

THE GREAT BATTLE OF VERDUN

HEROISM OF THE FRENCH TROOPS.

The general outline of the terrific battle of Verdun is now clearly understood, and the anxious feeling that, on February 25, made Paris feverishly expectant for news was justified. That day was, in fact, the turning point of the tremendous contest, unequalled in violence since the beginning of the war (writes the special correspondent of the *Catholic Times*). General Petain, whose valuable intervention turned the tide of success in favor of the French army, is comparatively a young man, fifty-three years of age, vigorous, active, and, said one who knew him well, 'audacious and prudent.' This happy combination of apparently opposite qualities gives him enormous influence, and has gained for him the entire confidence of his men.

Handicapped Before the War.

Before the war, General Petain was a plain colonel, whose military career was, it is whispered, handicapped by his clerical opinions. Such was the miserable condition of French politics that, before the war-cloud burst and cleared the air, even in the army politics played a part, and men of worth, like General de Castelnau, were kept in the background merely because they professed opinions that were not approved by an anti-clerical Government. The peril at hand, the dire pressure of necessity, have, for the time being, brought to the front the men whose talents fit them for responsibilities such as those that weigh on our leaders at the present moment. A Parliamentary friend of mine only the other day remarked how the most ferocious anti-clerical deputies, when faced by a tremendous danger, put aside, for the moment, their sectarian prejudices and were ready to worship the men they only lately looked upon with dislike and suspicion.

General Boulanger's Son-in-law.

The battle of Verdun is not over, but it is now possible to form an opinion of its first phase and, alas, to count our losses during days of intense activity. Among the losses, the disappearance—to quote the term that is used—of Colonel Driaux is a matter of deep regret. He was—or is, for he may be yet alive—the son-in-law of the once famous General Boulanger, but a man of a very different stamp. Clear-sighted and sagacious, he has the patriotic fire of the natives of Lorraine; born and bred on the frontier, they are doubly French in their sympathies. Colonel Driaux, moreover, is an excellent writer and a fluent speaker, whose influence over his colleagues in Parliament was even more remarkable than his popularity with the 'chasseurs a pied,' who literally worshipped their colonel. The atmosphere of the French Chamber seemed, at first sight, ill suited to one who was every inch a soldier, but he succeeded in forcing the esteem of his colleagues, even when he defended causes that were unpopular among the radical and Socialist majority of the Chambers. Colonel Driaux is, moreover, a practical and militant Catholic, whose active co-operation might be counted upon whenever the interests of religion and charity were at stake. He is said to be a prisoner, and his faithful 'chasseurs' cling to the hope. He was appointed to hold a post of importance, 'le Bois des Caures,' and his body not having been recovered, there seems some reason to believe that he is still alive, in the hands of the Germans.

Heroism of the French Troops.

The horror of the battle of Verdun, where the snow-covered rocks and valleys have been literally dyed in blood, is somewhat redeemed by the heroism with which the French troops have held their own against fearful odds. The military spirit of the nation leapt into flame under the German cannons. In the little village of Samogneux, north of Verdun, two companies belonging to an infantry regiment found themselves isolated from their comrades, and it seemed inevitable that they should fall into the hands of the enemy. Their captain, a very young soldier who began the war

as sub-lieutenant, resolved to prevent this at any cost. He informed his men of what threatened them, entrenched them strongly in a sheltered position, facing an open space that the Germans must cross to attack them; then he waited for the latter's advance. It took place at 11 in the morning, but the efficient firing of the French soldiers arrested the enemy, who retired, leaving about one hundred dead bodies on the field. At 12 the Germans, who, whatever may be their crimes, are brave soldiers, made another attempt to cross the empty space between their entrenchments and the ruined houses of Samogneux, where the French soldiers were concealed from view. Again they were checked by the intense fire, but the captain in command knew that his men could not face a third attack, and he resolved to make a supreme attempt to save them.

Driving the Germans Back.

His orderly was a quick-witted Parisian, on whom he knew he could rely. After briefly explaining the situation, he told him to carry to the lieutenant-colonel of the regiment a slip of paper on which he had written these words: 'I will attack the enemy at 3 o'clock, but I must be reinforced. If no help comes, we have but one course open to us—to die for our country.' The orderly crept warily out of the ruins, but at five minutes to three he had not returned. Then the captain thus addressed his men: 'My friends, in a few minutes we risk our last chance; if our comrades arrive, we still may hope to be delivered; if not, we will show the German how French soldiers can die.' At three he gave the signal; it proved a happy move, for the Germans, who believed the French to be discouraged and conquered, were taken by surprise and the sudden attack made them waver. Before they had recovered from their hesitation the reinforcements arrived, under the guidance of the orderly. The two companies were well-nigh exhausted, but, supported by the new-comers, they inflicted a prompt and sharp chastisement on the enemy, and eventually rejoined the French lines.

The Spirit of the People.

This is one among the many minor incidents of the battle of Verdun. The French nation at large may once have yielded too easily to the pressure of a sectarian Government, which does not represent the majority of the people, but which, disposing as it does of endless means of coercion, naturally moulded the weaker portion of the nation to suit its purposes. The war has revealed the real soul of France: brave, generous, self-sacrificing; it is this spirit that inspires our soldiers on the line of fire.

The Duc de Rohan and a Socialist.

Colonel Driaux's fate, as I have said, is yet uncertain. Another Conservative deputy, who is also a leading member of the French aristocracy, the Duc de Rohan, was twice wounded at Douaumont. The Duc de Rohan, before the war, was a cavalry officer, who from choice demanded to serve in the 'chasseurs a pied,' one of our best corps, but one that has largely paid its tribute to the war. His position as deputy might, had he wished it so, have dispensed him from active service. Some months ago a violent Socialist, who is more ready to make revolutionary speeches than to handle a gun, was vociferating in the corridors of the Chambers. A young man present ventured to remark: 'When the heart of France is with her soldiers in the trenches, I cannot imagine how anyone can discuss miserable party questions.' The Socialist turned round and said: 'Monsieur, I do not know who you are, but you do not come here often, for I do not remember you.' 'I have not been here for fifteen months,' was the reply; 'I seldom leave the trenches.' 'You are probably a journalist?' 'No, I am the Duc de Rohan, deputy du Morbihan.' The fiery Socialist, whose business is to destroy and demolish from within the nation that the Duc de Rohan and his comrades defend against its enemies without, had the grace to look confused; for once his ready tongue failed him. He perhaps realised that the 'aristocrate' who voluntarily lives in the trenches and risks his life at every