

Chapter X--The Battle of the Marne

The impression produced by the first week of war was that the British contingent had come just in time for the end of the world. Or rather, for any sensitive and civilised man, touched by the modern doubt but by the equally modern mysticism, that old theocratic vision fell far short of the sickening terror of the time. For it was a day of judgment in which upon the throne in heaven and above the cherubim, sat not God, but another.

The British had been posted at the extreme western end of the allied line in the north. The other end rested on the secure city and fortress of Namur; their end rested upon nothing. It is not wholly a sentimental fancy to say that there was something forlorn in the position of that loose end in a strange land, with only the sad fields of Northern France between them and the sea. For it was really round that loose end that the foe would probably fling the lasso of his charge; it was here that death might soon be present upon every side. It must be remembered that many critics, including many Englishmen, doubted whether a rust had not eaten into this as into other parts of the national life, feared that England had too long neglected both the ethic and the technique of war, and would prove a weak link in the chain. The enemy was absolutely certain that it was so. To these men, standing disconsolately amid the hedgeless plains and poplars, came the news that Namur was gone, which was to their captains one of the four corners of the earth. The two armies had touched; and instantly the weaker took an electric shock which told of electric energy, deep into deep Germany, battery behind battery of abysmal force. In the instant it was discovered that the enemy was more numerous than they had dreamed. He was actually more numerous even than they discovered. Every oncoming horseman doubled as in a drunkard's vision; and they were soon striving without speech in a nightmare of numbers. Then all the allied forces at the front were overthrown in the tragic battle of Mons; and began that black retreat, in which so many of our young men knew war first and at its worst in this terrible world; and so many never returned.

In that blackness began to grow strange emotions, long unfamiliar to our blood. Those six dark days are as full of legends as the six centuries of the Dark Ages. Many of these may be exaggerated fancies, one was certainly an avowed fiction, others are quite different from it and more difficult to dissipate into the daylight. But one curious fact remains about them if they were all lies, or even if they were all deliberate works of art. Not one of them referred to those close, crowded, and stirring three centuries which are nearest to us, and which alone are covered in this sketch, the centuries during which the Teutonic influence had expanded itself over our islands. Ghosts were there perhaps, but they were the ghosts of

forgotten ancestors. Nobody saw Cromwell or even Wellington; nobody so much as thought about Cecil Rhodes. Things were either seen or said among the British which linked them up, in matters deeper than any alliance, with the French, who spoke of Joan of Arc in heaven above the fated city; or the Russians who dreamed of the Mother of God with her hand pointing to the west. They were the visions or the inventions of a mediæval army; and a prose poet was in line with many popular rumours when he told of ghostly archers crying "Array, Array," as in that long-disbanded yeomanry in which I have fancied Cobbett as carrying a bow. Other tales, true or only symptomatic, told of one on a great white horse who was not the victor of Blenheim or even the Black Prince, but a faint figure out of far-off martyrologies--St. George. One soldier is asserted to have claimed to identify the saint because he was "on every quid." On the coins, St. George is a Roman soldier.

But these fancies, if they were fancies, might well seem the last sickly flickerings of an old-world order now finally wounded to the death. That which was coming on, with the whole weight of a new world, was something that had never been numbered among the Seven Champions of Christendom. Now, in more doubtful and more hopeful days, it is almost impossible to repicture what was, for those who understood, the gigantic finality of the first German strides. It seemed as if the forces of the ancient valour fell away to right and left; and there opened a grand, smooth granite road right to the gate of Paris, down which the great Germania moved like a tall, unanswerable sphinx, whose pride could destroy all things and survive them. In her train moved, like moving mountains, Cyclopean guns that had never been seen among men, before which walled cities melted like wax, their mouths set insolently upwards as if threatening to besiege the sun. Nor is it fantastic to speak so of the new and abnormal armaments; for the soul of Germany was really expressed in colossal wheels and cylinders; and her guns were more symbolic than her flags. Then and now, and in every place and time, it is to be noted that the German superiority has been in a certain thing and of a certain kind. It is not unity; it is not, in the moral sense, discipline. Nothing can be more united in a moral sense than a French, British, or Russian regiment. Nothing, for that matter, could be more united than a Highland clan at Killiecrankie or a rush of religious fanatics in the Soudan. What such engines, in such size and multiplicity, really meant was this: they meant a type of life naturally intolerable to happier and more healthy-minded men, conducted on a larger scale and consuming larger populations than had ever been known before. They meant cities growing larger than provinces, factories growing larger than cities; they meant the empire of the slum. They meant a degree of detailed repetition and dehumanised division of labour, to which no man born would surrender his brief span in the sunshine, if he could hope to beat his ploughshare into a sword. The nations of the earth were not to surrender to the Kaiser; they were to surrender to Krupp, his master and theirs; the French, the

British, the Russians were to surrender to Krupp as the Germans themselves, after a few swiftly broken strikes, had already surrendered to Krupp. Through every cogwheel in that incomparable machinery, through every link in that iron and unending chain, ran the mastery and the skill of a certain kind of artist; an artist whose hands are never idle through dreaming or drawn back in disgust or lifted in wonder or in wrath; but sure and tireless in their touch upon the thousand little things that make the invisible machinery of life. That artist was there in triumph; but he had no name. The ancient world called him the Slave.

From this advancing machine of millions, the slighter array of the Allies, and especially the British at their ultimate outpost, saved themselves by a succession of hair's-breadth escapes and what must have seemed to the soldiers the heartrending luck of a mouse before a cat. Again and again Von Kluck's cavalry, supported by artillery and infantry, clawed round the end of the British force, which eluded it as by leaping back again and again. Sometimes the pursuer was, so to speak, so much on top of his prey that it could not even give way to him; but had to hit such blows as it could in the hope of checking him for the instant needed for escape. Sometimes the oncoming wave was so close that a small individual accident, the capture of one man, would mean the washing out of a whole battalion. For day after day this living death endured. And day after day a certain dark truth began to be revealed, bit by bit, certainly to the incredulous wonder of the Prussians, quite possibly to the surprise of the French, and quite as possibly to the surprise of themselves; that there was something singular about the British soldiers. That singular thing may be expressed in a variety of ways; but it would be almost certainly expressed insufficiently by anyone who had not had the moral courage to face the facts about his country in the last decades before the war. It may perhaps be best expressed by saying that some thousands of Englishmen were dead: and that England was not.

The fortress of Maubeuge had gaped, so to speak, offering a refuge for the unresting and tormented retreat; the British Generals had refused it and continued to fight a losing fight in the open for the sake of the common plan. At night an enormous multitude of Germans had come unexpectedly through the forest and caught a smaller body of the British in Landrecies; failed to dislodge them and lost a whole battalion in that battle of the darkness. At the extreme end of the line Smith-Dorrien's division, who seemed to be nearly caught or cut off, had fought with one gun against four, and so hammered the Germans that they were forced to let go their hold; and the British were again free. When the blowing up of a bridge announced that they had crossed the last river, something other than that battered remnant was saved; it was the honour of the thing by which we live.

The driven and defeated line stood at last almost under the walls of Paris; and the

world waited for the doom of the city. The gates seemed to stand open; and the Prussian was to ride into it for the third and the last time: for the end of its long epic of liberty and equality was come. And still the very able and very French individual on whom rested the last hope of the seemingly hopeless Alliance stood unruffled as a rock, in every angle of his sky-blue jacket and his bulldog figure. He had called his bewildered soldiers back when they had broken the invasion at Guise; he had silently digested the responsibility of dragging on the retreat, as in despair, to the last desperate leagues before the capital; and he stood and watched. And even as he watched the whole huge invasion swerved.

Out through Paris and out and around beyond Paris, other men in dim blue coats swung out in long lines upon the plain, slowly folding upon Von Kluck like blue wings. Von Kluck stood an instant; and then, flinging a few secondary forces to delay the wing that was swinging round on him, dashed across the Allies' line at a desperate angle, to smash it in the centre as with a hammer. It was less desperate than it seemed; for he counted, and might well count, on the moral and physical bankruptcy of the British line and the end of the French line immediately in front of him, which for six days and nights he had chased before him like autumn leaves before a whirlwind. Not unlike autumn leaves, red-stained, dust-hued, and tattered, they lay there as if swept into a corner. But even as their conquerors wheeled eastwards, their bugles blew the charge; and the English went forward through the wood that is called Creçy, and stamped it with their seal for the second time, in the highest moment of all the secular history of man.

But it was not now the Creçy in which English and French knights had met in a more coloured age, in a battle that was rather a tournament. It was a league of all knights for the remains of all knighthood, of all brotherhood in arms or in arts, against that which is and has been radically unknightly and radically unbrotherly from the beginning. Much was to happen after--murder and flaming folly and madness in earth and sea and sky; but all men knew in their hearts that the third Prussian thrust had failed, and Christendom was delivered once more. The empire of blood and iron rolled slowly back towards the darkness of the northern forests; and the great nations of the West went forward; where side by side as after a long lover's quarrel, went the ensigns of St. Denys and St. George.