

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

## **CHAPTER V**

### **FURTHER COURSE OF THE RETREAT**

General Joffre had arranged for a conference at my Headquarters at St. Quentin with Lanrezac and myself, to take place early on the 26th.

I had reached St. Quentin at about 8 a.m. on the 25th. There had been little sleep during the night for any of us. In the earlier hours continual reports came in regarding the dangerous position of the 1st Corps. In addition to the unfortunate but inevitable delay in commencing their march in the morning, the troops were further greatly embarrassed and worried by the retirement of the French from the Sambre, and their convergence on our own line of march.

The enemy's cavalry, supported by guns, Jäger, and detachments of Infantry carried on motor cars and lorries, closely pressed our columns through the Forêt de Mormal. The result of this was to make it imperative that the 2nd Division should make a firm stand at Landrecies and Maroilles before the 1st Corps could reach the line assigned to it in the morning. A gap of some eight miles existed between the right of the 2nd

Corps at Le Cateau and the left of the 1st Corps at Landrecies.

The moment this news reached me I summoned Huguet, and through him dispatched an urgent request to two French Reserve Divisions (which formed part of the 5th French Army and were nearest to the British) to move up and assist Haig.

They readily responded, and the effect of the diversion enabled Haig to extricate his Corps from this most dangerous situation, which he did with great skill and judgment, whilst inflicting severe loss on the enemy.

Towards morning it was reported to me that the enemy had drawn off, and at dawn the retreat was resumed by the whole of the 1st Corps as ordered. The fighting of the 1st Corps through this night, combined with its skilful and efficient withdrawal in the morning, was one of the most brilliant episodes of the whole retreat.

No sooner was my mind made easier by this happy deliverance of the 1st Corps when the trouble related in the last chapter commenced with the 2nd Corps.

It was not until 8 a.m. on the 26th that I knew the left wing of the Army was actually committed to the fight. At this time I was anxiously awaiting the arrival of Joffre and Lanrezac.

Staff Officers were sent to General Smith-Dorrien, carrying peremptory orders to break off the action and to continue the retreat forthwith.

Shortly afterwards the French Commander-in-Chief arrived with his Chief of Staff. He was followed by the Commander of the 5th French Army, and we proceeded to discuss the situation.

I narrated the events of the previous two days, and pointed out the isolated situation in which the British Army had been placed by the very sudden change of plan and headlong retirement of the 5th French Army on my right.

Lanrezac appeared to treat the whole affair as quite normal, and merely incidental to the common exigencies of war. He offered no explanation, and gave no reason for the very unexpected moves he had made. The discussion was apparently distasteful to him, for he remained only a short time at my Headquarters, and left before any satisfactory understanding as to further plans and dispositions had been arrived at.

Joffre remained with me some considerable time. I gathered that he was by no means satisfied with the action and conduct of his subordinate General. No very definite plans were then decided upon, the understanding, as the French Commander-in-Chief left, being that the retreat was to be continued as slowly and deliberately as possible, until we found ourselves in a favourable position to make a firm stand and take the offensive. The Commander-in-Chief urged me to maintain my position in the line, which I told him I hoped, in spite of the heavy losses which we had suffered, to be able to do.

Immediately Joffre left I set out for Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien's Headquarters, as I could get no satisfactory report from that General. For the first few miles we were able to make fair progress, but as we went on, the road got worse and worse, and sometimes we were absolutely blocked for several minutes together.

The whole country-side was covered with refugees and their belongings, whilst our own transport were endeavouring to make all the haste they could to convey much needed food, ammunition and material to the Divisions in front.

Several messages reached me on the road, and at last I got information that Smith-Dorrien had broken off the action and that his columns were once more on the march. He was only just in time, for subsequent reports reached me during this motor journey of considerable Uhlan patrols in the neighbourhood, and towards evening St. Quentin itself was threatened by hostile cavalry, which, however, did not succeed in entering the town.

On reaching Headquarters I found that more or less detailed reports had arrived, which showed the shattered condition of the troops which had fought at Le Cateau.

All idea of making any prolonged stand on the Somme south of St. Quentin, which had during the day seriously entered my mind as a possibility, was definitely abandoned.

The first necessity was to rally and collect the troops, which had become mixed up and scattered by the trying experiences of the previous days and nights. The great essential was to recover order, restore confidence, and infuse fresh spirit with a clear aim in view. To enable all this to be brought about we had first to look to the cavalry. Orders were at once sent to Allenby to make such dispositions as would effectually cover our rear and western flank. I told him he was to enlist the co-operation of the French cavalry under Sordet. The Corps Commanders were ordered to move towards the line La Fère—Noyon.

On the evening of the 26th, Headquarters were moved to Noyon, where I arrived late at night to consider the possibilities of making a stand behind the Oise.

On the 27th the orders issued for the efficient conduct of the retreat began to take effect, and the cavalry kept the enemy well at bay.

Smith-Dorrien reported himself in the early hours of the morning, and later Major Dawnay (2nd Life Guards)—the recollection of whose splendid and invaluable services until he fell at the head of his regiment will for ever remain with me—brought news of Haig's progress, whilst Shea of the Indian cavalry—afterwards a renowned leader of a Division at the front—told me of the valuable *rôle* which was being so efficiently performed by the Cavalry.

In a telegram, which I communicated to the troops, General Joffre very handsomely acknowledged what he described as the "invaluable" services rendered to the Allied cause by the British Army throughout the past few days.

It was a sincere gratification to the Army to see the generous terms in which the French Commander-in-Chief expressed his appreciation.

I spent the early hours of the 27th in personally reconnoitring the country bordering the south bank of the Oise, in the neighbourhood of Noyon.

The one idea which now possessed my mind was the possibility of making a stand with the object of obtaining the necessary time for rest, and to make good equipment and bring up reinforcements.

At first sight it appeared to me that the line of the Oise and its tributary canalised waters offered such an opportunity.

The cursory examination of the ground which I was able to make on the morning of the 27th satisfied me that it possessed decided capabilities for a defence which was not intended to be prolonged, and I thought, also, that the tortuous course of the river afforded some alternative features, by availing ourselves of which a powerful offensive might be commenced at the right time.

During the day I had another interview with Joffre, which took place before I had time to estimate the actual fighting capabilities of the 2nd Corps and the 4th Division.

I was not even then fully aware of the terrible extent to which we had suffered at Le Cateau. That these losses were heavy I never doubted, but I had no idea, until many hours later, that they were such as must paralyse for several days any movement in the direction of taking the offensive.

My early morning deliberations were very much in accord with the view of the French Commander-in-Chief. The proposal Joffre then communicated to me was that the Allied Armies should fall back on a line, roughly, from Rheims on the east to Amiens on the west, which would bring the British Forces into the zone of country south of the Oise, whose course I had already reconnoitred. We discussed the situation thoroughly, and Joffre was most sympathetic and "understanding" in reference to our special position. He promised that the 5th French Army should be directed to take energetic action to relieve us from undue pressure by the enemy, and told me of his projects for the formation of the 6th French Army on our left.

We parted without coming to any actual decision: for my part I could give no promise until I knew exactly what I had to rely upon; whilst energetic pursuit by the enemy might well prevent Joffre rendering me that

support on both flanks which the situation imperatively demanded.

As a matter of fact, no more was heard of this project, and the idea of standing on the above-mentioned line was abandoned.

On the morning of the 28th, General Headquarters moved to Compiègne, where we remained till the morning of the 31st.

It was during Friday the 28th that I fully realised the heavy losses we had incurred. Since Sunday the 23rd this had reached, in officers and men, the total of upwards of 15,000. The deficiency in armament and equipment were equally serious. Roughly, some 80 guns and a large proportion of our machine guns, besides innumerable articles of necessary equipment and a large quantity of transport, had fallen into the enemy's hands.

It became quite clear to me that no effective stand could be made until we were able to improve our condition.

It was on this day that I received the assurance, the most welcome to a commander in retreat, that the cavalry under Allenby's skilful direction was effectively holding off the enemy's pursuit.

Gough with the 3rd Cavalry Brigade at St. Quentin, and Chetwode with the 5th at Cérizy, vigorously attacked the leading troops of the German cavalry at

both these places, and threw them back in confusion and with heavy loss on to their main bodies.

On our left, d'Amade with the two French Reserve Divisions, and Sordet with his Corps of cavalry, attacked the Germans in and around Péronne.

Allenby's Headquarters were then at Cressy (north-west of Noyon), and Sordet called upon him for support in this enterprise.

Before arrangements could be made for such assistance the French were driven back.

Although this attack failed to drive the Germans north, it was most valuable and effective in checking the pursuit, and by their vigorous action the troops of d'Amade and Sordet showed the stuff of which the embryo 6th Army was being formed: that Army which a few days later covered itself with imperishable glory on the Marne and Ourcq.

On our right there still appeared little encouragement to hope for an early effective stand. The 5th French Army was in full retreat, the Reserve Divisions, after fighting at Urvillers, were retiring on the Oise, whilst the 18th Corps on their right was thrown back from Itancourt to the Oise by a violent German attack.

I spent several hours of the 28th in going the round of the troops, as it was possible to intercept various columns on the march or at their temporary halts. I was able to get the men together on the roadside, to thank

them for the splendid work they had done, to tell them of the gratitude of the French Commander-in-Chief, and the immense value of the service they had rendered to the Allied cause. I charged them to repeat all this to their comrades, and to spread it throughout the units to which they belonged. There was neither time nor opportunity for any formal inspection or set parade. The enemy was on our heels, and there was little time to spare, but it touched me to the quick to realise how, in the face of all the terrible demand made upon their courage, strength and endurance, these glorious British soldiers listened to the few words I was able to say to them with the spirit of heroes and the confidence of children. It afforded me gratifying evidence of the wonderful instinctive sympathy which has always existed between the British soldier and his officer. These men had seen how they had been *led*, they *knew* the far greater proportionate loss suffered by their officers, they *felt* that they trusted them and were ready to follow them anywhere. It is this wonderful understanding between "leaders" and "led" which has constituted the great strength and glory of the British Army throughout all ages.

In all these roadside talks and confidences never did I hear one word of complaint or breath of criticism. The spirit of discipline was as palpably shown amongst these scattered groups of unkempt, overstrained, tired soldiers, as on any "King's Birthday" Review ever held on the Horse Guards Parade. Their one repeated

question was: "When shall we turn round and face them again?" And they would add: "We can drive them to hell."

It was distressing, indeed, to look at some battalions, which I had seen near Mons only some three or four days earlier in all their fresh glory and strength, now brought down to a handful of men and two or three officers; but the glorious spirit I saw animating the men gave me the keenest pleasure, and inspired a confidence which was of the utmost help.

On this day I inspected a large proportion of the transport of both Army Corps, which I found in a much better condition than could have been thought possible.

I did not reach my Headquarters at Compiègne until five. I found Huguet waiting for me with a Staff Officer of the 7th French Army Corps, which was to form part of the new 6th French Army. It was from the talk I had with them that I learnt how Joffre was forming the new 6th Army.

Huguet informed me that a considerable force was being railed round from Verdun to Amiens, and that the new Army would be commanded by General Maunoury. I knew nothing then of the French Commander-in-Chief's ultimate plans, and I doubt if at that moment he had been able to formulate any decided line of action. At this particular time I think the unprepared condition of Paris loomed largely in his mind, and that his original intention with regard to the 6th Army was most

probably to make further provision for the protection of the capital.

Joffre had particularly asked me to undertake the Air reconnaissance on the western flank of the Allied forces.

Our Intelligence Service had been admirably organised, and was working most effectively under the able direction of Brigadier-General Macdonogh. I cannot speak too highly of the skill and ability displayed by this distinguished officer throughout the whole time during which we served together. His service was invaluable; his ingenuity and resource in obtaining and collecting information, his indefatigable brain, and the unfailing versatility and insight with which he sifted every statement and circumstance were beyond all praise. He trained an excellent Staff who valued his leadership, for he had an extraordinary power of getting the most and best work out of everyone. His information as to the enemy's movements were remarkably accurate, and placed me throughout in the best position to interpret the enemy's probable intentions.

During my stay at Compiègne all appreciations of the situation pointed to the immediate investment of Paris by the right wing of the German Army as being the enemy's first objective.

It is fairly certain that the concentration of an important new Army on the western flank of the British, to the north of Paris, was quite unknown to the

Germans, and did not enter into their calculations until some days later.

We had also the best reason for believing that the German Higher Command regarded the British Forces as shattered and almost useless, at any rate so far as any effort which we could make for the defence of Paris was concerned. In fact, believing the capital to be practically at its mercy, the right wing of the German Army was blindly marching into a veritable hornet's nest, in spite of the backward condition of the Paris defence.

On the 29th a very brilliant and successful attack by the French 5th Army at Guise heavily defeated three German Army Corps and threw them back with severe loss. This had a great effect in assisting the retreat, for it not only enabled the 5th Army to hold its own for some time on the Oise, between Guise and La Fère, but it considerably relieved hostile pressure on the British and on the French troops on our left.

From Roye on the west, Montdidier, Noyon, La Fère, Guise, up to Hirson on the east, the heads of the Allied columns were established, well covered by their advanced cavalry.

Throughout this day reports often contradictory and conflicting reached me. It was quite clear that our position on the Oise was being dangerously threatened by superior forces, and I felt it to be impossible to stand on that line even until we could make good some of our

heavy losses, and I could not hope to get anything up for several days to come.

With great reluctance I ordered the retreat to be continued to the line of the Aisne from Compiègne to Soissons, but in view of the knock given to the enemy at Guise by the 5th French Army, and the desire expressed by General Joffre that the Allied forces should hold their ground as long as possible and only retire when necessary, I directed commanders to carry out their marches with all deliberation, and to take advantage of every opportunity to check the enemy's advance.

It now became known to the Allied Command that the enemy had detached a considerable force to his eastern frontier, where he was being seriously threatened by the Russians. Joffre's natural desire to profit by this, coupled with his fears for the safety of Paris, made him very anxious to take the offensive at the earliest possible moment. He came to see me on the afternoon of the 29th August at Compiègne, and urged these views upon me. I remained firm in my absolute conviction that the British forces could not effectively fulfil their share in such action for some days, and that, so far as we were concerned, a further retreat was inevitable. I assured the French Commander-in-Chief that no serious gap should be made in his line by any premature or hasty retirement, but I imperatively demanded the necessary time to refit and obtain reinforcements.

I strongly represented to Joffre the advantage of drawing the German armies on still further from their base, even although we had to move south of the Marne. Indeed, the ideas which I afterwards expressed at the British Embassy in Paris to M. Millerand, the French Minister of War, in the presence of Lord Kitchener, were the same which I had in my mind during this interview with Joffre, namely, that our stand should be made on some line between the Marne and the Seine.

The French Army was still in full retreat. The 6th French Army on our left was not yet formed, and the Commander-in-Chief had put no definite plan of attack before me, with an assigned *rôle* which he desired me to fulfil. All he asked me to do was to remain in the line and fill up the gap between the 5th and 6th Armies. This I had every intention of doing.

I am bound to say that I had to make this decision in the face of resistance from some of my subordinate commanders, who took a depressed view as to the condition of their troops. When I discussed the situation at a meeting of British commanders held at Compiègne, Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien expressed it as his opinion that the only course open to us was to retire to our base, thoroughly refit, re-embark and try to land at some favourable point on the coast-line. I refused to listen to what was the equivalent of a counsel of despair.

Our communications with Havre being now dangerously threatened, it became necessary to effect a change of base and establish a fresh

line. St. Nazaire and Nantes were fixed upon, with Le Mans as advanced base.

The morning of the 30th found our cavalry with two brigades to the north-west of Compiègne, one to the north and one to the north-east. The 5th, under Chetwode, covered the retirement of the 1st Corps. Our line that night was through Nampiel on the west to Coucy-le-Château.

Huguet to-day communicated to me Joffre's new dispositions. He was retiring the 5th French Army to the line of the Serre, their left on La Fère; their right on the left of the 4th French Army towards Rethel. The 6th French Army was to fall back to the line Compiègne—Clermont. Sordet's Cavalry Corps was to be on the left of the line.

Joffre sent an urgent request to me to destroy the bridges over the Oise between Compiègne and La Fère.

Huguet once more pressed upon me Joffre's urgent desire that I should remain and fill the gap between Compiègne and La Fère. In reply I again repeated emphatically what I had previously stated, namely, that I could be in no condition to stand and fight for several days, and therefore I could not consent to fill any portion of a "fighting" line. I was fully prepared to continue the retreat slowly and deliberately, retaining my present position between the 5th and 6th Armies.

Now, as before, the view I took of my responsibilities, in accordance with my interpretation of the "special instructions" given me, guided my deliberations in these difficult days.

I could not forget that the 5th French Army had commenced to retreat from the Sambre at least 24 hours before I had been given any official intimation that Joffre's offensive plan had been abandoned. I knew that it was alone due to the vast superiority of our cavalry over that of the enemy, and to the splendid tenacity and the superior marching and fighting powers of our troops, that we had been saved from overwhelming disaster. My duty to my country demanded that I should risk no recurrence of such a situation, and I determined that our needs and the interests of our Empire must be duly weighed and balanced in the councils of the Supreme Headquarters Staff.

I despatched a letter to Lord Kitchener on this day, in which the following passage occurs:—

"I feel very seriously the absolute necessity for retaining in my hands complete independence of action and power to retire towards my base should circumstances render it necessary."

On this day Pulteney arrived, and the formation of the 3rd Army Corps under his command was commenced forthwith. It was composed of the 4th Division and the 19th Brigade, with some mounted

troops temporarily attached, pending the arrival of the 6th Division, which had now been ordered to France.

On the morning of the 31st, Headquarters were moved to Dammartin. After riding round to see whatever troops I could, we reached there early in the afternoon. Huguet was waiting for me with more information and messages from Joffre. The demand that we should stand and fight was not only urgently repeated, but was actually backed by imperative messages from the French President, and from Lord Kitchener and the British Government, yet at this very moment Lanrezac was actually throwing back the left flank of the 5th Army and widening the gap between us. At the same time Lord Kitchener was assuring the Home Government that our losses were comparatively small, and that all deficiencies had been made good.

I retain the most profound belief that, had I yielded to these violent solicitations, the whole Allied Army would have been thrown back in disorder over the Marne, and Paris would have fallen an easy prey into the hands of the Germans.

It is impossible to exaggerate the danger of the situation as it existed. Neither on this day nor for several subsequent days did one man, horse, gun, or machine gun reach me to make good deficiencies.

I refused. This brought Lord Kitchener to Paris, where I met him on September 1st at the British Embassy. I went there with my Chief of Staff at his urgent request,

regarding him as a representative of His Majesty's Government.

I deeply resented being called away from my Headquarters at so critical a time. Two important actions were fought by considerable detachments of the Army under my command during this day, over which there was no one to exercise any co-ordinating control. Either might have easily brought on a general engagement.

The interview had one important result. M. Millerand (the War Minister) and M. Viviani (the Prime Minister) were present at the Conference, and before them all I was able to give a clear exposition of my views as to the future conduct of the Allied operations.

M. Millerand undertook to lay this document before General Joffre at once. This great statesman and invaluable servant of his country occupied the post of War Minister during most of the time I was in France. His invariable kindness and courtesy, coupled with his skilful and astute appreciation of the military situation throughout all its difficult and varying periods, will always be gratefully remembered by me.

The result of my proposals will be the better understood if I quote General Joffre's reply to the War Minister, and a personal letter which I received from the Commander-in-Chief on the same subject.

"Grand Quartier Général des Armées de l'Est,  
Au G.Q.G. le 2 septembre 1914.

"Le Général Commandant-en-Chef à M. le Ministre de la Guerre.

"J'ai reçu les propositions du Maréchal French que vous avez voulu me communiquer; elles tendent à organiser sur la Marne une ligne de défense qui serait tenue par des effectifs suffisamment denses en profondeur et particulièrement renforcés derrière le flanc gauche.

"Les emplacements actuels de la V<sup>e</sup> Armée ne permettent pas de réaliser le programme tracé par le Maréchal French et d'assurer à l'Armée Anglaise, en temps voulu, une aide efficace sur la droite.

"Par contre, l'appui de l'Armée du Général Maunoury qui doit se porter à la défense des fronts Nord-Est de Paris est toujours assuré à l'Armée Anglaise sur la gauche; celle-ci pourrait, dans ces conditions, tenir sur la Marne pendant quelque temps, puis se retirer sur la rive gauche de la Seine qu'elle tiendrait de Melun à Juvisy; les forces Anglaises participeraient ainsi à la défense de la capitale et leur présence serait pour les troupes du camp retranché un précieux réconfort.

"Je dois ajouter que des instructions viennent d'être données aux Armées en vue de coordonner leurs mouvements, et qu'il pourrait être désavantageux de modifier ces instructions. Elles tendent à placer nos troupes dans un dispositif leur permettant de prendre l'offensive dans un délai assez rapproché. Le date de

leur mouvement en avant sera communiqué au Maréchal French afin de permettre à l'Armée Anglaise de participer à l'offensive générale."

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"Grand Quartier Général des Armées de l'Est,  
État Major,  
Au G.Q.G. le 2 septembre 1914.

"Le Général Commandant-en-Chef à M. le Maréchal French,  
Commandant-en-Chef les Forces Anglaises.

"MONSIEUR LE MARECHAL,

"J'ai l'honneur de vous adresser mes remerciements pour les propositions que vous avez bien voulu soumettre au Gouvernement de la République, relatives à la co-opération de l'Armée Anglaise et qui m'ont été communiquées.

"La situation actuelle de la 5<sup>e</sup> Armée ne permet pas à cette Armée d'assurer à l'Armée Anglaise un appui suffisamment efficace sur la droite.

"En raison des événements qui se sont passés depuis deux heures, je ne crois pas possible actuellement d'envisager une manœuvre d'ensemble sur la Marne avec la totalité de nos forces. Mais j'estime que la co-opération de l'Armée Anglaise à la défense de Paris est la seule qui puisse donner un résultat avantageux dans les conditions exposées par la lettre ci-jointe que j'adresse à M. le Ministre de la Guerre et dont j'ai l'honneur de vous faire parvenir la copie.

"Veuillez agréer, Monsieur le Maréchal, l'expression de ma haute considération et mes sentiments de cordiale camaraderie."

I replied as follows:—

"Mortcerf,  
"September 3rd, 1914, 12 noon.

"To the Commandant-en-Chef from Field Marshal Sir John French, Commander-in-Chief, British Forces.

"DEAR GENERAL,

"I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your very kind and cordial letter of September 2nd (3332).

"I felt some considerable hesitation in putting forward my views as to the general trend of the future operations, and I am much indebted to you for the kind and friendly support which you have accorded to my expression of opinion.

"I have now received your 'Instruction No. 4' and your 'Note pour les Commandants d'Armée' of September 2nd, and I completely and clearly understand your plans and the part you desire me to take in carrying them out.

"You may rely on my most cordial co-operation in every respect.

"My troops have very much appreciated the kind consideration you have shown them in sending so many decorations for distribution.

(Signed) "F  
RENCH."

I touch with some diffidence on less agreeable features of this memorable discussion in Paris.

Lord Kitchener arrived on this occasion in the uniform of a Field Marshal, and from the outset of his conversation assumed the air of a Commander-in-Chief, and announced his intention of taking the field and inspecting the troops.

On hearing this, the British Ambassador (Sir Francis, now Lord, Bertie) at once emphatically objected, and drafted a telegram to the Foreign Secretary stating clearly and unmistakably his views, and demanding instructions. He gave this despatch to Lord Kitchener to read. The latter then asked for my opinion, and I said my views on the subject coincided entirely with those of the Ambassador.

After some discussion, the Secretary of State decided to abandon his intention, and the telegram to Sir Edward Grey was not sent. In the conversation which followed between us all, Lord Kitchener appeared to take grave exception to certain views which I expressed as to the expediency of leaving the direction of the operations in the field in the hands of the military chiefs in command in the field.

He abruptly closed the discussion and requested me to accompany him for a private interview in another room.

When we were alone he commenced by entering a strong objection to the tone I assumed. Upon this I told him all that was in my mind. I said that the command of the British Forces in France had been entrusted to me by His Majesty's Government; that I alone was responsible to them for whatever happened, and that on French soil my authority as regards the British Army must be supreme until I was legally superseded by the same authority which had put that responsibility upon me. I further remarked that Lord Kitchener's presence in France in the character of a soldier could have no other effect than to weaken and prejudice my position in the eyes of the French and my own countrymen alike. I reminded him of our service in the field together some 13 years before, and told him that I valued highly his advice and assistance, which I would gladly accept as such, but that I would not tolerate any interference with my executive command and authority so long as His Majesty's Government chose to retain me in my present position. I think he began to realise my difficulties, and we finally came to an amicable understanding.

Important telegrams and messages were then brought me, and I told Lord Kitchener that it was impossible for me to absent myself any longer from my Headquarters, whither I at once repaired with all possible speed.

It is very difficult for any but soldiers to understand the real bearing and significance of this Paris incident. If the confidence of the troops in their commander is shaken in the least degree, or if his influence, power and

authority are prejudiced by any display of distrust in his ability to conduct operations, however slight the indications of such distrust may be, the effect reacts instantly throughout the whole Army. This is more than ever true with troops which, as at the moment in question, were being subjected to great and severe demands upon their courage, endurance, and, above all, *faith in their leaders*.

Then again there was the effect which might have been produced on the French. Ministers and Generals were present and witnessed Lord Kitchener's apparent assertion of his right to exercise the power and authority of a Commander-in-Chief in the Field.

Fortunately, the incident terminated in a manner which led to no regrettable publicity. Lord Kitchener realised his mistake and left Paris that night.

I did not reach my Headquarters at Dammartin until about 7 in the evening of September 1st. Two important rearguard actions had been fought during the day, one at Néry—where Captain Bradbury was killed, whilst "L" battery fought heroically against overwhelming odds—and the other at Villers-Cotterets.

The proximity of the enemy, and the close presence of detachments of hostile cavalry with guns, which had broken through our line, required the retirement of my Headquarters to Lagny on the Marne. As it was necessary to move with precaution, this place was not reached until 1 a.m. on the 2nd.

I have already reproduced the communications from General Joffre under date September 2nd, in connection with the Paris interview on the 1st. Although I did not receive these documents until late on the 2nd, they indicated the ideas which occupied my own mind on that day, namely, the defence of the Marne with a view to a subsequent offensive.

On this day I also received a letter from the Governor of Paris which, with my reply, run as follows:—

"Gouvernement Militaire de Paris,  
"Le Gouverneur,  
"Paris, le 2 septembre 1914.

"Le Général Gallieni, Gouverneur Militaire de Paris et Commandant-en-Chef des Armées de Paris à Monsieur le Maréchal French, Commandant-en-Chef des Armées Anglaises.

"MONSIEUR LE MARECHAL,

"J'ai appris ce matin, dans la tournée que j'ai faite dans nos régions N.E. de Paris, que vous veniez d'arriver à Dammartin.

"Comme Gouverneur de Paris et Commandant-en-Chef des Armées de Paris, je m'empresse de vous souhaiter le bienvenu et de vous dire combien je suis heureux de savoir que les braves troupes anglaises qui se sont conduites si vaillamment ces derniers jours, se trouvent à la proximité de Paris. Vous pouvez compter

sur le concours absolu que nous devons à nos courageux compagnons d'arme.

"Personnellement, j'ajouterai que votre nom ne m'est pas inconnu, étant moi-même un colonial ayant fait de nombreuses campagnes, et notamment m'étant trouvé à Madagascar lorsque vous commandiez l'expédition anglaise contre les Boers. Je suis donc sûr d'avance que je puis fermement compter sur l'entière collaboration d'un chef tel que vous.

"Vous savez que le Général Commandant-en-Chef vient de faire placer Paris dans la zone de ses opérations. Je vous envoie donc les dispositions que je viens de prendre, afin que vous soyez bien orienté à ce sujet, pour couvrir les fronts N. et E. de Paris qui paraissent les plus exposés et d'autre part, pour attirer sur nous les corps qui menacent le flanc gauche de notre armée.

"Je vous serais reconnaissant de vouloir bien me tenir au courant de vos intentions et des dispositions que vous prendrez.

"Veuillez agréer, Monsieur le Maréchal, l'assurance de ma haute considération et de mes sentiments profondément dévoués.

"GALLIENI."

"Mortcerf,  
"September 3rd, 1914, 12 noon.

"MY DEAR GENERAL,

"I have received your very kind letter (with enclosures) for which I beg to offer you my most sincere thanks.

"A French officer attached to my Staff is now going into Paris, and will explain the situation of the British Forces and their intentions fully to you.

"You may rely upon my most cordial and energetic co-operation with the French Forces on my right and left.

"I have duly received Gen. Joffre's 'Instruction No. 4' and his 'Notes pour les Commandants d'Armée' of September 2nd, and I fully understand the Commander-in-Chief's plans and intentions.

"May I say what a keen pleasure and satisfaction it is to me and the Army under my command to be fighting side by side with the Grand Army of France!

"Believe me, My dear General,  
"Yours most sincerely,  
(Signed)"FRENCH, Field Marshal,  
"Commander-in-Chief, British Forces."

From these documents it will be seen that the safety of the capital was the paramount thought in the minds of the French Generals.

On September 2nd, the 5th French Army on my right and the 6th on my left were retiring on Chateau-Thierry and Paris respectively, whilst our own troops

reached the line of the Marne towards Lagny and Meaux. The 4th Division was, however, delayed by a small rearguard action and passed the night south of Dammartin.

I had spent the greater part of the day in carefully reconnoitring the best defensive positions south of the Marne, and to these points the British forces were directed to move on the following day, destroying the bridges after they had passed.

By early morning of September 3rd, General Joffre's letter (quoted above) had reached me, by which I judged that, whilst generally agreeing in my views, the General did not think it advisable to attempt a deliberate defence of the Marne. On this, the orders given to the British troops on the night of the 2nd were modified, and they were directed to continue their march to the line Montry—Crécy—Coulommiers.

Reinforcements of all kinds were ordered up to these points and were well on their way, but the railways were badly blocked and there was much delay.

I must now turn to the discussion of important information which began to reach us on the afternoon of the 3rd regarding the movements of the enemy.

It appeared that a direct advance on Paris by the German right wing was no longer intended. They were reported to be moving in large columns south-east and east. A few regiments were said to be moving east by train. Later on, further reports arrived that the country

in our front for several miles north of the Marne was clear of the enemy. No less than four German Corps were said to be concentrating on Chateau-Thierry and to the east along the Marne, and it was reported that they had begun an attack on the 5th French Army. The latest information told us that Chateau-Thierry was in the hands of the enemy, and that the 5th French Army was retiring south to the Seine.

The ideas underlying this concentration on their centre by the enemy look as if it was based on a totally wrong appreciation of our situation. The Germans were ignorant of the real strength which was gathering north of Paris in the formation of the 6th French Army. They regarded the British Army as practically crushed, and almost useless as a fighting force.

Relying upon this, they had no hesitation in leaving what they thought were the remnants of the Allied forces immediately north and east of the Paris fortifications to be dealt with by such of their own forces as were operating through Amiens and on their extreme right. The German Higher Command then decided to strike with overwhelming force at the Allied centre south of the Marne and to cut our Armies in two.

The first necessity for the enemy was a quick decision by a great victory to be achieved at once. They were out-marching their supplies; there was Russia to be crushed and their eastern frontier to be secured; and, further, a prolonged campaign was what they desired to avoid at all costs. The desperate attempt was no sooner

fairly launched than the fatal error of over-confidence and the folly of under-rating one's enemy stared them in the face with all its stupendous consequences, as west of the Ourcq the country was seen to blaze along its whole length with the fire of the French 75's, whilst the British and 5th French Armies, now at bay, threw the enemy back in confusion over the Marne.

With their usual arrogance and pomposity the Germans, ignoring the fact that it was their own negligence which had led them into a most dangerous situation, claim that General von Kluck showed unusual skill in extricating the 1st German Army from the toils.

After considering the subject very carefully, and with a thorough knowledge of the situation and the ground, I have formed the opinion that von Kluck manifested considerable hesitation and want of energy.

The rear section of the British General Staff had been established during this day at Melun, on the Seine. The leading section remained with me at Mortcerf, which became my advanced Headquarters.

Information which arrived during the 4th confirmed all our anticipations of the previous day, and, in the evening at Melun, messages reached me from Joffre that he was formulating his new plan.

I had spent most of the day at advanced Headquarters, and had passed some time with Haig near Coulommiers. It seemed likely, by the direction of the German advance, that the 1st Corps might be attacked, and Haig

had retired his 2nd Division in line with the 1st and was preparing for any eventuality. I conversed with him for a considerable time on the state of his troops, about which he expressed some anxiety. He said they stood in urgent need of rest and refitment, but as usual he was full of fight and ready to meet any emergency.

Whilst I was with Haig, Smith-Dorrien arrived.

The British Army had, indeed, suffered severely, and had performed an herculean task in reaching its present position in such fighting form, and its moral had withstood the ordeal.

I think the Germans were probably justified in doubting our offensive powers, but the thing they forgot was the nation from which we spring.

On my return to Melun on this night (September 4th) I found that Murray had received a visit from General Gallieni, Governor of Paris, who had communicated Joffre's plans for my consideration.

He wished the 6th French Army to recross the Marne between Lagny and Meaux on Sunday the 6th, and then to take up a position facing east towards the Ourcq. He asked me to fill up the space between the right of the 6th Army (on the Marne) and the left of the 5th Army (near Provins). He then intended the whole of the Allied Armies to advance east, north-east, and north, and endeavour to crush the German Corps operating between us.

General Franchet d'Esperey had now superseded Lanrezac in command of the 5th Army. I had sent Wilson (Sub-Chief of the General Staff) to him on the previous day, and to-night he returned and told me that d'Esperey was making similar plans.

I must say a word here with regard to Henry Wilson. I have known him for many years. He possesses a striking personality. In appearance very tall and spare, his frame is surmounted by a face in which one sees great intelligence and power, combined with a very kindly and humorous expression. In looking at him it is impossible not to realise the strength of will and character which he undoubtedly possesses. His appearance does not belie him, he is all that he looks. Not one of his many friends has had a more thorough experience of him than I, both in "Sunshine and Shadow." However dark the surroundings, however desperate the situation, however gloomy the prospect, his fine humour, splendid courage and high spirit are always the same.

In those many weary, anxious days we passed together during my term of command in France, I cherish a most grateful remembrance of his unfailing and invaluable help, as well as of his sincere, loyal, and wholehearted support. Of iron nerve and frame, nothing seemed to tire him. Having passed through the Staff College early in life with high honours, he was marked out for the most important Staff work; and after filling many important minor positions with distinction he became

Commandant of the Staff College, where his great talents were employed in reforming and much improving that institution. His *magnum opus* in peace time was done when he was Director of Military Operations at the War Office during the four years preceding the War. His countrymen have never realised, and probably may never know, the vital importance and invaluable results of the work he did there, not only in regard to the share he took in the preparation of the Expeditionary Force, but also in establishing those happy relations with the French Army which have proved of such help to Allied operations throughout the War.

Fearing no man, it was the very essence of his nature to speak his mind openly on all occasions, and when the great Irish crisis in the spring of 1914 was at its height, he sided openly with his native Ulster. He accompanied me to France as Sub-Chief of the General Staff, and when Murray's health broke down, in January 1915, I selected Wilson as his successor; but, owing to his candid expression of opinion in the Irish embroglio, he had many enemies, and his appointment was vetoed. It was this bad luck alone which prevented his valuable services then being used for his country's benefit in the best direction, and in a position for which he was better qualified than anyone else.

But to return to my story.

I somewhat feared the gap which existed between my right and d'Esperey's left, although the cavalry under

Allenby at Garatin were on this flank. Because of this, and also because the Germans were exercising some pressure on Haig on this night (September 4th), I ordered the British Forces to retire a few miles further south.

This facilitated the movements of reinforcements, supplies and material, which were coming up fast.

I have now brought the story down to September 5th, the last day of the great German advance. The British forces had halted on the previous night on a line facing nearly east and extending from Villers-sur-Morin on the north to Fontenay on the south. The 5th French Army lay east of my right flank on an east and west line through Provins, facing north. The 6th Army was on my left, preparing to recross the Marne between Lagny and Meaux.

I was at Melun early in the morning. Huguet had arrived in the night with despatches and a Staff Officer from Joffre, with whom I held a long conference.

It appeared that the 6th Army had already crossed the Marne, and would be in position west of the Ourcq at 9 a.m. on the 6th, on which day the French Commander-in-Chief proposed that the whole Allied Army should advance to the attack.

Shortly afterwards General Maunoury, commanding the 6th French Army, arrived, and we proceeded to discuss the situation fully. He described in detail what he intended doing, which was almost exactly as I have

explained above. He thought that very few of the enemy still remained north of Paris, his cavalry having reconnoitred for some distance north and north-west. He expressed it as his intention to attack most vigorously (*au fond*), and asked for my best support, which I promised to give.

I despatched Murray at once to visit the Corps and Cavalry Commanders and ascertain exactly the condition of their troops. He returned later in the day with very favourable reports. All were in excellent spirits and eager for the advance. They were having some much-needed rest; whilst reinforcements both of men and material were beginning to arrive.

Reports received during the day confirmed all we had previously heard. The enemy's concentration against the centre of our line was complete. They had crossed the Marne at several points, and their advanced troops had been engaged during the past night and this day with our cavalry and 1st Army Corps on our right, and along the entire front of the 5th French Army.

Later in the day Joffre came to Melun, and I had a long conference with him. We again went over all plans, and it was definitely arranged that the attack was to commence all along the line next day, the 6th.

Joffre was full of enthusiasm, and very hopeful of success if we all fulfilled our respective *rôles* and attacked *au fond*.

Thus ended the "Great Retreat."

In these pages I have avoided as far as possible any detailed account of the many splendid engagements which have added new and undying laurels to the battle rolls of all the distinguished regiments which fought them.

I repeat that the main cause of the success, which prepared this vast battle ground and opened the way for the decisive battle of the Marne, is to be found in the able dispositions made by the leaders; the magnificent example set by officers and non-commissioned officers; and in the wonderful spirit, courage, and endurance which was displayed by the rank and file of the Army.

My main object in writing this record is to explain as clearly as possible to my countrymen the line of thought which was in my own mind, the objects I set out to attain, and the reasons why I directed the troops as I did and came to the decisions at which I arrived at each successive phase of the operations.

In concluding this chapter I am anxious to lay particular stress on a principle which seems to me of the utmost importance, namely, the danger of undue interference by the Government at home with the Commander of an Army in the field. Stanton's interference with McClellan in the American Civil War should have been a sufficient warning.

I have referred to the natural anxiety which was deeply felt by the French President, Government, and Generals for the safety of Paris.

The utmost pressure was brought to bear upon me to alter my dispositions so as to make a dangerous stand on lines and in places which, in my judgment, would have exposed the British Army to the greatest danger of annihilation.

The shattered condition of my troops was not realised, but perhaps in view of the situation such pressure was natural and inevitable.

I had the power, in accordance with the instructions which I had received before coming to France, to use my full discretion in agreeing to or resisting such demands, and in all my happy experience of them, never did I find my French comrades resentful of such resistance when they realised the true reason for it.

But when, in spite of my earnest representation of the true condition of affairs, the Secretary of State for War himself and the Government with him, brought still greater pressure to bear, backed by the authority they possessed, to enforce their views, I was placed in a position of the utmost difficulty.

Lord Kitchener came to Paris with no other object than to insist upon my arresting the retreat, although no sign of a halt appeared at any part of the Allied line.

He was ignorant of the condition of the Army as I knew it, and was mistaken in his assertion that reinforcements of men and material had already reached me. The impression conveyed by his visit was that I had greatly magnified the losses which had occurred, and

exaggerated the condition of the troops. It was difficult to resist such pressure.

Fortunately I was able to do so.