

TOPICS
BATTLE of the MARNE,
1914

PREFATORY NOTE

THE following work has been scrutinized by the French Military Authorities, and the word (Censored) will be found in the text to indicate the eliminations they have deemed it expedient to make.

NEATH VERDUN

∴ ∴ August—October, 1914 ∴ ∴

By Maurice Genevoix. With a
Preface by Ernest Lavisse ∴ ∴ ∴ ∴

TRANSLATED BY

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IV

THE DAYS OF THE MARNE

Sunday, September 6th.

HALF-PAST one in the morning! Kit bags on the ground, rifles piled, lines in sections of four, at the edge of a little wood of birch trees struggling for life on a stony soil. The night is cold. I place a listening post well forward and return and seat myself near my men. The stillness is palpitating; the passage of time interminably long-drawn. The dawn begins to lighten the sky. I look around me and see the pale and tired faces of my men.

Four o'clock. A dozen rifle shots to the right cause me to leap to my feet just as I am making myself comfortable. Out of a small neighbouring wood a dozen Uhlans are flying at a gallop—they must have passed the night in the covert.

The day breaks clear and fresh. My Nubécourt bedfellow produces his inexhaustible flask,

THE DAYS OF THE MARNE

and we sip a drop of brandy which possesses no bouquet at all and seems like raw alcohol. The Captain joins us at last and explains the situation in a few words:

“A German army corps,” he says, “is marching towards the south-east, having for flank-guard a brigade which follows the valley of the Aire. The —th Corps is going to engage the said German corps, while it remains for us to deal with the flanking brigade.”

For the first time I am going to experience war in all its reality!

Facing the Aire, with Sommaisne behind us, the men commence to dig trenches with their handy entrenching tools. They know it is intended that we should fight, and they need no urging to put forth their best efforts. Before us and to the left towards Pretz-en-Argonne a battalion covers us. Through my glasses I see two watchful observers on the roof of a house.

The trenches are finished. They are only deep enough to shelter us kneeling, but that is sufficient.

Towards nine o'clock the bombardment commences. High explosives hurtle by without pause, bursting over Pretz, shattering roofs and bringing down whole walls. My men remain quite calm although they know that a violent and furious fight is immediately before them.

'NEATH VERDUN

Eleven o'clock and our turn is come. The men deploy instantly. There is no time for reflection on my part; I feel nothing, unless it be that the fevered fatigue of the past hours has now left me. Rifles are speaking close at hand, shells are still bursting in the distance. With a strange detachment I watch the lines of our men blue and red against the earth, advancing and advancing apparently without movement. About me the wheat bows down beneath a heavy, languid breeze, and with a certain feverishness I repeat to myself again and again: "I am in it now! This is war and I am in it!" and I am astonished to see that all the things about me retain their ordinary appearance, to hear the snapping of rifles which is no more than the snapping of rifles. For, on the other hand, it almost seems as if my body had undergone some change, that it is no longer the same, that I experience different sensations with different organs.

"Lie down!"

The bullets are whistling above us now. The rattle of the fusilade drowns their sharp notes; but I know that behind us the song of the bullets dies away to diminuendo and silence.

We commence to advance. The movement is admirably executed, with the same regularity

THE DAYS OF THE MARNE

and deliberation as if we were at manœuvres. Little by little there arises in me an exhilaration which raises me above myself. I feel that all these men are part of myself—these men who, at a gesture from me push forward despite the bullets shrilling towards us seeking chests, faces; the living flesh for billets.

We lie down for cover, we rise with a jump; we run as fast as our legs will carry us straight for the hidden Boches—we long to see those Boches so that we can get at them more surely and chase them far from these fields ruined and trampled by their hordes.

We are completely exposed and under fire. The bullets sing no longer; they pass invisible with a nasty spiteful hiss. They are no longer at play but in deadly earnest.

Clac! Clac! Two bullets have struck immediately to my left. The noise at once surprises and slightly amazes me; these bullets seem less dangerous when they sing and whistle. Clac! Clac! Stones, pieces of dried earth, spurts of dust fly into the air; we have been seen and they have got the range of us. Forward! I am leading, seeking a ditch, a slope, a fold in the earth wherein to shelter my men after the first rush—even the hedge of a field, or anything which will render them less visible to the Boches

'NEATH VERDUN

will do. A movement of my right arm shortens the line by half. I hear the tramp of feet, the rustle of the stubble lying in our course. And while we are running forward the detachment in support fires rapidly but steadily. Then when I raise my cap, that detachment in its turn charges at the double, whilst all around me my men's rifles come into play and speak unceasingly.

A strangled cry to the left. I have scarcely time to see the man sprawl flat on his back, his two legs still moving as though to carry him forward. A second, and all his body stiffens and then relaxes and the man is no more than an inert thing, dead flesh which to-morrow the sun will commence to decompose.

Forward! To remain still would cost us more dearly now than the most furious assault. Forward! The men are falling rapidly, stopped dead in full course, some crashing prone without a word, others halting and staring stupidly, while feeling with their hand for their wound. And they say: "I have got it," or, "Mine has arrived!" Often it is no more than a single expressive word. Almost all of them, even those whose wounds are slight, turn pale at the shock. The impression is borne in upon me that one thought alone is in all their minds; to get away very quickly, never mind where, so long

THE DAYS OF THE MARNE

as it be somewhere free from this eternal hissing of the bullets. They seem to me like little children, children whom one would wish to console, to protect. An almost insane desire seizes me to cry out to those waiting ahead of us:

"Do not harm them! You have no right to do so! They are no longer soldiers—they will do you no harm!"

Instead I say to one of the passing men:

"Come along, old man, cheer up! Thirty yards ahead of you, behind that little crest, you will be out of danger . . . ah, yes, I know your foot is bad, that it swells. But we will take good care of you in a minute. Do not be afraid."

The man, a corporal, dragging himself along on all fours, stops to look back at me with the eyes of a caged beast. Then he resumes his clumsy, tormented, crablike crawl.

At last I catch a glimpse of the Boches. They are hiding themselves behind sheaves which they push before them; but at least I know now where they are and my men's bullets will therefore stand a better chance of finding an objective.

The advance is resumed and continues without wavering. A great confidence possesses me. I feel that all is going well;—and at this moment a corporal arrives breathless and covered with perspiration:

'NEATH VERDUN

"Lieutenant."

"What is it?"

"The Major sends me to tell you you are too far advanced. The movement has been executed too quickly. You must halt and await orders."

I lead my section to the shelter of a slight undulation which is no more than a vaguely-defined fold in the earth, but where at least some shelter from the bullets will be obtained. And so we remain there lying flat, awaiting the orders which appear as if they will never arrive. Everywhere, above us, before us, to the right and the left, the shots whistle and hiss and shrill. A few steps from me the bullets of a deafening machine-gun strike the earth in a regular, steady stream. Dust and stones are flung high in the air, and for a moment I feel an almost irresistible temptation to approach that death-dealing squall, and touch that invisible stream of innumerable and minute splinters of metal, each of which can kill.

The minutes drag past long and wearying. I raise myself a little and attempt to see what is occurring. To the left the thin line of riflemen extend as far as eye can reach; all the men are lying behind their knapsacks firing. Behind a wheatfield, twenty men or so are standing to aim better and fire. I can see

THE DAYS OF THE MARNE

distinctly the recoil of their rifles and the corresponding jerk of their right shoulders. As the smoke clears for a second, I am able to distinguish Porchon's platoon, and Porchon himself smoking a cigarette. There also is the Saint Maixenter's platoon, somewhat disorganized. Further away again are the men of the 8th. Behind them a little man is walking up and down, erect, nonchalant and quite at home. Who can this reckless individual be? Through my glasses I make out an over-waxed moustache and the blue smoke of a pipe; it is the Captain! Someone had already told me of his attitude when under fire!

The orders, merciful Heavens, where are our orders? What can be the matter? Why are they leaving us here? I make up my mind and suddenly get up. It is imperative I should know what the Boches are doing and where they are at present. Keeping under cover of the sheaves, I mount the gentle slope until I reach the top of it. There before me, four or five hundred yards distant, are men in greyish green uniforms, almost indistinguishable from the greenness of the fields. It is only with the greatest difficulty I can make them out at all.

Quite near their line, but far to my right, is a machine-gun surrounded by men in French

'NEATH VERDUN

uniform firing at triple speed. I determine to bring my men to the top of the slope where at least they will be able to fire.

While I am making my way back to them a shell passes overhead. It explodes among the detachment of the 8th, and a gap of twenty yards is made in their line. The next second other men have filled the gap. A second explosion, another and still another; the bombardment has recommenced. All my men fling themselves flat.

"Oh! . . ." The cry escaped a dozen of us at once. A high explosive burst clean among the Saint Maixenter's platoon. And he, I saw it distinctly with my own eyes, received the shell full in his body. His cap vanished into space, a part of his coat, an arm. And there he is lying on the earth a shapeless mass, white and red pulp, a body stripped well-nigh naked, shattered. His men, finding themselves leaderless, give way and scatter.

What is this? . . . Can it be that the confusion is spreading to all the men on the left there? It travels rapidly towards us. Some soldiers are running towards Sommaisne beneath the shells. When each shell explodes it makes a gap among them, blowing away men as you blow away dust with a puff. The confusion has

THE DAYS OF THE MARNE

spread to the 8th now. If the Captain were only there, he would be able to hold his men. But a few moments ago I saw him press a hand swiftly to his face. Our covering section away to the left comes next; the bullets have left none to preserve discipline. Now it is the neighbouring platoon. Then suddenly, brutally, we are swept up by the wave: there are the unknown faces of men of other companies round about us mixing with the men and destroying their nerve. A tall thin man, the Captain of the 5th, cries out to me that the commander has ordered us to fight in retreat, that we haven't been supported in time, that we are alone and lost if we remain. And thus is the position abandoned.

With all my power I strive to preserve order and calm, to allay the panic among my men. I march deliberately with arms wide extended, exclaiming:

"Do not run, do not run! Follow me."

All my attention is concentrated on the task of getting my men away to safety with as little loss as possible. One of them near me receives a bullet through his skull while engaged in cutting an opening through some wire; he falls on to the wire and remains hanging there, broken in two, his feet touching the earth

'NEATH VERDUN

on the one side, head and arms hanging down over the other.

Shells follow us, high explosive and shrapnel. Three times I find myself within the deadly cone of bursting shrapnel: the bullets hiss into the earth about me, smashing heads and shattering feet.

We march through an inferno of smoke, from time to time obtaining a glimpse, through momentary clearings, of the village and the river running beneath the trees. But there is no trace to the shells which follow us in hundreds.

I recollect passing one of my sergeants being carried by two of the men on crossed rifles; he pointed out to me speechlessly, his torn and bloodstained shirt and his side terribly lacerated by an explosion. I could see the raw edges of the flesh. . . .

I march onwards and onwards exhausted and stumbling. I take a long gulp of the water that remains in my flask. Since yesterday evening I have eaten nothing.

When we reach the edge of the stream, the men halt and throw themselves down and commence to lap the muddied waters like dogs.

It must be seven o'clock now; the sun is sinking into a bed of virgin gold. The sky above us is a pale and transparent emerald. The

THE DAYS OF THE MARNE

earth darkens, colours vanish. It is quite dark by the time we leave Sommaisne. We become mere shadows trailing along the road.

We halt for the first time at Rembercourt. Nothing but sleep seems to matter now, and I fling myself down on the bare earth, calling upon it. Before it descends upon me I hear the rolling over all the roads of the wagons and ambulance vans filled with the wounded; and further away, back in Sommaisne, the smashing of rifle butts against closed doors and the harsh savage cries of the looting Teutons.

Monday, September 7th.

THE morning mist awakens me. My clothes are drenched and drops of water glisten on the mica of my map case. Before us and a little to the left is Rembercourt, whose large church dominates the village in its shadow. From where we are, we can see one side of it in all its length. Towards the left there is a little road which disappears between two slopes.

It is along that road that the Captain and Porchon appear towards ten o'clock accompanied by a handful of men. It appears that they found themselves cut off from the rest of the regiment and passed the night in a wood in advance of the French line. I was able to

'NEATH VERDUN

identify the Captain while he was still some distance off by means of a lance which he carried ; it was an Uhlan's lance, captured at Gibercy, and with which nothing could induce him to part. I made my report to him.

As at Cuisy, we dig trenches. Are we going to wait here for the Germans this time ? We no longer have the advantage of a valley before us as at Dannevoux, but in the course of the five hundred yards or so which intervene between our new position and Rembercourt, I estimate that should the Germans elect to advance along this road many of them will fall before they reach us.

Towards Beauzéc the fight is still in progress. Unendingly little groups of wounded men appear over the last crest and march slowly towards us. Those with arms in slings move more quickly ; others drag along, helping themselves with sticks cut in some small wood or other ; many halt, then drag themselves a few yards further, then pause again.

During the afternoon I went down into the village. It was full of soldiers . . . (Censored) . . .

(Censored.)

Soon after three o'clock the German heavy artillery commences to shell Rembercourt. At

THE DAYS OF THE MARNE

five o'clock the church takes fire. The crimson glow of the conflagration is emphasized as the shadows increase. The blackness of the night makes the church an immense brazier. The wooden framework of the roof is traced out in flames and incandescence. The steeple has become a living fire in the heart of which the dead bells hang black and grim.

The framework of the roof falls piecemeal. One can see the rafters sagging and sagging and then remaining suspended for a few moments above the furnace before falling with a deafening crash. And each time a portion falls in this way, a volcano of clear sparks rises high into the sky to remain drifting and floating like some echo.

For hours and hours I stood watching the fire, my heart sad and heavy. My men are asleep on the ground, lining the trench with their bodies. Try as I will I cannot lie down to sleep like them.

Tuesday, September 8th.

THE Captain roused me I don't know how many times to give me instructions ; as a matter of fact I believe it was because he himself found sleep impossible and was lonely with that loneliness which visits men on such nights. Together

'NEATH VERDUN

with his liaison officers he had taken up sleeping quarters in a dense thicket by the roadside. At each awakening I beheld the church still in flames.

This morning the ruins were still smoking. The mass of fire-blackened stone stood clearly defined against a limpid sky.

The men are sleeping heavily. . .
(Censored.) . . .

(Censored.)

From some woods away to the left a fusillade growing more and more violent each instant rings out. Behind us a battery of 120 mm.'s speak without pausing. And above Rembercourt at long intervals shells burst, half a dozen at a time.

(Censored.)

. . . , lying on a slope when the shriek of the shells announce the arrival of the Germans, then, quite placidly resume their task again.

(Censored.)

This morning someone offered me some brandy plums, huge greengages preserved in a narrow

THE DAYS OF THE MARNE

bottle, cherries in a thick syrup, green haricots and peas in bottles, as well as some pink sweetmeats arranged artistically beneath laced paper in a pale blue box on the cover of which, inscribed in letters of gold, was the name "Pamphile."

(Censored.)

At noon we leave the trenches. Marching in loose columns we move towards the road which runs from Rembercourt to Vauxmarie. All along the road from Erize-la-Petite we encounter the craters the shells have dug in the fields. The countryside is bare and depressing, despite the brilliant sunshine. In a ditch lie some horses, disembowelled, legs shattered, huddled at the bottom of the sloping sides. There were six of them all in a heap, making an enormous pile of carrion, the horrible stagnant smell of which saturated the air. Everywhere there are shattered ammunition carts, wheels in splinters, ironwork twisted.

Vauxmarie Road. We take up a position, availing ourselves of the ditch as a trench, ready to support those fighting ahead. There is a great desolate plain before us, ploughed by shells, sown with still bodies and fragments of the uniforms of men with faces turned either

towards the sky or buried in the earth, rifles lying beside them just as they had fallen from their hands. To the right the road mounts towards the top of the valley ; it is of a dazzling whiteness that tires the eyes. Far before us a number of platoons are lying on the ground in extended order, only to be distinguished with difficulty. They are receiving the full force of the German artillery. Abruptly the shells cease ravaging the uncultivated and shattered fields and come towards us. They arrive shrieking and all together. Nearer and nearer they come, until we are certain they are going to descend upon us. And the men hunch their bodies together, round their backs, thrust their heads beneath their knapsacks, all their muscles contracting in agonized suspense while waiting the explosion of those enormous messengers of death. The bombardment increases in intensity, and now plumes of black smoke are drifting along the hilltop and the noise becomes ear-splitting. Each time a shell falls in the ranks there ensues, in the real sense of the term, a scattering of the men ; and when the smoke has dispersed there remain lying on the yellow earth of the stubble field dark sombre patches, forms vague and unmoving. A commander of the gendarmerie mounts the hillside on his bicycle, pedalling with

all his strength. He is making directly for the point where the line of the valley touches the sky crowned with its sinister black plumes. Smaller and smaller he becomes, is silhouetted for a moment clear and distinct, and finally vanishes. A quarter of an hour passes before he reappears, a streak, now pedalling back into the valley. He has a message for our commander ; it seems that something is required of us.

We are conducted back to the heights of Rembercourt, passing to the right of the village. Here we take cover on a steep slope covered with wild vegetation, extending alongside the orchard which I had seen that morning. The bursting shells almost deafen us. They explode in hundreds, shattering the plain, obliterating the road along which we marched a short time since, causing tiles to fall and rattling the wood-work of roofs. Nor are we forgotten. A few compliments in the form of half a dozen high explosives are generously sent our way. The last of these burst so close to our commander, who was sitting on the slope, that it seemed as if someone had punched him violently and rudely in the back. Under the tremendous force of the explosions the trees of the orchard bend and sway, causing a shower of plums and apples to fall upon us.

'NEATH VERDUN

We have not been sighted, but the enemy knows the lie of the land so well that he guesses without difficulty the probable location of our reserves, and punishes them by way of precaution. Up to the present, however, all my men have escaped without serious injury, except one who, descending the slope, suddenly mounted into the air to come to the earth behind us. At least ten men received scratches.

Happily we leave before the enemy devotes serious attention to us. At a certain moment, immediately following the arrival of a shell, a messenger rushed out of the village where the Captain had taken up his station. He came running towards us, gesticulating violently. While he was still several yards away he cried in a loud voice :

“ Advance ! ”

Raising my sword I repeat the order.

“ Forward ! Follow me ! ”

And I jump down on to the road. Hardly have I taken three steps forward, however, before I hear the shells come shrieking towards us. There is just time for the men to rush back up the slope they had already quitted ; in the very act of throwing myself flat the shells explode six at once. A portion of the road rises towards Heaven to descend again in a hail of stones and earth.

THE DAYS OF THE MARNE

The smell almost suffocates me as I lie clinging to the earth there, shrouded in dense black smoke. I think that was a narrow escape ! A few moments of calm succeed. Now is the time to run : the men come down the slope at their best speed ; then, finding ourselves outside the zone of immediate danger and sheltered a little by the village, we mount a rising behind which I know we may hope to find a certain amount of safety.

More shells fall on the spot we occupied a few moments since. My men look at each other, look at me, and congratulate themselves. The narrowness of their escape loosens their tongues. “ Ah, the filthy dogs ! ” I hear. That also is what the messenger calls them when I see him again. On the road he had not sufficient breath left to express his feelings. He had been so near the explosion area that the buckles of his knapsack were shattered, and when afterwards he looked around it was to find himself occupying a post of honour in the middle of a field, innocent of a scratch, while the said knapsack hung gracefully among the branches of a plumtree.

The day declines ; we go back once more to our trenches. I rest, sitting in a ditch, two cavalry subalterns, one a Hussar, the other a

'NEATH VERDUN

Chasseur, belonging to some detachment or other. I had made their acquaintance at the depot.

(Censored.)

Night has fallen and once again we have forgotten to eat. A mouthful of iron rations, a drop of tepid water from my flask, which water has a pronounced taste of tin.—“Still, that is something else the Prussians won't have,” as my grandmother used to say.

Wednesday, September 9th.

Nor a wink of sleep. The noise of the shells hurtling through the air is constantly in my ears, while the acrid and suffocating fumes of explosives haunt my nostrils. Scarcely yet is it midnight before I receive orders to depart. I emerge from the trusses of wheat and rye among which I had ensconced myself. Bits of stalk have slipped down my collar and up my sleeves, and tickle me all over. The night is so dark that we stumble over the stones and irregularities of the ground. We pass very close to some 120's drawn up behind us; I hear the voices of the artillerymen, but only with difficulty can I distinguish the heavy, sleeping guns.

THE DAYS OF THE MARNE

Rations are distributed en route with no other light than that of a camp lantern which gives forth but a faint glow. The feeble yellow light stains with brown patches the portions of raw meat cut up in the dusty grass of the roadside.

A march across fields, a march of somnambulists, mechanical, legs light as down, heads heavy as lead. It seems to last for hours and hours. And we are always bearing to the left; at day-break, I assure myself, we shall have returned to our point of departure. Little by little the shadows rise, enabling me to recognize the Vauxmarie Road, the wrecked ammunition carts, the dead horses.

Hallo! The German guns are speaking early this morning! Before us shrapnel is bursting noisily and spitefully. Over the plain they have thrown a barrage. Nevertheless we have to go through it. Our first section detaches itself; in a line, long-drawn and thin, it moves across the fields towards a small wood which the captain has indicated as the objective. Rifles crackle away to the left. Bullets sing and throw up the dust about the marching section. Then shrapnel bursts right over the men. The undulating line becomes still, taking cover behind a ridge of earth shaped like a gigantic caterpillar, I have been given to understand that we are to

'NEATH VERDUN

occupy the advance post, and I await my turn to move forward. The major and the captain are before us, taking cover of some trees, watching. And the captain, seeing his men out there under the shower of shells, finds it difficult to make up his mind to throw us others forward. After a time the commander of the gendarmerie whom I had seen cycling along the road, comes up. He is crimson to the lips and his eyes are savagely glaring. Cursing and swearing violently, he utters a few breathless words.

(Censored.)

The captain, turning towards me, said:
"Go!"

So the time is come!

I experience a feeling only of pleasure. I am in the same strange mental condition as when under fire for the first time at Sommaisne. My legs move without volition; I march unthinkingly, conscious only of an all-pervading joy which elevates me above myself and permits me as it were to look upon myself as another being. In five minutes we reach the pine-wood which is our destination. We deploy before it, indeed almost within it. Without waiting a minute, the men set to work with their trenching tools.

THE DAYS OF THE MARNE

At the end of a couple of hours we possess a deep and narrow trench. Behind us to the left is Rembercourt; to the right front the tiny station of Vauxmarie.

The heat is enervating and unhealthy. A few clouds drift slowly past, increasing in size little by little and growing darker and more ominous, while the edges yet remain fringed with silver. From time to time puffs of wind bring to us a stench, sickly, penetrating, intolerable. It is as though we were in a charnel house.

All around us are bodies. One there is that is most horrible to look upon. Yet look upon it I must, despite my will. It is the body of a man lying near a shell hole; the head is detached from the trunk, and the blackened entrails protrude from a terrible wound in the abdomen. Near him lies a sergeant, the stock of his rifle still in his hands—the barrel and mechanism must have been blown far away. Another man lies with both legs parallel, yet the foot of one crosses the other; that leg must be shattered. And there are so many others! Our position compels us to look upon them, to breathe that foetid air until nightfall.

And until nightfall I smoke and smoke in an attempt to stifle the soul-sickening miasma, that

'NEATH VERDUN

smell of the poor dead, lost on the field of battle, abandoned by their own who had not the time to throw even a few lumps of earth over them to hide them from the eyes of the living.

Throughout the day aeroplanes hovered over us. Shells fell also. But our captain had had a keen eye for a good place, and while a few explosions came perilously near, we suffered no casualties. At the worst it was a few shrapnel or other shells which burst far too high overhead to cause us concern.

For what reason are the aeroplanes remaining so long aloft up there? For more than two hours they have floated above us, describing great circles, drawing away only when our artillery became too pressing in its attentions, then returning until the black crosses on their wings were easily and plainly discernible. Towards evening they headed directly for the heavy black clouds accumulating on the horizon.

Into those sombre masses the sun sinks, dyeing them crimson at first, leaden as the light slowly fades. The finish of the day is ominous and depressing. The darkness of night settles down almost tangibly, while the stench of the dead bodies rises and spreads.

Sitting at the bottom of the trench, my hands crossed over my raised knees, I hear

THE DAYS OF THE MARNE

before and behind me, over the whole plain, the sharp thud of pickaxes against stones, the scraping of spades throwing up the earth, the careful murmur of lowered voices. Occasionally, some man whom one cannot see, coughs and expectorates. The night envelops and hides us from the enemy's eyes, permitting us at last to bury our dead.

The voice of my sergeant calls to me through the darkness :

“ Are you there, Lieutenant ? ”

“ Yes, I am here ! ”

Groping about until he finds my hand, he places something into it.

“ Here, sir. This is all we found on them.”

Crouching at the bottom of the trench, I strike a match. In the light it sheds for a brief spell, I see a much-worn pocket book, a leather purse, and an identification disc attached to a piece of black cord. A second match! The pocket book contains the photograph of a young woman nursing a baby in her lap; also I am enabled to make out a name inscribed in straggling letters on the disc. The sergeant comments :

“ There was nothing on the other—I searched him from his heels to his—his neck—I mean the one whose head was blown off. And there was nothing except the purse which belonged to him.”