

On the left of the line there is blue among the brown of our armies, and on the morning of the battle I saw French limbers and transport wagons using the same tracks as our own, and heard the rattle of the "soixante-quinze" again below Houthulst Forest, where there are still leaves on the trees and the beauty of a dense yellowing foliage is there beyond all those other woods where there are only fangs and stumps of trees in the fields where our men have fought.

OCTOBER 23

THE fighting yesterday east of Poelcappelle and on the right of the French by Houthulst Forest across the Ypres—Staden railway showed a curious inequality in the strength and determination of the German defence. The French themselves had easy going, swinging up from Jean Bart House across some trench works and through a cluster of blockhouses. The German artillery-fire was slight against them, so that their losses are very few—though they were held a while in the centre by machine-gun fire—and it seems likely that the French gas-shells, fired over the enemy's batteries before the attack, had had a paralysing effect on some of the German gunners. Whatever the cause, there was a strange absence of high explosives, and the line was not thickly held by the men of the 40th Division, who have lately come from Russia. One officer and a score of men were captured, and a number of dead lie about the blockhouses, killed by the French bombardment. The others fled into the forest. Behind them they left two field-guns.

East of Poelcappelle and on the right of our attack the German infantry were also weak in their resistance, and our men of the Norfolk and Essex Regiments who advanced hereabouts did not have much trouble with them at close quarters. What trouble there was came from a machine-gun barrage farther back, which whipped over the shell-craters and whistled about the ears of our assaulting troops. The heavy gunning that we have put over this ground for more than a week, with special concentration on strong points like the ruined brewery outside the scrap-heap village of Poelcappelle and the other blockhouses, had made this area a most unhealthy neighbourhood for German garrisons, and they had withdrawn some of their strength to safer lines, leaving small outposts, with orders to hold out at all costs—orders easy to give and hard to obey in the case of men dejected and shaken by a long course of concussion and fear.