

# THE HIEVEMENT F FRANCE

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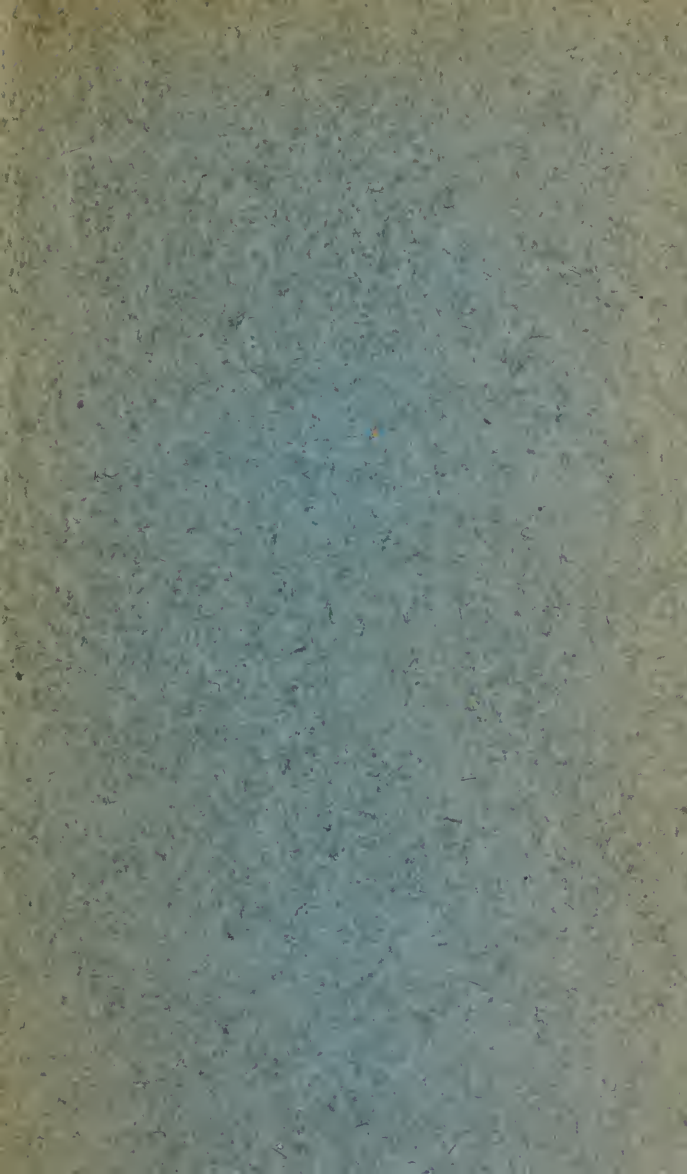


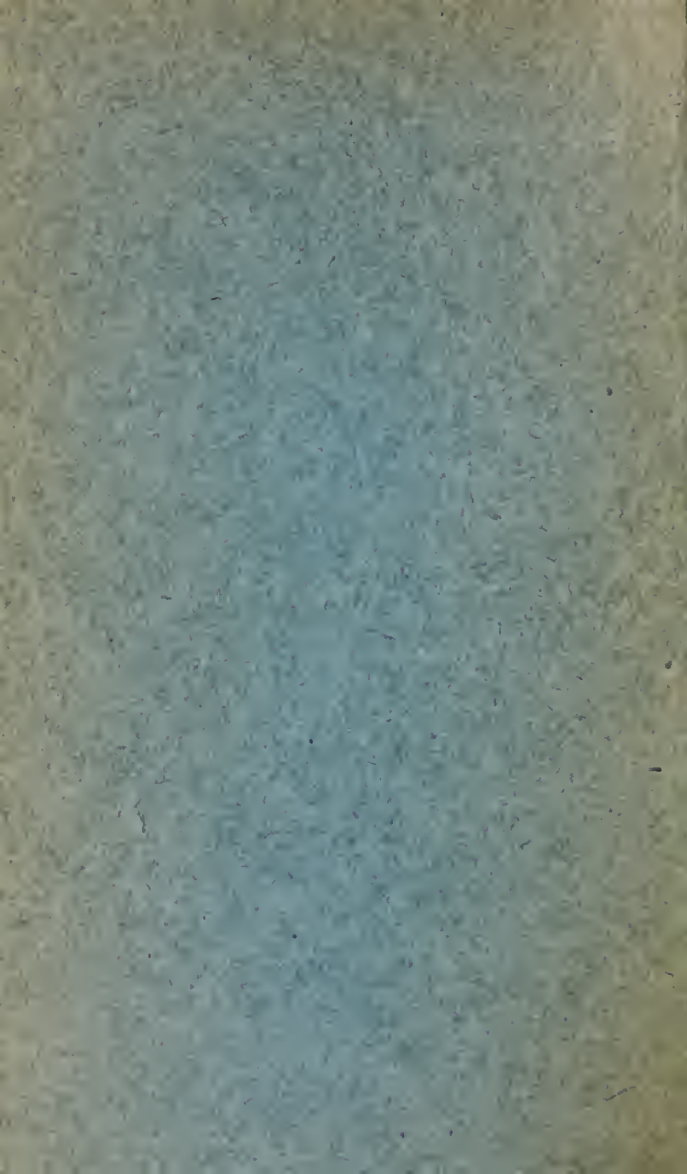
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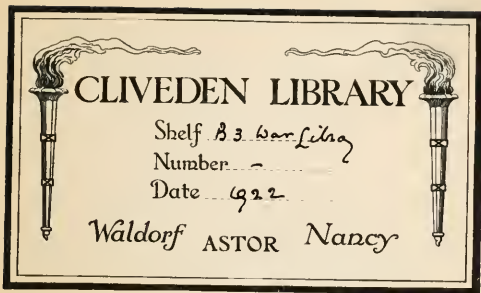


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THE ACHIEVEMENT OF FRANCE



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# THE ACHIEVEMENT OF FRANCE

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## PREFACE

**T**HE series of articles on "The Achievement of France," published in the *Times* newspaper at the end of June 1915, are here reprinted in response to a number of suggestions from readers both in this country and in France. They have, indeed, a special claim on public attention. Nothing is of greater importance in a struggle conducted by Allies than that those who fight side by side in the same cause should understand and appreciate the work of each other. The story of the campaign as it is now told from authentic French sources will enable many for the first time to see the great events of the last ten months upon the

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Western front with some approach to a true perspective. The extravagant and often injudicious exercise of the censorship has done much to render such a view very difficult. We have been favoured with accounts of particular incidents, while others of equal and of greater interest and importance have been passed over in silence, or consigned to a bald sentence in the course of a hurried dispatch. The result has been to present us with a picture which has often been blurred, sometimes mutilated, and always inadequate. Above all, the relations of the different incidents to each other and to the whole system of operations have been obscured, or presented to us in a distorted and misleading shape. We have been led to think of isolated links in the chain instead of fastening our minds upon the chain itself. The present narrative does not pretend to be comprehensive. The

full story of the movements with which it deals can, indeed, hardly be known for a generation. But it brings into relief as no earlier account has done the salient points in the operations, and it exhibits clearly and simply their interdependence and their bearing upon the strategy of both sides.

Great, however, as is the value of these articles as a lucid exposition of the highest French military opinion on the course of the Western war, they are still more important for the light they throw upon the French conception of what England has done and England ought to do, as France's true Ally. Well-informed Frenchmen and Frenchwomen perceive, and generously acknowledge, the greatness of the sacrifices and of the efforts we are making for the common cause. They know that people of equal information and intelligence in this country see as clearly as they do

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themselves that this cause is every whit as vital to England as to France. They are aware of the inestimable service which our sea-power has daily rendered the Alliance from the beginning of the war, and they are aware of the great and constant strain which the upkeep of the Fleet imposes upon our dockyards and our factories. They are sensible also of the magnitude and the value of our financial and industrial aid, and they own that even our contribution to the land forces of the Alliance has surpassed all possible forecasts. Even those who have less knowledge and less imagination recognize with gratitude that the help our soldiers gave France in the critical days of the retreat, in the battle of the Marne, which stayed the German "avalanche" and destroyed the German expectation of seizing Paris by a rush, and again in the terrible battle of Ypres, the bloodiest

and the fiercest of the war, was priceless to her. But the French people realize very keenly that, when all has been said of our assistance on these and other occasions, the main burden of the war, even in the West, has fallen, not upon England but upon France. The Frenchman is perplexed that this fact is not more generally understood by the English masses. Every incident in his daily life bears in upon him that he is wrestling in a death struggle with the common enemy. The closed shops in the towns, the fields tilled only by women and children, the complete transformation of the national existence are ever reminding him that France has girded herself for war. Then he hears exaggerated reports that things in England are going on much "as usual." He is not perplexed entirely without reason. From our insularity, in several senses, from the nature of our

institutions and the party temper they beget, from character and by tradition, we have been slower than we should have been to grasp as a nation the task we have to do. We have made, and we are making, efforts and sacrifices of all sorts without parallel in our history, and we set no limit to those we are prepared to make. But when it is said in one of the articles that "our effort is still a long way short of that of France," and that amongst us "the war has not bitten so deeply into our national life, its gravity is not so intimately and universally realized" as amongst our Allies, we recognize that these statements are nothing more than the naked truth. Nothing, perhaps, but actual experience in person and in property of the unutterable and unthinkable horrors and abominations of invasion as waged by the Germans can burn into the soul of a civilized people what war may really

mean. We have been hitherto spared that experience—spared all experience of the kind for many centuries. That fact alone prevents the masses of our people from feeling the same intense individual passion for the war which is causing men and women in France to wage it as they have waged none since the Revolution. Every company in the French Army, we are told, contains men who have ruined homes, murdered kinsfolk, and wives dishonoured to avenge. Men who have not seen and suffered such wrongs cannot feel as those who have. Even the knowledge that the Germans are thirsting to inflict them upon us cannot stir us in quite the same way as the wholesale outrages committed on their soil have steeled the hearts of Belgians and of Frenchmen. But the heart of our people is sound enough. No victim of German atrocities on his nearest and dearest can be

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more resolved than we are as a nation that "scientific barbarism" must be beaten out of existence. These articles should help us to understand the great share of France in that necessary and honourable task.



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# THE ACHIEVEMENT OF FRANCE

## I

### THE AVALANCHE

**T**HE story of the work of the French Army cannot yet be fully told, but a summary can be given, and even a bald summary may convey some notion of the greatness of the achievement. Our news of the French doings has been scanty and local, and we need a consecutive narrative to enable us to realize the magnitude of it all. Yet it is most vitally important that every Englishman should recognize what France has done and is doing, what she has suffered and is suffering,

for we shall win the campaign as Allies and make peace as Allies, and the attitude of our Allies towards the terms of settlement can only be construed in the light of what they have sacrificed.

To any reader of the diplomatic correspondence which ended abruptly on August 4th the attitude of France must have seemed almost pedantically correct. She, the proudest of nations, made every sacrifice for peace except the ultimate one. In the past few years she had not been well served by some of her politicians, but she had been brilliantly served by her diplomats. No Ambassador came out of the diplomatic tangle in July with a higher reputation than M. Jules Cambon, her Ambassador at Berlin. She was aware of Germany's designs, but she laboured for peace. Her new Army Law had not had time to take effect, her supply of munitions was deficient, she had no bellicose ambitions

to satiate, her temper was conciliation pushed to the farthest degree compatible with honour. The war was forced upon her, and she entered into it with the cleanest hands. A great solemnity fell upon the land, as of a man going into a desperate battle which he cannot refuse, and in which the odds are monstrously against him. She was unprepared—partly from blunders, partly from no fault of her own; but her unpreparedness is proof of her honesty.

Germany's attitude last August is often misunderstood. We talk of her madness in challenging the whole world, but in her eyes there was no madness. For a generation she had given her best brains to the study of war, and had prepared a machine without parallel in the history of the world. She believed that she was the one expert in a world of amateurs; that she had the perfect knowledge, the perfect weapon, and far greater numbers than

any Power or combination of Powers could bring against her for many months. She had long foreseen the possibility of a war on two fronts against both France and Russia, and she had made her plans accordingly. She hoped to repeat her exploit of 1870. Her aim was an immediate crushing blow against France, a blow so terrific that, as in 1870, the French armies would be destroyed and the French nation would be driven to clamour for peace. Then, while France lay prostrate and could be held by small forces, she would swing her great armies eastward and deal with Russia. She did not expect to conquer Russia, but hoped to deal with her so faithfully as to drive her out of the alliance. Then with France prostrate and Russia discouraged, she would have leisure to deal with her arch-enemy Britain. Observe that the scheme depended entirely upon the early over-

throw of France. If the disabling blow, "the battle without a morrow," as the German phrase went, failed, then every plan would have to be revised. Time was the essence of Germany's scheme. What she had to do must be done quickly.

Germany had on mobilization 25 corps of the first line: 21 of these she disposed against France. She had 33 reserve corps, and 22 of these were sent to the Western theatre. She had 15 Landwehr corps and 8 were under orders for France. That is to say, she sent 51 corps across her western frontier, which with army troops and cavalry meant  $2\frac{1}{2}$  million men. These were her first formations. As we shall see, the bulk of her subsequent formations were also used in the West. But numbers were only one part of her strength. By her elaborate system of espionage in peace-time she had made preparations on every possible field of

battle. She had worked out the problem of the frontier fortresses and had prepared great howitzers before which steel and concrete were useless. Her immense strength in motor transport enabled her to move her great armies at a speed unknown to history. In field artillery she had at least two guns to the Allies' one. Her tactics were devised to give the maximum results in the shortest time by means of a crushing artillery preparation and massed infantry attacks. She could afford to waste men and shells, for she was plentifully supplied with both. Further, it was arranged that huge bodies of cavalry should sweep round her flanks and terrorize the civilian population, and as a further inducement to panic she was prepared to fight with a complete disregard of the ancient decencies of war. German policy is inconceivable except on the view that she was bound to win a final victory



at the outset, when she could afford to laugh at the world. But the childish ruthlessness which will yet work her ruin was a terrible asset in her first descent upon the West.

Against this torrential invasion France could produce on mobilization something between one million and one and a half million men. On paper her numbers were greater, but partly owing to the fact that her new Army scheme was incomplete, and partly owing to defects of equipment, she could not hope to reach her estimated standard for some months. Germany had taken good care to take her old opponent by surprise. General Joffre had to face a problem whose difficulty might well have appalled the greatest commander. His numbers, even with the British Expeditionary Force, were no more than half those of his assailant. He had to await the attack on a line of 500 miles, and since the superior speed of Germany's

mobilization gave her the initiative, he could not tell where the chief force of the blow would come. Accordingly he followed Napoleon's famous maxim, "Engage everywhere and then see." It was his business to feel the enemy's strength along the whole line. But merely to wait and see would lead to disaster, for the first sight might also be the last. He therefore obeyed another of Napoleon's maxims, and behind his front held a large strategical reserve. The tactics which won the battle of Jéna were elaborated into the major strategy of a campaign. If the troops which first obtained contact with the main thrust of the enemy could fight a delaying battle and retire slowly in good order, time would be given for the reserves to swing round against the invader.

Such a plan was the only one possible for a defensive like the French. Certain facts were clear in the first weeks of

the war. The number of the Germans was obvious ; it was certain that a very strong right wing would move through the Belgian plain against the line of the Sambre ; it was certain, too, that a strong effort would be made by the armies based on Metz to open the road through Nancy to Paris. Where the major attack would take place was a matter of guesswork. A Commander-in-Chief, when all calculations have been made, is still left with a gamble before him. General Joffre tried to reduce uncertainty to a minimum. He had his frontier armies massing along the Sambre and the Meuse in the beginning of the third week of August. He had an army watching Verdun on its north side. The movement against Nancy he resolved to anticipate. A French advance from Lorraine would detain the Bavarian corps which might otherwise be used to weight the attack on the Meuse, and an offensive would

be the best defence of the eastern gate of France.

Such were the elements of the French problem in the third week of August. We know what happened. The four corps of De Castelnau's Second Army, including the famous 20th, commanded by General Foch, moved across the frontier towards Metz, while Dubail's First Army cleared the crests of the Vosges. By the 19th the French were at Saarbùrg, astride the railway between Metz and Strassburg, and pouring down from all the northern glens of the hills. But next day came the check. The Bavarians from Metz struck hard against the French left between Pont-à-Mousson and Château-Salins and drove it in, and the whole centre and right fell back to conform. Two days later the Germans were in Lunéville, and pressing on against the Grand Couronné of Nancy, the last defences of the eastern gate.

On August 23rd began the battle of Nancy on a front from Pont-à-Mousson to St. Dié under the Vosges.

On that day, Sunday, August 23rd, General Joffre had to face the most critical moment since Sedan in the history of his country. The avalanche was now launched against the line of the Sambre and the Meuse, and it was far more formidable than the wildest guesses. The German right, under von Kluck and von Bülow, which was believed to be at the most six corps strong, had not less than nine. Namur had fallen, its forts blown to atoms by the great guns which had been unwisely suffered to get within range. An unexpected army, that of the Saxons, under von Hausen, had forced the Meuse and pierced the Allied centre. The frontier forts were useless, the frontier guards were driven in, while in Lorraine the Bavarians, flushed with victory, were threatening to turn the flank of all the

northern armies, and cut their communications with the reserves and with the capital. The northern gate of Paris was forced, the eastern was menaced, and for a moment it looked as if the most dismal forecasts of pessimism would prove true, and, Paris and the gates of France lost, the Allies would be forced to fight a new Torres Vedras on the Biscayan coast.

The strategic reserves were not available. They were there, to be sure, in Alsace, in Burgundy, and behind Paris, but the time was too short. They could not be brought up to the front; the front must get back to them. That, in a sentence, is the explanation of the events between August 23rd and September 5th.

To conduct a successful retreat in the face of a triumphant enemy is, according to Frederick the Great, the most difficult of the operations of war. The Germans, moving at an incredible pace,

were threatening to envelop the Allied left, our centre was pierced on the Meuse, and at any moment news might come that our right flank in Lorraine was turned, and that the enemy were behind us in Champagne. No strategical plan, long brooded over in peace, was now of the slightest avail. There was nothing for it but retreat, swift and desperate retreat, till a line could be reached on which a stand was possible. At this crisis General Joffre showed that if the hour had come the man was not wanting. A lesser man would have seized upon local successes, such as that at Guise, to make a stand ; or, tenacious of his first plan, would have waited upon reserves which would certainly have arrived too late. But the French Generalissimo had the courage to play the rigorous game and to unmask even Paris in his bold defensive. There was still good hope if only De Castelnau could keep the gate of Nancy.

The story of the British retreat is familiar—how with the enemy on three sides we struggled from his grasp, checking his onslaught in more than one fierce battle. It saved the armies of the Allies, for so far as the retreat itself was concerned the British had the most perilous end to hold. But the achievement of the French Fourth and Fifth Armies must be remembered. They had been defeated in severe engagements at Charleroi and on the Meuse. At one time it looked as if the Fifth Army would be penned between von Bülow and the Saxons. Yet they succeeded in slipping through with many losses, and on the fourth day of the retreat could turn at Guise and make a successful counter-attack against the Prussian Guard. Mistakes were plentiful in these days, and many a distinguished general was “ungummed,” for General Joffre set before himself a standard of naked efficiency. The casualties were heavy,



as always happens in a hurried retreat. But it was no broken army which marched across the grassy vales of Oise and Aisne and Suippe, and left behind it the towers and vineyards of Reims, and did not rest till it was south of the orchards of the Marne and the flats of the Champagne-Pouilleuse. It is a bitter thing for men to leave their own countryside to an invader. It is a hard thing at all times to retreat, but it is harder to retreat after costly battles. The troops which in the early days of a hot September were drawn up between Fontainebleau and Verdun were a better fighting force than that which a fortnight before had lined the Meuse and the Sambre. Misfortune had welded them together and given them something to avenge.

Meantime Paris was exposed and in German eyes had already fallen. To the observers of Berlin it seemed that the war was over, and that it only re-

mained to gather in the fruits of victory. But they could not see what troops were moving through Paris streets. They misjudged the little British force now lying behind Crécy forest, and the weary but unbroken French armies on the Petit Morin and in Southern Champagne and on the heights round Verdun. They could not guess at the quality of the French reserves now south of Sezanne, or the brains of Foch, their general. They forgot that De Castelnau after a fortnight's desperate fighting was still holding the Nancy gate.

## II

### THE CHECK

ON Saturday, September 5th, General Joffre informed Sir John French that the hour for the counter-offensive had arrived. The French Army Commanders were ready and their men were as eager and confident as on the first day of battle. We can judge of the solemn ardour of the troops by the order issued on the morning of September 6th by their Commander-in-Chief: "At the moment when a battle on which the welfare of the country depends is about to begin, it is my duty to remind you that the time for looking behind has gone. We have but one business in hand—to attack and repel the enemy.

An army which can no longer advance will at all costs hold the ground it has won, and allow itself to be slain where it stands rather than give way. This is no time for faltering, and it will not be suffered." By all ranks, from the humblest private to the Generalissimo at the head, the coming days were felt to be the days of destiny.

At the moment in England we did not realize the full nature of the crisis. Still stunned by the great retreat, the ordinary man refrained from speculating and could only hope. In Paris they knew no more. The news of the Marne came, therefore, upon a world wholly unprepared. On September 5th von Kluck was wheeling his right to envelop the French Fifth Army; the Württembergers were driving hard upon Vitry to pierce the French centre; the Crown Prince had pushed south of Verdun and was awaiting his great howitzers to send it the same road as

Liège and Namur ; Maubeuge was in its last extremity. At Nancy the Bavarians under the Kaiser's own eye were preparing to tear a rent in the eastern barrier. If a man, wounded on September 5th, had come to consciousness on the 12th, he would have awakened to a very different world. For by that day von Kluck, himself beaten and outflanked, was hurrying back through the woods of Compiègne. Von Bülow, with his famous Guards reduced to half their strength, was retiring upon the Aisne. The Saxon Army had been badly shattered. The Duke of Würtemberg, after driving for days against the French centre, was now retreating north of the Champagne-Pouilleuse. Verdun was intact, and the French Army was entrenching itself around it at a distance which kept the Krupp howitzers out of range. And in Lorraine the White Cuirassiers had broken themselves against De Castel-

nau's line, Nancy was secure, and the Kaiser had turned away from a dream which had not come true.

The victory of the Marne was a triumph of a great strategical plan executed with a mathematical precision. General Joffre had now got his reserves, though the German forces still greatly outnumbered his. The battle was fought on a front of 200 miles, the most extended battle in history, and the handling of a defensive so widely dispersed was a masterpiece of military co-ordination. Some writers have assumed too readily that the Marne was won because of the German mistakes. Von Kluck indeed made mistakes, but the main German plan was sound, and it nearly succeeded. If von Kluck had enveloped D'Esperey's army, if the Duke of Würtemberg had pierced the centre at Vitry, if Verdun had fallen, and if De Castelnau had been driven from the heights around Nancy, Germany

would have won a complete victory and Paris would have dropped into her hands like an over-ripe plum. The Marne was won because all four of these dangers were staved off, and at two points a boldly conceived counter-offensive succeeded. It is hard to say that the credit of the victory is due to any one movement. Rather it was due to a series of audacious actions founded upon and co-ordinated by a sound general strategy.

The French left which von Kluck hoped to envelop succeeded in enveloping him, and the chief factor in the success was the brilliant attack by Maunory's Sixth Army against the German rearguards on the Ourcq. The nucleus of this Sixth Army, under D'Amade, had been for more than a week on the Germans' right, and they did not rate it highly. But during the first days of September, under cover of the fortress of Paris, it was increased

to a formidable striking force. It received two first-line corps and part of the 19th Algerian Corps, and was thus increased to something like 150,000 men. Every taxi-cab in Paris was employed to bring it swiftly to the front when the time came. The achievement of Maunoury was one of the few genuine surprises in this war of too-efficient Intelligence Departments. While Maunoury pressed upon the rearguards Sir John French and General D'Esperey checked and turned von Kluck's main advance, with the result that it fell back and uncovered von Bülow's right flank. This gave General Foch the occasion for the most sensational movement in the battle. He was fighting on the southern rim of the plateau of Sezanne against von Bülow and the right of the Saxon command. By a bold movement, begun in the darkness of a stormy night, he thrust a wedge between von Bülow and the Saxons, and for two days fought



a battle on two fronts—a feat which had already been achieved by our 4th Division at Le Cateau and was to be repeated months later by the Russians at Przasnysz. The doings of Foch during these days, when he drove the Prussian Guard into the Marshes of St. Gond and bit deep into the Saxon ranks, are already classic. The most brilliant military writer in Europe revealed himself as the most formidable of fighting men.

The success of the French left would have been indecisive had the centre given way. South of Vitry there was desperate fighting, where the Fourth Army, under Langle de Cary, had to face the Würtembergers. Under their savage pressure the French with difficulty held their ground, but on the most critical day, the 9th, they received as reinforcements the 21st Corps from the Vosges. On that day, too, the retirement of the German right began to

have its effect upon their centre. Farther east Verdun had been in deadly danger. The Crown Prince had got well to the south of it, and for five days bombarded Fort Troyon, on the Meuse. General Sarrail, who had now taken command, received the 15th Corps from Lorraine, and was able to stand his ground till the Crown Prince fell back on the 11th to conform to the general retirement. Since then Verdun has been in no serious danger. It has been defended, not by steel and concrete, but by a field army.

When the history of the war is written it may well be that De Castelnau's stand on the wooded hills around the old capital of Lorraine will rank amongst its foremost achievements. That army of Lorraine was the nursery of great soldiers. From it came Foch and Maud'huy, and in it the 9th and 21st Corps were first trained to the new conditions of war. From August 23rd

to September 9th the French were on the defensive. Then, when the ardour of the enemy was blunted against their unbroken front, they advanced in force, cleared the frontier forests, and by the 12th had regained Lunéville and St. Dié, and pushed their line almost to the German border. That gate into France was more vital for the campaign than even the inviolability of Paris.

The Marne was the end of the first phase of the war. The avalanche which was designed to crush out French resistance had failed in its purpose. The "battle without a morrow" was gone beyond hope; the battle had been fought and the morrow was come. Thereafter Germany was compelled to accept a slow war of entrenchments, which was repugnant to all her theories. Every week brought her nearer the position of a beleaguered fortress with all outlets shut. For the Armies of France it was an indubitable triumph

won against great difficulties by sheer patience, stamina, and skill. The world has always been ready to praise France's *élan* and fire ; it had now to realize that she had fortitude and endurance also, the endurance of tempered steel.

An army which has fought no war for a generation is always a packet of surprises. Established reputations crack and new ones are made with lightning rapidity. Not the least of General Joffre's virtues is his unflinching determination to search out capacity, and to use it regardless of military conventions. Age or youth has nothing to do with the question, only merit. Maunoury and Langle de Cary, for example, were over age at the outbreak of the war, and were recalled to active service, where they brilliantly justified themselves. Foch, Sarrail, and D'Esperey were Corps Commanders in August, and Army Commanders in September. But the most conspicuous instances of rapid

promotion are those of Maud'huy and D'Urbal. The first, a man of fifty-seven, was Professor of Military History at the Ecole de Guerre. At the end of August he was a Brigadier in the 8th Corps of the Army of Lorraine. In three weeks he passed through the ranks of Brigadier-General, Divisional General, Corps Commander, to Army Commander—a speed of ascent which recalls the spacious days of Napoleon. D'Urbal had the same experience. He is fifty-six years of age, and is therefore, except for Sir Douglas Haig, the youngest Army Commander in the West.

A hundred years ago, when Blücher and Schwarzenberg followed Napoleon into France, the former took up a defensive position on the plateau between the Aisne and the Oise, and from that position not all the genius of Napoleon could dislodge him. When after the Marne General Joffre set himself to decide upon the next step he was doubt-

ful as to whether the Germans meant to hold the Aisne plateau in force or merely to fight a rearguard action on their way to a further line. By September 18th he had learned the strength of the plateau and resolved to effect by an enveloping movement what could not be done by a frontal attack. Accordingly he extended his left wing north from Compiègne. Presently it was apparent that the Germans were also busy upon an enveloping movement. As the Allied left extended, so did the German right, and soon both sides were engaged in a feverish race for the North Sea. The garrison sought to break out of the fortress by the only port still left open. General Joffre was not slow to seize the meaning of the situation. De Castelnau's army went north of Maunoury, Maud'huy north of De Castelnau, the British north of Maud'huy, and a new army, under D'Urbal, was collected to assist the

Belgians in extending the line to the ocean. The next phase of the campaign was the holding of that northern door of France against which Marlborough had battered two hundred years ago.

### III

## THE NORTHERN GATE

THE second great German offensive fell upon one part of the Allied line. It concerned only Maud'huy's Tenth Army, D'Urbal's Eighth Army, and the British forces. We know now that when the movement to the North Sea began there was no conception on the part of the Allied Staff of the kind of contest before them. General Joffre hoped to be able to take the offensive and to move against the German right flank, and Sir John French, in pursuance of the same policy, actually initiated a forward movement as late as October 18th—a movement which left us the dangerous legacy of the Ypres salient.



Our first surprise was the extent to which the Germans had penetrated to the north-west. They were in La Bassée before us and as far west as the Hill of Cassel. These positions were at first lightly held, but Maud'huy from the start had the whole of von Bülow's command against him from Albert to the north of Arras. The second surprise was the numbers of the enemy, and this surprise fell chiefly upon the British force. It was not till October 18th that we realized that there was no gap north of Menin, but that four new German corps were moving against Ypres. Such surprises test the metal of the high commands. Carefully elaborated plans become worthless, a new strategy has to be improvised, troops have to be hurried from a distance and flung into the firing-line with scarcely an hour to rest and with no proper reconnaissance of the ground. In such a situation, too, until the front

has reached the sea the general commanding on the left has to fight a battle with his flank in constant danger of envelopment.

The last was now Maud'huy's case, and it is impossible to over-estimate the value to the Allied cause of his Arras battles. He held what Louis XIV. regarded as the true gate of Paris. In the flats east of the city he met von Bülow, while the Bavarians, now in position, attempted to outflank him on the north. He was driven back upon Arras, where his line could rest on the slopes which encircle the town, and on October 6th the Germans began the bombardment of the city. By the 8th the enemy was in Lens and was daily increasing in numbers. Maud'huy held his ground till the 20th, keeping the enemy well outside the Vauban ramparts. The great stroke was delivered between the 20th and 26th, when the Prussian Guard were in action. There

were three passages, by which the Germans might make their way to the Channel coast—the Yser, La Bassée, and Arras. This last was by far the best, since it gave a road both to the Channel ports and to Paris. The attack on Arras was probably the most dangerous moment of the campaign in the West. The Germans put this fight in the Artois in the forefront of the battles of the war, and but for Maud'huy's stubborn stand the gates of the north would have been unlocked. The Germans were within gun-range of the city, and shells rained in the ancient streets. But the French line remained unbroken, and by the 26th had begun a counter-offensive. The situation was saved, for by this time the main tides of war were now breaking against the bastion of the Ypres salient.

The La Bassée port was held by Smith-Dorrien and the British, and the British front extended, to begin with,

as far north as Bixschoote. Then came the line of the Yser below Dixmude and the sea. That line was at first held by the Belgian garrison from Antwerp with French cavalry and Territorials connecting them with the British in the south. A corps of weary and broken men cannot with all the gallantry in the world meet the attack of a superior number of fresh troops, and for a little the position was in deadly danger. The story of the heroic fight of the Belgian Army, of the British bombardment from the sea, and of the opening of the sluices has been told before. Here we are concerned only with the assistance given by the French. The critical point was Dixmude, where a main road and railway cross the Yser. It was held by a brigade of Breton Marines, under Admiral Ronarc'h, and its defence was one of the most brilliant feats of the war. The position was vital, for its capture by the Germans at any time

before the flooding of the Yser flats would have meant that the right of our front was turned. Admiral Ronarc'h placed his batteries with great skill behind the town, and was able till October 19th to keep the enemy out of the streets. Then came a terrific bombardment which battered Dixmude to pieces. On one night the defenders had to face no fewer than fourteen different attacks. But the Marines held firm and defended Dixmude till November 10th, by which time its fall had ceased to be of much importance. The full story has been told in a recent work by M. Charles Le Goffic, and is well worth reading. The author writes with the precision of a military historian and the poetry and passion of a Breton patriot.

Not less desperate was the struggle for the line of the Yser itself. By October 23rd General Grossetti had brought up part of D'Urbal's new army,

the 42nd Division of the 16th Corps, which had been fighting at Reims. Along with the Belgians they held the line of the railway about Ramscapelle during the heavy fighting on October 28th. On the 30th the Würtembergers made their final effort. Advancing through the sloppy fields and crossing the dykes by means of planks, they reached the railway-line and took Ramscapelle. But next day the African infantry of the 42nd Division counter-attacked along with the Belgians, drove the enemy from the village, and hurled them into the lagoons. Then came the second flooding, which decided the enemy's fate. Thereafter half a mile of floods made the line of the Yser secure.

By the last week of October the attack on the three passages had slackened, and the bulk of the enemy's strength was directed against Ypres. The little city had no value in itself

and it commanded no main highway to the coast; but the salient east of it seems to have exercised in the German High Command that peculiar illogical attraction which salients possess. In the battle of Ypres, which began on October 20th and ended on November 12th—the greatest battle of the war, and perhaps the greatest as yet in human history—the British Army held most of the line. They had on the whole the heaviest fighting, for they held the most critical points—the front of the salient at Gheluvelt and the southern re-entrant on the Klein Zillebeke ridge. This, I think, our generous Allies would acknowledge; but it is fair to add that without French assistance Ypres could not have been held, and Germany would have won her passage to the coast. Apart from the fact that Maud'huy at Arras and Grossetti on the Yser saved our flanks from being turned, detachments of D'Urbal's army

played an invaluable part in the actual battle of the salient. I will take two instances only. On October 30th Sir Douglas Haig borrowed from the French 9th Corps three battalions and one cavalry brigade. The three battalions, under General Moussy, whose recent death we deplore, took up position on the Klein Zillebeke ridge between Bulfin's detachment and Allenby's cavalry. The French had come to our assistance in the nick of time as sixty years before at the same season of the year they had come to our aid at Inkerman. On the terrible morning of the 31st Moussy kept the line intact by a desperate effort. Reinforcements were necessary, and he collected every man he could lay hands on, cooks and orderlies and transport-drivers, and dismounted the Cuirassiers of his escort. The adventure prospered, the line held, and when that afternoon the charge of the Worcesters relieved Gheluvelt, our whole position on the salient was intact.



A second instance is the superb fight of Dubois's 9th Corps, which held the line from Zonnebeke to Bixschoote with the aid of Bidon's Territorial Divisions and part of De Mitry's 2nd Cavalry Corps. He had to face the bulk of the four new German formations which had been first launched against the British, as well as the left wing of the Württemberg Army on the Yser. The position was the northern re-entrant to the Ypres salient, and had the Germans won the canal crossing they would have turned the defence of Ypres from the north. The fight raged fiercely around Bixschoote village, which became a charnel-house full of the unburied dead. There the Zouaves especially distinguished themselves, and at no point of our front did the enemy lose more heavily. For the better part of a month Dubois held the pass, till the enemy's offensive was broken.

The battle of Ypres, apart from its

strategic importance, will always occupy a special place among the battles of the war. In the retreat from Mons, at the Marne, and at the Aisne we had our Allies on each side of us, but at Ypres we mingled with them, and each learned at close quarters the prowess of the other. We are still fighting there in conjunction. He who visits that blood-stained salient to-day will see as many French as British troops on the road from Poperinghe. He will hear the French 75-mm. guns speaking beside the English 18-pounder, and see the lean, brown *tirailleurs* moving alongside the solid British infantry. At Ypres there began that new respect and admiration between the Allies which comes only to eye-witnesses. The three-weeks' battle was in a sense a more significant achievement than the Marne. It marked the defeat of the second great German offensive. It cost the enemy a quarter of a million men. It inaugu-

rated that winter stalemate which bore more hardly on Germany than on the Allies, and which gave France time to reorganize her levies and supplement her resources. It also established finally—if there had ever been any doubt of it—the supreme military talent of General Joffre and General Foch. The French reserves were not yet ready, but General Joffre managed to collect reinforcements when the call came. Apart from the new armies holding the front he sent up during the actual fighting not less than five Army Corps by rail and motor. It was Foch's task to make his scanty reserves go as far as possible, placing a division here and a division there, as the stress of battle altered. Only under the most brilliant leading could half a million men between Albert and the sea have beaten off at least three times their number.

## IV

### THE WAR OF ATTRITION

“**A**TTENTION” is a word which has been loosely used and frequently misunderstood. As applicable to General Joffre’s winter strategy it means the kind of war in which the enemy is held in a long series of positions, and subjected to a variety of attacks in which he loses more than the attackers. General Joffre saw clearly that the reduction of Germany’s man power was the first object of the Allies. A war of attrition benefits one side either if the losses of that side are out of proportion less than those of the enemy, or if the enemy is being detained pending the arrival of reinforcements.

Both objects were part of the plan of the French Generalissimo.

The Allied trench lines extended from the mouth of the Yser to the slopes of the Jura—a distance, if we follow the intricacies of the position, of some 590 miles. Of this the Belgians held 15, the British 31, and the French 544 miles. Not all that line was, of course, held in equal strength. There were large sections on the crests of the Vosges where the front could be held by occupying certain strategic points, and there were other parts where the war had languished into a genuine stalemate owing to the impregnability of both fronts. The space from the sea to Albert, the neighbourhood of Soissons and Reims, Northern Champagne, the Argonne, the Verdun, and Nancy circles, and the southern end of the Vosges were the sections requiring special protection. Yet, with all deductions, for an army of a million and a half to hold over

500 miles was an extraordinary performance, requiring ceaseless vigilance and putting a terrible strain upon the rank and file. There was no leave during these months in the French Army, and it was not till February that married men were permitted occasionally to visit their families.

We can dimly guess what the long winter meant to the French lines, where battalions were often kept in the trenches four or five times longer than anything known in the British section. Fortunately a large part of the French ground was well suited to trench work. Along the Yser it was a swamp and on the Ypres salient little better, while the chalky soil of the Aisne made life uncomfortable. But in the light soil of the Oise valley and of Northern Champagne things were better, and the woods of the Argonne and the Vosges allowed of forest colonies. There were horrible places, such as La Boisselle, near Albert,

where the French lines ran through a cemetery, but they were the exception. The French troops were not fed with the lavish variety of the British, but they had all they wanted, and their bread and coffee were the best in the world.

Not only was the line held, but a series of attacks were made which bit deep into the enemy's strength. There were movements on the Yser; there was the thrust north of Lens which ended in the capture of Vermelles; and in particular there was the great movement of General Langle de Cary during February in Northern Champagne which brought the French guns almost within range of the railway behind the German front. In all these movements the German losses were far greater than those of the Allies. Even in the fight at Soissons in January, where the German counter-attack succeeded, the enemy lost probably twice as much as the French, and in the Champagne

battles 10,000 German dead were buried, 2,000 prisoners were taken, and two regiments of the Prussian Guard were almost annihilated. Besides these actions, where attrition was the chief motive, there were certain movements undertaken with the intention of seizing vantage-points for a future offensive. Such was the fighting at Les Eparges, in the Woevre, and the movement on the left bank of the Moselle through the Bois le Prêtre, which between them pinched the German wedge at St. Mihiel very thin and gravely threatened its communications. Such was the advance over the Southern Vosges which secured the debouchments of the lower glens and won to within 10 miles of Mühlhausen. This part of the campaign was partly reconnaissance and partly a securing of a "jumping-off ground." That this successful "nibbling" could go on for six months simultaneously with the holding of 500 miles of front



is a proof of the superb vitality of the French Army and the tenacity of their leaders.

But the most important work of all was being done quietly behind the scenes at Headquarters and in a thousand centres up and down the country. General Joffre was busy remedying the defects which experience had revealed, preparing his new armies, and organizing the resources of the nation. He had already drastically purged the army of incompetent officers. Every leader was now a proved soldier, and the average age for generals had been reduced by about ten years. From the start he had refused to follow German precedents and had created a national strategy suited to the genius and the circumstances of the French people. In November he had an army thoroughly seasoned, welded, and perfected by war. But the three months' fighting had been maintained at a heavy

price. It was necessary to fill up the gaps and keep the armies up to strength, and, in the second place, to find new armies for a future offensive. It was necessary also to provide munitions on a colossal scale, including heavy artillery and the high explosives of which Germany had proved the value.

I do not think that history provides a parallel case of a great problem, with many intricate and novel developments, being met and faced in the midst of a life-and-death struggle. It was no mere question of the use of resources already available and organized. General Joffre's task was one of organic army reform and elaborate national reorganization. It would have been impossible unless he had had behind him a people inspired by a universal spirit of sacrifice. There were no politicians to obstruct. The Commander-in-Chief was a national dictator and the politicians were his willing colleagues. It is not possible

in a short space to explain the steps taken to increase the armed strength of France. Suffice it to say that large classes hitherto exempt from service were called up, that all reservists were brought to the colours, and that the 1915 class, which would normally have gone into training this August, was already in training before the end of last year. Steps were taken to call up still later classes. The consequence was that before the spring the French active forces were largely increased, and substantial reserves will be available during the summer and autumn.

More intricate was the problem of equipment. The need for a combined national effort which we have lately felt in Britain was realized months ago in France. Every factory and workshop which could by any possibility be adapted for the purpose was used for the manufacture of guns and shells. The result was that the supply by March

was increased 600 per cent. from what existed at the beginning of the war—a rate which will presently reach 900 per cent. The achievement applied, not only to quantity but to quality. New types of heavy gun, new types of hand grenade and bomb, and all the material required for trench warfare were improvised with astonishing speed. Let it be understood that this was not an official but a national effort. Local committees were formed everywhere of leading manufacturers, and every scrap of plant and all the intelligence and ingenuity of the land were pressed into the service. Much, no doubt, still remains to be done, but the achievement of France up to date is a lesson in the meaning of national organization.

In this work France had one great asset. Our labour troubles have always appeared to her incomprehensible. In the first place, the gravity of the war was intimately felt by every class, and

there was not the will to strike, even if there had been the means. In the second place, the existence of compulsory military service was an invaluable aid to the authorities when the ammunition crisis began to be felt after the battle of the Marne. There was little need for the State to take over the management of private factories. The workers were soldiers, engaged in military work and subject to military law. Many who had been mobilized were recalled to their former trades, and there was no wastage of talent in the wrong channel.

The subordinate services of the Army were brought to a like degree of efficiency. Since the beginning of the war the French railways have transported from one point to another in the theatre of operations more than 100 divisions by means of more than 10,000 trains in journeys varying from 60 to 350 miles. The 12,000 motor vehicles

of the Army have been used to carry troops at the rate of 250,000 men per month. As in the British Army the food supplies have been regular and excellent, and the medical service highly efficient. In spite of the inclement winter the sick-rate was lower than in time of peace.

Military critics speculated during the winter as to the direction of the great French offensive. Most were inclined to believe that it would take place in Alsace, or from the Heights of the Meuse in the direction of Metz. Much valuable ground has been won in these localities, but the main movement, which is still in progress, has been that of the army in the sector north of Arras. The value of a success here is obvious. If pushed far enough beyond Lens, it would threaten the main communications of the whole German front south of Compiègne and compel a wholesale retirement. It is idle to speculate about

work which is still unfinished. The French have won the high ground commanding the plain of the Scarpe and Scheldt, and inflicted terrible losses upon the enemy. The sight of one of their artillery "preparations," when heavy shell fire was delivered for hours together with the rapidity of a machine-gun, was a proof of the fruitfulness of General Joffre's strenuous winter work.

## V

### FRANCE AND BRITAIN

**W**AR reveals a nation to itself and not less to its allies. Generations of business dealings and official visits and self-conscious efforts towards understanding are less fruitful than a month's brigading together in battle. For the first week or two there is bound to be a little confusion. Each army has its own methods of fighting, and no foreign Staff quite comprehends them till it sees them in practice. The French, for example, are accustomed to hold their trenches lightly and to trust much to their field-guns. That wonderful weapon, the *Soixante-quinze*, can fire on an enemy as near as 40 yards to the



trenches on its own side. Hence, when the Germans attacked, the French often did not stick to their front trenches; they let the Germans take them and then cleared them out with their artillery—a very good plan, but one which at first embarrassed us a little if we happened to be on their flank. Now that we know their ways we have a great admiration for them. It is not difficult for allies in the field to understand the ways and achievements of each other, but it is more difficult and at the same time more important for the people at large on both sides to come to a proper mutual appreciation.

Quite naturally our eyes have been turned to the doings of the British troops, and some of us have drifted into the notion that we are bearing the heavy end in the West. It is not the truth. The Western front has been held by the French—with the assistance of the British. The French are a generous

people, very quick and felicitous in praise. They have most readily acknowledged the invaluable assistance we rendered them at Ypres and during the retreat. But far the greatest effort has been theirs. What is needed in Britain is some understanding of what the nine months of war have meant in the way of strain and tension to the French people.

It has been a universal effort. It was bound to be that with a democratic people who believe that democracy is worth fighting for. Every social class, every degree of wealth and education, will be found in the ranks. A Frenchman has no longer any politics or prejudices, except the determination to help his country to break for good the menace of her traditional enemy. In a democratic army you get in ordinary times an easy discipline. Officers and privates chaff each other—the former is perhaps a village schoolmaster's son and

the latter of a family which sent knights to Agincourt; and at night they play draughts together at the café door. In the modern French Army there is very little gold lace and all that it stands for. But, in war, discipline becomes marvellously tight because in its essence it is self-imposed. If it did not come from above, it would come from below. And not discipline only, but affection and a passion of devotion which are not surpassed in any army in the world. The French soldier to-day is a serious person. He never wanted to fight till the great cause suddenly revealed itself, but now he has that quiet resolution which might have been noted in some homely knight who left his hounds and orchards and all that he loved to ride to the Crusades. Being French, he cannot forget that adorable touch of *panache* which has coloured so many episodes of the war. His heroics, however, are of the soul and owe nothing

to deliberation. France does not need banners and uniforms to make her armies splendid. Her generals, whose fame is world-wide, are often, so far as their dress goes, hard to distinguish from the private soldier. She has found what Cromwell sought, the "plain russet-coat captain who knows what he fights for and loves what he knows."

It is the same with the civilians, the old men and women and lads. France has had a terrible death-rate. Her women have always been fond of black ; but now black seems to be the universal wear, especially in the country and provincial towns. Every family has a relative to mourn. The fields are being tilled by children and women and the very old. You hardly ever see a young man who is not in uniform. There is the sense everywhere of a mighty effort of which no one complains. There is very little pessimism. The people know

they will win, for they believe that a complete sacrifice is always rewarded.

We have to remember, too, that France has the invader inside her borders. Some of her fairest countryside and some of her richest industrial areas are in German hands and have been methodically plundered. I have heard people talk as if this detracted from the French effort. They say, "Any people will fight to the death if they are invaded," and draw therefrom a moral complimentary to ourselves. But it is fairer to look at it in the other way. Invasion means the weakening of the total national resources, and the country invaded fights under a handicap, since part of her territory is withdrawn from the national assets. But one fighting advantage has come from the German presence behind the Aisne and Oise. Every day proves more clearly that the stories of calculated and abominable outrages which we have

heard since August are far less than the truth. There is not a company in the French Army which does not contain men who are fighting, not only for France but to avenge ruined homesteads, murdered kinsfolk, and ravished wives. The German armies marched light-heartedly through rapine in a land which they believed to be crushed beyond hope of revival. They will repent their folly when, their artillery ramparts broken down, the *furia francese* bursts upon them and the ravaged comes to grips with the ravager.

Much of Britain's task in this war is still imperfectly understood by many classes in France. They are still hazy about the meaning of sea-power and the control of the seas. They do not realize the intricacy of the British Empire and the necessity of the subsidiary operations in Africa and Asia. They do not quite appreciate the vast industrial labours which Britain must

carry on for the benefit of all her Allies. It seems to me—and I know that this opinion is shared by many in France—that some concerted effort might well be made through the French Press to expound more fully to the ordinary reader the nature of Britain's doings. But when all has been said our effort in this war is still a long way short of that of France. Add in all our naval and overseas and industrial activities, and it is still short. The war has not bitten so deeply into our national life, its gravity is not so intimately and universally realized. It is our business to learn from our Allies, and we have much to learn from France.

You will hear no responsible criticism of Britain across the Channel, though Germany has laboured hard to make trouble between us. On the contrary, there is only gratitude, and that generous admiration of which France has the happy art. But if she is strain-

ing to her utmost we may well ask ourselves if we dare to do less. This war is not one whit more important for her than for us, since defeat for us would mean the end of all things. If France were conquered, we should hold our Empire and our freedom on a short tenure. Our Allies have no delusions about the nature of the contest they are engaged in. They do not talk, like some well-meaning people in Britain, about terms of peace before the battle is won, or about not humiliating Germany, as if *Messieurs les Assassins* after failure would suddenly become decent citizens if we refrained from hurting their feelings. Their creed is that to which Mr. Asquith has given final expression: they will not lay down the sword until scientific barbarism is beaten out of existence. There is, I think, more pessimism in Britain to-day than in France, and the reason is that France has a keener realization of the



nature of the war. If a man is wholly dedicated to a great cause, he is inclined to be cheerful. He has made the ultimate sacrifice, and his conscience is good.

The successful conduct of the war depends upon a full understanding between the Allied nations, and so also does the establishment of a lasting peace. There is no cement like blood shed in a common sacrifice. On the Western front, along the Marne and the Aisne, and everywhere from Vermelles to Ypres, there are little cemeteries of the dead. Each patch of coppice and corner of meadow-land has a cluster of rough wooden crosses. On these you will read both French and English names. Next to the cross which marks the resting-place of a Grenadier or a Scottish Borderer will be one which tells how Pierre L—, "an Alsatian," died for France. The country people tend these quiet graves, or the troops from

the nearest trenches, French or English, spare time to keep them neat. Allies have died together in the same cause and then quarrelled, but never, I think, after an ordeal so fierce as this. In a true alliance there may come a time when each fights, not only for the common purpose, but to some extent for the other's private sake. France, who has been the leader in human freedom, from whom we have drawn so much of our thought and art, may become for us a cause only less dear than our own. If we are fighting for civilization, France is an integral part of it—in M. Lavedan's phrase, she is "the eternal and the essential." If we have misunderstood her, she, too, admits that she has lacked perception, and after her generous fashion is eager to recant. A sonnet by M. Maurice Allou, which I roughly translate, is a proof of the new unity of Western Europe.

## OUR ALLIES THE ENGLISH.

“We know not France,” so ran their frank decree-  
ing ;

And we, we joyed not in their humours rude,  
They praised our fire, but scorned our fortitude.

“Fog-bound their land,” we said, “and dim their  
seeing.”

But side by side deployed in truceless wars  
Sudden our hearts are clear beyond surmising,  
They know a France to the great days uprising :  
We see beyond their fogs the ancient stars.

'Tis Kipling's spirit, fierce, unshackled, and bright,  
His songs of deepest peace and ardent flame,  
That in the eyes of her free warriors gleam.

And England, now thou look'st with heroes' sight,  
Thou know'st, O fiery race whom none may tame,  
That France has borne the sons of Corneille's  
dream.

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