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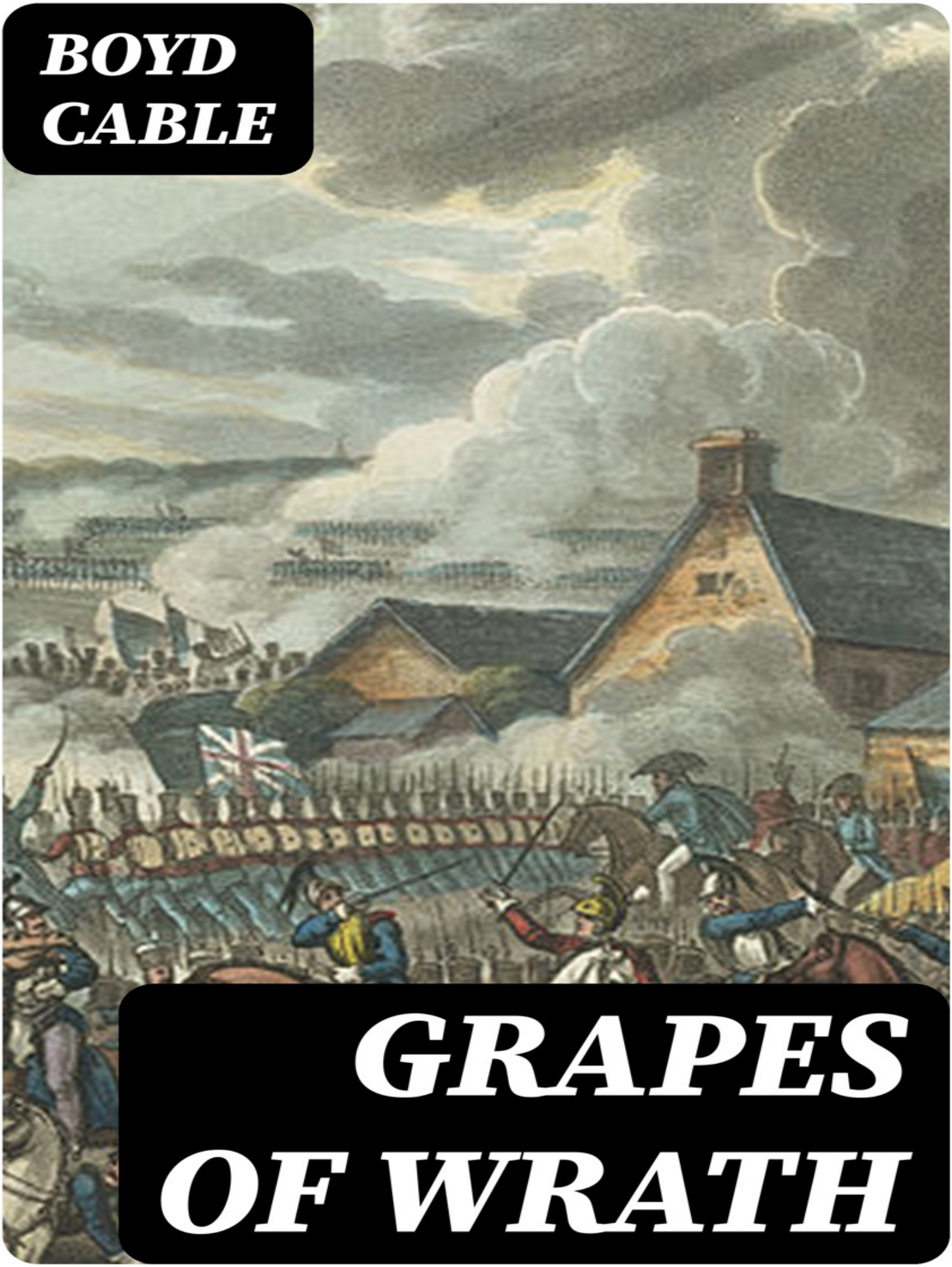

GRAPES OF WRATH

Boyd Cable

Grapes of Wrath

EAN 8596547387961

DigiCat, 2022
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BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC

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Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fatal lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch fires of a hundred circling camps;
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps:
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps:
His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel, writ in burnished rows of steel:
“As ye deal with My contemners, so with you My grace shall deal”;
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with His heel!
Since God is marching on!

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat,
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His

judgment seat;
Oh! be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born, across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me;
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave;
He is wisdom to the mighty, He is succor to the brave;
So the world shall be His footstool and the soul of time His slave:
Our God is marching on.

JULIA WARD HOWE.

AUTHOR’S FOREWORD

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It is possible that this book may be taken for an actual account of the Somme battle, but I warn readers that although it is in the bulk based on the fighting there and is no doubt colored by the fact that the greater part of it was written in the Somme area or between visits to it, I make no claim for it as history or as an historical account. My ambition was the much lesser one of describing as well as I could what a Big Push is like from the point of view of an ordinary average infantry private, of showing how much he sees and knows and suffers in a great battle, of giving a glimpse perhaps of the spirit that animates the New Armies, the endurance that has made them more than a match for the Germans, the acceptance of appalling and impossible horrors as the work-a-day business and routine of battle, the discipline and training that has fused such a mixture of material into tempered fighting metal.

For the tale itself, I have tried to put into words merely the sort of story that might and could be told by thousands of our men to-day. I hope, in fact, I have so “told the tale” that such men as I have written of may be able to put this book in your hands and say: “This chapter just describes our crossing the open,” or “That is how we were shelled,” or “I felt the same about my Blighty one.”

It may be that before this book is complete in print another, a greater, a longer and bloodier, and a last battle may be begun, and I wish this book may indicate the kind of

men who will be fighting it, the stout hearts they will bring to the fight, the manner of faith and assurance they will feel in Victory, complete and final to the gaining of such Peace terms as we may demand.

THE AUTHOR.

In the Field
20th January, 1917.

GRAPES OF WRATH

CHAPTER I
TOWARDS THE PUSH

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The rank and file of the ⅝ Service Battalion of the Stonewalls knew that “there was another push on,” and that they were moving up somewhere into the push; but beyond that and the usual crop of wild and loose-running rumors they knew nothing. Some of the men had it on the most exact and positive authority that they were for the front line and “first over the parapet”; others on equally positive grounds knew that they were to be in reserve and not in the attack at all; that they were to be in support and follow the first line; that there was to be nothing more than an artillery demonstration and no infantry attack at all; that the French were taking over our line for the attack; that we were taking over the French line. The worst of it was that there were so many tales nobody could believe any of them, but, strangely enough, that did not lessen the eager interest with which each in turn was heard and discussed, or prevent each in turn securing a number of supporters and believers.

But all the rumors appeared to be agreed that up to now the push had not begun, so far as the infantry were concerned, and also that, as Larry Arundel put it, “judging by the row the guns are making it’s going to be some push when it does come.”

The Stonewalls had been marching up towards the front by easy stages for three days past, and each day as they marched, and, in fact, each hour of this last day, the uproar

of artillery fire had grown steadily greater and greater, until now the air trembled to the violent concussions of the guns, the shriek and rumble of the shells, and occasionally to the more thrilling and heart-shaking shriek of an enemy shell, and the crash of its burst in our lines.

It was almost sunset when the Stonewalls swung off the road and halted in and about a little orchard. The lines of an encampment—which was intended for no more than a night's bivouac—were laid out, and the men unbuckled their straps, laid off their packs, and sank thankfully to easeful positions of rest on the long grass, waiting until the traveling cookers, which on their journey along the road had been preparing the evening meal, were brought up and discharged of their savory contents. But before the meal was served there came an unpleasant interruption, which boded ill for the safety of the night's camp. A heavy shell rushed overhead, dropped in the field about four hundred yards beyond the camp, burst with a crash and a gush of evil black smoke, a flying torrent of splinters and up-flung earth.

While the men were still watching the slow dispersal of the shell smoke, and passing comments upon how near to them was the line it had taken, another and another shell whooped over them in a prolonged line on the fields beyond. "We seem," said Larry Arundel, "to have chosen a mighty unhealthy position for to-night's rest."

"If the C.O. has any sense," retorted his mate, Billy Simson, "he'll up and off it somewheres out to the flank. We're in the direct line of those crumps, and if one drops

short, it is going to knock the stuffin’ out of a whole heap of us.”

While they were talking an artillery subaltern was seen crossing the road and hurrying towards them. “Where is your C.O.?” he asked, when he came to the nearest group.

“Over in the orchard, sir,” said Billy Simson. “I’ll show you if you like.”

The officer accepted his pilotage, urging him to hurry, and the two hastened to the orchard, and to a broken-down building in the corner of it, where the officers of the battalion were installing a more or less open-air mess.

Billy Simson lingered long enough to hear the Subaltern introduce himself as from a battery in a position across the road amongst some farm buildings, and to say that his Major had sent him over to warn the infantry that the field they were occupying was in a direct line “regularly strafed” by a heavy German battery every few hours.

“My Major said I was to tell you,” went on the Subaltern, “that there are one or two old barns and outbuildings on the farm where we have the battery, and that you might find some sort of shelter for a good few of your men in them; and that we can find room to give you and some of the officers a place to shake down for the night.”

Simson heard no more than this, but he soon had evidence that the invitation had been accepted. The battalion was warned to “stand by” for a move across the road, and the Colonel and Adjutant, with the Sergeant-Major and a couple of Sergeants, left the orchard and disappeared among the farm buildings, in the company of the gunner Subaltern.

Billy Simson repeated to his particular chums the conversation he had overheard; and the resulting high expectations of a move from the unhealthy locality under the German guns' line of fire, and of a roof over their heads for the night, were presently fulfilled by an order for the battalion to move company by company. "C" Company presently found itself installed in a commodious barn, with ventilation plentifully provided by a huge hole, obviously broken out by a shell burst, in the one corner, and a roof with tiles liberally smashed and perforated by shrapnel fire. But on the whole the men were well content with the change, partly perhaps because being come of a long generation of house-dwellers they had never become accustomed to the real pleasure of sleeping in the open air, and partly because of that curious and instinctive and wholly misplaced confidence inspired by four walls and a roof as a protection against shell fire.

Somewhere outside and very close to them a field battery was in action, and for a whole hour before darkness fell the air pulsed and the crazy buildings about them shook to an unceasing thump and bang from the firing guns, while the intervals were filled with the slightly more distant but equally constant thud and boom of other batteries' fire.

While they were waiting for the evening meal to be served some of the men wandered out and took up a position where they could view closely the guns and gunners at their work. The guns were planted at intervals along a high hedge; the muzzles poked through the leafy screen, and a shelter of leaves and boughs was rigged over each, so as to screen the battery from air observation.

Billy Simson and his three particular chums were amongst the interested spectators. The four men, who were drawn from classes that in pre-war days would have made any idea of friendship or even intercourse most unlikely, if not impossible, had, after a fashion so common in our democratic New Armies, become fast friends and intimates.

Larry Arundel, aged twenty, was a man of good family, who in civilian days had occupied a seat in his father's office in London, with the certain prospect before him of a partnership in the firm. Billy Simson was a year or two older, had been educated in a provincial board school, and from the age of fourteen had served successively as errand boy and counter hand in a little suburban "emporium." The third man, Ben Sneath, age unknown, but probably somewhere about twenty-one to twenty-five, was frankly of the "lower orders"; had picked up a living from the time he was able to walk, in the thousand and one ways that a London street boy finds to his hand. On the roll of "C" Company he was Private Sneath, B, but to the whole of the company—and, in fact, to the whole of the battalion—he was known briefly, but descriptively, as "Pug." Jefferson Lee, the fourth of the quartette, was an unusual and somewhat singular figure in a British battalion, because, always openly proud of his birthplace, he was seldom called by anything but it —"Kentucky," or "Kentuck." His speech, even in the wild jumble of accents and dialects common throughout a mixed battalion, was striking and noticeable for its peculiar softness and slurring intonations, its smooth gentleness, its quiet, drawling level. Being an American, born of many generations of Americans, with no single tie or known

relation outside America, he was, in his stained khaki and his place in the fighting ranks of a British regiment, a personal violation of the neutrality of the United States. But the reasons that had brought him from Kentucky to England, with the clear and expressed purpose of enlisting for the war, were very simply explained by him.

“Some of us,” he said gently, “never really agreed with the sinking of liners and the murder of women and children. Some of us were a trifle ashamed to be standing out of this squabble, and when the President told the world that we were ‘too proud to fight,’ I just simply had to prove that it was a statement which did not agree with the traditions of an old Kentucky family. So I came over and enlisted in your army.”

The attitude of the four men now as they watched the gunners at work was almost characteristic of each. Larry, who had relatives or friends in most branches of the Service, was able to tell the others something of the methods of modern artillery, and delivered almost a lecturette upon the subject. Billy Simson was frankly bored by this side of the subject, but intensely interested in the noise and the spectacular blinding flash that appeared to leap forth in a twenty-foot wall of flame on the discharge of each gun. Pug found a subject for mirth and quick, bantering jests in the attitudes of the gunners and their movements about the gun, and the stentorian shoutings through a megaphone of the Sergeant-Major from the entrance to a dug-out in the rear of the guns. Lee sat down, leisurely rolled and lit a cigarette, watched the proceedings with interest, and made

only a very occasional soft drawled reply to the remarks of the others.

“Do you mean to tell me,” said Pug incredulously, breaking in on Arundel’s lecture, “that them fellows is shootin’ off all them shells without ever seein’ what they’re firin’ at? If that is true, I calls it bloomin’ waste.”

“They do not see their target,” said Arundel, “but they are hitting it every time. You see they aim at something else, and they’re told how much to the right or left of it to shoot, and the range they are to shoot at—it is a bit too complicated to explain properly, but it gets the target all right.”

“Wot’s the bloke with the tin trumpet whisperin’ about?” asked Pug. “Looks to me as if he was goin’ to be a casualty with a broke blood-vessel.”

“Passing orders and corrections of fire to the guns,” explained Arundel. “There’s a telephone wire from that dug-out up to somewhere in front, where somebody can see the shells falling, and ’phone back to tell them whether they are over or short, right or left.”

“It’s pretty near as good as a Brock’s benefit night,” said Billy Simson; “but I’d want cotton wool plugs in my ears, if I was takin’ up lodgin’s in this street.”

The light was beginning to fade by now, but the guns continued to fire in swift rotation, from one end of the battery to the other. They could hear the sharp orders, “One, fire; Two, fire; Three, fire,” could see the gunner on his seat beside each piece jerk back the lever. Instantly the gun flamed a sheet of vivid fire, the piece recoiled violently to the rear between the gunners seated to each side of it, and

as the breech moved smoothly back to its position, the hand of one gunner swooped rapidly in after it, grabbed the handle and wrenched open the breech, flinging out the shining brass cartridge case, to fall with a clash and jangle on to the trail of the gun and the other empty cases lying round it. The instant the breech was back in place, another man shot in a fresh shell, the breech swung shut with a sharp, metallic clang, the layer, with his eye pressed close to his sight, juggled for a moment with his hands on shiny brass wheels, lifted one hand to drop it again on the lever, shouted “Ready,” and sat waiting the order to fire. The motions and the action at one gun were exactly and in detail the motions of all. From end to end of the line the flaming wall leaped in turn from each muzzle, the piece jarred backwards, the empty brass case jerked out and fell tinkling; and before it ceased to roll another shell was in place, the breech clanged home, and the gun was ready again.

Billy Simson spoke to a gunner who was moving past them towards the billets.

“What are you fellows shooting at?” he asked.

“Wire cutting,” said the gunner briefly. “We’ve been at it now without stopping this past four days,” and he moved on and left them.

“Wire cutting,” said Arundel, “sweeping away the barbed wire entanglements in front of the Boche trench. That’s clearing the track we’re going to take to-morrow or the next day.”

“I hopes they makes a clean job of it,” said Pug; “and I hopes they sweep away some of them blasted machine

guns at the same time.”

“Amen, to that,” said Kentucky.

CHAPTER II
THE OVERTURE OF THE GUNS

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All that night the men, packed close in their blankets, slept as best they could, but continually were awakened by the roaring six-gun salvos from the battery beside them.

One of the gunners had explained that they were likely to hear a good deal of shooting during the night, “the notion being to bust off six shells every now and again with the guns laid on the wire we were shooting at in daylight. If any Boche crawls out to repair the wire in the dark, he never knows the minute he’s going to get it in the neck from a string of shells.”

“And how does it work?” asked the interested Arundel.

“First rate,” answered the gunner. “Them that’s up at the O.P.[1] says that when they have looked out each morning there hasn’t been a sign or a symptom of new wire going up, and, of course, there’s less chance than ever of repairing in daytime. A blue-bottle fly—let alone a Boche—couldn’t crawl out where we’re wire-cutting without getting filled as full of holes as a second-hand sieve.”

1 Observation Post.

The salvos kept the barnful of men awake for the first hour or two. The intervals of firing were purposely irregular, and varied from anything between three to fifteen minutes. The infantry, with a curious but common indifference to the future as compared to the present, were inclined to grumble

at this noisy interruption of their slumbers, until Arundel explained to some of them the full purpose and meaning of the firing.

“Seein’ as that’s ’ow it is,” said Pug, “I don’t mind ’ow noisy they are; if their bite is anything like as good as their bark, it’s all helpin’ to keep a clear track on the road we’ve got to take presently.”

“Those gunners,” said Kentucky, “talked about this shooting match having kept on for four days and nights continuous, but they didn’t know, or they wouldn’t say, if it was over yet, or likely to be finished soon.”

“The wust of this blinkin’ show,” said Billy Simson, “is that nobody seems to know nothin’, and the same people seem to care just about the same amount about anythin’.”

“Come off it,” said Pug; “here’s one that cares a lump. The sooner we gets on to the straff and gets our bit done and us out again the better I’ll be pleased. From what the Quarter-bloke says, we’re goin’ to be kep’ on the bully and biscuit ration until we comes out of action; so roll on with comin’ out of action, and a decent dinner of fresh meat and potatoes and bread again.”

“There’s a tidy few,” said Billy, “that won’t be lookin’ for no beef or bread when they comes out of action.”

“*Go* on,” said Pug; “*that’s* it; let’s be cheerful. We’ll all be killed in the first charge; and the attack will be beat back; and the Germans will break our line and be at Calais next week, and bombarding London the week after. Go on; see if you can think up some more cheerfuls.”

“Pug is kind of right,” said Kentucky; “but at the same time so is Billy. It’s a fair bet that some of us four will stop

one. If that should be my luck, I'd like one of you," he glanced at Arundel as he spoke, "to write a line to my folks in old Kentucky, just easing them down and saying I went out quite easy and cheerful."

Pug snorted disdainfully. "Seems to me," he said, "the bloke that expec's it is fair askin' for it. I'm not askin' nobody to write off no last dyin' speeches for me, even if I 'ad anybody to say 'em to, which I 'aven't."

"Anyhow, Kentucky," said Arundel, "I'll write down your address, if you will take my people's. What about you, Billy?"

Billy shuffled a little uneasily. "There's a girl," he said, "one girl partikler, that might like to 'ear, and there's maybe two or three others that I'd like to tell about it. You'll know the sort of thing to say. I'll give you the names, and you might tell 'em"—he hesitated a moment—"I know, 'the last word he spoke was Rose—or Gladys, or Mary,' sendin' the Rose one to Rose, and so on, of course."

Arundel grinned, and Pug guffawed openly. "What a lark," he laughed, "if Larry mixes 'em up and tells Rose the last word you says was 'Gladys,' and tells Gladys that you faded away murmurin' 'Good-by, Rose.'"

"I don't see anythin' to laugh at," said Billy huffily. "Rose is the partikler one, so you might put in a bit extra in hers, but it will please the others a whole heap. They don't know each other, so they will never know I sent the other messages, and I'll bet that each of 'em will cart that letter round to show it to all her pals, and they'll cry their eyes out, and have a real enjoyable time over it."