

1---The Darkest Days of All

True Causes of the British Retreat

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BY PHILIP GIBBS

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Now that victory is ours, we may look back with steady eyes at bad times when it was hard to know the truth and still keep faith and courage. For the British armies in France and Belgium, and for those who counted upon their strength, the darkest days of all began in March of last year, when the Germans launched their offensive against the British lines and drove us back in hard retreat over a great stretch of country which our men had gained by enormous sacrifice of life through years of fighting. I saw the scenes of that retreat, and I confess now that when I saw our men coming back over the old Somme battlefields, when I saw remnants of our fine divisions so exhausted that they could hardly stand and so weak in numbers that they had no chance of resisting the enemy's onslaught outside towns like Albert and Amiens, which had been ours since the early days of the war. I was haunted by the thought that perhaps after all our enormous efforts and losses, victory might not be ours. It was worse a month afterwards when the group of armies under Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, in Flanders, started their northern attack, broke through our lines between Festubert and Givenchy, forced the passage of the River Lys, struck northward and captured Bailleul, swarmed back over Passchendaele and all the ridges around Ypres which had cost England the lives of thousands of her sons to take, and took Kemmel Hill from the French who had come up to support us. Then, indeed, it looked as though the worst might happen. Kemmel Hill was the key of all our northern defence and the very key of the coast and the channel ports. With Amiens menaced, the road to Abbeville thinly guarded by spent and broken divisions, and Kemmel Hill in the hands of the enemy, we who were on the ground knew that our fate hung on a thin thread of fortune, a thread depending for its strength on the thin lines of British soldiers, tired, fighting in small groups against great odds, but with no surrender in their souls.

England did not know what touch-and-go it was on the edge of irreparable disaster. I don't think England knows now, nor how hard pressed her men were in those days, nor how great their losses. For though I and other war correspondents described the retreat day by day in great detail, we could not tell our people, nor the world, the full measure of our peril, nor the extremity of our weakness; and in any case the spirit of England was so strong in belief of final victory that the gravest disasters did not shock her faith. Those of us in the field then thought that this sublime confidence was almost callous, and it irritated us to anger, knowing the frightful danger and the awful losses; but looking back to that time I see that England was right, and her faith justified.

800,000 British Casualties in 1917.

What were the causes of the greatest disaster that has ever befallen British arms? The answer to that question is not easy because, it involves many factors and events in the past history of the war. It is linked up with the battles of Flanders, fought between July and December of 1917, followed by the adventure in the Cambrai salient which began with a brilliant victory and ended with an unfortunate reverse at the close of the year. The battles of Flanders had been designed to capture the ridges round Ypres and gain the Belgian coast at Ostend and Zeebrugge at a time when a great part of the German army should be engaged by an important and continuous series of battles by the French in the Champagne district under the supreme command of General Neville. By the greatest bad luck, partly owing to the success of Hindenburg's new system of "elastic defence," the French attack did not make progress and came to a dead halt after heavy losses. The British battles of Flanders began late, and British troops instead of encountering an enemy who should have been heavily en-

gaged at the same time opposite the French line had to attack the strongest German divisions which could be replaced on the orders of the German General Staff by fresh divisions from other parts of the line whenever they were shattered by the British assault. For nearly five months this happened, our troops attacking and capturing the ridges in the foulest conditions of rain and mud, and although we inflicted enormous losses upon the finest troops of the German army—I saw their dead in heaps about the "pill-boxes" (or concrete block houses) on the way to Passchendaele—our own casualties reached terrible figures and we failed to gain the Belgian coast. Lord Northcliffe's estimate was 800,000 casualties to the British armies in 1917, and seventy-five per cent. of those were on the Western front. The adventure in the Cambrai salient in November of that year, when our surprise attack with tanks broke the Hindenburg line and when our gallant troops after all that fighting in Flanders took 90,000 prisoners and much ground, cost us numbers of valuable lives at week late rowing to the counter surprise by General von Marwitz, when our men had to fight desperate rear guard actions. So at the end of 1917 after all these bloody battles the British armies were terribly weakened in numbers, the gaps in their ranks not being replaced in many divisions by new drafts, and their strength was still further decreased by the loss of three of their finest divisions who were rushed off to Italy under the command of General Plumer to turn the tide of the Italian disaster which had then happened.

French Doubts Hurt British.

It was at that time, when the British armies on the Western front were weakest, that Sir Douglas Haig was called upon to take over a longer line of front south of St. Quentin, and it was at that time, in the beginning of last year, that the Germans transferred many of their divisions from Russia to France and Belgium with the menace of an overwhelming attack upon the British and French lines. The pressure upon Sir Douglas Haig to take over a longer front was insistent. The French believed that England was not "pulling her weight"—poor old England who was straining every muscle to keep her mines going to provide coal not only for her own needs but for the factories of France and Italy, and to turn out vast quantities of ammunition and guns, and to maintain a vast and expanding fleet, and to fill up the gaps in an army which had suffered 800,000 casualties in a single year. She was pulling some weight and painting

Philip Gibbs, the war correspondent, officially accredited to the British Armies on the Western Front, whose daily despatches appeared in the London Daily Chronicle, the New York Times, and many other papers throughout the world, has written a special series of articles which reveal, as in a searchlight, his most intimate knowledge of historical events whose innermost facts and secrets are not yet known by the British people or by those of the United States. During the progress of the war Philip Gibbs, as a patriotic Englishman, and as a war correspondent who played the game according to the rules of censorship, was unable to tell some things which may now be known, and indeed must now be known. The Germans wanted to know those things. They wanted to know the extent of their slaughter. They wanted to know the places and the periods of greatest weakness in the British Armies and the reason of that weakness. They wanted to know the effect of the poison gas which they fired over the British lines in vast quantities. They wanted to know the exhaustion of the British reserves, the morale of British soldiers, the difficulties and mistakes of British Generals. Above all they wanted to know where and when to strike with the best chance of destroying the people they hated most—those British soldiers—so that they might roll up the Western Front and demand the price of victory. If they had known all that they would have won, and therefore they could not be told. So Philip Gibbs and his fellow war correspondents kept these things secret.

Now there is no more cause for secrecy, and in this new series of articles Philip Gibbs tells, with absolute frankness, and without any reservation, the hidden meaning of episodes in the war which as far as the outstanding facts went he described day by day in despatches which have won him fame. His daily narrative of the great British retreat in March and April of 1918 held the world breathless, but he could not say then why that retreat took place, nor reveal the inner causes of the tragedy, nor tell the world how close the Germans were to victory. All that he is now about to tell, and for the first time the mystery will be cleared. In this special series he will also describe with more realism than he has yet permitted himself the agonies of warfare on the Western front, the sufferings so infernal that Dante's version of hell was not worse than what happened on the battlefields of Europe. In his articles Philip Gibbs hints at these things and the spirit of their tragedy brooded in his sombre words, but because he did not wish to cause despair among his people when they

needed all courage and all hope he spared them the worst knowledge of what their boys were suffering. Yet now the world must know or it will not realize the full heroism of the men who faced those tortures, nor the inhuman frightfulness of modern warfare, and so he will tell them as a remembrance and a warning. Without taking one laurel from the crown of honor which belongs to the British army, which he loves as a true Englishman because of its valor and its sacrifice through all the years of war. Philip Gibbs will criticize some of its weaknesses, some of its failures and some of its follies. For it had to learn many bitter lessons, and to gain victory by many mistakes. Not all its Generals were men of genius, and he will take the privilege of a trained critic of war to point out where they most failed in vision and leadership, and why their staff work led sometimes to unnecessary loss of life. Living among the soldiers constantly, dining in their messes and dugouts, meeting them on the battlefields and in their billets when they were wounded and dying, or in the exultation of victory, Philip Gibbs knew them to the heart and soul, and so he will have something remarkable to say about their mental make-up, the effect of war upon their character, their attitude towards life in their dark days and in victory, their hopes and despairs and agonies of spirit. All that will be new because Philip Gibbs in time of war had to guard the secret of these men's souls as they were revealed to him in their greatest suffering.

He will also deal with the German side of this tragic drama of war. Fair in mind and with an instinct of chivalry, Philip Gibbs will pay a tribute to the heroism of many German soldiers, describing their astounding courage, their frightful sufferings, and their genius as fighting men. It is only by a full knowledge and recognition of those qualities that we can measure the achievements of our own men who beat the greatest army in the world. Philip Gibbs will then show with many new facts why the German army failed and was utterly defeated. Finally, after a study of the comedy of war—as he explains, "a frightful paradox like laughter in hell"—he will write a psychological examination, based upon a four and a half years' experience, of the effect of war upon the character and ideas of the soldiers, showing the dangers that have been bred in the life of the trenches, and the fears as well as the hopes that follow upon the most intense and passionate experience that has stirred humanity since the beginning of civilization.

But the French people, sincerely and without malice, did not think so, and they started a campaign in the press and in political circles, pointing out the length of the line they held (forgetting that length of line does not count so much as the number of enemy divisions engaged on any front) and the greatness of their own sacrifices. Articles of a bitter tone found their way into the English press—and hurt us pretty badly. There was pressure at Versailles. It came over to the Prime Minister and his advisers in Downing Street, and it was transferred with urgent requests to Sir Douglas Haig. He knew the weakness of his strength with that German menace growing against him, but to satisfy France he yielded to the demand and our troops "side-stepped" and took over the line of battle north and south of St. Quentin down to La Fere on the Oise, where I met our London troops who had stayed over to the German lines, so silent there, and said: "When is this blinking battle going to begin?"

"Disaster If We Lose Amiens." Meanwhile the German menace was creeping nearer to us and increasing in its frightful possibilities. In January there were 185 German divisions on the Western front, about equal to the allied strength. By the beginning of March there were 207 German divisions. Our intelligence officers did wonderful work at this time, and no German unit moved without their knowledge within a week or two of its departure. By espionage in German territory, by aerial reconnaissance, and information obtained from prisoners, they learned every detail of the German decision to concentrate their full military weight in a last effort to smash their way to victory. They snatched out the enormous increase in the number of ammunition dumps, batteries, gas dromes, light railways and field hospitals behind the German lines, and they gained knowledge of the intensive training which was being practised by German storm troops for a new method of attack. As one of our intelligence officers said to me in February of last year: "England ought to be saying her prayers, because in another month her fate, and the fate of the world, will be at stake." The evidence for this was overwhelming. Yet in spite of thousands of small facts collected by our intelligence, all bearing out the same deduction, there was a strange unbelief in the reality of the peril that threatened us among men of responsibility. Bonar Law said: "I am skeptical of the great German offensive," and the army itself shared his scepticism. During the weeks preceding the German onslaught on March 21st I was about the lines from Arras to the south of St. Quentin, against which the enemy's assault was delivered and had the opportunity of talking to many generals and officers about the probability of a huge German offensive. Out of 13 of these generals, commanding divisions upon which the attack would fall if it came, there were only two who believed in its likelihood. The other said: "It is all bluff," or "G. H. Q. has the wind up." Some of

them standing as we talked in sight of the German lines, where there seemed to be utter solitude, and "nothing doing" except the usual harassing fire from isolated batteries, were dogmatic in explaining to me why the Germans would not risk their remaining man power in such a gamble which was bound to fail.

A few days later the tide of the German army had rolled over the positions which these generals had held. The British troops were just as optimistic as their leaders. "What will happen," I asked one of them, "if Fritz tries to come across?" "He will catch a cold in the head," said the man, and this answer was typical of all those I received. A week or so before the opening of the German offensive I had an interview with General Gough, commanding the Fifth Army, on the right of our line, through which the enemy afterwards broke. He was of one of those who had believed in the impending attack, and he was very frank in facing its possibilities. He showed me maps of his Fifth Army front, pointed out how he had adopted a system of defence by a series of machine gun redoubts in advance of the main battle positions and how behind that main battle line were three other lines upon which our men could fall back if hard pressed. Then he said: "If the enemy attacks in great strength we shall have to give ground, and the public must be prepared for this. But the giving up of ground will not matter very much so long as we fall back to other good positions and keep our line intact. It will be in no sense of the word a disaster. After our main line of defence is the River Somme, the situation would certainly be serious, but not even then a great disaster. It would be a disaster only if we lost our hold on Amiens."

I am bound to say that these words made me feel rather cold. The mere possibility of losing the Somme crossings so far behind our front at that time was an awful thought, and the mention of Amiens, forty miles back from the line sent a shiver through one's body. We waited with a dreadful apprehension for the rolling up of the curtain which hid the mystery behind the German lines, and we did not have long to wait.

Forty-five Mile British Front. The French on our right were as fully aware of the monstrous concentration behind the British line as our own intelligence officers, but they were convinced that at least half this weight would fall against themselves in the opening stage of the battle. It was a miscalculation. The full weight of the German blow was hurled against the British line on a forty-five mile front, between Bellecourt, north of Bapaume, and La Fere, south of St. Quentin. That ground was held on the north by the Third British Army under General Sir Julian Byng, and by the Fifth Army on the south under General Sir Hubert Gough; and forty-eight British divisions were attacked in the course of this offensive by 114 German divisions of picked and specially trained storm troops. They were overwhelming odds, and the luck of war was on their side at the beginning of the battles. Our new system of defence on the Fifth Army front by which our front line was held by a series of machine gun redoubts in advance of the main battle positions played into the hands of the Germans' new method of attack, owing to the foggy weather in which the offensive opened. The enemy's new form of assault, which they had first tried against the Italians with startling success, was by what is now known as "infiltration." That is to say while they were attacking frontally under the cover of storms of high explosives and gas shells and feeling for weaknesses in their enemy's line, they were also relying exclusively on machine gun fire. So it happened that although the greater part of our Third Army front held on to their trenches against the German frontal attacks which they met with a withering machine gun fire, the German forces in the enemy's ranks, they found themselves under deadly machine gun fire from their left and right flanks by bodies of men who were driving wedges between them in ever-increasing numbers, which threatened to cut in behind them and bar any way of escape. On our Fifth Army front our system of redoubts and the fog which enveloped them so that our machine gunners could not see twenty yards ahead made this method of attack easy. The German machine gun sections pushed in between the redoubts, surrounded them, and then drove arrow heads into our main battle positions and continued their policy of "infiltration" while overwhelming masses of men followed up every advantage gained in this way. The British troops fought with enormous heroism and the German dead lay in heaps before their lines, but this new method of attack surprised and confused them and divisional staffs were amazed when they received reports of the enemy having broken through to places behind our battle lines, or as happened several times, gained their first knowledge of this danger by hearing the rattle of German machine gun fire outside their huts. The garrisons of the forward redoubts had been quickly overwhelmed, but many of them fought to the death, as we now know.

German Storm Like Wolves. All telephone wires had been destroyed at once by German gun fire, but by means of a buried cable there came several messages from the Manchester Hill redoubt near St. Quentin. It was the colonel of the 14th Manchester who spoke, and he said: "We are entirely surrounded, but we are putting up a good fight." Later he said: "Nearly all my men are wounded, and the Germans are swarming round like wolves. They have got into the redoubt." The last message came at 3.30 in the afternoon, eight hours after the beginning of the battle, when the enemy had broken into our main positions and the forward redoubts were far behind the German lines. The colonel's last words were heroic: "The

16th Manchesters," he said, "will defend the redoubt to the last moment." By the end of that first day many British divisions had been forced to give ground and fall back to prevent themselves being cut off. In the north the enemy had forced a wedge between the 6th and 51st divisions of the Third Army, and was driving to their rear Bapaume. On the right of our line the Germans had broken through in several places between the 20th and the 36th (Ulster) divisions and between the 14th and 55th (London) divisions, near St. Quentin, and were advancing on to Ham towards the crossings of the Somme. A general retreat was decided, with orders to hold the line of the Somme at all costs. It was a difficult and tragic situation for generals and staffs as well as for battalion officers and men. All our well ordered machinery of war was suddenly thrown into disorder, a war machine which had lost its main spring. The headquarters of armies, corps and divisions were on the move like Nomads who pitched their camps at night and retreated hurriedly at dawn because a horde of Barbarians was bearing down upon them. So many of our staffs day by day in the midst of this retreat with maps spread on wooden boxes surrounded by the litter of their kit and furniture while down the road came a slowly surging tide of traffic like a world on the move, as heavy guns, ambulances, wagons laden with hospital gear, aeroplanes packed up like traveling circuses; thousands of refugees with their hand-carts, and long transport columns of motor lorries drew back from the advancing German lines. Owing to the destruction of telephone wires and this general confusion of retreat it was difficult for the staff to keep communication with the fighting units and responsibility for action was thrown largely on to brigadiers and battalion officers. They did glorious work, and their courage never failed throughout those days.

"Will Hold On to the Last." "I am writing this report with one hand and firing a rifle with the other," was a message received from General Griffith, of the Ulster division, when his headquarters were almost surrounded by Germans. English, Irish and Scottish battalions fought heroic rear guard actions until they were overwhelmed. A colonel of the 6th division reported: "Situation impossible without reinforcements, but will hold on till the last." And he was seen leading 20 survivors against a mass of German troops. That 6th division lost 80 per cent. of its infantry in 48 hours by desperate fighting against hopeless odds, and other divisions lost heavily. When the Ulstermen were relieved by the French 156th division after five days of rear guard fighting the French general was unable to detain his men quickly owing to heavy fire on the railway and asked the Irishmen to go on fighting until he could get to their position. General Nugent, commanding the Ulster division, sent a tragic message: "Do impress on the French general," he said, "that I can give him only 300 sound men." By this time the worst had happened. In spite of the help of

French cavalry and the French 56th division, which had come up to our aid at Guisard, we could not stem the German tide which was now in full spate across our old battlefields, and our 19th corps with the 66th and 24th divisions, with the 50th, 18th and 8th supporting them, were, after fearful losses in rear guard actions, unable to hold the crossings of the Somme and the enemy passed over the bridges at St. Christ and Irie, which had not been blown up in time. And as General Gough had said: "If we lose the line of the Somme the situation will be serious."

"Still Sticking It! Cheery-Oh!" The way was open to Amiens, and the only force that barred the way was a miscellaneous crowd of stragglers collected under a brigadier named Carey, from all those divisions which had lost most of their men in a fighting retreat, supplemented by clerks, orderlies and signallers from headquarters, and a gallant section of Canadian armored cars. It was "Carey's force" which saved Amiens in the days of greatest peril until the Australians came down from Flanders to strengthen our line and the French rushed up to defend its southern approaches.

I saw many scenes of that retreat from St. Quentin to Amiens and from Bapaume to Albert and the Ancre named Carey, from all those divisions which had lost most of their men in a fighting retreat, supplemented by clerks, orderlies and signallers from headquarters, and a gallant section of Canadian armored cars. It was "Carey's force" which saved Amiens in the days of greatest peril until the Australians came down from Flanders to strengthen our line and the French rushed up to defend its southern approaches. I saw many scenes of that retreat from St. Quentin to Amiens and from Bapaume to Albert and the Ancre named Carey, from all those divisions which had lost most of their men in a fighting retreat, supplemented by clerks, orderlies and signallers from headquarters, and a gallant section of Canadian armored cars. 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