

THREE CARDS *on the* WEST FRONT

ANY statement of the position of the armies at the moment of writing would almost certainly be inaccurate before it ap-

peared in print. For the German retreat still continues in echelon formation, although always at a diminished speed. Rearguard actions have been fought steadily since the Germans first left their trenches, and this means that one section turns around and fights a retarding action while the other sections move rearward. On March 23 the Germans had been expelled from 853 square miles of French territory, and from 366 towns and villages, but they were still in possession of 7,126 miles of French territory. That is to say, they had abandoned rather less than one-eighth part of their French holdings, and they were still moving eastward, although much more slowly.

There is no need to enter into any subtle explanation of the retreat of the German armies. They retreated because they had to retreat, and because their trench systems were being systematically destroyed by the British bombardment. But actually the retreat involves no new departure. The battle of the Somme dates from July, 1916, and the Germans began almost at once to fall back. The withdrawal was then very slow. It was measurable by yards, and we may easily believe that it was then a willing retreat, since it straightened out a salient that was not worth defence. The withdrawal at a steadily increasing speed continued until November, when winter called a halt to the fighting. The battle was resumed in February, and the German forces continued to fall back until a week ago, when they ceased to defend themselves, set their faces eastward, abandoning fortifications.

To talk about a strategic reason for the retreat is mere nonsense. The strategic reason was the British artillery, and shell supply that had accumulated during the winter until it was nearly inexhaustible. Photographs of the bombarded trenches show that they were reduced to mere heaps of rubble, that the dug-outs had caved in, and that even the deepest subterranean chambers had become uninhabitable. Never before since the beginning of the war, not even at Verdun, had the bombardment been so continuous or so destructive. No human endurance could survive it. And in addition to the bombardment, there were the nightly raids at unexpected points, a sudden invasion of the German trench by some score or so of men who busied themselves for some few destructive minutes, and then withdrew with their prisoners as silently as they had come, leaving wreck and demolition behind them. Small wonder that the German authorities should decide that trench warfare had reached the limit of its possibilities. Even though we admit that the German withdrawal began with the deliberate abandonment of a useless salient, it none the less remains a fact that the Germans, after holding grimly to their fortifications for two years and a half, have now been forced to abandon them by a blasting process that they could not resist.

At the moment of writing (on March 23) the greatest extent of the German retreat is about thirty miles, and their line now runs nearly straight from Arras to Laon. That is to say, instead of occupying

Germany Must Hold the New Line; or Retire to the Rhine, or Give Battle in the Open

By SIDNEY CORYN

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two sides of a triangle, it occupies the third side. The centre of the present line is about forty miles from the Belgian frontier, but we shall have to wait

it will presumably be too heavy for new ones, especially as there seem to be no topographical features about the Lille-Laon line that specially facilitate

its defence. We are by no means bound to assume that the German withdrawal is in obedience to some deeply laid plan to secure new advantages. If this were so, it would have been accomplished long ago. As a matter of fact, the two armies have been engaged in a trench battle for over two years, and that battle has now been won by the Allies. It is a

fact that cannot be covered by any amount of specious explanations. The Germans have been beaten out of the trenches that they have declared a dozen times to be impregnable. They will now do what they can to mitigate their great defeat, but to assume that they have something "up their sleeve" is merely to surrender to what we may call the German myth, that has been created and fostered by their own extravagant claims to military invincibility. And the best corrective is to remember that they have evacuated their fortifications, not because they wished to, but because they had to, because they had no choice.

The Germans have now three alternatives before them. They can hold a new line of fortifications, if the pressure of the Allies behind them will permit them to do so; or they can withdraw steadily to their own frontier and the shelter of the Rhine; or they can offer battle in the open upon a colossal scale. If they entrench themselves upon a new line of fortifications which will necessarily be weaker than the old ones they will at once encounter the same processes of bombardment and raids that have just proved themselves to be irresistible. If they retreat to the Rhine it will be a confession to their own people of utter and calamitous failure. If they give battle in the open they will be outnumbered and outgeneraled, as was the case on the Marne. To attribute something magical to the military capacities of Von Hindenburg may conceivably be presently justified by the events, but up to the present time there are no facts to sustain it. Von Hindenburg won great successes against Russian forces that were either criminally misled or pitifully wanting in munitions. He has yet to prove himself against western troops with every resource behind them, and western generals who have borne the brunt of three years of war. And we may note

as significant that Von Hindenburg's first military move since taking command in the west is to retreat.

A BATTLE in the open will be something quite different from all battles that have preceded it. It will be quite different even from the battle of the Marne. At the Marne we have a German advance that is turned suddenly into a retreat after a pitched battle on ground, not of German choosing, and therefore without even the most elementary fortifications. If the Germans should be willing to accept battle anywhere along their present lines the choice of ground will be theirs, and they will have plenty of time to prepare the rough-and-ready trench fortifications that will serve as temporary cover to their men. A trench of this kind can be dug in an hour or two, and it will be adequate for the purposes

DILEMMA: AN AMERICAN PRAYER

BY FLORENCE CONVERSE.*

O JESUS, if your good Samaritan

Had come along the road to Jericho

An hour earlier; if he had heard

The cries for help; if he had found those thieves

Half-killing that unhappy traveller—

Would he have waited, peeping round the turn,

To give the helpless victim time to offer

His coat, and cloak also, and other cheek?

What would a neighbour do? O Son of Man,

That day you call the nations unto judgment,

Do not forget—we gave two pence for Belgium.

O Jesus, were you thinking of the Germans,

Or Turks, or Austrians, or French, or English,

Or Russians, or Italians, when you said,

"Be not afraid of them that kill the body,

But cannot kill the soul; fear rather him

Who may destroy both body and soul in hell?"

Or were you thinking of old Master Mammon,

Who laughs to see his puppets, Peace and War,

Obedient to his hand that pulls their strings,

Dancing his Dance of Death? O Prince of Peace,

How shall we slay the slayer of the soul?

How shall we know your peace from Mammon's peace?

O Jesus, when we're set on your left hand

Among the goats, we wonder will it be

Because we took up arms and did our bit,

Killing our quota, reddening the shambles?

Or will it be because we always said—

America first!

*In the April Atlantic Monthly.

a while before we know whether the Germans intend to make a stand on the Lille-Laon line or whether they will fall back beyond the Belgian frontier. It would be futile to try to predict a movement that in all probability is still undetermined. Indeed, there could be no definite plans until the nature of the pursuit had unfolded itself. If the British and the French are able to keep in close touch with their enemies, if they are able to bring up artillery of sufficient calibre, it may easily prove impossible for the Germans to make a stand anywhere in the sense of occupying new trench lines. It is hardly likely that there can be anywhere a new trench line comparable in strength with the old one that had been perfected by nearly three years of effort, and that none the less proved to be untenable. If the artillery attack was found to be too heavy for the old lines