at the time of his capture before Verdun:

"At the Front, April 15, 1916.

"MY DEAR PARENTS—No doubt you are waiting impatiently for some sign of life from me. I hope this letter will reach you, but it is not easy to get one's correspondence sent through the post.

"The good time I had as liaison officer between our regiment and the 56th has been a thing of the past for several days. Our officer losses are rather serious, so that I have had to take over the 8th Company, as Company Commander in the first line. I am with my Company at present. I am huddled up in a little hole in the mud, which has to protect me against the enemy shell-bursts; and they never leave off for a moment. I have already seen a good many things in this war, but I had not yet been in such a situation as this. Its horror simply beggars description. I don't want to give you a detailed account, for I should only cause you needless anxiety. We are under a terrific artillery fire day and night. The French resistance is amazingly obstinate. On April 11 we made an attack in order to take their trenches. We opened with an artillery preparation on a tremendous scale, lasting twelve hours, and then the infantry assault was launched. The French machine-guns were entirely undamaged, the result being that the first wave of our onset was broken by machine-gun fire as soon as it left the trench. What is more, the French in their turn started such an artillery barrage that another attack was not to be thought of. We are in the first-line trench, about 120 yards from the enemy. The weather is miserable, always cold and rainy; I wish you could see the state I am in, boots, trousers, and cape soaking wet and covered with a layer of mud quite an inch thick.

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"All the roads are commanded by the French guns, and their fire is so incessant that we cannot even bury our dead. It is pitiful to see the poor devils lying dead in their mud-holes. Every day some of our men are killed and wounded. It is only by risking our lives that we can put the wounded in a place of safety. To get our meals, we have to go over two miles to the rear, to the travelling field-kitchens, and even there one is in danger of being killed. Every day there are casualties among those who go for their rations, so much so that many would rather endure hunger than make these dangerous expeditions for food. Nearly the whole company is sick. When you are out in the rain all day and get wet through, sleep in the mud, and are under a frightful bombardment night and day, and all this for a week at a time, your nerves become completely shattered. So far as health is concerned I am still in fairly good trim. My feet are very wet and cold, and I am fearfully chilly about the knees. I hope I shall have the luck to get out of this alive. One cannot even be buried properly here...."

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Some answers received from Germany add a few touches to this picture of the German Army in the Vaux

sector.

The following letter, covered with stains, was found on a dead man. It had been kept in spite of its having been written so long ago:

“COLOGNE, 29/12/1915.

91

“There is no doubt, my dear Willy, that we are living through very hard times, and one cannot yet see where it will all end. You tell me not to believe all that the newspapers say. But do you really think we believe, as we did at first, in that ‘rollicking mood’ (*Hurrastimmung*) among the men at the front? A year ago we fancied that we heard the note of warlike enthusiasm in every song that the soldiers sang. But to-day! Yesterday I happened to be present when thirty to thirty-five men of the Landsturm were starting off. Five of them were singing at the top of their voices, ‘Dear Fatherland, good-bye!’ But these five were so drunk that they had to lean against each other for support. Some hundred yards behind the group three policemen were marching and watching them to see that this enthusiasm was not overdone at the station. When we look at such scenes and then read the newspaper reports of deeds of valour, do you imagine that we think only of the latter? Yes, Willy, that’s what war is like, the ‘beneficent’ war that had to come, the war that was needed in order that the world should become a better place to live in. It is strange that after seventeen months of war I have not yet been able to discover any sign of improvement among my immediate neighbours!”

On the prisoners these letters were found:

“HEISSEN, *March 24, 1916.*

92

“It is still better to be at the front than here. We are suffering terribly from the cold, and have to wait in a queue from morning till evening, and even then we sometimes come home empty-handed at the end of the day and having nothing to eat. It is very sad, but you, my dear Fritz, are holding out in the enemy’s country; we shall hold out here as well.”

“STRASSBURG (PRUSSIA),
March 20, 1916.

“You write to us that you have had to suck snow, so great was your hunger, yet that was hardly likely to cure your pangs. Yes, my dear, you have to starve, but do you think things are any better here?”

These extracts will suffice. What is the use of publishing any more? Further letters would give us no more information as to the state of the German soldier before Fort Vaux. We could find enough and to spare of complaints about economic difficulties. That the German soldier who is fighting at Verdun should know so much of the material insecurity of those whom he has left behind him is a righteous punishment for the terrible scourge let loose by a whole nation drunk with the sense of power—the nation which sneered when Paris starved in 1870 and which has set out to organize a war of frightfulness. The fires of its hell burn hotter and hotter.

To Mont-Mare Wood and Le Prêtre Wood, which lie west of Pont-à-Mousson, where the plains of the Woevre meet the undulating country of La Haye, the German soldiers gave the names of Widows’ Wood and Wood of Death respectively. What will they call the region of Vaux?

93

It was the 6th Division of the 3rd Corps that attacked the earthwork of Hardaumont at the beginning of March. The assaults on Vaux village and fort on March 8, 9, and 10 were delivered by the 9th Reserve Division of the 5th Corps.

I have quoted, without comment, examinations of prisoners and extracts from letters. The proof is given by the enemy in person: over the soil of France which he came to trample upon, our artillery and our infantry deal him out death in ample measure or, when he escapes death, force him to lead a somewhat harassed existence. That, no doubt, is what he calls an “amazingly obstinate” resistance.

How curious is this phrase, as if the Germans were surprised and shocked at our resisting at all! How striking was the attitude of prisoners whom I have seen examined, and of whom not one, though he might be wounded, puny, hideous, or brutish, forbore to flaunt his pride in being a German! These experiences led me to dip into a notebook, in which I have copied out various passages from distinguished authors peculiarly fitted to give us food for our war reflections, and look up an extract from Fustel de Coulanges on the German method of writing history. “The German historians,” he says, “can find nothing nobler in history than that German emperor who pitches his camp on the heights of Montmartre, or that other emperor who goes to carry off the Imperial crown in Rome after wading through the blood of four thousand Romans slaughtered on the Bridge of St. Angelo. But when the French at last put an end to these repeated invasions, when Henri II., Richelieu, Louis XIV., by fortifying Metz and Strassburg, save France and Italy from these Teutonic inundations—then the German historians are up in arms and make virtuous protests against the Gallic lust for aggrandisement. They cannot forgive those who try to prevent them from imposing their sway on other nations. To defend oneself against them is a sign of war mania; to prevent them from robbing is to be oneself a robber.”

94

The German historians of a later day will find matter for indignation in the breakwater at Verdun, against which so many waves of their soldiery have dashed themselves in vain. Let us hope at least that our own historians, in recounting the superhuman efforts put forth in a carefully planned resistance—destined, by the way, to be changed into an offensive in the course of the Verdun battle—will enhance among future generations their pride in being sons of France.

FROM MARCH 30 TO MAY 31

Who shall sing the epic of Fort Vaux in its daily phases? Relieved at due intervals, the troops succeed each other with the same staying-power in the same inferno. Shall we ever know all the feats worthy of record in this war of countless episodes? How many dead would have to be awakened from their sleep and asked for their testimony!

The living walls of Verdun, like the mediæval cathedrals, have been built by a multitude of nameless toilers. To single out any regiment or individual is to do an injustice to those who are not singled out. Yet instances must be mentioned here, in order to give flesh and bones to the framework of my story. Before I begin, I will apologise for so many unintentional omissions, since I could not know everything or collect every detail.

In order to gain possession of the town, the enemy, after taking Douaumont—the resounding syllables of whose name boom like a great bell through his communiqués—tries to approach the main line of defence: Froideterre, Fleury, Souville. Vaux fort and village is one of the mainstays of that line. From March 9 he pounds the slopes of the fort and the approaches to the village. He continues to make frontal attacks on them and at the same time attempts his usual manœuvre of envelopment, on the one side debouching in La Caillette Wood, and on the other side outflanking us in the village of Damloup. 96

Damloup, to the south-east of the fort, runs out like a pier-head between two ravines, the gap of La Horgne which separates it from the fort, and the gap of La Gayette which sweeps down from La Laufée Wood. To the north-east, Vaux village, the eastern portion of which has been lost, lies at the side of the Dieppe road, in the ravine of Le Bazil, the entrance to which it commands. As you go up the ravine, you find, after traversing a hundred and fifty or two hundred yards, a dyke, then a little lake: the Pool of Vaux. At this point is the end of the ravine of Fontaines, called by our men “the Ravine of Death,” which cuts across Vaux-Chapître Wood. The enemy lays siege to the village, but at the same time he also tries to get down into the ravine of Le Bazil by advancing through La Caillette Wood. In this wild country, broken up by clumps of trees, brushwood, narrow glens and gorges, a dim, dogged struggle will be waged, dragging on for weeks and even months.

The enemy, at the end of March, has brought back the 121st Division from the Woevre front. On March 21, after having made an important reconnaissance on the previous evening, he overwhelms the fort, the village, and the ravine of Le Bazil with shells. These are the harbingers of an assault. The telephone communications are cut and the connection service is kept up by means of scouts, since the broken ground makes signalling impossible, except on the plateau of the fort. A liquid fire attack precedes the three waves of the onset, each a battalion strong, which dash in succession against the village. The first is battered down; the two others, at a terrible cost in lives, manage to encircle the three companies which still occupy the western section. 97

On April 2 the 1st Battalion of the 149th Regiment (under Major Maganiosc), which occupies the shelters of the Les Fontaines ravine, is ordered to reoccupy the village. At daybreak it makes for the dyke, where it breaks up into three detachments, each consisting of a company, with the fourth as a support. One company has the main road for its objective; another will operate farther north, between the railway and the brook, in conjunction with the 31st Battalion of Light Infantry; the third farther south, through the gardens.

In a few strides our men have reached the village and advanced as far as the church. An artillery barrage, however, cuts them off and prevents reinforcements from coming up to them. The liaison officers who succeed in crossing this incessant curtain fire bring news that at first cheers us, but then becomes more and more alarming. The assailants have had to face a counter-attack and have been swept away by the storming party. On the right bank, in the gardens, the company commander, Lieutenant Vayssière, has been killed, and his men have been thrown back. In the village there is hand-to-hand fighting. All the officers of the third detachment have been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner, among them Captain Toussaint, commanding the 2nd Company, who, though seriously wounded, was still exhorting his men not to surrender. Non-commissioned officers take their places. The enemy sets fire to the houses by means of petrol. Sergeant Chef has rallied the survivors, and, stationing them with a machine-gun section at the exit by the side of the pool, has barricaded himself in the last house, dug a trench, and brought the enemy to a halt. To the north, Sergeant Chapelle holds out in the same way with some details until nightfall. The men work in pairs; one makes a dug-out while his comrade fires. The German losses are heavy. A private who saw them said, “Yes, there were a good many of them laid out!” 98

Although the village is lost, but for the last house, the dyke road is blocked up. On the northern side of the ravine, however, the Germans have managed to get near the railway.

Early next day the 74th Regiment retakes the lost trenches of La Caillette, and, continuing his advance, pushes his listening-posts up to the ridge of far-famed Douaumont. 99

How can we tell the full story of all these fights, scarcely interrupted for a moment, and all these feats of valour? On April 11 the enemy attacks with two divisions placed side by side on a front of 1¾ miles, from Fort Douaumont to Fort Vaux; he is driven back. On the 15th we attack him (with three battalions of the 36th Regiment and details of the 120th) between the ravine of La Caillette and that of La Fausse-Côte, and take nearly 200 prisoners. On the 19th the attack is resumed; the 81st Brigade carries a small fort crammed with dead and wounded, captures 260 prisoners (among them 9 officers, 4 cadets,² and 16 non-commissioned officers), and seizes machine-guns and a large quantity of flame-throwers. In vain the enemy tries to renew the offensive three days running; he is unable to rob us of the trenches we have captured after so severe a struggle. All this month of April is favourable to us in the Vaux region. General Nivelles, who is in command of the sector, in accordance with instructions received from the Commander-in-Chief and from General Pétain, the leader of the army of Verdun, has given orders for an active defence, which raises the morale of the troops and baffles the purpose of the foe. Satisfied with the results obtained on both banks of the Meuse during the recent operations, General Pétain, summoned by the Commander-in-Chief on April 30 to take command of the central 100

group of armies, before handing over to General Nivelle the command of the Second Army, addresses the troops in an army order in which he says:

² The nearest equivalent to “aspirants,” *i.e.* candidates for commissions who have had one year’s service after passing an examination and one year’s training in a military school.—*Translator’s Note.*

“One of the greatest battles recorded in history has been raging for more than two months round Verdun. Thanks to all, officers and men, thanks to the devotion and self-denial shown by the various branches of the service, a notable blow has been struck at the military power of Germany.”

During the month of May a definite goal is aimed at, a task likely to provide us with many thrills—the recapture of Fort Douaumont. What a slap in the face this would be for German pride! Douaumont, which has made the Teuton blow a loud trumpet-blast of victory; Douaumont, a conquest won by surreptitious means and emblazoned with the glory of a fictitious assault; Douaumont lost again would mean an outcry of astonishment and wrath over the whole Empire. And on May 22 our gallant lads re-enter Fort Douaumont. Soldiers of Mangin’s Division, battalions of the 36th, 129th, 74th, and 54th Regiments, you will remember that hour and that date when you matched the most daring conquerors!

Fort Vaux followed them from its observing stations and saw them break through by the southern breach. It aided them with its guns in the direction of Hardaumont and La Caillette. And its walls, which resounded under the enemy’s bombardment, seemed to tremble with joy, even as the hills of Israel leapt, at the deliverance of its old comrade. 101

From the fort of Vaux to the pool the defences staked out on the slopes of the hill are connected by three redoubts or entrenchments more or less knocked to pieces, R¹, R², and R³ in the abbreviated style of the reports. Captain Delvert, who from May 17 to 24 has occupied R¹ with the 8th Company of the 101st Regiment, and who will occupy it again from May 31 to June 5, during the critical period, is one of those officers whom the war has revealed to themselves by abruptly withdrawing them from the civilian careers in which they had earned distinction. A student and a thinker, with a fellowship in history, he is the contemporary and was the close friend of Emile Clermont, the tender, subtle, and pathetic novelist of *Laure* and *Amour Promis*, who before he was killed in a trench was able to draw lessons favourable to his inner development from the scenes of bloodshed which he held in instinctive horror.

His generation was at that meeting-place of all the roads of the new age which has been marked by a certain indecision in all, or nearly all, of us in our turn: the war, making him a leader of men, will have prepared him for leadership in the intellectual world. He wears the Legion of Honour and the War Cross. Of middle height, with a sunburnt complexion, his eyes full of glittering fire behind his pince-nez, his voice low and his gestures eloquent, he has acquired the habit of looking at himself from outside recommended by Stendhal and his followers. He analyzes himself while he acts. He sees himself in action without being inconvenienced by the presence of this clear-sighted eye-witness. Accordingly he has a precise notion of all that is happening, and realizes the full significance of each event. The background of the canvas does not escape him; he can easily reproduce the stage-setting of the episodes, which he paints like an artist, with rapid, sweeping strokes and warm colours. Men of this type will later on make admirable chroniclers. At the most tragic moments he notices the statuesque pose of a bomb-thrower, or is capable of feeling the warm caress of a sunbeam. More than once I shall have recourse to the notes which he has allowed me to consult: the concise yet passionate style of his personal comments must be left to the imagination. 102

During the night of May 17-18, Captain Delvert, with his company, reaches the entrenchment R¹ by way of the ravine of Les Fontaines. On the way, the commander of the battalion which he is relieving receives him in his quarters and conveys his instructions to him. “He is a tall man,” writes Captain Delvert, “slim, about fifty years of age, his face clean-shaven. This face is lighted up by a pair of fine, intelligent eyes, and his lips pucker up into an ironical smile.” 103

There is a portrait in a few lines.

“He receives us,” continues the Captain, “in a charming manner. A conversation is struck up with our battalion commander.

“‘We are going to the dyke. Has it been much shelled with heavies?’

“‘Well, well,’ answers the major, very coolly, ‘one of my officers counted in his sector an average of four shells a minute in a whole day.’

“‘And the major? what about his headquarters?’

“‘Still in pretty good condition, but you can’t get out of the place. It opens out on to a ravine which is constantly being shelled.’

“‘And where do these shells fall?’

“‘On the north, west, and east. It is only on the southern side that we don’t get any, except when our 155’s fire short.... (A pause.) ... And then, you know, you will have *totos!*’

“‘Totos?’

“‘Yes—well, fleas, if you like! Everybody has them.’

“‘We emerge from the major’s quarters and pass into the gallery which leads to the ravine of Les Fontaines. The country becomes more and more dismal and desolate. The trees are already nothing more than stumps. To make matters worse, since we have had a lot of rain, the gallery changes into a canal, with water a foot or more deep.” 104

And now the rain of shells begins. What the Captain said is right; it comes from every direction except the south.

At last Captain Delvert reaches his post. Every day he draws up his balance-sheet, just as the officer of the watch on a cruiser writes out his log. Here is the record of his days from May 18 to 24. It is a picture of the life our men lead in the Vaux region:

Diary of Captain Delvert (May 18-24)

Thursday, May 18.—My trench by the side of the railway commands the ravine of Vaux, which is riddled like a sieve with shell-craters full of water.

"That ruin in front, some sixty or eighty yards from the village, is the 'western house of Vaux' mentioned in the communiqués.

"The village is now nothing more than a mass of crumbling walls, which our 155 mm. guns are constantly battering.

"In front of headquarters is Fort Vaux. To the north and east it is surrounded by the Boche trenches.

"The dreariness of the landscape is beyond description. At this moment (7 P.M.) it is bathed in the soft, warm, purple light of the setting sun. The ridges of the hill are bare, without a blade of grass. The Fumin Wood is reduced to a few tree-stumps ranged like the teeth of a comb along its summit, like that wood of 'the Hand of Massiges' which our troopers have nicknamed 'the Cock's Comb.' The soil has been so much churned up by the shells that the earth has become as shifting as sand, and the shell-holes make the place look like a range of dunes.

"All of a sudden the cannonade, which had slackened off a little, breaks out in all its fury. In one minute we count eight Boche shells whistling over our heads.

"On the ridge of Vaux, which shows up purple against the setting sun, the black clouds of our 155's rise in every direction. It is an orchestra of Hell.

"The Commandant's office is a shell-hole covered with a few beams and a little earth. Under the floor are corpses, perhaps those whom the shell has buried.

"The occupants go to sleep on the floor, their heads resting on their knapsacks.

"The men are crowded together in recesses that certainly would not shelter them from the rain.

"Let us wait!

Friday the 19th.—The cannonade never stops day or night. It deafens our ears and clouds our brains.

"To-day, since 6 P.M., the hillsides of Vaux have been disappearing under our shell-fire.

"From here one can see them falling right on to the white lines formed in the ground by the Boche trenches and communication passages.

"At night, in the starlight, green rockets shoot up from our front lines at the bottom of the ravines. 'Lengthen the range! Lengthen the range!' cry our poor comrades.

"Other shouts are then heard from all sides.

"Red rockets on the Hardaumont plateau. We are attacked. Fire, lads, fire! Bar the way in front of our trenches!

"Red rockets from Fort Vaux. Red rockets down there, far off, behind Fumin. How many desperate appeals all over this gloomy countryside!

"Meanwhile, the Boches from their lines send up other kinds of rockets, trench flares or 'star-shells.' These flash forth from the darkness every moment in order to ensure that no shovelful of earth shall be removed by the victims marked out for annihilation by the shells.

"The whistling of the projectiles which cross each other above our heads is so loud that you might imagine yourself to be by the sea, with the swell of the waves, as they rise and fall, crashing in your ears. The explosions, with their tremendous uproar, produce the effect of a continual thunderstorm, accompanied by periodic flashes of lightning.

Saturday the 20th (11 P.M.).—The lake, with its dreary waters and its sombre setting, runs right up to the three ridges that shut in the horizon. The moon hangs over this distant quarter like a silver veil, dotted with darker specks along the summit of the hills. At the foot of our trenches she sheds her shimmering light over the marsh of the ravine, so that it forms a burnished island amid the ripple of the waters.

"To the right, on the dyke, a procession of funereal shadows glides past in silence.

"It is the relief that is going by.

"At a steady pace, never stumbling, it climbs up towards the Hardaumont plateau, where our shells are crashing, and the white, red, or green cones rise unceasingly into the sky—a firework display given by men marked out for death.

Sunday, May 21.—The fine weather continues. So does the cannonade.

"Midnight.

"This evening, at nightfall, the Boche sent us tear-shells. These gases are extremely unpleasant. Your eyes smart, you weep, you choke, you get a splitting headache. What a torment!

"The cannonade becomes fast and furious.

"The 24th will soon have to attack on the hillsides of Vaux in front of R¹. All my men are at their posts. The hill that commands Fort Vaux stretches out its dark line beneath the half-red disc of the moon. It is reflected down below, a motionless shadow, in the marsh at the foot of our trenches.

"The horizon, the fort, the ravine, and the distant dip of the Woivre are wrapped in a silvery mist.

"Near me, right and left, I see in the darkness, above the trench, the dim glint of the men's helmets. I think of the terrace of Elsinore and of the sentries relieving each other there during the night. 108

"Here the sentries get no relief. Under those helmets their eyes are watchfully sweeping the ravine, the embankment slope and the ballast of the railway. On all sides there spurts up the lurid flame of the crashing shells. The splinters fall like a heavy shower of rain into the marshes; others come humming like a top and land in the trenches.

"The half-hidden, sinister struggle goes on.

"At ten minutes to two the cannonade grows more intense. Rifles and machine-guns spit and crackle. The night is made hideous with a confused uproar that re-echoes in the valley.

"Red rockets dart up incessantly from the German lines. On the parapet, with straining eyes, our rifles in our hands, dumb with horror, we witness a mysterious duel, in which we hear the din without seeing the actors. Green rockets flare up from our trenches. 'Lengthen the range!' is the cry, while a Boche machine-gun emits its crisp, abrupt note.

"Another machine-gun that the artillery preparation has forgotten.

"The valley is filled with a dense vapour, a blend of dust and smoke, which hides everything from view.

"On the Hardaumont plateau dawn begins to appear.

"But the struggle goes on without respite. It rages more and more furiously in the fog, a fog through which the rockets cleave a fiery trail and the red flames of the shell-bursts are constantly darting up. From all sides the bullets whistle around us. The youngsters of the 1916 class, now receiving their baptism of fire, cluster round the sides of the parapet. We officers and N.C.O.'s, our rifles in our hands, spur them on to fight. Very soon each finds his mark among the Boches, who can be seen—now that day has risen—gradually receding all along the hillsides of Vaux. 109

"Monday, May 22.—A cartridge-base of 130 mm. has entered my dug-out, broken my *bâteman's* leg, and flattened itself out on the wall near my head.

"11 o'clock.—German counter-attack on the trench taken this morning by the 129th. Boche detachments are crossing the slopes. We fire at them; they can be seen lying down flat on the ground, then proceeding again at the double. There is one who still lies prone. He must have been hit. One must admit that they are brave soldiers, these fellows.

"They have reached the trench. A hand-grenade duel begins. An appalling fire is directed at Fumin, through which other units of the 124th are to come as reinforcements.

"To our left, Douaumont has been recaptured since this morning.

"Wednesday, May 24—1 o'clock in the morning.—This time it is Hell indeed. The night is as black as ink. The little valley now seems a gigantic chasm girdled by fantastic hills, great sombre masses with vague outlines. At the bottom of the chasm the pools of the marsh glitter mysteriously in the dark. Dim vapours rise incessantly, accompanied by a terrific noise; red and white gleams cut athwart each other, so that out of the shadows there suddenly leap up mountains of darkness which appear for a moment to be encircled with light, then vanish at once into the night. 110

"Through the heavy air, in which one can scarcely breathe for dust and smoke, there is all the time an invisible gliding to and fro, a frightful whistling, roaring, and crackling, and a spurting of flames that seems endless.

"Is it the Twilight of the Gods? the *Götterdämmerung* which haunted the sublime imagination of their barbarian giant? Is the earth yawning, and is that savage world whose monstrous maw wellnigh devoured humanity sinking into a fiery pit? No. It is merely an episode of the war: the German counter-attack on R¹.

"Perhaps it will get a line in the communiqués.

"8 o'clock.—The hillsides of Vaux seem more sinister than ever.

"All along the German trench that is being fought over, rigid bodies stiff and stark in blue greatcoats, black trails. The soil, in places, looks as if it were burnt. One corpse has been stripped of its greatcoat. 111

"We can see that naked back in the sunlight."...

Each episode of the combat is linked up with the operation as a whole. The attack on Douaumont will have an immediate effect on the rest of the fighting. The battle on the Verdun front is a part of the single battle that is being waged on all the fronts. Accordingly the beleaguered islet of Vaux is about to rivet the attention of the entire globe.

Our troops have been unable to hold their ground in Fort Douaumont, of which they only occupied the superstructure and a part of the casemates. On May 24 a German counter-offensive has succeeded in enveloping and retaking the earthwork. It seems as if the daring enterprise of May 22 had aroused their anger as a strip of red cloth excites a bull. They nearly lost Douaumont; so outrageous an insult decides them to rush on Verdun with redoubled fury. They devote to the onslaught a new force, the 1st Bavarian Corps. On May 25, 26, and 27 they pounce upon Thiaumont Farm, in the direction of Froideterre. From May 31 onwards they move slantwise on their left and, flinging themselves at Fort Vaux, will not resign themselves to abandoning the prey which they covet and which they thought was in their grip eight months ago.

Their plan will be to outflank the fort to the west by way of the ravines of Le Bazil and Les Fontaines, and to the east by way of Damloup. 112

On May 31 our line is carried up again beyond the Le Bazil ravine so as to wind round the Hardaumont

salient, which belongs to us, through La Caillette Wood. Then it runs back, crossing the ravine by the dyke, passes in front of the entrenchments R³, R², and R¹, envelops the fort at a distance of barely 200 yards from the counterscarp, sweeps down into La Horgne bottom, is thrust out into a point at Damloup village, and bends back into La Gayette bottom in front of La Laufée.

The Hardaumont salient and Damloup village run out from the line like spires, and their defence is a hazardous business. The entrenchments have been broken up. What sort of a barrier can the fort still provide?

BOOK III

THE STRANGLEHOLD

I

STONES AND MEN

What is the condition of that luckless fort of Vaux, which for a hundred days, since February 21, has received its daily ration of shells: ten thousand on an average for the district, and of all calibre, but chiefly of the heaviest, the 210 mm., the 305 mm., and even the 380 mm.? It must have been hammered, pounded, bruised, crushed, scoured, pulverized: unusable and uninhabitable, can it be anything but an indiscriminate heap of stone and earth, of rubbish of all kinds transformed into dust or ashes? Where the Emperor William's artillery has done its work thoroughly, we are assured that nothing is left. Attila boasted that no grass grew where his horses' hoofs had trod.

And indeed the outward aspect of the fort is deplorable. The superstructures are entirely destroyed, and the top is now nothing but chaos. 114

The southern entrance has given way, and for a long time has been unfit for use. In order to make one's way into the interior one passes either by the double transverse gallery to the north-west, or by the single transverse gallery to the north-east.

The double transverse gallery has been staved in, but an exit has been fitted up, an exit for the use of the troops who succeed each other in the western sector of the fort (curtain, Besançon trench). The passage connecting it with the main pile has crevices in it near the descent into the ditch and has been smashed in near the barracks.

In the same way, the single north-eastern transverse gallery has been pierced near the exterior of the fort, and provides a passage for the details that hold the eastern and northern trenches (Fort and Belfort trenches).

These two entrances, which are on the side of the trapezoid nearest the enemy, will be to the advantage of the assailant. It is here if anywhere that he will penetrate. But can he expect a resistance in such a ruin? The 75 turret has been seriously damaged; it can no longer communicate with the barracks. The whole place is of little use for defensive purposes. The two armoured observing stations have escaped destruction, but machine-guns cannot be set up in them. The single transverse gallery to the south-west is in fairly good condition; its line of communication, which had been blocked up, has been re-established; it has no external opening. Finally, the barracks have cracks in them, but are still serviceable. A garrison can take shelter there. 115

The double barbed-wire entanglement which surrounded the fort is now in fragments, or buried in the shell-holes. The resisting power of the counterscarp, the escarp, and the ditch that lies between them cannot be reckoned upon; the walls have several breaches and have sunk down, and the ditch, now half filled with earth, is no longer an obstacle.

Such is this remnant of a fort, such are these inadequate defences which the enemy is approaching. On March 9, when he laid siege to it, he was still confronted with barbed wire, ramparts, parapets, covers for machine-guns. Now, if he succeeds in reaching it—and he is nearly touching it, he is less than two hundred yards from it—he can find his way into it without any marvellous acrobatic feats, and, in order to make an entry, he will find the two exits from the northern transverse galleries gaping wide before him. There is now no longer anything, apart from the demolished trenches in front and on his flanks, to oppose his inroad. Nothing but men who await the storm, like sailors determined not to forsake their disabled ship.

The commander of the garrison is Major Raynal of the 96th Infantry Regiment. Though wounded, he refused to wait until he was cured before returning to duty. Born at Bordeaux, where his father was a bootmaker, on March 7, 1867, of a family that originally came from Montauban, the future defender of Vaux was educated at the Angoulême *lycée*, then enlisted in the 123rd Regiment on March 15, 1885. Five years later he entered the military school of St. Maixent, and left it as a second lieutenant on April 1901, having gained the first place out of 328 candidates. A Captain at the outbreak of the war, he was appointed Battalion Commander on August 24, 1914. How he led his battalion may be shown by a quotation from an Army order: "Commanding the advanced guard of his regiment on September 14, 1914, and getting into touch with the strongly entrenched enemy at a brief distance from early in the morning onwards, he at once took up his position on the tactical points, and by strenuous efforts kept his battalion there under fire from German rifles, machine-guns, and heavy artillery. Seriously wounded in the afternoon, he retained command of his battalion, staying in the first line in order personally to direct the fighting, in close and difficult country, until his loss of blood became so great that he was compelled to retire." At Crouy, on September 14, a bullet from a machine-gun ripped up his chest on the left side. He had been a Knight of the Legion of Honour since July 11, 1900, and was promoted Officer³ on January 11, 1916, with the following description: 116

³ There are five grades of the *Légion d'honneur*: (1) *Chevalier*, (2) *Officer*, (3) *Commandeur*, (4) *Grand-Officer*, (5) *Grand-Croix*.—*Translator's Note*. 117

"An admirable officer of high character and military abilities. Badly wounded on September 14, 1914, he returned to the front, where he has continued to render signal service: was very badly wounded once more on October 3, 1915, when he was coolly and methodically proceeding to a reconnaissance of the sector in which his battalion was posted."

His second wound was received at Tahure, in Champagne; a splinter from a shell in his abdomen broke the top of his hip-bone before passing out through his back.

Not being sufficiently recovered to take up an active command with any confidence, he asked for a post where there would be little moving about and plenty of danger. "You will be given command of a Verdun fort." The Major pulls a wry face: he would prefer open country. "Then let it be the most exposed fort." "Which one?" "Vaux, obviously." "Very well, then, go to Vaux."

So off he goes. Such is the man to whom the destinies of the fort are entrusted. His force consists of a company of the 142nd Regiment, the 6th, under the command of Lieutenant Alirol (120 rifles), a company of the machine-gun section of the 142nd (under Lieutenant Bazy), some thirty artillerymen, ten engineers, twenty hospital orderlies, stretcher-bearers and telephone operators, and twenty Territorials for fatigues. In all, from 250 to 300 men. But this is the normal regulation number of the garrison. All of a sudden it will be increased by some fifty machine-gunners of the 53rd Regiment, then by wounded who will be conveyed to the dressing-station, then by details of the 101st and 142nd Regiments. The last-named, screening the fort in front and on the flanks, will be pushed back into the interior under the pressure of the enemy's advance, by way of the openings in the transverse galleries. As early as June 2 the numbers begin to swell, and from 250 they will soon rise to more than 600. This will add to the already serious difficulties of the defence. In fact, whereas the replenishments of munitions and the engineering and medical services are on the whole adequate, the food supply has been calculated to last out a fortnight, and that for a garrison of 250 men only. The cisterns have indeed been filled, but the troops of the centre have always looked upon the fort as a place to get water supplied by a merciful Providence to save them from the thirst that is so terribly hard to bear on those arid, fire-swept hillsides. The commandants of the fort have constantly had to struggle against this tendency: nevertheless, during May, they have succeeded in creating a reserve supply of water. This reserve supply has been brought in by fatigue parties, carrying water-bottles that hold three and a half pints each: heroic fatigue parties these, liable at times to tragic interruptions. On May 29 the reserve supply reached barely 3500 or 5000 pints. A garrison of the normal size, put on rations from the beginning, would have found in this amount resources for a period of ten to twelve days, and even more. The new arrivals will make it run out on the very first day. It will not be long before there is a shortage of water, and thirst will be the most cruel hardship of the Vaux garrison.

Yet the defenders are ready, and Major Raynal is waiting.

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II

THE STRANGLEHOLD TIGHTENS IN THE WEST

(JUNE 1)

From May 31 the bombardment of our first lines of La Caillette and of the Le Bazil ravine, the Vaux-Chapître Wood, the fort and the whole district of Vaux, Damloup, and La Laufée, outdoes the usual battering to such an extent that one expects an offensive. At what point will it be aimed? At the whole front or at a small section? Faithful to his old tactics of advancing one shoulder and then another, the enemy attacks only the west of the fort. He will confine his objective to the Hardaumont salient, which we still hold, the border of La Caillette Wood, the Le Bazil ravine where the railway passes, the pool and the dyke, and finally the Fumin Wood, a part of the Vaux-Chapître Wood lying to the east of Les Fontaines. If he reaches Fumin Wood, he will easily carry the series of entrenchments R³, R², and R¹, which defend the slopes above the pool of Vaux up to a point near the fort. If he gains the entrenchments, the fort will be outflanked and will fall in its turn. Perhaps a single day will suffice for him to achieve that turning movement which will win him the famous "armoured fort" whose pretended capture had sent a thrill of pride through Germany on March 9. In three months this ill-starred fort has been reduced to powder. No matter: it bears a sonorous name, and there should be no difficulty in taking it; what troops would ensconce themselves in such a shelter? In order to settle the matter once for all, the enemy launches the 1st Division (minus the 3rd Grenadiers) between La Caillette Wood and the fort, the 50th Division between the fort and the Damloup, and between the fort and Damloup a division comprising the 3rd Grenadiers of the 1st Division and the 126th and 105th Regiments of the 15th Corps. The vast number of effectives employed—destined even to be reinforced on June 5 by the 2nd Brigade of the Alpine Corps—shows the value that he attaches to this already sore-stricken prey. 121

Our defence outside the fort is disposed as follows: at the Hardaumont salient (La Caillette Wood) a battalion of the 24th Regiment; from the dyke to the entrenchment R¹ the 1st Battalion (under Major Fralon) of the 101st Regiment (one company at the dyke, one, the 3rd, under Lieutenant Gontal, at R³ and R², a platoon at each redoubt); from R¹ to the west of the fort the 8th Company, under Captain Delvert, at R¹ the 7th in a defensive hook-shaped arrangement in front and to the left of the fort. 122

The chain is carried on by the 142nd Regiment (under Colonel Tahon), who provided the fort with its garrison, and who occupies, in front and to the east, the trench of Belfort with his 2nd Battalion (under Major Chevassu); the 7th and 8th Companies in the Belfort trench, the two others acting as a support to the south-east. The 1st Battalion (under Major Mouly) occupies the village of Damloup with three companies, the 4th holding in the rear the battery of Damloup and the trenches of Saales which, from the battery, rejoins the village. Finally, farther to the east the 3rd Battalion, under Major Bouin, is put in charge of the Dicourt sector and the La Laufée earthwork. The defence will be completed by relief drafts or reinforcements.

On June 1, at eight o'clock, the enemy, after a strenuous artillery preparation, attacks that Hardaumont salient which we still hold to the north of the Le Bazil ravine, where the railway and the road from Fleury to Vaux pass by. At the redoubt R¹, where the ground slopes down from the plateau on which Fort Vaux stands, Captain Delvert is in the front row of the stalls to watch the performance going on before him on the other side of the ravine. He sees the German infantrymen come out like ants from an anthill that some foot has kicked. Here they are making their way down towards our trench in the salient. They leap into it. The white smoke that emerges shows that a hand-grenade duel is in progress. Farther up, swarms of light-blue greatcoats try to scramble up the slopes of La Caillette Wood, already bathed in sunshine; they fall back in disorder towards La Fausse-Côte and descend once more in the direction of the pool. The shells burst in their midst, but scarcely a man is hit. Then the Germans, in single file, creep alongside the railway! There can be no doubt on the point; the salient is lost and they hold the ravine. 123

They continue to defile up to the embankment slope of the railway. In ever-increasing numbers they arrive at the dyke, and cross it. Now they are approaching Fumin Wood and the entrenchments. These entrenchments are little more than shell-holes joined together, except R¹, which still retains a fortified aspect with its walls in reinforced cement and its lofty embankment. At noon, the assault is aimed at R² and R³; their resistance at last stops the enemy, whose on-coming masses are mown down by machine-guns and rifles. Every "grey ghost that crawls along the slopes of Fumin" is at once registered and fired at. For all that, the enemy has come very close; we have been able to capture from him, on the spot, a lieutenant, a cadet, and four soldiers of the 41st Infantry Regiment.

He will not halt when so near the goal, in spite of this sanguinary set-back. A battalion takes the place of the one that has been cut down. At two o'clock in the afternoon comes a fresh onset, which becomes a long-drawn-out contest, swaying backwards and forwards. The struggle is a fierce one in the communication passages and half-filled trenches, an affair of bombs, of bayonets, of hand-to-hand fighting. At three o'clock, however, the two entrenchments are lost. Not a man has come back to tell what has happened at the dyke. As to what took place at R² and R³, occupied by the two platoons, a postcard from their commander, Lieutenant Gontal, written from a prisoners' camp to Colonel Lanusse, commanding the 101st Regiment, brought the news a month later. 124

I met Colonel Lanusse when he had just arrived at a rest billet, in a pleasant little village amid the wild dales of the Argonne. He had had a spell in the trenches; he had left off his jersey on account of the heat, and was tuning a piano which he had discovered at the house of one of the villagers. Such a stroke of luck is rare for a music-lover. A flute and a violin, placed on the table, and also the score of a classical trio, were awaiting the performers.

"You see," he said to me, "*musica me juvat.*"

"Or *delectat,*" I countered, in pious recollection of my Latin grammar.

With the same simplicity he drew me a picture of the terrible week in which his regiment distinguished itself. Lieutenant Gontal's card cheered him like a march tune, but did not surprise him in the least. He was sure that things must have turned out in this way. And whenever he laid stress on the part played by any one of his officers, he hastened to do justice to the others. With the exception of himself, he gave some account of the whole cadre. Here, then, is the testimony of Lieutenant Gontal, which, in a few laconic words, sums up the defence of R² and R³: 125

"Wounded on June 1. Was picked up by the Germans and brought here. We carried out to the letter the order given: not to draw back an inch on any pretext. Thus it was that we were cut off, outflanked on all sides, and overwhelmed by weight of numbers. I was one of the last to fall, hit right in the stomach by a bullet fired at ten yards' distance. Lieutenant Huret had his right arm fractured. Second Lieutenant Pasquier was wounded. Sergeant-Major Farjon had his right hand crushed and his left thigh pierced by a bullet. Cadet Tocabens had five shell splinters in his body. Sergeant Lecocq was killed by a bullet in his forehead. The rest of the company suffered losses in proportion. This summary will tell you more than any lengthy comment of the way in which we understood our duty and satisfied the claims of honour.

"I would draw special attention to the bravery shown by Lieutenant Huret, Cadet Tocabens, and above all, Sergeant-Major Farjon, who richly deserves the Military Medal." 126

After each onset there is the same moving refrain, the same list of officers and N.C.O.'s dead or wounded.

The first postcard written by Lieutenant Gontal on June 5 from the hospital is addressed to his Colonel. The second is for his wife at Toulouse. "After fighting near Verdun for twenty days," he tells her, "I was wounded by a bullet in the stomach. I was picked up on the battlefield by Germans and taken prisoner. The doctor thinks he will pull me through. Cheer up! I fell as a soldier should; honour is not lost. But I was broken-hearted, for henceforth the War Cross is out of the question."

A month later, on July 13, he gives fuller details, but the same idea haunts him. "The brave fellows," he says of his company, "nearly all got killed or wounded on the spot, and not one officer came out of the battle unscathed." Then he adds: "How is it that my wound was not mortal? Once more Providence has intervened. Well, it will be the proudest boast of my life not to have yielded one inch of ground and to have fallen at the post that my country had entrusted to me. All this, you know, makes me forget my pain and throws a halo round the memory of all the gallant lads of my company who were killed there."

Finally, in August, he seems to have recovered from his wound and to be quite hopeful again. He asks his people in a graceful bit of writing for some ten-centime cigars—"those good cigars of our sweet France, from which there rises, subtle and sly, the blue smoke that is like a corner of heaven mirrored in our lovely clear waters, the smoke in which you can see our hills, our great forests, our dear land with its twenty centuries of glory, honour, and faith—in short, that France for which I and so many others have so gladly given up the best part of our lives." To make his exile bearable, he will no doubt write verses. Is it not fitting to quote these letters from a prisoner before reverting to that day of June 1? 127

In the course of this great day, the scouts, who had almost all volunteered, ensured the connections with unflinching devotion. One of them arrived at the Commander's headquarters in Fumin Wood, crossing—by what a marvellous stroke of luck!—a very heavy curtain fire.

"You might have waited a few moments," says the Colonel to him in a fatherly tone.

The man points to the envelope.

"Yes, sir, but he has written 'urgent.'"

Two others are sent from the regiment to brigade headquarters. On the way, one of them is killed by a 105, and the despatch that he was carrying is lost. His comrade goes back to the Colonel's headquarters, asks for a copy of the despatch, and starts off again to carry out his mission.

The Germans, now in possession of the two entrenchments, make an advance in Fumin Wood. The task that lies before them is to storm R¹, the redoubt nearest the fort, and then they will approach the fort by the west and even the south. Our surprise and their daring will perhaps enable them to take it without striking a blow. 128

Nevertheless the Colonel of the 101st makes his arrangements for the battle in the manner of an eminent orchestra conductor. He stations his reserves as a barrier in the wood, seeks and finds his connections in the Fontaines ravine, and has the ground dug into in order to gain a better grip on it. All the ensuing night he will make his men work without a break, profiting by the uncertainty as to the time that paralyses the enemy's artillery, in order to find cover and to organize his front between R¹ and the ravine.

The redoubt R¹ is besieged from the evening of June 1. Two machine-guns, sweeping the hillsides, damp the enemy's ardour: in front of their range of fire, one sees clumps of grey bodies stretched out on the ground. In our trenches the scene is already a tragic one: "Everywhere the stones have been splashed with red drops. In places, great pools of violet-coloured, viscous blood have been formed, and cease to spread. Half-way along the communication trench, in the bright sunshine, corpses are lying, stiff and stark under their blood-stained canvas. Everywhere there are piles of débris of all kinds: empty tins of canned food, disembowelled knapsacks, helmets riddled with holes, rifles shattered and splashed with blood. In the midst of these ghastly heaps a white shirt flutters, hideous with red clots. An intolerable stench poisons the air. To crown it all, the Boches send us some tear-shells, which make the air impossible to breathe. And the heavy hammer-blows of the shells never cease from echoing all around us." 129

This is the picture of that June evening drawn by Captain Delvert, who is in command of the defence of R¹. R¹ will hold out until the 8th, and will not be taken until the night of June 8–9. Just as an artist makes a rough cast before carving the statue in marble, so the defence of the redoubt is a sketch, in miniature, of the defence of the fort. As regards this episode of the fort, it is best not to interrupt the story, but to follow it to the end, looking ahead for a while. In any case, R¹ fights a lonely battle, unconscious of what is going on at its right or its left, not knowing whether the fort is alive or dead, imagining that it is still guarding one of the fort's flanks,

when the enemy has already succeeded in passing between the entrenchment and the counterscarp. He who led the resistance has a peculiar right to act as its historian. Here, then, is a portion of Captain Delvert's admirable notes, from June 2 up to the evening of the 5th, when he was relieved:

Captain Delvert's Diary, June 2-5

"*Friday, June 2.*—A night of agony, broken by continual alarms. Yesterday we were not replenished. Thirst is what troubles us more than anything. Biscuits are being looked for.... A shell has just made my pen slip. It fell not very far off. It landed in headquarters by the door, and pulverized my quartermaster-sergeant, poor little C—. Everything suffered from the concussion. I was covered with earth, but was quite unhurt—not a scratch!

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"*8 o'clock P.M.*—The Boches opposite us are emerging from their trench. Here, every one is at the loophole. I have had grenades handed out to the whole company, for at the distance where we are the rifle is useless.

"Here they come!

"'Forward, boys! Stick to it!'

"S— cuts the wire and we fling our bombs.

"The Boches reply to us with rifle-grenades, but their range is too long. Those who came out of the trench, taken aback by our reception of them, turn tail and make with all speed for Sarajevo—except those who here and there, sometimes in groups, are left stretched out upon the plain.

"From Sarajevo (the Sarajevo trench, occupied by the enemy, is scarcely 50 or 60 yards from the redoubt) shadows can be seen flitting out hastily and betaking themselves to the rear: doubtless this is the second wave that is ebbing back.

"'To your rifles, lads! We must follow them up!'

"Ch— sends up a red rocket. If we could use 75's now, the conditions would be ideal.

"All of a sudden there is a spurt of flame behind us, with torrents of black and white smoke. It is as though fiery fountains were playing. There can be no doubt about it! They have forced a passage on the right and are directing a liquid fire attack at us.

"But now, from the conflagration, red and green flames are rising. What can it be? Ah, it's my store of rockets that is ablaze. At such a moment! Luckily the Boches have been well looked after. Some poor devils rush down on the right, with loud shrieks. A few of the men near me take alarm and leave the loophole.

"'Back to your places! Good heavens, what do you think you are doing? And you, you pack of fools, bolting away because a couple of rockets catch fire!'

"In less than two minutes order is restored.

"The flames rise and bubble incessantly, in the blackness of the night, amid the shower of shells. Every moment a fresh rocket gushes out into flame.

"The blaze reaches headquarters, and two tongues of fire soon dart out from there. First of all we must save the grenades, which are quite close to us. A sack of cartridges has been caught in the furnace, for we can hear the crackling. The worst of it is that the walls are made of sandbags and also help to feed the flames. Then there are the shells, and the bullets that never stop whistling.

"At last! All the cases of grenades have been cleared away. Shovelfuls of earth are thrown on to the fire, which is now beginning to grow less violent.

"Fortunately, our bombs have had a sobering effect upon the Boches.

"True, we must go and look for more grenades if we wish to hold out against a fresh onset. Nearly twenty cases of them have been emptied.

"*10 o'clock P.M.*—A man comes from the Colonel's headquarters with five water-bottles—one of them empty—for the whole company. The bottles hold four pints each. This makes not quite eighteen pints for 60 corporals and privates, 8 sergeants and 3 officers.

"The sergeant-major, in my presence, distributes this water with scrupulous fairness. It has a taint of corpses.

"*Saturday, June 3.*—I have not slept for nearly sixty-two hours.

"*2.30 P.M.*—The Boches are making a fresh onslaught.

"'Keep cool, my lads! Let them get well out! We have to husband our ammunition. At twenty-five paces! Let them have it hot and strong when I give the word of command!

"'Fire!'

"'Jump to it!'

"Crack! go the rifles, all together. A smart piece of work. Well done! Black smoke rises. We see batches of Boches spin round and fall. One or two get up on their knees and manage to crawl away. Another lets himself roll down into the trench, so great is his haste. Some, however, advance towards us, while their comrades who remain in the trench riddle us with bullets.

"One of them even comes right up to the wire entanglement, three yards from the parapet. D— lays him out with a bomb flung fair and square at his head.

"At three-thirty they have had enough, and withdraw into their lair. The sun is shining brightly. A song

rises to my lips.

"You are in good spirits, sir!"

"Obviously. After all, when the die is cast——"

"At six o'clock the German stretcher-bearers come out to pick up their wounded. I forbid my men to fire upon them.

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"The Germans pass the dyke without a stop. They occupy R¹. We are hard pressed on all sides. The situation is highly critical. The horror of it grips our very heart-strings.

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"This evening, the Boches clear the way with heavy artillery fire. We shall certainly have to face a fresh attack.

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"I order my men to reconstruct the machine-gun emplacement, which has been destroyed during the day, and to take up a position with the one of the two guns which they have succeeded in repairing.

"For drinking-water, as it is raining, the men have put their mugs outside, and have laid down canvas.

"At 8.30 P.M. the gentlemen over the way emerge from Sarajevo.

"The *poilus* rejoice at this. At 15 yards they send them such a violent barrage of bombs, supported by machine-guns, that the Germans are not inclined to press the point. The attack is brought to a dead stop.

"At 10 P.M. an officer appears in my quarters.

"This is to announce reinforcements, some details of the 124th and 298th Regiments which have come to help in the defence. The sorely-trying little garrison of R¹ is already greatly thinned in numbers.

"The shells begin to fall again.

"It is impossible to light a candle in the C.O.'s headquarters. If the least bit of light is seen from outside, the Jack Johnsons land on the spot.

"In order to make out my report for the past twenty-four hours, I have to crouch down in a corner, under a blanket, and write on the ground.

"As for taking a moment's rest, that is not to be thought of. The bombardment does not break off for a single minute, and, what is more, we are so much pestered with fleas that we scratch ourselves as if we had the itch.

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"*Sunday, June 4.*—"They're not up to taking R¹, those Boches," cries one of my *poilus* to me as he passes.

"I was at the redoubt, organizing the connections with my left.

"Well, about twenty-four hours ago you had a pretty gruelling time of it here," remarks X—— to me.

"Yes, you saw those grenades being handed out."

"At the same moment comes a significant crackle. A duel of grenades is in progress.

"I hastily scramble up the narrow path which leads me into the trench and reach my post in the fray.

"The weather is superb. The bombs are roaring on all sides. A grenade duel is a fine sight: the bomb-thrower, firmly ensconced behind the parapet, hurls his bomb with the graceful swing of an athlete.

"S——, crouching down near the grenade cases, calmly cuts the wires and passes them to us without a word. A dense black smoke rises heavenwards, in front of the trench.

"At four o'clock all is over, but for a few rifle-volleys. These are like the final sobs of a long spell of weeping.

"The sunshine is glorious, and makes one realize all the more keenly the utter desolation of this ravine.

"Some wounded come down, streaming with blood.

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"The dead are brought in, among others poor D——, who rose up in the trench in order to smite down a Boche officer, and had his skull pierced.

"At the end of the trench occupied by bomb-throwers of the 5th, and ten men of the 124th, two Boches entered and were blown to atoms.

"A prisoner comes down. His face is beardless, his eyes are sunken. He lifts his bleeding hands and shouts 'Kamerad!' Our fellows take hold of him and hurry him off to the dressing-station. I go to visit that dressing-station. It is a gloomy place. In a dark room, with only one candle for a light, the patients are laid out, and one hears a constant groaning. They recognize me and call out to me. One of them has been asking for me long before I came in; he wants me to give him news of his brother. Another requests me to write to his parents.

"Poor Corporal O——, whose face already has death written all over it, bids me a farewell that draws tears from my eyes. All are in dreadful agony, for they are parched with fever and haven't a drop of water to drink.

"In the curtain of the fort, another German prisoner, one of the 1916 class: a savage-looking brute. Next to him is an N.C.O., short, spare, light-haired, aged about twenty-four, clearly a man of good breeding; he is an architect from the outskirts of Cologne.

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"6 o'clock P.M.—The bombardment opens again.

"A stretcher-bearer, gasping for breath, comes to lean for a few moments against the wall of my headquarters. His plucky, honest, good-natured face is now worn and hollow; his eyes, with blue circles

round them, seem to start out of his head.

“Sorry, sir, but I am simply done up. There are only three of us stretcher-bearers left; the others have been killed or wounded. For three days I haven’t had a bite of food or drunk a drop of water.’

“One feels that his frail body only lasts out through a miracle of energy and will-power. They are always talking of heroes nowadays; here is a hero, a more genuine one than many who are so acclaimed.

“The appalling cannonade goes on all the time.

“There are no green rockets.

“D—, R—, and I, under a low shed built of planks covered over with a few sandbags, wait for the shell which will blow us to pieces. We all look glum. The horror of the situation is clutching at our very vitals.

“8 P.M.—We are relieved!

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“11 P.M.—A note from the colonel: In view of circumstances which have arisen, the 101st cannot be relieved.

“Thanks!

“What a disappointment for my poor lads!

“Lieutenant X— is astounded at them, and with good reason. But I have only thirty-nine left!

“*Monday, June 5.*—I should like to take a rest, but the fleas seem to have an objection.

“Since the relief has been countermanded, the company won’t have any water to-day. As soon as I received the order I sent out a fatigue party for water. It did not come back. It must have been overtaken by daylight. Probably it is held up at Tavannes or in the tunnel.

“Luckily it is raining. The men go to spread out canvas so as to catch the water.

“One’s throat is parched with a terrible thirst. I am hungry. To eat bully beef with biscuit will make my thirst still worse.

“Coffee, sir!’

“H— is in front of me, with a smoking mess-tin in his hands. Yes, it really is coffee! I can hardly believe my eyes.

“I found some coffee tablets, sir, so I said to myself, “This is where I come in! I’ll make coffee.” Would you care to accept the first mug, sir?’

“What good fellows they are! I am so deeply moved that I don’t know what to say.

“But what about you, old chap? And your mates?’

“We have some for ourselves.’

“Well, I can’t accept a whole mug! Just a mouthful, that’s all.’

“No, no, sir; it’s for you. Come on, V—, pass along some mugs; I shall need the mess-tin.’

“I give in without further resistance. I carefully put the mug aside. It will enable me to eat a biscuit.

“What good fellows! What good fellows!

“5 P.M.—The order for the relief has come. If only it isn’t countermanded!

“We shall leave our dead in the trenches as a souvenir. Their comrades have piously laid them out of the way. I recognize them. Here is C—, with his velvet breeches; A—, poor youngster, of the 1916 class; and D—, stretching out his waxen hand, the hand that once flung bombs so valiantly; and P—, and G—, and L—, and so many others!

“Alas! how many ghastly sentinels we leave behind! There they are, lying in a row on the breastwork, stiff and stark in their blood-stained, blood-dripping canvas,—grim and solemn guards of this nook of French soil where it seems that, even in death, they would fain bar the way to the enemy.

“9 o’clock P.M.—The relief.”

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The uninterrupted bombardment, the fire in the neighbourhood of the grenade store, the daily onslaughts, the lack of provisions, the lack of water, the lack of sleep, the smell of the corpses and the asphyxiating shells, the mind preyed upon by the sense of death as the body is preyed upon by vermin,—these men have endured all. And because the sun is shining, the captain finds a song rising to his lips.

“You are in good spirits, sir.”

“Obviously. After all, when the die is cast—”

The whole attitude of our soldiers is summed up in that phrase. A private as he passes exclaims with a laugh:

“They’re not up to taking R¹, those Boches.”

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Yes, the whole attitude is summed up in this: to stick to one’s post and to think nothing of self.

The 6th Company of the 101st is relieved on June 5, in the evening, by a company of the 298th, which will hold out for three days longer, under more and more critical conditions, but will be outflanked in the night of June 8-9. The enemy has managed to make progress on the right. The fall of the fort, in the early morning of

June 7, has given him a tactical point.

R¹, however, throughout the whole siege of the fort, from June 2 to 7, has floated, like a fishing-boat that has mastered the waves, in the wake of the great vessel.

III

THE STRANGLEHOLD TIGHTENS IN THE EAST

(JUNE 2)

On June 2, at six o'clock in the morning, Colonel Tahon, commanding the 142nd Regiment, takes over the command of the sector stretching from Fort Vaux to Dicourt bottom, to the south-east of the fort.

The plateau on which the fort is situated makes a bend immediately to the east towards La Horgne bottom. Damloup village lies along the border of the Woevre, at a point where the ground falls away from a promontory that separates the La Horgne ravine and La Gayette bottom. This La Gayette bottom skirts the wooded height of La Laufée, on the other side of which lies Dicourt bottom. It is worth while describing once more the lie of the land in this region.

I saw Colonel Tahon on a Sunday in July, at the new headquarters then occupied by him in the Argonne. This post hid itself coyly in a leafy retreat. The air was heavy with heat; it was warm even in the shade. In the branches of the trees, wherever the light penetrated, insects were humming. Here and there you came across a sentry or a fatigue party, disturbing with their footsteps all this luxuriant growth of the virgin forest. Not a rifle-shot could be heard; only now and then came a stray shell, that seemed like some rude interloper. Without this reminder of actualities, one might have fancied that life had come to a standstill here—the same feeling that steals over one on a Sunday excursion to the country. At one time this scrap of soil was fiercely wrestled over and watered with blood. "At one time": was it, then, so long ago? 142

In the colonel's thoroughly sheltered quarters there was a very pleasant coolness, as in a cellar. A certain degree of comfort prevailed here: armchairs, a table, and on the table a photograph, plans, maps. The longing for domesticity takes hold of the wanderer so very soon: the commonplace dug-out which he will have to leave to-morrow becomes in a few moments, and for a few moments, a real home. All that the 142nd had done during those memorable June days was revealed to me there by its chief. He was careful to speak of it with fairness and moderation, and to restrain the enthusiasm which prompted him to set his men on a pedestal; that I learnt from the lips of those men, who had returned from so great a distance. If you have not seen things yourself, the next best course is to question those who have seen them. 143

When he came to occupy his post on June 2, at 6 o'clock A.M., a portion of his troops, placed at the disposal of the previous commander, were already in line. Of the 2nd battalion (under Major Chevassu) one company (the 6th) formed the garrison of the fort, and the 7th, 8th, and 5th Companies held the approaches to the north and east. The 1st battalion occupied Damloup and the Damloup battery; the 3rd (under Major Bouin) Dicourt and La Laufée. The night had been one of great activity. The fort had been subjected to assaults. Alarming rumours were going abroad; the fort, it was said, had been taken, shadows had been descried on the platform. At daybreak, the air was still foul with the gas of countless asphyxiating shells: in the ravines, especially in La Horgne bottom, the clouds left by these gases were trailing, like those mists that rise in the morning from the rain-soaked earth.

At eight o'clock a sergeant runs up all bathed in sweat, scared and breathless.

"Damloup is lost. The Boches are on the way."

Immediate measures have to be taken. The artillery must open a curtain fire in front of and to the east of Damloup and in La Horgne ravine, in such a way as to prevent any advance on the part of the enemy. The alarm has been given to Bouin's battalion, and one of its companies—the 11th, under Captain Hutinet—has been ordered to make a prompt counter-attack. The 4th Company (under Captain Cadet), which has been detached from the Damloup battalion in order to hold the battery, mans the Saales trench which connects them, in order to oppose any sortie of the Germans, should the latter attempt to debouch from the village. Finally, reinforcements are expected of the brigade, which places at the disposal of this sector Pelissier's battalion of the 52nd Regiment. 144

Scouts who have managed to escape from Damloup come to confirm the news brought by the sergeant. With the aid of the dense, deadly vapours emitted by the asphyxiating shells—these vapours still hang about La Horgne and La Gayette bottoms—the enemy has been enabled to penetrate into the village. The look-out men, gassed or taken unawares, have given an inadequate alarm. There has been fighting in houses and cellars, under a fire of flame-throwers and bombs; a difficult and tardy defence which has not saved Damloup. And the enemy will certainly try to advance towards the promontory.

He is forestalled by Hutinet's company. It has taken that company only a little time to reach shelter and, by the La Bruche communication trench, running parallel with the pier at the end of which the village lies, to march upon Damloup. Only a little time, and how valiantly this force rushes to the rescue, officers and N.C.O.'s at its head! Only a little time, and the enemy has already consolidated his gain. 145

An officer of the company charged with the defence of the Damloup battery, Second Lieutenant Brieu, was an eye-witness of the struggle, and gives the following details: "We see our comrades starting off, their heads lowered, and jumping from shell-hole to shell-hole. The Germans, however, have brought up machine-guns, which mow down our poor *poilus*, and these complete the task of shattering the counter-attack. In a few minutes the unlucky 11th is wiped out, and Captain Hutinet and two second lieutenants are brought in to us badly wounded. What is left of the company goes on fighting, but its effectives are terribly reduced, and this tiny band comes to take refuge near us. At this moment Colonel Tahon, being apprised of the state of affairs, orders us to hold the battery at all costs and to prevent the Boches from advancing. Captain Cadet strengthens the position with the 4th and the remnant of the 11th, and also with a machine-gun section. We set to work energetically, for we realize that the Germans will try to take the important position that we are occupying.

Throughout the day we are on the alert....”

Thus the counter-attack on the 11th Company of the 142nd Regiment has been broken by machine-guns set up at the exit from Damloup, scattered on the bits of roof that have been spared by the bombardments, or hidden behind the fragments of wall. Must it be started all over again with more numerous effectives? Pelissier's battalion of the 52nd is ready to march; grenades have been handed out to it. But the few hours that have elapsed have given the enemy an opportunity of entrenching himself more strongly. Damloup, on the western side, is easier to defend than to attack. The ravines that skirt it, as far as the southern slopes, are in the hands of the Germans, and the promontory that leads to them is narrow. What is more, the reinforcements have been seen coming from Dieppe, and working parties have been signalled to the artillery on the western and southern sides of the hill. It would be preferable to fortify the Damloup battery, the southern slopes of La Gayette and La Horgne bottoms, and to profit by the darkness of night in order firmly to consolidate this new line, which may hold its ground. And our men set to work, while our artillery goes on constantly dispersing the massed formations of the enemy and peppering the lost village of Damloup. “The men dig and take cover. The deluge of iron has opened afresh and lasts the whole night long; there is a deafening uproar of continual explosions.” Next day, at dawn, the situation has changed for the better, and our men resolutely await the attacks. 146

The bombardment which precedes them demolishes the hastily improvised trenches facing Damloup and overpowers the battery. It is the tocsin that sets the conflagration going. It is not until three o'clock in the afternoon that the Germans come up for the assault. At this point I have recourse to Second Lieutenant Brieu's narrative. 147

“On the 3rd, the rising sun finds each man in his place and the situation improved. As in a dream, I wonder what this day has in store for us, and I inspect my men. They are certainly very tired, that can be read in their faces, but one can see that they are determined and can be relied upon.

“Yesterday I had a fairly long list of killed and wounded; the number has grown during the night, and this morning the bombardment claims fresh victims, among them my poor friend Lieutenant Métayer, killed at his post, with a bullet in his abdomen.

“All of a sudden, about three in the afternoon, the German artillery, which has been raging for a few moments, lengthens the range, and we see the Boches advancing. They are mown down by our rifle and machine-gun bullets. They falter and stop; we redouble our fire, while that of our machine-guns ceases. I look and see, in the midst of the dust, rapidly moving shadows. These are Sergeant Favier and his men; he has come out of the fray without a scratch. He unearths his gun, cleans it under the enemy's fire, and with the help of his men is setting it up as calmly as if he were at manœuvres.

“About 5 P.M., to our astonishment, we see some sixty French soldiers sally forth from the German trenches. They come towards us. They have grenades in their hands and are on the point of throwing them. ‘Fire! These are Boches!’ I had scarcely uttered this cry before the volleys followed each other in quick succession, and, of the handful of Boches in French uniforms, those who were not hit fled like mad and regained their dug-outs. 148

“Towards 7 P.M. the Boches advance on the battery from two quarters at once, the north and the east; their object is to encircle us and seize the position entrusted to our care. But we hold out, the artillery delivers a curtain fire with considerable effect, the battalion of the 52nd sends us reinforcements, and we repel all attacks. Some Boches fall at a distance of less than ten yards from the battery. It is true that we are in an agony of suspense, but we must stick to our ground at all costs; this is the order, and we carry it out. At 8 P.M. comes a fresh onset, and a renewed defence on our part. At last we can breathe freely, bury our dead, send away our wounded, reorganize our positions, and make ready to drive back further assaults. It is the third night, however, that we have had no sleep, and this ordeal of sleeplessness comes on top of all the hardships we have already suffered. What does it matter? No one thinks of taking a rest, for we must guard the territory placed in our keeping.”

The Germans have attacked the position of the battery from three sides: to the east, debouching from Damloup village in French uniforms; to the north, opposite the Saales trench; to the west by going up the La Horgne ravine. All their onslaughts have failed, but they have come up to within ten yards of the battery. It has been a sharp struggle. Pelissier's battalion of the 52nd has provided reinforcements. The fire of Chevassu's and Bouin's battalions, of the 142nd, the one to the left, the other to the right, the one above the La Horgne ravine, the other above the La Gayette ravine, has worked havoc in the enemy's ranks. His losses have been heavy. At the bottom of the ravines the blotches of grey-green uniforms have grown more and more numerous. The order given charged us “to resist on the spot with might and main and to hold our positions.” It has been faithfully carried out. Shall we be able to carry out the second part of it on the morrow? 149

In consequence of the losses and the men's exhausted condition the situation is critical. The enemy continues to mass in the La Horgne ravine. Our artillery fires on these groups; they scatter, only to be reformed. And on the ridge of Vaux there appear German detachments, which our machine-guns riddle with bullets. Is the fort still in our hands? That is the crucial problem.

At daybreak a patrol carried out in front of the battery brings in two prisoners; according to the information they supply, five companies occupy Damloup, while three others have left the village and are under orders to attack the battery. 150

“Throughout the whole day of June 4,” Second Lieutenant Brieu notes, “the Germans bombard us furiously, and even in the evening they launch a vigorous attack. Our rifle-fire brings them to a halt. It is at this moment that our brave captain and beloved comrade Cadet falls, struck by a bullet in his forehead. While two privates convey his body a little way to the rear, we go on fighting. At last, in the evening, we are relieved.”

The effective firing of our artillery upon Damloup, upon the La Horgne ravine, and in front of the battery crumples up the enemy's forces, and the night passes without an attack. The relief, by a battalion of the 305th, is carried out without losses. On June 5 there is a renewed bombardment and a renewed assault from the direction of La Horgne. This assault is shattered before it can get into full swing. 151

What took place at Vaux on the western side from June 1 onward also took place to the east on June 2 and the ensuing days. On June 1 the enemy flung himself at the Hardaumont salient and gained possession of it. From that point he penetrated into entrenchments R³ and R², but his way was blocked at Fumin Wood and in front of R¹. Up to the night of June 8-9, R¹ resisted all attacks. In the same way, on June 2, the Germans, taking full advantage of the poison gas attack that paved the way, occupied Damloup, but the Damloup battery deprived them of the outlet from the village. In vain did they rush against this battery on June 3 and 4 with ever-increasing forces; they could not contrive to make an entrance. Its defence, more fortunate even than that of R¹, will be prolonged until July 2. Even on July 2 the enemy will be immediately driven out, and will not come back, this time to hold it for good, till the 10th. 151

Thus the movement whereby it was intended to envelop the fort was hampered on the right and on the left by the auxiliary defences, which were unable to save the fort, but, even after its loss, forced the enemy to slacken his onward pace.

The fine defence of the Damloup battery was kept up by units reduced in numbers, limited to their emergency rations, suffering from lack of water, and unable to obtain any rest or sleep. It seemed as if the unexpected loss of Damloup made the position almost untenable. But is any position untenable when troops are resolute? Fort Vaux is about to reveal to us unsuspected powers of endurance.

BOOK IV

THE LAST WEEK

I

THE BATTLE AT THE FORT

(JUNE 2)

Those who contrived to escape from the fort have related the whole drama. All the shifting scenes here delineated, whether outside or inside, are based on the accounts of those who have seen them and lived through them. The witnesses in this case are themselves the actors. Finally, the fort itself spoke. Up to the last moment, up to the death-agony, it communicated with the high command by means of its signals and its carrier-pigeons.

The day of June 1 is heavy with anguish. The storm slants off to the left, but the air remains sultry and oppressive. The Le Bazil ravine is lost, the dyke is crossed, the enemy break through into Fumin Wood. Of the three entrenchments that stake out the slopes between the pool and the fort, two are given up. R¹ still holds out, but will it be strong enough to prove an obstacle to the foe? Between R¹ and the fort, the La Courtine trench and that of Besançon, which ends in a winding at the double transverse gallery (north-eastern) that has been half-disembowelled, are manned by the 7th Company of the 101st Regiment. In front of the fort, the trench that protects it and, farther east, the Belfort trench are occupied by the 7th and 8th Companies of the 142nd Regiment, the 5th being on the plateau as a support. Will these troops suffice to check the onslaughts? Will they not be outflanked to the west by way of Fumin Wood, and to the east by Damloup and La Horgne bottom, against which the bombardment is raging? 154

During the night there is great liveliness. The air shivers with countless lightning-flashes from the batteries, and with rockets going up or coming down in showers of stars. Darker than the night are the columns of smoke that rise from the shell-bursts. From the observing-station one of the guard signals movements at the foot of the slopes. No one sleeps, except a few wounded whose strength has completely failed them. Major Raynal, leaning on his stick, takes a turn round the corridors. He does not speak much, he is preoccupied, but his energetic air is reassuring. "The officers," remarks an eye-witness, "were constantly walking through our midst; they were as calm and collected as usual, but we felt that the hour was at hand, for they looked into every detail." 155

At a quarter-past two, before sunrise, the enemy's range lengthens, and the waves of the attack unroll themselves against our defenders in a semicircle. Our curtain fire came too late; the waves have been able to advance without being broken, and soon they are coming up to the trench of the fort opposite them, to the Besançon trench on the west, to the Belfort trench on the east.

Opposite, they dash against the 7th Company of the 142nd Regiment, which replies by throwing bombs. The first platoon is annihilated on the spot, after inflicting serious losses on its assailants. The second, which was acting as a support, hastens to the rescue, and now comes a formidable rush against more numerous forces, which it prevents from passing. Captain Tabourot is in command of this reinforcing platoon, aided by Cadet Buffet. One of the survivors has drawn the following portrait of him: "Captain Tabourot fought like a lion. He overtopped us all with his tall figure, he gave his orders in curt tones, he encouraged us and put us in our right places. Then he put his hand himself in the grenade sack, took out an armful, and, leaning backwards a little, threw them with perfect composure, taking careful aim every time. This roused us, and we gave a good account of ourselves. What a pity that it didn't last!"

The heroic band is all of a sudden assailed in the rear, between the trench and the fort. As a matter of fact, to the east, the Besançon trench, after repelling a first onslaught, has given way. Its little garrison, now outflanked, has fallen back upon the double transverse gallery, where one of the two entrances to the fort is to be found. Already they have had to convey to the interior of the fort the dauntless Lieutenant Tournery, who, with his head pierced by a bullet—a mortal wound—will take three days to die without confessing the tortures that rack him. A force deprived of its leader seeks a shelter in order to re-form itself. This force, sadly thinned, re-enters the fort by the transverse gallery, the opening in which it defends. The enemy, however, has managed to worm his way as far as the counterscarp. The northern ditch is barred to him by a revolving gun placed in the double transverse gallery, but, passing along it, he has taken Captain Tabourot's platoon in the rear. 156

The captain is struck from behind by a bomb, which breaks his back and slashes both his legs. "Mastering his pain," says the eye-witness already quoted, "he did not let a single cry of complaint escape his lips, and I can still see him pass in front of us, supported by two of his sergeants. He was pale, but he pointed out the enemy to us."

He is carried to the infirmary. The procession makes its way into the interior by the breach in the north-eastern single transverse gallery. Major Raynal at once comes to join him. The meeting between the two soldiers is brief: no word of consolation is spoken, no false hopes are held out. The one divines that all is over; the other has too high an opinion of him to take refuge in falsehood. A firm handshake, then the commandant of the fort merely says: 157

"Well done, my dear fellow!"

The captain's thoughts are with his men:

"If the Boches get through, sir, it won't be my company's fault. It has done all that could be done to block their way."

After this report he closes his eyes. The major returns to his post. The captain is left alone with a hospital orderly amid a wailing and groaning throng of wounded. A moment later he asks for Cadet Buffet. But Cadet Buffet is in the thick of the fray with the rest of his company.

"He must not be sent for, then," says the dying man.

A little later Cadet Buffet comes in of his own accord to visit him. The platoon being in danger of having its flank turned, what was left of it had to cleave a passage for itself in order to re-enter the fort.

"Come near me, boy; you who are from Dijon, if you get back safe from the war, you will tell my wife how I died."

The captain is at peace with his men and with his conscience as a leader, and his thoughts turn towards his home. These were his last words. From now onwards, until the death that comes a few hours later, he devotes all his strength to avoiding any outward sign of the ghastly wounds that he could not survive. 158

Already his name is rushing through the night, borne by a carrier-pigeon which flew off from the fort at three o'clock in the morning:

"The enemy is around us. I must honourably mention the gallant Captain Tabourot, of the 142nd, who has been very badly wounded; we are still holding out."

A few hours later, a second pigeon announces his death:

"Captain Tabourot of the 142nd died a glorious death, his wound being received while he was defending the north-eastern breach. I recommend him for the Legion of Honour."

This is only a part of the message; the rest refers to the operations.

Nevertheless, the Germans have reached the two open breaches, the one in the north-western double transverse gallery and the other in the north-eastern single transverse gallery. They try to force their way through it. At each entrance there is a hand-to-hand conflict. On the right they are at first pushed back. "Our bombs," says one of those who took part in the combat, "made gaps in their ranks, but reinforcements were continually coming up. Their dead and wounded formed shifting heaps, and, to add to the horror of it, these were cut and torn by splinters from our projectiles." 159

Fighting now proceeds in the passages which, from the transverse galleries, lead to the interior. Major Raynal has barricades put up consisting of sandbags got ready in anticipation.

Outside the battle is no less violent. Chevassu's battalion, of the 142nd Regiment, seems likely to find itself in a hazardous situation. The enemy, if he is checked to the west of the fort by the entrenchment R¹, which he is unable to seize, has contrived to insinuate himself between the curtain and the fort. He reaches the southern side. On the other hand, Damloup was captured at six or seven o'clock in the morning, and, by way of La Horgne ravine, fresh forces ascend to the onset. Chevassu's battalion, which has two companies in the fort (the 6th and the fragments of the 7th which Captain Tabourot was leading), is charged with the defence of the eastern side of the fort. It does indeed hold its ground at the Belfort and Montbéliard trenches, where the struggle becomes a hand-to-hand one. Second Lieutenant Huguenin, set upon by an enemy private, knocks him down, disarms him, and fights with his adversary's rifle. The Germans recoil, but return to the onslaught, in the afternoon, with unfixed bayonets. The men of the 142nd, on being reinforced by a company of the 53rd, receive them with cries of "Long live France!" 160

For all that, the battalion is in danger of having its flank turned. Its machine-gun sections change places and are pointed in three directions—in front, towards Damloup to the east, and to the west against the enemy, who is debouching to the south of the fort. The section commanders calmly indicate the objectives. Sergeant Narcisse, while standing near his machine-gun, is killed by a bullet that hits him right in the forehead. He was a gallant soldier who had been granted the Military Medal in the Champagne battle. Corporal Reveille takes his place, and shouts to his men, "Don't get flurried, I take it upon myself to clear away the Boches."

The observers in balloons signal to the north of the fort the arrival of more and more numerous troops, who burrow themselves in our old trenches to evade our curtain fire and to gain ground during the intervals. At noon, some forty men are seen upon the fort, the majority hidden in holes. At 3 P.M. the fort itself issues a bulletin:

"The enemy has gained possession of the north-eastern and north-western transverse galleries. I am pursuing the struggle in the inner passages. A large number of wounded and fugitives. Officers and men are all doing their duty. We shall fight to the bitter end."

At seven o'clock in the evening, the watchers on the posts of the Fleury redoubt signal that infantry details of several companies are at present marching up in file from the north to the south, at the north-western bend of Fort Vaux. They escalate the fort and vanish through the summit into the interior. While this is going on, other detachments glide along the trenches surrounding the fort. 161

And at two o'clock in the morning on June 3, Major Raynal sends this message by visual signalling:

"Situation unchanged. The enemy is pursuing his labours on top and round the earthworks. The fort is to be pounded by small ordnance. The enemy occupies our old first-line trenches in force and is strengthening them. He seems to have a trench armed with a machine-gun facing the south-west, not far from the ditch of the defile."

This machine-gun is not in the ditch of the defile, but on the very superstructure of the fort, where the enemy has managed to convey it, and whence he sweeps the southern slopes. It is impossible to dislodge him from the terreplein; the cupola for 75's is demolished, there is no cupola for machine-guns, and a fruitless attempt has been made to pass short rifles through the cracks in the observing stations; even these weapons

were too long, and could not be used for slaughtering the German infantrymen, who were only a few yards distant.

The southern front of the fort has been saved by the 5th and 8th Companies and the machine-gun section of Chevassu's battalion, reinforced on the morning of June 2 by the 11th Company of the 53rd Regiment, and in the evening by a battalion of the same regiment. This battalion was to counter-attack without delay, but when brought up close to its objective it has already been sorely tried by the curtain fire it has had to suffer on the way, and must limit itself to holding its ground, to reconstructing the demolished trenches, and to interposing itself among the reduced sections of the 142nd. 162

Accordingly, on the evening of the 2nd, the enemy is in the northern and western ditches. Partially held in check to the east and south, he is master of the two northern transverse galleries and tries to advance in the stairway. What is more, he has clambered on top, and, from there, searches the southern side with machine-gun fire. Any sortie becomes difficult, if not impossible. All the lines of communication are cut. Nothing is left but carrier-pigeons and signals. The garrison is huddled together in the barracks. It still has access to the observing stations and the single north-western transverse gallery, which has no opening towards the outside. Here they have succeeded in setting up a machine-gun to sweep the southern ditch.

"A large number of wounded and fugitives," said Major Raynal in his signal message. There is almost as much danger here as outside. The sight of dying men, so continuous and so close at hand, is likely to shake the morale of the garrison. Orders are transmitted more slowly in the crowded and littered corridors. Finally, if there is enough tinned meat and biscuits for all, the supply of water will soon give out. 163

THE FORT APPEALS

“Roland says: ‘I will blow a blast on my horn, and Charles, who is passing through the gorges, will hear it. I avow to you that the Franks will turn back.’

“Roland has put the horn to his lips. He grasps it firmly and blows with might and main. The mountains are high, and the sound goes on in long-drawn-out echoes. Those echoes were heard at a distance of thirty leagues. It comes to the ears of Charles and all his men. The king says: ‘Our troops are fighting.’

“Count Roland, with great difficulty, great effort, and great sorrow, blows his horn. The bright blood gushes forth from his mouth. Near his forehead his temple is shattered. But the sound of his horn carries so far! Charles hears it as he passes through the gorges; Naimes hears it.... And the king says: ‘I hear Roland’s horn. He would not blow it if there were no fight going forward.’

“Count Roland’s mouth is bleeding. Near his forehead the temples are shattered. In pain and sorrow he blows the horn. Charles and his Frenchmen hear it. And Charles said: ‘That horn is long-winded.’ Duke Naimes answers: ‘It is Roland who is in pain.’” 165

* * * * *

Are the appeals of the horn that shook the Pyrenees more than ten centuries ago more moving than the silent appeals of Fort Vaux, which, above the enemy’s lines, communicates to the High Command the details of its death-agony and its resolve to hold out?

On the morning of June 3 a swift-flying pigeon reaches the dovecote.

“Messenger, what are your tidings? The fort, since it can send you, still lives. Tell us if it can endure a siege until the hour we had fixed for its deliverance.”

In vain does it look under its wing for the despatch that it should carry. Badly fastened, it has fallen off on the way. The bird has been let loose to no purpose. How many of its mates are there left in the fort?

On the 4th, about midday, the dovecote is visited by a poor wounded pigeon, which drags itself laboriously up to its resting-place. This one has not made a useless journey. Here is the message that it brings:

“We are still holding out, but are subjected to a very dangerous gas and smoke attack. It is urgent that we should be extricated; let us have immediate visual signalling communication by way of Souville, which does not answer our appeals. This is my last pigeon.” 166

The last pigeon! The telephone wires have long since been cut, and the signals are not working. The last pigeon: it is the final connecting link with the fort. The fort is now cut off from the outer world. No flapping of wings will ever again convey its messages. It will remain dumb if they do not contrive to restore the visual signalling connections. Nothing more will be known of its career. At the military dovecote a soldier has put the bird on his hand—the bird, which, like some scout, was wounded on active service.

The afternoon of June 4 passes, but the communications are not restored. It is impossible to obtain a signal from the fort. Probably there has been no means of registering the position of its sighting gear. On the 5th, however, at three o’clock in the morning, the headquarters of the division see two men arrive. They have issued from the fort—nothing more than that! They belong to the searchlight section. As there were no more pigeons and the signals were not working, they had to come to restore the communications. That is as plain as a pikestaff.

“So the fort is not encircled?”

“They are on top with a machine-gun, but there is no one at the southern exit.”

“That exit is stopped up.”

“You jump from a window into the ditch.” 167

Others have made the attempt, but have not succeeded in escaping. These two do not furnish many details. For the time being they are too much absorbed in other matters, for they are professionals. Will the fort hold out? Life is no laughing matter in the interior on account of liquid fire and thirst. Then, too, the place is overcrowded: more than 600 men. Yet the morale is good. Up there, they will try once more to interchange messages.

At half-past seven in the morning Fort Vaux is no longer isolated. It speaks and receives an answer....

“The mountains are lofty, massive, and dark, the valleys deep, the torrents swift. Behind and in front of the army the trumpets ring, and they all seem to reply to the horn....”

But when Charlemagne’s trumpets ring, Roland is already no more. Imagine him rising up in face of death to listen to those blasts!

Fort Vaux informs the High Command as to the position of the enemy. Its message rings with hope:

“The enemy is working at the western part of the fort to construct a mine-chamber and blow up the vault. Strike quickly with artillery.”

Ten minutes later it becomes insistent:

“Where are you?”

At eight o’clock, having had no reply, or having been unable to decipher it, it confesses the agony of its 168

suspense:

"We do not hear your artillery. The enemy is plying us with gas and liquid fire attacks. Our situation is as bad as can be."

At last, at nine o'clock, this signal is transmitted to it: "Don't lose heart. We shall soon attack."

Roland, as he was dying, heard Charlemagne's trumpets. They are so distant, but their music is so sweet. He starts up, he listens, he motions to death to wait awhile. But the French must make haste! Already the shades are closing in around him and his speech grows thick.

All day the fort waits. When night falls, it shows signs of impatience. Will not this coming night be the last? will it not be wrapped in its lethal winding-sheet? The opening of the message that it sends is unintelligible, the rest already has the tone of a funeral oration—it speaks of its defenders in the past tense:

"... preceding day. It is essential that I should be delivered this evening and that a fresh supply of water should reach me at once; I am very near the end of my tether. In any case, the troops—officers, N.C.O.'s, and men alike—all did their duty up to the last."

Is this not a final farewell? Is it not the death-rattle that precedes the end? And now, amid the formidable bombardment which from this side and that overwhelms the hill with iron and flame, one of our searchlight stations gets hold of these fragmentary signals: 169

"... 53 ... wounded ... aspires ... losses.... You will intervene before we are utterly exhausted. Long live France!"

Roland has raised himself up. He is calling. He stretches out his arms towards "sweet France."

For the second time the echo of Charlemagne's trumpets has been borne as far as the vale of Roncevaux.

For the second time the Souville headquarters reply to Fort Vaux: "Your message received. Don't lose heart!"

* * * * *

Don't lose heart! Will this wreck of a fort have any heart left after the three days it has just lived through? Not for a single moment has the storm ceased to shake the plateau. To the left, it wreaks its fury upon the entrenchment R¹, which has the audacity to resist; to the right, upon the Damloup battery, which holds the promontory and sweeps La Horgne bottom and the outlet from the village, and upon the immediate approaches, which are defended to the west by La Courtine and to the right by the Belfort and Montbéliard trenches. The enemy follows up the general attacks with local attacks, in order either to carry the whole position at a blow, or to make us waver at one point, against which he can then concentrate his onrush. He plunges into the abyss with three divisions, which he will even have to reinforce with a brigade of the Alpine corps. He lays siege to the fort from three sides—he is around it, above it, and inside it. Yet the fort doggedly refuses to give in. Cut off from the outer world for a whole day, it has no sense of being forsaken. Outside there, it feels certain, they are working on its behalf. Inside it sets up more and more barricades. Step by step it defends the stairways, and foot by foot the corridors. It faces heavy artillery, machine-guns, grenades, liquid fire, smoke-bombs, thirst, poisoning, intoxication, stench, putrefaction. It will go to the utmost limit of human endurance, the limit that is extended still further when one thinks that it has been reached, goes beyond all anticipation, and verges on the impossible. Among its cramped stones and under its echoing vaults the terrible sacrifice will be accomplished in full measure. 170

A second lieutenant of the 142nd, an officer in Chevassu's battalion, fighting on the plateau outside the fort, described later to a comrade those days of horror: "Everywhere there was nothing but fire and dust, and in this pandemonium a few soldiers on the watch prevented the Boche hordes from passing. Their attacks were renewed every day, striking now at this point, now at that; never did we yield an inch of ground so long as there was a man to defend it. I will not speak to you of all that we went through. No water, no revictualing; those who went out to bring us supplies never got back. The only thing that we were not short of was munitions. We are terribly weakened, but happy to have done our duty, to have had our share in preventing the Boches from taking Verdun—Verdun, which their Emperor promised to them, and which they will never gain.... They would be compelled to pass over our bodies and over the corpses of all their comrades whom we have slain.... They attacked us from three sides at once, but they never got us in their claws...." 171

During the day of June 3 the enemy seeks to turn to account the capture of Damloup and make his way round the fort to the east. Details of the 142nd and 53rd Regiments hold him in check, and, assuming the offensive, even force him to draw back.

Whether for army, army corps, division, or brigade, the High Command supports the conflict that stretches from Fumin Wood to La Gayette bottom, pours fresh troops into the firing line, and prepares counter-attacks. There is a counter-attack on Damloup from the morning of June 2; at any rate this rescues the battery. There is a counter-attack on the fort from the evening of the 2nd, made by a battalion of the 53rd Regiment, which has to run the gauntlet of murderous curtain fires and can only reinforce the troops of the sector. There is a counter-attack on June 3 upon our left, to recapture the line of the entrenchments and come to the aid of R¹, which still holds out. And the balloon observers never cease from signalling the arrival of enemy columns, which are coming up the slopes to swell the number of the assailants. 172

Connection with the fort must be established, that is beyond all question. Comrades are there, waiting for the hour of their deliverance to strike: "In the fort we have French comrades," the army telephones; "they must be released from their present plight. First and foremost, we must get into touch with them. This is the duty of all alike—a sacred duty." General Tatin, who is in command of the sector, will personally direct the operation.

Yet the enemy does not leave off attacking, and he floods his objective with an endless deluge of projectiles. On the 4th, at two o'clock in the morning, an attack upon the fort is started from the north-east and the south-west. It begins by making progress, then it is checked by the machine-guns. At daybreak an aeroplane flies

above the fort and comes down so low that it casts a shadow over all this chaos. Will the daring bird let itself be wounded, like the last pigeon? It darts through the midst of shells and bullets like a salamander in the fire, and behold, it is now rising again and going away! It has fulfilled its mission: on the superstructure of the fort it has registered the position of the machine-guns. A few minutes later our 75's and our 155's crush to pulp everything that the Germans had installed on the upper part of the earthwork. At ten o'clock in the morning, the weather being clear, our airmen report that the fort trenches have been entirely razed and that not a man is left upon the top of the fort.

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On the following night the enemy once more begins to construct his works and his machine-gun shelters upon the superstructure. In this way he blocks up the southern exit. He tries to make it impossible to sally forth or to communicate with the outer world. Reconnoitring parties—as soon as they were suggested, the number of volunteers was so large that a selection had to be made—have tried to find a way of getting into the fort. None of them was successful. To compensate for this, some have managed to go out. Two signallers, we know already, crossed the lines on the early evening of June 4. Some hours later, during the night, Cadet Buffet, two N.C.O.'s, and three men of the 7th Company of the 142nd leave the fort in their turn. The problem is less baffling for those going out than for those coming in. The former merely have to elude the Boche machine-guns, whereas the latter have to elude ours as well. The fort, in order not to be invested, must keep the southern ditch and the approaches. Every shadow that draws near is suspect. The difficult thing is to convince the sentries that one is a friend.

"Don't lose courage, we shall soon attack," was the signal received, and the High Command speeds up the preparations for a fresh attack with more numerous effectives. It cannot be set going until June 6 at two o'clock in the morning.

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* * * * *

We must now retrace our steps in order to know what has been going on in the interior of the fort.

From the morning of June 2 onwards the fort is swarming with Boches as the mane of a lion swarms with parasites. The Boche is in front, on the flanks, on top, and even inside, for he has rushed through the two gaps in the transverse gallery and is trying to bore his way through into the heart of the place. Major Raynal has introduced some order and system into the garrison, whose numbers have been unduly enlarged by the wounded and the overflow from neighbouring details. It ought not to consist of more than the 6th Company of the 142nd, the machine-gun company, and the fort engineers. The 7th and 8th Companies of the 142nd, which defended the right-hand transverse passages, have reinforced it with more than a hundred rifles; the 7th Company of the 101st, which defended the left-hand transverse passages, has brought some fifty. A machine-gun company of the 53rd has been left behind. With the wounded, this makes a total of over six hundred men. Six hundred soldiers who have to be supplied with water, when the cistern has run dry! Six hundred soldiers, among them wounded men, wasted with fever, who beg for a drop to drink! Nevertheless the garrison is divided up into reliefs, look-out men and rest units, and the distribution of boxes of tinned food, biscuits, chocolate, and even brandy is carried out with regularity. The water ration, which on May 31 was two pints, is reduced on June 2 to a pint and three-quarters. It will be cut down to a pint, then to barely half a pint—and under what conditions! From June 4 the commandant will be forced to take a decided step.

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As we have seen, the enemy is at the transverse galleries on the morning of June 2. In spite of his losses, he manages to press the defenders hard, and they beat a retreat. The revolving gun of the double transverse gallery has been put out of action by a shell. The machine-gun that guards the entrance has been smashed by a bomb. The defence is driven back into the interior. A barricade is at once set up under the breach, but from the outside the Germans command it and overpower it with grenades. It has to be withdrawn to the foot of the stairway that leads up to the observing station. Another one is constructed at the top of the stairway. This latter one will hold out until the 4th. The same manœuvre takes place at the single transverse gallery at the north-eastern angle. The barricades keep the enemy back in front of the grating of the corridor, facing the lavatories, which can still be used.

"In the semi-darkness of the fort," writes a survivor of the 142nd, "the struggle goes on. The enemy tried to exhaust us by depriving us of sleep and condemning us to thirst. The atmosphere was heavy and tainted. At every moment some part of the barricades blew up, and the grenade duel was resumed. We would not give in. But the air grew hot with all these explosives; the smoke and the stench made it almost impossible to breathe, yet the fighting went on all the time. We had installed machine-guns, which blocked up the gangways and did splendid work. It was then that the Germans, having contrived to blow up a barricade, attacked us with jets of flame and liquid fire. The heat, and the fact that we were taken unawares, caused us to waver for a moment. But Lieutenant Bazy, who was there with his machine-gun, darted forward, and so quick was he, that before we had recovered from our amazement he was standing upright in the middle of the gangways and fighting the Germans single-handed with bombs. The flames came up to his shoes, his left arm was bandaged, being already wounded, but little did he care. As he could not speak, on account of that black acrid smoke, he encouraged us by his example. Accordingly we shook off our stupor and went forward in rotation to stand by his side. At last the flame-throwers were quenched. He had succeeded in checking the attack and was beginning to go up again on to the barricade, when the Boches started sending us petards, which knocked us all down with the sandbags on top of us. I was quite convinced that my back was broken, and I only just had enough strength left to put my mask on, as I detected the whiff of poison gas. A private extricated me and carried me to the infirmary while the struggle recommenced. The Germans discharged gases whose heavy fumes hung about the gangways. Despite all their devilish contrivances, their flame-jets, their gases, and their petards, they made no advance. It was magnificent. They shouted to us in French: 'Surrender, or you will all be killed,' and we answered by slinging bombs full at their faces."

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"It was magnificent!" How comical is that outcry, in the thick of the fray!

It was on June 4, about midday, that this liquid fire attack took place. The Germans made it through the breach in the western passage. The fort was filled with a "black and acrid" smoke. In order to breathe, the

garrison had to remove the armour-plating from the barrack windows. The flames came up to the corridor leading into the rooms. Some soldiers even jumped into the ditch in order to recover their breath. The machine-guns installed on the fort had been destroyed in the morning by our artillery. The curtain fire cut off the exits a little farther south. Without disorder, the troops retired into the interior, but the windows had to be closed again. The enemy swung up sacks of bombs with delay-action fuses, which he sent through the openings, and tried to blow up the armour-platings.

Nevertheless, he made progress in the north-eastern single transverse gallery. We had to retire some yards in the corridor, but not beyond the lavatories. The sick and the wounded had to be looked after on the spot. The stretcher-bearers took advantage of the destruction of the enemy machine-guns installed on the fort, and were thus able to carry corpses away in the western ditch and to cleanse the infirmary of all its filth. From the ensuing night onwards this task was beyond their powers. The dead had to remain with the living. An unspeakable horror stalked through these dim vaults, where, in a thick, pestilent atmosphere, a sleepless, nerve-racked, thirst-maddened garrison, crowded into a narrow space, refused to abandon the struggle. 178

It needed but one man to turn aside the flame attack: Lieutenant Bazy, straight and upright like a god, amid the smoke, in the middle of the corridor, his left arm in a sling, his right arm hurling bombs, barring the way to the foe. It needed but the commandant, a few officers and N.C.O.'s, a handful of picked men, to ensure, amid all these sufferings, the maintenance of a single idea, a single aim: to hold out.

The fort is cut off from the rest of the world, its last pigeon was sent off on the previous day, and its signals have not been transmitted. But when night has fallen, two signallers leap into the ditch: they are going to restore the communications.

Next day the fort's appeal is heard.

III

THE SORTIE

On June 4 the water ration was half a pint. Half a pint for men who have fought and are fighting in the haze of bombs, of flame-throwers, of asphyxiating gases! Half a pint for fever patients, tossing uneasily at the overcrowded dressing-station, amid the dead and the dying! Piteous wails and entreaties are heard on all sides. Silence, however, is instantly restored when Major Raynal puts in an appearance. Half a pint, and no more. Who was it that asked for a larger ration? Why, as things are, half a pint is a great deal! Even the wounded resign themselves. Each man swallows his grief, having no saliva left.

The commandant has taken a census of the garrison. All who are not ordinary members of it will have to leave the fort. Under cover of night the sortie will be attempted, either by the southern ditch—the windows of the barracks will in that case be blown up—or by the south-western transverse gallery, which is not in the enemy's hands.

The order is a formal one. Those who have to go, endeavour by the light of day to gauge the difficulties of the enterprise: are there machine-guns and look-out men on the fort? How far off are the German curtain fires, and at what points are they directed? The sortie is exceedingly risky, but the French cannot be very far away. 180

The first who jump into the ditch, at half-past ten at night, are volunteers: the two signallers of whom I have spoken, who are going to restore communications. With beating hearts their comrades listen: the noise of the fall, then silence, no rifle-shots, no rockets, merely the usual bombardment. Their range has not been found.

The detachments of the 101st and the 142nd, whose departure has been settled upon, now fall in.

"Go," says Major Raynal to them, "and if you escape, tell our comrades how we stand and how we are resisting."

The two groups salute. It is the moment for the sortie. It is half-past one in the morning, and it seems as if the shower of "heavies" were growing less violent. Cadet Buffet is in charge of the detachment from the 142nd. He makes use of an uncovered gap at the south-eastern corner, and is the first to descend, followed by a scout and the quartermaster's corporal. The company proceeds behind them, leaving intervals so as not to attract attention. A pebble has rolled down, and the German look-out men, from the top of the fort, are at once on the alert, send up rockets and fire their rifles. Almost at the same moment their artillery opens an appalling curtain fire at the immediate approaches to the fort. The cadet has got through, with a small group at his heels. They reach the French lines, which are quite close at hand. The first is received by a rifle-shot, which misses him. He makes himself recognized, not without difficulty. Explanations follow, a warm welcome is given, while the bombardment rages at the rear of the little group. Others are on the way; our comrades must take care not to shoot at them. They are awaited, but after a long interval only two or three arrive. The rest have been unable to cross the zone of death. 181

A private of 142nd, wounded in the flame attack, gives the following account of the expedition:

"When the C.O. had finished speaking, I saluted and made my way to the dormer window, from which I had to jump a depth of three yards. I passed my hand over my stiffened limbs. Then, without further hesitation, I let myself go. I certainly felt acute pain. I heard rifle-shots aimed at me, and I flung myself down and shammed dead, for the Boches were still watching. I don't know how long I stayed like this. At any rate, after a good minute, I began to crawl on my belly over a lot of corpses. Gently, gliding from one corpse to another, I managed to get over the ditch and cross the line. I could scarcely breathe under the endless bombardment, and at last I succeeded, I don't know how, in reaching a dressing-station. I don't remember the end of the adventure, but I woke up in hospital!" 182

The upshot of the sortie was not very fortunate. It had to be undertaken all over again. On June 5, at sunrise, there was another attempt and another set-back. The day slipped away, a day still more cruel than any that had preceded it. The struggle at the barricades began again, with grenades and flame-jets. Water was now distributed only drop by drop. The wounded implored their comrades to put them out of their misery. Quicklime had to be thrown upon the dead, who could not be carried away. The hardships were more severe than ever, but a gleam of hope had appeared. The fort was no longer isolated: the two signallers who went off the previous evening had succeeded in their task. When the fort spoke, it was heard, and the reply came: "Courage! we shall soon attack." The defenders are not forgotten. Their deliverance is at hand. One day more, and relief will come. One day—how long it is, how hard to live through! Still, it will pass, like the others.

The numbers will have to be cut down. The contingents of the 101st and 142nd, whose presence is not indispensable, once more receive the order to depart. During the night, more than a hundred men succeed in getting away. Here is the story of one of them, since a selection must be made: one cannot recite the names and fortunes of the whole hundred. One shall be chosen, for there is no better way of making the reader realize such tragedies than to lay one's hand on a human heart and feel its beats. 183

Stretcher-bearer Roger Vanier, of the 101st Regiment, received the Military Medal for his conduct at Sabot Wood on February 26, 27, and 28, 1915, the official report being as follows:

"Gave proof of heroic courage and self-sacrifice. Worked for three days and three nights without taking a rest. Went several times under enemy fire to look for wounded between the French and German trenches, and brought them in. At the same time identified several who were killed. Won universal admiration from the battalion to which he showed such whole-hearted devotion. Was registered for non-combatant service at the mobilization, but asked to be sent to the front."

General Joffre decorated him personally on March 25, 1915, at Courtisols.

In the Champagne battle, on September 21, he is mentioned in army corps orders:

"Seeing some comrades hesitate to go out of the trench for the attack, he took off his Red Cross armlet, jumped up on the parapet and shouted 'Forward!' He was instantly hit in the leg by a bullet.

"He belongs to the 1916 class: of middle height, rather delicate in health, with a tanned complexion, a faint shadow of a moustache, his face frank, eager and all aglow, as it were, with the fire of his eyes. 'When there is any danger,' he says, 'I no longer know myself; I have to go.' And he goes. He comes of a humble family at Montfort L'Amaury. One of his brothers, a school teacher, a corporal-telephonist in the 146th Regiment, was killed on March 2 at Douaumont; his leg broken by a shell, he was carried to the Les Fontaines ravine, where he died shortly afterwards. His body remained on the spot. The stretcher-bearer of the 101st, coming in his turn to the Vaux district, might well have found himself face to face with the corpse when he went to look for water in the ravine. Before the war he had been a valet. But since he has served his country and lost his brother, his only desire, after the war, is to enter the service of God instead of the service of death."

Who is it that moulded such hearts as these? Vanier always carries about with him a letter from his mother. The worthy dame of Montfort L'Amaury writes to him on February 29: her spirit is resolute, but her spelling is a trifle shaky:

"I know that your poor brother is at Verdun, that is to say at the post of honour, for it is a fine thing for the French Army to hold up that hord of savages there. How happy our Lou must be to see the war outside the trenches! Oh, how glorious it is. I haven't heard from him yet, but I suppose he can't find an opportunity of writing. I always feel firmly convinced that nothing will happen to him. And you, my darling boy, you must have a lot to do, be very careful, my precious, though, of course, be brave, more and more brave than ever. Save all those poor wounded lying there in the blood and snow. My blood boils at having to stay here while there is so much to do down there, picking up all those poor dears. Why don't they want women in a place where they are so necessary? Ah, yes, it is the business of mothers to pick up all those poor children and speak soothing words to them. Well, my dear boy, you must take the place of a mother, and do everything, even imposible things, so as to be of some use to them, yes, of great use. I see you walking, running, crawling to look for all these wounded. I should like to slip in and come along with you, laddie, for I feel that I ought to be by your side. Cheer up, cheer up, I know that it is the beginning of the end, a glorious end for all who have fought in the cause of justice...."

These mothers of France—are they not all at the front with all their children, bleeding from all their wounds, but thrusting them forward, in the path of duty, for their country's sake?

Stretcher-bearer Vanier has been at the fort since June 1, doing duty at the dressing-station with his comrades, under the command of the admirable doctors Gaillard, Conte, and Boisramé (I think there is one other whom I have forgotten). At all costs, then, the garrison must be delivered. The sortie of the evening of June 4 has proved a failure. The 5th is a gruelling day; at its close the defenders themselves are amazed at the fact that they are still withstanding the foe. What will befall on the morrow? It is better not to wait for it. What is left of the 101st and of the 7th and 8th Companies of the 142nd will try to get away.

Vanier attaches himself to the men of the 101st. They are thirty-four in number, and among them there are some wounded. The order is to leave the fort at no matter what cost; every man is to look after himself, not troubling about the others. During the day each of them has registered the direction he will take. Vanier, at half-past 10 P.M., is the first to jump into the ditch, accompanied by a comrade. Both crawl up the side of the ditch and, once on top, start running along at full speed.

"*Wer da?*" (Who goes there?) "*Halte-là!*" (Halt there!)

They stop and throw themselves into a shell-hole. Vanier thinks he has heard the German words "*Wer da?*" (Who goes there?). He loads his revolver and whispers to his companion:

"Don't come with me, chum. I don't want to be a prisoner; I'd sooner be killed."

"But it's a Frenchman," answers the other.

They draw near and make themselves recognized. At barely 200 yards from the fort they have come upon a detachment of the 298th. They are taken to the rear, they are given wine to drink—wine, when they have drunk no water for thirty-six hours!—they are examined.

Out of thirty-five only five miss the roll-call. Vanier goes to rejoin his colonel at the rest billets, where he finds his regiment once more.

"I promote you to corporal," said the colonel, embracing him.

That is how Stretcher-bearer Vanier won his stripes.

IV

SOME ONE RE-ENTERS THE FORT

Cadet Buffet, of the 141st Regiment, who assisted Captain Tabourot when the latter was dying, and who left the fort during the night of June 4-5 with a detachment of his company, also belongs to the 1916 class. He is the son of a working man. When quite a child he lost his mother, and was brought up at an orphanage. He proved an excellent pupil, gained his Bachelor's degree in classics, and was being trained for the teaching profession when the war caught him in its grasp. The would-be schoolmaster is short and slim. He wears a small beard, and his face is scarred with the marks of bomb-splinters and flame-jets. When he arrives at divisional headquarters his eyes are almost haggard, and he seems to be in that state of agitation which precedes a nervous breakdown. Nevertheless, in dealing with the combats in the interior of the fort, with the German field-works, with the German positions, he furnishes such accurate reports and draws such shrewd conclusions that the Divisional Commander sends him to the headquarters of the sector. 189

Arrived there, he resumes his account and his explanations. The General listens to him, watches him, then orders him to take a rest. The young man, at the end of his tether, goes to bed. A few hours later, having washed, shaved, and had a meal, he already looks a different being.

Once more he goes before the General. Matters are urgent; a serious problem has to be solved. An attack has been arranged to relieve the fort. It will be started in a few hours. Major Raynal may contribute towards its success. Let him signal, if he can, the position of the enemy machine-guns on the fort, let him thus direct the artillery fire during the night; he will help in the operation. While the work is going on elsewhere, let him detain the enemy in the interior passages. But how is one to get into touch with him? Several times, reconnoitring and water fatigue parties have tried to do so. They have not been able to cross the gorge: they have been brought to a halt or mown down by the German curtain fires, or perhaps by the machine-gun which the commandant himself has had installed to guard the southern ditch. One who is thoroughly acquainted with the fort, who knows its ins and outs, might possibly carry out so hazardous a mission. Cadet Buffet is the only one who possesses these qualifications.

"I'll go," says the lad, without letting the General finish. 190

The General, whose only son has been killed, beams at him with a paternal look.

"This is not an order, my friend"—he must have been very nearly saying "my son"—"what I ask of you is something more than your duty. To get away from the fort was a fine performance. I don't *order* you to go back there."

"I'll go," repeats Buffet stoutly.

"Of course you'll be rewarded: the Legion of Honour or the Military Medal."

"Oh no!" protests the cadet; "I'll go for nothing."

A staff officer asks for the privilege of accompanying him.

"I would rather go alone," he says. "When we get there, things will be easier if I am alone. Besides, I want entire freedom of movement."

The Chief of Staff hands him his orders. He reads them, rereads them, imprints them in his memory and returns the paper, for he must not carry anything away with him.

Night comes, and he is taken by motor-car as far as motor-cars dare go. He shakes hands with the officer who is with him, then lightly runs off into the darkness, where his outline is soon lost.

It has been arranged that, if he re-enters the fort, the searchlight will end up its next signals with "Long live France!" 191

At 11.20 P.M. the visual message transmitted from Fort Vaux, after an opening which the bombardment made it impossible to understand, contains this phrase: "You will intervene before we are utterly exhausted. Long live France!"

THE LAST WORDS

The effort to extricate Vaux has not been relaxed for a moment, but the German attacks and ours succeed each other, dash against each other, anticipate each other, cancel each other. Neither side contrives to forge ahead. On the right, the enemy is unable to debouch from Damloup, and spends his strength in vain against the battery. On the left, his way is blocked in Fumin Wood, and R¹ continues to withstand him. The battle drags along in the hard-pressed, flame-ravaged, starving fort, where the energy of a handful of men makes the resistance seem likely to last for ever. But we cannot retake the external earthworks, which bristle with machine-guns. The whole tableland and its slopes are swept to such an extent that the ground is like a mass of cinders.

In the course of the morning of June 6, we might have fancied for a moment that we once more held the whole fort and that the garrison was delivered. An attack had been prepared, and was to open at two o'clock. At four, a German pioneer of the 27th Regiment was brought into divisional headquarters, scared out of his wits, his uniform in rags. He was found in our lines, without weapons, wild-eyed, running breathlessly. On being examined, he stated that he had escaped from Fort Vaux when the French surrounded it. 193

The attack was to approach the fort by its three fronts: towards the western front, a company of the 238th; towards the gorge, another company of the same regiment and a section of engineers, commanded by Major Mathieu; finally, towards the eastern front, two companies of the 321st, commanded by Major Favre. The signal was to be given at two o'clock in the morning by a series of rockets.

On the right, the two companies of the 321st, vigorously inspired by their leader, reach the ditch of the counterscarp in two waves; they are received by a curtain fire of bombs and machine-guns. Their ranks thinned by the fire of these machine-guns, which crown the parapet of the escarp, the first bomb-throwers fall back. In their turn, the two waves unroll themselves successively. Their leaders, however, are almost all struck, and that almost at once: Major Favre, killed by a bullet in his head; Lieutenant Ray, Second Lieutenant Rives, seriously wounded; Lieutenant Bellot, wounded but revived; Second Lieutenant Morel, killed; Second Lieutenant Billaud, killed; Second Lieutenant Desfougères, wounded; Lieutenant Aymé, wounded. What a roll of honour, what a book of martyrs! Robbed of so many officers, the troops waver. Captain and Adjutant Baume takes over the command of the battalion, restores order in the ranks, appoints the subordinate commanders, and holds himself in readiness to thrust back a counter-assault which, in face of the attitude of his men, does not come off after all. The scouts keep the regiment and the brigade posted as to the situation. However violent the curtain fires may be, they scour the volcanic country, the survivors taking the place of the wounded or the dead. 194

Farther to the left, the attack of the 328th on the western front and the gorge has met with similar obstacles. For a few moments it has contrived to encircle the fort, but has not been able to hold its ground. It has even been impeded by the fire of our artillery upon the superstructure, to demolish the enemy machine-guns placed there. This attack, too, has had to fall back on the positions from which it set out.

With what throbbing hearts have the various phases of the struggle been followed from the interior of the fort! To feel that one's comrades are approaching, that they are there, that they are bringing deliverance, and then that they are shipwrecked when almost in harbour—what thrills of hope, and what a disappointment! At twenty past six in the morning the following message, half of it undecipherable, is transmitted from the fort: 195

"... without having attained the objectives. Enemy machine-guns on top of the fort: these ought to have been shelled..."

Where are they, then, these mysterious machine-guns which our artillery cannot manage to demolish? In what hidden lurking-place, under what shelter?

This is an account of the battle so far as observation of it has been possible from the fort. A few minutes later the fort speaks again. This time its words ring with the grandeur of honourable achievement, and the sadness of grim resignation.

Reopen the *Song of Roland*, at the verses where Roland, victorious but grievously wounded, journeys through the vale of Roncevaux in search of the peers of France, brings back their bodies one by one, and lays them at the feet of Archbishop Turpin, who will give them the last blessing:

"Roland departs. Alone he scours the battlefield, goes up and down the valley, up and down the mountains. He finds Gérin and his comrade Gérier, he finds Bérenger and Otton, he finds Anséis and Samson, he finds old Gérard, Count of Roussillon. He carries the barons one by one, comes back with them to the archbishop, and lays them in a row at his feet...."

"Roland returns and searches all over the plain. He has found his friend Olivier, he has pressed him tightly to his heart, and he returns as best he can to the archbishop...." 196

After the failure of the final attempt at deliverance, Fort Vaux does not know how many hours or minutes it still has to live. In a message resembling a last will and testament, the Commandant musters the names of his dauntless comrades-in-arms, pays a tribute to his men, and offers them to the high command. At half-past six his signals transmit the following message:

"I have no more water, in spite of the ration system of the last few days. It is essential that I should be extricated and that a fresh supply of water should reach me without delay. I think our resources have nearly touched rock-bottom. The troops—officers, N.C.O.'s and men,—in all circumstances, have done their duty to the bitter end.

"I mention: Lieutenants De Roquette and Girard of the 53rd, Bazy, Albagnac of the 142nd, all wounded; Alirol, Largnes, Cadet Tuzel, Sergeant-Major Brune of the 142nd, Lieutenants De Nizet and Rebattet, Artillery,

Lieutenant Roy and Cadet Bérard of the 2nd Engineers, Corporal Bonnin of the 142nd.

“Losses: 7 killed, among them Captain Tabourot of the 142nd and Lieutenant Tournery of the 101st.

“Seventy-six wounded, among them 4 officers and the auxiliary doctors Conte and Gaillard.

“I hope that you will once more intervene with vigour before we are utterly exhausted.”

The chief's duty is fulfilled. He has forgotten nothing but himself.

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After this the fort maintains silence. For the whole day of June 6 the visual signalling posts, on the watch, will not register a single message. The fort retires within itself to face all the suffering piled on suffering: the barrages, the bombs, the flames and the gas and the suffocation, the horror of unspeakable sights and smells, and, above all, thirst, the thirst that makes men howl like wolves, and lacerates their tongues and their lips.

Is it dead, is it alive? Is it captured, is it still free? The outside world no longer knows. The longing to know keeps the whole army in suspense. This longing is contagious at a distance. Like the signals, it flashes to the end of the country, to the end of the world. In sober truth, the whole earth awaits with intense eagerness the upshot of the drama of Vaux. And it is the miracle of the defence, and that alone, that has aroused this great thrill of admiration and anxiety.

Yet the fort is not forsaken. The whole army is concerned with working its salvation. Without delay, a new offensive is planned. A regiment of Zouaves and a regiment of colonial infantry, formed into a composite brigade, are brought up into the neighbourhood. As soon as methodical preparations will allow of it, they will be drafted into the line.

The enemy is seized with no less determination. Amazed at the protracted nature of the struggle, he seeks to overpower the defence at any price. At any price? What an exorbitant price he has already paid for each square yard of the tableland slopes! Our observing-stations signal that the German infantrymen are coming up in column of companies to storm Fort Vaux. It is half-past 7 P.M. Once more the tornado is let loose. The artillery rages over the whole chaotic scene.

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And the Commander-in-Chief's headquarters, at half-past 8 P.M., sends to the army headquarters the following telegram, which is to be transmitted to the fort by visual signalling:

“The Commander-in-Chief wishes to express to the commandant of Fort Vaux, and the commandant of the garrison, as well as to their troops, his satisfaction at their superb resistance to the repeated onslaughts of the foe.

JOFFRE.”

Amid the lightning flashes from batteries and rockets, amid the uproar of the storm that makes the hills tremble, the message is put through. The fort, however, does not reply. Red rockets in sheaves are descried above it. Is it dead or alive? Is it taken, or still free?

At 9 P.M. the voice of the Commander-in-Chief is heard once more, drowning the hurricane of fire and steel:

“Major Raynal is appointed Commander of the Legion of Honour.”

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To transmit this order, the impossible has to be achieved. It is the express desire of the supreme commander. In vain is Vaux summoned by signals of all kinds—Vaux no longer replies. Suddenly, at daybreak on the 7th, at 3.50 A.M., Vaux awakes and issues an appeal. The signalling posts make out these three words: “Don't leave us.” “Don't leave us”—the cry of a dying man holding the hand of one he loves. After that, nothing more. Fort Vaux will not speak again.

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BOOK V

THE DÉNOUEMENT

I

THE GERMAN ACCOUNT

On June 7, at ten to four in the morning, Fort Vaux was still breathing.

A German account of its last agonies and its death—doctored, no doubt, to suit the German public, but nevertheless paying a tribute of respect to the defenders—was published in the *Breisgauer Zeitung* of June 16, 17, and 18. The first part is dated June 4, the second June 7. It is signed by one of the war correspondents admitted to the Great General Headquarters, Kurt von Reden, but it is dated from “the Great General Headquarters of the attacking troops,” and it is easy to guess from certain details that it was revised, if not actually written, by the Staff. Here is the complete text of the enemy version:

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PART I

“GENERAL HEADQUARTERS OF THE ATTACKING TROOPS
NORTH-EAST OF VAUX, *June 4.*”

“On June 2, at four o’clock in the morning, the four attacking companies were drawn up in a semicircle round Fort Vaux, at about 100 yards’ distance; at one swoop they pushed forward even to the ditch, which, 10 yards broad and 5 deep, encloses the whole earthwork, in the form of an irregular trapezoid, within its sheer walls built of large square stones. Across the appalling curtain fire of the French we had only been able to convey a part of our war material up to the heights of the fort: flame-throwers, hand-grenades, axes, and wire-cutters.

“In consequence of the long bombardment with heavy guns, the fort, though very massively built, was no longer capable of defending the surrounding space effectively; but the dug-outs, hollowed out deep in the rocks and covered with reinforced concrete, had held out. The flanking transverse passages of the fort, too, were still factors to be reckoned with. Accordingly the first problem was to make their artillery and machine-guns harmless; for these, with their raking fire, churned up the bottom of the ditch, and prevented us from crossing and reaching the interior of the fort. Each of the two breastworks in front showed an open breach, caused by very heavy projectiles, in the gigantic blocks of concrete of which they were formed. The damage was repaired, up to a point, by sandbags; and, to protect the breach, they had placed there a machine-gun which might be able to operate towards the glacis. The principal obstacle, however, was still the guns of the transverse passages, which from their narrow concrete embrasures could sweep the short line of the ditches with a pitiless fire. Access to either of the breastworks was impeded by the fire of a 37 mm. revolving gun, a 55 mm. gun, and by two machine-guns. Not a cat could have passed through.

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“First of all, the machine-gun, which at the very breach prevented our approach, was silenced by hand-grenades. Then the pioneers crept right up to the upper edge of the escarped wall, above the western transverse passage, set up the flame-throwers, and, from above, with the aid of a crank shaft, inserted the tubes of the flame-throwers into the embrasures. A flame of two yards, accompanied by dense smoke, drove the garrison far away from its guns.

“At this point some thirty pioneers, taking advantage of the breaches in the masonry, contrived to get down into the ditch and, on the other side, to reach the top of the main parapet, where they lay down and improvised a sort of shelter in the rubbish-heap. This little band was at once cut off, the French having reopened fire with the machine-guns; these made a retreat impossible for them, while in the transverse gallery the smoke had dispersed. In the tremendous din of the German curtain fire, about 200 yards behind the fort, cries could not be heard at 20 yards. The officer in command had to signal with his cap, which he waved in the Morse code.

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“At 7 A.M. we succeeded in capturing the second transverse gallery, the eastern one, after which the garrison, through a breach made by the shells, was nearly overwhelmed by a bomb attack; thirty men were captured, and the machine-guns, with an abundance of munitions, fell into our hands and were made use of.

“But in the case of the other transverse gallery, the smoke had only counteracted the effects of its fire for a brief spell; it was therefore essential to take it, no matter how. Bags were filled with hand-grenades and passed along the wall until in front of the embrasures, where they were made to explode. This, however, could not be done without considerable risk to the brave pioneers, for the French had placed another machine-gun in a doorway not far from the embrasures, and could thus shoot from below at any head overlapping the upper edge of the wall. For all that, about 5 P.M., the explosions were successful, and we were at last able to penetrate into the transverse gallery which we had first attacked. The garrison, by a deep corridor passing underneath the bottom of the ditch, had taken refuge in the interior of the fort. It had been a lengthy operation, for the explosives, in view of the French curtain fire, could only be placed on the slope in small quantities, and even then the danger was terrible. During the interval of waiting, the pioneers and the infantrymen, who were not working directly at the explosives, dug trenches above, on the glacis, and farther west, by the side of the fort; they occupied these positions with the machine-guns taken

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from the enemy to meet a possible attack from the south-west.

"About 7 P.M. we pushed forward towards the gorge of the fort, after crossing, behind the first parapet, the second ditch, which under the bombardment had become a wide excavation containing enormous masses of shattered concrete. The armed turrets on the first parapet—an observing-station at each of the two breastworks, a big cupola in the middle, provided with two guns, and a raised and armoured machine-gun shelter at the left-hand breastwork—were unfit for further use and stripped of their thick revetment of concrete; the iron rods of the framework stuck out all over them like the prickles of a hedgehog. In the same way the infantry position higher up on the cavalier had been completely ripped up by the German shells.

"At this point the officer commanding the pioneers wanted to make his way into the earthwork itself, and that by the same underground passage which the defenders of the smoked-out transverse gallery had followed. There was a deep stairway, then a short landing, then a steep flight of stairs going up to a stout oaken door, which prevented one from going farther. Pioneer-Lieutenant Ruberg decided to blow up this door by putting against it all the hand-grenades required and taking advantage of the ensuing confusion to storm the position with his troops. In order that the force might not itself be wiped out by the explosion, it was essential that it should gain enough time to be able, once the match was lighted, to go down the staircase and climb up the other side; this would necessitate a cord burning at least twenty seconds. Lieutenant Ruberg, for want of explosive petards, accordingly tied together a dozen grenades. He was fastening them up against the heavy door, when he heard behind it a whispering on the part of the French, and the slight crackle that denotes a Bickford cord. There was no time left to think matters over, for in half a minute at the most the door would blow up from inside, and in that case the French would have the moral superiority in the assault. The great thing was to anticipate them. The Lieutenant motioned to his men to be on their guard, pulled out the normal detonator of one of the hand-grenades, which acts in five seconds, and rushed to the foot of the staircase in order not to be blown to pieces. When he was half-way, a formidable explosion took place: the charge laid by the French, acted upon by the other, exploded simultaneously. The pressure of the air threw the Lieutenant a few yards farther, and he received several splinters in his back. His pioneers darted forward into the corridor and reached a crossing, but were then confronted by two machine-guns placed at about a right angle ten paces to the rear, so that it became impossible to push on any farther. They had to possess their souls in patience throughout the night. From now on there were two commandants of Fort Vaux, a French commandant below ground and a German commandant above him. The French could not poke their heads out anywhere without being greeted at once with bullets or bombs; and the Germans, for the time being, were unable to advance. A horrible stench emanated from all the open cracks in the ceiling of the casemates. The corpses of the French killed in the previous fighting still lay there; there was no means of either pulling them out or of burying them in the thick, hard stone. In the course of the night a dozen French tried to find a way out. Some of them were killed, others taken prisoners by outposts placed at the south-west of the fort.

"On June 3, at five o'clock, a French airman flew above the earthwork in order to reconnoitre the position with accuracy. He came down very low, perhaps 100 yards above the ground, in order to see better, but he flew with such zigzags and so rapidly that the sensitive spot, the heart of the aeroplane, could not be hit in those few seconds. He made his escape; and ten minutes later a withering shell-fire of 22 cm.'s burst upon the trenches of the gorge which we were occupying, so that we had to take refuge as quickly as possible in the casemates that we had captured.

"To-day, June 4, is the fourth day that the fort has been shared by the two sides; the French are within like mutinous prisoners defending themselves against their warders. It is a situation which has never been prolonged to such an extent in the whole history of fortress warfare.

"The conduct of the French garrison is admirable; but still more admirable is the heroism of the German companies, which day and night, without a wink of sleep, without a drop of water, almost without food, withstand the most terrific fire, and will not let go their hold until this last corner of the underground passages of Vaux is in our hands.

"KURT VON REDEN."

PART II

(Delayed in Transmission and Mutilated by the Censor.)

"GENERAL HEADQUARTERS OF THE ATTACKING TROOPS
NORTH-EAST OF VAUX, *June 7.*

"For five days and five nights the terrific combat has been raging without respite in the interior of Fort Vaux, up to the moment when the remnant of the intrepid garrison, deprived of their last means of resistance, surrendered to the victors.

"I have described at length the engagements of June 2 and 3; the fighting was continued on the following days with unparalleled stubbornness and ferocity. The situation was such that within the fort there had been formed, so to speak, a second fort, which the French, utterly reckless of their own lives, defended to the very last gasp.

"After blowing up the heavy door opening on to the corridor which led to the western observing-station at the barracks of the Gorge, the Germans advanced step by step in the corridor. It was very dark, only 90 centimetres wide and a metre and a half high; the French had raised a barricade of sandbags two yards deep, and had set up a machine-gun behind it. It was now essential to blow up the barricade, in order to fall upon another a few yards farther on. Thus the French were pushed back step by step over a distance of twenty-five yards.

"Near the gorge, the courtyard of the barracks had previously formed a concrete platform about five yards thick above the underground corridors and magazines; but it was now only a huge ploughed-up crater. The heavy shells, even in this crater, had hollowed out a sort of funnel, at the bottom of which a

narrow opening, pierced through the last vault, seemed as if it might give access to the interior of the structure. The French, till then completely screened from above and entirely shut in, were suddenly in great danger of being smoked out through this opening. The bombardment that overwhelmed the fort, however, made observation almost impossible for us. The French were the first to notice, from the interior, that the bombardment had almost entirely staved in a ceiling; they at once occupied the edge of the funnel, stopped up the hole with sandbags, and installed a machine-gun. Thus they commanded a portion of that broken country, which now constituted the top of the fort; In consequence, the German communications with this top part, which had before this been unhampered, were now somewhat restricted; nor could they manage to come close enough to overwhelm the new pivot point with bombs.

“Among the French the signs of hunger and thirst became more and more marked. Some succeeded in escaping, by the ditch of the gorge (this was still in their hands), towards the Montagne Wood, in front of Fort Souville. In this direction lay the first line of French infantry. By this route, too, the commandant of the fort, when he had no more carrier-pigeons, sent liaison officers. The underground telephone communications had been destroyed by heavy shells.

“On June 5 and 6, the position of the French garrison grew steadily worse; the number of dead and especially of wounded increased with rapid strides; at last there were no more than a hundred pints of water left, even for the wounded. Those who had not been wounded had not a drop, and had eaten scarcely anything since the 4th. Yet the French continued to fire from the direction of the gorge, through the embrasures in the barracks and those in the ditch, at every target that offered itself. In this way the German garrison of Fort Vaux suffered losses. Other losses, by no means negligible, were inflicted upon it by the continual flanking fire directed against the fort from the infantry tactical point, situated quite close at hand, to the west; it was provided with a field gun. Similarly, the high-perched battery of Damloup, on the south, opened a very troublesome bombardment.

“On the afternoon of June 6 the position of the Germans became extremely hazardous. The casemates which they occupied were assiduously peppered, at first with gas projectiles, somewhat later by heavy shells. The two bombardments were clearly the forerunners of an infantry counter-attack aiming at the recapture of the earthwork from the south-west. This attack, however, was brought to nought by the overpowering effects of the German curtain fire, which opened as soon as the attack was started.

“To-day, at dawn, the French garrison surrendered through the medium of its commandant. The prisoners who are beginning to come in are the living image of misery.

“KURT VON REDEN.”

The text, which has been suitably edited, calls for some brief comments.

The engagement before the fort on June 2 is pictured as quite separate from the fighting of the previous day round the Hardaumont salient, Fumin Wood, and the line of entrenchments, and, on the same day, at Damloup and by the Damloup battery. As a matter of fact, it forms an integral part of all this fighting. It was the retreat of the details, placed west and east of the fort and overwhelmed by numbers, that allowed the enemy to approach the transverse passages.

The number of cannon and machine-guns allotted to the defence of these transverse passages is doubled in the German version.

The northern ditch, not having been swept by fire, became for the enemy a sort of stronghold.

The anomalous situation of a commandant of the fort on top and another inside, the one French, the other German, was not new. It had arisen, though *vice versa*, on May 22, 23, and 24 at Fort Douaumont, where General Mangin's troops occupied the superstructure and a portion of the casemates.

It was on June 4, towards noon, that the Germans, above the barricade of sandbags, were able to hurl liquid fire and asphyxiating gases.

The German account informs us of a remarkable episode in the resistance, or rather completes the reports of an artillery observer who signalled on June 6 that the armoured turret of the fort would be gutted. Not only were the besieged shut in and suffocated with smoke, but the ceiling gave way and fell upon them. An opening was made in the vault which protected them. They were the first to notice it, and partly stopped up the fissure with sandbags, but succeeded in installing a machine-gun, which battered down a part of the superstructure and seriously interfered with the enemy's progress. This machine-gun was so skilfully worked that it did not allow the assailants to approach and cripple its fire with bombs. This incident may be assigned to June 5 or 6, for Cadet Buffet's report, which summarizes the life of the fort up to the night of the 4th-5th, makes no mention of it. Thus, up to the last moment, the energy and ingenuity of the defenders did not cease to be exerted to the full.

There was no plan for a counter-offensive on our part on the afternoon of June 6. Our attack of the 6th, at two in the morning, had just, and only just, failed. That of the composite brigade could not take place until the morning of the 8th. On the evening of June 6 it was, on the contrary, a furious enemy attack in the neighbourhood of Vaux that was shattered under our fire.

Finally, is it possible reasonably to compare with the defence kept up for six days under the frightful conditions already described, the feat—admirable, no doubt, but far easier to explain—of the attacking troops, who were relieved, revictualled, supplied with water (even if only by rain-water—for there were several showers), and breathed an air which was not tainted and foul?

The true victor in the contest should be mentioned, and the German account as good as names him when it says: “Those who were not wounded had not had a drop of water for two days.” Not a drop of water, in the corridors poisonous with the smoke from bombs and the asphyxiating gases!

The true victor in the contest was Thirst.

II

THE FINAL EFFORT

"The mountains are lofty, dark, and huge, the valleys deep, the torrents swift. Behind and in front of the army, the trumpets ring, and all seem to answer the horn. The Emperor rides in anger, and the French, wrathful and gloomy, ride with him. There is not one who does not weep and wail, not one who does not pray to God to guard Roland until they arrive together at the battlefield and smite valiantly in his company. But what good is it? All this is useless: they have tarried too long to arrive in time."

Charlemagne's trumpets will not have power to wake Roland at Roncevaux.

On June 7, the fort no longer answers the appeals by visual signalling. The German communiqué has announced its capture; but had they not already announced it on March 9? The high command will not surrender except to evidence. It needs certainty before it will give up the idea of delivering the garrison. True, the mangled fort is merely a point in the front, and has no longer any value in itself. But perhaps it still shelters Frenchmen under its unyielding vaults.

On the 7th, General Nivelle, commanding the Second Army, addresses the following order to the contingent entrusted with the operations in the Vaux area: 216

"The composite brigade placed at the disposal of Colonel Savy, consisting of the 2nd Regiment of Zouaves and the colonial regiment of Morocco, has been entrusted with the noblest mission that a French force can wish for, that of going to the aid of its comrades-in-arms, who are valiantly doing their duty under tragic circumstances.

"Chosen out from the heroic army of Verdun among those most worthy of so glorious an enterprise, the 2nd Regiment of Zouaves and the colonial regiment of Morocco, supported by a powerful artillery, inspired by the unconquerable will to pursue their task to the end, will approach the enemy with their usual magnificent dash, and will add fresh laurels to those that already cover their flag.

"The nation will know how to show them its gratitude.

"Good luck, comrades, and long live France!

"R. NIVELLE."

The day of June 7 is devoted to the final preparations. The battalions possess bombs, rockets, Bengal fire signals, as well as a second water-bottle of four pints per man. The distribution of cartridges is completed. Each man must carry provisions for four days, for one cannot reckon on the possibility of revictualling. Finally, the orders are read out to each company, so that no man may fail to be alive to the importance of the task in hand: their comrades are waiting for them to come to their rescue. 217

The approach march is made under the worst possible conditions; it is raining, the ground is soaked, and the night is pitch dark, so that the guides go astray and the entry of the three companies into line is delayed. The attack is to be launched at ten past 4 A.M. One hour previously, the enemy himself starts a bomb attack, and returns to the charge a second time against Doualin's battalion at the Belfort trench. He is driven back, but not until he has caused some confusion in our ranks.

Nevertheless, at daybreak, the Zouaves and the colonial infantry close with the enemy "with their usual magnificent dash." Doubtless, the hope of bringing succour to the defenders of Vaux is a very slender one. All the signs, in fact, go to prove that it is too late. If the German wireless message which announced the capitulation must be received with caution, the observing-stations have noticed changes in the aspect of the vaults: in front of rooms 7 and 8, the bomb-proof shelter of sandbags or stones is almost entirely destroyed.

Under the tornado of fire—for the enemy knows how to keep what he has won—our infantrymen advance. They want to go on until they get into touch with their comrades. They will go on.

A shell penetrates into the C.O.'s headquarters. The telephone apparatus remains intact, but the operator has both hands cut off by a splinter. He holds out the stumps to his chief and apologises: 218

"I can no longer telephone."

Like the attack of June 6, that of the composite brigade succeeds in encircling the fort. The enemy, however, occupies the superstructure, and his machine-guns work great havoc in our ranks. His reinforcements are constantly coming up. The battalion on the right can only just hang on to the terrain, after very slow progress. In the centre, the advance continues up to the ditches of the fort. It is at this moment that the German machine-guns do us the most serious damage. The leaders of the expedition fall one after the other, among them Major Gilbert and Major Jérôme de Mouy. The latter was a cavalry officer who had passed the staff college; he had returned from Morocco and been awarded a staff appointment, but asked for the command of a battalion of Zouaves.

The two battalions, deprived of their officers, are compelled to give up the scheme of recapturing the fort and to entrench themselves in the parallel lines from which they started.

Suddenly an explosion occurs in the fort, and a dense black smoke issues from casemate 5.

There is no human being left alive in this last stronghold.

At eight o'clock in the morning the battalion of the colonial regiment which acts as a support still has no precise information about the operation that has been embarked upon, save that the two attacking battalions have not returned. Hence they have had to advance, and they need munitions to ward off the imminent counter-attacks. A fatigue party of eighty men is told off, under the command of a lieutenant and of Cadet Jacques Bégouen. They carry grenades, rockets, and Bengal fire to stake out our lines. Their progress can be followed in 219

detail, thanks to Cadet Bégouen's notes, from which I will quote a passage. He too, later on, will be among the chroniclers of the war. A son of Count Bégouen, whose historical learning is well known, he has two brothers serving with the colours—one of them, like himself, belongs to that heroic colonial regiment of Morocco which distinguished itself at Dixmude in December 1914, and which, in the battle of Verdun, added new lustre to its crown of glory.

From Cadet Bégouen's Notebook

June 8.

"So we have started in miscellaneous contingents to fulfil one of the most perilous missions, one where there is need of mutual knowledge among the men concerned and of good officers and N.C.O.'s who have confidence in you.

"The guide marches slowly at our head. The men know their orders—all must follow. We go through a copse of dense undergrowth, where a deep communication trench is hidden, a place that cannot be taken under the enemy's fire. We sink in the watery mud up to our calves. All is going well. 220

"We have marched up the counter-slope, and are once more facing the German sausages.

"At this point begins the zone of curtain fire and of mathematical pounding which stops only at the French first lines.

"Having come to the end of the road, we climb the steep slope leading to the ridge. Already the trees and shrubs have been blasted by the firing.... The battering process begins. But the German sausages have not yet seen us, and we endure the usual punishment; barely fifty or sixty shells fall to the right and to the left of the little communication trench.

"Before crossing the ridge, we take a brief rest. The first contingent, in front, continues its journey little by little.

"Suddenly the guide says to me, 'Where am I to lead you?' 'To the first line, I am told.' 'But I've got to stop at the Colonel's headquarters.' He does not know the way to the first line. We advance all the same. Here we are on the plateau where so much blood has been spilt: the communication trenches have become mere tracks, the forest a few sparse trunks stripped of their branches, the soil is made up of scraps of all kinds, and the corpses, lying in batches just as they fell, are in every conceivable attitude.... 221

"I bid my men follow me, jumping across the shell-holes, and we begin marching for two hundred yards.

"At this moment the guide stops us: 'Here on the right is the communication trench leading to the Colonel's place.' I still insist, 'But I have to go to the first line.' 'I don't know the way: I am going to the Colonel's quarters,' and in less time than it takes to tell he hurries away in that direction. What can we do? The men are restless, and won't march without a guide.... We all rush in the direction of the Colonel's quarters. In places, the communication trench cannot be traced, for it is chock-full of corpses. All classes of troops are there: engineers, foot-sloggers, colonials.... In this blend of mud and dead bodies we mark time, and all that amid an acrid smell of blood and putrefying flesh.... Our nerves are on edge; we begin to become the supermen that we shall be when the gunpowder has scorched us....

"We come to a relief post for scouts. Our guide is here. I am on the point of scolding him severely and asking for an explanation, when a substitute comes to lead us, this time to the first line. This fellow actually does know the way. We about turn to go back again upon the road towards Fort Vaux. The men are tired out. We break off for a rest.

"Urged by the guide, who maintains that the faster we go the better it will be for us, we resume our march. Once again we are on a good road. The first fatigue party, led on the direct route by its guide, is far on ahead. It has passed the plateau and is now descending the slope of the Ravine of Death. At this moment the Boches begin to aim at them and start curtain fires; a rain of steel, projectiles of all calibres, proceeds to fall ... everywhere one sees things flying in the air.... 222

"Forward! It is a terrible dance of death. The men begin to spread out; if I stop, they will not start off again....

"The whole countryside is ablaze with sunlight.... An unrivalled opportunity for taking a splendid photograph: in the background, on the left, Fort Vaux; on the right, the Woevre plains; on the left, the few tree-stumps that mark what was once La Caillette Wood, blackened with 210 rounds of gunfire. In the foreground, the stricken field where the shell-holes adjoin each other, full to the brim with dead. And everywhere great geysers, as it were, of earth and war-material leap into the air under the impact of the shells.... It was a unique scene, and so easy to photograph, since it was a part of my duties to do so.... But my camera was at Fort Tavannes...."

When the onslaughts upon the entrenchments that he was guarding were at their height, Captain Delvert admired the pose of a bomb-thrower in action. A soldier of the 142nd who managed to get away from Fort Vaux, in describing the attack by flames, gas, and explosive petards, and the giving way of the door, and the men flying in the air, and the Boches rushing in, and Lieutenant Bazy barring the corridor to them, cannot help giving vent to the exclamation, "It was superb!" Cadet Bégouen, leading his fatigue party under the geysers caused by the shells, feels sorry that he has not his camera with him. Such are the undying characteristics of our race, ever in love with beauty, ever desirous, under the most adverse conditions, of seeing life and realizing it to the full. 223

THE HARVEST OF THE FUTURE

Vaux is lost, for the time being, but Vaux will be regained, and the battle of Verdun is being won day by day. Day by day the meaning of the Verdun battle grows clearer. The infantryman who only knows his trench mates is an atom of a vast army distributed over all the fronts: his blood and sweat will mingle in history with the blood and sweat of his unknown and remote brothers. A scrap of disputed territory, which seems to the men involved an end in itself, is really nothing but a point in the vast shifting front where the two great forces of the world are at grips.

On June 12, five days after the capture of the fort, the Commander-in-Chief informs the Verdun troops of the Russian victories in Bukovina and Galicia, through the following Army order:

“The plan matured by the councils of the coalition is now in full course of being carried out.

“Soldiers of Verdun, it is to your heroic resistance that this consummation is due. It is this resistance that was the essential condition, and it is on this resistance that our coming victories depend; for it was this resistance that has created over the whole theatre of the European war a situation that will soon bring about the final triumph of our cause.”

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The enemy is now held, and will have to submit to our laws and accept our manœuvres.

On March 10 the enemy climbs the northern slopes of Fort Vaux. He is now only two or three hundred yards off the counterscarp. To cross those two or three hundred yards will take him three months. Three months of superhuman exertions, of ceaseless attacks, of an inconceivable outlay of munitions and incredible losses among her young men, the flower of the nation. Three months, as if the war had no other object than this.

And during those three months the coalition finishes concerting, preparing, and carrying out its plans.

Fighting takes place in front of the fort, above and within it, from June 2 to 7. On the 4th, the first Russian offensive is launched south of the Pripet. It at once forces Austria to abandon its own offensive against the Trentino.

There is fighting in front of Verdun from February 21, and fighting goes on there during June and July. The Italian offensive on the Trentino opens on June 25, while that on the Isonzo begins during the early days of August. The Franco-British offensive on the Somme starts on July 1, and the central Russian offensive on July 3.

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“Soldiers of Verdun, it is to your heroic resistance that this consummation is due....”

* * * * *

In *War and Peace*, Prince Bagration, in the course of a battle, hears bad news, but his coolness astonishes and reassures the aides-de-camp who bring it. He has an unswerving confidence in Russia's future. A temporary set-back cannot make him any less certain of the final triumph.

“Merely at the sight of him, those who approached him with anxious looks began to recover their calm....”

This gives us a clue to the comforting words heard at Verdun in March, when the fort was swept by the storm for the first time:

“You need feel no uneasiness.”

For the future is taking shape.

The fort played its part before the inviolate citadel of Verdun. And while it was keeping the enemy in check, the storm-clouds were gathering elsewhere, some day to burst and humble the German might in the dust.

* * * * *

Hapless fort of Vaux, a stronghold reduced to ashes, a marvel of endurance, you who pulsated like a human heart, the whole world had its eyes riveted on you for the space of a few days. The whole world was not in error when it ascribed to you that significance which your courage enhanced. You were minister to plans whose full tenor you did not know, and to-day you play your part in the operations that are unfolding themselves and will continue to unfold themselves.

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Land that has been overrun by the lava of volcanoes shows an unparalleled fertility when the lava has passed. Upon your tortured soil a harvest of victories will spring up, and from your defence will gush forth a fresh and inexhaustible fount of French heroism....

THE END

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Transcriber's Notes

Punctuation and hyphenation were made consistent when a predominant preference was found in this book; otherwise they were not changed. Inconsistent spellings were not changed, as the book contains letters and diary entries from different writers.

Simple typographical errors were corrected; ambiguous hyphens at the ends of lines were retained.

Page [185](#): Text explains that the letter beginning at the bottom of that page contains spelling errors.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LAST DAYS OF FORT VAUX, MARCH 9-JUNE 7, 1916 ***

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