

**1914, by John French, *Viscount of Ypres***

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **THE RETREAT FROM MONS**

At 5 a.m. on the 22nd I awoke, as I had lain down to sleep, in high hopes. No evil foreboding of coming events had visited me in dreams; but it was not many hours later that the disillusionment began. I started by motor in the very early hours of a beautiful August morning to visit General Lanrezac at his Headquarters in the neighbourhood of Philippeville.

Soon after entering the area of the 5th French Army, I found my motor stopped at successive cross roads by columns of infantry and artillery moving *south*. After several such delays on my journey, and before I had gone half the distance, I suddenly came up with Captain Spiers of the 11th Hussars, who was the liaison officer at General Lanrezac's Headquarters.

There is an atmosphere engendered by troops retiring, when they expect to be advancing, which is unmistakable to anyone who has had much experience of war. It matters not whether such a movement is the result of a lost battle, an unsuccessful engagement, or is in the nature of a "strategic manœuvre to the rear." The fact that, whatever the reason may be, it means giving

up ground to the enemy, affects the spirits of the troops and manifests itself in the discontented, apprehensive expression which is seen on the faces of the men, and the tired, slovenly, unwilling gait which invariably characterises troops subjected to this ordeal.

This atmosphere surrounded me for some time before I met Spiers and before he had spoken a word. My optimistic visions of the night before had vanished, and what he told me did not tend to bring them back. He reported that the Guard and 7th German Corps had since daybreak advanced on the Sambre in the neighbourhood of Franière, and had attacked the 10th French Corps which was holding the river. The advanced troops had driven the Germans back; but he added that "offensive action was contrary to General Lanrezac's plans," and that this had "annoyed him."

The 10th Corps had had to fall back with some loss, and were taking up ground known as the "Fosse Position," on the south side of the Sambre. Spiers thought that the 10th Corps had been knocked about a good deal. He gave me various items of information gleaned from the Chief of Intelligence of the French 5th Army. These reports went to show that the German turning movement in Belgium was extending far towards the west, the right being kept well forward as though a powerful envelopment was designed. It was evident that the enemy was making some progress in his attempts to bridge and cross the Sambre all along the front of the 5th Army. There appeared to be some

difficulty in finding General Lanrezac, and therefore I decided to return at once to my Headquarters at Le Cateau.

I found there that our own Intelligence had received information which confirmed a good deal of what I had heard in the morning. They thought that at least three German Corps were advancing upon us, the most westerly having reached as far as Ath.

The hopes and anticipations with which I concluded the last chapter underwent considerable modification from these experiences and events; but the climax of the day's disappointment and disillusionment was not reached till 11 p.m., when the Head of the French Military Mission at my Headquarters, Colonel Huguet, brought a French Staff Officer to me who had come direct from General Lanrezac. This officer reported the fighting of which Spiers had already informed me, and said that the French 10th Corps had suffered very heavily. When thinking of our estimates of losses in those days, it must be remembered that a dearly bought experience had not yet opened our minds to the terrible toll which modern war exacts.

The position of the 5th French Army extended from Dinant on the Meuse (just north of Fosse—Charleroi—Thuin back to Trélon) about five Corps in all. Sordet's Cavalry Corps had reported that probably three German Corps were advancing on Brussels.

The German line facing the Anglo-French Army was thought to be "roughly" Soignies—Nivelles—Gembloux, and thence circling to the north of the Sambre, round Namur. A strong column of German infantry was advancing on Charleroi from Fleurus about 3 p.m. on the 21st. There had been heavy fighting at Tamines, on the Sambre, in which French troops had been worsted. General Lanrezac was anxious to know if I would attack the flank of the German columns which were pressing him back from the river.

In view of the most probable situation of the German Army, as it was known to both of us, and the palpable intention of its Commander to effect a great turning movement round my left flank, and having regard to the actual numbers of which I was able to dispose, it is very difficult to realise what was in Lanrezac's mind when he made such a request to me.

As the left of the French 5th Army (Reserve Division of 18th Corps) was drawn back as far as Trélon, and the centre and right of that Army were in process of retiring, the forward position I now held on the Condé Canal might quickly become very precarious.

I, therefore, informed Lanrezac in reply that such an operation as he suggested was quite impracticable for me. I agreed to retain my present position for 24 hours; but after that time I told him it would be necessary for me to consider whether the weight against my front and outer flank, combined with the retreat of the French 5th

Army, would not compel me to go back to the Maubeuge position.

I should mention that earlier in the day, on my return to Headquarters after my talk with Spiers, I had despatched the following message to General Lanrezac:—

"I am waiting for the dispositions arranged for to be carried out, especially the posting of French Cavalry Corps on my left. I am prepared to fulfil the *rôle* allotted to me when the 5th Army advances to the attack.

"In the meantime, I hold an advanced defensive position extending from Condé on the left, through Mons to Erquelines, where I connect with two Reserve Divisions south of the Sambre. I am now much in advance of the line held by the 5th Army and feel my position to be as forward as circumstances will allow, particularly in view of the fact that I am not properly prepared for offensive action till to-morrow morning, as I have previously informed you.

"I do not understand from your wire that the 18th Corps has yet been engaged, and they stand on my inner flank."

I left my Headquarters at 5 a.m. on Sunday the 23rd and went to Sars-la-Bruyère (Headquarters of the 2nd Corps), and there I met Haig, Smith-Dorrien, and Allenby.

The cavalry had, during the 22nd, drawn off towards my left flank after heavy pressure by the enemy's advancing columns, leaving detachments in front of my right to the east of Mons, which was not so severely threatened. These detachments extended in a south-easterly direction south of Bray and Binche, the latter place having been occupied by the enemy. They were in touch with the 5th French Army. Patrols and advanced squadrons had engaged similar bodies of the enemy and had held their own well.

The 2nd Corps occupied the line of the Condé Canal, from that place round the salient which the canal makes to the north of Mons, and extended thence to the east of Obourg, whence that part of the line was drawn back towards Villers-St. Ghislain.

The 5th Division was holding the line from Condé to Mariette, whilst the 3rd Division continued the line thence round the salient to the right of the line occupied by the 2nd Corps.

The 1st Corps was echeloned on the right and in rear of the 2nd.

I told the commanders of the doubts which had arisen in my mind during the previous 24 hours, and impressed on them the necessity of being prepared for any kind of move, either in advance or in retreat. I discussed exhaustively the situation on our front.

Allenby's bold and searching reconnaissance had not led me to believe that we were threatened by forces

against which we could not make an effective stand. The 2nd Corps had not yet been seriously engaged, while the 1st was practically still in reserve.

Allenby's orders to concentrate towards the left flank when pressed by the advance of the enemy's main columns had been practically carried into effect. I entertained some anxiety as to the salient which the canal makes north of Mons, and enjoined on Smith-Dorrien particular watchfulness and care with regard to it.

They all assured me that a quiet night had been passed and that their line was firmly taken up and held.

The air reconnaissance had started at daybreak, and I decided to await aircraft reports from Henderson before making any decided plan.

I instructed Sir Archibald Murray, my Chief of Staff, to remain for the present at General Smith-Dorrien's Headquarters at Sars-la-Bruyère, and gave him full instructions as to arrangements which must be made if a retreat became necessary. I then went on to Valenciennes. General Drummond (Commanding the 19th Infantry Brigade) and the French Commandant at Valenciennes met me at the station.

I inspected a part of the entrenchments which were under construction, and the disposition of the Territorial troops (two divisions under General d'Amade) which were detailed to hold them and to guard our left flank. The 19th Brigade (2nd Batt. R. Welsh Fusiliers,

1st Batt. Scottish Rifles, 1st Batt. Middlesex Regt., and 2nd Batt. Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders) was just completing its detrainment, and I placed Drummond under the orders of General Allenby commanding the Cavalry Division.

During this day (August 23rd) reports continued to reach me of heavy pressure on our outposts all along the line, but chiefly between Condé and Mons.

Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, it will be remembered, was now in command of the 2nd Corps, having been sent out from England in succession to Sir James Grierson on the latter's untimely death.

After my conference with the Corps Commanders on the morning of the 23rd, I left General Smith-Dorrien full of confidence in regard to his position, but when I returned to my Headquarters in the afternoon, reports came to hand that he was giving up the salient at Mons because the outpost line at Obourg had been penetrated by the enemy, and that he was also preparing to give up the whole of the line of the canal before nightfall. He said that he anticipated a gap occurring in his line between the 3rd and 5th Divisions in the neighbourhood of Mariette, and he went so far as to make a request for help to the 1st Corps.

Up to this time there was no decided threat in any strength on Condé, Sir Horace, therefore, need not have feared an imminent turning movement, and, as regards



his front, he was nowhere threatened by anything more than cavalry supported by small bodies of infantry.

At that time no directions for retreat had been issued from Headquarters, although the Chief of the General Staff had been left at Sars-la-Bruyère on purpose to give orders for such a movement if it should become necessary.

The General's anxiety seems to have lessened later in the afternoon, for at 5 p.m. a message from the 2nd Corps said that the commander was "well satisfied with the situation."

The 3rd Division was now effecting a retirement south of the canal to a line running west through Nouvelles, and this movement had the inevitable result of bringing back the 5th Division and handing over the bridges of the canal to the German cavalry.

Every report I was now receiving at Headquarters pointed to the early necessity of a retirement of the British Forces in view of the general strategic situation, and I did not, therefore, deem it desirable to interfere with the 2nd Corps commander.

Reports of German activity on his front continued to be received from the G.O.C. 2nd Corps. At 7.15 p.m. he asked for permission to retire on Bavai; at 9.45 he was again reassured—a Divisional Headquarters which had retired was now "moving forward again"; and at 10.20 p.m. he reported, "casualties in no way excessive; all quiet now."

The line which the 2nd Corps had taken up for the night showed an average retirement of three miles south of the canal. During the late afternoon the advanced troops of the 1st Corps were engaged, but not seriously threatened; they held their ground.

During the late afternoon and evening very disquieting reports had arrived as to the situation on my right. These were confirmed later in a telegram from French Headquarters, which arrived at half-past eleven at night. It clearly showed that our present position was strategically untenable; but this conclusion had been forced upon me much earlier in the evening when I received a full appreciation of the situation as it then appeared at French General Headquarters. General Joffre also told me that his information led him to expect that I might be attacked the next day by at least three German Corps and two Cavalry Divisions.

Appreciating the situation from the point of view which all reports now clearly established, my last hope of an offensive had to be abandoned, and it became necessary to consider an immediate retreat from our present forward position.

I selected the new line from Jerlain (south-east of Valenciennes) eastwards to Maubeuge. This line had already been reconnoitred. The Corps and Divisional Staff Officers who were called into Headquarters to receive orders, especially those of the 2nd Corps, thought our position was much more seriously threatened than it really was and, in fact, one or two

expressed doubts as to the possibility of effecting a retirement in the presence of the enemy in our immediate front. I did not share these views, and Colonel Vaughan (Chief of the Staff of the Cavalry Division) was more inclined to accept my estimate of the enemy's forces on or near the canal than the others were. His opportunities of gauging the enemy's strength and dispositions had been greatly enhanced by the fine reconnoitring work done on the previous two or three days by the Cavalry Division. However, I determined to effect the retreat, and orders were issued accordingly.

The 1st Army Corps was to move up towards Givry and to take up a good line to cover the retreat of the 2nd Corps towards Bavai, which was to commence at daybreak. Our front and left flank was to be screened and covered by the cavalry and the 19th Infantry Brigade.

At about 1 a.m. on the 24th, Spiers came in from the Headquarters of the 5th French Army and told me that they were seriously checked all along the line. The 3rd and 4th French Armies were retiring, and the 5th French Army, after its check on Saturday, was conforming to the general movement.

The information previously referred to as arriving from French Headquarters at 11.30 p.m. on the 23rd was as follows:—

1. Namur fell this day.

2. The 5th French Army had been attacked all along their front by the 3rd German Corps, the Guard, the 10th and 7th Corps, and was falling back on the line Givet—Philippeville—Maubeuge.
3. Hastière had been captured by the Germans on the 23rd.
4. The Meuse was falling rapidly and becoming fordable in many places, hence the difficulty of defence.

At 5.30 a.m. on the 24th I went out to my advanced Headquarters, which had been established at Bavai, a small village which is strategically important from the circumstance that it is the meeting place of roads from every point of the compass. The orders issued through the night had been carried out. The 1st Corps was on the line Nouvelles—Harmignies—Givry, with Corps Headquarters at Bonnet. They were making an excellent stand to cover the retirement of the 2nd Corps, which was being hard pressed, particularly the 5th Division to the south-east of Condé. In fact, at 10 a.m. General Fergusson, Commanding the Division, found it necessary to call very urgently upon General Allenby for help and support. The 19th Infantry Brigade under Drummond had, it will be remembered, been placed at the disposal of the commander of the Cavalry Division, who, calling this Brigade up in immediate support of the 5th Division, directed Gough's 3rd and De Lisle's 2nd Cavalry Brigades (3rd Cavalry Brigade: 4th Hussars, 5th Lancers, and 16th Lancers; 2nd Cavalry Brigade:

4th Dragoon Guards, 9th Lancers, and 18th Hussars) to threaten and harass the flanks of the advancing German troops, whilst Bingham's 4th Cavalry Brigade remained in observation towards the west.

The intervention of Allenby and Drummond, and the support they rendered, was most effective in taking the severe pressure of the enemy off the 5th Division and enabling it to continue its retreat. About 11.30 a.m. the 2nd Corps Headquarters were retired from Sars-la-Bruyère to Hon.

Soon after arriving at Bavai I visited the Headquarters of the 1st Corps at Bonnet and observed the fighting above mentioned. Our troops in this part of the line were very active and pushing. The 8th Brigade under Davies (2nd Batt. Royal Scots, 2nd Batt. Royal Irish Regt., 4th Batt. Middlesex Regt. and 1st Batt. Gordon Highlanders) was now at Nouvelles, on the left; then came the rest of the 2nd Division, and then the 1st Division under Lomax, on the right.

I went out from Haig's Headquarters to a high ridge, whence the ground slopes down towards the north and north-east, along a gentle declivity stretching almost to the canal which was some distance away. The situation of the 1st Corps was excellent, and the artillery positions were well chosen. From where we stood we could observe the effect of our fire. It was very accurate, and shrapnel could be seen bursting well over the enemy lines and holding his advance in complete check, whilst the German fire was by no means so effective.

The infantry were defending their position a long way down the slope with great determination and tenacity. The steadfast attitude and skilful retreat of our right wing at Mons had much to do with the success of our withdrawal, and the short time I spent with the 1st Corps that morning inspired me with great confidence.

The subsequent retirement of the 1st Corps was carried out successfully and with little loss, Haig's Headquarters being established at Riez de l'Erelle at about 1 p.m.

After visiting some important points in the field over which the 2nd Corps was fighting, I determined to seek out General Sordet, Commanding the French Cavalry Corps, which was in cantonments somewhere to the east of Maubeuge. I found Sordet's Headquarters at Avesnes. The scene in the village was very typical of continental war as it has been so often presented to us in pictures of the war of 1870.

The Commander of the French Cavalry Corps and his Staff, whom I met in the central square, formed a striking group against a very suitable background of gun parks and ammunition wagons. One looked in vain for the fire-eating *beau sabreur* of a Murat.

The man who had come back from that first desperate onslaught in Belgium, and had so grandly supported and succoured our hard-pressed Allies in their splendid defence, was a very quiet, undemonstrative, spare little figure of at least 60 years of age. He appeared hard and fit, and showed no sign of the tremendous strain he had

already undergone. On the contrary, he was smart and dapper, and looked like the light-weight horseman he is. His clear-cut face and small, regular features, denoted descent from the old *noblesse*, and he struck me in his bright tunic as one who might be most fittingly imaged in a piece of old Dresden china; but added to all this was the bearing of a Cavalry Commander.

His manner was courteous in the extreme; but he showed inflexible firmness and determination.

His Staff were of the pattern of French cavalry officers. I have seen much of them for years past at manœuvres, etc., and they combine the best qualities of cavalry leaders with the utmost *camaraderie* and good fellowship.

I interviewed the General at some length, pointing out what I had been told by General Joffre and his Chief of Staff, namely, that the Cavalry Corps had been directed to operate on my left or outer flank. I informed him that in my opinion this was the point where his presence was chiefly required, and where his action would be most effective in checking the advance of the enemy. I told the General that I should be very glad of his help in that locality as soon as possible, because in my present forward position, and having regard to the continued retirement of the 5th French Army, I should sorely need all the assistance I could get to establish the Army under my command in their new position.

General Sordet was very courteous and sympathetic. He expressed the utmost desire to help me in every possible way. He added that he had received no orders to move to the left flank and must, therefore, await these instructions before he could march. He further told me that after the arduous time he had experienced when supporting the Belgian Army, his horses stood in the most urgent need of rest, and that, in any case, it would be impossible for him to leave his present position for at least 24 hours. He promised, however, to do all in his power to help me, and, as my story will presently show, he kept his word splendidly.

I then went back to Le Cateau to pick up any messages or news from Joffre or Lanrezac. Here I was gladdened by the sight of the detrainment of the advanced troops of the 4th Division (General Snow).

After a brief halt at Le Cateau, I started again for my advanced Headquarters at Bavai. The experiences of that afternoon remain indelibly impressed on my memory. Very shortly after leaving Le Cateau I was met by streams of Belgian refugees, flying from Mons and its neighbourhood. They were lying about the fields in all directions, and blocking the roads with carts and vans in which they were trying to carry off as much of their worldly goods as possible. The whole country-side showed those concrete evidences of disturbance and alarm which brought home to all our minds what this retreat meant and all that it might come to mean.



After much delay from these causes I reached Bavai about 2.30 p.m., and it was with great difficulty that my motor could wind its way through the mass of carts, horses, fugitives and military baggage trains which literally covered almost every yard of space in the small town. The temporary advanced Headquarters were established in the market place, the appearance of which defies description. The babel of voices, the crying of women and children, mingled with the roar of the guns and the not far distant crack of rifles and machine guns, made a deafening noise, amidst which it was most difficult to keep a clear eye and tight grip on the rapidly changing course of events.

In a close room on the upper floor of the Mairie I found Murray, my Chief of Staff, working hard, minus belt, coat and collar. The heat was intense. The room was filled with Staff Officers bringing reports or awaiting instructions. Some of the Headquarters Staff had not closed their eyes for 48 hours, and were stretched out on forms or huddled up in corners, wrapped in that deep slumber which only comes to brains which, for the time being, are completely worn out.

If some of the armchair critics who so glibly talk of the easy time which Staff Officers, compared with their regimental comrades, have in war—if some of them could have watched that scene, they would be more chary of forming such opinions and spreading such wrong ideas.

Personally, I have always been far more a regimental than a Staff Officer, and I have every reason to sympathise with the former, but when I have witnessed scenes and gone through days such as I am now very imperfectly describing, and when I know such days to be frequent and long drawn out occurrences in war, it makes my blood boil to hear and to read of the calumnies which are often heaped upon the head of the unfortunate "Staff."

Murray did splendid work that day and set the best of examples. On my arrival at Bavai he reported the situation fully and clearly to me. The action of the cavalry and the 19th Brigade on the left had greatly relieved the heavy pressure on the 5th Division, and the retirement was proceeding fairly well.

Information had, however, reached me of the defeat and retreat of the 3rd French Army, and the continued falling back of Lanrezac. I judged also, by the method and direction of the attack, that strenuous attempts were being made to turn our left flank and press me back on Maubeuge. The force opposed to me was growing in size, and I judged it to be more than double my numbers. As subsequent information proved, we were actually opposed by four corps and at least two cavalry divisions.

Early in the afternoon it was clear to me that further definite decisions must be taken. We could not stand on the line towards which the troops were now retiring.

The fortress of Maubeuge lay close on my right rear. It was well fortified and provisioned. It is impossible for anyone, who has not been situated as I was, to realise the terrible temptation which such a place offers to an army seeking shelter against overpowering odds.

For a short time on this fateful afternoon I debated within myself whether or not I should yield to this temptation; but I did not hesitate long, because there were two considerations which forced themselves prominently upon my mind.

In the first place, I had an instinctive feeling that this was exactly what the enemy was trying to make me do; and, in the second place, I had the example of Bazaine and Metz in 1870 present in my mind, and the words of Sir Edward Hamley's able comment upon the decision of the French Marshal came upon me with overwhelming force. Hamley described it as "The anxiety of the temporising mind which prefers postponement of a crisis to vigorous enterprise." Of Bazaine he says, "In clinging to Metz he acted like one who, when the ship is foundering, should lay hold of the anchor."

I therefore abandoned all such ideas, and issued orders at about 3 p.m. directing the retreat some miles further back to the line Le Cateau—Cambrai.

The pressure of the enemy on our left flank became greater towards night. All reports and reconnaissances indicated a determined attempt to outflank us and cut

across our line of retreat, but Allenby's cavalry was splendidly disposed and handled. The German columns were kept at bay, and the troops bivouacked generally on a line somewhat south of that towards which they had been ordered to retreat in the morning. There was some confusion in the retirement of the 2nd Corps. The 5th Division crossed the rear of the 3rd near Bavai, got to the east of them and somewhat on the line of the retreat of the 1st Corps, whose movement was thus hampered and delayed.

I got back to Headquarters at Le Cateau late in the evening, where a budget of reports awaited me. The most important news was contained in a telephone message received at 9.40 p.m. from Major Clive of the Grenadier Guards, who was my liaison officer at French Headquarters. This ran as follows:—

"The 4th Army, fighting against an enemy estimated at three Corps, has fallen back to the line Virton—Spincourt. Three Reserve Divisions made a counter-attack this afternoon from the south against the enemy's left flank. The 3rd Army, fighting in difficult country, has fallen back to better ground this side of the Meuse, about Mézières and Stenai. The enemy have been unable to cross the Meuse. The 3rd Army is waiting for sufficient strength to make a counter-attack from its right. The 1st Corps of the 5th Army found that the Germans had crossed the Meuse behind them south of Dinant; they therefore fell back to the neighbourhood of Givet and Philippeville."

Murray followed me to Headquarters about 3 a.m., and reported that all orders had been carried out effectually and that the move was proceeding satisfactorily. All the troops were very tired and had suffered severely from the heat. Our losses in the fighting of the last two days were considerable, but not excessive, having regard to the nature of the operations.

In the early hours of the 25th the retreat was continued, again covered skilfully by Allenby's cavalry.

During the night the 4th Division had nearly completed their detrainment, and were taking up the position assigned to them towards Cambrai. In the course of the morning of the 25th I visited Snow, who commanded this Division, and went over the ground with him.

The only action of importance during the day occurred at Solesmes, when the rearguard of the 3rd Division under McCracken was heavily attacked. Allenby, with the 2nd Cavalry Brigade (4th Dragoon Guards, 9th Lancers, and 18th Hussars), came to his assistance and enabled him to continue his retreat. He did not, however, arrive at his appointed destination till late in the evening, and then it was with very tired men.

The reports received up till noon of the 25th showed that the French were retiring all along the line, and there was no longer any doubt in my mind as to the strength and intention of the enemy in our own immediate front. Three Corps and a Cavalry Division were concentrating

against us, whilst a fourth Corps and another Cavalry Division were trying to turn our western flank.

I had now to consider the position most carefully and again come to a momentous decision. Was I to stand and fight on the line to which the Army was now retiring (Le Cateau—Cambrai) or continue the retreat at daybreak?

To hold the Le Cateau position in view of the heavy threat on my front and western flank was a decision which could only be justified if I were sure of the absolute determination of the French Commander to hold on all along the line with the utmost tenacity; but our Allies were already a day's march in rear of us, and every report indicated continual retreat. At least one Army Corps and two Cavalry Divisions of the enemy were engaged in an outflanking movement on my left, in which they had already made some progress, and the only help I could depend upon in that quarter was from two French Reserve Divisions spread out on an enormous front towards Dunkirk, and very hastily and indifferently entrenched. It was unlikely that they would be able to oppose any effective resistance to the enemy's flank movement.

If this flank attack were successful, my communications with Havre would be practically gone.

There had been neither time nor labour available to make the Le Cateau position strong enough to withstand a serious onslaught by the superior numbers which were

advancing against my front, and the British troops, which had been almost continuously marching and fighting since Sunday morning, stood in much need of rest, which could only be secured by placing some serious obstacle, such as a river line, between my troops and the enemy.

After long and anxious deliberation, it seemed clear to me that every consideration pointed to the necessity of resuming our march in retreat at daybreak on the 26th, and orders to that effect were accordingly issued.

I determined to direct the march on St. Quentin and Noyon. The troops were to be held so concentrated as to enable me to take immediate advantage of any change in the situation which might check the retreat and offer favourable opportunities for taking the offensive. Failing such developments, my idea was to concentrate behind the Somme or the Oise. Behind such a barrier I should be able to rest the troops, fill up casualties and deficiencies in material, and remain ready to act effectively with the Allies in whatever direction circumstances might dictate.

The retreat had been resumed at daybreak, and at 6 p.m. all the troops of the 2nd Corps were on the Le Cateau line except McCracken's Brigade, which, as before described, had been obliged to stand and fight at Solesmes. The 1st Corps, however, was delayed in starting for several hours, and was only able to reach the neighbourhood of Landrecies; so that at the conclusion of the day's march a somewhat dangerous gap existed

between the 1st and 2nd Corps, which caused me considerable anxiety in the small hours of the morning of the 26th.

When darkness fell on the 25th, the enemy had sent forward advance troops in motors and lorries through the Forêt de Mormal in pursuit of the 1st Corps. This culminated in a violent attack on Landrecies, which, however, was splendidly driven off with heavy loss to the enemy, chiefly by the 4th (Guards) Brigade under Brigadier-General Scott-Kerr.

With reference to this action, the following is an extract from a letter which I despatched to Lord Kitchener on August 27th:—

"The 4th Brigade were fighting in the early morning in the streets of Landrecies. A German infantry column, about the strength of a brigade, emerged from the wood north of the town and advanced south in the closest order, filling up the narrow street.

"Two or three of our machine guns were brought to bear on this magnificent target from the other end of the town. The head of the column was checked and stopped, a frightful panic ensued, and it is estimated that, in a very few minutes, no less than 800 to 900 dead and wounded Germans were lying in the streets."

Sir Douglas Haig, although his troops were very tired and handicapped also by heavy rearguard fighting, still proceeded to carry out the instructions he had received,



and the retirement of the 1st Corps was continued in excellent order and with complete efficiency.

Things did not go so well with the 2nd Corps. General Allenby, who had been most ably covering the retreat of the Army with his cavalry, had already materially assisted the rearguard of the 3rd Division to surmount their difficulties at Solesmes. McCracken's Brigade (7th) (3rd Batt. Worcester Regt., 2nd Batt. S. Lancs Regt., 1st Batt. Wilts Regt., and 2nd Batt. R. Irish Rifles) did not reach the Le Cateau position until 10 or 11 p.m. on the 25th. His men were, of course, nearly done up, and he had suffered severe losses.

Colonel Ansell, Commanding the 5th Dragoon Guards, one of the finest cavalry leaders in the Army, who fell at the head of his regiment a few days later, gave information to General Allenby at about 2 a.m. regarding the nature of the German advance. This seemed of such great importance that the latter at once sought out Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien and warned him that, unless he was prepared to continue his march at daybreak, he would most probably be pinned down to his position and would be unable to get away. Sir Horace asked General Allenby what, in his opinion, were the chances he had if he remained and held the position, adding that he felt convinced his troops were so exhausted as to preclude the possibility of removing them for some hours to come. Allenby's reply was that he thought, unless the commander of the 2nd Corps

made up his mind to move at daybreak, the enemy probably would succeed in surrounding him.

Nevertheless, Sir Horace determined to fight. As to this decision, a commander on the spot, and in close touch with his Divisions and Brigades, is in the best position to judge of what his men can do.

I had, late on the evening of the 25th, before leaving for my Headquarters at St. Quentin, visited several units of the 2nd Corps in their bivouacs and, though tired indeed, they had not struck me as being worn out troops.

By the break of day on the 26th the 5th Division on the right had secured several hours' rest. The same may be said of the 8th and 9th Brigades, which came next in the line. The 7th Brigade had only just arrived at cantonments at 10 p.m. or 11 p.m. on the 25th, after a heavy day's march and some severe fighting, but they could in such an emergency have marched at dawn. The 4th Division on the left of the 2nd Corps was comparatively fresh.

I visited in particular one Artillery Brigade, some of whose guns had been saved from capture on the previous day by the cavalry. The Brigade Commander broke down with emotion as he recounted to me the glorious bravery displayed by Francis Grenfell and the 9th Lancers.

This Brigade fought magnificently for several hours next day on the Le Cateau position.

All reconnaissance and intelligence reports received up to midnight on the 25th concur in saying that Cambrai was then still in the possession of the French, and that the position there was not yet seriously threatened; further, that whilst there were clear signs of the outflanking movement in progress, no considerable bodies of the enemy had yet crossed the line Valenciennes—Douai, and that, after their repulse at Solesmes by McCracken and Allenby, the enemy was not in strength south of the line Valenciennes—Maubeuge.

This estimate of the situation was confirmed by a German wireless message, intercepted towards the evening of the 26th, which stated that the outflanking German Corps was only at that time "moving towards" Cambrai, and that the remaining Corps, which were engaged in the frontal attack, were only then "moving on" towards Cattenières, Walincourt and Le Cateau respectively.

The 1st Corps had, as we know, experienced a much harder day's march on the 25th, and was attacked at Landrecies and its neighbourhood before it could get any rest at all. Sir Douglas correctly appreciated the strength of the enemy on his immediate front and gauged the situation, namely, the German design to impose on us the idea that he was in great strength, and to pin our troops to the ground whilst his flanking movement became effective.

For this purpose the enemy had hurried forward a large force of Artillery, composed of guns and howitzers of all calibres, escorted and protected by four Cavalry Divisions and a limited number of jäger battalions.

These troops were pushed forward against the 2nd Corps at Le Cateau as they had been against the 1st Corps at Landrecies, and with a precisely similar purpose.

The superb gallantry of the troops, and the skilful leading by Divisional and Brigade and Battalion Commanders, helped very materially by the support given by Allenby and, as I afterwards learned, by Sordet and d'Amade, saved the 2nd Corps, which otherwise would assuredly have been pinned to their ground and then surrounded. The cavalry might have made good their retreat, but three out of five Divisions of the British Army with the 7th Brigade must have been lost.

The enemy, flushed by this primary victory, would have pressed in on the flanks of the 1st Corps, cut off their retreat, and, continuing his combined front and flank attack, would have almost certainly pushed the whole Allied Army off their line of retreat, and a stupendous repetition of Sedan might well have resulted.

The magnificent fight put up by these glorious troops saved disaster; but the actual result was a total loss of at

least 14,000 officers and men, about 80 guns, numbers of machine guns, as well as quantities of ammunition, war material and baggage, whilst the enemy gained time to close up his infantry columns marching down from the north-east, at the cost of losses not greater than, if as great, as our own, but which were, in view of the immense superiority he possessed in numbers and fighting power, infinitely less important to him.

The effect upon the British Army was to render the subsequent conduct of the retreat more difficult and arduous.

The hope of making a stand behind the Somme or the Oise, or any other favourable position north of the Marne, had now to be abandoned owing to the shattered condition of the Army, and the far-reaching effect of our losses at the Battle of Le Cateau was felt seriously even throughout the subsequent Battle of the Marne and during the early operations on the Aisne. It was not possible to replace our lost guns and machine guns until nearly the end of September.

In my dispatch, written in September, 1914, I refer eulogistically to the Battle of Le Cateau. I had been, together with my staff, directing the movements of the British Army day and night up to the time of the Battle of the Marne—in the course of which battle I received an urgent demand from the Government that a dispatch should be forwarded.

It was completed, of necessity, very hurriedly, and before there had been time or opportunity to give thorough study to the reports immediately preceding and covering the period of that battle, by which alone the full details could be disclosed.

It was, indeed, impossible, until much later on, to appreciate in all its details the actual situation on the morning of August 26th.

At the time the dispatch was written, indeed, I was entirely ignorant of the material support which was rendered throughout the day by Generals Sordet and d'Amade, and I accepted without question the estimate made by the commander of the 2nd Corps as to the nature of the threat against him and the position of the German forces opposed to him.

It is very difficult for the uninitiated to realise the concentration which the direction of an Army carrying out a vigorous offensive like that of the Marne, demands from the brain of the Commander-in-Chief, if he is to make the best use of the forces under his command.

In the surroundings and under the conditions of a great battle, the preparation of material for and the compilation of any dispatch is a matter of great difficulty. It is very easy to say: "Why not employ others?" I have always held that it is only the General who conducts an operation of any magnitude who can, or should, sum up and describe it. No one else can know what was passing in his mind, or how his judgment was

directed and formed by the swiftly moving procession of events.

Nor can *exact* information become available for weeks or months, sometimes, indeed, even for years, after the conclusion of a particular series of operations.

In more than one of the accounts of the retreat from Mons, it is alleged that some tacit consent at least was given at Headquarters at St. Quentin to the decision arrived at by the commander of the 2nd Corps. I owe it to the able and devoted officers of my Staff to say that there is not a semblance of truth in this statement.