

1914, by John French, *Viscount of Ypres*

CHAPTER VII

THE BATTLE OF THE AISNE AND ITS PROGRESS UP TO SEPTEMBER 30TH

I am throwing my thoughts back, and endeavouring to recall the mental atmosphere which surrounded me during the two days of pursuit following the fighting on the Marne, and during the early days of the Battle of the Aisne, which I am now about to recount.

I know that the predominant sentiments which ruled my mind were decidedly optimistic.

As I pointed out in the opening pages of this book, we had not *even then* grasped the true effect and bearing of the many new elements which had entered into the practice of modern war. We fully believed we were driving the Germans back to the Meuse if not to the Rhine, and all my correspondence and communications at this time with Joffre and the French Generals most closely associated with me, breathed the same spirit.

This will be better understood if I quote an order which was issued from French General Headquarters, at Chatillon, dated September 10th, the day which practically saw the close of the Marne battle:—

"The German forces are giving way on the Marne and in Champagne before the Allied Armies of the centre and left wing.

"To confirm and take advantage of this success, it is necessary to follow up this movement with energy so as to allow the enemy no rest.

"The offensive movement will, therefore, be continued along the whole front in a general N.N.E. direction.

"(a) The 6th Army will continue to rest its right on the Ourcq at the Sapières stream and on to the line Longpont—Chaudun—Courmelles—Soissons(inclusive). Bridoux's Cavalry Corps will gain ground on the outer wing and will endeavour to disturb the enemy's line of communication and retreat.

"(b) The British forces should follow up their victorious advance between the above-mentioned line and the road Rocourt—Fère-en-Tardenois—Mont Notre Dame—Bazoches, which will be at their disposal.

"(c) The 5th Army east of the latter line will turn the forest S. and N. of Epernay on the west, covering itself against hostile troops which may be found there, and ready to act in an easterly direction towards Rheims against the columns which are retiring before 9th Army. The 10th Corps will move from about Vertusin the direction of Epernay—Rheims, securing connection between the 5th and 9th Armies and ready to support the latter at any time."

Subsequent to the issue of the above orders, Joffre and I held several consultations with reference to marches through the wooded country (Forêt de St. Gobain and other places) lying to the north of the Aisne.

In these first few days of this period of the war we were decidedly encouraged by reports from other theatres. The Belgian Army appeared to be well established in Antwerp, and a fine sortie, directed by the King of the Belgians, had considerable effect in scattering the German forces operating there, and certainly delayed the movement of reinforcements which had been ordered south.

The news from Russia was also not unfavourable.

However, we were destined to undergo another terrible disappointment. The lessons of war as it is to-day had to be rubbed in by another dearly bought experience, and in a hard and bitter school.

The first surprise came when the "Jack Johnsons" began to fall. This was a nickname given by the men ("Black Marias" was another) to a high-explosive shell fired from 8-in. howitzers, which had been brought down from the fortress of Maubeuge to support the German defensive position on the Aisne. They were our first experience of an artillery much heavier than our own. Although these guns caused considerable damage and many bad casualties, they never had any very demoralising effect upon the troops.

As day by day the trench fighting developed and I came to realise more and more the much greater relative power which modern weapons have given to the defence; as new methods were adopted in the defensive use of machine guns; and as unfamiliar weapons in the shape of "trench mortars" and "bombs," hand grenades, etc. began to appear on the battlefield, so, day by day, I began dimly to apprehend what the future might have in store for us.

This drastic process of education went steadily on, but still reports came periodically from our aircraft, from our trenches, and from the French on either flank, that the enemy in front of us was "weakening," that (phantom!) columns had been seen marching north, etc.—and so the small still voice of truth and reality, trying to speak within me, remained faint and almost unheard.

Presently came Maunoury's great effort to turn the German right flank. I witnessed one day of this fighting myself with General Maunoury and came back hopeful: alas! these hopes were not fulfilled. Afterwards we witnessed the stupendous efforts of de Castelnau and Foch, but all ended in the same trench! trench! trench!

I finished my part in the Battle of the Aisne, however, unconverted, and it required the further and more bitter lesson of my own failure in the north to pass the Lys River, during the last days of October, to bring home to my mind a principle in warfare of to-day which I have held ever since, namely, that given forces fairly equally

matched, you can "bend" but you cannot "break" your enemy's trench line.

Everything which has happened in the war has borne out the truth of this view, and from the moment I grasped this great truth I never failed to proclaim it, although eventually I suffered heavily for holding such opinions.

The great feature of the pursuit on the 11th was the capture by the 3rd French Army of all the artillery of a German corps.

On the 12th my Headquarters were moved to Fère-en-Tardenois. Early in the day I joined Pulteney at some cross-roads two miles south of Buzancy (S.E. of Soissons). The enemy was opposing the passage of the Aisne to the 6th French Army all along its line westwards from Soissons, and the 4th Division held a position on the bridges south-east of Soissons to assist it.

The banks of the Aisne are very precipitous, and our position on the heights gave us a wonderful view of the fighting. What astonished me was the volume of the fire. Between Soissons and Compiègne the river seemed ablaze, so intense was the artillery fire on both sides.

I watched the action till about 1.30 p.m., when the German artillery, which had been very active all the morning at Montagne de Paris (south of Soissons) and other important points, withdrew north of the river. We

saw large masses of transport and troops moving in a N.E. direction.

At nightfall our 3rd Corps was close to the Aisne, the bridges of which were destroyed.

On my return to Headquarters at night the reporting officer informed me that the 6th French Army had reached the Aisne after some opposition, and that the French cavalry on the left were working round by Compiègne and moving N.E. to threaten the German communications.

The 5th French Army on our right was on the line Cormicy—Rheims—Verzy, the 18th Corps being thrown back on its left flank in touch with our right.

A message from Joffre informed me that the 9th and 4th French Armies had both made considerable progress and driven back the enemy.

The cavalry under Allenby did very good work on this day. They cleared the town of Braine and the high ground beyond it of strong hostile detachments. They bivouacked this night at Dhuizel. Allenby reported to me some excellent work done in the neighbourhood of Braine by the Queen's Bays assisted by Shaw's 9th Brigade of the 3rd Division (1st Batt. Northumberland Fusiliers, 4th Batt. Royal Fusiliers, 1st Batt. Lincolnshire Regt., and 1st Batt. Royal Scots Fusiliers).

The 1st Corps reached Vauxcéré and the 2nd Corps Braine and neighbourhood. Gough, with the 2nd Cavalry Division, was at Chermizy.

Thus, on the morning of September 13th, the day on which the Battle of the Aisne really opened, the British Army was in position south of that river in its course between Soissons on the west and Bourg on the east, with outposts on the river.

Now as to the ground over which the British Army fought. The Aisne valley runs generally east and west, and consists of a flat-bottomed depression, of width varying from half a mile to two miles, down which the river follows a winding course to the west, at some points near the southern slopes of the valley and at others near the northern. The high ground, both on the north and south of the river, is approximately 400 ft. above the bottom of the valley itself, which is broken into numerous rounded spurs and re-entrants. The most prominent of the former are the Chivres spur on the right bank and the Sermoise spur on the left.

Near the latter place the general plateau on the south is divided by a subsidiary valley of much the same character, down which the small river Vesle flows to the main stream near Sermoise. The slopes of the plateau overlooking the Aisne on the north and south are of varying steepness, and are covered with numerous patches of wood, which also stretch upwards and backwards over the edge on to the top of the high ground. There are several small towns and villages

dotted about in the valley itself and along its sides, the chief of which is the town of Soissons.

The Aisne is a sluggish stream of some 170 ft. in breadth, but, being 15 ft. deep in the centre, it is unfordable. Between Soissons on the west and Villers on the east (the part of the river attacked and secured by the British forces) there are eleven road bridges across it. On the north bank a narrow-gauge railway runs from Soissons to Vailly, where it crosses the river and continues eastward along the south bank. From Soissons to Sermoise a double line of railway runs along the south bank, turning at the latter place up the Vesle valley towards Bazoches.

The position held by the enemy was a very strong one, either for a delaying action or for a defensive battle. One of its chief military characteristics is that, from the high ground, on neither side can the top of the plateau on the other side be seen, except for small stretches. This is chiefly due to the woods on the edges of the slopes. Another important point is that all the bridges are under either direct or high-angle artillery fire.

The general lay and contour of the ground in the region over which the British Army fought at the Battle of the Aisne are deeply impressed on my memory.

Rolling downs of considerable altitude characterise the country over which the approaches to the river from the south lead, whilst the banks of the river itself, especially at the south, are wooded, precipitate and rocky. Thus

was I able to secure many posts of observation which enabled me to compass a much greater personal survey of the fighting than in any other terrain over which we fought.

During the early phases of the Battle of Ypres, the high ground north of the River Lys presented some similar features; just as Kemmel Hill, and the height overlooking Lens and, further south, the rolling plains west of the Somme, were also good for observation; but these all differed from the Aisne as affording a distant view, whereas, by avoiding observation and creeping through woods and undergrowth, it was possible to reach points of vantage on the southern bank of the Aisne, whence a close observation of the fighting line could be maintained.

I can remember sitting for hours at the mouth of a great cave which lay high up the southern bank of the river, within about 400 yards of the village of Missy and to the eastern flank of it, from which point I saw some of the first effects of the 6-in. siege howitzers which were sent to us at that time. Missy lay along the bed of the stream on both banks, and the Germans occupied a curiously shaped, high, conical hill which was called "Condé Fort." This was situated about 600 yards north of Missy, and reached by a steep ascent from the banks of the river. The hill completely dominated the village.

On the day of which I am writing (September 24th), it was very interesting to witness the clearance of this hill by our high-explosive shells. We could see the Germans

flying in all directions to the rear, and we subsequently got reliable information that their losses on this occasion were very heavy.

Although this relieved the pressure on the 5th Division, which was holding Missy and the entrenchments to the north of it, I have always thought it very creditable to Sir Charles Fergusson and his command that he retained his hold on Missy to the last in face of the threatening situation on his front.

He was no doubt much helped by the superior power of observation obtained by his artillery owing to the configuration of the ground all along the south bank, and this, in fact, was most helpful to the British Army throughout the battle.

Missy is another instance in proof of the principle which all recent fighting has clearly established, namely, that command of ground is of value chiefly with regard to the power of observation it affords.

On another occasion I well remember spending a long time lying on the top of a rick, covered by hay for concealment. From this point very valuable artillery observation was secured, and an excellent view of all Haig's positions was afforded.

Poor Wing, the C.R.A. of the 1st Corps, took me to this place, and was beside me all the time. He was afterwards killed at the Battle of Loos whilst in command of the 12th Division. He was beloved by all

who served with him; his gallantry, skill, and dash were spoken of by every one, and his loss was deeply felt.

In the early hours of the 13th, we attacked the river line all along our front. The enemy artillery made a vigorous defence, employing many heavy and other kinds of guns. The German infantry was not very energetic in defence, but the bombardment continued heavily all day on both sides. At nightfall all passages except that at Condé were secured and held, our advance line running from Bucy-le-Long on the west through spurs N. and N.E. of Celles to Bourg on the east.

On this afternoon I went to see the bridge which the 3rd Corps had thrown over the Aisne at Venizel. The task had to be done under fire of heavy guns with high-explosive shell, and it was a fine piece of work.

After leaving there, I went to the Headquarters of the 5th Division at Serches, where I met Fergusson. Here I learnt that up to then they had been unable to approach the crossing at Missy, as the enemy had infantry and machine guns on the opposite bank, supported by artillery in rear. Throughout the battle this particular point was a locality of great interest.

Early on the 14th I got news that the 6th Division, which had been sent out to me from England, was now concentrated south of the Marne, and was beginning its march to join us.

During the night of the 13th all three Corps had constructed bridges on their fronts for crossing, and in the early morning of the 14th, the remainder of the 1st Corps crossed at Bourg, the 2nd at Vailly and Missy, and the 3rd Corps at Venizel. On the 14th I spent some time with Haig, who was very successful, and made an excellent advance considering the strong opposition which confronted him.

Early in the morning, Lomax, with the 1st Division, surprised the enemy at Vendresse, capturing 600 prisoners and 12 guns. This distinguished Divisional Commander died a few months later from the effect of wounds received during the first Battle of Ypres.

From the opening of the campaign up to the day he was wounded his services were invaluable. The Division he commanded was always in the hottest of the fighting, and he commanded it throughout with consummate skill and dash. His personality gained for him the esteem and affection of all who served with him, and his loss was badly felt throughout the Army.

On this day (14th) the 2nd Division also made good progress, and in the evening its left held the Ostel Spur, an important point of vantage.

The centre and left of the Army were not so successful. The 3rd Division, after crossing at Vailly, had nearly reached Aizy (about 2-1/2 miles north of the river) when they were driven back by a powerful counter-attack supported by a strong force of heavy

artillery. At nightfall, however, they were still one mile north of the river. The enemy's artillery position north of Aizy was a very strong one.

The 5th Division was unable to advance beyond the northern edge of the Chivres plateau. Here also a considerable force of heavy artillery was concentrated against them.

The 4th Division retained during the 14th the position they had taken the day before north of Bucy-le-Long.

The 6th French Army pushed up its left flank, and the 4th French Corps was advancing east in support of the 7th Corps, which was holding the enemy from the north.

The French position about Soissons was well held all day.

The 18th Corps (5th French Army) had its left flank close to the right of our 1st Corps on the heights of Craonne. The remainder of the 5th Army was heavily engaged the whole day all along its line as far as Rheims.

On the night of the 14th I began to think that the enemy was really making a determined stand on the Aisne.

Our situation on this night was as follows :

1st Corps and Cavalry Division holding line Troyon—S. of Chivy—S. of Beaulne—Soupir, with 1st and 2nd

Cavalry Brigades on the left, all in close touch with the enemy.

1st Corps Headquarters: Courcelles (afterwards Dhuizel).

2nd Corps: 3rd Division holding circle round Vailly, 5th Division holding south of Chivres plateau to Ste. Marguerite and Missy, both in close touch with the enemy; guns on south bank of river.

3rd Corps : 4th Division holding south end of Spurs from Le Moncel to Crouy (French on north of Crouy ridge), also in close touch with enemy; 19th Brigade in reserve at Venizel Bridge.

Gough's 3rd and 5th Cavalry Brigades: Chassemy.

On this day our casualties were heavy, amounting to between 1,500 and 2,000, including three Commanding Officers.

On the 15th my impression of the previous day, namely, that the enemy was making a firm stand in his actual position, was confirmed also by an intercepted German wireless message. It seemed probable that we had the whole of the German 1st Army in front of us.

This being my appreciation of the situation, I was not satisfied with my own position in two important respects. In the first place, our losses were heavily accumulating, and I had not sufficient reserves to reinforce dangerous points; the enemy had a great artillery superiority, and at this time and for some days

afterwards I badly felt the want of the guns and machine guns which had been lost at Le Cateau and were not yet made good. In the second place, I was most anxious to get the 2nd and 3rd Corps forward and more in line with the 1st Corps on the right.

The 6th Division had now crossed the Marne, moving north, and orders were sent to its Commander, General Keir, to come up as quickly as possible. My idea was that the 6th Division should go to Haig, and that, with this reinforcement, he should advance west and take the pressure off the 2nd and 3rd Corps.

The 1st Corps was heavily counter-attacked on several occasions throughout the 15th, and, although the enemy was most gallantly repulsed everywhere, our losses were very severe.

Towards evening a retirement of both German infantry and cavalry took place, and my hopes were revived of the continuance of the enemy's retreat. On this I directed the 6th Division to join its own 3rd Corps on the left.

However, the enemy showing no further signs of leaving the position, my hopes for a further advance at last began to be founded altogether upon the probability of a successful attack by the 6th French Army.

On the 16th I went to see General Maunoury at his Headquarters. I found him watching an attack of the 61st and 62nd Divisions on the village of Nouvron and the plateau above it. The General and his Staff were standing on a kind of grassy tableland on the edge of a

wood. I remember that a French Staff Officer who was there spoke English fluently. I threw myself down on my face on the grass and watched the battle taking place on the other side of the river. I spent an hour or two with the General at this spot and discussed the situation with him. From all I could see the French appeared to be getting on very well.

On my way back I visited the Corps Commanders again, and they all expressed the utmost confidence in their ability to hold their positions.

After my return to Headquarters in the evening, Colonel C. B. Thompson (liaison officer with the 6th French Army) reported to me. His accounts were disappointing after my experience during the day with Maunoury. He said that the 13th French Corps had been checked south-west of Noyon by a night-attack of troops from the 9th Reserve German Corps, which was said to have reached Noyon from Belgium. Here was another incident in that continual "flanking" and "outflanking" manœuvre which was only to cease at the sea.

Again, the 4th French Corps arriving east had been arrested on finding the German force entrenched on its left (northern) flank.

It is from this particular evening of 16th September that I date the origin of a grave anxiety which then began to possess me.

In the years which preceded the war, discussions on various subjects which had come before the Imperial Committee of Defence, of which I was a member, had imbued my mind with a sense of the vital importance it was to Great Britain that the Channel ports should be held by a power in absolute friendship with us.

I venture here to quote some extracts from a paper which I wrote very shortly before the war, for circulation amongst the members of the Committee of Imperial Defence :

"... I think it will be allowed that, in a war between ourselves and a great Continental Power which is in possession of the Eastern Channel coast-line between Dunkirk and Boulogne, submarines, assisted by aircraft, would effectually deny the passage of the Straits of Dover to any war or other vessel which was not submersible. In fact, the command of the sea, in so far as this part of the Channel is concerned, would not depend upon the relative strength of the opposing Navies, but would remain in dispute until one side or other effected practical destruction of its adversary's aircraft and submarines.

"The way would then lie open to the Power which had gained this advantage to move an invading force of any size in comparative safety across the Straits at any part of the coast between (say) Ramsgate and Dungeness on the one side and Dunkirk and Boulogne on the other.

"The command of these Straits would be a contest between submarines and aeroplanes....

"If the Continental Powers secured the command they would possess the great advantage of menacing us with a twentieth century edition of the stroke Napoleon intended to deal against us from Boulogne in 1805.

"To put the matter briefly; I hold that the Straits of Dover, regarded as a military obstacle to the invasion of this country, will, in the not far distant future, altogether lose their maritime character, and the problem of their successful passage by an invading force will present features somewhat resembling those involving the attack and defence of great river lines or operations on the great lakes in a war between Canada and the United States.

"The main object to be attained in trying to secure the passage of a great river line is to gain possession of the opposite bank and establish a strong bridgehead.

"In accordance with the views enunciated in this paper, I apply the same principle to the Straits of Dover, and hold that the only reliable defence against a powerful attack by hostile aircraft and submarines in vastly superior numbers, is to possess a strong bridgehead on the French coast with an effective means of passing and repassing across the Straits which would only be secured by the projected Channel Tunnel."

The bearing of all this upon the subject of the present chapter is apparent. So long as the Germans were being

driven back, whether by frontal or flank attack, the Channel ports might be considered comparatively safe; but on the particular night of which I am speaking (September 16th) I had arrived at the conclusion that a frontal attack was hopeless, whilst it began to appear that any threat against the German flank would be effectually countered if not turned against ourselves.

This, then, was my great fear. What was there to prevent the enemy launching a powerful movement for the purpose of securing the Channel ports, whilst the main forces were engaged in practically neutralising one another?

From this time I sent constant and urgent warnings to London by wire and by letter to look out for the safety of these same ports.

It was just about now that I began to conceive the idea of disengaging from the Aisne and moving to a position in the north, for the main purpose of defending the Channel ports and, as a secondary reason, to be in a better position to concert combined action and co-operation with the Navy.

At the moment of which I am speaking, and for many days afterwards, there was no serious thought or belief that Antwerp was in danger. My fear for the Channel ports, which then began to lay a strong hold upon my thoughts, in all probability influenced my mind, and, perhaps, affected my dispositions throughout the rest of

the time during which I took my part in the Battle of the Aisne.

I remember on the same day (September 16th) visiting some hospital trains which were taking the wounded away. It was gratifying to mark the great improvement in their organisation and equipment.

On the 17th the 1st Corps was heavily attacked, but repulsed the enemy with great loss. Craonne was lost by the 18th French Corps, but a strong position was still maintained by them on the Chemin des Dames.

Our operations on the Aisne were at this time much hampered by heavy rain.

On this day (September 17th) a French Reserve Division captured two complete battalions of Prussian Guards in Berry-au-Bac, and a French Cavalry Corps made a splendid raid on the German communications, operating from Roye and moving east as far as the neighbourhood of Ham and St. Quentin. In this raid General Bridoux, commanding the Cavalry Corps, was killed in his motor, and his papers were captured.

I detached the 6th Division from Pulteney's command (3rd Corps) to form an Army Reserve, but gave him the use of the divisional artillery.

An entrenched position was now selected and laid out, and work begun on it south of the Aisne in view of a possible retreat to the south of the river.

The 1st Corps continuing to be subject to heavy and constant attacks, I reinforced Haig on the 18th with a brigade of the 6th Division, and moved the remainder of that Division into a more central position. My anxiety as to reserves caused me also to move Gough's Cavalry Division from the 2nd Corps to take up that duty.

The prominent feature of this day's dispositions was the issue of an order from Joffre by which the 6th French Army assumed a defensive *rôle*, occupying the line Soissons—Vic-sur-Aisne—Tracy-le-Val—Bailly, pending the formation of another Army to consist of four Corps (4th, 14th, 13th, and 20th French) with two Cavalry Corps.

This Army was to concentrate at once to the N.W. of Noyon; it was intended that it should operate in an easterly direction against the enemy's flank, and it was placed under the command of de Castelnau.

I had enjoyed the great advantage and privilege of a close acquaintance with this distinguished French commander for some years before the war, and in that time I had learnt enough of his splendid, soldierlike character, and great capabilities as a leader, to experience no surprise when actual war revealed his ability.

Although de Castelnau and the Army he commanded were not successful in actually turning the enemy's flank and compelling his retreat, I believe that history will

assign to this great General the honour of commanding the Army which drove the first big nail into the German coffin, for it was the Army which struck the blow that changed the line of battle from "east and west" to "north and south." De Castelnau, by the fine leading of that Army, built the first section of the great besieging wall, which was destined to form an impenetrable barrier between Germany and her main objectives.

In directing this great movement as he did, Marshal Joffre must once again be credited with one of those flashes of military genius which have never been surpassed in the annals of war.

A somewhat significant and rather amusing example of Haig's power of resource was shown on the 19th, when he arranged with the Zouaves on his right to give them 10,000 rations of bully beef in exchange for the loan of two heavy guns.

It was estimated that the enemy's attacks against the 1st Corps up to this time had cost him at least 7,000 men. The dead were lying thick in front of our trenches.

The fighting on the 19th September will always remain memorable to the French, because on this day the Germans practically destroyed Rheims Cathedral by artillery fire.

On the 20th I had a long conference with Haig at his Headquarters, and afterwards visited both his Divisional Commanders (Lomax and Munro) and also some of the Brigadiers.

The 1st Corps was indeed hard pressed, but was gallantly repulsing all attacks. Nevertheless, it was suffering heavy losses and badly needed rest. I told Haig he could call upon the remaining two brigades of the 6th Division (he already had the 18th Brigade in his trenches) for reinforcement, if necessary.

Later in the day a violent attack on the 3rd Division (2nd Corps) obliged me to place the 16th Brigade (1st Batt. the Buffs, 1st Batt. Leicester Regt., 1st Batt. Shropshire L.I., and 2nd Batt. York and Lancs Regt.) at Smith-Dorrien's disposal. This left only the 17th Brigade and Gough's cavalry in general reserve.

I told Haig he could call upon them if absolutely necessary, but asked him to do without them if possible. Although he was heavily pressed he finished the day without the aid of these troops.

The position of the three Reserve Divisions on the left of the 6th French Army gave cause for great anxiety on this evening, as the development of de Castelnau's movements to the north could not make itself felt for some two or three days.

On the 21st I was able to effect a much needed relief of the troops holding the trenches. The 16th Infantry Brigade of the 6th Division relieved the 7th Infantry Brigade (3rd Batt. Worcester Regt., 2nd Batt. S. Lancs Regt., 1st Batt. Wilts Regt., and 2nd Batt. R. Irish Rifles) of the 3rd Division, the 7th

Brigade joining the 6th Division in general reserve at Couvrelles. The 17th Infantry Brigade (1st Batt. R. Fusiliers, 1st Batt. N. Staffs Regt., 2nd Batt. Leinster Regt., and 3rd Batt. Rifle Brigade) relieved the 5th Infantry Brigade (2nd Batt. Worcester Regt., 2nd Batt. Oxford and Bucks L.I., 2nd Batt. H.L.I., and 2nd Batt. Connaught Rangers) of the 2nd Division, the latter joining the 6th Division as general reserve at Dhuizel.

A significant result of our recent experience was that the cavalry were calling out loudly for *bayonets*.

On this day Sir Henry Rawlinson arrived and reported himself. General Snow having met with a severe accident owing to his horse falling, I placed General Rawlinson in temporary command of the 4th Division.

General Maxwell, the newly appointed Inspector-General of Lines of Communication, also reported his arrival.

On the afternoon of the 22nd I went out with Allenby to the extreme right of Haig's position, where the cavalry were working, and made a close reconnaissance of the ground over which the 1st Army Corps was fighting.

We ascended the heights north of the Aisne leading to the plateau which lies to the south of the Chemin des Dames, now so famous a locality. The ground was thickly wooded up to the edge of the plateau, and the winding narrow road led through small groups of rough

houses and buildings which seemed as if they had been hewn out of the rock. The enemy's "Black Marias" constantly searched those roads in close proximity; indeed, actually within the boundaries of these locations, but still tiny children were to be seen playing beside the road all unconscious of any danger.

Near the top of the ascent was an enormous crater or valley, apparently of volcanic origin, which furnished covering and concealment to a large force of Moroccan troops in reserve, who completely filled it. They, like the children, seemed to be perfectly oblivious of the high-explosive shell which often fell amongst them. Lying about in their light blue and silver uniforms they presented a very picturesque appearance.

On the night of the 22nd I got a letter from Maunoury telling me that the enemy was most certainly going away from his front, and that he intended to advance and attack at 4 a.m. on the 23rd, and he asked me to support him. I learned also that the 5th French Army on my right was also planning an attack.

I arranged to co-operate accordingly, but by the night of the 23rd very little progress had been effected.

After this I think all our eyes were turned eagerly towards the north and to de Castelnau, whilst, as to myself, I was more determined than ever that my proper sphere of action was clearly on the Belgian frontier in the north.

The 2nd French Army made decided progress up to the end of September, but their action did not compel the enemy to evacuate his positions on the Aisne, nor did it seriously turn his flank.

On the 26th, de Castelnau was heavily engaged, and was on that evening roughly on the line Ribécourt—Roye—Chaulnes—Bray-sur-Somme, with one Cavalry Division north of the Somme. On the 26th it was clear that the flanking movement of the 2nd (French) Army had for the moment failed, as the 2nd Bavarian Corps was on its left north of Péronne.

By the 30th, de Castelnau was practically thrown on the defensive, and another Army was composed of units drawn from the east. This Army was intended to effect a turning movement pivoting on de Castelnau's left.

There are a few salient points in the history of these last few days of the month which materially affected the course of the campaign.

On the 26th, Sir Charles Haddon, President of the Ordnance Board, Woolwich Arsenal, arrived at my Headquarters to discuss the question of armament and ammunition. I took this opportunity to impress upon him how terribly deficient we were in heavy artillery as compared with the Germans, and urged as strongly as I possibly could that the manufacture of this class of ordnance, as well as an abundance of ammunition, should be put in hand at once.

My official correspondence with the War Office on this vital subject dates back to this time, and continued right up to June, 1915, when at last Mr. Lloyd George came to the rescue and entered upon his career of patriotic salvation. Britons all over the world will ever remember this distinguished statesman with the utmost gratitude as one of the greatest of their Empire's sons.

Only those who were in any degree associated with Mr. Lloyd George in this time of trial can fully realise the awful responsibility which rested upon him, and the difficult nature of the problem he had to solve. His work was done in face of a dead weight of senseless but powerful opposition, all of which he had to undermine and overcome.

In later pages of this volume I shall refer again to the subject of deficiencies in armament and ammunition. I have mentioned it here because I am firmly convinced that, had my advice with regard to it been listened to and acted upon at the time, the War would have finished long before it did, and untold suffering would have been saved to the civilised world.

I think it was on September 24th that a few 6-inch siege howitzers arrived and proved of great help to me.

As I am about to recount the *pourparlers* with Joffre which led up to our move north, I am reminded that it was during these latter days of September that my friend, Winston Churchill, paid me a visit. I think of him in connection with this subject

— quite apart from any question of Antwerp, which was not then in danger — because it was at that time that we first discussed together the advisability of joint action by the Army and Navy. It was then that we sketched out plans for an offensive with one flank towards the sea, which, although the subsequent fall of Antwerp effected a drastic change in the conditions, were the same in principle as those which took substantial shape and form in the early days of 1915, and which will be recounted in their proper place.

I cannot adequately express my sense of the valuable help which I received throughout the War from Winston Churchill's assistance and constant sympathy. Not only have I always indignantly repudiated the shameful attacks which his countrymen have so often made upon him, but it rejoices me to know that I have been able to do so — having a full knowledge of all the facts — with a deep and true sense of the horrible injustice of the charges brought against him. I shall have more to say on this subject later.

On September 29th I addressed to the French Commander-in-Chief the following note which was conveyed to him that evening by General Wilson :

"Ever since our position in the French line was altered by the advance of General Maunoury's 6th Army to the River Ourcq, I have been anxious to regain my original position on the left flank of the French Armies. On several occasions I have thought of suggesting this move, but the strategical and tactical situation from day

to day has made the proposal inopportune. Now, however, that the position of affairs has become clearly defined, and that the immediate future can be forecasted with some confidence, I wish to press the proposal with all the power and insistence which are at my disposal. The moment for the execution of such a move appears to me to be singularly opportune.

"In the first place, the position of my force on the right bank of the River Aisne has now been thoroughly well entrenched.

"In the second place, I have carefully reconnoitred an alternative position on the left bank of the River Aisne, and have had this position entrenched from end to end, and it is now ready for occupation.

"The strategical advantages of the proposed move are much greater. I am expecting to be reinforced by the 7th Division from England early next week.

"Following closely on this reinforcement will come the 3rd Cavalry Division from home, and then the 8th Division from home, and simultaneously with this last reinforcement will come two Indian Divisions and an Indian Cavalry Division.

"In other words my present force of six Divisions and two Cavalry Divisions will, within three or four weeks from now, be increased by four Divisions and two Cavalry Divisions, making a total British force of ten Divisions (five Corps) and four Cavalry Divisions.

"All through the present campaign I have been much restricted both in initiative and in movement by the smallness of my Army in face of the enormous numbers of the enemy.

"With an Army of five Corps and four Cavalry Divisions my freedom of action, field of operation and power of initiative will be increased out of all proportion to the numerical increase in Corps, more especially as almost half my total force will then consist of fresh troops and will be opposed by an enemy already much worn by the severity of the previous fighting.

"Another reason of a strategical nature for changing my position in the line is the great advantage which my forces will gain by a shortened line of communication, an advantage which falls almost equally on your railways.

"It appears to me, therefore, that both from strategical reasons and from tactical reasons it is desirable that the British Army should regain its position on the left of the line.

"There remains the question of *when* this move should take place.

"I submit that *now* is the time.

"We are all sedentary armies, and movements and changes are easily made. Once the forward movement has been commenced, it will be more difficult to pull out my Army from the line of advance, and a further delay in the transfer of my force from its present

position will lead to great confusion both at the front and on the L. of C., and a great loss of power and efficiency in the coming campaign.

"It is for these reasons that I advocate the transfer of my force from its present position to the extreme left of the line, and I advocate that the change should be made now."

On the 30th, I received the following reply from Joffre:

"Great General Headquarters Staff,
"3rd Bureau,
"September 30th, 1914.

"Note by General Joffre, Commander-in-Chief, to Marshal French, Commanding British Army.

"His Excellency, Marshal French, has been good enough to draw the attention of the Commander-in-Chief to the particular interest attaching to the proposal that the British Army should reoccupy the position which it originally held on the left of the French Armies.

"In view of the ever-increasing strength of the British Forces, this position would offer great advantages in lightening the work of the French railways and diminishing the length of the British line of communication, and, above all, in giving to Marshal French's Army a liberty of action and of power very superior to those it now possesses.

"The increase of strength which will shortly accrue to the British Army by the arrival of the 7th and 8th Divisions and a Division of Cavalry, and the two Indian Divisions and one Cavalry Division from India entirely justifies the Marshal's request. The Commander-in-Chief shares this view, and is persuaded that if this movement had been possible it would have been very advantageous for the Allied Armies; but so far the general situation has not admitted of this being carried out.

"Is it possible at this moment to contemplate its realisation in the future? His Excellency, Marshal French thinks that the present moment is particularly favourable to his project. In front of the British line, as also in front of the 6th, 9th, and 4th Armies, the situation is, so to speak, unchanged. For nearly 15 days the Armies of the centre have been *accrochées* to the ground without making any real advance. There have been violent attacks and periods of calm, but the Commander-in-Chief wishes to point out that this is far from being the case on the wings.

"As a matter of fact, on the right, the 3rd Army and a portion of the 1st Army for several days in the neighbourhood of St. Mihiel have been fighting an obstinate battle, the issue of which is not in doubt, but the results of which have not yet made themselves felt. On the left, the 2nd Army, which to-day forms the extreme flank of the line has for three days past been the

object of furious attacks, which show how important it is for the enemy to crush our wing.

"Will this Army always form the left of the French forces? We cannot think so, because the fact that to-day the Army there has been subdivided will doubtless lead the Commander-in-Chief to form a new Army there; the transport of troops necessitated by the creation of this Army, formed from elements taken away from the front without leaving a gap in our line, must of necessity render our situation somewhat delicate for some days.

"If the Commander-in-Chief has contemplated the possibility of withdrawing a certain number of Corps without modifying his front, he has never thought of transporting an entire Army, the removal of which would create a gap impossible to fill.

"The battle has been going on since September 13th. It is necessary that during this period of crisis, which will have considerable influence on the subsequent operations, everyone should maintain his position without thinking of modifying it, so as to be ready for all eventualities.

"Now, the movement contemplated by His Excellency Marshal French would inevitably entail complications, not only in the position of troops but also in those of supply trains, etc. It might possibly create confusion in the general dispositions of our Armies, the extent of which it would be difficult to measure.

"For the above reasons the Commander-in-Chief cannot share the view of Marshal French as to the time at which this movement should be carried out; on the other hand, it appears that it might be possible to begin it from to-day onwards by making certain dispositions, the detail of which is given below :

"1. The British Army might operate like the French Army. It is to-day strongly entrenched in the positions which it occupies. While maintaining the integrity of its front, it might doubtless be possible for it to withdraw a certain number of divisions (to begin with one Corps), which might in succession be transported to the left.

"2. The British Cavalry Division is at the present moment unemployed on the front; it might, similarly to the 11th and 10th Corps and 8th Division of Cavalry, move by rail or by march route to the extreme left to act as a communicating link between the Belgian Army and the French troops.

"3. The 7th and 8th Divisions, which will shortly arrive, could be disembarked in the neighbourhood of Dunkirk. They would subsequently operate in the direction of Lille. Their action would immediately make itself felt on the right flank of the German Army, which daily receives fresh reinforcements. These divisions would be joined to the divisions withdrawn from the front.

"4 The Indian Divisions, as soon as they are able to take the field, would move by rail to join the English

formations assembled in the northern region, and would form the nucleus with which would be united the other British Divisions as soon as they should be removed.

"5. As soon as the advance can be resumed, the front will be narrowed; it would then be possible for the English to halt and slip behind with a view to moving the left of the line while the 6th and 5th Armies close in towards each other. The fewer units remaining to be moved, the easier would be the operation.

"To sum up, the Commander-in-Chief shares Marshal French's view that it is desirable for the whole British Army to be on the left of the French Armies, but cannot be entirely of the same opinion as to the time at which this movement should be carried out.

"The Commander-in-Chief would be grateful to His Excellency, Marshal French, if the latter would let him know whether he shares his views as to the proposals indicated above."

On the same date, I replied to the Commander-in-Chief as follows :

"September
30th, 1914.

"Note by the Field Marshal Commander-in-Chief, British Forces, to His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief.

"The Field-Marshal Commander-in-Chief, British Forces, has received the note which His Excellency the

Commander-in-Chief has been kind enough to address to him, in reply to his Memorandum of the 29th instant.

"Sir John French entirely agrees with the views expressed, and will give effect to them at once in the following manner :

"1. The 2nd Cavalry Division, consisting of two Brigades under the command of Major-General Gough, which is now located in rear of the left of the line held by the British Forces, will hold itself in readiness to proceed to whatever point on the railway His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief may decide upon, to be moved thence to Lille, if that place should be decided upon as the point upon which the British Forces should first concentrate on reaching the left of the Allied line.

"2. As soon as trains are available, the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief will disengage the 2nd British Corps which now occupies the centre of the British line. This Corps will concentrate in rear and be ready to move by the same route and for the same destination as the 2nd Cavalry Division.

"3. In like manner, the 19th Infantry Brigade will be held in readiness to move immediately after the 2nd Corps.

"4. The position in the centre of the British line, held now by the two Divisions of the 2nd Corps, will be divided between the 1st Corps, now occupying the left of the British line, in such a manner as to unite the

inward flanks of the two Corps; whilst the 1st Cavalry Division will be held as a reserve south of the river.

"5. The Field Marshal understands that, as soon as a forward move by the whole line becomes feasible, these two corps and the 1st Cavalry Division will remain behind, their places being filled up by closing in the 5th and 6th French Armies on their inward flanks.

"6. The Field Marshal will immediately inform the British Secretary of State for War of these arrangements, and will ask that the 7th and 8th Divisions may be moved as soon as practicable *viâ* Boulogne or Havre to join the British forces concentrating at Lille.

"7. The Indian Division will be directed to move in accordance with the views expressed in the note of September 30th.

"Sir John French hopes that these proposals will meet with the approval of His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief."

The following was General Joffre's reply :

October 1st,
1914.

"The Commander-in-Chief of the French Forces has the honour to acknowledge receipt of the letter of His Excellency the Field Marshal Commanding the British Army, dated September 30th, referring to the future movements which are to be carried out by this Army.

"He is happy to be able to comply with the wishes expressed by the Field Marshal and to state, once more, the entire unanimity of views which exists between the Commanders of the Allied Armies. At the same time, owing to the necessities of the railway service, it is not possible to commence entraining before the afternoon of October 5th.

"Referring to the points touched on in the letter of September 30th, and in accordance with the views given by the Field Marshal, it is suggested that the following instructions might be given :

"1. The 2nd Cavalry Division (two brigades under the command of Gen. Gough) should move by road, owing to the lateness of the date on which entrainment becomes possible. They should move in rear of the 6th and 2nd Armies, by Villers-Cotterets—La Croix—St. Ouen—Amiens—St. Pol—Lille (similarly to the 8th and 10th French Divisions).

"2. The 2nd Corps should march to the area Longueil—Pont St. Maxence, by October 5th, to be moved by rail to the Lille district, its place on the front held by the British to be taken as arranged by the Field Marshal in his letter of September 30th.

"3. The 19th Infantry Brigade to be in readiness to follow the 2nd Corps.

"4. As regards the two Corps and the Cavalry Division remaining at the front, it would appear inconvenient to

leave them halted there when the general advance of the whole line becomes possible.

"Apart from the unfairness of depriving the British troops of the satisfaction of advancing after their valiant fighting, it will be more convenient to halt them successively, as the closing in of the inner flank of the 5th and 6th Armies shortens the front allotted to the British Army.

"It would be advisable for the Commander-in-Chief and the Field Marshal to arrange mutually, at some convenient date, the conditions under which the transport of these troops by rail should be made.

"5. Referring to the disembarkation of the 7th and 8th Divisions, the Commander-in-Chief is most anxious that these two Divisions should proceed as soon as possible to Boulogne. Their arrival at Lille, where they are to join the British Forces pushed to the front, would then be more rapid than if they were disembarked at Havre and the arrangements would be simpler. Their movement from the port of landing could be carried out by road with the assistance of the railway for marching troops.

"6. The Indian Divisions should be moved to the neighbourhood of Lille as soon as the Field Marshal reports that they are ready.

"The G.O. C.-in-C. hopes that these proposals are in accordance with the views expressed by the Field Marshal in his letter of September 30th, and he would

be glad to be assured of this as soon as possible in order that steps may be taken to execute them.

(Signed) "J.
JOFFRE."

I acknowledged the above in these terms :

"October 1st, 1914.

"The Field Marshal Commanding-in-Chief the British Forces has duly received the note dated October 1st, 1914, from His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief.

"He is extremely glad to find that the proposals contained in his last note meet with the approval of the Commander-in-Chief.

"Such modifications as are suggested in the present note are perfectly feasible, and Sir John French will give immediate effect to them.

"The necessary orders were issued to-day, and the preliminary movements are now in progress.

"The Field Marshal hopes that the 2nd Cavalry Division will commence its march towards Lille on the morning of October 3rd."