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COMBED OUT

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BY

F. A. V.

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"The silent, colossal National Lie that is the support and confederate of all the tyrannies and shams and inequalities and unfairnesses that affect the peoples—that is the one to throw bricks and sermons at."

(MARK TWAIN).

COMBED OUT

I

SQUAD DRILL

OUR Sergeant looked at us contemptuously and we looked anxiously back at him. Then he gave his first instructions:

"Now I'm goin' ter show yer 'ow ter do squad drill. It's quite heasy—yer've only got ter use a bit o' common sense an' do hexac'ly as I tell yer. Now we'll start wi' the turns. When I gives the order Right Turn, yer turn ter yer right on yer right 'eel an' yer left toe. When I gives the order Left Turn, yer turn on yer left 'eel an' yer right toe. Now just 'ave a try an' see if yer can do it.——Squad!—now when I shouts Squad it's a word o' warnin', an' it means I want yer ter be ready ter go through yer evverlutions. Now then, yer s'posed ter be standin' to attention. That's not the way ter stand to attention—yer want ter use some common sense—when yer stand to attention, yer stand wi' yer chest out, yer stomach in, yer 'eads erect an' facin' to yer front, yer shoulders straight, an' yer 'ands 'angin' down by yer sides wi' yer thumbs along the seams o' yer trousers. Now then, Squad! Stand at Ease! . . . When I gives the order Stand at Ease, yer places yer feet about eighteen inches apart an' yer clasps yer 'ands be'ind yer backs, yer right 'and inside yer left, but yer mustn't look round or talk until I shouts Stand Easy! Now then, Stand at Ease!"

We obeyed the command with fair smartness, only a few stood awkwardly, not quite knowing what to do with their

hands or doubtful whether their feet were really eighteen inches apart.

"That ain't so bad for a first shot," said the Sergeant, to our great relief. "Now, remember what I told yer about standin' to attention—when I gives the order Tshn! yer all springs smartly to attention. Now then, Squad—Tshn! . . . No, no, I wants it done smarter'n that. Stand at Ease! Now then, try agin: Tshn!—No, no, that ain't 'alf smart enough. Try agin. Stand at Ease!—Tshn! That's a bit better, it wants a lot o' improvin' though. Still, yer only a lot o' rookeys* an' yer can't learn everythink all at once. Now we'll 'ave a bit of a change an' try the turns."

We turned to the right, the left, and the right-about. We were all depressed or resentful and thinking of home. We performed the movements mechanically and repeated the same mistakes time after time. The Sergeant was losing patience. He glared at us and bawled out his orders. But the hour came to an end and we were dismissed for breakfast.

The breakfast interval seemed to pass like a flash. We were back on the parade ground, standing at ease. Another Sergeant approached us and yelled "Number Four Squad—Tshn!" We sprang to attention and stood rigidly erect, not daring to move. The roll was called and then the weary round of drill began again.

We marched up and down in response to commands that were barked at us in a sharp ringing voice. As the minutes and hours crept along we became sore-footed and thirsty, for the ground was hard and the sun very hot. From time to time we were allowed a brief respite. We would then sit down on the parched grass and feel the stiffness of our limbs and the burning in our flushed faces.

We learned to "form fours" and to "form two deep." We formed fours again and again, but someone was sure to

* Recruits.

make a mistake every time. Our Sergeant shouted abuse at us, but no one cared. We passed on to other movements. We "changed direction to the right" or to the left, we "formed squad," we advanced, we retired, we wheeled and turned and gyrated. The stultifying occupation dragged on as though it would never cease. Our sore feet, our aching limbs, the burning sun, and our clothes clammy with perspiration maddened us. Suddenly the man next to me began to sniff and a tear rolled down his cheeks. Our Sergeant observed him and shouted "Halt!" and said:

"Don't take it ter 'eart, yer'll soon get used to it. I know it's bloody awful at first. Fall out an' sit down a bit."

The man—a tall, elderly fellow, with dark hair and bushy eyebrows—left the ranks and flung himself down in the grass, sobbing violently.

"Pore bloke, 'tain't orften they're took as bad as that."

Five minutes ago we hated our Sergeant, but this sudden revelation of humanity on his part changed our attitude so completely that we felt ready to die for him. Moreover the interruption had distracted us, and the next half-hour passed very quickly. But gradually our physical discomfort reasserted itself. When at last the morning's drill was over we were so dispirited that we hardly felt any relief. We received the order "Dismiss," and flocked towards the mess-room where we formed a long queue.

We filed slowly in and passed by a trestle on which three foot-baths were standing. We held out our plates while a soldier in a grimy uniform ladled cabbage, meat and a greasy liquid on to them. We sat down on benches in front of tables that were littered with potato-peel, bits of fat, and other refuse. We were packed so closely together that we could hardly move our elbows. The rowdy conversation, the foul language, and the smacking of lips and the loud noise of guzzling added to the horror of the meal.

I was so repelled that I felt sick and could not eat. I sat back on the bench and waited. I observed that the man

sitting opposite was watching me intently. Suddenly he asked: "Don't yer want it, mate?" I said "No," whereupon he exclaimed eagerly, "Giss it." A bestial, gloating look came into his face as he seized my plate and splashed the contents on to his own, so that the gravy overflowed and ran along the table in a thin stream. He took the piece of meat between his thumb and his fork and, tearing off big shreds with his teeth, gobbled them greedily down.

We washed our plates outside the mess-room in a metal bath that held two or three inches of warm water. Others had used it before us, and it was thick with grease and little fragments of cabbage and fat were floating about in it. From a nail in the wall a torn shred of a disused woollen pant was hanging. It was black and glistening, for it had already been used times without number. Some of the men wiped their plates on it, but others preferred to rub them with earth and then clean them with a bunch of fresh grass from a patch of lawn near by.

Then, to our dismay, the bugle sounded. We were back on the parade ground, but no Sergeant took charge of us. Instead there appeared a man without a cap and wearing a jersey. He was of colossal size. He had coarse, brutal features. He was our physical drill instructor.

He scowled darkly at us for a short while. Then he looked at one man after the other. His eyes rested on me. I wondered what was the matter. I was kept in suspense for a brief space and then he roared like a bull, "Take those bloody glasses orf," as though the wearing of glasses were a crime against humanity. I took them off and put them into my pocket. The instructor gave me a savage look and then bawled out a number of commands in rapid succession—so rapid that we were unable to follow any of them. We stood still and felt uncomfortable, not knowing what to do. There was an embarrassing pause, and then he thundered:

"Bloody lot o' fools—gorne to sleep 'ave yer? Don't

try any o' yer tricks on me. I ain't 'avin' any. *I'll* smarten yer up a bit—by Gawd—I'll break yer bleed'n' 'earts afore I've done wi' yer—by Gawd I will. When I tells yer ter do a thing yer've got ter *do* it, else there'll be trouble, Gawd strike me blind. Now then, let's see what yer can do."

He gave his orders more slowly and performed each movement himself while we imitated him as best we could. We jumped and ran, we bent our bodies, and threw back our heads, we stretched our arms, we rose on our toes, we flopped down on to the ground and got up again with lightning rapidity. We ran to and fro until we were breathless. Mistakes were frequent, and whenever a mistake was made the instructor would stride up to the culprit with bared teeth and clenched fist and bellow contemptuous and filthy abuse at him. Not one of us had the courage to remonstrate. Suddenly our tyrant looked at his watch, and, to our immense satisfaction, walked off without saying a word.

We remained standing irresolutely for a while and then sat down on the grass one after another. It was not long before a Sergeant came up and said he was going to give us saluting drill.

"On the order 'Right 'and Ser-loot,' yer bring up yer right 'and to the peak o' yer cap an' turn yer 'ead sharply to yer left an' 'old it there while I counts six paces. At the end o' the six paces yer cuts yer 'and away an' brings it smartly dahn ter yer side an' looks to yer front. Squad—Tshn! By the Right, Quick March! . . . Right 'and, Ser-loot!"

Up went our right hands and our heads turned smartly to the left, while the Sergeant shouted, "One, two, three, four, five six, *Dahn!*" whereupon we brought our hands smartly down to our sides and turned our heads to the front again. We marched to and fro saluting imaginary officers with our left hands, it may have been twenty times, it may have been fifty, we were so overcome with infinite boredom that we regarded everything with complete apathy and could

not trouble to count. Then, by way of variety, we saluted with our right hands, and some more dreary minutes passed by. Then we stood to attention and saluted to the front. Finally, in order to complete our mastery of the art, each man had to leave the ranks in turn and salute the Sergeant in passing. Some of us did so clumsily and incorrectly and were sent back in order to repeat the performance.

Although each one dreaded his own turn, lest he should make himself look ridiculous, yet the mistakes made by the others were greatly enjoyed, so that when five or six men saluted without a single error there was general disappointment. But consolation was at hand, for the next man walked past the Sergeant with trembling knees. He was so hampered by nervous fright that he saluted awkwardly and with the wrong hand. There was loud laughter and the Sergeant, simulating an outburst of intense fury, roared at the unfortunate man, "Use a bit o' common sense, can't yer! Yer in the bleed'n' army now, yer not at 'ome wi' a nurse to look arter yer! Get back an' bloody well do it agin!" The man's nervousness increased, his mouth was open and his eyes were staring. With a violent effort of the will he mastered his fear and saluted correctly although in a grotesque and ungainly fashion.

We began to pity him, but one of our number, a man with long arms, a low forehead, and a protruding jaw, shouted, "Make 'im do it agin, Sergeant."

The Sergeant swung round and bellowed—he was really angry this time:

"What's the matter wi' yer? 'Oo told you to interfere? Mind yer own bloody business! Come an' do it yerself an' show us what yer made of."

We applauded this utterance, while the nervous individual slunk back in the ranks, thankful that attention had been distracted from him. The man addressed stepped out with swaggering alacrity. We hoped he would make a mistake and were ready to jeer and laugh at him. But to our great

annoyance his salute was perfect, affectedly perfect. As he came back to the ranks he leered horribly at the Sergeant and then looked at us with a smirk of triumph and self-congratulation.

More men were called out, one after the other, but as there were no further displays of pitiable shyness or nervous embarrassment (although errors were frequent) the proceedings began to bore us intensely, and once again we counted the minutes and longed for the end of the afternoon.

The Sergeant's voice was becoming hoarse and he gave us brief intervals of rest with increasing frequency. Our movements became slower. Our mistakes, instead of disappearing, became more numerous. Our faces and necks seemed on fire. They were so sunburnt that to touch them was acutely painful. Our limbs moved sluggishly and reluctantly. The Sergeant looked at his watch. "Time yet, Sergeant?" asked someone in a drawling, agonized voice.

"There's another twenty minutes ter go—we'll risk it though, and knock orf in ten. Only get along to yer 'uts as soon as I dismiss yer an' don't show yerselves nowhere, else yer'll get me into trouble."

Our weary spirits were revived a little. The prospect of a quick termination to our discomforts caused the last ten minutes to pass with comparative rapidity. We were dismissed for the day, and straggled back to our huts, too broken in mind and body to think or do anything except lie down and rest.

So this was our first day in the army. How many more days of drill would we have to endure? Perhaps we would be sent to the front soon. That would be a change at least. I tried to visualize the future. What would actual warfare be like? I thought of bayonet charges and men falling under machine-gun fire. Then I recollected having heard somewhere that a soldier can take an active part in a modern war without ever seeing the enemy, and I imagined a low range of distant hills dotted with little puffs of smoke. I

could not, however, realize the precise mental state of a soldier under fire, so that none of these pictures seemed convincing to me. I wondered whether I would be anxious, nervous, terrified, excited, exuberant, or calm and indifferent in the presence of danger, but I could not arrive at any conclusion. Even the term " under fire " conveyed no precise meaning. Nothing I had read about the present war was of any help to me. The reports of the war-correspondents in the daily press were so full of obviously false psychology, that I regarded them as obstacles in the way of a proper understanding of modern warfare, and no doubt that was partly the object with which they were written or rather inspired. I knew that within a few weeks I might be dead or terribly mutilated, but as I could not visualize the precise circumstances the prospect only filled me with an indefinite uneasiness. The possibilities before me were too vague and too numerous, and I did not possess sufficient knowledge to estimate them accurately. I did not even know whether I would remain in a fighting unit. I hoped we would be sent to the front soon, for the one thing I feared was a prolongation of the dreary round of infantry drill. Moreover I was intensely curious as to the real nature of war and eager to experience new sensations and conditions. Nevertheless, from time to time I felt a wild desire to run away and enjoy a few days of freedom, but the realization of the futility of such a wish always brought on a fit of such black despair that I tried not to think about it at all.

II

THE FATIGUE PARTY

THERE was much gaiety amongst us. There was also much gloom and bitterness. We would often quarrel violently over nothing and enrage over little inconveniences—intense irritability is the commonest result of army life. Our morale was dominated by the small, immediate event. Bad weather and long working hours would provoke outbursts of grumbling and fretful resentment. A sunny morning and the prospect of a holiday would make us exuberantly cheerful and some of us would even assert that the army was not so bad after all. A slight deficiency in the rations would arouse fierce indignation and mutinous utterances. An extra pot of jam in the tent ration-bag would fill us with the spirit of loyalty and patriotism. If an officer used harsh, brutal words we would loathe him and meditate vengeance. But if an officer spoke to us kindly or did us some slight service we would call him a " brick," a " toff," or a " sport," and overflow with sentimental devotion. It was not difficult to please us, indeed it was often touching to observe for how small a thing the men would show the most ardent gratitude and work enthusiastically so as to show their appreciation. If those with high authority in the army had only realized the tremendous influence just a little kindness and consideration had on the morale of the troops, much hatred and misunderstanding, much useless suffering and humiliation would have been avoided.

Not that the officer was any worse than the common soldier. In fact, he was usually better. Most officers,

belonging as they did to the comparatively wealthy and leisured classes, had been able to cultivate luxuries like good-nature, benevolence and politeness all their lives. But mere goodness was not sufficient.

Moreover, the very fact that a man possesses authority separates him from his fellows. How could it be otherwise? What man capable of genuine friendship could bear to exert authority over his comrades with the obligation to inflict punishment on them if he should think it "necessary"? To dominate is worse than to be dominated. The very feeling that a man has power over others gives him an exaggerated notion of his own importance and merits, it arouses latent brutality, it fosters grandiose thinking (that terribly harmful vice of nearly all our statesmen). Indeed, most of the cruelty and injustice in the world are due to the demoralizing influence of authority. And that is why there were some amongst us who would not have accepted promotion whatever material advantages it might have brought.

How could our officers, seeing that they had authority and did not live our lives, understand us and treat us as we ought to have been treated, if they were not men of exceptional imagination, sympathy, and intuition? We never had an officer who was really a bad man. At heart they were all good, kindly men—and yet how often we suffered from their lack of something more than mere goodness!

. . . . . .

We were twelve in a tent and going to bed always tried our tempers severely. Some of us would come in with muddy boots and tread on the blankets of the others. Those who went to bed early could stretch out their legs until their feet touched the tent-pole. Those who arrived later would have to wedge themselves in as best they could and remain with knees drawn up for the rest of the night—any attempt at forcing them down would be sure to create a

disturbance and lead to a furious dispute and an exchange of insults and obscenities. When we were all in bed, no one could stir without causing inconvenience to his neighbours. A sleepless night, invariably accompanied by the restless impulse to stir and fidget, was unforgettable misery, but fortunately our work was so hard that sleepless nights were very rare.

One morning when it was still dark and the others were snoring loudly I looked at my watch. It was twenty past four. Reveillé would be at half-past five, so I abandoned myself to more than another hour, so I thought, of delicious indolence. I closed my eyes and was beginning to doze and dream again when I heard the flop, flop of heavy feet treading the mud and slush outside. The canvas of the tent was banged violently and a voice, which I recognized as that of the Police Corporal, shouted:

"Reveillé—breakfast at 5 o'clock, parade at 5.30 with haversack rations."

I started up in dismay and shouted:

"It's an hour too early! What's the matter?"

The Corporal answered resentfully:

"Never mind what's the matter—show a leg, and get a move on!"

He passed on to the next tent and repeated his order, and then to the next, and so on, until his voice grew faint in the distance.

I was full of vexation at being deprived of the extra hour of sleep. I could not understand why reveillé should be so early, unless it was my watch that was wrong.

The other men in the tent began to stir. They sat up and groaned and yawned and stretched out their arms, or turned round impatiently and went to sleep again. One of them looked at his wrist-watch:

"Gorblimy, 'tain't 'alf-past four—what the bleed'n' 'ell d'they want to wake us this time of a mornin' for? Some bloody fatigue, I bet yer!"

"Wha', ain't it 'ah'-past five?"

"'Alf-past five be blowed! 'Tain't 'alf-past four!"

"Why can't they let a bloke sleep of a mornin'!—they don't want yer ter be comfortable, that's what it is. I bet yer me bottom dollar the C.O. don't get up at this time!—'e don't get up afore ten or eleven, you bet yer life. 'E 'as eggs an' bacon for 'is bloody breakfast wi' a batman ter wait on 'im an' put plenty o' bloody sugar in 'is bleed'n' tea! All 'e does is ter shout at us an' tell us orf when we comes back from work.

"Gorblimy—when's this bastard life goin' ter end! When I think o' Sunday mornin' at 'ome wi' breakfast in bed an' the *News o' the World* wi' a decent divorce or murder, I feel fit ter cry me eyes out. Bloody slavery, soldierin'! An' what's it all for? Nothin' at all—absolutely nothin'! Why don't the 'eads come an' bloody well fight it out amongst theirselves—why don't King George 'ave a go wi' Kaiser Bill? What d'they want ter drag *us* out 'ere for ter do their dirty work for 'em? If I was ter 'ave a row wi' another bloke, I'd take me coat orf an' set about 'im me bleed'n' self! I wouldn' go an' arst millions an' millions ter die fur me! I'd fight it out meself, like a man! That's me! That's 'ow I'd do it! Act like a bleed'n' sport, I would—tell yer straight! Gorblimy—draggin' us out 'ere inter this bloody misery—it makes me blood boil . . . "

This fulmination was interrupted by shouts of "Shut up" and "'Old yer jaw" and "Put a sock in it" and "Let's get a bit o' sleep," but there was no chance of further sleep. The air was heavy with the rank smell of stale tobacco. Several men lit cigarettes and the ends glowed in the darkness, each one illuminating a face as the smoke was drawn in. Someone lit a candle and the bright flame dazzled us at first. Another man got up and threw immense black shadows. The recesses of the tent were full of murky gloom.

"Have a look what the weather's like!"

I raised the flap and peered into the outer darkness. A cold gust of wind blew in carrying several snowflakes with it.

"It's snowing!"

"Jesus Christ, another day o' misery afore us—when *will* this life end!"

I began to dress. I picked up my towel and soap and loosened the flap once again. I felt I had to go out and wash, for I had not washed at all on the previous day, fearing the dirty, freezing water and the piercing wind. I longed to remain in the warm tent, and for a moment I wavered. Then, with an effort of the will I suppressed the strong temptation, and squeezing through the tent-opening, I stepped out into the oozy mud. The black night seemed to weigh heavily on the world. Only here and there dull glimmering blurs showed that candles were burning in the other tents.

An icy wind was blowing round me. I was in my shirt sleeves and regretted not having thrown my great-coat over my shoulders. The cold made me contract my muscles and draw my breath in sharply between my teeth. I felt the snowflakes beat gently against my face. I folded my arms across my chest and found a little protection from the gusts that seemed to pierce me. My left foot had sunk deeply into the slush. I pawed the mud with my right in order to find the duckboard. I touched the edge and stepped firmly upon it. With an effort I dragged the other foot from the slush. It came out with a loud, sucking squelch, but I felt it was leaving my boot behind. I let it sink back again and then freed it with a twist of the ankle.

I could not see the duckboard in the dense gloom. I walked along it carefully, feeling the edge from time to time. I heard a rapid step behind me—another man was going to wash; he must have grown accustomed to the darkness, for he walked along without hesitation. He slowed down as he approached me. I tried to go faster, but trod on the extreme edge of the boards. I had to stop

for a moment and the man behind me became impatient and shouted :

" Get a bloody move on, for Christ's sake. It's too cold to wait out here in this weather."

I stood aside to let him pass. He brushed roughly by, nearly pushing me over. I uttered a curse and stepped back with one foot—it sank deeply into the mud. I bent sharply forward to draw it out again, there was the beginning of a squelch and then it suddenly slid out of the boot. I ground my teeth and took a box from my pocket and struck a match, although my numb fingers could hardly hold it. There was a splutter and for a moment I saw a whirl of white snowflakes, a patch of glistening mud, and a deep, funnel-shaped hole with my boot at the bottom of it. The match went out, but I judged the direction accurately and pulled my boot out of the ooze. I forced my frozen foot into it and plodded on through the darkness.

The duckboards came to an end although the ablution benches were another seventy or eighty yards away. Our Commanding Officer was a keen sportsman and he had stopped the laying of duckboards so that all energy could be devoted to the construction of a boxing-ring.

My feet were so cold that the pain was almost unbearable. I was strongly tempted to turn back, but having got so far, I resolved to go on. My teeth began to chatter. The man who had passed by me had already reached the ablution shed and I could see a faint gleam from his candle in the distance, so that I did not fear to lose my way.

I reached the shed and saw him standing with bared chest and shoulders, gasping and shivering. I picked up a zinc basin and once more stepped into the outer gloom. The well was only a few yards off—I could just distinguish its black mouth. I placed my basin on the edge. I grasped the cold, wet rope and lowered the bucket into the depth. I drew it up again and emptied it into my basin—the bits of ice floating in the water knocked sharply against the zinc.

I carried the basin back and placed it on the bench. My fingers were so cold that it nearly slipped from them. I plunged my hands into the water and quickly splashed face, chest and shoulders. The water was a dirty grey colour and full of sand and grit. I rubbed myself with my towel and began to glow. I emptied the basin and left the shed, glad to think that this one unpleasant duty had been performed. My face was burning.

It was still snowing and the wind was blowing hard. I trudged through the mud and soon felt frozen through and through again. Several dark figures went by on their way to the shed. I could now just distinguish the duckboards and I quickly reached my tent. I lifted the flap and stepped in. Some of the mud, with which my boots were smothered up to the tops, splashed on to the blankets belonging to a man who lay near the entrance. He growled incoherently at me. Most of the other men were up.

I finished dressing and put on my great-coat. I picked up my tin plate and mug and went out into the darkness once again. I was afraid I might have to stand in a long queue outside the cook-house, but fortunately only a few men were waiting before me. I joined them and we marked time at the double in a vain attempt at stilling the intolerable pain in our frozen feet.

About ten minutes passed and then the front of the cook-house was thrown open. A light appeared and a voice shouted: "Breakfast up!" We raised a feeble cheer and filed past while one of the cooks poured tea into our mugs and placed a fragile wisp of bacon on to each plate.

I balanced my mug in one hand, fearing to spill the tea, and the plate in the other, fearing that the wind might blow away the thin bacon fragment. The snow fell into the mug and dissolved in the rapidly cooling tea. It settled on the bacon which had grown quite cold.

I stepped into my tent and sat down on my —— I cut off a piece from the previous day's bread ration—it had been

nibbled by mice overnight and was soiled and dusty. Other men arrived, one by one. We ate our meal in silence. It was usually so—either the conversation was violent and rowdy or nothing was said at all.

We wiped our plates on an old sock or a rag or a piece of newspaper and packed them into our haversacks together with our mugs and rations for the day—a chunk of bread and a dirty piece of cheese. I tied up my boots—the laces were covered with liquid clay—and put on my puttees which were hard and stiff with caked mud. It was a quarter-past five and I lay down at full length, glad to have a few minutes to myself. But the pain in my feet became intolerable—I jumped up and stamped the floor of the tent, grinding my teeth with mortification.

Several of the men had not come in yet with their breakfasts. We could tell by the banging of mess-tins, mugs and plates, and by the angry shouts of " Get a move on," that a long queue was still waiting in front of the cook-house.

Suddenly the tent-flap bulged inwards and two hands, the one holding a full mug and the other a plate, forced their way through. They were followed by a head and shoulders. Thereupon the man tried to step in, but he tripped over the brailing underneath the flap, and plunged forward, spilling the greater part of his tea. He uttered a savage, snarling oath, walked over to his place and sat down, growling and cursing under his breath.

Another man followed. As he pushed his way through the entrance the shoulder-strap of his tunic caught one of the hooks on the flap and his progress was sharply arrested. He held out his mug and plate helplessly, but no one moved to assist him.

" Take these bloody things orf me, can't yer!" he shouted with furious resentment. Someone jumped up and took the mug and plate, while the newcomer freed himself from the hook.

It was five-and-twenty past five when the last of us came in with his breakfast. But before he could reach his place there was a loud blast of a whistle, and a distant voice shouted, " On Parade!"

The irritation that had been accumulating since reveillé burst out.

" Why can't they let yer finish yer breakfast—'tain't 'alf-past yet, not be a long way!"

" They treat yer like pigs!"

" We're a bloody lot o' fools ter stand it—that's the worst o' this mob though, yer'll never get 'em ter stick together an' do anythink."

"I bet the C.O.'s enjoyin' 'isself . . . " A stream of filthy language followed—abuse of the Commanding Officer, abuse of the army, abuse of the war, and abuse of the Government. The man could find no other way of expressing himself with adequate force and crudity. At times he became incoherent.

He was not grumbling at the little hardships and discomforts of this particular morning. He was grumbling at an entire life of discomfort. He was rebelling against his degrading slavery and enforced misery, and it was the harrowing consciousness of his own impotence that added such bitterness to his anger.

Not one of us left the tent. There was a second blast of the whistle, louder and more prolonged than the first, followed by an angrier " On Parade!"

We stepped out into the cold air one by one and splashed and plodded through the slush in surly reluctant fashion. The day had just begun to dawn, and in the grey twilight I could perceive innumerable dingy figures moving slowly towards the parade ground amid the falling snow.

A long double line of men had already formed up. The Sergeant-Major blew his whistle a third time and shouted " On Parade—get a bloody move on!"

Masses of men came straggling up and the line grew

longer and longer. Another double line was formed behind it, and then a third and fourth.

Nearly everybody was on parade, only a few here and there were coming over from the tents. The Sergeant-Major observed them and shouted to the Corporal of the Police: "Corporal, take those men's names—have 'em up for orderly room this evening." Then he turned to us. "If you can't turn out a bit smarter, I'll have you on parade ten minutes earlier—this is the last warning yer'll get."

The Police Corporal was standing over by the tent-lines, entering the names of the stragglers in his notebook. I could see a solitary figure issue furtively from a tent and slink round the bottom of the parade ground in order to join us from behind and escape observation. I wished him success and followed his movements with interest. But just as he was darting into the ranks, one of our Sergeants caught sight of him and said to the Sergeant-Major: "There's a man what's just fell in over there, sir."

The Sergeant-Major shouted "Come here!" in peremptory tones, but the man pretended he had not heard and remained in the ranks.

"Come here, damn you!"

This second order frightened him, he slunk out of the line, crossed over to the Sergeant-Major and stood to attention before him.

"What's the matter with you, are you deaf? Why aren't you on parade in time? D'you want to sleep all day?"

"I thought—er—parade was at—was at half-past—and—and—I couldn't find my puttees . . . "

"Who the hell d'you think yer talkin' to—*Sir* to me, d'you hear!"

"Yes, sir . . . I couldn't help it, sir . . . I couldn't find . . . "

"Take this man's name and number, Corporal. We'll have him up for Orderly Room to-night. . . . Fall in and

look sharp, damn you, keeping us all waiting like this."

It was still snowing hard. Our caps and shoulders were covered with a white layer. The parade ground was a big stretch of well-trodden mud and slush. We sank into it up to our ankles. Our feet were torturing us, but only a few men in the rear ranks ventured to stamp the ground a little. The wet had penetrated our boots several weeks before and they had never been dry since.

The Sergeant-Major blew his whistle and shouted: "Listen to the Orders." He held a bundle of papers in his hand and read with the help of a torch:

"Every man must shave once in twenty-four hours. Buttons" (he pronounced it "boottons," for he came from the North Country), "cap-badges and numerals must be cleaned thoroughly once a day. Box-respirators and steel helmets will always be carried. Except when it is raining, great-coats or waterproofs will not be worn when men are working. Men are forbidden to smoke while at work.

"It is observed that discipline is becoming very slack indeed throughout the Coomp'ny. It is especially noticed in marching, taking up dressin', etc. The men . . . app . . . the men apparently . . . do not realize that when marching at all times each section of fours must keep their dressing and cover off correctly and keep the step and when at attention there must be no talking and the order to stand at ease is a drill-movement and the heads and bodies must be kept still. Unless there is an improvement in future the Coomp'ny will parade each evening at 5.30 and on Sunday afternoon for extra drill.

"Men must not clean their boots on the refuse tins, otherwise the tins, which are of thin material only get—er—demol—demolished. Mud from boots must not be put into tins.

"Pigs in camp are army property and will eventually be consumed by this Coomp'ny. It is therefore not only—er—reprehensible, but also against their own interest if men

tease these pigs and pull them about by tails and ears or feed them with unsuitable food. Offenders will be severely dealt with."

We had been on parade for nearly half an hour. The torture of freezing toes was so acute that even men in the front ranks were trying to get warm by treading the mud or sharply raising and lowering their heels. The Sergeant-Major suddenly observed them, blew his whistle and shouted angrily: "Stand still there —— —— d'you hear? Stand still there. Can't yer understand English, damn yer?" We were convinced that we would hear the blast of his whistle and his angry shout in our nightmares to the end of our days.

He was in reality quite a kind-hearted man, but he was bullied by his superiors just as we were bullied by ours. He was bullied into being a bully. And his superiors were bullied by their superiors. The army is ruled by fear—and it is this constant fear that brutalizes men not naturally brutal.

The Sergeant-Major began to call out the fatigue parties. We felt relieved and thought that at last we would begin to move and get warm.

"Fall out Sergeant Waley's party!"

A score of men splashed across the mud and lined up under Sergeant Waley.

"Fall out Sergeant Hemingway's party!"

Forty or fifty men lined up. It was Sergeant Hemingway whose sense of duty had prompted him to report the man whom he saw slinking into the ranks after we were all assembled on parade.

Then the proceedings were interrupted. One of our officers, wearing top boots and a fur-lined overcoat with a big fur collar, emerged from the half darkness and the whirl of snowflakes and walked up to the Sergeant-Major, who stood to attention and saluted. The officer returned the salute and the two talked together for several minutes.

A man in the front rank not far from me muttered in an agonized voice: "Gorblimy, get a bloody move on—I'm perishin' wi' cold." Another added: "They don't say nothin' when '*e* comes late on parade—'e wouldn't mind if we was kept 'ere all day—oo, me feet, they're absolutely froze."

The Sergeant-Major swung round sharply and bawled out: "Stop that talking there—you're stood to attention!" Then he went on talking to the officer. At length the conversation came to an end. Salutes were exchanged once more and the officer walked over towards a house on the far side of the road that ran alongside the camp. As he opened the front door a warm glow shone out into the gloomy morning. Then the door closed, like the gates that close on paradise, and there was nothing left to relieve the dismal dreariness of our dingy world.

"Sergeant Fuller's party!"

Another set of men fell out. I did not really belong to them, but I joined them because I noticed that one of my friends was of their number, while all the men of my own party were strangers to me. I hoped that I would not be detected.

Sergeant Fuller counted his men. There was one less than the required number and I felt encouraged, for there could now be no objection to my presence. The Sergeant asked: "Where's Private Hartley?" and someone answered, "Gone sick, Sergeant." Suddenly he perceived me and asked:

"What are you doing here?"

"I've come instead of Private Hartley, Sergeant," I replied, hoping that the feeble lie would pass.

"Who gave you permission?"

"Er—I—Hartley said I could take his place."

"Who's Hartley? Is he God Almighty? Get back to your own party!"

I did not move.

"D'you hear—get back at once!"

"It's only for to-day, Sergeant—I want to work with my mate. Hartley'll take my place again to-morrow. Besides, you'll be two men short without me."

"Get back, will you, and do as you're told."

I did not move.

"D'you refuse to obey the order? Get back at once, or I'll have you put under arrest."

I turned away and the blood rushed into my face with vexation. I even forgot my numb feet in thinking of the long dreary day before me, with no one to talk to.

"Corporal Locke's party!"

I saw another friend of mine fall out and I went with him. Corporal Locke counted his men and found he had one too many. He looked down the ranks, he saw me, and said:

"You don't belong to my party—you'll have to go somewhere else."

"I want to work with Private Black—I've been on your party before."

"I don't remember you. Anyhow, you weren't with me yesterday—I'm sorry, but I can't have you."

"Nobody'll notice the difference."

"I'm sorry; the S.M. has told me off once already for having too many men on my party. He went off the deep end* about it and said I'd get him into trouble. I can't let you stay."

One after another the fatigue parties were called out and I fell in with my own, the last of all and about eighty strong. Sergeant Hyndman was in charge.

The Sergeant-Major blew his whistle and shouted, "Move off!" and one by one the N.C.O.'s gave the words of command:

"Party—Tshn! Into File—Right Turn! By the Right—Quick March!"

* Lost his temper.

As we passed out of the camp each of us drew a shovel or a pick from a great heap of tools near the entrance.

We got on to the road and formed fours, and at last began the longed-for march which would restore our circulation and warm our frozen feet.

The snow was still falling heavily and the wind blew it into our faces. We bowed our heads and pulled our caps down over our eyes. Our feet began to glow but our ears became painfully cold instead. We held our hands over them and as our ears grew warm our fingers became numb and frozen, so that we put our hands back into our pockets (although it was against regulations) and tried to think of something else.

Gradually, however, I became warm in every member and was filled with a sense of physical comfort that released my thoughts from immediate, material things. I thought of home and made plans for the future. I had a long, stubbornly contested argument with an imaginary opponent about the issues of the war. And then physical discomfort made itself felt again, all my free and wandering thoughts were gathered in by a wide-flung net and roughly thrown into a narrow dungeon.

I was growing unpleasantly hot and I longed to get rid of my heavy, sodden great-coat. The strap of my haversack was making my shoulder ache. I became peevish and fretful once more.

We swung along the road with rapid strides. Some of the feebler marchers showed signs of weariness and began to grumble at our speed. There was an ironical shout of "Double up in front," whereupon the front fours slowed down a little.

The wind increased in power and the snow flew past us in horizontal lines obscuring the Flemish landscape. We marched on in silence for an hour or more until suddenly the front fours halted and all the others thronged up against them. We had reached our destination.

There was a broad-gauge railway. On one side of it huge stacks of sleepers stretched away in long rows that were soon lost to sight in the wintry atmosphere. On the other side was a barbed wire fence. Beyond it lay flat fields on which the snow had settled evenly. In one of the fields was the dim form of a farm-building, barely visible through the rush and turmoil of dancing snowflakes.

A Sergeant of the Royal Engineers came up and told us what our work would be. We were to carry all the sleepers across the line and stack them in four rows on the far side of the fence.

"Is it a task job?" we asked.

The Sergeant did not know.

"What did they make us bring our shovels for?"

A voice, mocking such a naïve questioner, answered:

"Don't yer know the army be now?"

We broke down a section of the fence. Two men were assigned to each stack. They loaded each sleeper on to the shoulders of a couple of men who carried it across the railway lines into the field, where it would be received and stacked by other men.

Hour by hour we trudged to and fro in pairs, bearing our wet and heavy loads. We lost consciousness of everything except driving snow, squelching mud, aching backs and sore shoulders. When one shoulder became so sore that mere contact with our load was intensely painful, we changed over to the other, until that too became bruised, and then we would change back again. And so on, hour by hour.

Our legs seemed as heavy as lead and yet they seemed to move of their own accord without any effort of the will. Our minds became blurred and numb—a numbness that was broken from time to time by a sharp stab of pain whenever a sleeper was placed across our shoulders.

"For Christ's sake, let's 'ave a blow," said my partner suddenly.

I looked at my watch. It was a quarter-past ten—nearly two hours more till lunch!

We observed that only a small number of men were working, and my partner blurted out:

"I ain't goin' ter do more'n me share. There's a lot o' fellers swingin' the lead be'ind them stacks. I'm goin' ter 'ave a bit of a rest, I'm bloody well done up."

We both went behind a stack and found that a crowd of men had gone there before us. One of them shouted cheerfully: "Here come two more leadswingers!"* We leaned against the wood and rested, but a few minutes had hardly passed when a Corporal appeared and shouted peremptorily: "Come on out o' that—get on wi' yer job an' put a jerk in it." We struggled reluctantly back to our work.

The wearisome, monotonous trudge began again. As the first stacks disappeared the journey became longer and longer. I again looked at my watch—it was twenty to eleven. The quarter-past ten seemed several hours ago! The way the time dragged drove us to despair. But there was no escape—we had to live through every minute of this dismal day.

My partner and I worked on in silence. Gradually the men slackened their pace and tried to miss their turn. We did the same. Others, who were behind us, followed suit, refusing to do more than their share. Our progress became slower and slower until at length it stopped altogether. There was a long straggling queue in front of the half-demolished stack. The first pair of men refused to take the sleeper held in readiness for them, protesting that there were others who ought to have gone before, and the others refused to work until the first two had taken their turn. A deadlock ensued and then a Sergeant came up with "What's the matter now? This ain't a bleed'n' picnic! Don't yer know there's a war

* Idlers.

on? Yer like a lot o' school kids. Go an' get a bloody move on!"

A chorus of voices asserted that some people couldn't play the game and were swinging the lead and dodging their turn. Thereupon the Sergeant formed us up into two ranks and ordered us to proceed with the work. This interruption made at least a portion of our time pass more quickly. Then we continued our wearisome tramp. An age seemed to pass. I looked at my watch, but it was only twenty-three minutes after eleven. To and fro we went with bruised shoulders, aching backs and numbed intelligence. I fell into a kind of semi-conscious state. Suddenly the whistle blew for lunch. How quickly the last twenty-seven minutes seemed to have passed!

It was good to have an hour's rest before us. As for the afternoon, well, there was no need to think about it, for it was still a long way off. Besides, somehow or other, the afternoons always seemed to pass more quickly than the mornings. Moreover, we had paraded an hour earlier than usual, so perhaps we would also stop work an hour earlier.

"'Urry up an' dror yer tea," our Sergeant shouted. "Yer only gettin' 'alf an hour fur yer dinner—we've got ter git the job done ter-day."

"Why didn' yer tell us it was a task job? Gorblimy—we ain't done 'alf of it! We won't get 'ome afore five or six o'clock ter-night."

"*I* can't 'elp it, 'tain't *my* fault. Yer've got ter git it done, them's me orders!"

There was vociferous grumbling and swearing that continued while we formed a queue and filed past a man who poured tea in our mugs from three large dixies.

We sat down by the stacks wherever we could find shelter from the wind. We were still hot and perspiring after our morning's labours. We ate our rations in silence,

for the resentful shouting had died down and had given way to a sullen quiet.

When we had finished our meal we stared vacantly at the snowflakes that were blown over the top of the stack above our heads and whirled round and round in front of our eyes. Gradually we began to feel the cold again. Many of us got up and walked about, for it was nipping our feet. I was stiff in every limb and full of bitter thoughts. I hoped the half-hour would be over soon.

At length the Sergeant blew the whistle and shouted: "Fall in! Yer'd better put a jerk in it—yer won't go till yer've finished. It's a task job. Yer didn't shift 'alf the sleepers this mornin'—there's another couple o' thousand left, so get a bloody move on!"

The grumbling was renewed in the ranks.

"It's no good yer bloody well grousin'. The work's got ter be done. Carry on!"

Our tedious round began again. The distance from the old stacks to the new increased steadily. We tramped through mud and slush in wind and snow, hour by hour.

"I'm goin' ter 'ave a rest—I've 'ad enough o' this," said my partner. I felt annoyed, for although I was stiff and tired and sore, I had again relapsed into that state of dulled sensibility in which my limbs seemed to move automatically and time to have no existence at all. Although I was aware of pain I was yet indifferent to it. And now my partner was going to drag me back to full consciousness. I gave way to his wish and we leaned against a stack. We stayed there with several others until we were discovered by a Corporal who chased us out and abused us roundly.

We went on with our work. The brief rest had only done harm, for the first sleeper that was subsequently laid on to my shoulders produced such a pang that I had to close my eyes for a moment. Nor could I set my stiff

limbs in motion without difficulty. I silently cursed my partner.

The dreary hours dragged on. I tried hard to fall back into my former state of blurred consciousness, but the very attempt itself frustrated the effort. I was full of growing resentment against my partner. My dormant anger was aroused, it had found an object and, against all reason and fairness, demanded vengeance. I pretended to stumble and jerked the sleeper so as to hurt his bruised shoulder.

"'Ere, what yer doin' of?" he shouted, in great pain. "Christ Almighty—be a bit careful!"

In a moment I regretted what I had done and said, "Sorry, I stumbled over something—I hope I didn't hurt you!" I felt ashamed and all my resentment vanished. Thereupon I became too oppressed in spirit even to look at my watch.

We had been splashing and squelching to and fro, I did not know how long, when an officer arrived. He stood still for a moment and watched us work, and then he said:

"The job's got to be done this afternoon, my lads, but I'll try to get you a day off to-morrow. Who's in charge of the party?"

We pointed to Sergeant Hyndman. He was sitting in an improvised shelter in front of a fire, sipping hot tea. He had spent the greater part of the day there and had not observed the arrival of the officer, who was walking slowly towards him. Suddenly he jumped up and there was an exchange of words which we could not hear, although we tried hard to do so. The Sergeant came over to us, looking rather disconcerted, so we were able to guess the nature of the conversation.

We felt greatly encouraged and worked with renewed vigour. The stacks vanished one by one. Time appeared to slip by with gathering speed. A kind of common

rhythm seemed to pervade our movements as we plodded to and fro with mechanical regularity.

The officer went up to the stacks from which we were removing the sleepers and made a mental calculation. "Only four hundred sleepers left now, boys—that's five apiece or ten to each pair. You'll soon be finished, and I've ordered lorries to take you home!"

His kindness did us good and we worked with a kind of grim determination. My partner was coming to the end of his strength. His knees were bent and from time to time he staggered, jerking the sleeper so as to make me wince with pain. But he kept up obstinately. We counted the sleepers as we received them—one, two, three and so on. This occupied our minds and the time passed all the more quickly. Eight . . . nine . . . ten! At last our work was done! "Thank God," said my partner with deep conviction. We rested against one of the newly erected stacks, but it was not long before Sergeant Hyndman came striding up and addressed us angrily. He had evidently been snubbed by the officer and was giving relief to his mortification by bullying us.

"What yer doin' there? Swingin' it on yer mates, are yer? Call yerselves sportsmen, do yer? Get back an' bloody well do yer bit!"

"We've done our share—there were four hundred sleepers left, which makes ten journeys for each pair. If it doesn't work out it's because some of the others have been swinging the lead behind the stacks. We've carried our ten and aren't going to do any more."

"Why d'yer let 'em swing it on yer? It's yer own bleed'n' fault! D'yer think I'm goin' ter stand over yer all day? Some o' you blokes is as 'elpless as a lot o' kids —yer want a wet nurse to look arter yer!"

"That's what *you're* there for, to look after us!"

"Don't bloody well tell me what I'm there for! I know me job an' don't want no tellin'. Get stuck into

it an' don't let me 'ave any o' yer bloody lip, else yer'll be up fur orderly room—I shan't give yer another warnin'!"

Seeing that argument was useless, we walked away and crossed the railway lines. My partner growled: "I 'ope I meet 'im in civvy life—I'll give 'im somethin' ter think about—I've seen better things'n what 'e is crorlin' about in cheese!"

There were fifty or sixty sleepers left. We dawdled on our way back, hoping that there would be enough men in front of us to clear the lot. The officer shouted: "Come along, my lads, sharp's the word and quick's the action! You'll be finished in a few minutes."

The khaki-clad flock straggled forward. The remaining sleepers were loaded on to our shoulders—my partner and I received the last one. As we carried it off a cheer was raised by the other men.

At last the whistle blew and we fell in. The sky was still covered with dark, heavy clouds, but the snow had ceased to fall and the wind had dropped. We could see the dreary landscape a little better now. The railway lines curved away until, in the far distance, they ran into a ghostly procession of tall, slim poplars that filed across the dim horizon and marked the passage of a main road. On one side of the lines long rows of dark squares in the snow showed where the sleepers had lain before we moved them. A brown stretch of churned and trodden mud and water connected them with the new stacks that extended in four rows along the other side of the lines. We had shifted five thousand eight hundred sleepers in all. Around us were level, snow-covered fields unrelieved by anything except an occasional tree and the farm. It consisted of three buildings, a house and two big barns, forming three sides of a square. The cottage had a low, thatched roof, dirty, whitewashed walls, and green shutters. In the middle of the square was a huge muck heap, covered with patches of melting snow. A pig was pushing its snout into

it here and there and grunting from time to time. There was no other sign of life anywhere. A dreary, depressing landscape!

"Remember Belgium!" said one of the men in the ranks derisively.

"We won't forget it in a hurry!"

"Fritz can have it for all I care!"

"He's welcome to it—I don't want it, I want to get back to Blighty!"

We were called to attention. The promised lorries were waiting for us—three lorries for eighty men. We marched towards them in file, but as we got nearer to them, the men broke rank and everybody rushed wildly to get in first so as to secure any available boxes or petrol-tins that might serve as seats. A noisy, turbulent throng clustered round each lorry. We scrambled in, pushing, hustling, and swearing. We were soon so crowded together that there seemed to be no room for any more, but nevertheless more men climbed up and forced an entrance. We formed a compact mass and our picks and shovels were heaped on the floor in everybody's way.

The lorries started with a lurch so that we all staggered backwards. They raced along, and bumped, and swayed from side to side. The roof of the lorry in which I stood was so low that I had to keep my head bent forward all the time. The fumes from the exhaust made our eyes water and smart.

We reached camp after about half an hour's ride. We jumped out and lined up on the road. Sergeant Hyndman perceived the Commanding Officer strolling about amongst the tents and said to us in an awe-stricken voice:

"Smarten up a bit, for Christ's sake—there's the Captin walkin' about—don't make no bloomers when yer dismissin' else yer'll get extra shovel-drill an' get me into trouble in the bargin. Mind yer salute prop'ly . . . Party—Tshn! Inter File, Right Turn! Quick March!"

We wheeled into the camp holding our picks and shovels at the trail. Our Commanding Officer stood still and watched us. As we passed him the Sergeant yelled out with unaccustomed sharpness: "Eyes—Right!" We all turned our heads smartly to the right and he saluted with strained, affected precision. The Captain touched the peak of his cap in a perfunctory manner. He hardly seemed to be looking at us at all, but suddenly he spotted a man who was not holding his shovel perfectly horizontally and thundered:

"Hold your shovel properly, that man there!"

The man was disconcerted for a moment but soon re-adjusted his shovel to the satisfaction of his superior. The ground was so muddy and uneven that it was sometimes impossible to keep the exact military formation. Without having noticed it, I was a little more than the regulation distance from the man in front of me.

"Close in there, you with the glasses," bawled the Captain in a resentful voice, as though my transgression were intended as a personal insult. But his anger was diverted by another man and he shouted with gathering fury:

"That tall man over there—hold your pick properly. Not like that, damn it . . . hold it at the point of balance —no, no, no, not like that . . . here, Sergeant, take that man's name and number and give it to the Corporal of the Police. He'll do half an hour's extra shovel-drill this evening."

We halted. The Sergeant made a note of the offender's name and then said to us in an awestruck whisper: "Now mind yer dismiss prop'ly for Christ's sake!"

We faced to the front and on the command "Dismiss!" we all turned to the right, raised our picks and shovels and transferred them from our right hands to our left, touched the peaks of our caps with our right hands, turning the palms outwards, paused a moment and then broke away.

" Fall in, fall in—very bad, very bad, absolutely disgraceful!" bawled our infuriated C.O. " If you don't do it correctly this time, you'll get an hour's extra drill every day for a week! Now dismiss them again, Sergeant!"

The prospect of extra drill filled us with dismay. Sore shouldered, stiff, and aching in every limb, oppressed and wearied in mind and body, we only had one intense desire —to get away, to hide somewhere, to enjoy at least a brief spell of warmth and comfort.

The Sergeant gave the command, and we dismissed a second time. We went through the absurd performance with anxious punctiliousness, but three men, either through fear, weariness or carelessness, made some slight mistakes and their names were taken for extra drill.

As soon as the men were off the parade ground there was a wild stampede in the direction of the cook-house.

The scramble became a mad hustle. The men raced along the duckboards or splashed through the mud in a frantic attempt to get served first, pulling their mess-tins and plates out of their haversacks as they ran.

It was growing dark and a few snowflakes were floating about in the air. The sky was a murky leaden colour.

As I stood waiting in the dinner queue I had an imaginary fight with our Commanding Officer. I knocked him down and gloated over him as he lay sprawling in the mud with my hand savagely clutching his throat. Our pent up feelings often found relief in vindictive dreams.

The queue stretched along the duckboards and in between the tents like a dingy snake in the gathering gloom. It was rapidly growing in length as more and more men came hurrying up.

But the front of the cook-house was still closed. The men grew impatient and banged their plates and tins. There were shouts of " Get a move on." Fretful, smouldering impatience increased until it flared up in anger. " Get a bloody move on—we want somethin' ter eat after

a 'ard day's work! . . . *We've* got a fine bloody lot o' cooks, keepin' us waitin' in the bloody cold—get a move on, for Christ's sake!"

The shout was taken up all along the line—" Get a bloody move on "—and tins and plates were banged until the uproar was deafening. It gradually died down again, although curses and resentful remarks were still frequent.

" 'Tain't worth eatin' when yer do get it!"

" Bleed'n' stew, I s'pose, 'nough ter make yer go queer!"

" I wouldn't feed me dog on the stuff they give yer in the army—I wouldn't 'ave the cheek ter orfer it to 'im."

" Come on . . . put a jerk in it "—the cry was taken up again. There was hooting and booing and banging of plates until pandemonium reigned once more.

Suddenly the shutter in front of the cook-house was pushed up and one of the cooks appeared in the opening. The booing changed into loud, ironical cheers:

" What yer bin doin' all day? Swingin' the lead?"

A squeaky voice retorted: " I've bin up since four in the mornin' workin' a bloody sight 'arder 'n what you 'ave. Yer never satisfied, yer bleed'n' lot o' . . . " The rest was drowned in a storm of derisive shouts.

Then the men in the queue took up the argument again.

" Yer too slow—yer could'n catch the measles!"

" You come an' do my job an' see 'ow yer like it!"

" Do *your* job! No bloody fear, why, 'tain't a man's job at all, it's only old women what goes inter the cook-'ouse."

" Go on, get a move on—don't stand there talkin'!"

Another cook appeared. He dipped his ladle into a receptacle behind the till and emptied into the first man's plate. The next man held out his plate, and then the next. The cumbrous serpent moved forward inch by inch while a counter movement began of men straggling back

through the slush, holding up tins or plates of steaming stew.

Two candles were burning inside my tent. The men were sitting on their kits. The noisy manner in which they ate was irritating beyond measure.

After the meal I went over to the tent of a friend. He was sitting by a flickering candle in moody silence. I asked him to come with me to the village. He put on his great-coat and we walked along the duckboards on to the road. It was intensely dark and we were conscious of the silent fall of snow.

"What sort of a day did you have?" I asked.

"Undiluted misery. We marched to the quarry and when we got there we found there was nothing to do, because the train hadn't turned up. So we waited in the wind and snow, just walking up and down, stamping with our feet and trying to get warm. Lieutenant Rowlatt was in charge of us. He wouldn't let us leave the quarry or go into an estaminet. And he only gave us half an hour for dinner. Of course he spent most of the time in an estaminet himself, eating eggs and chips and flirting with the girl . . . I couldn't keep warm and there was no shelter anywhere. It was like doing an eight-hour guard."

All the windows in the streets of the village were shuttered, but the light shone through cracks and chinks—a promise of warmth within that cheered us a little.

We entered an estaminet. It was crowded. Soldiers were standing round the walls waiting for vacant seats. We went to another place, but that too was crowded. Indeed, they were all crowded. Nevertheless, it was better to stand in the warmth than to walk about stiff-limbed in the slush and falling snow. We went into the next estaminet we came to. We entered the main room. An oil lamp was hanging from the ceiling. In the middle there was a long table and soldiers were seated round it,

squeezed tightly together, eating eggs and chips and drinking wine or coffee. We leaned up against the wall with a number of others and waited our turn. The air was hot and moist and smelt of stale tobacco, burning fat, and steaming clothes. There was a glowing stove at one end of the room. It looked like a red-hot spherical urn on a low black pedestal. A big bowl of liquid fat was seething on the fire. A woman with flaming cheeks was throwing handfuls of sliced potatoes into it while she held a saucepan in which a number of eggs were spluttering. The heat was becoming intolerable and we edged away from the stove. We waited patiently. More and more men came in until there was no standing room left. The conversation was boisterous and vulgar, much of it at the expense of the woman, who laughed frequently and pretended to feel shocked and called the soldiers " Naughty boyss." A few men rose from the table from time to time and at last our turn came, so that we were able to sit down. We ordered eggs and chips and *vin blanc*, but had to wait a long time before we got them. I rested my head on my hand and struggled hard with sleep. At last the woman brought us the things we had ordered and we ate and drank in silence. We would have been glad to sit and doze in this warm place in spite of the smell and noise, but when we had finished we felt obliged to get up and make room for others.

We stepped out into the darkness. The snow had turned into rain that fell in a steady drizzle. I was so tired that I had no desire left except to get back to my tent.

" I wonder how much longer this is going to last?" I said to my friend.

" I've given up hoping. The war's a deadlock that may continue for years. All I look forward to now is the spring and the warm weather. And perhaps we shall get leave some day."

" We've only been out here six weeks—we won't get leave for another eight or nine months."

" It's something to think about and look forward to, anyhow."

We said good-night to each other and retired to our tents. Most of the men were already in bed. They were smoking their cigarettes as they lay stretched out on the floor. One of them was reading a newspaper by candle-light. I wrapped myself up in my blankets and wedged myself tightly in between my two neighbours. Although I was wearied out, I felt compelled to glance at a paper. There might perhaps be some hint of peace, some little glimmer of hope to go to sleep with and dream about. I took up my copy of the *Times* which I received irregularly. I began to read the leading article but was so irritated by its unctuous hypocrisy that I turned the page over and scanned the headlines. Suddenly a big drop of water splashed on to it. I became aware of the rain outside, swishing down upon the canvas, and, looking up, I saw a glistening patch of moisture collect above my head. Another heavy drop descended, I stretched out my arm and pushing my fist against the wet patch drew it down the canvas as far as the brailing. But the moisture continued to gather, and soon it was dripping in many places. My kit-bag, standing upright next to me, was getting wet, so I placed the *Times* over it and let the water trickle off towards the ditch. Then a man shouted from the other side of the tent:

" It's coming through like anything, my whole pillow's sopping wet."

It was more than he could bear. Each little discomfort taken separately would have been altogether negligible. But when petty discomforts accumulate there comes a time when one more, however small it be, has the effect of a sudden infliction. He ground his teeth with fury at those pattering drops of water, but the realization of impotence

seemed to descend upon him with such power that he lay back and closed his eyes, a prey to violent mental agitation. Then he uttered a foul oath, blew out his candle, pulled the blanket over his head and tried to go to sleep. I heard one of the other men laugh and say good-humouredly, "'E's gettin' on—'e'll soon be swearin' wi' the best of us."

The man referred to was rather refined and had resisted the habit of swearing far longer than any of us. I was amused, and my own equanimity, which had been on the verge of collapse, was restored by this incident.

I was conscious of irresistible weariness and called out with a yawn: "Good night all," and the answer came "Good-night!" Then I heard someone singing ironically: "When you come to the end of a perfect day." I began to feel warm and was filled with a sense of intense comfort. I could hear the water dripping on to my coat, but I had become indifferent to it. My limbs were so tired that to rest them was an exquisite luxury. And then sleep came with a sudden, overwhelming rush.

We felt refreshed and yet indolent when we heard the steps of the Police Corporal splashing through the mud at half-past five the next morning. He banged the tent and shouted: "Reveillé—breakfast at six, parade at six-thirty." We enjoyed a few minutes in bed. I ran my fingers through my hair and found that it was soaked. My pillow—a shirt stuffed with spare clothing—was wet also, but the rain was no longer beating down on the canvas. The air inside the tent was pervaded by a foul, acrid stench. I threw the flap aside and looked out. The vast expanse of steely blue was dotted with glittering stars and on the eastern horizon it merged into a faint pallor. The air was deliciously fresh. We got up one by one, yawning, groaning and grumbling, and dressed and went out to wash.

As I stood in the breakfast queue I saw that the east was shot with a delicate rose colour. The purity of the

dawn seemed extraordinarily beautiful compared with the sordid dinginess of the mud and khaki that were always with us.

We paraded, but at first the parade did not seem so tedious as usual. I was in the rearmost rank, standing next to a friend, Private Cowan, and we were able to converse in whispers. He remarked that the morning was like a "symphony in blue and gold." Even the glistening mud, usually so hideous, was flecked with luminous patches. But my feet were becoming numb and cold again. I felt that the pain they were giving me was about to deprive me of all pleasure in the rising sun to which I had been looking forward ever since reveillé. I fought against it, but it was stronger than I. I became angry and trod the mud in order to get warm. I gave up the attempt and waited impatiently for the end of the parade. When the sun's rim cut the horizon and sent a shaft of light across the land, it merely irritated me.

Three lorries arrived, our party was called out, we left the parade ground and scrambled into them. They quickly bore us to the place where we had worked the day before.

The sun was shining brightly. The long rows of stacked sleepers stretched out before us. We wondered what our work would be. Someone suggested we would have to restack the sleepers in their former places and we did not consider the suggestion absurd.

Our Sergeant had gone to get instructions. He returned and told us a mistake had been made the day before. We nearly groaned with apprehension. He leered at us and did not, for a moment, say what the mistake had been. Then he told us:

"It's all right, me lads. I was only pullin' yer legs a bit. Yer needn't get the wind up, yer 'aven't got ter put 'em back. This is what 'as 'appened. Yer was supposed ter spend two days on the job an' yesterday yer did two days' work in one. I see the officer about it an' 'e says

yer worked bloody fine an' says 'e won't 'ave yer workin' ter day although there's plenty o' other things ter do. 'E says yer ter go back ter camp an' 'ave a good rest. 'E ain't 'alf a toff, I tell yer."

This announcement was followed by loud cheers. We scrambled back into the lorries. Everyone was jubilant at the prospect of having a holiday, and there was shouting and singing as the lorries sped along. We reached the camp and jumped out. We were dismayed at seeing our Commanding Officer walking about and conversing with the Sergeant-Major.

As we marched into the camp the C.O. said to our Sergeant: "Where've these men come from?" The Sergeant explained. "They've got the day off, have they? Kit inspection at ten o'clock!"

Our hearts sank and several of the men muttered something between their teeth. Our Sergeant, however, screwed up a little courage for once and explained that we had worked exceptionally hard the day before and that the officer in charge had promised us a holiday. The S.M. intervened in the discussion and pleaded on our behalf. At last the C.O., after walking up and down impatiently, said:

"Very well, we'll drop the inspection—they'll have to go to the baths though!"

We were elated beyond measure and when we were dismissed we saluted with all the smartness of which we were capable in order to please the Captain, and walked off the parade ground in the strictest regulation manner. Once they were off the parade ground the men rushed towards their tents, hallooing like schoolboys.

The baths were not unwelcome, although to stand in a tub under a thin drip of hot water in front of a broken window through which a cold gust of wind came and whistled round our shoulders, was no pleasure. But the ordeal was quickly over and before eleven o'clock in the morning most of us were free to do as we pleased. The

greater part of the day was still before us and the morrow was a long way off.

There was much bustling and shouting and singing. It was easy to please us for pleasure was such a rarity. I was scheming how to make the most of this precious holiday. I decided to go for a solitary walk. I left the camp and strolled up a hill from where I could get a fine view of the surrounding country.

I gazed in an eastward direction. All the snow had melted, the fields, the bare trees and hedges, were steeped in warm sunlight. In the distance there was a gentle slope crowned by a long line of poplars.

Beyond the poplars, about eight miles away, there was something I did not see, although I knew it was there—a stupid, terrible, and uncouth monster that stretched in a zig-zag winding course from the North Sea to the Alps. It was strangely silent at that hour, but I was fascinated by it and thought about it harder and harder, in spite of myself. I became increasingly conscious of it and it grew upon me until it darkened everything and seemed to crush me beneath its intolerable weight.

If only the end would come! And, until it does come, give me hard work so that my own thoughts cannot oppress me and I may forget all except sore shoulders and aching limbs!

III

ON DETACHMENT

THE light-railway engine pulled the trucks slowly along by winding circuitous routes. It was a warm, sunny evening. Everything was green and peaceful. The farms and cottages bore no signs of war. But soon we saw a number of shell-holes grouped round cross-roads, and gradually, as we proceeded, the fields came to be pitted more and more thickly. We skirted a large village. It was deserted. The roof of the church had three black holes. All the houses were damaged and we could see the splintered rafters standing out darkly against the sky.

We passed by camouflaged shell dumps and guns of big calibre, camouflaged and concealed amongst trees and bushes, so that often the muzzle alone was visible. Shell-holes were dotted everywhere. Many of the trees were scarred and their branches wrenched away.

We steamed into the terminal siding. Some distance in front of us was a row of poplars, regular except for the gaps where branch or trunk had been shattered. To the right was a patched-up road with several ruined cottages on either side. To the left of the poplars was a wood in which a large white château was half concealed. It looked very dreary with its black, gaping windows. To our right was a big farmhouse. Most of the tiles had been blown from the roof, showing the bare rafters. The door was in splinters, and the walls were riddled. A little lane wound round the farm in a loop and then lost itself in the wood.

Behind us was a hedge and a group of trees amongst which a gun was hidden.

There was no sound of firing. No birds were singing, although it was spring. All was quiet except for the frogs that uttered raucous musical croaks in a pond near by and puffed out the bladders at the corners of their mouths, so as to produce long-drawn shrill vibrations.

We shovelled the stones out of the trucks. Several of the men expressed disappointment at the fact that there was no " excitement."

Soon after nightfall desultory firing broke out some distance off. Then a gun began to fire a long way behind us. The shells passing high overhead made a faint rustling noise, as though they were travelling along in leisurely fashion.

Suddenly all the batteries in the entire neighbourhood joined in. The uproar was like that of innumerable thunderstorms crashing together. The guns bellowed and roared and pounded and deep reverberations filled the night. From behind us there came flashes so dazzling that we could not bear to look at them, and great blasts of air and thunder-claps that seemed to strike our ears with colossal hammers and make them drone intolerably. Thunder-clap followed thunder-clap, long jets of white flame pierced the darkness, and now and again the very air seemed to kindle, and brilliant sheets and shreds of flame blazed and crackled round us. Above there was a noise as though thousands of devilish creatures were rushing along, helter-skelter, with inconceivable rapidity, howling, shrieking, screaming, wailing, laughing, exulting, whistling and gibbering.

The shells burst over and beyond the belt of trees in front of us. Vivid, multicoloured scintillations and innumerable glittering stars flashed out and thronged the sky. At times the shells fell so thickly that a white flame of dazzling brilliancy would dart writhing along the tree-tops with lightning speed. The booming of the guns and the terrible screeching of the shells continued unabated. We were blinded, deafened, and all our senses were confused.

At last the tumult began to die down. I looked round, curious to see the effect on the other men. Frequent flashes still lit up every detail of our surroundings.

Everyone had stopped working. Most of us were gazing ahead, thoroughly scared. Standing next to me was someone who said he had always wanted to see a bombardment and now he was satisfied. He was not at all frightened, being one of the few who realized that we had been in no danger. By the light of the gun-flashes I saw, a few yards in front of me, one of our men, a young nervous fellow, stretched out at full length, trembling, and sobbing hysterically and clutching at the grass with hands that opened and closed in mad spasms. Another man was cowering down by one of the trucks, his face buried in his arms.

Our Sergeant approached. He was quite unafraid and had a rather bored look on his face. Two men were walking beside him. One of them, a Corporal, who a few hours before had complained that we were having no excitement, was saying in a strained, halting voice, that he felt very unwell, that he had hurt his knee, and would like to go back to camp. The other, a small, broad-shouldered, full-chested, squat individual, with a flat nose and a brutal face—the champion light-weight boxer of our unit—implored the Sergeant in whining tones to let him go home. The Sergeant, however, told him to shut up and go on with his work.

Gradually the firing became less and less frequent, until finally it died down altogether. Soon the big yellow disc of the moon rose above the tree-tops and all was silent except for the croaking of the frogs.

We finished emptying the trucks and then sat down inside them. The engine came along, rattling and puffing. It was coupled to the train, and the return journey began.

The landscape was plainly visible in the light of the rising moon. Shell-holes, torn trees, and ruined houses

decreased in number. We passed a straw-thatched cottage nestling amid a group of bushes and poplars. A light shone from the window, a dog barked. A bat flitted silently past. It seemed as though the uproar of the cannonade had been a dream.

The engine stopped at the siding. We jumped out of the trucks and retired into our tents. Not a word was spoken by anyone.

The following day we again received orders to proceed to the terminal siding by the light railway.

In the morning our champion boxer had reported sick in anticipation. He looked convincingly pale and complained of the usual " pains all over." The Medical Officer gave him " light duty " and he spent the day in camp, picking up matches, bits of paper, and miscellaneous rubbish.

It seemed strange that the ruined houses, the belt of poplars, the damaged farm, and the wood with the white château were still standing there so peacefully after the bombardment of the previous night. The frogs, charming creatures, were still croaking merrily.

When we had unloaded the trucks we sat down in the grass and awaited the return of the engine.

The trees were dim in the warm haze. I gazed at the white château. It fascinated me, for some inexplicable reason, and I felt an impulse to go and explore it. I was seized by a mood such as I had rarely felt since childhood, when almost every lonely and desolate building filled me with a sense of awe and mystery, as though it were the home of ghosts or fairies or witches. I was conscious of the absurdity of the emotion, but I surrendered to it and even enjoyed its strangeness.

There was no sound of firing.

I obeyed the impulse and strolled down the little winding lane. It led through a gap in the green hedge that surrounded the wood. Knowing that the enchantment of the

château would vanish as soon as I entered it, I dawdled on the way so as to prolong my pleasure. Suddenly the bushes in front of me caught fire and a bright sheet of flame shot upward and almost simultaneously there was a sharp report. I was so thrilled by the mysterious attraction of the château that I barely noticed the event. As I passed a small ruined cottage, which I had not observed before, for it was hidden amongst the trees, there was a short whizz on a high note, and then a loud crash. Smoke issued from the windows and the riddled roof, and bits of wood and débris hurtled through the air. Then there was a loud wailing noise followed by a terrific detonation. The château was blotted from view by a dense mass of black smoke that rose out of the ground in front of me. The spell was broken. I hesitated whether to go on or not, when I became aware of a voice behind me. I looked round and saw one of our Corporals shouting and gesticulating. I turned back and rejoined the others, though not before I had been called a " bloody fool " and threatened with arrest for walking off without permission.

Suddenly the loud, rustling wail was repeated and a portion of the wood was enveloped in a dark cloud. There was a deafening thunder-clap and jagged shell fragments sailed over our heads or dropped in our midst.

Then shell followed shell in rapid succession, all bursting in the wood. A piece of metal whizzed past the ear of a man standing a few yards away. He became unnerved, dashed towards one of the trucks and cowered down by the wheels, trembling in every muscle.

None of the others showed any sign of fear except anxious looks. We had been in no danger at all during the previous night's bombardment, but many of the men had been terrified. Now, when they were in considerable danger, they felt nothing more than anxiety, simply because there was no awe-inspiring display of flame and thunder.

Murky smoke clouds issued from the trees and hung above them in thin streaks. Another sound was added to the uproar—a long-drawn whine—and a sepia coloured puff appeared high up in the sky. A sharp ringing crack followed. Then another puff appeared, and then another. High-explosive and shrapnel shells continued to burst without intermision.

The frogs had ceased to croak, for one of our men, standing on the edge of the pond, was throwing pellets of mud at them. All at once he dropped like some inanimate object and lay on his side. At the same time a motor-ambulance came rushing up and stopped at the cross-roads. Two soldiers issued from the wood, carrying a stretcher. A wounded man was lying on it. He did not move arms or legs, but he howled and screamed, his voice rising and falling in a weird inhuman manner. A little after, two more wounded were carried out on stretchers. They were white, silent and motionless.

A small crowd had gathered round the man who had fallen by the pond. He was laid on to a stretcher. He seemed rather dazed but did not look pale. A shrapnel ball had hit him in the back.

The human loads were pushed into the ambulance which disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Our anxiety had deepened. Many of us were walking up and down in agitation. Nevertheless, there was no hysteria and no ignominious expression of fear as there had been on the previous night.

At last the railway engine appeared, to the immense relief of everyone. We climbed into the trucks and the return journey began. The shelling continued unabated. Above the belt of poplars a little black speck was moving along at great speed. Around it and trailing behind it were numerous black puffs. The frogs had resumed their concert.

When we reached our destination we were met by

several others of our unit who had arrived during the afternoon and were quartered in the town. Two of my friends were amongst them and together we walked over to their billet.

We entered a huge bare room and sat down on some of the kits that were arranged neatly round the floor.

"What sort of a time have you had?" I asked.

"Bloody awful . . . The S.M. and the C.O. have been making our lives a misery. We've had umpteen extra drills and parades and kit inspections. There've been at least a dozen orderly-room cases and several court martials since you left. You know Deacon? He got fourteen days. Fritz has been over a good bit lately and we have to put out our lights as soon as it gets dark, else we'd cop out for sure. Well, one of our Sergeants had a candle burning in his tent and the flap wide open—you could have seen it a mile off, you've no idea how a candle shows at night-time! We heard the archies firing in the distance and we yelled, 'Put out that light!' The Sergeant didn't take any notice though—he was reading a book. So Deacon, who's got a decent bit of pluck, walked across and asked him to blow out his candle. The Sergeant told him to mind his own bloody business. So Deacon said he'd blow the candle out himself. The Sergeant flew into a rage and swore at him and told him to sling his bloody hook. Deacon got wild too—he's one of those fellows who won't stand any nonsense—and blew out the candle. The Sergeant went off the deep end properly and had him placed under arrest. Deacon got a District Court Martial and was charged with insubordination. They gave him fourteen days' Number 1. He's serving it in camp. There's no gun or wagon there, so they can't crucify him on a wheel in the ordinary way. They've been tying him to a post instead, one hour in the morning and one in the afternoon. That blackguard of a Police Corporal won't

let him be in the shade where the trees are, but has him tied up in the full glare of the sun.

" The C.O.'s been down on people writing things in letters too. Lewis wrote home he'd starve on the rations we get if it weren't for the parcels his people send him. The C.O. had him up. He told him to make complaints through the proper channels in future and gave him seven days Number 2. He has to collect and empty the latrine buckets every morning before breakfast. When he gets back from work in the afternoon he has to chop wood with that swine of a Police Corporal standing over him. Of course, he's a bloody fool to write in that strain—our rations aren't so bad, considering. Thompson was up for the same sort of thing. He wrote he'd seen a thing or two out here and when he got back home he'd open people's eyes a bit about the war and the army. All bluff, of course, for the truth about the war and the army could never be published. He got five days for his trouble. I nearly got into hot water myself. Luckily for me I was the first one to be on the peg for writing things in my letters, else I'd have got a stiff sentence. I wrote : ' Being in the army is just like being back at school; the only difference is that whereas at school your superiors generally know a little bit more about things than you do, in the army that is not the case.' The C.O. told me off properly. He said it was most serious, a court martial offence, in fact. The charge would be one of ' Conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline.' He let me off, though, because it was my first transgression. Old Peter Cowan was nearly run by the S.M. a couple of days ago. He was inspecting us and when he came to Peter he shouted, ' Why haven't you cleaned your boottons?' Peter answered with a perfectly solemn countenance, ' I omitted to do so, sir.' The S.M. glared at him, but he wasn't quite sure about the meaning of the word ' omitted,' and being afraid of making a fool of himself he passed on. Fletcher, who was standing

only a few numbers away, smiled at Peter's remark. The S.M. spotted him, and shouted, 'What are you grinning at —anything foonny?' Fletcher said, 'No, sir,' and straightened his face with a wry contortion. The S.M. shouted to the Orderly Sergeant: 'Take this man's name.' Fletcher was up before the C.O. in the evening and got three days for laughing in the ranks. I'm sure Peter'll get into trouble before long. He did the same sort of thing yesterday. Sergeant Hyndman was in charge of us and we were standing to attention. Peter started talking —you could hear him as loud as anything. Hyndman got his rag out and yelled, 'Stop talkin' there, will yer?' Peter dropped his voice and went on in a whisper. Hyndman could still hear him, so he walked up to him and shouted, 'What the bloody 'ell's the matter wi' yer?' As cool as you like old Peter replied, '*Cacoethes loquendi.*' Of course Hyndman hadn't the remotest idea what that meant and said, 'None o' yer bleed'n' impudence, else I'll land yer inter trouble.' He didn't run him though.

"I tell you, I'm jolly glad to be away from headquarters. We've got old Rusty in charge of us. He's been a bit of a worry-guts about having cleaned boots and buttons ever since he got his second pip, but he's quite a decent old stick taking him all round. He get's drunk every evening, so that he's generally too far gone to trouble about lights out. He doesn't make a fuss over our letters either—I believe he can only read a very plain hand and has to skip the longer words. A good job, too, for that's one thing I absolutely cannot stick, the way all our letters are read . . .

"I hear you've had some excitement? It put my wind up a bit when I heard about it. Still, I'm glad in a way—the monotony of our lives was becoming unbearable. I'd rather have shell-bursts than blasts of the S.M.'s whistle. Have many been dropping in the town recently?"

"A good few—I daresay you'll have some to-night if

you're lucky. Yes, the S.M.'s whistle got on my nerves too. I was longing for a change and frightfully keen on seeing a bit of the war. I confess I wasn't particularly scared by the shells we had—of course, none of them came very near. But I don't want to have any more, not after seeing those wounded carried along on stretchers to-day. You're right in the town here and it's quite likely that you'll make a closer acquaintance with high-explosive shells than I've been able to make . . . "

I had hardly spoken when there was a faint muffled boom in the distance and a long, deepening howl, and then a loud explosion that shook the building.

A few minutes after a second shell passed overhead and exploded somewhere in the town.

Then, without the usual warning, there was a roar that seemed to split our heads and an impact that sent us reeling backwards against the wall. The room was filled with dense, pungent smoke and dust that choked and blinded us. Above the violent droning in our ears we could hear the clatter of falling bits of plaster and masonry. A whistle blew and there was a shout of "Clear Billet." We thronged the doorway and poured down the stairs, panic stricken, but before we had left the building there was another reverberating crash and once again we were enveloped by smoke and dust while the bits of plaster showered down upon us from the ceiling. I bowed my head and held my arm up to protect my face. Something whizzed closely by, and a man dropped heavily with a groan in front of me. He lay on his face with one arm doubled up underneath, quite motionless. Two men went up to him and crossed their hands under his chest to raise him. His blood was gushing out and forming a pool on the floor. As we dashed out into the road I saw an artilleryman standing alone on the cobbles and looking around in a scared fashion. There was another deafening explosion and dense clouds of smoke issued from a building forty or fifty yards away.

Suddenly the artilleryman clutched his face with his hand. The blood began to stream through his fingers and down his wrist into his sleeve. He hurried away with staggering steps.

We left the town behind us and waited near a barn in the open fields. We were joined by the two men who had remained behind to help our wounded fellow soldier.

"Is it serious?" we asked.

"Serious?—He's done for, poor chap! A big bit of shell caught him right in the chest—it didn't half make a hole. We carried him away from the billet and sat him up against a wall. We couldn't stop the blood from flowing. He came to for a few seconds though, and moaned, 'O my poor mother! O my poor mother!' enough to break your heart. And then he seemed to lose consciousness again. The ambulance arrived and we laid him on a stretcher. I expect he died before he got to the hospital."

"Anybody else hit?"

"Two of our fellows—one of them pretty seriously. They could both walk though. A lot of men from other units have been killed. The last shell dropped into a mess-room and laid out a dozen or more, and just as we were coming along we saw an artilleryman lying in the road with a big hole right in the middle of his face. He was still warm but his heart had stopped beating. It's a bloody awful feeling to lose one of your mates, though."

"I can't make it out, some'ow. 'E was talkin' an' jokin' to me only a few minutes back, an' now 'e's dead. The way 'e said 'O me poor mother!' nearly set me cryin'. Poor old chap, 'e was one o' the best—it's allus the best as gets killed an' the rotters left alive."

No more shells dropped into the town that day, but instead of going back to the billet, the men made their beds in the barn at nightfall. I returned to camp, thinking of the man who was dead and wondering whose turn would come next.

IV

THE CASUALTY CLEARING STATION

"For who feels the horrors of war more than those who are responsible for its conduct? On whom does the burden of blood and treasure weigh most heavily? How can it weigh more heavily on any man or set of men than those on this bench?"

MR. BALFOUR (House of Commons, June 20th, 1918.)

THE rain came swishing down. Water gathered on the canvas above, and heavy drops fell splashing on to the floor with monotonous regularity. Somebody was muttering curses in his sleep. Others were snoring loudly. I lay awake for a long time, staring into the black darkness of the marquee. Suddenly—it must have been two or three o'clock in the morning—the familiar rumbling noise broke out in the distance. It seemed to spread along the whole horizon. The "stunt" had begun.

A drowsy voice growled: "They're at it again—why can't they stop it once and for all." Another groaned deeply and muttered: "Awful—awful slaughter—blackguards, blackguards."

The uproar increased. I was filled with a terrible dejection, but I went to sleep in the end.

It was broad daylight when I woke up to the sound of innumerable motor-cars coming and going out on the road. The wounded were streaming in.

The operating theatre was alive with figures clothed in white, blood-stained garments, bustling up and down, or standing in groups around the other tables. At the far end of the theatre someone was blubbering like a little child.

"Here, come on—hold this man's leg up. What d'you think you're here for?" It was the surgeon at the next table who was speaking to me.

I grasped the leg by the foot—it was quite cold—while the orderly removed a bandage from the thigh. The bone had been shattered. A bullet had also entered the man's chest, making a small round puncture. A shell fragment had struck his upper lip, leaving a jagged triangular hole below the nose. Several teeth had been knocked out. The upper palate had been gashed and partly separated from the bone. It hung inside the half-open mouth like a shrivelled flap. He breathed feebly and irregularly. The surgeon bent over him and asked him if he had been wounded long. He answered in low, hoarse whispers that he had been lying in the mud and rain for several days. Then he turned his eyes up so that only the whites were visible. They remained rigidly fixed in that position. He received a dorsal injection, being too weak for chloroform. The shattered thigh was painted with picric acid and the tourniquet tightened above the injury. The surgeon cut through the leg with a circular sweep of the knife, the splintered bone offering no resistance. The limb came off in my hands. I held it for a moment, being awed by it. It seemed very heavy. Then I dropped it into the pail below. When the surgeon had dressed the stump, he made a slight incision in the forearm in order to inject a saline solution. The man, who had not uttered a sound hitherto, winced and gave a faint cry.

"Come along—hold this leg up!"

I darted to the next table and seized another foot and ankle. There was a greenish festering hole so high up the leg that it was impossible to use a tourniquet. So the

surgeon laid bare the main artery by a longitudinal incision and tied it up with catgut to prevent excessive loss of blood. With a rapid stroke of his knife he then made a shallow cut right round the limb above the injured spot, and depressing the blade cut deeply down to the bone. The blood gushed up suddenly, formed a pool on the towels and sheet underneath, overflowed the edge of the table, and splashed down on to the floor in a cascade. The operator paused a moment and then, while the blood continued to stream from the wound, he cut round the bone until flesh was entirely severed from flesh. The upper periosteum was pushed back and held by means of a metal plate. The bone was sawn through—the saw grated and jerked and jarred in a horrible manner. The leg came off and I dropped it into the white enamelled pail. The toe-nails clicked against the enamel, and the thigh, bumping against the rim, overturned it and flopped into the pool of blood under the table.

"Come on—look sharp—never mind that leg—give a help here and remove this man's bandages."

I was looking at a head that resembled a huge football made of soiled linen. In place of the mouth there was a small, dirty hole through which the fetid breath came and went. Above the hole was a big red patch. I unwound the bandages one by one. Gradually the face was revealed. Between the mouth with black, swollen lips and the bruised eyes, closed by grey greenish lids, there was, where the nose should have been, a red hole big enough to contain a human fist.

The wounded came and went in an unbroken stream. The tables were always occupied. I went from one to another, unwound bandages, held up limbs for amputation, fetched splints, padding, gauze, or new bandages. I was too busy to think or to feel any horror. I was vaguely conscious of nausea and of a hot, stifling atmosphere heavy with the fumes of chloroform and ether.

Some of the wounded had arms that hung by shreds of muscle and sinew. Others had feet that were nothing but masses of clotted blood, lumps of torn flesh, and bits of bone tied up in blood-sodden linen parcels. Some had deep holes in their backs, others had gashes in their heads from which soft, pink matter oozed.

Before me lay a man with a blackened face, a shattered knee, and festering holes all over his body. Gas-gangrene had set in and the stench was almost unendurable. The surgeon gently felt the injured leg, but the man gave such long-drawn piercing shrieks that he had to be left alone. He was sent to the resuscitation ward to recover strength a little, for he was very weak through loss of blood. In the evening he began to rave—he asked for whisky in a boisterously jovial voice, and then he yelled and cried: "Sergeant, Sergeant, Sergeant, you've ruined my career." In the night he died.

The wounded were often perfectly silent. But more often they would groan or wail or shout. Sometimes they would all howl in chorus like cats on a roof. Indeed the weird and terrible howling of wounded men is more like the howling of cats than any other sound I know.

Men regaining consciousness after an operation would sometimes laugh uproariously or cackle fiendishly. Or they would break into torrents of filthy language. One man yelled in a crazy voice that England was the most glorious country on earth and that he had done his best to be a good soldier. Then he was seized by a fit of violent weeping, while someone at the other end of the theatre was shouting with intense fury: "If I had Lloyd George here, I'd shoot the blighter," and another man was carried out with his head lolling from side to side and saying in mad, amiable tones: "Zig-zag, zagazig, zig-zag," and so on without a break.

A man who had undergone an operation some days previously was brought in to have his wound redressed—a

deep laceration, that reached from knee to hip and exposed the thigh-bone. The padding was removed, but as soon as the raw flesh was touched he threw back his head, bared his teeth, and uttered shrill, piercing cries in sudden blasts, and nothing could be done to comfort him.

Near by a wounded man had been lying quietly on a table when all at once he gave a yell and, before we could rush to the spot, he plunged head foremost and crashed down on to the floor. We picked him up, but his mind seemed too confused to realize what had happened. He did not struggle any more, but gibbered and whimpered piteously.

If the chloroform and ether were not administered with great care and skill, the patients would choke and kick and make furious efforts to tear the mask from their faces. And so great was the number of wounded and so rapidly was it necessary to perform each operation, that it was not humanly possible to devote sufficient time to each individual case. Gas was the most merciful anodyne, but it could only be used for brief operations. Under its influence men became unconscious quickly and without a struggle, and they recovered consciousness without the fearful retching and vomiting that always followed the use of chloroform or ether. And yet, even with gas, haste and carelessness and defective apparatus added suffering to suffering.

On the table lay a man with a shattered gangrenous knee. He received gas and became unconscious, but, just as the bone was being sawn through, he regained his senses. His face was ashen pale and the sweat ran down it in big drops. He was too weak to struggle, but his eyes were staring in a way that was terrible to see. I held the foot and an orderly held the stump while the saw grated harshly as it cut through the bone, and the man moaned in piteous drawling tones: " Jesus Christ have mercy upon me, God Almighty have mercy upon me, and forgive me *all* my sins."

When the operation was over, he was carried out, making unintelligible sounds.

He was followed by a man from whose chest I removed a filthy, blood-sodden mass of padding. I observed that his breathing was becoming weaker and weaker. The anæsthetist shouted:

"Fetch the oxygen—look sharp!"

An orderly brought a long black cylinder along, but the rubber tubing was knotted in a bundle and several seconds passed before it could be disentangled. At last the end of the tube was pushed into the mouth of the dying man. The tap of the cylinder was turned on, but there was no sound of gas running through. The anæsthetist glared angrily around and shouted: "Corporal Chamberlain!"

The Corporal came and the anæsthetist thundered:

"Go and get a new cylinder—this one's empty—your damned carelessness again—look sharp about it."

It was the Corporal's business to see that the cylinder in the theatre was always full. He fumbled in his pockets for the key to the cupboard in which the reserve cylinders were kept, but he could not find it. He walked out and searched in the shed opposite the theatre. He came back without it.

"Hurry up for God's sake—the man's dying—it'll be too late in a minute!"

He looked round the theatre with affected deliberation, for the angry shouting of the anæsthetist had wounded his pride. At last he found the key on a shelf. He unlocked the cupboard, fetched out a new cylinder, and placed it beside the table. The tube was pushed into the open mouth, the tap was turned, there was a rush of gas. But it was too late. The man was dead.

'D'you see what you've done?" shouted the infuriated anæsthetist. "Here's a man dead through your neglect. Don't you bloody well let it occur again, else I'll put you under close arrest and have you up for a court martial."

The Corporal walked sulking out of the theatre and muttered something about a "bloody fuss."

One of the orderlies went to the door and shouted:

"Another slab for the mortuary!"—Those who died on the operating tables were facetiously called "slabs."

Two bearers came in with a stretcher. The corpse was pushed on to it and carried away to the mortuary. There it would be sewn up in an army blanket, ready for burial. And then a telegram would be sent to a wife or mother, informing her that her husband or son had "died of wounds received in action."

There was amputation after amputation. The surgeons were tired of cutting off legs and arms—it was "so monotonous and uninteresting," as one of the sisters put it.

Then there came a little variety in the shape of a man with a bullet wound in his throat. He breathed quite normally, but when the bandage was removed, his breath rushed bubbling through the aperture and bespattered all who stood around with little drops of blood. "A most unpleasant case." He was quickly replaced, however, by another who lay on a stretcher white and motionless. His tunic had been unbuttoned. His shirt had been pulled loosely over a big, round object that appeared to be lying on his belly. The surgeon drew back the shirt. The round object was still concealed by a dirty piece of lint. The surgeon lifted it off and revealed a huge coil of bluish red entrail bulging out through a frightful gash in the abdomen.

"Here, Crawford, here's something for you!"

Captain Crawford was an abdominal specialist, at least he was particularly interested in abdominal cases, or "belly cases" as they were humorously termed. Captain Wheeler, who had called him, was interested in knee cases. Captain Maynard, who was working at the far end of the theatre, had a fondness for head cases.

"Such a delightful tummy, isn't it?" said Captain

Wheeler, who spoke in the affected drawl of our public schools and universities.

"Rather," replied Captain Crawford, who had come over from his table holding a blood-stained scalpel in his hand. He added:

"Just my rotten luck—I've only had amputations."

He looked at the bulging entrail admiringly and went back to his work. In a few minutes he was ready for the next case—a man whose head was thickly swathed in bandages.

"That's a bit of a change, anyhow—I'm fed up with legs and arms."

The bandages were removed. Amid a mass of tangled, blood-clotted hair was an irregular patch where a piece of bone had been blown away, leaving the brain-matter exposed.

The Sister looked at it with eager curiosity and said:

"A *most* interesting case. I'm *sure* Captain Maynard would so *love* to see it! Captain Maynard!"

"One moment, Sister!" He was busy with a delicate knee operation. After a little delay he came over and inspected the damaged head.

"You've got all the luck," he said. "I haven't had a decent head for ages. Still, I s'pose we have to put up with these annoyances—horrors of war, you know!" He laughed and the Sister smiled. Then he went back to his knee while Captain Wheeler attended to the head.

It must not be supposed that the surgeons, sisters and orderlies of the ——th C.C.S. were particularly cruel and heartless. They were simply ordinary human beings and the ordinary human being, however he may be horrified by the first sight of wounds and suffering, soon gets used to them and accepts them as facts of everyday life.

It was growing dark outside and the electric light was switched on. The wounded still arrived in multitudes.

Towards eight o'clock the day-shift came to an end and the night-shift began. We had no time to clear the theatre. The new surgeons continued where the old had left off. They were in high spirits and set to work merrily, exchanging jokes all the time.

The bearers were utterly exhausted and several of them had blue rings round their eyes through lack of sleep.

"Poor bearers," said one of the Sisters, "I *do* feel so sorry for them—they have an awfully hard time!"

Captain Dowden—another "head specialist"—said to me:

"Give the bearers a bit of a rest. Go to the Prep. yourself and bring me a nice head case."

I went accompanied by an orderly. The Prep. was a long marquee and on either side was a long row of stretchers, one close up against another. A man was lying on each, generally silent and motionless. Only a few were groaning feebly. We selected one whose head looked like a parcel of blood-sodden bandages. We carried him into the theatre and laid him on to the table.

The bandages were unwound. The man's hair was matted and caked with gore. There were three deep gashes in the skull. The head was washed and shaved and then painted with picric acid. The brilliant electric light, the clean white garments of the fresh teams, the bare head painted bright yellow and the three thin streaks of red blood trickling down made a strange picture. The largest wound was just above one ear. A local anæsthetic was injected and the skin round the injury pushed back. With a pair of curved pincers the surgeon broke away bits of bone from the edge of the hole. Then he pushed his little finger deeply into it and fetched out a large bone fragment and a quantity of soft matter, coloured a pale red, which he allowed to flop down on to the floor. The man was motionless except that he violently wagged his left big toe. And all the time he made a continuous cooing, purring noise, like that of a brooding hen.

The surgeon working at the next table, Captain Wycherley, received a " case " with a shattered right arm and a right thigh. He called his colleague, Captain Calthrop, over, and the two operated together, the one amputating the arm and the other the leg.

Meanwhile the head case was replaced by a boy who came walking into the theatre and mounted the table unassisted. His right eye was bandaged. As he became unconscious under gas the bandage was removed. With a few dexterous strokes of his scalpel Captain Dowden removed all that was left of the eyeball, a dark, amorphous mess. The wound was cleaned, dressed and bandaged. The boy regained consciousness. For a moment he looked vacantly round. Then he slowly raised his hand to the bandage, and, turning down the corners of his mouth suddenly broke into bitter weeping. He was gently helped down from the table and led out of the theatre, crying: " They've done for me eye, oh, oh, oh, they've done for me eye!"

" Poor kid," murmured the Captain sympathetically, and began to operate on the next man, who had a wound in his shoulder about as large as a hand. In the middle of the raw flesh a short length of undamaged bone was visible. Nothing serious, and only a flesh wound. The man inhaled the chloroform and ether fumes without choking or struggling. His wound was excised, " spirit bipped," dressed and bandaged. Then he was whisked off the table and carried away to a ward.

In the doorway appeared a man with his arm in a sling. He was dazzled by the electric light and put his hand over his eyes. Captain Wycherley called out to him: " Come along, my lad, and hop on to this table." He walked up to the table with uncertain steps. An orderly helped him on to it. He lay back and turned his head to one side and looked towards the next table on which Captain Calthrop was amputating an arm. It came off in the hands of an

orderly who dropped it into the bucket. The newcomer followed it with horror-stricken eyes. He continued to gaze, as though fascinated, at the half-closed hand that projected above the edge of the bucket. Then he trembled violently.

Captain Wycherley observed what was happening and said:

"Come on, don't worry about the next man. Let's have a look at your wound."

"Yer not goin' ter take orf me arm, are yer, sir?"

"No, of course not, don't be so silly!"

"Yer won't 'urt me, sir, will yer?"

"No, no. Pull yourself together now. Be a man! You won't feel anything at all."

The orderly untied the sling and began to unwind the bandage, but the man drew his arm away and cried:

"Oo, oo, oo—very painful, sir, very painful!"

The orderly, pleased at being mistaken for an officer, said in a soothing, patronizing voice:

"We'll just have this bit o' bandage orf an' then we'll give yer some gas and send yer orf to sleep. You won't feel nothin' and yer a sure Blighty. I wouldn' be surprised if yer got acrorss termorrer."

He went on unwinding the bandage, but the man began to shout and struggle again.

Thereupon the surgeon intervened:

"For God's sake be quiet. Pull yourself together and don't make such a fuss."

"I can't 'elp it, sir—I couldn't never stick no pain, sir, no, sir, never, sir—it's very painful, sir, very painful. I'll try 'ard, I'll do me best—but it *is* painful, sir."

However, as soon as the bandage was pulled a little he yelled and writhed. The surgeon at last lost patience and said: "Hold him down."

Two orderlies and two bearers seized his hands and feet

while the bandage was quickly removed. He shrieked and struggled violently, but he was firmly held.

He had a small, deep wound in the fleshy part of the forearm. He received gas and soon lost consciousness. The surgeon pushed a probe into the hole. There was a metallic click, whereupon he inserted his forceps and pulled out a jagged piece of steel, the fragment of a German shell. When the wound had been excised and dressed, the man was carried away and replaced by another whose right leg was thickly wrapped up. The wrapping was removed and revealed a shattered knee and two toes dangling from the foot. Captain Wycherley snipped them off with a pair of scissors. The man winced and they dropped on to the floor. The anæsthetist administered gas. It was some time, however, before the patient lost consciousness, for the balloon that adjoined the mouthpiece leaked badly and once the rubber-tubing was blown off the nozzle of the cylinder.

Captain Dowden was busy with a foot, or all that was left of a foot, a number of crimson shreds hanging from an ankle over a projecting piece of bone. Captain Calthrop was attending to a " belly case "—he had cut a longitudinal slit in his patient's abdomen and both his hands were groping inside it, buried up to the wrists, while the stomach-wall heaved up and down with the breathing of the unconscious man.

The " case " lying on the end table had been in the C.C.S. for several days. He had undergone operation as soon as he arrived. At that time he only had a small surface-wound below the knee, but it was slightly gangrenous. The next day the gas-gangrene appeared above the knee-joint. The wound was excised a second time. But soon afterwards gangrene appeared again, still higher up, and a third operation was necessary. And now the wound stretched from below the knee almost as far as the hip. It was shallow, but as broad as a hand and of a greyish-green

colour. The man breathed feebly and his eyes were turned up so that only the whites were visible. He received gas. Amputation was impossible for the gangrene had reached too far. The wound was excised, but the surgeon said: "I'm afraid he's done for, poor fellow." The man's breathing became almost imperceptible. The oxygen cylinder was sent for, the rubber tube was pushed in between the blue lips, and the gas rushed through. In a few seconds he had revived and gave loud and regular snorts, jerking back his head and shaking his body with each ingoing breath. He was taken back to the ward and put back to bed. He began to talk volubly about his wife and children. Within half an hour he was dead.

"Just go and see if there are many left in the Prep.," said Captain Dowden to his orderly.

The orderly came back and reported that there were hardly a dozen.

"Any Huns amongst them?"

"Four or five, sir."

"Are we still receiving?"

"No, sir, we stopped about an hour ago. There won't be any more cases arriving to-night, sir."

"Good—we shall be able to get off early, at two or three in the morning if we're lucky. We can take things easy a bit."

The bearers came in with a stretcher.

"Take it easy, bearers. There's no hurry—we haven't got many more to do. Just put him on that table there."

The newcomer's left leg was thickly bandaged, but the blood was oozing through and forming a pool on the table. When the bandage was removed, Captain Dowden examined the limb, but no injury was visible on the upper surface. I grasped the foot—it was blue and cold. I raised it, so that the surgeon could look at the under-surface of the leg. As I did so, the calf gave way in the middle. He told me angrily to pull harder. I pulled until

the leg was taut again. The muscles and the sinews squeaked faintly as they stretched. Underneath the calf was a big hole and the bone had been completely shattered. The man was strangely quiet. His bare chest did not move. I looked at his face and suddenly I saw his lower jaw drop. He was dead.

"Another slab for the mortuary!"

The remaining tables were empty and no more wounded were brought in for a while. The bearers were obeying the surgeon's order and were taking a rest. The officers and sisters in the theatre were in high spirits. They were trying to speak French and ridiculing each other's efforts. Captain Wycherley began to hum a tune and wave his amputation knife like the conductor of an orchestra, whereupon the others locked arms and danced up and down the theatre, talking and joking. Then Captain Calthrop broke away and danced by himself, kicking his legs up in the air. The Sisters watched him and laughed loudly. One of them could hardly control herself, and shrieking with laughter, cried:

"Oh, Captain Calthrop, you really are *too* funny!"

Captain Dowden had not joined in the merrymaking. He was standing by the table on which the corpse was lying. He smiled uneasily and said to an orderly: "Tie up his jaw and his feet and hands and take him away. And tell the bearers to get a move on. Let's get finished as quickly as possible."

The orderly pushed the dead man's lower jaw sharply against the upper, so that the teeth clicked, and kept it in position by tying a bandage right round the head. Then he crossed the dead hands and feet and tied them together also.

He went to the door and shouted, "Bearers!"

But only one bearer appeared with a stretcher over his shoulder. I helped him to lift the corpse on to it and carry it away. It was an intensely black night. All was

silent except for an occasional muffled boom in the distance and the sound of someone whimpering in one of the wards. Our load was very heavy and we had to feel our way slowly along the duckboards. When they came to an end we walked through the grass. I was in front and all at once I tripped over some obstacle. With a strenuous effort I retained my balance but nearly tipped the dead man off the stretcher. We walked on, but did not reach the mortuary, although we should have done so long ago. We put the stretcher down and looked around. The darkness enveloped us like a mantle. We could see nothing except a few shafts of light that shone through chinks in the walls of the distant operating theatre. Roughly guessing our direction we continued our journey. I felt a tent rope brushing against my leg. I stepped over it and encountered another, while the orderly knocked his foot against a peg. We put the stretcher down a second time. It rested partly on the ground and partly on the ropes, and we held the corpse for fear it should roll off. We shouted for a light. Someone answered near by and struck a match. The momentary glimmer was sufficient to show that we were standing amongst the ropes of the mortuary marquee. The man struck another match to show us the way in. We entered and added our burden to a double row of other dead, who lay there in the flickering match-light staring at the roof with sightless eyes and rigid, expressionless faces.

When we got back to the theatre all the three teams were busy again.

The bearers came in with a case, and one of them said:

"This is the last Englishman, sir. There's about half a dozen Fritzes to do, sir."

"Bring 'em along—let's get the job done."

The swing-doors were pushed open and two bearers appeared with a stretcher on which a man clothed in grey was lying. His dark hair was matted. His boyish face

was intensely white. His eyes were closed. He gave a hardly audible moan with every breath. A blanket was drawn up to his chin.

"Is this a Hun or a gentleman?" asked Captain Calthrop.

"A 'Un, sir," said one of the bearers and grinned.

"Dump him on the table!"

The blanket was removed and a blood-sodden strip of linen unwound from the German boy's right forearm, which was hanging to his shoulder by a few shreds of flesh and sinew.

"Tell him his arm's got to come off."

I explained to the boy that it would be necessary to remove his arm in order to save his life.

He did not seem to understand at first and looked at me with a puzzled expression. Then he suddenly broke into a wail, like a little child, and cried, "Ach Jesus, ach Jesus, ach Jesus . . . "

The chloroform mask soon muffled his cries and he became unconscious. I grasped his cold hand and slender wrist. The arm was rapidly amputated. The red stump with the disc of severed bone in the middle was cleaned and bandaged and he was carried back to the prisoners' ward, retching and vomiting.

On Captain Wheeler's table lay a healthy looking German with a bronzed face. His legs were pitted with a great number of small wounds caused by minute bomb fragments. The mask was clapped over his mouth and the chloroform allowed to drip on to it. But he inhaled the fumes with difficulty, and began to choke.

The anæsthetist got angry and snarled:

"That's it, choke away—a choker like all the rest of them—you blasted race of murderers—I'm sorry for the individual though, this deluded fool, for instance."

Captain Dowden was vainly trying to converse with a German who had been hit in the back. The bullet had

passed through the lower part of his lung, and then through the abdomen, leaving a hole through which part of the intestine projected.

"Come along and ask him some questions," he said to me. "Don't stand about there doing nothing—make yourself useful. Tell him he'll be well treated—better than the English wounded are treated in Germany."

The prisoner answered in a drawling whisper:

"I never expected bad treatment—the English wounded are not treated badly by us either."

"Aren't they! That's all he knows about it! . . . Ask him if he likes war."

"O God, no—war's good for the rich, not for the poor."

"I thought these Huns loved warfare—ask him if he thinks Germany will win."

Germany's in a bad way—Ach Gott, don't ask me any more, give me something to stop my pain!"

"That's the retort diplomatic! Send him off to sleep—let's get the job done."

When the man had lost consciousness, Captain Grierson, the anæsthetist, put the chloroform bottle aside, jumped down from the stool, and searched the pockets of his helpless patient. He did not find much, however, only a few letters and picture postcards until he came to a deep trouser pocket from which he drew a big German pipe.

"Not a bad souvenir," he said, as he put it into his own pocket and returned to his stool. Of course this was not stealing, it was merely "scrounging" or "pinching" or "collecting souvenirs," which is an entirely different thing.

For a time the surgeons worked silently, amputating arms and legs, holding the bare skin between two fingers and cutting the flesh, throwing bleeding bits on to the floor, dressing and bandaging stumps and excised wounds.

Captain Calthrop was grumbling at the tedium of the work when his anæsthetist lit upon a happy thought and said:

" How'd you like to try your hand at giving an anæsthetic? I'll have a shot at surgery—I've never done it before. I'd like to see if I'm any good at it."

" Right you are," replied Captain Calthrop, " we'll change over."

" Jolly good idea," added Captain Wycherley at the next table, " we'll change over too."

" Right-o," said his anæsthetist.

And so the two anæsthetists operated and the two surgeons gave anæsthetics. It was, perhaps, rather a dangerous thing to do, but as the wounded men were only Germans it did not matter.

Captain Dowden took no part in this experiment. In fact he even suggested that it was " a bit thick," but his disapproval did not assume a more tangible form.

After finishing one case each, the four surgeons and anæsthetists changed back again.

" Surgery isn't so bad as I thought it would be."

" Isn't it—you wait till you get an abdominal!"

" Giving an anæsthetic's rather a ticklish affair. I thought my man was going to choke to death, he got so blue in the face."

A few more Germans with slight flesh wounds that only required dressing were brought in, and then the work of the night shift was over.

The surgeons, anæsthetists and sisters trooped out gaily to have tea and cakes in the shed opposite the entrance to the theatre.

Our work was not yet over, for we still had to put everything in order for the day shift.

The operating theatre looked like a butcher's shop. There were big pools and splashes of blood on the floor. Bits of flesh and skin and bone were littered everywhere. The gowns of the orderlies were stained and bespattered with blood and yellow picric acid. Each bucket was full of blood-sodden towels, splints, and bandages, with a

foot, or a hand, or a severed knee-joint overhanging the rim.

Two of us got pails of hot water and set to work with swabs, scrubbing brushes and soap. We mopped up the pools of blood and wrung our swabs out over the pails until the dirty water became dark red. We scrubbed till our arms ached. With our bare hands we brushed the bits of flesh, skin and bone into little heaps and threw them into the buckets, and these we emptied into a big tub after picking out the amputated limbs which we carried off to the incinerator to be burnt. Within an hour and a half the theatre was clean and tidy.

A heap of blankets and articles of clothing had been left in a corner. We loaded them on to a stretcher and carried them to a small tent some distance away, taking a candle with us.

We folded the blankets and stacked them carefully. Some of them were clammy and slippery to the touch. Others were hard and stiff. The rank smell of stale, clotted blood was sickening.

The clothing we carried to the pack store, a large marquee, where we sorted it, putting great-coats, tunics and shirts on separate heaps. I was holding a shirt when I became aware of a tickling sensation across one hand. I hurriedly dropped the garment and lowered the candle so that I could see it distinctly. It was swarming with lice.

We walked out into the darkness and made for our own marquee. As we passed the prisoners' ward an orderly called out from inside:

"'Ere, just come in a minute. 'Ere's a Fritz been 'ollerin' out all the evenin'—come an' tell us what 'e wants."

We went in. The prisoners were lying on stretchers in two rows. Most of them were asleep, but one was tossing about and crying in piteous tones:

"Hab'ich noch'n Arm, oder hab'ich keinen?"

" 'E's bin at it for 'ours, pore bloke. Arst 'im what 'e

wants—I 'xpect it's somethin' ter do with 'is arm what they took orf early in the evenin'."

I asked the man what he wanted and noticed that his right arm had been taken off at the shoulder. He was silent for a moment and looked at me with haggard eyes. Then suddenly he wailed:

"Kamerad, sag mir doch—Comrade, tell me—is my arm still there, or is it gone?"

"He want's to know if he's still got his arm," I said to the orderly, who turned to the prisoner and exclaimed: "Arm bon, goot!"

"Aber ich fühl ja nichts—But I can't feel anything—for God's sake tell me if it's still there!—Ach Gott, ach Gott, ach Gott."

He buried his face in his pillow and sobbed hysterically.

I explained to him that it had been necessary to remove his arm, but that he would live and be well treated and see no more fighting.

He turned round and stared at me and then shouted jubilantly:

"Jetzt weiss ich's—Now I know—thank God, I shall live, live, live. O du lieber Himmel, das Glúck ist zu gross."

He gave a deep sigh of relief and satisfaction and closed his eyes and turned on his side to go to sleep.

Somehow it seemed strange that there could be any happiness left in the world.

"Thanks awfully," said the orderly. "It must 'a' bin the uncertainty what upset 'im. I'm bloody glad yer came in. Yer've done 'im a world o' good. I took to the pore bloke some'ow—I allus feels pertickler sorry fur wounded Fritzes, I dunno why. I 'xpect 'e's got a missis an' kiddies just like meself . . . Good-night!"

"Good-night," I answered, and added mentally:

"Your profession of soldier, the most degrading on earth, has not degraded you. You are engaged in the most

infamous and sordid war that was ever fought, and yet you have remained uncontaminated—there is no honour or decoration in all the armies of the world good enough for you."

We entered our marquee and made our beds.

All at once I noticed how utterly tired I was both in mind and body. I crept under the blankets and closed my eyes and saw a vast confusion of red and yellow patches, of severed limbs and staring eyes and blue, distorted faces of suffocating men. They thronged the darkness in ever increasing numbers and then they arranged themselves into a kind of gigantic wheel that began to turn slowly round and round. And suddenly I became conscious of a grief so intense that it seemed almost like physical pain, but weariness soon mastered every other sensation and I fell into a dreamless sleep.

V

WALKING WOUNDED

"The war is doing me good as though it were a bath-cure."

(FIELD MARSHAL VON HINDENBURG.)

SOME had dirty bandages round their heads. Some had their arms in slings. Others had hands so thickly swathed that they looked like the huge paws of polar-bears. Many were caked with mud and wore tattered uniforms. Some limped or hobbled along. Others could walk unaided. Some leaned heavily on our shoulders and some we had to carry on our backs.

As each one entered the waiting-room—a little wooden shed opposite the swing-doors of the operating theatre—we took off his boots and tunic and made him sit down in front of the glowing stove. From time to time an orderly would shout across from the theatre:

"Next man!"

And we would take the "next man" over and help him to mount one of the tables.

They were all very quiet at first and many sat with bowed heads. Some were dreading the operation, others, who were not badly wounded, looked bright and cheerful, as well they might, for they were going to have a holiday, perhaps in England, but anyhow at the Base, where they would enjoy a respite from danger, hardship, and misery—a respite that might last for weeks. And in the mean-

time the war might come to an end—one could never tell.

Two infantrymen with packs and rifles passed by. They had been discharged from the C.C.S. and were going to rejoin their units. They stopped outside the waiting-room for a few minutes and looked enviously at the wounded sitting round the stove inside, and murmured with deep conviction: "Lucky devils."

A patient came out of the theatre with bandaged arm. He held a large, semi-circular piece of iron in his hand.

"Is that what they took out o' yer arm?" said one of the infantrymen.

"Yes—decent bit, isn't it!"

"Gorblimy, I wish I could 'ave a bit like that, in me knee or somewhere, to lay me up for months."

His comrade added in a voice full of hopeless longing:

"I wish I were in his shoes. Anything to keep out of that hell up the line!"

"'E's a sure Blighty, ain't 'e?"

"Sure!"

The man with the injured arm put on his boots and threw his tunic over his shoulders and walked off, smiling happily.

A German, looking weak and pale, came in. He was in great agony and had received permission to enter the theatre with the British wounded, so that his pain might be relieved as soon as possible.

"'Ullo, Fritzie," said someone in a cheerful voice. "Got a Blighty?"

The German did not understand and looked utterly miserable. He sat down timidly with the others. The room was dark except for the glow given out by the stove that lit up the hands and faces of those around it. Suddenly a man shouted from the background:

"Them bastard Fritzes—I'd poison the 'ole lot." And that started the argument.

"I reckon one man's as good as another."

"I reckon a Tommy's worth a dozen Fritzes. The bleeders ought ter be wiped orf the face o' the bleed'n' earth. I see 'em do a thing or two, I tell yer—me an' my mate was in the line down Plugstreet way when they crucified a Canadian. I see the tree what they did it on wi' me own eyes—dirty lot o' swine!"

"Bloody lies! Yer read it in the paper!"

"Wha' if I did?"

"Yer said yer saw it yerself!"

"Well, I read it in the papers and then I see the tree what they did it on arterwards. The nails was still there. An' what *d'you* know about it? Yer in the artillery, yer don't see no fightin'!"

"Don't see no fightin'! Gorblimy, I reckon the infantry wouldn't be much bleedin' cop wi'out the artillery."

"I'll tell yer what the artillery do—blow up their own mates what's in the front line, there now!"

"If we'd 'ad artillery in August, 1914, the war'd 'a' bin over in three weeks!"

"Don't yer believe it! It's the infantry what 'as all the danger an' gits all the rotten jobs. The artillery's cushey compared wi' the infantry."

"The artillery 'as a bloody sight 'eavier losses!"

"Go on—tell us another! It's no good arguin' wi' yer, yer won't see any side 'cept yer own."

But a third man, bringing the argument back to its original subject, said:

"I reckon it's all bloody lies what's in the papers. The Belgies is a damn sight worse'n Jerry.* Yer know that there gun what used to shell Poperinge—well, they never knew where the shells came from till they found it was a Belgian batt'ry 'id in a tunnel. They caught the gunners when they was telephonin' to Jerry. They stood the 'ole bleed'n' lot up aginst a wall an' shot 'em--serve 'em right too."

* The Germans.

"Go on—tell us another!"

"I bet yer it's true, now then!"

"How much do you bet?"

"Fifteen bloody francs!"

"All right, I'll take yer on!"

"I reckon the Froggies is the worst," said a man who had not spoken before. "I was out 'ere in 1914 an' they didn't 'alf let us down. I was a bloody fool ter join up though—I'd like to strangle meself for it. They won't catch me volunteerin' for the next war, not this child, no bloody fear! Look at the way they treat yer—like bleed'n' pigs. There ain't no justice anywhere. There's strong an' 'ealthy fellers at the Base just enjoyin' theirselves. Then there's the 'eads what 'as servants to wait on 'em—d'yer think French or Duggie 'Aig ever 'as shells burstin' round 'em? Then there's the Conchies what 'as a easy time in clink—if I see a Conchy in civvy life, I'll knock 'is bloody 'ead orf, struth I will. And the civvies—gorblimy—when I was 'ome on leave they kep' on arstin' me, 'Ain't yer wounded yet?' an' 'When are yer goin' back?' But d'yer think they care a damn—Not they, you bet yer life on it! *They* don't want the war to stop—they're earnin' good money an' go to dances an' cinemas. They'd start cryin' if we 'ad peace—I tell yer, I was glad when me leave was over an' I was back wi' me mates. I won't 'alf throw me weight about when I gits out o' the army! I won't 'alf raise 'ell—I'll 'ave a bloody revverlution, you see if I don't! . . ."

The shout of "Next man" sounded across from the theatre, and the would-be destroyer of the social order got up and walked across.

"Where were you wounded?" asked one of the soldiers of his neighbour who was drawing his breath in sharply between his lips, evidently being in great pain.

"Near Eeps,* by the Canal. A shell busted in front

* Ypres.

o' me an' a bit copped me in the shoulder. Fritz was sending 'em over by the 'undreds, whizz-bangs an' 'eavy stuff all mixed up—gorblimy, 'e don't 'alf give yer what for!"

There was a temporary lull in the conversation and then a small, wiry, spiteful looking Cockney spoke. He had reddish hair and big round spectacles of the army pattern.

"I didn' 'alf do it on a Fritz afore I was wounded! 'E give 'isself up an' I takes 'im along—I makes 'im walk in front o' me—yer can't take no risks wi' them bastards. 'E turns rahnd an' says ter me in English—'e must 'a' bin a clurk or a scholard—'e says, sarcastic like, 'I s'pose yer think yer goin' ter win the war!' I gets me rag out an' tells 'im ter mind 'is own bleed'n' business. I tells 'im if I catch 'im lookin' rahnd agin I'll kill 'im! We walks on a bit an' suddenly I throws a Mills at 'im—gorblimy, it wasn't 'alf a fine shot, it busted right on 'is shoulder. It didn' 'alf make a mess of 'im—I bet 'is own mother wouldn't 'a' rekkernized 'im as 'e lay there wi' 'is clock all smashed up!"

"I think it's a damned shame to kill a man after he's surrendered," said a tall Corporal.

"I wasn't goin' ter stand no bleed'n' sarcasm! An' Fritz does the same to our blokes! It's 'e what started it! We learnt it orf of 'im!"

"Yes, that's what they all say. It's always the other man who's done it first. There's been many a fellow who's quite decent at heart who's murdered a helpless prisoner thinking to avenge some abominable outrage that was never committed, but only dished up by some skunk of a pen-pusher who's never seen any fighting in his life. I don't know much about Fritz, he may be worse than us or he may be better, but I've seen our fellows do some bloody awful things. Anyhow, I know the German soldier's doing his bit just as we are. He thinks he's in the

right and we think we're in the right, and he's just as much entitled to his opinion as we are to ours. And I tell you straight, if I had the choice between killing a German soldier and killing Lord Northcliffe, I'd shake hands with the German and ask him to help me kill Lord Northcliffe and a few others like him. And I'm not the only one who's that way of thinking, I can tell you. We call ourselves sportsmen, but have we ever recognized that we got a brave enemy? Say what you like about Fritz, he may be a brute, but he's got some pluck—he's up against the world, he is. He'll be beaten in the end, that's a cert, but he's putting up a bloody hard fight. I didn't think much of him before I came out, but it's hats off to him now! But d'you think the civvies or the papers admit it? No bloody fear! The other day I saw a picture of the grenades we use—I think it was in the *Graphic* or one of these illustrated rags. It was headed, 'Ferreting Fritz out of his Funk Holes.' I know the man who wrote that hasn't been in the trenches himself! He's never seen a lot of Germans lying dead round their machine-gun after fighting to the last, as I have! He hasn't even seen a shell burst, not he! I bet he slipped into *his* funk hole, though, when there was an air-raid on! Dirty, filthy swine! When I was home on leave I got so wild at the way the civvies talked that I gave them a piece of my mind and told them a thing or two. And one of them called me a pro-German! He, of course, was a patriot. He was making money out of the war and wanted a fight to a finish. Well, I got my rag out properly and I caught him by the throat and shook him till he was blue in the face. It was in the street too, and a lot of people standing about. They didn't say anything more after that, though! I felt I'd done a good deed. I was really glad to feel I'd clutched his windpipe with all my strength. I expect he still wears the marks of my finger-nails, although it happened months ago . . ."

"'Ere, 'ere! That's the stuff to give 'em! I reckon Fritz is a bloody good sport. We ought ter shake 'ands an' make peace now. Peace at any price, that's what I say . . . I tell yer a thing what 'appened when I was in the line. We 'ad a little dog wi' us an' one night she must 'a' strayed inter Fritz's trenches. The next mornin' she came back wi' a card tied round 'er neck an' on the card it 'ad: 'To our comrades in misfortune—What about Peace.' I reckon that was a jolly decent thing ter say. Jerry wants ter get 'ome to 'is missis an' kiddies just as much as what we do!"

"Next three men," shouted the theatre orderly.

The next three were light cases. They were dealt with very quickly. Then the German hobbled across and several English wounded followed in rapid succession. When the waiting-room was empty we went over to the Prep. and fetched the other Germans along. There were no wounded arriving at the station at that moment, but we knew from the distant rumble of the bombardment that the Prep. would soon be crowded once again.

A number of British soldiers gathered round the entrance of the waiting-room, curious to see the prisoners and hear what they had to say.

"Ask 'em if they're glad to be out of it."

I put the question and there was a chorus of fervent "Ja's" and "Gott sei Dank's."

They were all glad to be out of it. No more fighting for them, Gott sei Dank! War was no good, at least not for the common soldier.

"Ask him what he thinks of Hindenburg."

A cheerful youngster from East Prussia answered: "Der's' nicht besser als wir—He's no better than we are!"

"Did you ever see him?"

"Yes, he came into the trenches a week ago and gave us cakes and cigars."

" But that was jolly sporting of him, wasn't it?"

" He can keep his cigars—*he* doesn't have to lie in shell holes for days on end."

" War's no good," said a small man with a protruding forehead and keen eyes and wearing a red-cross on his arm. " Ich danke meinem Gott—I thank my God that I've never taken up a rifle during the whole war, and I've been in it since the beginning. No human being has lost his life through me, thank God."

" Was für'n Zweck hat es—What's the good of shooting each other like this? The heads ought to come and fight it out amongst themselves."

" It's good for politicians and profiteers—für die ist's gut."

" Ask them what they think of the submarines."

A Lieutenant of the Prussian Guard answered contemptuously that he didn't think much of them. He didn't believe stories of food-shortage in England, he didn't believe anything the papers said, they were all full of lies.

" Ask them if they're satisfied with their treatment."

Yes, they were all satisfied. The Lieutenant pronounced it " blendend " (dazzling). They had not eaten so much and such good food for months and months. Oh it was good to be out of the fighting. Yes, their treatment was perfect—except for the thieving. Why were British soldiers allowed to steal the buttons, caps, rings, and watches belonging to their prisoners?

A German private, a tall thin man with bushy eyebrows, who had not spoken hitherto, said he didn't mind losing a few buttons—but to rob a man of his marriage ring, that was very mean—eine Gemeinheit—his marriage ring had been taken from him: he would have lost anything rather than that, for it always reminded him of home.

The boy from East Prussia said he didn't care what they took from him as long as they didn't take his life. He

was safe now and nothing else mattered. He spoke with a Polish accent.

I asked him what town he came from.

"Allenstein."

"Did you see anything of the Russians in 1914?"

"Jawohl"—he had seen plenty of Russian troops. They behaved very well. "Die sind besser als die Deutschen—They're better than the Germans . . . "

But the theatre orderly interrupted us and asked us to "send two or three across."

I went to the Prep. to see if there were any new arrivals. It was full once again and the wounded were streaming into the station.

It was quite dark outside. The duckboards were lit up by rows of hurricane lamps. The bombardment was still going on.

When I got back to the waiting-room all the prisoners were gone and English wounded were taking their places. Soon the benches round the stove were crowded with dark figures whose hands and faces were lit up by the glow.

A man with haggard features and a bandage round his head began to talk in a mournful voice:

"Oh, it's 'ard ter lose yer mates. There was three of us—we was always together—we couldn't bear the idea o' separatin'. One of us copped a packet* about three months ago an' went inter dock†—'e wasn't 'alf upset when 'e left us, though 'e was a sure Blighty—'e was afeard they'd send 'im to another mob when 'e got well agin. But 'e came back to us arter all—we didn't 'alf 'ave a bust up that evenin'. The two of us was absolutely canned to the wide‡—'e wasn't though, 'e didn' drink much—'e was better'n what we was—well-spoken like—didn' go arter no tarts—didn' do no swearin'. Yer never came acrorst a better mate'n what 'e was! We was goin' over the top when a shell busted in front of us. It blinded me for

* Got wounded. † Hospital. ‡ Dead drunk.

a moment and then when I could see agin—gorblimy—it must 'a' copped 'im in the stomach an' ripped it open—ugh!—'e was rollin' over wi' all 'is guts 'angin' out—ugh! —yer should 'a' 'eard 'im groan. 'Me own mate,' I says ter 'im, but 'e didn't rekkernize nothin' and then we 'ad to go on—yer can't stop when yer goin' over! Soon arter me other mate copped it too. Somethin' bowled 'im clean over, but 'e gets up again an' shows me 'is arm. 'There's a bastard,' 'e says, as cool as yer like—'is 'and was blown clean orf at the wrist! He just turned round an' was walkin' orf to the dressin' station when a shell busted atween us. It copped me in the 'ead an' knocked me senseless. Arterwards I 'eard me mate 'ad bin blowed ter bits. Oh, it's 'ard when yer've bin together all the time an' shared everythink."

He buried his face in his hands and made no further sound except an occasional sniff and a hasty drawing in of the breath through trembling lips.

"It's bloody murder up the line," said a full Corporal. "We were in a trench four feet deep and up to our waist in water. A Jerry sniper spotted us and one man got biffed,* and then the next, and then the next all along the trench. We were packed together like sardines and had no cover at all for our heads and shoulders. I got the wind up terribly 'cause I knew my turn was coming. He only gave me a Blighty though—I reckon I'm bloody lucky!"

"We was ready for to go over the top an' waitin' for the whistle to blow. We didn't 'alf 'ave the wind up. You could 'ear the teeth chatterin' all along the trench. I was shiverin' all over, I . . . "

"Next man!" The conversation stopped while the next man went across, but having once begun to tell their experiences, the men would not stop altogether, and after a brief silence an elderly little man with a bandaged foot said:

* Killed.

"What I couldn't get over was insomnia. I could never sleep at the right time and I was always dead tired on duty. Once I worked forty-three hours at a stretch and after that I had to do a guard in our trench. I felt sleepy all of a sudden. I pinched myself and banged the butt of my rifle on my toes, but everything seemed to swim round me. Then, I don't know how, I went off to sleep. I was awakened by an officer who shook me and swore at me. I was a bit dazed at first and then suddenly it struck me what had happened. I never had the wind up so much in all my life and I implored him not to report me. I don't remember what happened next, I was in such a state. But he did report me. I got a court martial and was sentenced to death for sleeping at my post. They put me into the guard-room and I expected to be shot the next day. It was a rotten feeling, I can tell you. I didn't think about myself so much as about the wife and the little boy. I wouldn't go through a night like that again for anything. But I went to sleep all the same. I woke up the next morning when someone came into the guard-room. I didn't know where I was for a second or two, and then in a flash I realized I'd got to die. I don't mind admitting that I rested my face against the wall and blubbered like a kid. Anyone would have done the same, I don't care what you say. But the man who'd just come in said:

"'Pull yourself together, old chap—you're all right for to-day, anyhow.' I sat bolt upright and stared at him.

"'They're not going to shoot me?'

"'Not to-day,' he answered. 'Cheer up, all sorts of things might happen before to-morrow.'

"The joy I felt was so big that I can't tell you how big it was. But I soon felt miserable again. I couldn't understand what had happened. I didn't know whether I was going to die or live. The uncertainty became so terrible that I wished I'd been shot that morning—all would have

been over then. They brought me a meal, but I couldn't eat. I asked them what was going to happen, but they didn't know. Another night came, but I didn't get any sleep at all. I lay tossing about on my bed, now hoping, now despairing. I thought of home mostly, but once or twice I thought of the kids in the school where I taught—to die like this after the send-off they gave me! Still, they wouldn't know, they'd think I was killed in an accident, and that was some consolation to me. And the next morning—I can't bear to think of it—nothing happened: that was just the terrible thing about it—nothing happened. The day passed and then another day. At times I longed to be taken out and shot, and once or twice I felt I didn't care about anything. I didn't care whether I died or not. A week passed and then another week. I don't know how I lived through it. Then, one day, I was told to pack up and rejoin my unit. I don't know exactly what I did, but I think I must have gone hysterical. I remember some N.C.O. saying I ought to stay a bit because I wasn't well enough to go up the line. He said he'd speak to the officer and get me a few days' rest. But the thought of staying in that place made me shiver. I said I was absolutely all right and went back to my unit.

" But I never found out what had happened—you see, I was only a common soldier, so they didn't trouble to tell me—until I got a letter from the Captain who was in charge of me when I was on that forty-three hour job. He said he'd heard I was in for a court martial for sleeping when on guard, so he wrote to our headquarters to tell them I'd worked forty-three hours on end and wasn't fit to do a guard after a spell like that. Then they must have made a lot of inquiries—I expect there's a whole file of papers about me at headquarters. Anyhow, that's how I got off—it's more than a month ago now. Well, yesterday morning I was put on guard again. I tried to get out

of it, but the officer said I was swinging the lead and he wouldn't listen to any excuses. I told him I'd had insomnia overnight and could hardly keep my eyes open. I said I'd do anything rather than a guard—a fatigue job or a patrol, no matter how dangerous, as long as it kept me on the move. The very thought of doing a guard made me tremble all over. He swore at me and said he'd heard these tales before and told me to shut up and get on with it. Well, I had to stand in the trench in front of a steel plate with holes in it through which I had to peer. It was just about daybreak. There was a tree growing about fifty yards off. It had been knocked about pretty badly, but there were plenty of leaves left on it. I stared at it, trying hard to keep awake. But soon the trunk began to quiver, then it wobbled with a wavy motion like a snake. Then the leafy part seemed to shoot out in all directions until there was nothing but a green blur, and I fell back against the trench wall and my rifle clattered down. I pulled myself together, absolutely mad with fear, because I kept on thinking of the last time I went on guard and the court martial and the death sentence. I ground my teeth and stared at the tree again. But the trunk began to wobble with snaky undulations and the green blur grew bigger and bigger in sudden jerks, while I tried frantically and desperately to keep it small. But it got the better of me and all at once it obscured everything with a rush and I dropped forward and knocked my forehead against the steel plate. I pulled myself together and prayed for a Blighty or something that would get me out of this misery. I looked at my watch—O God, only five minutes had gone, one-twelfth of my time! I had a kind of panic then and I dashed my head wildly against the trench wall and I bit my lips—I almost enjoyed the pain. I looked through the hole. The tree was steady at first, but it soon began to wobble again. Then I said to myself: 'I don't care, I'll risk it, I won't look out, I'll

just keep awake. I don't suppose any Fritzes will come along—I'll just peep through the holes from time to time so as to make sure.' I stamped on the duckboard and kicked the sides of the trench and jerked my rifle up and down just to keep myself awake. It was all right at first and I was beginning to think I would get over it somehow, but my feet soon felt as heavy as lead and my head began to swim until I fell forward once again. Jesus Christ—I didn't know what to do. I thought of looking at my watch, but I hadn't the courage at first. Besides, I felt the seconds would slip by while I was hesitating and so I'd gain at least a little time. I counted the seconds—one, two, three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . . my head dropped forward and I nearly fell over. I looked at my watch—fourteen minutes had gone, nearly a quarter of an hour! That wasn't so bad. I felt a little relieved, but drowsiness came on again. I fought against it with all my strength, but with an agony no words can describe I realized that it was too strong for me. I pulled myself together with another despairing effort. I noticed that my clothing felt cold and clammy—I had been sweating all over . . . "

The theatre orderly burst into the waiting-room and shouted: "Are you all deaf? I've been yelling out 'Next man' the last five minutes, but you won't take no bloody notice. Send us two or three. The Colonel's in the theatre—he'll kick up a hell of a row if you don't get a move on."

We were scared and sent three men across. When they had gone, we asked to hear the end of the story.

"Well, I was absolutely desperate. I kept on looking at my watch, but the minutes crawled along. I believe I must have started crying once, but I don't know for certain, I was so sleepy that I don't remember half of what I did and what I dreamt—I know I did dream, it's funny how you can start dreaming even when you're standing up

or moving about. I couldn't keep my eyes open and I kept on dropping off and pulling myself together. Suddenly, there was a terrific crash and a shell burst, it must have been forty or fifty yards off. I thought, bitterly, that there'd be no Blighty for me—no such luck. Then, high up in the air, I saw a big shell-fragment sailing along in a wide curve, spinning and turning. I looked at it—it was coming my way—Jesus Christ, perhaps I'd have some luck after all—and in any case a few more seconds would have passed by. It descended like a flash, I started back in spite of myself and held one hand out in front of my face. I felt a kind of numb pain in my right foot—nothing very bad. I looked down and, oh joy, I saw a big, jagged bit of shell imbedded in my foot. I tried to move it, but the pain was too great. Joy seemed to catch me by the throat, I began to dance, but such a pang shot through my leg that I had to stop. I dropped my rifle and hopped towards the dressing-station. I think it was the happiest moment in my life. I lost the sensation of weariness for the time being. But my foot began to hurt very badly and I got someone to help me along. My wound was dressed. I got on to a stretcher and I didn't know anything more until I was taken out of the motor ambulance here at the C.C.S. Anyhow, I'm all right now and I'm going to try and get across to Blighty and swing the lead as long as I can."

There was silence for a while. It had grown dark outside. But the call from the theatre sounded again. Gradually the waiting-room emptied itself until at last there were only two men left sitting in front of the fire. They both seemed depressed and gloomy. Then one of them broke the silence and said:

"We was goin' over when a 'eavy one burst. I didn't 'alf cop a packet in me shoulder. It's the third time too, an' I've got the wind up about goin' up the line agin when I'm out o' dock. The third time's yer last, yer know.

Fritz'll send one over with me number on it, that's a bloody cert!"

"If yer number's up it's up," said the other, who had a big patch over his right ear. "If yer've got ter die yer've got ter die, an' it's no use worryin' about it."

Their turn came before long and I helped each one to get on to a table. Then I went over to the Prep. to see if any more walking wounded had arrived, but there were none at all.

I stood out in the open for a few minutes in order to breathe the fresh air. There was a roar and rumble of distant drum-fire. The trees behind the C.C.S. stood out blackly against the pallid flashes that lit up the entire horizon.

The mortuary attendant came walking along the duck-boards.

As he passed by me he growled:

"There's a 'ell of a stunt on—there'll be umpteen slabs for the mortuary."

VI

AIR-RAIDS

IT was a warm, sunny afternoon. About a dozen of us were pitching a marquee in leisurely fashion, when suddenly there was a shout of "Fritz up!"

We gazed at the sky, and, after searching for a while, saw a tiny white speck moving slowly across the blue at an immense height. Then, at some distance from it, a small white puff, like a little ball of cotton-wool, appeared. A few seconds passed and we heard a faint pop. More puffs appeared around the moving speck, each one followed by a pop. All at once, behind us, a bright tongue of flame flashed out above a group of bushes. There was a sharp report and a whizzing, rustling noise that died down gradually. Then another puff and another pop. The bright flames flashed out again in rapid succession. The little speck moved on and on. Grouped closely round it were compact little balls of cotton-wool, but trailing behind were thin wisps and semi-transparent whitish blurs. Above a belt of trees in the distance we observed a series of rapid flashes followed by an equal number of detonations. The upper air was filled with a blending of high notes—a whizzing, droning, and sibilant buzzing, and pipings that died down in faint wails. The little white speck moved on. It entered a film of straggling cloud, but soon re-emerged. It grew smaller and smaller. Our eyes lost it for a moment and found it again. Then they lost it altogether and nothing remained save the whitish blurs in the blue sky and a hardly audible booming in the far distance.

"I bet 'e's took some photographs—'e'll be over to-night. I reckon we're bloody lucky to be at a C.C.S."

"D'yer think 'e wouldn't bomb a C.C.S.?"

"Course 'e wouldn't—'e knows as well as what we do that there's some of 'is own wounded at C.C.S.'s."

"Yer've got some bleed'n' 'opes—do anythink, 'e would. Didn't yer see it in the papers? 'E bombed a French C.C.S. at Verd'n an' knocked out umpteen wounded."

"I bet that's all bloody lies—yer can't believe nothin' what's in the papers."

"Can't yer! If yer don't it's because yer don't want ter. I believe yer a bleed'n' Fritz yerself, always stickin' up fer the bastard. Everythink what's in the papers is true—the Government wouldn't allow it if it wasn't! That's got yer, ain't it?"

"Yer want ter look at it a bit more broad-minded. Course 'e makes mistakes sometimes like anybody else—'ow do 'e know it's a C.C.S.—'e can't see no Red Crorss at night?"

"Mistakes be blowed—'e knows what's what, you take my word for it . . . "

We gathered idly round the disputants, glad of a distraction that would help to pass the time. A third person joined in the argument:

"If 'e bombs 'orspitals an' C.C.S.'s it's our own bloody fault. Look at our C.C.S. 'ere. There's a ordnance park and a R.E. dump up the road. There's a railway in front an' a sidin' where troops is always detrainin'. Then there's a gas dump over yonder. An' if we're bloody fools an' leave the lights on at night, 'ow can 'e tell what's what when everything's mixed up together? Why the bloody 'ell don't they put C.C.S.'s away from dumps an' railways? Why don't they stick 'em right in the fields somewhere? I bet we'll cop it one o' these nights, an' serve us right too."

German aeroplanes had passed overhead almost every

clear windless night, but the buzz of propellers, that often went on for hours, and the dull boom of bombs exploding far away had never caused anything more than slight uneasiness and apprehension.

One night, after we had been at the C.C.S. for about a month, we heard the uproar of a distant air-raid. Early the next morning a number of motor-ambulances arrived with their loads of wounded men. A camp, a mile or two from the station, had been bombed and fifty men had been killed and many more wounded. One of the "cases" brought into the theatre had been hit on the forehead. The bomb-fragment had not penetrated the skull, but had passed along its surface. The scalp hung over the forehead loosely like an enormous flap, the red, jagged edge nearly touching the eyebrows. Since then I thought of this man every time there was an air-raid.

The event increased our uneasiness. After each "bombing-stunt" we thought: "We were lucky this time—it will be our turn next though." Moreover, we began to realize our helplessness. We were compelled to remain in our tents during a raid and there was no possibility of taking shelter. We could have put on our steel helmets—they would at least have afforded some head protection, but hardly any of us had the courage to do anything that might be regarded by the others as a sign of fear.

The discussion about the bombing of hospitals had made us all think of air-raids. We had nearly finished our day's work when we noticed a few clouds on the horizon. We felt relieved. Perhaps the sky would be overcast and we would have an undisturbed night.

"I can't stick night raids," said one of our number. "They don't put my wind up a bit, but they interfere with my sleep and make me feel tired in the mornings."

A man who had been in the war from the beginning answered:

"I can see you haven't been out here long, and have

never been in a proper raid. I'll never forget the last time we were bombed. We were out on rest about fifteen miles behind the line. Fritz came over and I had the wind up so badly that I left the tent to go into the open fields. (I'd had a taste of it before, you know, and that makes all the difference.) Then he bombed us before I knew where I was. I ran for my life. There was a hell of a crash behind me and a bit caught me in the shoulder and knocked me down. When it was all over I got up and went back, although my shoulder hurt like anything. A lot of our fellows were running about and shouting. Where my tent used to be, there was a big bomb-hole and my mates were lying dead all round—fourteen of them. I didn't recognize most of them, they were so smashed up. Fritz had dropped one right on the tent. I reckon I was lucky to get off with a Blighty! I was in hospital six weeks and then I got ten days' sick leave in London. Fritz came over one night—Christ, I didn't half have the wind up! We were sitting in the kitchen, mother and father didn't seem to mind much—they didn't know what it meant. Fritz had never dropped any our way before. I never heard such a barrage, at least not for aeroplanes. It wasn't so bad as out here all the same—you could take shelter, anyhow. Air-raids are bloody awful things, they put my wind up much more than shell-fire."

We finished our work as the sun was setting. The clouds on the horizon had vanished. One by one the stars came out. It was " an ideal night for a raid."

Soon after dark a man was brought into the station with a crushed knee. Immediate operation was necessary. He was carried into the theatre and laid on to one of the tables. He received an anæsthetic and became unconscious. With his scalpel the surgeon made a deep cut in the knee-joint and searched the cavity with his finger. There was a Sister standing by. Also an orderly who had won the Military Medal for bravery in an air-raid some months

before. Suddenly there was an outburst of anti-aircraft firing and a tumultuous whistling of shells overhead. It lasted for several seconds and then with a deafening, reverberating thunder-clap that shook the entire theatre, the first bomb fell. Before our ears had ceased drumming another bomb exploded and then another. The orderly, who had held his hands in front of his face, now gave way to fear. He darted madly to and fro and then scuttled beneath a table. The Sister, who had remained quite calm, said in an amused voice: "Pull yourself together, it's all over now." The orderly got up trembling, his face very white. The surgeon had not moved away. He had just grasped the edge of the table tightly and had bent his head forward, while his muscles seemed stiff with a violent but successful effort at self-control. The anæsthetist, too, had remained on his stool, but was leaning right over his patient. I had been conscious of a powerful impulse to duck down, but I grasped the table and gave way to the impulse so far as to lean slightly forward. This compromise saved me from any violent expression of fear. The Sister was the only one of us who showed no sign of fear at all.

The surgeon went on with his work and extracted several fragments of bone from the injured limb. A few seconds passed and suddenly the electric light went out in accordance with the orders that decreed that all lights should be extinguished on the approach of hostile aeroplanes. The surgeon cursed loudly and the Sister fetched an electric torch which she held over the knee. The operation continued, but it was not long before anti-aircraft fire broke out once more. Then there was a weird bustling, rushing sound, followed by a roar that again shook the theatre and rattled the windows. Six explosions followed in rapid succession. This time the orderly controlled himself, for he knew the Sister was watching. Nevertheless, his knees trembled violently. The Sister held the torch steadily and the surgeon paused for a

moment and went on with the operation as soon as all was quiet.

In a few minutes it was finished. The wound was dressed and bandaged and the patient carried away.

I stepped out into the clear night. The sky was thronged with glittering stars. Everything seemed strangely peaceful. I walked round the station, trying to find out where the bombs had fallen, but nobody knew. I went to the marquee and found Private Trotter sitting there, breathless and white. The neighbouring C.C.S. a few hundred yards away had been hit. A Sister and an orderly had been killed and several patients wounded.

"It didn't 'alf put me wind up," said Trotter, excitedly. "When the first'n drops I lays down flat on the duck-boards and one bursts just aside o' me an' smothers me with earth. Then another'n bursts an' I 'ears a man 'oller out—krikey, 'e didn't 'alf scream. I gets up and another'n bursts, so I flops down agin, but it didn't come so near that time. I waits a bit an' then I gets up an' goes to see what they done. I couldn't see nothin' at first, but I sees some fellers runnin' about wi' lights. There was a noise in one o' the wards, so I goes in. A bomb must 'a' burst on the roof—there was a big 'ole in the canvas. The bed underneath was all twisted an' torn, but there wasn't nobody in it. There was some wounded lyin' in beds at the fur end of the ward, an' one of 'em was cryin' somethin' chronic. Then someone brings a light an' I sees an orderly lyin' by the side o' the bed with a big 'ole in 'is face an' the blood pourin' out. I goes roun' to the other side—gorblimy—an' there I sees the Sister lyin' on the floor with 'er 'ead blown clean off—I dunno where it was blown to, I couldn't see it nowhere. Krikey, it wasn't 'alf a sight to see 'er body without a 'ead lyin' in a pool o' blood. It made me feel sick, so I ran orf an' came 'ere."

Private Trotter was trembling in every limb. He was

the pluckiest man I ever knew and capable of any piece of foolhardy daring. But this time he was near a nervous breakdown.

We went to bed full of anxiety. For a long while we lay awake, straining our ears to catch the sound of firing or the drone of German propellers. But no sound broke the stillness of the night, and one by one we dropped off to sleep.

The next morning was clear and sunny. The sky remained blue all day. Not a cloud could be seen. "Our turn next"—that was the thought in everybody's mind.

The evening was starlit once again. As we lay on the floor of the marquee, wrapped up in our blankets, we heard the sound of bombing and firing in the distance.

Clear days and clear nights followed each other. Sometimes a train would stop in front of the C.C.S., hissing and puffing, and throwing up a great shaft of light. We would curse it, fearing that it would attract German raiders.

If only the fine weather would come to an end! Give us wind and rain so that we could lie in bed without being oppressed by anxiety! But the sun continued to shine and the stars to glitter.

The disaster that had befallen the adjoining C.C.S., which had been brilliantly lit up during the raid, had acted as a warning example to us. At nightfall the windows of the theatre were screened with blankets and no lights were allowed to show in the wards or on the duckboards.

If only the trains would halt somewhere else at nighttime!

One day a number of Flemish peasants began to collect hop-refuse in the surrounding fields. They made three great heaps of it and set fire to them. In the evening the heaps were burning brightly, but no one took any notice.

The canteen was crowded. All the benches were occupied and men who were unable to find seats stood around in groups. There was noisy conversation and singing and

shouting. Nearly everyone was drinking beer. Those who sat at the tables were playing cards. The air was thick with tobacco-smoke. Two or three candles were burning on every table. And all at once, without any warning, the thunder was loosened upon us. There was an ear-splitting roar and in a moment candles were swept away, benches and tables overturned, and the whole crowd of men was down on the floor, trembling and panic-stricken. Another detonation, and then another, shaking the ground and reverberating, and sending up showers of stones and loose earth that came rattling down on to the canteen-roof, while the huddled, sprawling mass of human bodies shook and squirmed with terror. The droning of propellers could be plainly heard, then it grew weaker and weaker, until it passed away. One by one the men got up. Someone lit a candle. Tables, benches, and prostrate bodies had been thrown into confusion. Cards and coins and overturned beer-mugs littered the floor. The smell of spilt beer mingled with the smell of stale tobacco. A few of us stepped out into the open air. We inhaled a pungent, sulphurous stench. We were sure our camp had been bombed this time and were fearful lest any of our friends had been hit. We walked past the Church tent—it was full of rents and holes. And just beyond it was a huge pit with fresh soil heaped up in a ring around it. Loose earth and stones and sods were scattered everywhere. Then we saw something move in the darkness—it was a man on all fours, dragging himself painfully along and uttering a groan with every breath. Two bearers arrived with a stretcher. They put it down by his side and helped him on to it. Then they picked it up and disappeared in the gloom. We had hardly walked a few yards further when we saw a light approaching us. We went towards it. A man was staggering slowly along and leaning on the shoulder of a comrade who was carrying a lantern. He supported his right elbow with his left hand, down the

back of which two thin streams of blood were winding. His left sleeve was darkly stained and the blood was dripping from it. His face was very pale and the corners of his mouth were slightly turned down.

Suddenly the broad white beam of a searchlight swung across the darkness. For a time it seemed to paw the sky in a hesitating fashion and then it remained fixed on one spot.

"There 'e is! There 'e is!" someone shouted in an excited voice.

In the white track was a brilliant silver object travelling along at a great speed. A number of anti-aircraft guns opened fire simultaneously, and all around the shining fugitive innumerable stars of pale, liquid gold flashed out and melted away again.

"I bet they're puttin' 'is bloody wind up! Rotten bastard, bombin' a lot o' wounded! If I get 'old of a Fritz up the line, I'll murder 'im. Yer won't catch me takin' no more pris'ners, I tell yer."

A flashing star suddenly seemed to envelop the aeroplane.

"Got 'im that time—bloody good shot—'e's comin' down, look, look, 'e's comin' down! Look, 'e's all in flames!"

But the aeroplane sped on, growing smaller and smaller. Then the white beam swung back and was extinguished, while the guns ceased firing.

"Fine lot o' gunners we got—couldn't 'it a Zep 'alf a yard orf! They ain't worth the grub they get!"

We returned to our marquee and sat down on our kits. My friend Private Black came in after us, smiling ruefully. I asked him what was the matter.

"I was playing the piano in the Sergeants' Mess when the first one dropped. We all jumped up together and rushed out. Then the second one burst and I lost my head and didn't know where I was going. I darted to and fro, tripping over tent-ropes and dashing up against revet-

ments. I never had the wind up so much in all my life. I couldn't get my breath, there was a kind of weight on my stomach and a tightness round my chest and throat, and my knees kept on giving way all the time. The third one burst and I fell down and crawled under some ropes and lay flat against some sand-bags, trembling all over and feeling as though I was going to choke. I waited for a long time, but nothing happened, so I got up and looked round. Lucky escape for us! There's a terrific hole by the Red Cross and another one behind the bath-house. The third's in the next field. Only two men hit. O'Neil's got it in the elbow—he's all right for Blighty. Poor old Hartog's badly hurt—a frightful gash in the thigh with the piece still in it. I hope he won't have to lose his leg. Christ, I'm glad it's all over—I wouldn't like to go through that again."

There was silence for a while, but soon the silence was broken by the distant muttering of anti-aircraft fire.

"Jesus Christ Almighty—'e's comin' again—O God, why can't 'e leave us alone."

We stood outside the marquee and anxiously watched the horizon. We heard a faint humming noise. It grew louder and louder until it became a deep, droning buzz that rose and fell in regular pulsation. Then boom—boom—boom—three times the sullen roar of distant explosions sounded. Then there came the familiar rushing, whistling noise of a descending bomb. We flung ourselves down in the wet grass. I felt every muscle in my body contract as though I were trying to make myself as small as a pin point in expectation of the terrible moment. There was a dull thud close by and I felt the earth vibrate. The bomb had fallen a few yards away, but had merely buried itself in the earth without exploding.

There was no anti-aircraft fire, but the droning noise continued loudly, rising and falling. Private Trotter, who was lying beside me, was drawing his breath in sharply

between his lips. Our fear of impending disaster was prolonged intolerably. The droning propeller seemed to be directly above us. I tried to analyse my feelings. If one finger is held close to the middle of the forehead a curious sensation of strain seems to gather in that spot. That was precisely the sensation I had at the back of my head and neck, only with far greater intensity. It was the concentrated, agonizing consciousness of the swift descent of a huge iron mass that will strike the base of the head and blow the whole body to pieces. In the region of the solar-plexus I had a feeling of oppression such as one often has before an examination, before jumping into an icy river, before opening a letter that may contain bad news. I also breathed more heavily than usual. I made no attempt to master these sensations. It occurred to me that fear is merely a physical reaction that cannot be avoided. If a man reacts so violently that he is overcome and rushes about as though he were demented, it is no more his fault than if he shivers with cold. A man can stop shivering by an effort of the will, but only to a certain extent. And no effort of the will can prevent him from feeling cold. In the same way, no effort of the will can prevent him from feeling fear, and only to a limited extent can the will control the outward manifestations of fear. Nevertheless, some distraction may enable a man to forget his fear for a while, just as it may enable him to forget the cold. I was so intent upon self-analysis that I lost consciousness of everything except my mental concentration, even of those sensations I was trying to analyse, for the very act of analysis was destroying them. As they grew weaker, the effort of my will increased. It became so great that I grew conscious of great mental tension and at the same time I realized that my fear had vanished altogether. For a brief space I had a sensation of vacuity, as though I could neither think nor feel. Then my mental effort suddenly collapsed, I once more became aware of

the droning overhead, and with a rush my former fears were upon me again. I pressed myself flat to earth. I heard the descent of a bomb. I trembled and tried to shrink to nothing. There was a deafening thunder-clap and the ground shook. A quantity of loose earth came down upon us. Another bomb descended—every muscle in my body tightened and I stopped breathing altogether. But the explosion that followed was fainter than the last. Then there was another, still further off. All my muscles gradually relaxed and a delicious feeling of relief pervaded my whole being. The buzzing noise became more and more feeble. I got up and walked back to the marquee, trembling and weak at the knees. The others followed.

Most of us went to bed, but a few continued to pace up and down in great agitation. One man picked up his blankets in a bundle and went off in order to sleep in the open fields, far away from the camp.

An hour had hardly passed before distant anti-aircraft fire broke out again. Anxiety began to renew its tortures. We heard the dull, sullen roar of bombs exploding at intervals. Then fourteen burst in rapid succession as though a gigantic ball of solid iron had bounced fourteen times with thundering reverberations on a resonant surface. But the sound of firing died down and soon all was quiet. And then sleep came upon us and our troubles were over for a time.

The next morning was windless and clear. All day we kept looking at the sky, but not a cloud was to be seen.

The evening approached, darkness fell, and the stars shone. "Lights Out" was sounded and we extinguished our candles. None of us said a word, but everybody knew what everybody else was thinking of. And soon we heard the familiar buzz. At first it only came from one propeller, but others arrived and the sound multiplied and increased in volume, and at the same time it rose and fell in irregular gusts and regular pulsations. Anti-aircraft

firing burst out suddenly and for a few minutes there was a blending of whining, whistling, rushing sounds overhead punctuated by faint reports. The firing ceased, but the droning noises continued louder than ever. The German aeroplanes seemed to be above us like a swarm of angry wasps, and above us they seemed to remain, hovering and circling. We awaited the downward rush and the deafening thunder-clap that would destroy us all. One man was groaning loudly. Another shivered. I could hear the chattering of many teeth. My neighbour trembled violently and cowered beneath his blankets. But his fear grew so strong that he could not bear it any longer. He got up and said in a strained voice, trying to appear calm, "I'm goin' to 'ave a look at 'em." He ran out of the marquee and disappeared. I found my powers of resistance ebbing. I was unable to control my imagination. I saw my comrades and myself blown to pieces. I saw the clerk in the office of the C.C.S. write out the death-intimations on a buff slip and filling in a form. I saw a telegraph boy taking the telegram to my home. He stopped on the way in order to talk to a friend. Then he whistled and threw a stone at a dog. He sauntered through the garden gate and knocked at the front door. The door opened . . . but I could not face the rest, and with a tremendous mental impulse I turned my mind away to other things. But my terrible thoughts lay in wait for me like tigers ready to rush upon me as soon as my will relaxed its efforts. I tried to compromise, and I imagined myself killed and invented all the details of a post-mortem examination and burial. I found some relief in these imaginings, but soon that implacable telegram claimed my attention once more and drew me on to what I dared not face. I sought distraction by muttering some verses of poetry to myself. They had no meaning to me, they were just empty sound and their rhythm had a hideous pulsation like that other pulsation overhead:

> " He above the rest
> In shape and gesture proudly eminent
> Stood like a tower . . . "

and so on, line after line. The dreariness of the verses grew so intense as to be almost intolerable. At the same time I was dimly conscious of the fact that at one time I thought this passage beautiful. But the beat of the blank verse carried me on. Sometimes it seemed to blend with the buzzing of those angry wasps above and sometimes the two rhythms would vie with each other for speed, so that they hurried along each alternately ahead of the other. I came to a line where my memory failed me. I faltered for a moment, but the droning sound seemed to grow into an enormous roar, and I leapt back to the beginning:

> " He above the rest . . . "

and then on and on a second time until my head throbbed with the double pulsation.

Suddenly a man who had been lying on the far side of the marquee got up and said:

" I've had enough of this, I'm going to sleep in a ditch."

He went off. The wasps were still buzzing, but the interruption had broken the spell. I felt a sense of relief. I became conscious of intense weariness and felt ashamed of my fears. I cursed the German aeroplanes and thought, " Let them do their worst, I don't care." I made up my mind to go to sleep and resolutely buried my face in my pillow. Then it occurred to me that I would never be able to enjoy *Paradise Lost* again, and I was half-amused and agreeably distracted by the trivial thought.

But the wasps were still buzzing. Another man began to groan loudly:

" Gawd—this is bloody awful—why the bloody 'ell can't they leave us alone!"

Thereupon his neighbour tried to create an impression by

appearing calm and philosophical. He said in a strained, breaking voice:

"Think of all the waste in life and treasure this frightful war involves. Think of the moral degradation. Think of the widows and orphans. Think of the . . . " He was unequal to the effort and his voice trailed away and then seemed to catch in his throat. But he recovered and with a kind of gasp he squeezed out a few more words: "Bill, forgive me for insulting you to-day—I didn't mean it, Bill. Forget it, Bill, forget it! If you get killed without forgiving me, my conscience will always torture . . . "

"For Christ's sake shut up, yer bleed'n' 'ypocrite," interrupted the gruff voice of "Bill" somewhere out of the darkness. "Yer always bleed'n' well preachin'—it's bad enough 'avin' Fritz over us without you bloody well rubbin' it in. If yer don't shut yer mouth, I'll come over an' shut it for yer, 'struth I will."

The philosopher said no more, but another voice made itself heard, that of a good-natured, elderly bachelor, who said with melancholy resignation:

"It's jolly hard, all the same, to be knocked out like this. You're so helpless—no dug-outs, no shelters anywhere . . . "

"It's doubly hard when you're married," said another. "I haven't got the wind up about myself at all, but I can't help thinking about my wife. . . . They're going away now, thank the Lord. You never know when they won't be coming back though—that's just the worst of it."

The noise of the propellers was indeed dying away.

Several voices muttered "Thank God," but one man's teeth were still chattering as though he was so absorbed by his own fear that he had not noticed the disappearance of its cause. Soon there was complete silence and one by one we fell asleep.

Another clear day and another clear night. We lay awake listening anxiously to the bursting of bombs and

the muttering of anti-aircraft fire. But we went to sleep in the end and felt drowsy all the following day—a clear day. Casualties came in from a camp that had been bombed overnight, and we saw shattered limbs, smashed heads, and lacerated flesh. Several of our men were looking pale through lack of sleep and had dark rings round their eyes.

Another clear night. The agonizing vigil began again, but I was so weary that I went to sleep a few minutes after lights out. Sullen thunders mingled with my dreams and did not wake me up.

Another clear day. Would the fine weather never end? Late in the afternoon, however, a few clouds collected on the horizon. In the evening the entire sky was overcast and not a star was to be seen. And as we went to bed we heard the rain swishing down upon the canvas roof. The unspeakable joy we all felt at the prospect of an untroubled night!

"Bloody fine, this rain: we'll get some proper sleep now, thank God. I never had the wind up so much in all my life, and I've been out here since '15 and in some pretty hot places too."

"I reckon the longer yer out 'ere the windier yer get. I joined up in '14 like a bloody fool. At first I didn't care a damn for anything. Then I was wounded on the Somme an' sent across to Blighty. I dreaded comin' back agin. I only 'ad a little wound in me 'and, an' I used ter plug it wi' dubbin' an' boot-polish ter keep it raw. It didn't 'alf 'urt, but it gave me a extra week or two in 'orspittle. I 'ad to go in the end though—the M.O. didn't 'alf give me a tellin' orf. Jesus Christ, didn't I 'ave the wind up when we went up the line! An' now I'm scared at the slightest sound, an' I sometimes wake up out o' me sleep shiverin' all over. When I was on leave a motor-car backfired in the street—it didn't 'alf make me jump; me mate 'oo was with me said I looked as white as a sheet. The

longer yer out 'ere the worse yer get—it's yer nerves, yer know, they can't stand it. In the line it's always the new men what's the most reliable. . . . "

"That's a bloody fact. When we first come out, I thought all the Belgian civvies a lot o' bloody cowards takin' cover whenever Fritz came over. *We* used to stand an' look at 'im. They wasn't cowards, it was us who was bloody fools. They knew summat about it, we didn't. All the same, I know one or two old reg'lars 'oo was in it from the first an' never 'ad the wind up any time—there's not many like that though, generally it's the old soldiers what's the worst o' the lot for wanglin' out o' risky jobs."

"Napoleon was right," observed a small, red-haired lance-corporal, whose remarks generally had a sardonic touch, "when he said the worse the man the better the soldier. It's only people who have no imagination and no intelligence who are courageous in modern war. Nobody with any sense would expose himself unnecessarily and rush a machine-gun position or do the sort of thing they give you a V.C. for. Of course, there are a few cases where it's deserved, and it isn't always the one who deserves it that gets it. I'm quite certain the refined, sensitive, imaginative kind of man is no good as a soldier. He may be able to control himself better than the others at first—educated people are used to self-control—but in the long run his nerves will give way sooner. Moral courage is a thing I admire more than anything, but there's no use for it in the army, in fact it's worse than useless in the army. The man who's too servile to be capable of feeling humiliation and too stupid to understand what danger is—that's the man who makes a good, steady soldier. We've seen men so horribly smashed up by bombs that it makes you sick to look at them, and then people expect us not to be afraid of air-raids. The civvies haven't seen that sort of thing, so they may well show plenty of pluck, although I believe

there are a good many with enough imagination to have the wind up when there's an air-raid on."

"Bloody true. You know, if there was a lot o' civvies an' a lot of Tommies in a Blighty air-raid, I reckon the civvies'd show more pluck than the Tommies. My mate who's workin' on munitions told me 'e saw 'underds o' soldiers rushin' to take shelter in the last raid on London. O' course there was crowds o' civvies doin' the same, but 'e says there was a lot what didn't seem to care a damn. The other day we 'ad a bloody parson spoutin' to us—'e said war brings out a man's pluck an' makes an 'ero of 'im. I reckon that's all bloody tosh! War makes cowards of yer, that's the 'ole truth o' the matter, I don't care what yer say. I didn't know what fear was afore I joined the army. I know now, you bet! I'm a bloody coward now —I don't mind admittin' it. There's things I used ter do what I wouldn't dare do now. When we go up the line I'm in a blue funk from the time I 'ears the first shell burst to the time we goes over the top. An' when we goes over I forgets everythink an' don't know what I'm doin'. P'raps I'll get a V.C. some day wi'out knowin' what I done ter get it. And I'm not the only one like that. Anyone 'oo's bin out 'ere a few months an' says 'e ain't windy up the line's a bloody liar, there now . . . "

"By the way," I interrupted, "how did that orderly who works in the theatre get his Military Medal—he had the wind up more than any of us the other night?"

"I know whom you mean," answered a private of the R.A.M.C. "He got it that bombing-stunt a few months ago. It was bloody awful too—the worst thing I've ever been in. I was standing next to him when the first one exploded. He flopped down and lay flat on the ground, but I rushed away into the fields with a lot of others. When it was all over we went back and heard the wounded crying out in a way that was dreadful to hear. This fellow was still lying on the ground by the duckboards, trembling

all over and paralysed with fear. We went to help the wounded, but he was in such a state that he could not come with us, so we left him behind. There was an inquiry afterwards and *we* got into a frightful row for running away. He got the M.M. for sticking to his post!"

VII

THE GERMAN PUSH

"What madness there is in this arithmetic that counts men by the millions like grains of corn in a bushel . . . A newspaper has just written about an encounter with the enemy: 'Our losses were insignificant, one dead and five wounded.' It would be interesting to know for whom these losses are insignificant? For the one who was killed? . . . If he were to rise from his grave, would he think the loss 'insignificant'? If only he could think of everything from the very beginning, of his childhood, his family, his beloved wife, and how he went to the war and how, seized by the most conflicting thoughts and emotions, he felt afraid, and how it all ended in death and horror . . . But they try to convince us that 'our losses are insignificant.' Think of it, godless writer! Go to your master the Devil with your clever arithmetic . . . How this man revolts me—may the Devil take him!"

(ANDREYEFF.)

THROUGHOUT the winter one question above all others was discussed by the few who took an interest in the war: "What were the Germans going to do?" It was clear that they had been able to withdraw many divisions from their Eastern Front. Would they be numerically equal or superior to the Allies on the Western Front?

On the whole we were of opinion that, whatever happened, our positions would prove impregnable, although we observed with some astonishment that there were no extensive trench systems or fortified places behind our lines. I doubted whether the Germans would even attempt to break through—I thought they would merely hold the Western Front and throw the Allies out of Macedonia, Palestine, and Mesopotamia.

The winter was over and the fine weather had set in. For several months we had been working in a wood-yard and saw-mills. Our lives had become unspeakably monotonous, but the coming of warm days banished much of our dreariness. The hazy blue sky was an object of real delight. I often contrived to slip away from my work and lean idly against a wall in the mild sunshine. At times I was so filled with the sense of physical well-being, and so penetrated by the sensuous enjoyment of warmth and colour, that I even forgot the war.

At the bottom of the wood-yard was a little stream, and on the far bank clusters of oxlips were in bloom. Here we would lie down during the midday interval and surrender to the charm of the spring weather. It seemed unnatural and almost uncanny that we should be happy, but there were moments when we felt something very much like happiness. Moreover, it was rumoured that leave was going to start. How glorious it would be to spend a sunny May or June in England!

Once a fortnight we paraded for our pay outside one of the bigger sheds of the yard. As a rule, I was filled with impatience and irritation at having to wait in a long queue and move forward step by step, but now it had become pleasant to tarry in the sunshine. One day, when we were lined up between two large huts, a deep Yellow Brimstone butterfly came floating idly past. It gave me inexpressible delight, a delight tempered by sadness and a longing for better times. I drew my pay and saluted perfunctorily,

being unable and unwilling to think of anything but the beauty of the sky, the sun, and the wonderful insect.

I held my three ten-franc notes in my hand and thought: "I *will* enjoy this lovely day to the full. When we get back to camp I will do without the repulsive army fare, I will dine at the St. Martin and buy a bottle of the best French wine, even if it costs me twenty francs. And then I'll walk to the little wood on the hill-slope and there I'll lie all the evening and dream or read a book."

The whistle sounded. It was time to go back to work. But I cursed the work and decided to take the small risk and remain idle for an hour or two. I went to an outlying part of the yard and sat down on a patch of long grass and leant back against a shed. The air was hot and several bees flew by. Their buzzing reminded me of summer holidays spent in southern France before the war. I thought of vineyards and orchards, of skies intensely blue, of scorching sunshine, of the tumultuous chirping of cicadas and grasshoppers, and then of the tepid nights crowded with glittering stars and hushed except for the piping of tree-frogs.

Before the war—before the war—I repeated the words to myself. They conveyed a sense of immeasurable remoteness, of something gone and lost for ever. But I *wouldn't* think about it. I *would* enjoy the present. But the calm waters of happiness had been ruffled and it was beyond my power to restore their tranquillity. I began to think of many things, of the war itself, of the possible offensive, and soon the fretful rebellious discontent, that obsessed all those of us who had not lost their souls, began to reassert itself.

But why not desert? Why not escape to the south of France? Why not enjoy a week, a fortnight, a month of freedom? I would be caught in the end—I would be punished. I would receive Number 1 Field Punishment, and I would be tied to a wheel or post, but nevertheless

it would be worth it! I imagined myself slipping out of camp at night and walking until dawn. Then I would sleep in some wood or copse and then walk on again, calling at remote farms to buy bread and eggs and milk. I would reach the little village, the main street winding between white houses and flooded with brilliant moonlight. I would climb the wall and drop into the familiar garden and await the morning. Then I would knock at the door and I would be welcomed by an old peasant woman, and she would ask: "Tu viens en perme?" How could I answer that question? It worried me, I felt it was spoiling my dream. But I dreamt on and at the same time battled against increasing depression. Even a few days of freedom would be a break, a change from routine. And would the little village be the same as when I saw it last? No, it would be different, it would be at war. I might escape from the army, but I could never escape from the war. My dream had vanished.

But I *would* make the best of things. I *would* enjoy the immediate present—was I not losing hours of sheer pleasure by harbouring these thoughts and ignoring the beauty of the day?

Some distance ahead was a farm of the usual Flemish type—a thatched roof, whitewashed walls, and green shutters. Near by was a little pond with willows growing round it. In the field beyond, a cow was grazing peacefully. The sky seemed a deeper blue through the willow-branches. The tender green of the grass was wonderfully refreshing to the eyes. The cow had a beautiful coat of glossy brown that shone in the sunlight. I abandoned myself to the charm of the little idyll that was spread out before me and forgot the war once again.

And then all at once a gigantic, plume-shaped, sepia coloured mass rose towering out of the ground. There was a rending, deafening, double thunder-clap that seemed to split my head. For a moment I was dazed and my ears

sang. Then I looked up—the black mass was thinning and collapsing. The cow had disappeared.

I walked into the yard full of rage and bitterness. All the men had left the sheds and were flocking into the road. Some were strolling along in leisurely fashion, some were walking with hurried steps, some were running, some were laughing and talking, some looked startled, some looked anxious, and some were very pale.

We crossed the road and the railway. Then, traversing several fields, we came to a halt and waited. We waited for nearly an hour, but nothing happened and we gradually straggled back to the yard.

Some of us walked to the spot where the shell had burst. There was a huge hole, edged by a ring of heaped-up earth, and loose mould and grassy sods lay scattered all round. Here and there lay big lumps of bleeding flesh. The cow had been blown to bits. The larger pieces had already been collected by the farmer, who had covered them with a tarpaulin sheet from which a hoof protruded.

The next day, at about the same hour, the dark cloud again rose from the ground and the double explosion followed. We again abandoned the yard and waited in the field. But this time there were several further shell-bursts. No dull boom in the distance followed by a long-drawn whine, but only the earth and smoke thrown darkly up and then the deafening double detonation.

The next day more shells came over, and the next day also.

The big holes with their earthen rims began to dot the fields in many places. No damage of " military importance " had been done. Not even a soldier had been killed, but only an inoffensive cow.

At night the sky was alive with the whirr of propellers, and shells whistled overhead and burst a long way off.

One Sunday, toward the end of March, when we had a half-holiday, I walked up the hill that was crowned by a

large monastery and sat down on the slope by a group of sallows. They were in full bloom. A swarm of bees and flies were buzzing round. Peacock and Tortoiseshell butterflies were flitting to and fro. The sunlight filtered down through the bluish haze. I rested and let an hour or two slip by. Then I got up and crossed a little brook and strolled along a narrow path that wound its way through a copse. The ground was starred with wood-anemones, oxlips, violets, cuckoo-flowers, and in damp places with green-golden saxifrage. I came to a small cottage that had pots of flowers in every window. I sat down while a hospitable old woman made coffee and chattered volubly in Flemish. Another soldier arrived soon after. Had I heard the news? The Germans had broken through on the Somme and had captured Bapaume. I asked him if he had seen it in print. No, he had heard it from an A.S.C. driver. He hoped it wasn't true, but he feared it was.

I returned to camp full of suppressed excitement.

Something was wrong. The shelling of the back-areas continued; air-raids became more and more frequent. These were ominous signs.

Then the newspapers arrived. The Somme front had collapsed. The Fifth Army was in full retreat. The Germans had taken Bapaume and Peronne and were threatening Amiens.

. . . . . .

Had I been living in Germany during the war I would have felt a powerful tendency to defend the cause of the Allies, to excuse their misdeeds, to overrate their ability, while being highly critical and censorious of every German shortcoming.

A nation at war is a mob whose very blatancy, injustice and cruelty drive one to hatred and opposition. The

enemy mob seems less detestable because it is out of sight and one thinks almost involuntarily: "It cannot be as bad as our own."

I could not bear to hear a victory joyfully announced. The jubilation and the self-glorification of the crowd filled me with loathing, and I could only think of the intensified slaughter and misery that are the price of every victory. They who pay the price, they alone have the right to rejoice, but they do not rejoice. The German mob revealed its depravity when it hung out flags in the streets to celebrate the first German victories. And, when the first battle of Cambrai was won, London jeered at the bereaved and mocked the dead by ringing the joy-bells.

Every genuine patriot is called a traitor in his own country. But patriotism, however genuine, is a thing that must be surmounted. There is only one good that war can bring to a nation—defeat. A patriot, loving his own country, would therefore wish his country defeat in war. But he who has surmounted his patriotism and has attained complete impartiality would not selfishly claim the only benefit of war entirely for his own country, but would desire all to share it alike, and would therefore wish defeat for every warring nation.

If a horde of British and a horde of German soldiers engage in mutual butchery, and if the maimed, broken remnants of the British horde have just enough order left to drive back the remnants of the German horde, leaving innumerable dead and wounded and for ever darkening the lives of countless friends and wives—in other words, if the British army wins what our infamous Press would call a "glorious victory"—then all that is evil in the life of the nation is encouraged and justified. It is then that the diplomatists who lied and schemed to bring on the monstrous event, that all the politicians who exploit and foster the nation's madness and misery to enhance their own reputations, that those who batten on the slaughter, and

that those who glorify the carnage at a safe distance and fight the enemy with their lying tongues, are justified. They all are justified. But if, instead of victory, there is defeat, then they tremble lest they should be disgraced and lose their places, lest they should be victims of a disillusioned people's anger, lest they should forfeit their plunder, lest they should be called to account for the lies with which they fooled the masses. Defeat is the defeat of evil, victory is the victory of evil.

. . . . . .

A second batch of papers arrived. The German advance was continuing. The British reverse was becoming catastrophic. At first I felt a kind of grimness, and then I was thrilled by the thought that perhaps the end of the war might be near. We might not have a good peace, but peace of any kind was preferable to war. The mendacious Press talked much about a "dishonourable peace," as though any peace could be as dishonourable as a prolonged war.

But the immediate reality became too overwhelming. Grey multitudes were sweeping khaki multitudes before them. High-explosives, shrapnel, grenades, bombs, bullets were rending, piercing, and shattering the living flesh and muscle and bone. Towns and villages were being turned into heaps of brick and wreckage. Hordes of old men, women, and children were thronging the roads, and fleeing from approaching disaster.

We went to work as usual although we worked less than usual, for we now had something to talk about. Would the Germans reach the coast? If they did, then the northern armies would be cut off and destroyed. A general retreat from our front might be ordered at any moment. We stood in groups and discussed these problems hour by hour.

One day we were returning from work and passing through the village. A crowd of civilians was standing round the window of the Mairie, where a written notice was exposed. An old woman dressed in black was moaning, "Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, mon Dieu." The '19, '20, and '21 classes had been called up.

Then the German advance came to an end. A French army had arrived and saved the situation. The shelling of the back areas had ceased. The danger was over for a time.

Had the Germans assembled all their strength for one supreme attempt at breaking through the Western Front? Or was it only the beginning of a whole series of operations?

One morning, as we woke up, we heard the roar and rumble of a bombardment. We did not take much notice of it, for we had heard the sound so often.

We paraded, and marched off to work. The continuous roar gradually gave place to irregular, though frequent, outbursts of firing along the entire front.

The next day the sound seemed to have come nearer. Rumours began to circulate—it was said that Armentières had fallen, that the Portuguese had been annihilated at Merville, that the British had counter-attacked and taken Lille.

Rations, newspapers and letters were delayed. Large bodies of troops passed through the village. We got no definite or official news, and nobody had any clear notion of what was happening.

But the sound of firing grew louder and louder and our anxiety deepened. There could no longer be any doubt about it—the Germans were advancing on our front.

The sickening certainty transcended all other considerations. A few miles from us thousands were being slaughtered. I ceased to ponder the problems of failure and success. I forgot the politicians and was conscious of

only one despairing wish, that the terrible thing might come to an end. Victory and defeat seemed irrelevant considerations. If only the end would come quickly—nothing else really mattered.

I often wondered what was in the minds of the other men. Many of them looked anxious, but on the whole they were normal in their behaviour. They grumbled and quarrelled much as usual and talked rather more than usual—but so did I, in spite of my intense mental agitation.

The sound of firing grew louder.

We marched to an extensive R.E. park and saw-mill near a railway siding. We had to dismantle the machinery and load everything of any value on to a train. For several hours five of us dragged a huge cylinder and piston along the ground. We toiled and perspired. We made a ramp of heavy wooden beams in front of the train and then we slowly pushed the iron mass into a truck. We went back and, raising a big fly-wheel on its edge and supporting it with a wooden beam under each axle, we rolled it painfully along, swaying from side to side.

Then there came the long-drawn familiar whine, and the black smoke arose behind some trees a hundred yards away and the thunder-clap followed. A jagged piece of steel came whizzing by and lodged in a stack of timber behind us.

We pushed the wheel up the ramp and returned to fetch heavy coils of wire, bundles of picks and shovels, sacks and barrels of nails. Our backs and shoulders ached, our hands and finger-tips were sore.

Another shell came whining over. It burst by a little cottage. Its thunder made our ears sing. The fragments of flying metal made us duck or scatter behind the stacks.

We worked until we almost dropped with sheer fatigue. Iron rods and bars for reinforcing pill-boxes, bags of cement, boxes of tools, parts of machinery, all went on to the

train. Then we entered a big shed, where a number of tar-barrels stood in a row. We rolled them out and placed them by the timber stacks. We laid a pick beside each barrel so that it could be broached, the tar set alight, and the entire park destroyed at a moment's notice.

It was dark when we stopped work. We reached camp after an hour's wearisome marching. We waited in a long queue outside the cook-house. The cooks served out the greasy stew as quickly as they could, but we were so tired and ill-tempered that we shouted abuse at them without reason and without being provoked, and banged our plates and tins. The war, the advance, the slaughter were forgotten. We were conscious of nothing but weariness, stiffness, and petty irritation.

The following day we marched to a ration dump. The wooden cases of rations were piled up in gigantic cubes, so that the entire dump looked like a town of windowless, wooden buildings. We formed one long file that circled slowly past the stacks, each man taking one case on to his shoulder or back and carrying it to the train. And so we circled round and round throughout the monotonous day.

In the evening I did not wait in the dinner queue, but went to the St. Martin. It was kept by an old woman and her two daughters. They were tortured by anxiety: "Les Allemands vont venir ici—de Shermans come heer?" they asked. But I knew no more than they did. I told them, against my own conviction, that the German advance would be held up, but they remained anxious. The uproar of the cannonade was louder than ever. All the windows of the building shook and rattled. The old woman muttered: "'Tis niet goet, 'tis niet goet," and the elder daughter echoed: "Oh, 'tiss no bon, 'tiss no bon."

Two British officers entered. They looked round and saw that private soldiers were sitting at the tables. But the St. Martin was the biggest estaminet in the village and

provided the best wines and coffees, so they stood in the doorway, undecided what to do. They asked one of the girls if there was a restaurant for officers in the neighbourhood. She answered: "No—no restaurant for officeerss—you come heer—privates, zey no hurt you—privates, officeerss, all same."

Encouraged by these assurances, one of the newcomers said to the other:

"Come on, let's sit down here and have a coffee—we needn't stop long."

All the smaller tables were occupied, but there was one long table that stretched across the room and only a few men were sitting at the far end of it. The officers sat down at the near end and ordered coffee. They seemed a little embarrassed at first, but they soon began to talk freely to each other:

"I wonder if there's a war on in these parts—I hear the Huns have made a bit of a push."

"Curse the blighters—they'll mess up my leave, it's due in a week's time."

"Jolly good coffee, this! Here, Marie, bring us another two cups—der coop der caffay—that's right, isn't it?"

"Dat's right," said the girl, "you speak goot French—vous avez tout a fait l'accent parisien."

Suddenly her sister came running into the room, sobbing loudly:

"English soldier come round from Commandant—he tell us Shermans come—ve got to go 'vay at once, ve got to leave everysing—ve go 'vay and English troops steal everysing and shellss come and smash everysing and ve looss everysing."

The civilians of the village had received orders to leave immediately. Through the window we could see groups of people standing in the street and talking together. They were greatly agitated.

The old woman sniffed and wiped her eyes. The elder

daughter was packing a few things in a bundle. One of the officers asked: "What about our coffee?" but she took no notice. Her sister had gone out in search of further information.

She soon returned. Yes, they would all have to leave at once, but, if they liked to take the risk, they could come back to-morrow with a wagon, if they could get one, and fetch their belongings.

They were comforted. They knew where they would be able to get a wagon. They would cart their stock and their household property away on the morrow. They would start another estaminet somewhere. They would suffer loss and inconvenience, but they would not be ruined —their valuable stock of wines would save them from that.

The bundle was made up and they prepared to leave. We paid our bill and went out into the street. Numbers of soldiers were straggling past. They looked wretched and exhausted. Their boots and puttees were caked with mud. They had neither rifles nor packs. Three men were lying up against a garden wall. We asked them for news. They could not tell us much, except that the Germans were still advancing.

"We was at Dickebusch when 'e started slingin' stuff over—gorblimy, 'e don't 'alf wallop yer—umpteen of our mates got bleed'n' well biffed. We cleared out afore it got too 'ot."

Several famished "battle-stragglers" had entered our camp in order to beg for food. They sat round the cook-house and ate in gloomy silence.

In the adjoining field a number of tents had sprung up. Blue figures were moving in and out amongst them. The French had arrived.

The next morning, about breakfast time, the first shell burst near the camp—a short rapid squeal followed by a sharp report. The second shell burst a few minutes after, throwing up earth and smoke. A steel fragment came

sailing over in a wide parabola and struck the foot of a man standing in the breakfast queue. He limped to the first-aid hut, looking very pale. When he got there, he had some difficulty in finding his wound, it was so slight.

We paraded and marched off. Several shells burst in the neighbouring fields. We reached the ration dump and began to load the train. A civilian arrived with the newspapers. Our N.C.O.'s were powerless to stop the general stampede that surged towards the paper-vendor.

The Germans had advanced on a wide front . . . Armentières had fallen. The news was several days old and much might have happened since.

We went back to our work and discussed events. We were bullied and threatened with arrest, but we talked in groups while we carried cases of rations. Would we be involved in the advance? We might even be captured—that would at least be an experience and a change.

In the evening a few of us went to the St. Martin to see if the old woman and her daughter had been able to fetch their property away. We observed that the windows, where tinned fruit, chocolate, cakes, soap, postcards, and other articles used to be exhibited, had been cleared completely. We entered and found one of the girls in tears:

"All gone—all gone—I show you—you come into de cellar—all de wine gone—bottles all, all broken. English soldiers come in de night and take everysing 'vay—ve nussing left—it's de soldiers in de camp over zair in de field—zey plenty drunk dis morning—ve lose everysing—ve poor now."

Besides the windows, the till and the shelves had been cleared, and empty drawers and boxes had been thrown on to the floor. We went down into the cellar. All the cases had been opened and the stone floor was littered with empty and broken bottles. The girl began to sob again when she saw the ruin that had been inflicted:

" All gone, all gone—ve poor now."

" Why don't you complain to the Town Major?" one of us suggested.

" Complain?—vat's de use complain?—de Town Major, he nice man, he kind to us, but he no find de soldiers dat come, and if he find zem he punish zem but ve get nussing. Vat's de use punish zem if ve get nussing? All gone, ve poor now—oh, dis var, dis var—dis de second time ve refugeess—ve lose eversing 1914, ve come here from Zandvoorde and ve start again—ve do business vis soldiers, soldiers plenty money, ve do goot business, and now ve refugeess again and ve novair to go. If de Shermans come, ve do business vis de Shermans—but de shells come first and ve all killed—ah, dis var, dis var! Vat's de use fighting? All for nussing! Var over, me plenty dance!"

We ascended the cellar stairs. The mother was in the main room, wiping her eyes. We said good-bye to her and her daughter, feeling ashamed of our uniforms, and walked out into the street.

A mass of French cavalry were galloping past. It was growing dark. The cannonade had become deafening. Over the town a few miles off there was a crimson glare in the sky.

A horde of civilians was thronging the main street of the village. Old men and women were carrying all that was left to them of their property on their backs. Others were pushing wheelbarrows heaped up with clothes and household utensils. Girls were carrying heavy bundles under their arms and dragging tired, tearful children along. White-faced, sorrowful mothers were carrying peevish babies. Great wagons, loaded with furniture and bedding, and whole families sitting on top, were drawn by lank and bony horses. A little cart, with a pallid, aged woman cowering inside, was drawn painfully along by a white-haired man. They passed by us in the gathering gloom, and there seemed to be no end to these straggling multi-

tudes of ruined, homeless people who were wandering westwards to escape the disaster that threatened to engulf us all.

The eastern sky flickered with vivid gun-flashes and scintillated with brilliant shell-bursts. The night was full of rustling noises and sullen thunder-claps, while a more distant roaring and rumbling seemed to break against some invisible shore like the breakers of a stormy sea.

We retired to our huts and tents. Soon after lights-out the Police Corporal came round and shouted:

"Parade at 4.45 to-morrow morning in marching order."

The tumult increased as though the surge were coming nearer and nearer. Shells of small calibre passed overhead with a prolonged whistle and burst with a hardly audible report. The thunder of bigger explosions shook the huts and caused the ground to tremble.

As I woke the next morning the din of the cannonade broke in upon my senses with a sudden impact. Rumbling, thundering, bellowing, rushing, whistling, and whining, the tumult seemed all around and above us. Sudden flashes lit up the whole camp so that for fractions of seconds every hut and tent was brilliantly illuminated. Multitudes of dazzling stars appeared and disappeared.

We drew our breakfast and packed up our belongings. All was confusion in the hut.

We paraded, the roll was called, and as the day began to dawn we marched off.

We passed down the main road in long, swaying columns of fours. We left the woodyard behind us and hoped it would be destroyed—how we hated the place for the dreary months we had spent there! The westward stream of refugees had ceased, but an eastward stream of French infantry and field artillery thronged the roads. The artillerymen were mostly tall and powerfully built. The infantry were nearly all elderly men of poor physique.

They looked desperately miserable. We exchanged greetings:

"It's a good war!"

"C'est une bonne guerre!"

And then we broke into song:

"Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, *Oh* it's a lovely war!"

The French did not sing, but we, who were escaping destruction, passed from one song to another:

> "I don't want to fight the Germans,
> I don't want to go to war,
> I'd sooner be in London,
> Dear old dirty London."

And

> "Far, far from Ypers,
> I'd like to be,
> Where German snipers
> Can't get at me."

And

> "When this bloody war is over,
> O how happy I shall be,
> When I get my civvy clothes on,
> No more soldiering for me."

and all the other songs familiar to every soldier in the British army.

We marched all day along straight roads running in between flat fields and past ugly little villages. As we grew tired and footsore our rollicking spirit abated and the singing died down.

Towards nightfall we halted in a large meadow with a pond in one corner. Several lorries loaded with tents were waiting for us. We unloaded them, pitched the tents, crept into them, and went to bed.

The rumble of the cannonade sounded faintly in the far distance.

" I reckon it's a bloody shame to let the other Tommies and the Frenchies . . . "

The voice seemed to die away into a drawl as weariness overcame me. I continued to hear the sound of words for a little while, but they conveyed no meaning. And then sleep descended and brought entire oblivion.

VIII

HOME ON LEAVE

> "I have several times expressed the thought that in our day the feeling of patriotism is an unnatural, irrational, and harmful feeling, and a cause of a great part of the ills from which mankind is suffering; and that, consequently, this feeling should not be cultivated, as is now being done, but should, on the contrary, be suppressed and eradicated by all means available to rational men."
>
> (TOLSTOY.)

A CHANGE had come over us all. Instead of long spells of dreary silence interrupted by outbursts of irritability, by grumbling and by violent quarrels over nothing, there was animated conversations and sometimes even gaiety. Our talk was all about one subject—not about peace, for we had abandoned all hope of peace and hardly ever thought of it—but about leave. We had been waiting for seventeen months when, without warning, a leave allotment was assigned to our unit. About half a dozen men were going every day and no one knew whose turn would come next. We were full of intense excitement and glad expectation, but also of anxiety in case something should happen to stop our leave altogether.

I made up my mind to enjoy myself thoroughly. I would see parents and friends and forget all about the army and the war. I would be gay and frivolous and go to theatres, music-halls and cafés. And one day I would

spend in the British Museum and lose myself in books—that would be just like old times! Of course, our leave would not last for ever and the return journey would be terrible. No doubt the fortnight would pass very quickly, but I determined to enjoy every single hour with deliberation and understanding, and to squeeze every drop of pleasure out of it. How many hours were there in a fortnight? More than three hundred! Many would be wasted in sleep, but still, there would be many left and by dwelling upon each one, the fortnight would seem an age.

. . . . . .

An afternoon and an evening in a train that travelled all too slowly. A night and half a day at Calais Rest Camp. How terrible was the rankling impatience that gnawed our hearts as the hours dragged on.

But at last we were on the leave boat. There was another long delay, and then, with a feeling of immense relief, we heard the engines throb and the paddle-wheels begin to turn. I looked overboard and saw white foam hissing along the surface of water rapidly widening between us and the quay.

Seventeen months of exile and slavery had come to an end and before us lay a wonderful fortnight of freedom and happiness. And at the end of the fortnight? There was no need to think of that now.

The sea was blue and smooth and a cool breeze was blowing. We saw the cliffs of England grow larger and larger. Soon we were able to distinguish the town of Dover, the houses clustered round the harbour, and the Castle up on the cliff. It was there that I had begun my career as a soldier more than two years before. How much had happened since then! I felt that I had become a different being altogether.

The boat entered the harbour and ran alongside the

quay. A train was waiting for us. We poured out of the ship in two streams that spread out fan-wise and flowed into the carriages.

It was good to sit by the window in a comfortable compartment and lean back against soft cushions.

Glad anticipation and barely suppressed excitement were visible on everybody's face.

The train sped through familiar country: meadows, pastures, cornfields, orchards and woodlands. People waved their handkerchiefs at us from cottage windows.

It was growing dark as the first rows of drab suburban houses began to glide past.

So this was London. I stared out of the window and tried to grasp the tremendous, wonderful fact with all the power of my mind. Somehow or other it did not seem real, but I felt I could make it real by an effort of the will.

Streets and houses and moving people soon crowded the whole view. The people filled me with intense curiosity. I longed to talk to them and find out what they felt and thought about the war.

We entered Victoria Station. I opened the door of the compartment with hasty, trembling hands. I did not wait to change my French money, but hurried out into a street and got on to a 'bus.

London, with its subdued lights, lay all around me. It had not changed since I saw it last, and yet I felt it ought to have changed. The reason was that I had changed. And then I began to fear that I had changed beyond the power of recovery. The oppressive sensation that I was in a dream forced itself upon me. I felt that there was only one reality in the whole world—the war. Would I ever escape from the war? It would come to an end some day, and I would leave the army, but would not the war obsess me until the end of my life? Would I ever be myself again?

But this was not the way to enjoy my leave! I began to feel disappointed at not being so happy as I had expected to be. Why was I not full of rapture? Why did not every object fill me with delight? But I ought to have known that habitual discontent and bitterness and revolt are not shaken off in a few hours or a few days, and that they persist even after their immediate cause has been removed.

I looked round at the other people sitting on the 'bus. I had visited foreign countries in former years, but never before had I felt that I was amongst complete strangers. There are moments when a dog, a horse, or a bird fills us with a sense of the uncanny—its mind is an insoluble mystery, with depths so dark and inscrutable that one feels something that approaches fear and horror. And so it was as I sat on the 'bus. The civilians around me seemed like animals of a different species. They were not human at all—or was it I who was not human?

I went to another seat in order to listen to a man and woman who were talking together. I felt that if they were to talk about the war, the uncanny spell would be broken, the dream would dissolve and I would be restored to my own fellow creatures. But they spoke about trivial domestic matters and about a flower show. If they had only mentioned the word "war" I would have felt relieved by its familiarity, but they did not mention it once.

And then, in great mental agony, I said to myself: "I *will* be happy, I *will* enjoy my leave." But a number of invisible cobwebs hung between myself and the world around me. I tried to brush them away, but they were so impalpable that the movement of my hand did not disturb them at all.

I gave up the attempt. I would wait until I got home. Then I would talk and forget myself—only by forgetting myself would I enjoy the present. Only those who for-

get themselves are happy. The obsession of self is the most oppressive of all burdens.

I descended from a 'bus and took a train. A girl sitting opposite me stared at my blue chevrons and whispered to her fellow passenger: "He's just come from the front." So I too was regarded as a strange kind of animal. I got out at my home-station. I showed my leave-warrant to the ticket collector. He was a benevolent looking old man. He smiled and wished me good luck. Things began to seem a little less foreign. And then the thought of being home in a few minutes absorbed me entirely.

I hurried down the street. I knocked at the door, and it opened. The long yearned-for meeting took place at last.

I threw my pack, equipment and steel helmet contemptuously into a corner. I took an infantile delight in clean, furnished rooms, in the white table-cloth, the shining silver, the cut flowers, and the oil-paintings on the wall. And we talked until late into the night.

It was good to wake up the next morning and to know that the first day of my leave was still before me. I felt encouraged to face my new surroundings boldly. I would understand them and identify myself with them. If the sensation that I was dreaming came upon me again, I would welcome it and then I would destroy it once and for all. I would enjoy my leave at any cost. It would become my only reality, and when it was over it would be a reality which I would take back to the front. I would hoard it and always think of it out there, so that the war would seem like a dream, the end of which I could await with patience and resignation.

I went out to seek friends and acquaintances. I also hoped to meet some war enthusiasts. I would tell them something about the war. How would their theories be able to stand before my actual experiences!

I was soon disillusioned.

I dined with a wealthy kinsman. The slaughter of millions had brought him prosperity. He had never done any fighting except with his mouth, but it is precisely that kind of fighting that infuriates the spirit, engenders heroic ardour, and causes the nostrils to dilate. He was so bellicose that he even desired to do some *real* fighting, not understanding the difference between the two. He thought of joining an infantry unit—the artillery were not good enough, he did not want to fire at an enemy he could not see, he wanted to use the bayonet and murder his fellow men in hand-to-hand encounters.

I began to understand why many men I had met were glad to come back from leave.

I tried to dissuade him, although I felt it would do him good to see something of the war and he would learn a much-needed lesson. And yet I did not want him killed or horribly mutilated, although I knew that he and those like him were alone responsible for the entire war, both at its origins and its continuance.

But he would not be persuaded. He said he was *dying* to go out and see the fun.

At the word " fun " I felt a sudden and violent contraction of all my muscles. I had an almost irresistible impulse to stand up and strike him across the face. But I was in a public restaurant and I controlled myself. He did not seem to notice anything.

The conversation drifted away from the war and became commonplace. I tried to relate a few of my experiences, but somehow or other they seemed unsuited to the occasion.

I had set out with the intention of destroying a mouldering, tottering edifice built up of illusions and ignorant prejudices, and I found myself face to face with towering, strong, unshakable walls, strong and unshakable precisely because it was built of illusions, lies, and prejudices.

I felt the burden of war descending upon me with all its crushing, annihilating weight. I fought a losing fight

against the conviction that for the rest of my leave I would be able to talk of nothing else and think of nothing else but the war. If only I could talk to someone who would understand, that at least would bring relief!

I longed to see my two friends, although I felt some anxiety lest they might have changed, or rather lest they might not have changed with me.

It was in the evening of my first day that we met. At first the one embarrassed me a little by his apparent cold aloofness. But his caustic observations on the war soon made it clear that he had stood the test. I realized, from the hatred that lay behind them, that he had suffered as much as many a soldier in the trenches.

Then the other said to me:

"This is a thing I have never told anyone yet, but I will tell it to you now. There are times when I almost wish I could see German troops marching victoriously through the streets of London. It is not my reason that is speaking now, but my bitterness, which has become stronger than my reason."

I understood him far too well to make any comment.

And then after a long silence, I said: "I wonder if anybody else thinks like that."

And he answered: "Yes, there are many—more than you would believe."

But the first added: "We must remain neutral—that is our one and only duty. The more malevolent our neutrality the better, but it must be neutrality. Remember that there are Germans whose bitterness prompts them to wish that British troops were marching through the streets of Berlin. I think their wish is juster than yours, but both wishes cannot be fulfilled, and it is therefore desirable that the next best thing should happen, namely, that both the Allies and their enemies should be entirely deprived of victory."

I agreed, but added:

"Yes, fundamentally one must remain neutral, but in relation to present circumstances one cannot remain neutral. It is our business to arraign England, our own country, and not Germany. It is for every nation to discover its own faults. There are many Germans of courage and honesty who will condemn their country for the crimes she has committed. But condemnation from outside is useless and is always discredited. In all probability the Allies and the Central Powers are both equally bad, and to denounce the enemy only is mere yelping with the rest of the savage, vindictive pack."

"That is true, but what is the good of saying it, or thinking it! Ignorance, prejudice, and intellectual dishonesty are far stronger than you are. The depravity of mankind is such that only failure and humiliation will carry conviction. Mere words are only wasted. If any nation is completely defeated in this war, then its people will rise against its rulers, whether they are guilty or not, and they will fix all the responsibility of war upon them and upon themselves. There will be a frenzy of self-accusation—whether just or unjust it doesn't matter—and as for the victors, they will say: 'Our enemies admit their guilt, so what further proof is needed?' Where the *real* guilt is, that is an irrelevant and trivial question. Success or failure will be the sole ultimate criterion. There is only one hope for the world—that failure will be so evenly distributed that there will be anxious heart-searchings in every country. Failure alone makes ignorant people think. Success is taken for granted. Even after a single battle lost, the Press is full of explanations and excuses, but after a battle won, there is only complacency and self-glorification, and questions as to the why and wherefore are considered out of place or even treasonable."

When we parted I was seized with a feeling of intense loneliness, but nevertheless I realized with satisfaction that I was not entirely alone. I also gave up the idea of enjoy-

ing my leave and conceived a deep aversion for all pleasures and amusements.

The next day I wandered into the British Museum. The 600,000 volumes that surrounded me on the shelves of the reading-room had a depressing effect. I took out a few books, but was too distracted for serious study.

I almost smiled with self-contempt when I thought how I had set out the previous morning in order to conquer my old world, and how it was now receding further and further from me. I looked at the other readers. They were mostly old men, engrossed in their studies, just as they had been in peace time. I wondered what they thought about the war. I knew they would not allow it to disturb them much or interfere with their studies and their sleep. And after all, why should they care? It was only youth that was being slaughtered on the battlefields and not old age.

The sleepy dullness of the museum became unbearable and I walked out into the street.

I spent the evening with a member of the National Liberal Club, an intimate family friend, whose intellectual arrogance was one of the evil memories of my childhood, when many eager impulses and aspirations had been turned to bitterness by his lofty depreciation and his imperturbable assumption of superiority based on maturer years and experience. Having at different times received material kindnesses at his hands, I knew I could not tell him what I really thought, and the prospect of meeting him filled me with uneasiness. Moreover, in his presence I felt a kind of pride which I did not usually feel in the presence of others—a pride that forbade me to express any sentiment or to reveal my inner mind. And yet my inner mind was clamouring intolerably for revelation. I realized the advantage he would derive from his simple attitude and from his lack of mental integrity, which enabled him to ignore any considerations that did not conform to his preconceived

notions, and I realized the disadvantage of my complex attitude, made up as it was of so many conflicting impulses, at war with each other and with the world around me.

My fears were justified.

At first the conversation was commonplace, and I related various experiences in a desultory fashion. Those that were mildly amusing were most appreciated. But gradually we drifted towards more vital issues and then the long and futile argument began. The weapons of sarcasm and denunciation were denied to me by the laws of politeness and etiquette. I beat in vain against the solid walls of obstinate prejudice and superficiality. His statements were uttered with dogmatic emphasis. They expressed beliefs held with all the self-assurance born of ignorance. They were based on no independent reasoning or observation, but had been assimilated either directly from the daily Press or from a circle of acquaintances whose entire political outlook was the creation of the Press. It was only then that I realized the immense power of newspapers.

For most people "thinking" is just the discovery of convenient phrases or labels, such as "pessimist," or "socialist," or "pacifist" or "Bolshevik." When any puzzling mental attitude comes before their notice, they pin one of their labels to it, and, having labelled it, they think they understand it. The Press supplies them with these labels, and, consciously or unconsciously, they store them up in their minds and always have a few ready for immediate use.

So familiar and commonplace were the phrases which my opponent selected from his store in order to reply to my every utterance, that I could almost tell what he was going to say before he said it. Moreover, the fact that he had travelled abroad and had associated with foreigners, instead of widening his view had only narrowed it. Had

he never travelled he might have been sufficiently modest to admit that he knew nothing of foreign countries and he might have suspended judgment about them ; but the mere fact that he had travelled filled him with a deep conviction that he knew all about the places he had visited, and this conviction, enunciated with pompous emphasis, supplanted the real knowledge and understanding derived from honest observation. Like so many people who do not possess the faculty of experiencing, he continually appealed to his own experience and continually referred to his maturer years, as though old age of itself brought wisdom.

As for the war itself he took no deep interest in it, although he glanced at the war news every day. But to understand it, to analyse its causes, to grasp its significance, to realize its true nature, that he never attempted to do. His labels and his alleged experiences and his years were sufficient to cope with the entire question and answer it satisfactorily for himself. I almost envied him for his self-sufficiency. He would never suffer acutely from any mental strife or agitation due to any but immediate and personal causes. Perhaps such a stable mentality that can without effort reject all inconvenient data is the most desirable of all and the most conducive to happiness. Certain it is that the stability of society and the very existence of civilization itself depend upon the preponderance of that particular type.

I knew that the argument was hopeless. Indeed, it was no argument. It was no exchange of ideas. It was no mutual attempt at discovering truths by an impartial comparison of two different attitudes.

At times there were signs of heat on both sides. My opponent spoke of "our democratic army" (familiar phrase!) and the overbearing manner in which he connected this dictum with a number of false, irrelevant or arbitrary generalizations made me feel a momentary pang

of anger and I wished he could experience a term of military service. Nevertheless, there was no actual display of bad temper or emotion and we parted with all the habitual formulae imposed by social decorum.

I knew I had come into contact with the truly representative man. His opinion and the opinions of those like him, they all made up popular opinion. All other opinion was abnormal and negligible. It was with despair that I realized the hopelessness of my own position and that of my friends.

The public did not understand the war and did not want to understand it. It was far away from them and they did not realize the amount of suffering caused by it. It also brought wealth to many who would therefore have regretted its sudden termination. This seems a hard thing to say, but nevertheless it is true. The so-called "working-classes" had developed an appetite for wealth and power that nothing could satisfy. This appetite was being fed continually, but the more it devoured the more voracious it became. Nor did the shameless profiteering of the wealthy tend to allay it in any way. Protests against the war never went beyond the passing of mere resolutions. Those who had sufficient humanity and imagination to hate the war in its entirety and to suffer from it, although not necessarily taking any part in it, were too few and too scattered and isolated to take any effective action.

The extent to which a man can suffer is the precise measure of his merit, and thus it was that our patriots and war-enthusiasts being incapable, by reason of their grossness and vulgarity, of suffering in a spiritual sense, were immune from the misery caused by the war and yet it was they above all others upon whose support the continuance of the war depended.

This was the terrible fatality. The more a man suffered from the war the smaller was his control over it.

Everywhere, those who deserved to suffer did not suffer

and those who did not deserve to suffer suffered. And that was why the war went on. Most people were so indifferent that it was impossible to talk to them without anger. I could think of nothing else but the war. I could not escape from its invisible presence. The streets and houses seemed the immaterial creations of some dream, and somewhere behind them the slaughter was going on, and amid the noise of the traffic the throbbing of the bombardment was plainly audible.

Sometimes I felt an impulse to shout from the housetops like a Hebrew prophet and denounce this most wicked of generations. But the very futility of the idea filled me with mortification.

Our enlightened twentieth century has no use for prophets. Christ Himself would have been arrested as a pacifist or a lunatic if He had spoken His mind in the streets of London. And the clergy would have applauded the imprisonment of a dangerous "pro-German." The scribes and Pharisees were more numerous and more powerful than ever before.

Particularly the scribes.

There never was in all the world an infamy as great as the infamy of our war-time Press. A horde of unscrupulous liars and hirelings spat hatred and malice from safe and comfortable positions. They played the hero when no danger threatened. They defied an enemy who could not reach them. They boasted of the deeds they had not done. They gloried in the victories they did not win. They mouthed frantic protestations of injured innocence when they should have felt the burden of guilty shame. They were mawkishly sentimental when they should have felt keen grief and horror. They denounced murder and they urged others to commit murder. They spewed their venomous slime into every spring of healing water. At a time when clear thinking and balanced judgments were needed more desperately than ever before, they squirted

into the air thick clouds of lies, and half-truths, and misleading phrases, and judgments distorted by hatred and warped by malice. And as for those who were either lured on to perpetrate the great iniquity by grandiose and seductive falsehoods or were dragged from their homes and families and sent unwilling to the slaughter, these miserable slaves the Press of all countries urged on, one against the other, brutally deaf to their misery, representing them as glad and cheerful when they had reached the extreme of human suffering, magnifying them into heroes of epic proportions (before they donned their dingy garb of war they were "lice" that had to be "combed out"), endowing them with absurdly impossible virtues—when they were just ordinary human beings in misfortune with no ambition except to live in peace and comfort—and at the same time bestowing lofty patronage upon them and calling them "Tommies" and sending them cigarettes, chocolates and advice, as though they were children to be petted, with no will or intelligence of their own.

The Press, the cinema, the atrocity placards, and propagandist leaflets, they all practised the same deliberate and colossal deceit and kindled hatred against the enemy. And so successful was this diabolical conspiracy that hatred became second nature to vast masses of people. To think evil of the enemy was an article of national faith, and to question this faith, or still more to repudiate it, that was heresy of the most heinous kind. Religion died long ago, but the cult of nationalism that replaced it was infinitely more pernicious in its intolerance and cruelty than religion at its very worst.

Individually men are often good, but collectively men are always bad. The national mob had never been so powerful, nor had it ever been so servile, and that was why its passions were those of the coward and not of the brave man; that was why chivalry and generosity and fair-mindedness were execrated, and only hatred and

boastfulness and vindictive malice were allowed to live.

The rapidity with which the time passed was terrifying. Although my leave had produced so much disillusionment, I yet dreaded its termination. Just as my life at the front had made me unfit for life at home, so my short spell of life at home had rendered me unfit for further life at the front. Moreover, I knew that my concrete experiences had done a little towards strengthening and confirming the attitude of my few friends, a consideration that gave me some satisfaction. I thought that in time I might get into touch with other people who shared our attitude and then take part in some anti-war movement and fight against the war instead of in it. That would have been the only activity to which I could have devoted myself with energy and enthusiasm. But I would soon have to go back and be muzzled once more by a ruthless discipline and an all-embracing censorship. Moreover, as my leave approached its end I began to regret that I had not striven harder to enjoy the comforts and freedom of civilian life. The dread of the coming return to slavery and dreary routine began to outweigh every other consideration. The prospect of living in a tent crowded with foul-mouthed, noisy soldiers filled me with dismay. I made a feeble attempt at securing an extension of my leave, but failed, and then I resigned myself to my fate.

One afternoon, towards the end of the fortnight, I went to Kew Gardens with my friend.

The softness of the warm September day, the calm trees, and the flowers that were pure untroubled beauty (how I envied them their dispassionate lives, their tranquil growth, their effortless attainment of perfection, and their unconscious dying!)—all these had a strangely harmonizing influence upon my discordant spirit. We spoke little, and of the war not at all. Indeed, the war suddenly seemed curiously remote and I could hardly hear the throbbing of

the guns. I knew that this afternoon would never be lost, that I would often think of it when back at the front. It would remain a dream of tranquil beauty that would haunt me at unexpected moments. I felt that for this alone my leave had been worth while.

The last morning came. I made a successful effort to control myself. I said good-bye. It was all over.

. . . . . .

When I got back to camp all the men were out at work. I sat down alone in my tent. I felt slightly dazed, but not as miserable as I had expected to feel. I did not know how to occupy my time. I had brought several books with me, but I felt no inclination to read. Life seemed empty and purposeless. I waited impatiently for the return of the others.

They arrived and the evening passed quickly in talk. My friend, whose place was next to mine, remarked that I was far more cheerful than men returning from leave usually are.

The next day and many days after I was unable to shake off the feeling of mental torpor and a vague regret for what had been and what had gone for ever. My leave seemed like a thing I had dreamt of long ago. Sometimes I asked myself in a puzzled manner: "Have I really been home on leave?"

The end of the war, no one could tell when that would be. But the next leave—it might come in eight or nine months—that was something to look forward to and I began to think of all the things I would do when it actually did come.

IX

ACROSS THE RIDGES

"And Cuchullain . . . deemed it no honour nor deemed he it fair to take horses or garments or arms from corpses, or from the dead."

(TAIN BO CUAILGNE, 5th Century).

THERE were only a few stars visible above, but the whole eastern horizon was flashing and scintillating. Down in the valley, where several British batteries were in action, long thin jets of flame darted forth incessantly.

As the day dawned we could see that the distant ridges were enveloped in drifts of dense, white fog. From time to time patches of the fog would glow redly and then become brilliantly incandescent and throw up sheets of lurid flame. German shells came whistling over and burst with angry, reverberating roars. Black fountains of earth and smoke spurted up from the fields and left slowly thinning clouds that hung suspended for a while and then dissolved in air. Sepia-coloured puffs appearing in the sky above were followed by sharp explosions and the rattle of descending shrapnel.

For several hours the tumult continued unabated and then the whistle of German shells became less frequent until at last it died down altogether.

Towards noon about a hundred German prisoners passed by under armed escort.

The ridges had been taken.

. . . . . .

Our new camp lay at the foot of a gloomy hill. A disused trench ran right across it. Rifles, bayonets, bandoliers, grenades, water-bottles, packs, articles of clothing and bits of equipment lay scattered everywhere. Barbed wire rusted in coils or straggling lengths. Rusty tins and twisted, rusty sheets of shrapnel-riddled corrugated iron littered the sodden mud. Water, rust-stained or black and fetid, stagnated in pools and shell-holes. The sides of the trench were moist with iridescent slime. Dead soldiers lay everywhere with grey faces, grey hands and mouldering uniforms. Their pockets were turned inside out and mud-stained letters and postcards, and sometimes a mildewed pocket-book or a broken mirror, were dispersed round every rotting corpse. In front of my tent the white ribs of a horse projected from a heap of loose earth. Near by a boot with a human foot inside emerged from the black scummy water at the bottom of a shell-hole. An evil stench hovered in the air.

We buried all the dead that lay within the camp-lines. Then darkness descended and we crept into our tents.

We were lying on wet, oozy clay, thinly covered with wisps of soaked grass and decaying straw—there had been a cornfield here a year ago.

There were thirteen of us in one tent. We were wedged in tightly, shoulder to shoulder, our feet all in one bunch.

Candles were lit and some of the men sat up and searched their clothes. I was conscious of a slight irritation, but was so tired and depressed that I resolved to ignore it and postpone my usual search to the following day.

But as I lay still, trying hard to fall asleep, the irritation increased. At last it became so maddening that I started up in bitter rage. I lit my candle and pulled off my shirt.

"Chatty* are yer?" said someone in an amused tone.

"I've got a big one crawling about somewhere," I answered. None of us ever admitted that we had more

* Lousy.

than one or two, even when we knew we had a great many. It was also considered less disreputable to have one " big one " than two small ones.

" It's the Gink's fault—'e swarms with 'em. I was standin' be'ind 'im in the ranks the other day an' I saw three of 'em crorlin' out of 'is collar up 'is neck. 'E never washes and never changes 'is clothes, so what can yer expect?"

The " Gink " flared up at once :

" Yer god-damn son of a bitch—it's youss guys that never washes. I bet yer me borram dollar I ant got a god-damn chat on me . . . "

A long wrangle ensued. Wild threats and foul insults were flung about. But the quarrel, like nearly all our quarrels, did not go beyond violent words.

I began to search and soon found a big swollen louse. I crushed it with my thumb-nail so that the blood spurted out. I heard several faint cracks coming from the opposite side of the tent and knew that others were also hunting for vermin.

I examined the seams of my shirt and found two or three more. Then, to my dismay, I discovered several eggs. They are so minute that some are sure to escape the most careful scrutiny. The presence of eggs is always a warning that many nights of irritation will have to pass by before the young grow sufficiently big to be discovered easily.

I thought I had looked at every square inch of my shirt, but I looked at it a second time in order to make sure. I soon found a whitish elongated body clinging tightly to the cloth. Then I found another wedged into the seam.

Meanwhile, my neighbour, who had been tossing about restlessly and scratching himself and sighing with desperate vexation, lit his candle and began to search busily. The sound of an occasional crack showed how successful he was.

The night was warm and sultry. A storm threatened and it was necessary to close the tent flap. I blew out my candle and wrapped myself in my blankets. I was unable to stretch my legs because others were in the way. I was hemmed and pressed in on all sides. I felt an impulse to kick out savagely, but was able to control myself.

The stifling heat became unbearable, and at the same time the cold, clammy moisture from the soft sodden mud underneath began to penetrate ground-sheet and blankets.

The irritation recommenced. A louse so big that I could feel it crawling along stopped and drew blood. I tried in vain to go to sleep. I heard my neighbour scratching himself steadily. Nor could he find a comfortable position to lie in and kept twisting and turning and moaning. The other men were snoring or fidgeting restlessly.

At length a fitful slumber came upon me and a confusion of rotting bodies swarming with monstrous lice passed before my closed eyes. I was fully awake long before reveillé, sleepy and unrefreshed, and when reveillé came we received orders to move within two hours.

Four of us and one N.C.O. were left behind to load a lorry. And then we, too, packed up and set out to follow the unit.

Thinking to take a short cut across country we ascended the hill-slope, jumping and clambering across shell-holes and striding through long grass and weeds. Now and again we would chance upon some narrow winding track that soon lost itself again amid the tangled growth.

Low clouds burdened the sky and a fine rain began to fall. The top of the hill was hidden in grey mist.

We passed a heap of broken concrete blocks from which the twisted ends of iron rods projected. A little further on a concrete shelter stood intact except for deep vertical fissures. I peered into the narrow entrance that sloped steeply down. I slipped in the soft mud, but by stretching

out my arms and clasping the outer wall I just saved myself from falling flat on to a rotting corpse that lay half-immersed in greenish-black water. I drew slowly back, feeling sick with horror.

As we climbed the hill-side the devastation increased. The trees and bushes were torn, splintered and uprooted. Only a few grey trunks remained standing like scarred, bare poles. We approached the summit and crossed shell-hole next to shell-hole, for not a square yard of ground had remained untouched. Some of the holes were wide and deeply funnel-shaped, others were shallow, and others were hardly distinguishable, the earth having been churned and tossed up time after time. On the very top of the hill, there was nothing left of the trees that had densely clothed it a few months before, except fragments of wood and stringy lengths of root. Even the grass and weeds had been destroyed and blasted by the bursting of innumerable shells.

We walked along the crest between upright bundles of splinters that projected from the ground in two parallel rows—all that remained of an avenue of pines and larches.

We descended the further slope by a narrow gulley. Here the shell-holes were less frequent. A miry path led through an abandoned camp—a chaos of riddled and shattered boards and contorted iron sheeting. Dead Frenchmen were lying everywhere. From a drab heap of mud and clothing a human arm projected. The terminal finger-joints had dropped off. The blackened skin was drawn tightly over the back of the hand which seemed to clutch frantically at some invisible object.

A little further on two soldiers were scraping the soil with sticks.

"Gorblimy—'e ain't 'alf rotten—puh—don't 'e stink! I 'ope 'e's got summat in 'is pockets arter we've bin takin' all this trouble."

"Yer never find much on these 'ere Froggies, the rotten

bastards. They don't 'ardly get no dibs.* Canadians and Aussies—them's the blokes yer want ter look for. Fritz ain't so bad neither. I got a bloody fine watch orf a Fritz last year down on the Somme—sold it to an orficer for thirty bleed'n' francs!"

"Put yer stick under 'im an' 'eave 'im out!"

One of the men pushed his stick obliquely into the ground and levered up the putrefying corpse. The other turned the pockets inside out. A few soiled and mouldy bits of paper came to light, but nothing of any value.

"Just our bastard bleed'n' luck! Let's see if we can't find a Fritz or a Tommy!"

Robbing the dead was always a recognized thing at the front, but our Corporal, who was rather an unsoldierly individual, did not seem to think it quite the proper thing, and shouted:

"What d'you want to rob the dead for? Why don't you leave them alone?"

"What's it got ter do wi' you?" answered one of the treasure-seekers. "Why don't yer mind yer own bleed'n' business? What's the use o' lettin' good stuff go west? A dead un can't do nothin' wi' watches an' rings an' five-franc notes! Gorblimy, 'ave a bit o' sense! It's allus your class o' blokes what makes a bleed'n' fuss!"

Having thus vindicated their rights, the two men turned away in order to continue their search for the legitimate spoils of war.

We walked on and the gulley widened out into a level crater-field. The hill loomed dimly behind us, and, looking ahead through the rain and mist, we could see the reddish blur of a ruined village.

Near a small shell-hole were the remains of a German who had been blown to bits. The clothes, limbs and trunk were in one confused heap. The head lay some distance off; it was quite undamaged. The skin was black and

* Money, pay.

drawn tightly over the skull. The hair was matted, but the short, blonde moustache had been neatly trimmed. The lips were shrivelled, exposing two perfect rows of white teeth, giving the dead face a horrible expression of ferocity. The eyelids were closed and taut, the cracks near the nose revealed the dark, empty eye-cavities underneath.

A little further on lay another head. The face had been smashed and no features were recognizable except the lobe of one ear, behind which there was a deep triangular hole. Two or three yards away there was a booted leg and beyond that a severed hand lying beside a heap of rotting flesh, bone and sodden clothing, all covered with thick brown masses made up of the innumerable empty cases of maggot chrysalids.

We struck a main road. It was dotted with shell-holes that had recently been filled in with bricks and pieces of stone. To the left of the road were many scarred tree-trunks. Some were still erect, others were aslant, while others lay prone, having been broken off short or torn up by the roots. They were all dead and ashen grey. Behind them was a broad ring of stagnant water covered with duckweed. On the island within the ring was a huge heap of loose bricks—a few months ago this had been a picturesque château with gabled roofs, surrounded by gardens and a wooded park. Amongst the shell-holes and scattered branches and twisted lengths of white railing, a few michaelmas daisies, chrysanthemums, dahlias, and other garden flowers were in bloom.

Further on, to the right of the road, stood the ruins of the church. A few thick pieces of wall were still standing and a part of the steeple pointed upwards like a jagged finger. Heaped up inside were brick-fragments and tiles, together with splintered beams and rafters, riddled sheets of lead and zinc, broken chairs, twisted brass candlesticks, bits of stained glass, and here and there chunks of coloured plaster, the remains of apostolic or saintly images. One

of the confessionals was still visible, although all the woodwork was shattered. Of the altar nothing could be seen. Behind a crumbling fragment of brick wall was a band of machine-gun ammunition and a heap of empty cartridge cases.

The big bronze bell lay outside the church in two pieces. The cemetery had been churned by shell-fire. The tombstones were chipped and broken. One big block of granite had been overturned by a bursting shell and the inscription was so scarred as to be illegible. The stone Christ had been hit in many places. His left hand was gone, so that He hung aslant by the other. Both His legs had been blown off at the knees and His nose and mouth had been carried away by some flying shell-fragment or shrapnel-ball. All the graves had been thrown into confusion by the violence of innumerable explosions. Bits of bone—femurs, ribs, lower jaws—lay scattered about. The hip of a soldier who had been buried in his clothes projected from the soil with the brown mass of maggot chrysalids still clinging to it. Two bent knees of a greenish-grey colour, that had only begun to decay, emerged from a patch of trodden mud.

Beyond the church, by the roadside, were the dwelling-houses. Some of them were a tangle of rafters mixed up with heaps of brick and miscellaneous rubbish—stoves, pots and pans, chair-legs, pictures, bedding, boxes, and all kinds of household articles. Others had been dispersed around. Others seemed to have been tipped up bodily, so that all their contents had been spilt into the street, and then to have been dropped back again with such an impact that they had collapsed on their own foundations. The sweet, sickly smell of bodies that had not been decaying long, and the rank, pungent smell of those that were approaching total dissolution emanated from under heaps of wreckage and from hidden cellars.

The devastation increased with every mile and the shell-

holes came closer and closer together. Dead horses, shattered guns, wagons, and limbers lay overturned in the ditches. At one spot on the roadside the legs and buttocks of a man, all brown and shrivelled, slanted upwards from a deep, wide rut, many heavy wheels having passed across the small of his back.

Gradually houses, trees and bushes disappeared entirely. We reached the site of a village that before the war had sheltered several thousands of people. Nothing remained except small bits of brick mingling with the bare soil, piled up and scooped and churned and tossed by shell-fire.

Here, too, there were many dead. A little way off the road lay an Englishman who could not have fallen more than a few days before. His hands were clenched, his mouth wide open, his eyes fixed and staring. Near him was a tall German. He lay at full length with arms outstretched and legs crossed. His left hand, immersed in a pool, was white and puffy. His right hand was half closed and only slightly wrinkled. His side had been ripped open and fragments of entrail projected from the rent. The water beneath and around him was stained with blood. His pockets were turned inside out and papers and postcards lay scattered around in the usual manner. His cloak had been thrown across his face.

Other bodies had lain unburied for several months ; others for several years, and of these only the mud-stained bones were left.

We reached the highest point in the series of so-called ridges. The desolate country spread out before us—miles and miles of low undulations ploughed by shell-fire and bared of everything except an occasional concrete shelter or the splintered stump of a dead tree.

We marched in silence through this dismal land of ruin and desolation. At length, in the distance, we saw a solitary fragment of a brick wall standing in a wide hollow,

a sign that we were nearing a habitable region once again.

We passed by riddled German sign-boards—Vormarschstrasse, Hohenzollernstrasse, Kaiserstrasse, Mackensenstrasse, Admiral Scheerstrasse. We came to a litter of wreckage that had once been a village and then we left the main road and entered a little wood, or rather an assembly of scarred tree-trunks leaning at all angles. It was crossed by a zig-zag trench and all the refuse of battle lay scattered about.

An Australian soldier lay on a low mound. His head had dropped off and rolled backwards down the slope. The lower jaw had parted from the skull. His hands had been devoured by rats and two little heaps of clean bones were all that remained of them. The body was fully clothed and the legs encased in boots and puttees. One thigh-bone projected through a rent in the trousers and the rats had gnawed white grooves along it. A mouldy pocket-book lay by his side and several postcards and a soiled photograph of a woman and a child.

An attempt had been made to bury some of the dead, and several lay beneath heaps of loose earth with their boots projecting. But the rats had reached them all, and black, circular tunnels led down into the fetid depths of the rotting bodies. The stench that filled the air was so intolerable that we hastened to get out of this dreadful place.

Soon we perceived a church steeple far away. It brought some relief to the feeling of oppression and despair which had begun to burden us. We struck the road once again. We passed houses of which the scarred walls were still standing, but with their bare, splintered rafters, empty windows, and riddled doors they looked more gloomy and forlorn than complete ruins. There were more concrete shelters and then some rusty iron cranes and the site of a "Munitionslager" from which every shell had been re-

moved. We approached a small town. Many of the houses were intact except for scattered tiles and broken windows. The stately church was full of huge holes. All the streets were deserted.

Beyond the town, on either side of the road, was a series of dumps, collecting stations, R.E. parks, workshops, and woodyards—Mastenlager, Pi-Park, Gruppenwegebaustof-flager, Pferdesammelstelle, and others. Then a German military cemetery, beautifully kept and planted all over with shrubs and flowers. We had never seen a military cemetery like it before.

A bend of the road, as it topped a gentle slope, revealed an expanse of smooth green fields dotted with groups of trees. It did our eyes good to see trees that were alive and unharmed. Their foliage was autumn-tinted—until now we had hardly realized that autumn was with us. A placid river flowed through the meadows. On the far shore was a town, beyond it a hill crowned by a fine château.

As we walked on, the scattered houses drew closer and closer together until they formed continuous rows. A civilian passed by, pushing a wheelbarrow that clattered over the cobbles. Then there followed a woman with a bundle on her back.

There was something peculiar about the houses. They were not damaged in the same way as the others we had seen. They were all roofless and floorless, but the walls were unharmed except for occasional holes and scars. Then we suddenly realized that the Germans had stripped the entire street of all woodwork—of floor-boards, of beams and rafters, of doors and window-frames, leaving only the bare, empty shells of brick.

We turned a corner and entered another street in which the houses had not been rifled. Several were occupied by civilians.

Before us, in an open field, lay our camp. Scribbled in

chalk on a piece of board nailed across a broken window were the words:

"Der Friede wird stündlich erwartet."*

*Peace is expected every hour.

X

THE ARMISTICE

EVER since we had received news of the German peace offers and President Wilson's replies, rumours had multiplied enormously—the Kaiser had been assassinated, the German Fleet had surrendered, German troops were deserting in masses, German submarines were floating on the surface and flying white flags, a German Republic had been proclaimed with Liebknecht as President.

One evening after a day of unusually hard labour, we were lying exhausted in our tent. Suddenly the flap was thrown open, a man pushed his head in and shouted excitedly:

"I say, you chaps, the Armistice has been signed—it's official!"

"Who says so? Did you see it in print?"

"No, I just heard it from a despatch rider. He got it from his C.O.—it's official."

"Don't believe it. We've heard that tale too often."

"All right, then, don't!" the man shouted angrily and walked off.

No sooner had he gone when our Corporal said:

"It wouldn't surprise me if he were right. In any case, even if the Germans haven't signed yet, they'll have to do so soon. Bulgaria, Turkey, and Austria have collapsed. The Germans have decreasing resources and no reserves. The Allies have increasing resources and unlimited reserves. The longer the war goes on, the more

desperate is Germany's position. She must accept our terms, she can't help herself."

"I do not think they will sign," I replied. "I think we can expect at least another year of war. I know Germany is in a bad way, but our terms mean unconditional surrender. The Germans will not be silly enough to imagine that, once they are disarmed and helpless, we shall stick to the Fourteen Points or be bound by any promises of any kind. No, the Germans will fight on, they will shorten their front, and they will at least keep the Allies off German territory for an indefinite period until they can secure better terms."

"You overrate the strength of the Germans. I think the German army is becoming completely demoralized. I also think that the blockade has done its work amongst the civilian population. We shall have an armistice within the next few days. Perhaps rumour is correct for once and the war is already over. We haven't heard any guns for a long time—the front is extraordinarily quiet."

"Yes, but we would have heard officially—news like that would never be kept from us."

"That's true enough—I expect the thing is being discussed and a decision will be reached before long."

We all agreed that as soon as the fighting ceased, we would be informed. The news of the Armistice would be telegraphed to every unit and it would reach us within a few minutes from the actual signature. And then, what would we do then? How would our feelings find an outlet? It was impossible to say. Shouting, singing, dancing, would they give us relief? Speculation was useless, painfully useless. And yet what else could we think about?

Peace—peace did not matter so very much, if only the slaughter would stop. To us soldiers, and most of all to soldiers in the line, an Armistice would mean more than any words could tell. And, therefore, we would be the

first to receive the news. Bad as the army was, it was not so bad as to keep such tidings from us. Besides, everybody would rejoice so much, that all distinctions of rank would disappear and the general would be no more privileged than the private. Still, the war was not over yet, and it would be better not to hope too much.

It was Sunday, the 10th of November. We had no work to do and wandered restlessly round the town. An official communique was posted up outside the Mairie, but it contained nothing new. There was a crowd of soldiers round a Belgian boy who was selling English papers. We bought the last copies, but they were of the previous Thursday and did not add to our knowledge. The suspense was becoming unbearable. My conviction that the Germans would reject the terms of the Allies was shaken—not by any further evidence, but by the general atmosphere of excitement and hopeful expectation which communicated itself to me. I kept on repeating to myself, "They will not sign, they will not sign," and intellectually I believed my own words. And yet I was continually imagining the war already over and what I merely thought seemed unessential and irrelevant. The stress of wild hopes and mental agitation became almost a physical pain.

Darkness came on and we retired to our tents. I gradually became aware of a faint noise, so faint that I hardly knew whether it was real or not. As soon as I listened intently I could hear nothing. Then one of us said: "What's that funny noise?" There it was again, a low, hollow sound like that of a distant sea. It grew louder and then ceased. Then it became audible once more and grew louder and still louder. Suddenly we realized what it was—it was the sound of cheering. It came nearer and nearer, gathering speed. It flooded the whole town with a great rush, paused a moment, and then burst over our camp.

Everybody went mad. The men rushed out of the

tents and shouted: "It's over—it's over—it's over!" I could hear one shrill voice screaming wildly: "No more bombs—no more shells—no more misery." The deafening clamour from innumerable throats was topped by the piercing blasts of whistles and the howling of catcalls. A huge bonfire was lit in the camp and sheets of flame shot skyward. The brilliant stars of signal-rockets rose and fell in tall parabolæ and lit up all the neighbourhood. The Sergeant-Major blew his whistle with the intention of restoring order. He was answered by a hullabaloo of derisive hoots and yells. He gave up the attempt and instead he headed a procession that marched into the town, banging empty tins and whirling trench-rattles. An anti-aircraft battery opened fire with blank charges. Aeroplanes flew overhead with all lights on.

Many of us went back into our tents and sang with all the power of our lungs.

So the war was over! The fact was too big to grasp all at once, but nevertheless I felt an extraordinarily serene satisfaction. Then someone said: "The people who've lost their sons and husbands—now's the time they'll feel it." The truth of this remark struck me with sudden violence. My serenity was broken and I looked into the blackness beneath it. I knew what I was going to see, but, nevertheless, I looked, in spite of myself, and saw innumerable rotting dead that lay unburied in all postures on the bare, shell-tossed earth. A horror of death such as I had never known before came upon me—a crushing, annihilating horror that seemed to impart a fiendish character to the shouting and singing in the camp, as though millions of demoniac spirits were howling and dancing with devilish glee over the accomplishment of the greatest iniquity ever known. At the same time I felt ashamed of not joining in the general jubilation, and bitterly disappointed that my own thoughts—always my worst enemies—should obsess me at this supreme hour. But I knew that the war had

lasted too long and that the world's misery had been too great ever to be shaken off. I also knew that all the dead had died in vain. In order to escape from my intolerable meditations I sat up and began to talk to my neighbour:

"I suppose it'll be read out officially to-morrow morning?"

"Sure—and we'll get a day off at least."

We continued to talk of commonplace things. It was several hours after midnight and the uproar was dying down a little. I felt sleepy and something like contentment was beginning to steal over me once again.

Reveillé did not sound until nine o'clock on the Monday morning. The whistle blew for parade. There would, of course, be an official announcement that the Armistice had been signed and perhaps a letter of thanks to the "splendid troops who had won the war" (which would bore us extremely) and a holiday (which would be welcomed with loud cheers).

We paraded. The Sergeant-Major addressed us:

"I'm sorry, boys, but nothing official's coom through. You must go to work as usual. It's a damned shame, I know, but I can't help it. I expect the message'll coom during the day and you're sure to get to-morrow off."

There was a murmur in the ranks, but bewilderment deprived us of the power of taking concerted action. A sudden fear seized me—could last night's celebrations have been the result of a false alarm?

We marched off. But no one did a stroke of work the whole day. All discipline had gone. The N.C.O.'s had no vestige of authority left. Men from other units whom we met knew no more than we did. They said the Armistice had been signed, but there had been no official announcement.

We got back to camp in the afternoon. No official news.

In the evening the celebrations were renewed. I was

troubled by an intense anxiety which began to spread to the others. Still, there would certainly be an announcement the following morning.

We paraded on Tuesday morning. No announcement of any kind. We marched off to work as usual, but again no work was done. Suddenly I caught sight of a soldier walking along the road a long way off with a newspaper in his hand. I ran after him and caught him up.

"Any news?" I asked.

He gave me the paper. It was dated Monday, the 11th November—only a day old. The headline ran: "No Armistice yet."

So Sunday's demonstration had been a sham and a fraud!

I rejoined the others. They, too, had heard that no Armistice had been signed by Sunday midnight from a despatch rider who had, however, added that signature was expected every minute.

We were back in camp. Many new rumours were circulating—the Germans had rejected the terms, the Italians had renewed the offensive. In the evening some of us thought they could hear distinct gunfire. We listened carefully, but our mental tension destroyed our power of hearing very faint sounds.

Wednesday morning, and still no definite news. The suspense was becoming unbearable. No work was done. I questioned men from five other units, but none of them were any better informed than we were.

The expectation of peace had made us forget our bitterness towards the army, but it began to show itself again:

"They don't want us to know!"

"They're damned sorry it's all over!"

"There's too many of 'em wi' soft jobs what wants the war to go on for ever!"

"What are you grumbling about? What has the Armistice got to do with us? The Armistice concerns

the Staff, not us. It's not our business—we're only common soldiers."

When we got back to camp a boy was selling papers at the entrance. I bought a *Times*. It was Tuesday's. The Armistice had been signed on the Monday morning!

I went to my tent and sat down and thought it over. The terms were ominous. There was no doubt about it this time—the war had come to an end. I thought of home and of freedom. It almost seemed as though army-life had been a dream. I was still in the army, but a few months more or less would make no difference, for my thoughts would be all in the future.

Then I pondered over the last insult the army had given us—the insult of not even telling us when the war was over, and making no concessions to allow us time for rejoicing or reflection. After having slaved and suffered all these years we were ignored as though we did not exist. Still, one insult more or less did not matter, for we would be out of it soon.

In the evening the celebrations were resumed. They lacked the spontaneity of those that were held on the Sunday night. Nevertheless, the rejoicing was genuine, for our suspense had been followed by an immense relief.

As I lay in my tent amid the shouting and singing I again felt that bitter thoughts were gathering, but I was distracted by a man sitting two places from me, who said:

"It's a bloody shame we can't get any wine or spirits and get bloody well drunk to-night."

A man lying near him, who had kept very quiet all the evening, suddenly sat up erect, glaring with fury, and shouted:

"That's all you can think about, getting drunk—you dirty little blackguard! You don't deserve to have peace, you don't! Bloody lot of fools—all shouting and singing and wanting to get drunk! They ought to have more respect for the dead! The war's over, and we're bloody

lucky to get out of it unharmed, but it's nothing to shout about when there's hundreds and thousands of our mates dead or maimed for life."

"Don't talk bloody sentimental rot—call yourself a soldier? You ought to be a bloody parson!"

"I don't call myself a soldier—it's a bloody insult to be called a soldier. I'm not a bloody patriot either—I reckon patriotism's a bloody curse. I kept out of the army as long as I could, but they combed me out (that's their polite way of putting it!), and shoved me into khaki, but they never made a soldier of me! I've never been any use to them! I only worked when they forced me to. I've been more expense and trouble to them than I'm worth. I haven't helped to win this wicked war, and I'm proud of it too! Sentimental rot be damned—if everyone had been my way of thinking there wouldn't have been a war, no, not in any country. The war's won, I know, and I'm sorry for it. But Fritz has come off best, not us. He's lost the war, but he's found his bloody soul! I'll tell the civvies something about war when I get home—I'll tell 'em we rob the dead, I'll tell 'em . . . "

"For God's sake chuck it . . . "

"All right, I'll chuck it—I know it's no bloody good talking to fellows like you. Go and get drunk, then, do as you bloody well please. That's all you're fit for . . . "

He flung himself back into bed and wrapped himself up in his blanket and did not say another word

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