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LETTERS TO HELEN







LETTERS TO HELEN  
Impressions of an Artist  
on the Western Front  
By KEITH HENDERSON

Illustrated

LONDON  
CHATTO & WINDUS  
MCMXVII





## PREFACE

THESE letters were never intended for publication.

But when the pictures were brought back from France it was suggested that they should be reproduced, and a book evolved.

Then a certain person (who shall be nameless) conceived the dastardly idea of exposing private correspondence to the public eye. He proved wilful in the matter, and this book came into the world.





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## LETTERS TO HELEN

*June 6, 1916.*

WELL, here we are in the slowest train that ever limped, and I've been to sleep for seven hours. The first good sleep since leaving England. And now, as we've got twenty-eight hours to go still, there's time to write a letter. The last three days' postcards have been scrappy and unintelligible, but we departed without warning and with the most Sherlock Holmes secrecy. Not a word about which ports we were sailing from or to.

However, I'll tell you what I can without disclosing any names of places.

After moving off at midnight from among the Hampshire pine-trees, we eventually reached our port of departure. Great fun detraining the horses and getting them on board. The men were in the highest spirits. But how disgusting those cold rank smells of a dock are.

We sailed the following evening. Hideously rough, and it took seventeen and a half hours.



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The men very quiet indeed and packed like sardines. It was wonderful to think of all those eager souls in all those ships making for France together over the black deep water. Some had gone before, and some came after. But the majority went over that night. I felt decidedly ill. And it was nervous work going round seeing after the horses and men when a "crisis" might have occurred at any moment! Luckily, however, dignity was preserved. Land at last "hove in sight" as the grey morning grew paler and clearer. What busy-looking quays! More clatter of disembarkation. No time to think or look about.

Then, all being ready, we mounted and trekked off to a so-called "rest camp" near the town, most uneasy and hectic. But food late that evening restored our hilarity. A few hours' sleep and we moved off once more into the night, the horses' feet sounding loud and harsh on the unending French cobbles. By 8 a.m. we were all packed into this train. Now we are passing by lovely, almost English, wooded hills. Here a well-known town with its cathedral looks most enticing. I long to explore. Such singing from the men's carriages! Being farmers mostly, they are interested in the unhedged fields and the acres of cloches. They go into hysterics of laughter when the French people assail them with smiles,



## FRANCE AT LAST

broken English-French, and long loaves of bread. They think the long loaves *very* humorous! There are Y.M.C.A. canteens at most stations, so we are well fed. The horses are miserable, of course. They were unhappy on board ship. A horse can't be sick, you know, even if he wants to. And now they are wretched in their trucks. Rinaldo and Swallow are, of course, terrified, while Jezebel, having rapidly thought out the situation, takes it all very quietly. She has just eaten an enormous lunch. Poor Rinaldo wouldn't touch his, and Swallow only ate a very little.

In this carriage Jorrocks is snoring like thunder. Edward is eating chocolate. Sir John is trying to plough through one of "these Frenchy newspapers—damned nonsense, you know! they don't know what it all means themselves." And Julian is scrutinizing a map of our area.

Everyone is so glad to be going up right into it now. That pottering about at home was most irritating. Just spit and polish, spit and polish all the time since August, 1914.

We are all getting cramp, and have to stand up occasionally. Toby has smoked his fourteenth pipe.

Oh, look! What a lovely rainbow! Treble. And under it a village with an estaminet, a dozen slate-roofed houses, and a very new château, hideous with scarlet bricks and chocolate draw-



## LETTERS TO HELEN

bridge and pepper-pot turrets. Poplars and more poplars. Still we rumble along through symmetrical France.

*June 7.*

We are in one of the most lovely old French châteaux I have ever imagined. Half château, half farm, fifteen miles behind the line. We remain here for two or three days. Arrived late last night, tired and grubby. But, O ye gods, when dawn began to reveal this old courtyard with its hens and chickens and pigeons! On one side the old house with its faded shutters. On the other side the old gateway with a square tower and a pigeon-cote above. Along the other sides old barns. The country round we have hardly seen, but it looks exquisite. There are several most attractive foals in a field close by.

And inside the château funny old-fashioned things—old beds with frowsty canopies, and old wall-papers with large designs in ferns and cornucopias. Imitation marble in the hall. Gilded tassels. Alas! my kit has not yet arrived. It's awful. And the anxiety to draw these things is feverish. We go so soon.

When you look out of the rooms into the courtyard, you see our waggons and draft-horses, and the men eating bully-beef like wolves. Some of



## THE CHÂTEAU-FARM

them (including Sergeant Cart) are shaving and washing stripped to the waist. The others just tear at the bread and beef and munch without speaking. Corporal Nutley and Corporal Field are pointing with their tea-mugs to the old gateway and the ducks and things. They all evidently love it. They sleep in the barns amongst the hay. The sun is warm and sleepy.

*June 8.*

Still at this lovely château-farm, and Life seems to have gone into a trance. I wake up and look out into the courtyard and the sunlight, on geese, Muscovy ducks, pigs, and pigeons, and it all feels like a half-forgotten story. There are traces of the Huns, but all that seems unreal. You hear the boom! boom! boom! of the guns all day, and more so at night; but nothing can disturb the extraordinary remote peace of this château. The very stones in the courtyard look more friendly and more countrified than ordinary stones, as if some ancient fairy lived here. There's no doubt at all that the men feel it. Several of them have said how they like the place. They think it's a little bit like —shire. I think I know what they mean.

After the war perhaps we may visit the place together: I should love showing it to you. I'm



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not at all sure that it's really very beautiful. The architecture isn't good when you consider it. But somehow . . .

*June 10.*

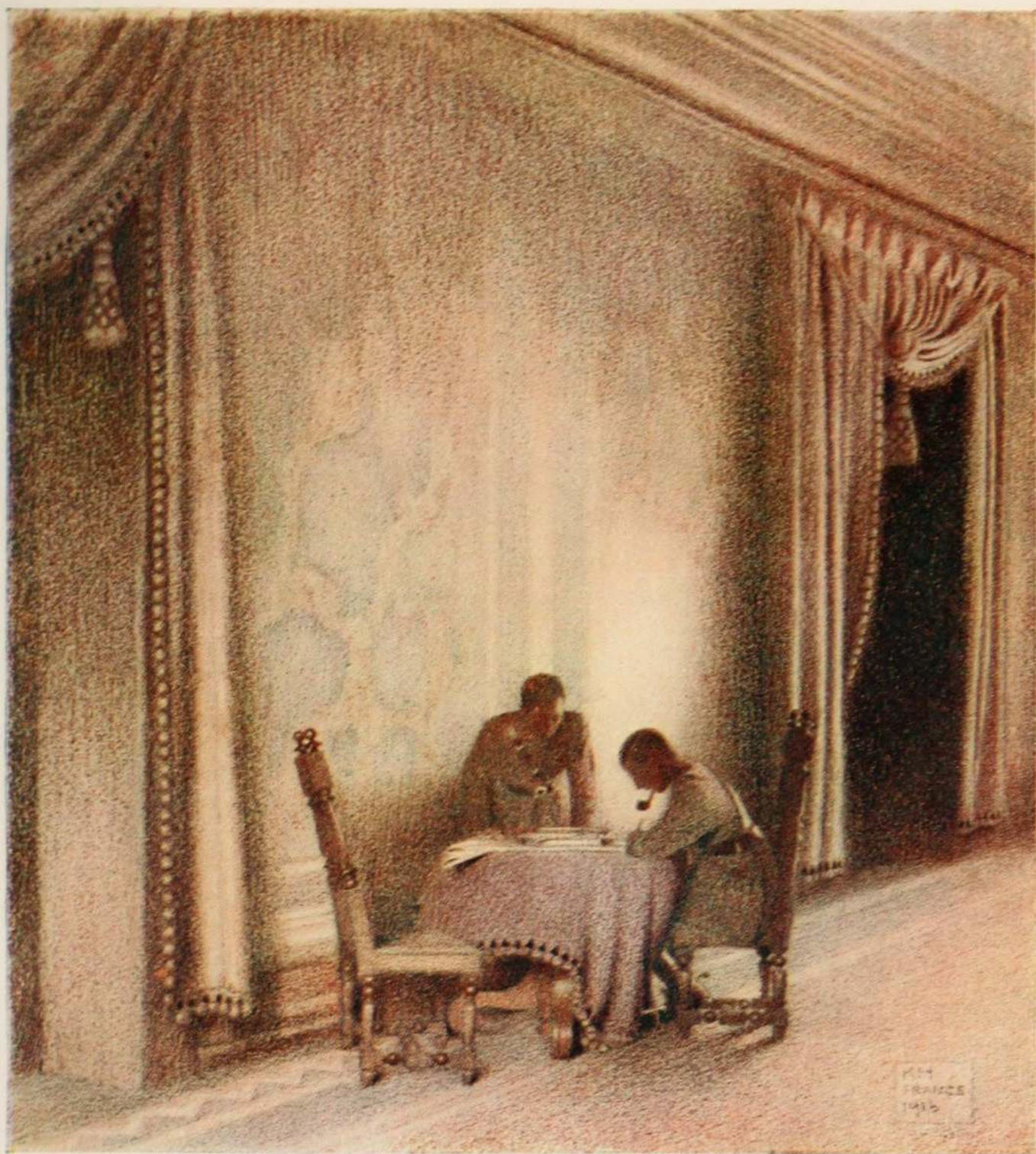
The same château. We are living a simple and brainless life. No field-days, of course, and for this relief much thanks. We don't know in the least what is happening. Troops come and troops go, and guns go by during the night, and Red Cross waggons go hither and thither, and the old turkey gobbles.

Yesterday I was out with my troop, quite uninteresting. But what do you think? Something exploded not 100 yards away from Rinaldo. I was much farther off, dismounted. He didn't turn a hair, but only looked round and watched the smoke. Whereas, as you know, a little bit of paper blown across the road sends him into paroxysms of terror.

*June 11.*

I went into an old church in a large town ten miles from here to-day with Sergeant Hodge. There were the usual tinsel things and red baize and sham flowers. Sergeant Hodge much impressed. He said after we emerged: "You know, sir, it's very fine indeed. It puts me in mind of









## A SERVICE FOR KITCHENER

a bazaar." This was in all good faith, and was intended as a great compliment to the church! We are having lots of rain, which is bad for the horses, who are picketed in the open. And thunder. It's often extremely difficult to tell whether, when the thunder is far away, it is thunder or guns. Quite a novel experience, and quite pleasant after the long period of make-believe in England. Discipline. So salutary and so irksome. Now for the battle. I own I long to get into the thick of it soon. We see infantry returning and going up, and we feel sick, somehow, to be still safe.

This country is very charming, but a bit monotonous. Every road and every field exactly like every other.

*June 13.*

A service to-day for Kitchener. And we had to ride fifteen miles there in pouring rain. Then we stood in deep mud for about an hour, the rain gradually trickling down our necks.

To-day delicious rumours of a German defeat at Verdun. Lots of prisoners, including the Crown Prince!

Goodness me, such rain. Jezebel bit Swallow above the eye merely to show what her feelings were. He now has one eye enormously



## LETTERS TO HELEN

swollen and almost closed up. It is dressed with iodine, so he looks most remarkable. His beauty much damaged. But it will only be temporary.

Hunt tells me that Swallow is so frightened of Jezebel he daren't lie down at night. But then, Hunt thinks Jezebel a sort of Bucephalus, and the more horses she kicks or bites the more pride he takes in her. He has no love for Swallow, unfortunately.

There's a distant cannonade going on to-day. We all eye each other.

*June 17.*

In the small-hours of to-night we leave this wonderful place. Why we were ever sent here or why moved away is one of those mysteries only known to a few staff officials.

But how we have loved it. At least I have. Some of the others—Jorrocks for instance—have been bored. But, then, they couldn't draw, poor dears. Do you know I have done three pictures. That's a lot in this military life. One of the courtyard, with cocks and hens and things, and in the distance men cleaning their saddles. Another of the vestibule, with Julian and Edward consulting over some map or other at a table. Another of a "fosse" or coal-pit about a mile away. A coal-pit sounds repulsive, but not so in Northern France. They are away from all houses and sur-



## FEBVIN TO BAILLEUL

rounded by corn-fields. The coal refuse is the curious part of it. Up it comes from the main shaft and is piled up into a series of large pyramids, visible for miles around. Many of the famous "redoubts" are coal-refuse pyramids really. And such nice little chimneys. Rinaldo—gone! Isn't it heartbreaking! An important person comes nosing round, and asks for him. Sir John doesn't like to refuse. I am powerless. Adieu, dear Rinaldo! One gets awfully fond of a horse. Rinaldo was very naughty sometimes, but I loved him all the more for it. And now his good looks have been disastrous. Oh that he had been uglier. Isn't it maddening. Such a leaper, so fast, and such courage. Well, perhaps I shall see him again.

*June 19.*

At the last moment an order that we are not to go. Then late last night an order to send on an advanced party of one officer and one sergeant and two men immediately. So off I go with Sergeant Dobbin and Hunt and Noad. We had to find billets and bivouacs for the squadron at a place far from here. This we did, and the squadron has just arrived, and we have had lunch and are feeling very fat indeed. We have just seen a pretty aeroplane show. Six of them flew over our heads towards the Boche, and presently



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puff, puff! went the little dark clouds of smoke all amongst them. They then got too high and too far off for us to see, but we still saw the Archie shells following them. First a flash in the sky, then a very dark spot; then the spot grows larger and fluffier, and becomes a dusky little cloud. So you see some flashes, some dark spots, and some larger fluffy clouds—all on the wretched aeroplane's track.

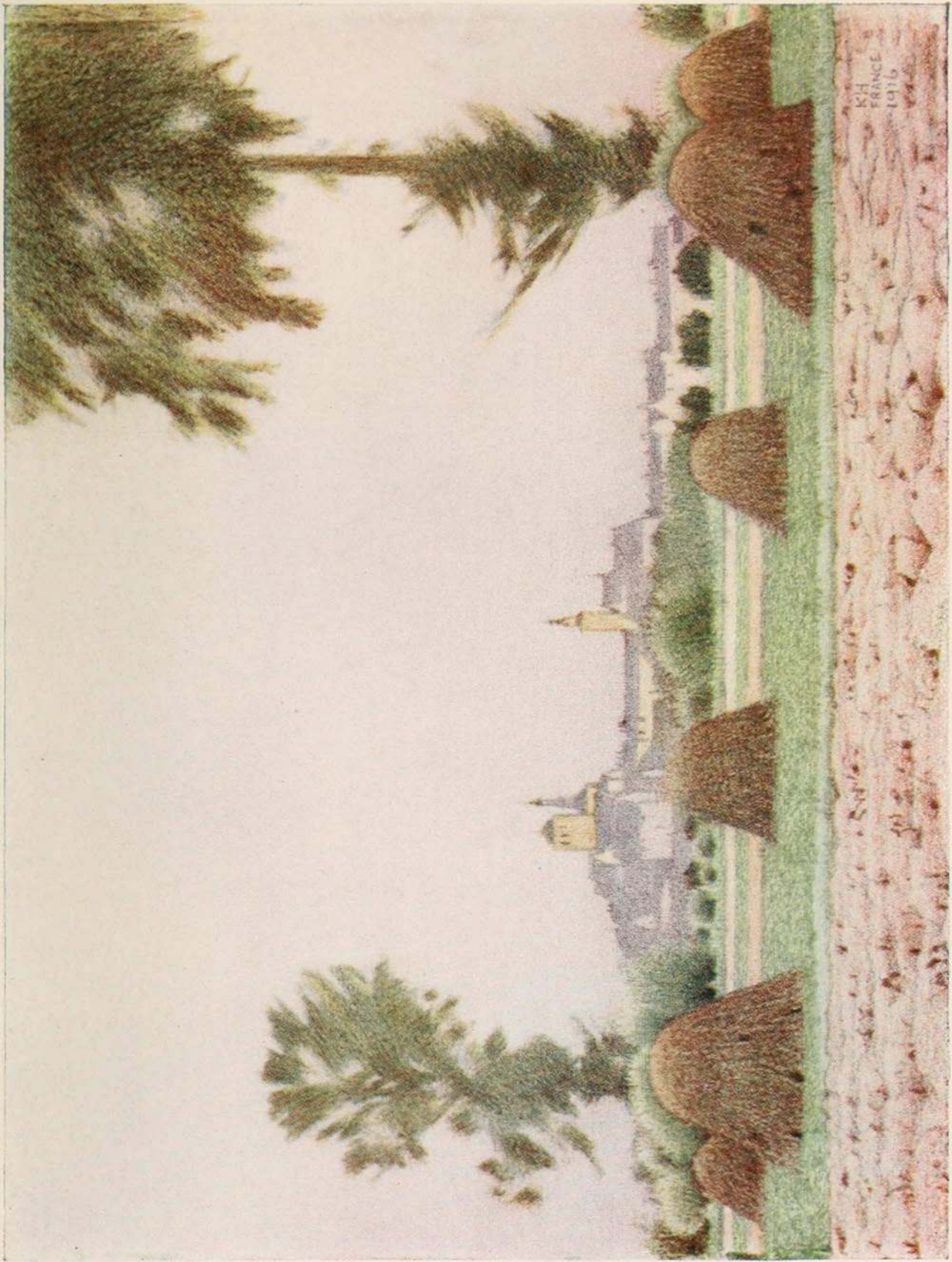
Only two returned, alas! but they told us they had brought down three Aviatiks.

We're moving with great rapidity up into colder climes. More anon.

*June 22.*

I wrote a p.c. early this morning, as I thought I might get no other chance. Things are all merry and bright. We have moved up like oiled lightning from —— to a rather famous place. Hedges and hop-fields. Very interesting church—not hurt at all. We are suffering so (at least, the poor men are) from thirst. There's no water anywhere. I long to gulp down green pond water. However, that will be remedied shortly, I hope. I went into the big town and bought a barrel of beer for the men. Tempting Providence. But there's nothing else. The water isn't good even when boiled. However, all will be well soon.









## MANY SMELLS AND NO WATER

*June 23.*

The most extraordinary things are happening. All very quiet and humdrum on the surface. Only the aeroplanes are busy, and if the sun is between you and them there are always the little black high Archie clouds following them, like vultures appearing from nowhere.

Our quick bolt up here has had several pleasant results. First, the country is very beautiful, more hilly in this immediate neighbourhood, with great plains stretching away on all sides. The low hills all have woods round them, and a windmill or a church on the top. Second, B Squadron have already arrived, and our old Brigade-Major and lots of other old friends. It was most joyous meeting them all again. We came trotting down one road, covered with dust, and they came trotting down another road even more covered with dust, having trekked all day.

Isn't it funny. One gets so quickly used to things that already we have ceased to notice the smells, which at first made us wield bottles of disinfectant wherever we went. But now, when the farms and outhouses and other places where we live smell, we merely laugh, and "fatigues" are all at work automatically before nightfall, and by next morning—well, the smells have not gone,



## LETTERS TO HELEN

but the general feeling is that a good start has been made.

The water problem is still unsolved, and we get very thirsty; but thirst is a small fleabite, after all. "Which would you rather have," I asked a discontented lance-corporal, "a bit of a thirst or a dentist drilling a hole down a pet nerve?" And he owned he'd rather have a thirst. You know, it's most awkward. They come to you when there's any difficulty and seem to think you can put things right always. For instance, a man came up the other day: "Please, sir, I've lost my haversack." "When did you miss it first?" "Between —— and ——, sir." "Now what do you want me to do?" "I don't know, sir." "Do you want me to go back to —— and search the whole of the twenty odd miles to —— on the off chance of finding it?" "No, sir." "Do you want to do so yourself?" "No, sir." "And even if I ordered you to go, do you think that, with so many troops about, you would be likely to find it still there?" "No, sir."

The result is, of course, that I have to buy one for the unfortunate lad in the nearest town. One must eat. And our haversacks are our larders. Haversacks are supplied by the army, but it takes such a time to get anything, that, if the matter is urgent, it has to be done without the army. We (the bloomin' orficers) have a



## READY FOR THE PUSH

“mess-cart” for all our absurd wines and tinned peaches and things, but the men often have nothing but the contents of their haversacks.

*June 25.*

We are in a funny state of waiting for something to happen. Rumours flying about all the time. We live on them—a bite off one, a slice off another, a merry-thought off another. And so we learn the news of the world. Papers when we get a chance of going into some town, and then only two days old, or else French, which are very scrappy. Often we get no news at all for three or four days, except what some passing ambulance will vouchsafe. And usually they don't really know much. So when there's an extra heavy strafing or an extra quiet lull we learn that the entire German staff has been captured, or Rheims evacuated, or Holland sunk, or something else equally strange. The M.G.'s were hammering away furiously last night, and the whole line was lovely with star shells hanging like arc lights in the air, and then dropping slowly to earth. They light up everything like immense moons.

*June 28.*

Starting from the farm where the horses are hidden at nine o'clock last night (twenty-one, as



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we call it out here), after a hot meal, we marched through Bedfordshire-like country, along ascending paths, to the bottom of a wooded hill where a motor lorry with picks and shovels met us. Thence along a narrow muddy path through a wood. The path circles round the hill. The east side of the hill faces the Boche front line. It was still quite light. The undergrowth thick and dank. Our fellows very merry. The Boches know this path, which is pitted with shell holes. They shell the place by day, oddly enough, but hardly ever by night.

It was raining gently. Turtle-doves continually crossed our way. I felt much intrigued. A very weird wood. The guns crashed lethargically, intermittently.

When we got round to the east side of the hill, the R.E.'s, who were acting as guides, comforters, and friends, showed us what we were to do : to dig a line of trench 6 feet deep, and as narrow as might be, for some cables that were to lead into a very important set of dug-outs for certain pink and gold people.

The dug-outs are deep in the side of the hill. It's what is called an advanced H.Q.—*i.e.*, when the Push begins, the gilded ones will crawl in and rap out messages to the various commanders, and watch the battle.

The R.E. officers showed us what was wanted,



## TRENCH DIGGING

and each man put in his pick or shovel to mark the line. This is the procedure: each pick or shovel about 2 yards apart, and each man delves on that spot till he is 6 feet down. If it were not done like this, then (when it became too dark to see) the line would be lost. This only applies fully, of course, when you are in woods or other cover. Digging isn't really a cavalry job. But what of that?

Well, now we've started. It's about ten o'clock, and getting very dim. Drizzle, drizzle, drizzle. Humphry and I creep up (neglectful of duty) to the top of the hill. A tiny tower there, smashed to pieces, but beautiful in the twilight. We creep about amongst shell craters. Presently a strange sweet odour. Flowers? Impossible. We stare into the dusk. An exquisite faint scent all around us. Surely, surely, thyme? Yes, sweet-williams, thyme. Evidently there has been a cottage here, but now only a mass of rubble and beams and glass to show where once it was. Sweet-williams, thyme, and later some Canterbury bells. Another dream-place, like that old château-farm.

What a view from here of the German lines and ours! As it gets darker, the flashes of the guns and the Very lights' solemn brilliance illuminate the whole show like a map. That tragic ruin of a town on our left is being shelled as



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usual. Jim is there. In front of us the German salient. All comparatively quiet. How lovely it is! The sounds of our men digging in the wet soil mingle now with other small noises. Voices underground. Listen. And a mouth-organ's cheery bray coming from the bowels of the earth. It is pitch-dark. We stand up like Generals surveying the battle-field. No danger. The Boche does not waste ammunition.

The rain is very heavy. I have got a tuft of sweet-william to smell.

We return to the men. They are wet through, but quite happy and content. Not a bullet, not a scrap of anything that goes pop. They work in a warm, wet peace. That is one of the odd things you learn—that only certain places are dangerous, and usually only at certain times.

The rain is coming down with tropical intensity. I am in a misty dream. It's all so mysterious. Suddenly I fall over something—plonk into the middle of some excavated earth, which the rain has made into semolina pudding. Tiresome to be absent-minded. How it pours! Midnight.

The roots of the trees make it very difficult to dig tidily, but the men use their "billucks" with the unerring skill of farmers, and their spades and picks as you or I would use a pencil. Time goes



## A STRAFE

on. The trench must be done before 2.30 a.m. We have to be gone before dawn. It is nearly done now. Half-past twelve. The rain is stopping. One o'clock. No, it isn't. It's coming down again. Half-past one. The trench is finished. We must cover up all signs of it with branches, lest the wily Taube should see, mark, learn, and inwardly digest.

A quarter to two.

Suddenly crash! bang! clash! boom! bang! We almost jump out of our skins. Where the deuce were all those guns hidden? From all about us, and far away behind and on either flank, our guns have begun strafing. The most hideous and deafening din.

The ground seems to shake. Then an order comes that we are to clear out at once. We do so. The Boches haven't answered yet, but they will. The whole thing seems quite unreal. The men vastly entertained. I honestly felt as if I were at some exciting melodrama. The least cessation of the guns, and I found myself saying: "Don't stop! don't stop!" I shouted into Corporal Nutley's ear: "Can you hear what I'm saying?" and he answered: "No, sir."

At last we got out into the little path, and had to double along through the mud. Humphry was last man out, and he saw the one and only



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shell the Boches sent over, exploding quite close to the aforementioned dug-out.

Isn't it funny. The Boches don't apparently know of this dug-out, or of the cable trenches, or they would, of course, smash it to pieces. And, for some reason that I haven't yet grasped, they never reply to our guns immediately. They wait for perhaps ten minutes, and *then* they don't always reply to the same spot we spoke from. As, for example, this wood. Our guns were all in and round about the wood. The Boches apparently strafed back at an unoffending village on the west side of the hill.

So, with our guns still behaving like things delirious, we eventually reached the horses. Jezebel was quietly gorging herself with long luscious grass beside the hedge. She told me she hadn't noticed anything unusual. Poor Swallow was standing quite still, with his nostrils wide open, breathing hard and trembling all over. A good many horses were trembling, but the majority agreed with Jezebel: "It's only some silly nonsense on the part of those Human Beings again. Don't listen."

Then we saddled up and rode back to a place well behind, where we could exercise the beasties. They had been given no exercise for three days. And so home again to this farm. The horses are all in a field surrounded by trees, and couldn't











## THE ROADS NEAR DRANONTRE

be seen from above at all. I have seen lots of other horse-lines of other units, though, much closer to the front than this is—quite open to view. The fact is, I think, that Hun aircraft very seldom indeed gets across into our preserves.

*July 6.*

Overnight it appears in orders that the roads from — to — via — are to be reported on with reference to their suitability for heavy transport, guns, cavalry, infantry, etc.

So after an early breakfast Hunt comes round, with Swallow for me and Jezebel for himself, haversack rations for us both, and feeds for the horses. I feel very much on the qui-vive, as I haven't seen that particular part before.

A grey warm day. Some miles to go due south before we get near our destination. As we approach it we find, as usual, roads and railways being made, and fatigue-parties repainting tents with blotches and stripes. Then come notices, "No traffic along this road," or, "This road liable to be shelled," with signboards at every corner, "To —" or some other place in the trenches. Sometimes the notices say "Something-or-other Avenue" or "Burlington Arcade," etc.—nick-names, but recognized officially. And all the



## LETTERS TO HELEN

time we are passing endless lorries and Red Cross waggons and troops and dug-out camps. As we get closer the signs of shelling get worse, and children are seen no longer. Old men, though, occasionally observed working in a field quite unperturbed. Rarely a French soldier or an interpreter with his sphinx badges. All this quite lost on Hunt, who has "quite got used to abroad, thank you, sir." He is eating chocolate or something, half a horse-length (the correct distance) behind me.

Now on our left is a famous ridge, with a ruined village on the top. Not, you understand, a ridge in the Swiss sense, but rather in the Norfolk sense. I should like to go and see it, but it's too open to the Boche's eye, and I don't want to dismount yet. So we curve round right-handed a bit. Aha! "To ——." *Nous voilà!* Follow down this muddy track under cover of the ridge, and we arrive at ——. A wood just beyond the little town. Oh, mournful wood! "*Bois épais, redouble ton ombre.*" But they say the anemones and the primroses were as merry and sweet as ever this spring. Bravo little wood!

The village is, of course, evacuated by all inhabitants. The houses all in ruins. By now all the remaining windows have been boarded up and the blown-out doors barred against prying eyes. Here we are at an old estaminet called



## PLOEGSTEERT

“Aux Cœurs joyeux.” There’s hardly anything but the sign left. At the cross-roads in the centre of the town is the church, so dismal. No roof, pillars broken and lying about the floor amongst débris of broken images, chairs, and muddy rubble.

As I am coming out I turn over the hand of an image, and underneath it what the deuce is this? Why, a fragment of an old picture, torn and decaying away. What shall I do? Leave it to rot? Give it to . . . Yes, exactly . . . to whom? And would anyone thank me for it? Just a head of St. John, very battered and faded. It’s a fragment about a foot square, and through all the mud one can see something like this: A head of St. John in the corner; rays of light (two very thin small rays) shining on him, and a look of great suffering on his face. The background a sort of dull ochre. Evidently once a large composition. There are two books, one with EVAN, and the other with, I think, BIBLIA SACRA, written on it. It is quite worthless except from a sentimental point of view.

The exposure and the heat of the explosions have sadly cracked and peeled the paint, but it seems vaguely symbolical. Near here I picked up some minute bits of green glass.

However, there was a notice: “It is dangerous to loiter here.” So I tore myself away, and we



## LETTERS TO HELEN

remounted. The Boche can't see into the town because of the remaining buildings, but the whole place is utterly empty—not a dog even.

Soon the road to the next village *is* exposed to the Boche's view. Therefore canvas screens about 20 feet high have been erected, so that, if necessary, troops, and even lorries, can hurry by. It is most curious. "But for that thin bit of canvas, my good Swallow, you would get something into your tummy you wouldn't like," I remarked. At that moment the sun came out. We were keeping to the side of the road where it is soft going. Suddenly Swallow leaped like a stag into the middle of the road all over the *pavé*. Panic terror. He had seen the shadow of a starling flit across his path!

Jezebel was tittuping along behind, thinking only of her next feed. I cannot get her to take any interest in these thrilling spots. Sometimes a soldier or two would emerge from a cellar, the entrance to which would be piled up with sandbags. And once or twice bang! bang! goes a gun quite close by.

Well, so we go through the next deserted and wrecked village, again out of sight of the Boche, because of the ruins and a few trees. Then into a very famous town indeed, and across a river three times by three different bridges—not the old bridges, which are broken down, but sapper-



## ARMENTIERES

built bridges. Here is a party going into the trenches just on the far side of the town. They look distinctly cheery, and are all of the same ripe brown. Thence right-handed again and gradually back to civilization, or, rather, to life first and civilization some way behind. Eventually people strolling about and shops. I bought a pair of those jolly French-tartan stockings for little Bun. With a grey dress they will look most charming, I think.

Again masses of soldiers with their field-kitchens in muddy fields from which all traces of grass have been stamped long ago. And the everlasting mule. There are mules everywhere out here.

Such attractive cottages, white with green shutters, and sometimes little Dutch gardens. Many windmills, several pigeons always fluttering round each. A lorry in a ditch. A roadside canteen, with perhaps an A.S.C. camp near by. Fields and fields of corn and every other crop under the sun. I long to sketch, but feel slightly nervous of so doing so far from camp. I don't want to be arrested as a spy. We are practically out of the danger area by now, but you never know. Some boring A.P.M. might pounce on the sketch and create a botheration.

Meantime I have been laboriously making pretty maps to present to Sir John, coloured



## LETTERS TO HELEN

maps showing where such and such a rise of ground could be held, or where such and such a road offers difficulties to transport, etc. But it's not easy to do, and we don't get back to camp till five minutes before stables, having covered about thirty miles. Besides, we had to stop and feed ourselves and the horses.

Then stables. Sergeant Hodge reprimanded for not having reported a bad kick. Southcombe slacking a bit. Must keep an eagle eye on that young man. At the end a whistle (no trumpets allowed). The horses all neigh and toss their heads and paw. Nosebags are put on, and after touring round to see that all is correct we slope off to tea, which Hale and Co. have got all ready. Luxurious ménage as of yore. But good when you're hungry, there's no doubt. We are moving again—probably to-morrow.

*July 10.*

We have moved. The sixth time altogether. Not far though. A close view of the sweet-william hill. It must be sketched.

I am sitting on some sacks of corn, wondering why Fritz doesn't lob over a crump or two, just to wake us up. Jezebel is gorging herself close by. Swallow eats a bit, and then suddenly looks up and sniffs nervously. I suppose he has heard



## THE HORSES

a beetle trotting by, or seen a twig fall off a tree.

The horses are all picketed out in a field, and we are in bivvies. Hale has made me a bed out of some poles and wire netting, as he says it is a clay subsoil and I mustn't lie on the grass. I suppose he knows.

*July 12.*

I'm writing this in a queer dilapidated mud cottage, inhabited by an ancient ex-soldier aged eighty-three. He is very difficult to understand. His language is quite foreign to me. But he owns the quaintest little doll-like image of the Virgin in a glass case, and several Bristol balls! I nearly fell flat when I saw them. His grandfather, I think he says, was in England once. The cottage is quite close to our present camp, and we go in for meals when it's very wet.

The bed Hale made me is growing into a house. He has discovered various old sacks, bits of tarred felt, and planks, and the place is becoming a most attractive little abode.

Then you must imagine an old wild-cherry tree, and lots of young oaks and elders, etc., all round. Jezebel and Swallow live close by. Jezebel has acquired a new trick. You know she doesn't like having her tummy groomed.



## LETTERS TO HELEN

Well, now (especially, of course, when it's very muddy) she waits till Hunt has finished dressing her, and then, as soon as his back is turned, she lies down and rolls. Hunt is in despair. He used to be really fond of her. But now I believe he'd kill her if he could, sometimes. All his labour entirely and ridiculously in vain. I'm convinced that she does it on purpose, because she always chooses just the moment when he has achieved a beautiful polish on her, and either has to go off to breakfast or else to get the saddle or something. It's as good as a play.

We are learning the "tactical" merits of all the roads and woods and hills (such as they are) all along our sector of front, and as much as we can, with field-glasses, of the other side. An offensive. What fun. But exactly where are we going to offend? Rumours everywhere. If, we say, that village or that ridge has to be taken from this or that unexpected position, how shall we do it? Suppose we get Fritz on the hop, as they have near Peronne. Where are the most covered approaches to the slopes of that hill? Shall we carry the thing off as splendidly as those squadrons did before Peronne, or shall we bungle the show? You'll see.

We get so few papers here, and only two days old at that, but no one seems much the worse for it.



## NEUVE EGLISE

Only one solitary man with lice so far. The man has been sent away, and is, I hear, to be given sulphur baths and scrubbed with a scrubbing brush.

Oh, I was going to say just now—*re* reconnoitring—that we were doing all the ground about a village where there is a church even more smashed than the St. John place. It is on a hill, and all the village is Sahara. The church remains with the remnants of four outside walls and the tower. Fritz does not destroy the tower, as it is a good spot for him to range on to. And outside the tower, right up at the top, is the bronze minute-hand of the old clock. The rest of the clock-face has been blown into the middle of the church, and lies there nearly complete amidst a crumbled heap of pillars and mortar and chair-legs and pulpit fragments. One notice on a house amused me so, and the troop too. It says, "Do not *touch* this house." The reason being rather obvious. For if you did touch the house, it would certainly fall on to your head. The next shell will bring it down, even if it's a couple of hundred yards away, merely by the vibration. We find shell holes so useful for watering the horses. They seem to retain water in a most curious way.



## LETTERS TO HELEN

*July 19.*

On the move again. A four days' trek. Not more than twenty miles a day, in order to keep the horses "in the pink." They are certainly very fit now, and a gentle twenty miles a day just keeps them nicely exercised. But twenty miles *at a walk* is not overexciting. Still, it is interesting to be covering the ground. We already know quite a lot of the back of the front. Last night we arrived in a cool lull after showers. From quiet and uneventful stretches of hedgeless corn-fields, intersected by long straight roads, lined sometimes with poplars, but more often with lopped wych-elms or willows, we descended rather suddenly into a little wooded valley where a village sits by the trouty stream. After watering the horses at the stream, we filed by squadrons into various fields and picketed down for the night. Some of us in a small but clean estaminet, others in barns.

A very peaceful trek, quite different from the dazzling swoop that was threatened.

*July 20.*

Am I telling you about the things you want to hear? Usually I think I've talked mostly about our surroundings, doings, and only to a very small extent about our thoughts. But, truth



## FLESSELLES

to relate, we think so little that there is not much in that line to record. On this job you just can't think. And a good thing too, perhaps.

However, here we are, and here I expect we shall remain for, say, a week. The horses are all right out in the open. The men are in barns. But we are in cottages—real, almost English-looking cottages. Edward and I share a room in one, and the others are dotted about the village. Now, this is the cottage:

From the high street (the only street) you turn into a little gate, and then walk down a path of brick with a narrow flower border on either side, and vegetables beyond. The cottage is white, with lace curtains and brick floors, without carpets, like all French cottages. The walls have endless pictures of saints and things, with occasional crucifixes and school certificates and faded photographs of people in stiff dresses and crimped hair.

Out at the back more kitchen-garden with some fruit-trees.

Altogether quite a charming little place. Dusty and rather flat open country intersected by deepish valleys, not unlike the Cirencester road if you removed all the woods, or nearly all. We don't, of course, know what we are going to do now.



## LETTERS TO HELEN

*July 23.*

Things is curiouser and curiouser. In all haste we got ready to move. We then moved like tortoises. I rode over to —— yesterday. Cavalry all over the place like locusts. And, lawks! what a din! Guns in a violent paroxysm of rage. Aeroplanes wandering about in the sky, purring like angry panthers, all yellow in the sunlight. And all day and night more dusty men and dusty horses and dusty lorries and dusty guns coming and going, coming and going.

The other squadron at last quite close to us. Long talks with Dennis. He's had an exciting time, and was under orders for a most hair-raising job, which didn't come off owing to Fritz's tiresome habit of doing the unexpected. Horrors! The General has been trying Swallow. I fear he may steal him. Of course he has every right to any horse in the regiment, but it is quite difficult to smile. Swallow is, unfortunately, even more showy than Rinaldo was; but he shied at a goat, bless him, and I think that may just turn the scale. I shall now proceed to train Swallow to shy at every blade of grass, every grain of sand. Long live that goat! We are still "standing by." It is a wearing existence. I bathed yesterday in a well-known river. So beautiful and willowy.



## A BATH

*July 28.*

Temperature 100,000° ! And I am lying on a bed in a wee cottage, very, very dusty and dirty. Hale, however, is going to bring some water from the pump, and, oh Jerusalem, won't it be heavenly—a bath ! All these things off, and lovely clean things on, and lovely coffee to drink when that's done. I wouldn't change the prospects of the next half-hour for all the pearls and peacocks of Araby—no, not if you offered me the Peace of Europe ! Europe be blowed ! I want my bath.

You see, it's like this : The corps H.Q. moved to a different area some days ago, preceded by us. Everything in the area left in an utterly unorganized, uncatalogued condition. We have to tear round and find out where the various divisions can go.

And we have *got* to find room for more divisions than have ever occupied this area before. Useless to come back and report that such and such villages have no water for men or horses. The water has got to be found. Dig for it. Organize fatigue-parties and dig. Dam up little trickles by the roadside until quite large ponds are formed. Get the engineers and pioneers on to it. Labour battalions—anything. So I've



## LETTERS TO HELEN

been riding madly about, and I'm like a treacle pudding in a sand-storm.

The bath! Hale, you are a most excellent fellow. That'll do splendidly. Have you got my towel? . . . INTERVAL. . . . And now, dear friends, it is another man that you see before you. A man who has had a bath. A man less like a bit of oily motor-waste, and more like Sir George Alexander. This delicious coffee, too! A bowl of it, made by Mme. Whatever-her-name-is. I take it up in both hands and quaff it. Here's to You and to Home, and to Everybody—and (just to show there's no ill feeling) here's to the poor old Boche!

*July 29.*

In the same cottage.

It's very hot. Ammunition lorries go by in an endless string, making the deuce of a dust. But we are far away from guns and gun food and noise. I got leave to go up to — yesterday.

I do dislike noise so, don't you? The noise of a battery in action is diabolical, and the very thought of it makes me shiver. There go the senseless lorries, all packed with music for a more hellish orchestra than you can remotely imagine. The first few bars are enough to drive you nearly frantic. It's unholy. It seems to split your











## GUNS AT FRICOURT

head and tear your ears out of their sockets. Can you understand a noise that hits you? Hits unbearably, and then again. Crashes on to you. Bangs your bones out of your skin, till you feel dazed and sick.

Still the lorries go by.

*August 3.*

I hear the General doesn't like Swallow, so there's a good chance of his returning. When you get angry with Swallow, he loses control of his legs altogether, and they all fly about in every direction. He is quite like Rinaldo in character,—not so perpetually fidgety, but as nervous, and more easily frightened. Jezebel is showing her worth now like a Trojan. She knows she has to make up for the loss of Swallow (whom I think she rather misses). She is behaving splendidly. She is blatantly well, and obeys all orders like clockwork; never tired; always hungry—a model. The other mare, Moonlight, a dark brown, seems to be somehow exhausted. I think she has had a very hard time of it, and has been wounded in the foot. Her foot is all right now, but she seems to have no life left in her. The war has utterly beaten her. Hunt is grazing and grooming and petting her all day. So she may pick up. At present she is somehow rather



## LETTERS TO HELEN

pathetic. She was with the Indian cavalry before she got wounded. And then she went to a veterinary hospital. She is well made, and may possibly brighten up. Hunt declares that she has "lost all her courage." I'm glad I'm not a horse.

*August 5.*

This is such an amazing country and in such an amazing condition. I could collect a Harrod's Stores in a day—interesting and useful things, too. But it's impossible to carry things about. One daren't overload the horses, and one daren't overload the transport. Both are so heavy laden, as it is.

The signal job is quite interesting, really, and the Colonel gives me an absolutely free hand.

Jezebel and Co. are driven distracted by the horse-flies. I took Jezebel into a stream to-day, but she started to sit down! So the flies must just bite, I fear. Large grey brutes.

Hunt made me laugh so last night. I was looking round the horses with Edward. They were waiting to be fed with their evening hay. To my surprise and pleasure, Moonlight suddenly neighed. "Evidently getting her appetite back," I remarked. "Oh yes, sir," says Hunt; "several



## JEZEBEL IN ONE OF HER MOODS

times I've caught her *hollerin'* for her meals lately!" Isn't that a lovely expression?

Hunt is such a good chap. He thinks nothing of "abroad," but a lot of the "'osses," as he calls them. I found him what seemed to me a very nice loft to sleep in when we got here. But no: "I'd rather sleep with my 'osses, sir, thank you." And he sleeps practically under their noses. "You see, sir, the mare might get one of her moods on."

He is getting very fond of Jezebel now, and whenever she errs, he attributes the error to one of her moods.

She tore her nosebag to pieces the other day; whether because she was hungry and it was empty, or because it amused her, or because she was being bitten by a fly, I don't know. No one seems to have seen her do it. "One of her moods," says Hunt; and that's all there is to be said about the incident.

My dear, this country is most enchanting. Far away from nasty noises, full of unexpected wooded valleys and willowy streams.

All the little shrines are, as usual, surrounded by half-clipped trees.

And the wild-flowers. Clear pale blue succory is the most charming of all, and I am going to send you some plants as soon as they have ceased flowering.



## LETTERS TO HELEN

*August 6.*

You can't think how difficult it is to take any interest in military matters sometimes. The inclination to let things slide. The feeling that an order is not so terrifying as it once was; that, after all, who will know or bother if one furtive subaltern creeps out one evening to sketch?

*August 8.*

Do you know, it's unintelligent, but I do so enjoy being here away from the fevers of war. War is getting tedious, and the summer is all too short.

Swallow is coming back. Isn't it splendid! The General finds him too irritating and tiresome. Jezebel will be glad, for she doesn't like the ghost-horse Moonlight, and she never really disliked Swallow. I can't say she liked him, because she likes no one, dear lamb. But she used to look on Swallow with rather less suspicion, somehow. And Swallow has a habit of licking that she approves of. I have often seen her snap at him even while he is licking her; but he always continues after a moment. I think it soothes her when the flies are tiresome.

This place has a beautiful church, which I have drawn. It's quite an unusually charming bit of the country.



## DOMART

*August 11.*

Jezebel did such an astonishing thing yesterday. I was out with the signallers practising. We didn't want the bother of holding or picketing the horses. So I ordered "off-saddle," and then put a guard over the disused quarry where I had decided to leave them. The quarry had a grassy floor, and walls of chalk that in one place were only about 7 foot high. Jezebel has been so good (for her) lately, that I determined to leave her with the other horses. They were stripped of all bridles and saddles and things, and had heaps of room to wander.

Meanwhile we were carrying on with our work.

Presently shouts from the guard. I went back to see what was the matter. My dear, Jezebel had tried to jump out of the quarry!

She had tried twice, but the sides were too steep and high, and she had slipped back. When I arrived, she was quietly grazing as if nothing had happened. Ah, but wait. This is not all.

Later on in the morning another hoo-roosh. A loud squealing and sounds of kicking. One of her moods again, I thought to myself grimly. That well-known voice. I should recognize her squeal anywhere. As I was going towards the quarry with Corporal Dutton to get her tied up or else



## LETTERS TO HELEN

hobbled, lo and behold! the two guards had vanished. "What the devil . . ." And all of a sudden out pour the horses careering downhill like mad! It was so appalling that Corporal Dutton and I just stood and shouted with laughter.

My dear, if there is anything in the whole world that goads a Major, a Brigadier, or any other military man, to fury and madness, it is a loose horse.

Imagine, then, forty-four horses all riderless, without saddles or bridles (and therefore almost impossible to catch), stampeding straight into a corps H.Q. village. This village is crawling with Generals!

Well, in the end we caught them all, and by some dazzling piece of luck, for which Allah be praised, no General, no Colonel, nor anyone else, seems to have got wind of the incident. Subalterns, yes, and I am sumptuously ragged about it. But how all the Generals and things happened to be out of sight and hearing at the time, I don't know. And *still* this is not the cream of the comedy.

After giving orders for rounding up the animals, I went on to the quarry with Corporal Dutton. My dear, *There was Jezebel grazing, as cool as a cucumber!*

She still further insulted me by coming up and



## ANOTHER MOVE NORTHWARDS

trying to push her nose into my pocket, where I sometimes keep an apple for her.

The guards, you see, had instantly gone in to get her away from the horse she was kicking, when we first heard the commotion. The other horses had mooned out of the entrance gap, and then, I suppose, something—a fly, perhaps—had frightened them, and off they had galloped. While “the accursed female,” as we sometimes call Jezebel, too sensible to stampede, quietly continued feeding. I shall never be taken in by her air of innocence again. Never. I don’t a bit mind saying I was decidedly alarmed. That mare might have been responsible for the death of the Corps Commander.

O Jezebel, I wish I could get angry with you and give you a jolly good hiding one day. But you know I can’t, you dear old thing. I’m writing this in the orchard, where the H.Q. horses live, and Jezebel is standing sleepily in the shade of her tree. She looks intensely stupid. She occasionally tries to flick away a fly with her short tail. Occasionally she sighs deeply, with that blubbery, spluttery noise that all horses make when they sigh.

*August 15.*

On the move. This is our first day’s trek, and we are at a place where we have been before—



## LETTERS TO HELEN

but not the same billets. I am in a cottage with an earth floor (which looks very odd with a hideous drab-coloured wall-paper), and small children and hens, both dirty, wander in and out of my room. It's too hot to keep the door latched. A swallow's nest in the room next door; and the people say that, although the young have flown, they still return at night.

*August 19.*

The Adjutant is away, and won't be returning for some time; so I am still acting. And this, together with signal work, etc., is somewhat arduous. I live all day in the "office," a very small bivouac in a green field. There I sit praying for inspiration, when letters come in marked *Urgent*, beginning something like this:

“ LP/3657042—G1.

“ Ref. your memo HC/516342/L12 of 13/8/16, please find A.F. 361B for completion and immediate return.”

And I haven't the least idea what I said in my memo HC/516342/L12 of 13/8/16, and I can't find any record of it. And I can't for the life of me make out how I am meant to fill in A.F. 361B, because I haven't the least idea what it's all about.



## BEHIND KEMMEL

*August 26.*

Impossible to write yesterday, and only a brief scrawl to-day.

The regiment is being scattered over the face of the earth—an O.P. here, an O.P. there; a digging-party here, a draining-party there, etc., etc., etc.; not to mention a few on duty as military police *pro tem.*, others guarding bomb shelters, others reconnoitring new areas for new divisions, etc. Dennis is very badly wounded. He can't be moved yet. Some bits of shell went into his thigh, up his back, and it's not certain yet whether it entered his lungs or not. They are afraid so. He was on his tummy at an O.P. A crump got him. Dear old Dennis! I hope he'll pull round. Also Clive is very seriously wounded, I fear. Damn!

*August 27.*

I am Acting Adjutant now. An Adjutant's job is a most hairy job, and I sit with drops of perspiration dripping off my brow all day. Never see the horses, never get any exercise except for a moment or two.

*August 29.*

We are probably going to move again soon, and consequently the amount of correspondence



## LETTERS TO HELEN

is vast. Clive is better, I think. Dennis about the same. I suppose a thing can go into your lung and not kill you?

*September 2.*

The Colonel seemed (from a telegram he sent yesterday morning) to be in a great hurry for me to come down to the other squadron. So I decided to go by train, and send Hunt with the horses. And this is the train journey.

The station at ——— quite recovered and tidy after a feeble strafing the other day. Even two or three civilians travelling. Not many of the military—a hundred or so, perhaps, all waiting and smoking idly, each armed with his “Movement Order.” The dull boom of guns not excessive, though there’s a frequent “plom! plom! plom!” of the Archies, and the sky is dotted with clusters of pretty little shrapnel clouds. Sometimes the crack! crack! crack! crack! of machine guns high up in the blue. It makes you feel slightly homesick. I don’t quite know why. That sort of thing isn’t done at home.

In comes the train. The French station officials all in a paroxysm of excitement because one Tommy throws down a gas helmet for the train to run over. Up we clamber. Hale heaves up valise and coat and so forth, and retires to a



## THROUGH HAZEBROUCK

“third,” while I feel a beast lounging in this luxurious “first.” Off we go, and I look out at all the familiar country.

There’s one of those quaint French notices in the carriage :

<p>TAISEZ-VOUS ! MÉFIEZ-VOUS ! LES OREILLES ENNEMIES VOUS ÉCOUTENT !</p>
--

All too necessary, they tell me.

*Later.*—It is getting dark. We stop at a large town that I know well. Two hours to wait. I turn in to a Follies show. There is usually one going on, run by this or that division, all soldiers, but looking very odd in their paint and ruffles. But what a curious concert. The first I’ve seen out here. The comic Scot vastly popular ; but even more so are hideously sentimental songs all about the last bugle and death and my dead friends under the earth and eternal sleep. You know ? However, they love it, and the dismal piano beats a tinny accompaniment.

Staff officers even are here, and I recognize one Somerset ; also Grey, who was in the Gun section with Dennis and me, now a Captain. Delightful talking over old times.

*Later.*—Into the train again. On the platform



## LETTERS TO HELEN

beforehand I meet a gunner subaltern. We talk. He's very well read, and interested in lots of the things I love so much. We discuss the war. He knows a lot of the billets I know. Evidently we have nearly met out here often before. What is that book he is reading? Richard Jefferies? From Jefferies to Maeterlinck. What has become of him? War so foreign to that mystic mind. Yet his beautiful abbey in Flanders must be in the hands of Fritz, if it still exists at all. We talk for about two hours. Then he gets out at ——. I don't know what his name is, and very likely I won't ever meet him again. But out here one makes friends quickly. There are so many of us all in the same boat. And one hardly expects ever to meet again. Then (alone in the carriage) I doze. The electric light in full blaze, and no curtains are down. Stations rather like bad dreams. Soldiers everywhere. A great clanking of horse-trucks and gun-carriages. Vast stores of timber for huts. Bookstalls open all night. These trains seem to hoot and whistle most horribly. Far more noisy than English trains, surely. That, combined with all the shouting and clatter of trollies, etc., rather racking in the small hours. At 5 a.m. we arrive at ——, where we all change.

*Later.*—No one allowed outside the station except officers and sergeants. But, dash it all,



## ABBEVILLE

I can't leave Hale here the whole day. Our train leaves at 8.36 to-night. The R.T.O. will be here at 7 a.m. Let's see what we can work. Meanwhile (5.30) the platformless station is full of men, who have just dumped themselves and their kits down where they stood. They haven't finished sleeping. It looks like a battle-field. They lie in every attitude, officers among them. Hale is eating from his bully-beef tin in silence. A few men stand round a Y.M.C.A. stall drinking coffee or eating chocolate, cake, and stuff.

*Later.*—I got Hale out, and took him to see the cathedral. He said he thought it must have cost a lot of money. Not a bad criticism, either. Then I let him go his own way, and now it's 1.45 p.m. Had a charming lunch—two œufs à la coque, thé, and croissants. Now I'm sitting by the side of the river—very peaceful. There's a white goat on the other bank, and its reflection is dancing gently all the time.

Several French widows are talking together near the goat, their black veils hanging funereally; and there's a small boy with socks and a bowler hat, all black, too. Poor dears!

Good heavens alive! there's George! He has just flashed by in a car, red cap and all. If only there had been time to hail him! Now for a sleep till it's time for tea.



## LETTERS TO HELEN

*September 5.*

This is a part of the line I don't know at all, a most exciting area. I have been up several times into what is by the way of being our front line, but the whole thing is so chaotic that often the Huns come into our trenches and we go into theirs quite by mistake.

I have several times gone right across the open, within full view of Fritz (whom I could see), at a distance of 600 yards. I think they must all be very confused, also, as there is very little rifle fire and very little organized sniping. Nothing but shelling, with the result that for miles and miles there's just tumbled earth.

The famous woods you read about are mere scratchy little collections of a few tree-stumps splintered and wrecked beyond belief. Things lie scattered everywhere in aimless profusion. Muddy rifles, coats, boots, and every description of kit, both British and Hun. I have met lots of men I know, and everyone is very cheery and hopeful. Fritz is withdrawing his big guns—always a good sign. However, the myriads of prisoners nearly all look a sound type of man still. They are put to work a long way behind the line immediately, which is good.



## THE SOMME FRONT

*September 7.*

We have been for some time right up in parts quite destitute of houses and villages and shops. All the remnants of villages here are ruins. And messing is consequently more difficult. So may I have a large-sized cake now and then?

The war isn't over yet, I fear. We live in the usual touch-and-go condition.

*September 8.*

Things hum. Troops like ants all over the ground. In tents, in bivvies, in the open, everywhere. And the eternal chain of motor lorries bringing up ammunition and supplies. These one sees all over France. But here they block half the roads. Well, yesterday morning I rode out alone with the Colonel and two orderlies. We went to some high ground from which you can see it all, dismounted, and sent the horses back. In front of us, in the valley, a wrecked town with the strangest thing on the still-standing tower. I hope to make a picture of it if ever I can get any time again.

Later in the day from one of our O.P.'s I began a sketch of the whole panorama of the battle. Desolate ragged country, torn with shell wounds; the poor scarecrow trees like arms stretched up to heaven for help. Fields that



## LETTERS TO HELEN

once were golden with corn now grey and scarred with white trenches that look like a network of pale worms lying where they died.

Now, from another O.P. I'm looking at the arid chaos below. Arid and lonely-looking, but not silent. A strafe is on. Seems to be getting louder and more continuous. We passed on our way here a great naval gun crashing out death to the burrowing Huns. Swallow doesn't like naval guns.

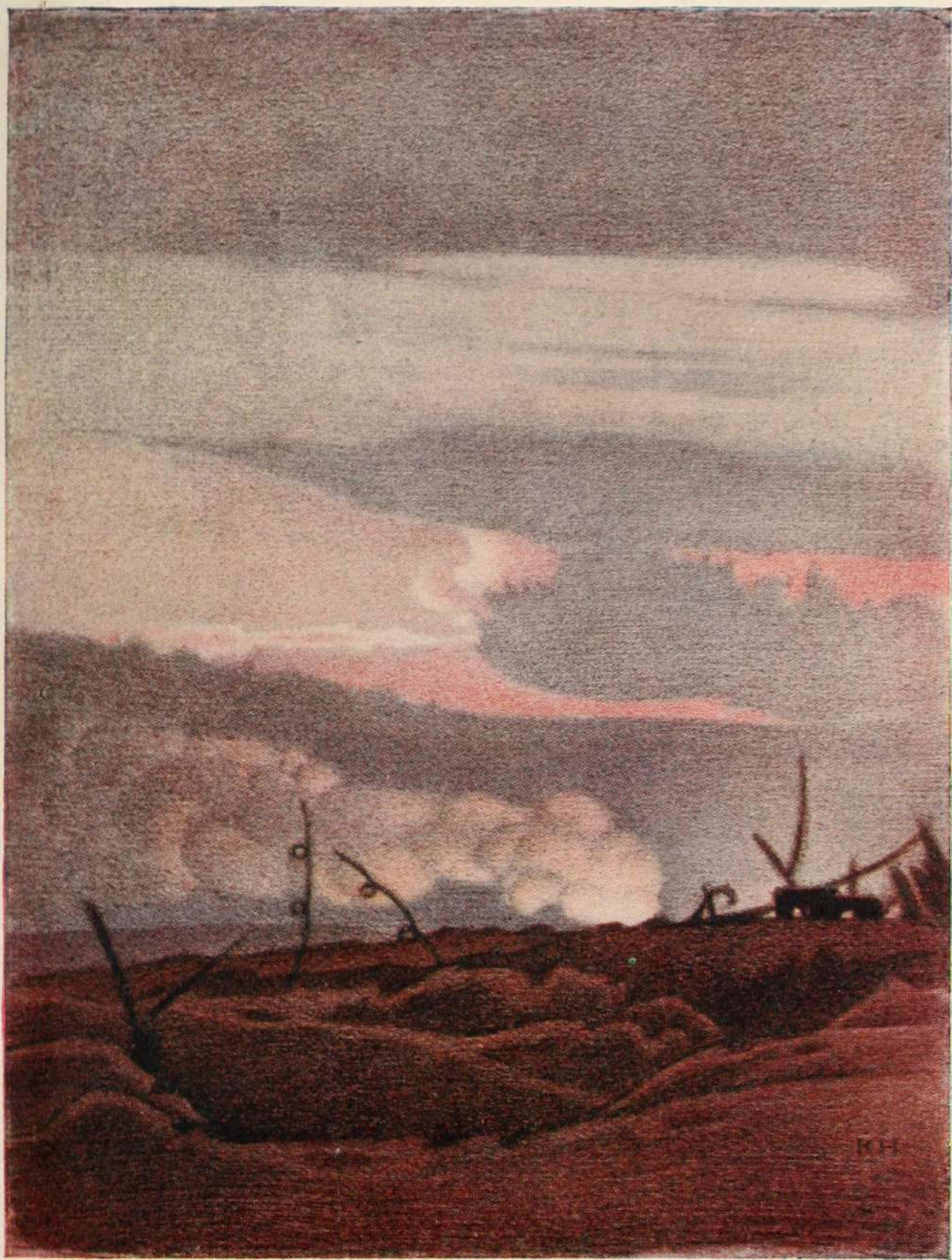
From flimsy net shelters flash the expensive guns, and the bombardment gathers strength, gathers volume, until you'd think something must burst—the world or the universe: either might split from end to end. The dust and smoke are gradually making everything invisible. Crumps come whistling and heaving up great clouds of heavy blackness. We look at our watches. Zero hour in five minutes. The aeroplanes buzzing aloft, and the sausages sitting among the low clouds, inert and so vulnerable-looking. Can there be anything left? Can a single soul live?

*September 9.*

Surely we shall get through. Even in spite of the rain. The rain has made the country into a quagmire.

Reconnoitred the front trenches to-day with the Colonel, in a particular part where everything











is at sixes and sevens, and no one quite knows what we haven't or have got. Most odd. Shells of all calibres bursting on every side—corpses, odours unspeakable.

You see, things are expected to happen soon, and so I'm anxious to know all about it. This part of the line is terrific.

Where we are, and for miles and miles around, myriads of troops, cavalry, artillery, everything, all camped in the open—no concealment. Mud? Why, everyone is mud, up to the eyes, and so are the horses. This big movement has quite dislocated the ordinary trench warfare, and now all over the dreary uplands are trenches hurriedly dug by the Hun and then abandoned. Trenches that often barely shelter you above the knees. Chaos, chaos. Rifles lying to rust in the mud, duds everywhere, men sitting in dug-outs, not knowing what they are expected to do next. Others in mere scratched-out shelters or in actual shell holes. Sometimes they sing. Often they are asleep. Wreckage indescribable. Shrapnel crackling into black clouds close by. Enormous and magnificent H.E.'s hurling up black earth and red earth, and smoke that drifts slowly and solidly away to limbo. Poor dead men lying about, and dead horses, too. And in the trenches this limitless porridge of mud. Cr-r-r-ump! go the crumps searching out a battery. But oh the



## LETTERS TO HELEN

woods—the poor scarecrow woods. I was in a famous wood that looked positively devilish in its sinister nakedness. And it's September, too, when woods are so often at their loveliest. Not a leaf—not one single leaf; and, instead of undergrowth, just tossed earth, fuses, a boot, a coat, some wire, and above-ground dead men. Below-ground (or as far below as they can get in the time) live men.

The Boche dug-outs are marvellous. They are really works of art. So solidly, even beautifully built. I went into one that had wooden pillars supporting the roof like some baronial hall, with neat little cupboards, tables, beds, and everything complete. There were two of our M.M.G. officers sleeping there, and we left them sleeping. But emerge out into daylight, and ye gods! the confusion makes you feel awed. A village is usually a heap of rubble, with here and there a bit of a gaudy enamelled coffee-pot or something; a geranium from a window, still growing; a china egg, a bit of a chair, a bit of an iron gateway. And as far as the eye can see in this particular region, just undulating stretches of tormented earth. All the old game of never showing above the parapet is quite disregarded, for often there is no parapet. Time after time the Huns could have seen us, and I saw lots of them running across gaps. You see, no sniping or anything like



## TOWARDS FLERS

that can be organized yet. Huns often come into our lines by mistake, and we do likewise. And when you are not actually in close view of them, you go across the open. If you get cut off by a barrage you just wait till it's over.

I have been round all our M.G. positions and other Detachments.

*September 10.*

About 5 p.m. the mess cook came and said he had been unable to get enough food in for the morrow, as the expected hampers from England had not arrived, and the district was so packed with other troops. So we decided to get some hares or partridges. But it's forbidden to shoot game. Very well, we wouldn't shoot them. We'd ride them down. The country behind is entirely open. No hedges. Just gently undulating uplands. The crops are all cut. So three of us set out. The orderly-room work had almost been finished, and the remainder could wait. Jezebel was brought round for me, Chloe for Roger, and Minotaur for the Colonel. The Colonel's orderly, Corporal Orchard, following on Shotover. We rode back to the more open country where there are few troops, and then started the drive. Jezebel on the right, Chloe next, Shotover next, and Minotaur on the left, at intervals of 20 yards or so.



## LETTERS TO HELEN

It had been decided that, if a hare got up, even while we were after partridges, we must chase the hare.

Well, presently a covey got up, and away we galloped up a long slope. Suddenly a wild tally-ho from Roger. A hare had got up and was lepping across Jezebel's line. So Jezebel fairly flattened herself out to keep the hare in. But the hare was across before she could get wide enough.

Then the hare doubled back and we swung round, so that now Minotaur was on the right. Hooroosh down the hill. The hare was gaining. There was a minute brick enclosure a quarter of a mile ahead. The hare was making for that. And gained it. Check. We surrounded the enclosure and Corporal Orchard dismounted and went in. After about ten minutes out popped the hare on t'other side. Loud yells, and after her again. She made for some high ground where there was a small wood. "Cut her off," signalled the Colonel wildly.

Impossible to cut off the hare. She gained the wood, which we surrounded. But, oh silly hare! she came out the other side. Minotaur after her like an arrow.

Then she tried to get away across Jezebel's front. But Jezebel was too quick, and Chloe came up in support.

Then the hare doubled again through Shotover



## CHASING THE HARE

and Minotaur, and we swung about. The hare was getting tired. She had run about three miles. She then doubled back again through Chloe and Jezebel.

But meanwhile the horses were all getting dark with sweat, and although a low line of upland hid us, we knew we were approaching some reserve wire. The hare must not gain that wire.

She was dead beat and going very slow, flopping along, and looked as if she would tumble head over heels any second. We were close behind her.

She got into some long grass 20 yards away from the wire, and disappeared from view. We had got her. Corporal Orchard dismounted and began beating the grass for her. There! Just missed her. She flopped on a few yards, and Corporal Orchard dashed after. Then he tripped and fell. The hare came out of cover and lolloped towards the wire. Yells from Roger and the Colonel.

*And the hare got there first!*

Inwardly I laughed with joy and relief. Thank goodness that little hare got away. Corporal Orchard took over the horses, and we went in amongst the wire, but we never found her. The weeds had grown tall, and were perfect cover for the poor wee beastie. I sometimes say what I think, but such views are naturally neither under-



## LETTERS TO HELEN

stood nor taken seriously. And the Major, bless him! likes me to do this type of thing because he thinks it is good for me. "We must really try and teach you to be more of a sportsman, you know. Sporting instinct. What? Every Englishman should have it!" This all very good-humouredly, and I answer, laughing: "Aha, sir. You see I know better." Which merely stirs some jovial spirit to stand up and propose: "Gentlemen, fox-hunting!" You see?

*September 12.*

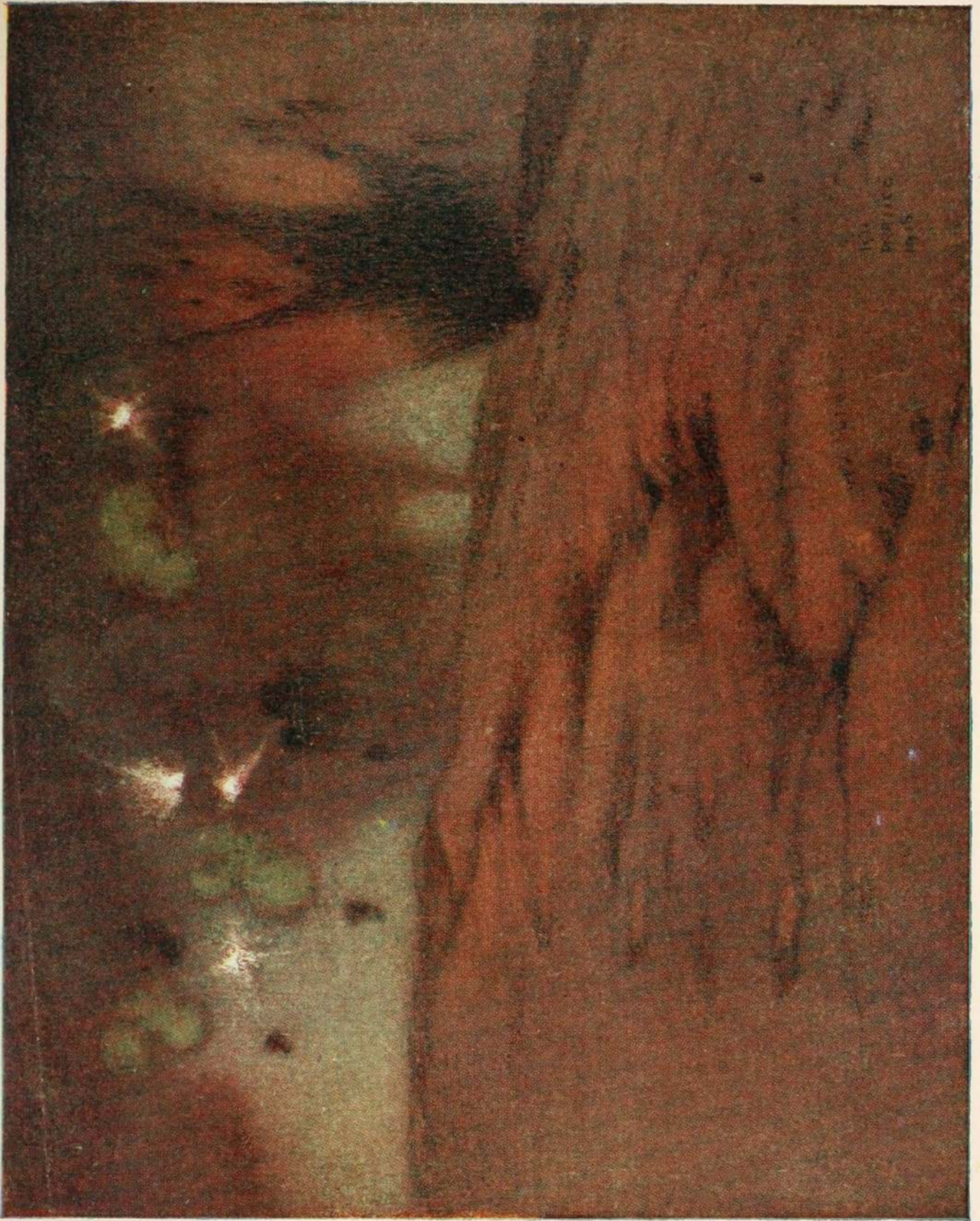
The next act will shortly begin. We are all very hopeful. Certain signs. . . . Fritz very nervous. Of that there can be no doubt at all. Prisoners betray it quite unwillingly. Poor Fritz! He comes to attention when we go up to him and ask him if he is fairly happy, which he is (with a smile) invariably. He talks good English, and wishes the war would end.

Some of our machine gunners, including Clare, were done in the other day, and they put up a biscuit tin, with their names pierced in with nail holes, to mark the spot. This war is the quaintest, most incongruous show.

*September 15.*

Zero hour has come and gone. The show is a peach. Fritz is scuttling back with us on his tail.











## TOWARDS GEUDECOURT

We are to creep up, and as soon as Fritz is beyond his last line of trenches (which he jolly nearly is now) up and through we hope to go.

*September 20.*

We are long past Fritz's first line ; past his second line ; at his third line ; and his fourth line he is wildly digging now—places for his M.G.'s wire, etc. But he's very, very hard put to it. We have almost all the high ground. Our guns are at it day and night. Trench warfare no longer exists. A few hastily dug holes, a few short lines of trench, mostly battered to pieces, and that's all. It's almost open fighting. Even the infantry come up across the open. No communication trenches, nothing of that sort. The crump holes are continuous. There's scarcely an inch of ground that isn't a crump hole.

I was up in an interesting wood this morning with the Colonel. Now, this will give you some idea of how dislocated and above-ground everything is :

We wanted to go to a place the other side of the wood. When we reached the middle of the wood, where a new O.P. of ours has been established, Fritz put up a barrage on the edge of the wood. Very well, then. We just waited at the O.P. till the barrage was over, and then calmly



## LETTERS TO HELEN

walked out. The wood is only a few shattered stumps of trees, and the place where undergrowth once was is one continuous sea of earth thrown about in every conceivable shape, with dead Tommies and dead Fritzes lying side by side. So the wood isn't much cover, you can imagine.

On the far side of the wood is beautiful rolling country, but not green. It's all brown, just a mess of earth. It's pitted with holes just like sand after a hailstorm. In the distance you can see real lovely trees, but nothing grows where the strafing is. Overhead the martins flicker and swoop, and starlings sail by in circling clouds, while the colossal noises crash and boom away merrily.

Ought I, perhaps, not to talk of these things? Does it worry you to think of crumps bursting and so on? But, really, it seems quite ordinary and in the day's work here. Men talk of crumps as you would talk of bread and butter. That is, perhaps, why letters from home that talk about homely things—cows and lavender and the new chintz—are so welcome.

Besides, good heavens! don't you know that there's not a man in France but knows that the best-beloved ones at home are having a far worse time than we are having here? Wet clothes? Mud? Shells a-bursting, guns a-popping? Even a wound, perhaps? Pish! No one *thinks* at all



## TEAR SHELLS

out here. There isn't time. Most of the people out here are perfectly happy and merry, really. The sort of "long-drawn-out-agony" touch is, I think, rare.

I'm writing this in a jolly Boche dug-out, all panelled and cosy. Jezebel and Swallow and a new pack mare I've got are in a valley that's hardly ever touched, and in fine, all's well.

*September 24.*

Tear shells or "lachrymatory shells." They haven't been putting many over lately, apparently. But they put some over the other day, and they are so amusing that I must describe them to you.

The Colonel and I were up trying to find a "working-party" from the regiment. The regiment is sadly split up at present into various parties doing various jobs in various places, all unpleasant. Better than infantry work, but still unpleasant.

We rode up much closer than we have ridden before, and left the Colonel's orderly and Hale in a bit of a valley with Minotaur, Jezebel, Hob, and Tank. Tank is a new mare I've got. Hale was riding her, as I never take Swallow closer than I can help.

We dismounted in this small valley, and the



## LETTERS TO HELEN

Colonel's orderly and Hale were given orders to move if any shells were put over too near them.

Then the Colonel and I went up through a wood that is just a few splintered stumps now.

We passed behind several batteries, and I thought to myself: "Dash it all! I know my eyes can't be watering because of the noise. What the deuce is the matter? I hope the Colonel won't notice."

However, on we waded and plodded. Suddenly the Colonel stopped, and exclaimed: "Oh damnation! This is perfect nonsense." His eyes were like tomatoes, and the tears were rolling down his cheeks!

By this time we could hardly see at all, and it dawned on us that we must hastily put on our tear goggles, which we had never used before, but always, of course, carry. They go in the satchel along with the two gas helmets.

Presently we met some infantry coming back, all safely begoggled. The Huns, they told us, were dropping tear shells just into that valley in front, where our working-party was supposed to be. You can tell them (the tear shells), they said, by the fluttering sound, and they knock up no earth and make very little smoke.

Sure enough, as soon as we got over the brow there they were. They make a foolish wobbly,



## BETWEEN HIGH WOOD AND FLERS

wavy sound as they come over, and look most innocent. So they are really if you get your goggles on in time. But if one bursts close to you, and you haven't got goggles on, why, then you'll be as blind as an owl, and you'll weep like a shower bath.

Then the absurd thing was that we couldn't find the working-party. Plenty of dead Huns, but nobody alive. Not a sign. Only crumps dropping here and there and everywhere. So we found a bit of a trench that led back round the side of the wood. The front line trenches were only very lightly held, partly because they are almost completely blown in. And we could get no information as to the working-party at all.

Presently we saw why. The Huns had put up a barrage across the valley they were coming up. We knew they would come up this other valley, as they had to report on their way to H.Q., — Division. So we got into a hole and waited.

After about half an hour the barrage lifted and up came our working-party none the worse. It is a most amazing war. People literally dodge shells and things as you might dodge snow-balls.

When we arrived back at the place where we left our two men, they also were not to be seen.

After some time and anxious inquiries for two men with four horses, we at last discovered



## LETTERS TO HELEN

them nearly half a mile away. Fritz had put some heavy stuff over fairly near, and they had moved.

“A very interesting bit of the line isn't it, Hale?” I said as we moved off. “Yes, sir,” he said, adding with a fierce frown, “but not very *safe*, sir.”

And then we all laughed. Hale does frown so when he makes one of his oracular utterances.

*September 29.*

It's up to us to reconnoitre carefully every time there is a move forward, so as to see the new ground.

One of the most curious and interesting things is this: the Boche rarely wastes. He only puts his crumps and pip-squeaks just where he thinks (or knows) our batteries are, and our infantry want to be, and our horses would be likely to be (if they weren't somewhere else). So that gradually you begin to track out safe routes. Don't go near the edge of —— Wood, but 200 yards inside the wood, on the north side, you're pretty comfy. Don't go near the mangled remains of —— village, but keep to the right of it until you get to the wrecked aeroplane, and then turn down the remains of —— trench, and you probably won't be touched. That sort of thing.











## BOCHE DUG-OUTS

I've been sleeping in the most superb Boche dug-out. Very deep; I should think 30 feet down. The inside is pillared rather like the studio, and cretonned all over with maroon-coloured stuff instead of wall-paper. There are lovely little cupboards everywhere, and doors and window-frames just like a real house. The windows, of course, only look out on to an air-shaft, so it's very dark, and you have to have candles all the time. The windows have no glass, of course, as that would be shattered to smithereens by the vibrations. Then there's an arch and more steps down lower still, into the bedroom for two.

Yesterday, being rather misty, I thought as follows:

"It is too foggy to see what Fritz is doing. No attack is intended or expected. The Colonel is at corps H.Q. Swallow and Jezebel and Tank are safe in — valley. Roger is still here as Adjutant. Why not an afternoon off?"

So picture a holiday-maker armed with a revolver, two gas helmets, tear goggles, some sandwiches, and a large empty haversack. Now where to go? What about — trench and all round — village, even, perhaps, a lightning five minutes in the village itself? We have just taken the village, but it's rather an unhealthy spot at present.



## LETTERS TO HELEN

— trench is a new trench that poor Fritz dug just before he was driven out of it. I had seen lots of dead Fritzes there the day before. Also there were reports of curious things flung out into the mud in and round the village.

So I set forth. And at — met another fellow I knew, and the affair became neither more nor less than a search for souvenirs. Here is a list :

1. A few buttons with double-tailed lions.
2. Four shoulder-straps with the figure 6 in red. This indicated a division which has been opposite us for some time and is quite exhausted, I think.
3. One haversack and one respirator haversack.
4. One rosary.
5. Five different sorts of bayonets from different regiments. These I thought we might hang up.
6. Four tassels. They are worn by Fritz rather in the same sort of way as lanyards are worn. Quite pretty, though rather soiled and worn.
7. A bit of a wing of a crushed aeroplane that is lying on the brown, feverish earth like a dead sea-gull.
8. A brass spring very beautifully made, that I am going to have made into a bracelet for you. Also from the aeroplane.
9. A cardboard box for signal flares. *Signal*



## TROPHIES

*Patronen* they are labelled. I threw the flares away, as they might go pop *en route*.

10. A jolly bit of gilded carving from a house in ——

11. Now then for No. 11! A bit of embroidery. I think it is a vestment of sorts. It's white, and there's heavy gold embroidery at the sides. It is a cloak of some description, but the top part, where there should be a collar or something, is gone. Then 11A is a piece of black and silver embroidery. It was all very muddy and riddled with shrapnel or bits of crump, so I just cut off the only sound bit. Both these things are exceedingly beautiful. They are probably vestments, because they were quite near what must have been the church. I am sure it must have been the church, although I hadn't a map—first, because I saw the village in the distance some time ago, while the church was still standing, and therefore I know the church's situation ; and, secondly, because I saw remains of large pillars, and a few bits of what was once a font amongst the *débris*.

There now. Isn't that a good haul! It's not easy to get anything worth sending home, because everything is so utterly smashed up.



## LETTERS TO HELEN

*October 2.*

Jezebel and Swallow and Tank have all been clipped trace high. I am getting rather attached to Tank. She is so modest and unselfish—a contrast to Jezebel. She never expects little treats, and seems quite surprised when I give her anything. Swallow and Jezebel always neigh when they see my electric torch coming towards them after dinner (while we are back in these safe places). But Tank is very shy of the light, and thinks it will bite her.

Swallow is getting much better, and really seems to understand that the shells and guns and things probably won't hurt him. We have been most extraordinarily lucky. The troop that got through nearly to —— the other day, hadn't a single casualty, although Dick's own mare was shot under him and a great many other horses were wounded. The squadron of —— were very badly scuppered, I fear. But, anyhow, we all feel that Lloyd George is right. We are just beginning to win.

*October 5.*

It is a glorious day. Such clouds. Swallow kicked up his heels and played about like a kitten when Hunt took him to water this morning. It's extraordinary how used the horses are



## ARCHIE

getting to trenches and wire, etc. At first they were rather afraid to jump these sudden deep ditches, but now they pop across like rabbits.

*October 17.*

Yesterday some Hun aeroplanes got across and came right above this camp, a comfortable way behind the front line. Heavily strafed by our Archies. The blue sky was dotted all over with the pretty little white clouds of shrapnel.

Sergeant Pritchard and I were standing close to Flannagan (one of the men's horses), and the men were at stables. We were all looking up and longing to see a Hun aeroplane hit, when suddenly "s-s-s-swish, plop!" just behind me. It was one of the Archie shrapnel cases. It buried itself deep in the ground 3 yards from where we were standing. We dug it up, and I'll bring it home for you. If it isn't too tediously heavy.

Of course, Archie shrapnel cases all come down, and you see hundreds of them lying about; but I've never had one so close before. They sometimes fall broadside on, and sometimes end on, in which case they bury themselves fairly deep. All the Hun aeroplanes got away, alas!

*October 26.*

Once more I'm going up to the strange dead village of ——. In many ways I shall be sorry



## LETTERS TO HELEN

to go back to comfort and billets, because the material for pictures here is very wonderful. You shall see several small things (the powers that be call it waste of time!), and it's infuriating to think that more can't be done.

I tell you, if you were here, and if I could paint a bit every day, I should be quite happy. The "subjects" are endless, and in particular I long to do great big stretches of this bleak brown land. Well, it can't be helped, so it's no good thinking about it.

*October 29.*

We are moving to a "back area" to-morrow.

*November 1.*

It's a superb day, and we are back at —, one of our old billets, right away from the beastliness. And although leave won't be for another week or two, still, it will come soon. And Swallow is in tremendous spirits.

Here is a drawing done surreptitiously of a tank in full view of Fritz. You see those little stumps of trees? Well, I'll tell you what those are called when we meet, and also what village is just on their left. You may say it was stupid to sit in full view of Fritz, but it was the day after an advance, and there's hardly ever anything











## COCQUEREL

doing then in the way of sniping. The guns, of course, are all pooping off, but they weren't shelling just there, so it was quite safe. This drawing gives you some idea of the desolation, but none of the unevenness of the ground. You can't walk in a bee-line for three yards without getting into a hole. The last time I was in those parts, by the way, I came on a rather jolly cottage wineglass that had been thrown out into some soft mud, and was not even cracked.

*November 6.*

An extraordinary change. Let me now give you an idea.

We are in a pretty little country village miles and miles away, and (although one of Fritz's aeroplanes flew over the church as bold as brass just before we got in) the quiet and peace of the place is very refreshing. And, droll to relate, I'm writing this in bed, with a touch of flu—such a bed, too, all soft and billowy. In ordinary life it would be condemned as a "feather" bed, but now it is a bed for princes.

And the room. A rather dark old-fashioned paper, an old clock ticking, an old shining chest of drawers with a marble top, and clothes hanging on pegs. Hale has arranged the pistol, and



## LETTERS TO HELEN

ammunition, and maps, and gas helmets, and steel helmet, and spare kit, with great elaboration, all over the room. At the present moment he is "sweeping out" with the appropriate hissing noises. The dust will, I hope, subside during the course of the day.

Hunt has got Jezebel, Swallow, and Tank into a disused barn, where they will be warm and happy.

Out of the window I can see hens pecking in an orchard, and an old grey pony browsing. The leaves are yellow, and there's no wind.

The old man and the old lady to whom the cottage belong have brought me in some little "remèdes," which Tim refuses to let me have. One is what the old man (an ex-chemist) calls "salicite de métal," and the other is what the old lady calls a "remède de bonne femme." You rub yourself with it all over every two hours!

Tick, tick, tick, tick. Lovely! The old clock is rumbling. It is about to strike twelve.

It has struck twelve—no, not struck twelve, rather it has buzzed twelve, like some old happy bee.

The hens are still pecking about in the orchard, and the grey pony is rubbing himself against a tree.

All so cosy and delicious. Now for a doze.



## DOZING

*November 7.*

Here's a poem. It's called

### HENS.

At the end of the war  
    (Ring, bells, merry bells!)  
    We intend  
    To keep hens,  
    Me and Helen.  
    (Ring, bells!)  
    Such hens!  
    (Merry bells!)

And though all our hens' eggs be surrounded by shells,  
We shall laugh and not care;  
For there won't be no war,  
And no hell any more,  
While Helen is there  
With the hens.

I've just made that up, and the inspiration of so profound an epic has made me want to doze again. Such a lot of dozing!

*November 12.*

In to-day's letter I enclose a couple of field post-cards which I found on a Boche dug-out bed-hole.

I've been so busy these last days, up till late hours, and writing has been "na-poo." Leave? Yes, leave will come in time. Probably the first half of December.

How maddening it is for poor old Tom! It's most damnable hard luck being kept there with-



## LETTERS TO HELEN

out leave such a long time. And I expect that he also has rather lost interest. At first the men were a great source of interest, and the horses and everything. Then France and the front were very interesting. Lastly, being under fire was very interesting. But now that we are back in Rest, I begin to feel I shall be rather sorry to go through it again. And Tom has had so much of it. Yes, he ought to come home.

The cottage people here have those lovely pale salmon winter chrysanthemums in their gardens. Don't you like them?

Since we arrived in this wee village a week ago, I haven't been on a horse once, and have never seen anything outside the village itself, which consists of one street and a side-lane.

*November 14.*

I wasn't able to write yesterday, and there may be several blank days to come.

Roger is temporarily away, and I am in charge. The thing that's happening is this: A and B are coming down to us, and others are going to relieve them. So the arrangements and correspondence are vast. All the billeting of this town is pushed on to my hands, too; and though it's only a small village, there's a good lot to do. I can't collect any thoughts to write to you. You understand,



## THE OTHER SQUADRONS ARRIVE

I know, and so I needn't say more. I'll write again at length when things settle down. This sounds muddled. But I count on your understanding that I've got more work to do than I can manage.

*November 16.*

To-day, by some amazing fluke, there's a lull. One squadron has gone. Sir John is on his way down. Julian starts early next week, and Gerald a few days later. So within a fortnight we shall all be together. Which will be good.

Some infantry came in from the line to-day. Oh ye gods! the British infantry! No rewards, honours, no fame, can ever be enough for them. We have not yet gone through what they have to go through, but we have been in and out amongst them all the time, and we know. Thank goodness this spell of dry weather seems to have come for a few days at least. Cold at night is nothing. It's wet at night that just kills men right and left. Alan died yesterday morning. Died of exposure. He caught a chill while we were up in front, and then got much worse, and it finally developed into peritonitis and pneumonia. And now he, too, is dead. We were all very fond of Alan.

Death is such a little thing. A change of air



## LETTERS TO HELEN

—no more. Death is the last day of Term, the last day of the Year. Regret? That's because we don't understand, quite.

*November 17.*

I sent you off another beastly little scrap of paper to-day, because it was impossible to write more. Here (7 p.m.) is another moment, so I snatch it.

Listen. Of course it is true that leave has been cancelled, but we hear (Rumour) that this is only for a few days owing to submarines. *If* leave reopens again, as seems likely therefore, I go next. I shall have to hand over Orderly Room and all current correspondence, etc. That means, with luck, I leave here on the 2nd. Don't, of course, count on this; but let's toy with the idea.

*November 23.*

I am sitting in the sun, having read your letter. The valley of the — is below me, a mile wide, all reed-beds and half submerged willows, with the main stream lying like a blue snake amongst pale acres of sedge.

Damn! I was going to write a long and cosy letter, but was called back. I had escaped for



## THE SOMME VALLEY

an hour from Orderly Room with your letter and a sketchbook, and was caught in the act. No time now.

*November 25.*

A few more moments with you before you go to bed.

Yes, isn't it funny how we seem to be talking face to face! And to every question of mine you reply in three days' time and *vice versa*. It always sounds to me like this, rather:

	QUESTION.	ANSWER.
<i>Mon.</i>	Isn't it cold?	None.
<i>Tues.</i>	Have you seen mother?	None.
<i>Wed.</i>	Are you happy?	None.
<i>Thurs.</i>	How are you all?	Freezing.
<i>Fri.</i>	When did I see you last?	Only yesterday.
<i>Sat.</i>	May I have a cake!	Yes, very.
<i>Sun.</i>	How is Queen Anne?	Much better.
<i>Mon.</i>	None.	Last April.
<i>Tues.</i>	None.	I'll send one.
<i>Wed.</i>	None.	Dead.

Don't you find it's a bit like that? What question can I have asked a week ago to which the answer is a rabbit? So tiresome when we want to talk at very close range.

As to leave—well let's not talk about that. Every dog has his day.

You know the dog who has been shut up in a kennel for a long time? Or the dog who has



## LETTERS TO HELEN

been locked up in an empty house for a long time? It'll be a mixture of these.

Well, the day will come.

*November 27.*

Can't write properly because it's very cold and I've been riding, and that makes one's fingers like pink bananas. They don't seem to answer to the bridle. There's an awful noise of hissing going on. Hale and Hunt are busy on the horses.

*November 28.*

A box will arrive containing another Bristol ball, which I discovered in a cottage here, and bought for 1fr. 50c. Rather a jolly green one, biggish. Also I am enclosing the wineglass from Geudecourt, which I mentioned some time ago. There can't be any harm in mentioning this name, as we have left that area some time now. I have got several sketches of other places round about there, which I hope you will like. Won't it be fun, when the time comes, looking at them. To-day Hunt came round in a great state about the horses. Jezebel had pulled up her shackle, and was in "one of her moods," as Hunt always describes it. She had been kicking both Tank and Swallow with great violence. He had left



## A PRUDENT SERGEANT

Hale trying to get her quiet, and rushed up to report.

She was quiet again when I got down, and Hale had tied her up successfully.

But the point of telling you of this episode is that meanwhile it was getting time for the post to go. Prudent Sergeant Marsden (Orderly Room sergeant) observed that I hadn't addressed the letter yet or signed it outside. So he did it himself! "You very seldom write any letters to other addresses, you see, sir, so I thought I'd better address it myself. I thought it would be *inadvisable* to miss a post, and I thought the young lady would forward it on if it was not for her!"

It made me laugh as I haven't laughed for a long time. Wasn't it nice and thoughtful. He tells me he duly forged my signature in the left-hand bottom corner.

Jorrocks sends his love. "Your little filly" he always calls you.

*November 29.*

About leave. There's no more chance of it at present, I think, as we are going up to the line again in a week or two, and we want to work off all the men, who haven't had any leave at all, before moving up mudwards, when all leave will



## LETTERS TO HELEN

be stopped. We are engaged at present in practically rebuilding and making sanitary an entire French village, and in "training," which means all the old dismal tedium of manœuvres plus spit and polish.

These villages are most amazingly ill-built. Swallow this morning lashed out on being bitten by Jezebel, and (dear silly Swallow!) instead of hitting Jezebel, she brought down half the wall of the shed in which they live, which frightened her to such an extent, Hunt tells me, that she allowed Jezebel to eat all her food at midday stables.

*November 30.*

We move next week, I think, or possibly the week after.

We are not going back to quite the same part of the line, but near it. It will be new country to me altogether, and to everyone else concerned.

Poor Swallow, poor Jezebel, poor Tank, I'd give anything to shelter you three; but, alas! I fear you are going to have a nasty time of it now. All clipped, too. It's Swallow particularly that I tremble for. He does so throw up the sponge. Tank copies Bird in everything, so she ought to pull through all right.



## AMIENS CATHEDRAL

*December 1.*

All leave is cancelled again, at any rate in this army—possibly on account of the move, possibly on account of nasty fish in the sea. However, the telegram says “until further notice,” which usually means for a short time only. Not that it affects me, but it’s bad luck on some of the men who were just off.

Now about Xmas. I have got a new crop, thank you ever so much, that I bought at a town near here.

A beautiful cathedral town.

With doors all padded up with sand-bags, the great cathedral towers above the town, and is seen for miles and miles. A good effort. What fun they must have had building it. What they believed then they expressed in outward and visible form. What we think now is (or ought to be) very different indeed from what they thought then. But I can’t remember having ever seen anything that *begins* to express what we think (or ought to think) now.

Everyone in the Church of England now seems to me to think *almost exactly* what was thought when this cathedral was built! If this war achieves nothing else, I pray with all my mind, and all my soul, and all my strength, that all the sects and all the churches may suddenly



## LETTERS TO HELEN

feel tired of all the 1001 little methods of procedure, and say: "Damn it all! what does all this ancient paraphernalia mean to us? Is God quite so complicated and involved as we have supposed? Everything else in the world progresses. Thought progresses. Let us take a deep breath, and realize that religion ought to be more 'into the future' than even Zeppelins or Tanks, please."

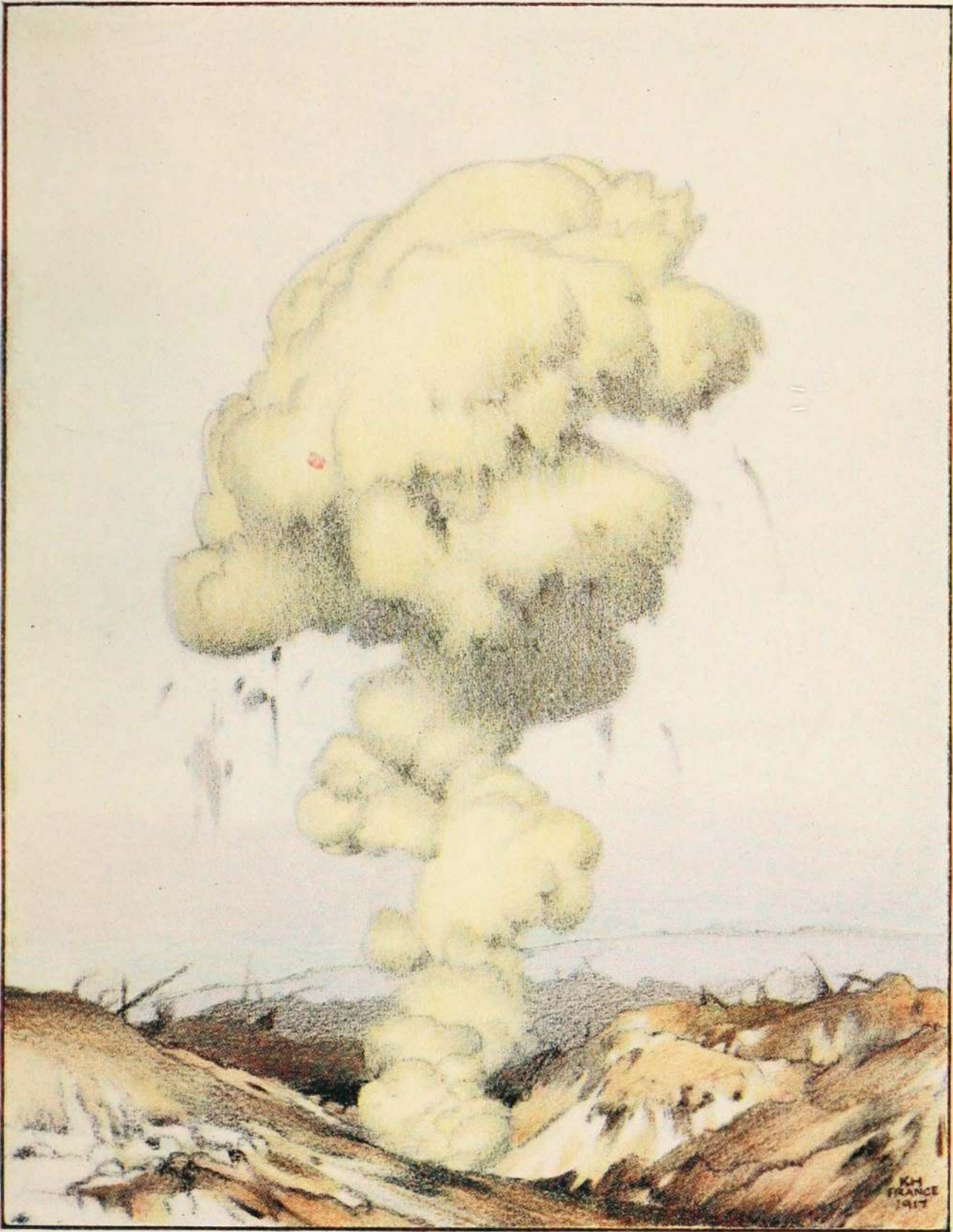
*December 2.*

Just been superintending the burying of some horses. A curious job. You have to disembowel them first. Quite ghoulish. And then head and legs are cut off, and the whole is buried in a hole 12 feet deep. Up there they often lie about for some time, and get as smelly as dead human beings. Back here it all has to be done prestissimo.

The strange thing is that, whereas before the war I should have felt sick and possibly dreamt about it, now it seems merely more boring than most other things of the kind.

Up there Tommies and Honourables eat their lunch of sandwiches with lots and lots of dead people in varying stages of decomposition all round. An odour more hideous than anything you have ever imagined. But you get used to it.











## TALKING ABOUT HOME

“How unpleasant they are to-day,” you say to anyone you are with. And the answer is probably just a laugh. Then you go on (if things are quiet) to discuss an imaginary day at home. You would smile.

We actually discuss everybody's clothes, the things in the room, the shape of the fireplace, the look of the tea-things and the comfiness of the chairs.

And we always end up by saying: “And then after that I shall do absolutely *Nothing* for a fortnight!”

### *December 3.*

December. Frost on the trees, all fairy-like in this dense mist. Not a sound. The sun quite small and white and far away. And if we were on the Cotswolds, I expect we should go out for a bit of a walk, just to warm up, after breakfast.

### *December 4.*

A staff job has been in the air several days. It may or may not come off. I'm not very keen about it in many ways. But I've a feeling that I could do it rather well, and so I'm not sure that I oughtn't to accept.

Jezebel and Swallow have quarrelled. Isn't it



## LETTERS TO HELEN

awful. Hunt has had to put Tank in between them.

Jezebel kicked Swallow, and the blood fairly spouted out—got her in the leg, and she lost her temper, and began lashing out. Hunt, with great presence of mind, threw a bucket of water over them both. And as soon as they were quiet, dear, good, demure little Tank was put in between them as buffer.

It's a most dreadful nuisance. They used to get on so well together. I hope they will leave that curious little Tank alone. Swallow is as lame as a cat now. The accursed female is very exasperating, I fear. Hunt quite irritated me for a moment when he remarked, after the incident: "Oh, it's all right, sir. She was in one of her moods." I pointed out to him that it was not all right. Whereupon he took it into his head that I was strafing him, and muttered sulkily: "Well, sir, I must say I never did like Abroad."

Which made me laugh to such an extent that I got a sort of fit of laughing (don't you know?) and couldn't stop. Eventually I had to go away. He looked so comic and so dejected, and his use of the word Abroad (as if it were a country in itself) always makes me laugh idiotically. I haven't seen him since, and it will be difficult to explain the apparent frivolity.

Things have been very complicated just lately



## CONCERNING WORK

owing to our having to make arrangements about taking over this new bit of line.

*December 5.*

One of the many things the war has taught us, I think, is the comparative equality of all work. Work depends almost entirely on the actual number of hours per diem, don't you think?

Certainly brain work is more tiring than spade work. But I'll guarantee that the man who does eight hours' brain work is not *much* more tired than the man who does eight hours' spade work.

The only difference is that open-air work means better health, and consequently more power to work long hours.

But I really do believe that, for example, a nurse's day's work (either for wounded or babies) is *just* as hard as a bricklayer's day, or a bank clerk's day, or an engine driver's day. And I believe that the various degrees of skill, necessary for doing any job really well, are not very different on the whole. Different, yes, but not very different. A General's job is difficult, but not *much* more difficult than a nurse's job.

And so I believe all jobs ought to be paid on a rather more equal footing. Not on an equal



## LETTERS TO HELEN

footing, but a *rather more equal* footing than now.

Do you agree?

*December 6.*

Cathedrals, the earth, the sky, and all that in them is—those are the things that rest and soothe one out here. Thank God for cathedrals! How splendid of Litlin, to be getting Bunny taught reels. I do trust she will give lots of attention to it.

After seeing a certain amount of human misery and so forth, I believe more than ever that the whole aim of the world is in the direction of Joy. And as dancing is one of the most primitive expressions of joy, give me dancing, says I.

This is all said in the middle of dictation of orders, and so I expect it's ungrammatical, but you know what I mean.

*December 7.*

What do you think? I lunched to-day with George. We lunched in a most superb officers' club, formerly the house of some Count or other: all white and gold, and chandeliers and mirrors—a dream.



## JEZEBEL ACCEPTS AN APOLOGY

*December 8.*

Our move has been postponed twice now, and we don't go till Monday.

But meanwhile I heard from Mark to-day. He is A.D.C. to the G.O.C., and apparently caught sight of Roger and me the other day, while flashing past in the G.O.C.'s car. So we are going to have a great meeting. It will be immense fun. Mark, Dennis and I were all tremendous friends—just the same type.

Swallow is much better, and Jezebel says that, if she had known Swallow would bleed so much, she would have kicked him in a different place, where he wouldn't have bled so profusely. This, for Jezebel, is extremely gracious.

Tank's only remark about being put between the two was: "Well, I'm always very glad to do what I'm told."

Swallow is desperately sorry about the whole affair, and is on tenter-hooks lest Jezebel should never speak to him again. He says she really didn't mean to kick, and she can't understand how it is that he has so little control over himself. So all's well.

*December 9.*

Hunt and Hale have made their very tumble-down barn a perfect model of neatness. They



## LETTERS TO HELEN

sleep within about 3 yards of the horses' heels. Hunt in particular never likes to be far away from "my 'osses," as he calls them. I have less and less say in the matter of the 'osses as time goes on! I merely say: "Hunt, I want a horse and an orderly at 8 a.m. to-morrow."

It's useless for me to say I'd like Swallow or Tank or Jezebel, because, if I name one in particular, there's always some reason why it would be better not to ride that one that day. Oh, "she wants shoeing behind," or, "she had one of her moods this morning, and so I exercised her very early," or "he didn't eat his corn, and had better stay in." So I just meekly ask for a horse. And a horse arrives.

Swallow is still rather lame, but seems better now. And the gentle influence of Tank is, I really believe, soothing Jezebel. Tank is a very charming creature, and her perfect manners are a good example to the other two. But—what an awful admission!—she is so good that I own I find her rather dull. Poor little Tank!

Jorrocks has gone off to a nasty place, I fear, with his troop. But all seems fairly quiet at present.

*December 12.*

The trek is at an end.

We have arrived at a place well behind the



## SAILLY-LE-SEC

line, and not at all wrecked, except for holes here and there. But the river! Oh my aunt! It's marvellous. It winds in and out of low hills, and as I saw it this evening, from an eminence, it looked more snaky than ever. Huge great loops with the lovely pale sedges on either side. The almost yellow hills are dotted with junipers. I long to see it to-morrow morning. There's no doubt it's one of the most fascinating rivers I've seen. Hooded crows sailing over the uplands, and I met a flock of bright sweet goldfinches near some guns, and a tree-creeper in a copse.

What a wonderful day! It was snowing all the time, with quite warm, sunny intervals. Swallow and Tank and Jezebel are all under cover, and I've actually got a bed! You might not call it a bed, but it is a bed, because it has four legs (one of them a biscuit tin). The place where we were going to has been rather too heavily strafed lately, so they are keeping us back here.

Things are wonderfully quiet, and there are no batteries near us, which is pleasant. I did want to show you the beautiful river winding in and out of the little hills. The great river-bed is quite untouched by shells here, and the very sight of it would soothe the most jangled nerves. Oh, it did look so heavenly this evening. Thank God for this glorious river. The snow melted



## LETTERS TO HELEN

as it fell. The snow flakes as they touched the river were like fairies taking headers.

*December 15.*

Isn't this fine about Peace ?

So Fritz would like Peace, would he ? No amount of flamboyant talk can possibly hide the fact that he wants peace. And it isn't the victor who asks for peace first. Carry on, say we.

*December 20.*

Have you had any of the letters in which I told you how the place we were to have been sent to was too continuously strafed ? And how we were sent to this very quiet and unwrecked place ? And how I've got a bed, and how happy the horses are ?

About the intelligence job. Things are hanging fire rather, as the Staff Major, who may ask for me to come away with him to another corps, is now attached to this corps. So what will be the end of it I don't know.

Frankly, I am sore tempted for this reason, that I think I could do it rather well. Of course, each corps does things differently, but, judging from the way in which this corps likes the job done, I feel certain I could tackle it in another



## A STAFF JOB

corps. That's boasting. But you understand so perfectly. It would be glorious to be doing something really well.

I *can't* be an ordinary soldier. Too absent-minded—hopelessly vague and careless. I live on tenter-hooks always. What detail have I forgotten? What order did I give that could be taken two ways?

It's sad for Pat that his friends are gone. I feel so murky when mine go, that I understand what it must be for him. But friends or no friends, broken-hearted or whole, we must damned well carry on! And that's all about it.

A perfect letter from old Norman to-day. He must be quite useless as a soldier, whereas at his own job he stands alone, with a wonderful future before him. Well, well! I meant not to grouse to you again. And here's a letter nearly full of it. But there, I made a stupid mistake to-day, and it's all so boring and beastly.

Anyhow, we are fighting for civilization, and the Huns are, too, in a way. But our idea of civilization is better than the Huns' idea. So we gradually win.

*December 21.*

I have at last made up my mind. I'm going to take on this job. How unwillingly I can



## LETTERS TO HELEN

hardly tell you. I wanted to be in the great Push next year so badly. Everyone, everything, is preparing for it. The cavalry will get through, and I shall be driving about behind in some gilded car, or watching from some very distant hill with Jezebel (who won't care a damn whether the cavalry get through or not).

But I had two interviews with the Major and the General to-day. Coves like painters seem to be rather wanted, and—well, it's clear now. I must go.

To-morrow or next week, perhaps, the extreme fascination of the job will obliterate a certain feeling of flatness, of disappointment, of . . . of . . . of shirking. Yes, that's it: I feel as if I were shirking all the horrors. You see, I shall enjoy this job immensely. All the hateful "arrangering things" for large numbers of men, all the tiresome formalities, all the discomfort, all the future dangers, finished with—over. I don't say that we've had *long* periods of danger or *much* discomfort; but we've had quite enough to make a very ordinary mortal hope never to go through it again.

But to think that I've deliberately chosen the easy path. Well, I don't care! I've chosen it. I meant to choose it. I'm glad I've chosen it. That is the one job in the whole war that I could do really well. How best to serve the country—



## A DECISION

that's the only question. So there you are. I've been and took the plunge, and I believe I'm right.

First of all a week or two getting to know the ropes in *this* corps, and then off with the Major and the General to another corps.

My aunt! what an egoistical letter this is. However, to you no apologies.

*December 22.*

Letters have been lurching in, in threes and fours. But what matters it how they come? I always know that they are coming. And the future's where *my* heart is always. So here's to the letters to come, and here's to our meeting again, and here's to Life—long, sweet, glorious Life.

We shall see the Christmas roses of the Cotswolds together one day, and I think the war will have given them a mysterious loveliness that we never understood before. Every year they'll come up out of the ground again and surprise us. I shall be getting older and older—and so will you, too. And all our little plans will have a quiet, peaceful joy for us that wouldn't have been possible but for the war. Art will be like angels coming and going. Effort will be intensified. The lives of the poor must be happier, because everyone will be more ready to give and take.



## LETTERS TO HELEN

It won't come all at once. But there'll be a difference. The war will have made a difference. Thank God for the war!

*December 25.*

Never talk about the "idle" staff. Yesterday we were working absolutely solid without any break at all except an hour for lunch and an hour for dinner (tea? away frivolous thought!) from 9 a.m. till 11.30 p.m. Most interesting; but let's hope this first day's experience won't be a fair sample, or I shall simply melt down like a guttered candle. None of the Generals and people seemed to think it unusual. At least they never said so. Personally I found it quite kolossal.

*12.30 a.m.*

Such a funny Christmas Day! I've been fixing on a large map all the gun positions on the corps front. There are a very great many, and the positions must be marked very exactly. I was quite nervous lest there should be a mistake. It has taken since about two o'clock till now. And I think it is accurate at last.

At about 10 p.m. I found out an awful mistake. One of the heavies quite 100 yards wrong, which might have meant that it would be ranging on



## CHRISTMAS, 1916

the wrong place, and probably do no damage whatever. Desperate thought!

Well, the staff is the most hard-working body of men I've ever seen. They don't appear ever to get any exercise. And, really, the work is all so vital that I don't see how they ever can expect to get any exercise.

About leave. Possibly on the way up to the other corps a side-slip to Blighty will be allowed.

Don't depend on anything. There seems to be a dearth of people who can do this work, and so it would be unwise to count on getting away. The thing is, however, conceivable—that is all.

### *December 27.*

First of all about current affairs here.

Captain G—— is probably going to Army, so it is suggested that I shall take his place here. He runs all the plotting of the aeroplane photographs, etc., for the corps. It's a most awful and alarming responsibility, and I don't feel that I can do it yet. May he not get taken away just for a little while, or I'm lost.

The corps commander sends for him (he has been doing the job for nine months), and says: "Now, where is our line at the present moment? Has so-and-so trench been repaired, and where is so-and-so German battery that was shelling



## LETTERS TO HELEN

the —— Brigade yesterday?" Well, of course I simply couldn't answer these questions yet.

The prospect is murky. Given a little time, I think I could do it; but . . . well, one can but try.

I asked the Captain if he thought leave at all possible. He most strongly advised me not to dream of asking. The corps is certain to refuse in any case, as they will want me to sweat up the show and get to know all about it as rapidly as possible.

*January 2, 1917.*

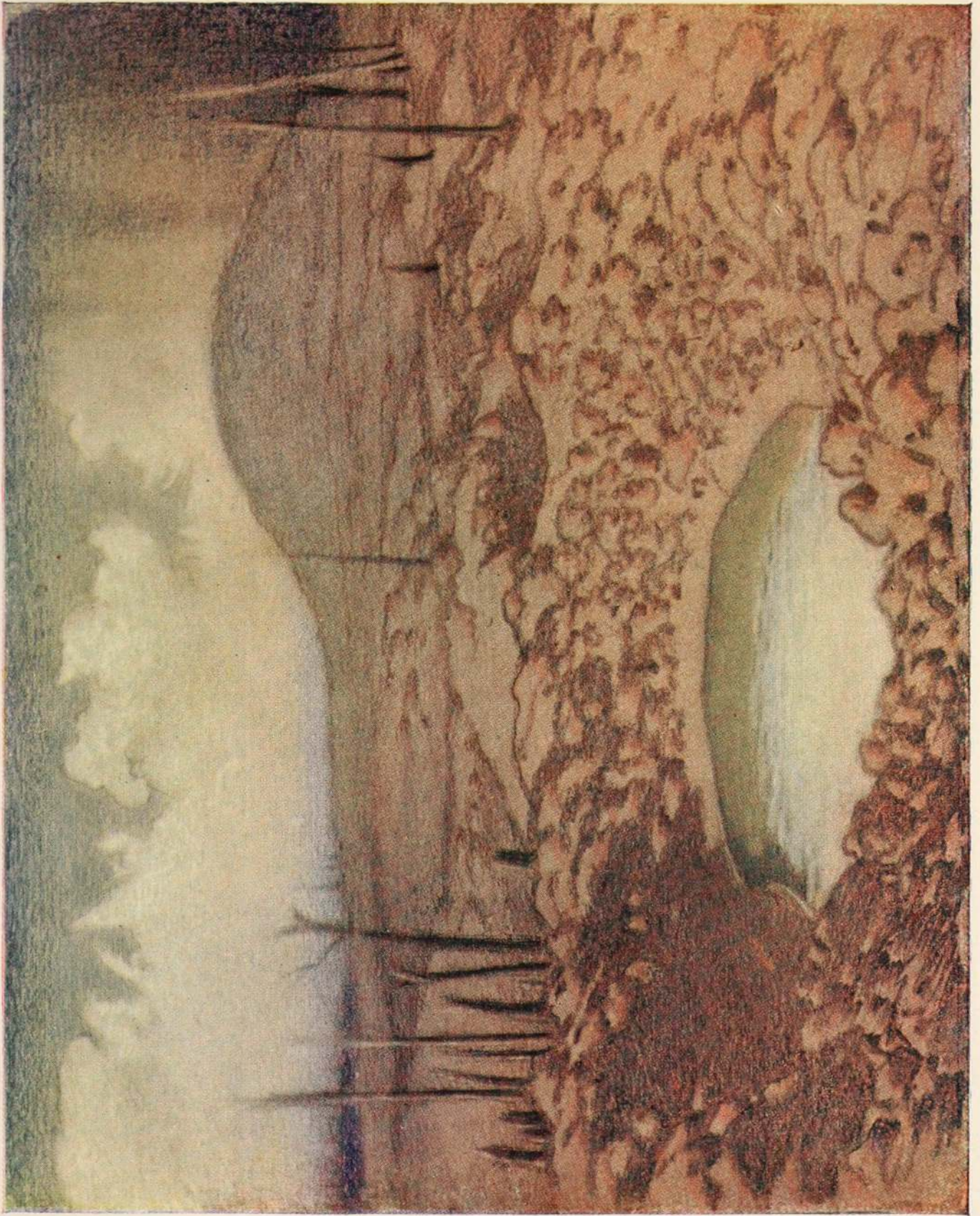
I think I shall be going to live with the R.F.C., so as to be able to snatch their photographs the instant they come in—puzzle them out—put them quickly on to a map—and send them off. Everyone then will know far more quickly what Fritz is up to.

So don't be surprised if letters are addressed from R.F.C. shortly. I shall take a couple of draughtsmen and a clerk and an orderly, and Hale.

*January 11.*

I don't know when leave will be possible. This job is rather in the making, and is really very important stuff. A great responsibility,











## AEROPLANE PHOTOGRAPHS

says the corps commander. In fact, I am just a bit nervous about things generally. That battery that was reported in so-and-so wood. Is it there still? Well, where has it moved to, then? You are not sure? Why not? No recent photographs of it? But why not? Can it be in so-and-so quarry, perhaps? That light railway has been repeatedly smashed up by our heavies. Repaired? What? What evidence have you? Let me have a map as soon as possible, showing exactly where you believe that line has been repaired, and the exact position of that battery in the quarry—if it really is there. But don't tell me it's in the quarry unless you are quite sure. Yes, sir. And you'd better have the map duplicated. How many can the draughtsmen print before to-morrow? About 300. Well, send out copies. I must have that battery silenced at once. Do you see? Can I rely on it being sent out in time? Yes, sir.

That's the sort of thing. Things that *must* be done and quickly. Perhaps it sounds nothing much—a mere bit of a map. But maps are like lamps to men in the dark. And they must be accurate. To me, therefore, the most inaccurate, absent-minded mortal before the war that ever breathed, it is all a source of great anxiety.



## LETTERS TO HELEN

*January 12.*

I've got a bedroom with a brick floor in a cottage. I really hardly know what it's like, as I arrive there about twelve o'clock every night and fall into bed, and then up again at 7.30 next morning as a rule, and frowsy at that. The roads here are just as muddy as ever, and if you go off the roads you go too deep. We are camouflaging the whole place, and I think it will soon be very difficult for the Huns to see it. At least, when I say "we" are camouflaging, I mean that I run out for two minutes about every three hours, and give hurried directions to a few bewildered men, and rush in again. I'm sure they think the extraordinary patterns that I order them to paint all over the huts, etc., are quite mad. The R.F.C. show isn't ready yet, but it's likely to be so shortly.

*January 17.*

To-day's letter got me into an absurd fit of internal laughter. Hale brought it in while I was poring over some new photographs of Boche emplacements, or dug-outs, or something—poring with a magnifying glass. . . . And then came your drawings of the rooms at the cottage.

That'll be admirable. I tried to hold my head



## BUSY DAYS

and think of exactly how the cottage looked, and where the new rooms were to be ; but somehow I've got no brains left. And I leave it all to you. One day we shall be able to discuss it peaceably, but at present this brain is like some limp jelly-fish floating in the sea.

To-day I'm doing a map, and the draughtsmen are copying it, of some Boche dug-outs. Ye gods ! what do I care about dug-outs ! As well make maps of all the rabbit-holes in Glamorgan-shire. But there, what's the good of talking like that. It's got to be done.

*January 24.*

The aeroplanes have brought in the most marvellous photographs, and I am very busy deciphering them and mapping the information on to a map.

*February 8.*

After many, many days of incessant work comes a brief interval of repose—till to-morrow morning.

We moved up here yesterday afternoon late.

Well, imagine a lovely large hut.

The room on the left is where all the maps,



## LETTERS TO HELEN

etc., are made, and the room on the right is my office.

But outsiders can't just barge into my office. Oh no! They must ask one of the orderlies if they can see me. Isn't it ridiculous!

Then there is a tiny bedroom.

The office walls are entirely covered now with aeroplane photos and maps. It is all rather fun, and I think it won't be quite such a strain. The cold is intense. Hale is functioning with the stove in my room at the moment. I have said once that I don't really need a fire in my bedroom; but he evidently has different views, and is firmly lighting it. He is quite happy here.

I'm having the hut papered, to make it warmer. And canvas curtains, if you please!

The R.F.C. people are most hospitable and nice. I like them very much. It's all quite interesting, and the aeroplanes are delicious as they move, buzzing like vast mosquitoes.

I go down in a side-car every day (that's the programme) to corps H.Q. to report and get instructions.

*February 12.*

Something may happen to prevent leave before leave comes. You will understand. I should have to "remain at my post," as novels say.



## WITH THE R.F.C.

*February 15.*

A very difficult map has just been finished, and is being printed, and here we sit down for a little talk together. The war is for the moment far away. Away anxiety, away nervous apprehension, away fatigue, away responsibility, away Wilhelm! Let the doors be shut, the curtains drawn. Listen. An adventure, amusing, and rather exciting. Would you like to hear about it? Well, I was making a raised map of a particular part of the line for the corps commander. And I go up from time to time to scan the ground, so that it may be very accurate and therefore rather useful. At least that is what I hope. Yesterday, then, up into the blue, piloted by Eric.

It was not a good day. In fact, too dud for good observation. But the relief map must be ready quickly.

Imagine us, please, robed in leather coats and leather helmets and gauntlets, and with goggles, waiting at the entrance of a hangar while the mechanics bring out the gadfly. They have already looked the creature over with great care. The pale yellow wings glitter against the violet horizon. The sun is shining, but it's freezing hard. Eric climbs in, and then I do. I sit behind with the machine gun.



## LETTERS TO HELEN

I clasp a sketchbook, to sketch the lie of the land. O my aunt in Jericho! isn't it Arctic! Fingers that feel like ammoniated quinine. You know, a faint unpleasant tingle.

They are starting the engines. Difficult this cold weather. The following strange colloquy ensues :

*Mechanic* : "Contact."

*Pilot* : "Contact."

*M.* "Switch off."

*P.* "Switch off."

*M.* "Contact."

*P.* "Contact."

*M.* "Switch off."

*P.* "Suck in."

*M.* "Contact."

*P.* "Contact."

And with a terrific whir the propeller flashes round. The sound increases, and then decreases slightly, and increases again. The gadfly moves. Moves more rapidly. Skims along the ground. Rises, rises, rises. Ah, the beautiful river! Every time I have flown the beauty of that river catches me in the throat. But this featureless waste. Bereft of everything but earth, and a few low shelters and gun-pits, and seamed with trenches. Hideously lonely.

Well, anyhow, here we are sailing high above it all, the wind occasionally lifting one of the



## A SCRAP IN THE AIR

wings, and then the other, like a sea-gull's. There is a haze, and it's not easy to see. You peer over the edge, and behold at last the desired wood.

A wood? That? Good heavens! That poor miserable mess of splinters and gashed soil? Each time I see one of the woods destroyed by this war I thank God that our glorious Cotswold woods are still untouched. Primroses, wood-anemones, squirrels. To think of squirrels! . . . Not another aeroplane in sight. Neither our own nor Hun machines. Eric circles smoothly round above the wood, and then crosses back over no-man's-land to fly low, so that I can see the wood obliquely. Archie quite wide of his mark. This doubling and circling perplexes him. The sketch progresses. I look round from time to time to see that there are still no Huns about. Eric also looks about. No; nothing in sight. The guns are pooping off, but the noise of the engines makes the guns sound like tiny little "pops." There, now I've nearly done. Lucky I came, because the wood isn't quite what we thought. Yes, that'll do . . . . We are up at a considerable height . . . .

Suddenly Rat-tat, tat, tat, tat, tat, tat! above our heads. Three Hun aeroplanes right on top of us; Eric drives headlong in a spiral curve at full speed, smoke trailing out behind.



## LETTERS TO HELEN

The gun! I fumble. Can't get round to it.  
Damn!

Rat-tat, tat, tat, tat, tat, tat! go the Huns. But Eric is faster. Are they all Huns, though? Shall I fire? Yes. No. They daren't come down low over our lines. We are safe. Yes, look, they were all Huns. They hang about far up aloft. The Hun usually hunts in threes. Why, oh why, didn't I fire? Well, it can't be helped now. Eric looks round. We both laugh. "Why didn't you fire?" he shouts. I can't hear what he says, but I know from the shape of his mouth that's what he is saying. I just smile and shake my head. Can't explain now.

Where on earth did they come from? Coasting about very high up, I suppose, and suddenly swooped down at us.

However, the drawing is done. So that's that. Home, John!

One little bullet-hole through one of the wings, no more. Indifferent shooting, my friend Fritz. However, I can't talk, because I never fired at all!

*February 16.*

I've never thanked you for the chocolates which arrived two days ago. But they arrived during one of the avalanches of work, and were all eaten



## TOLL OF WAR

within half an hour or so; not by me, but by various R.F.C. men who are always coming in and out of my office for "the latest."

To-day all frosty and sunny. Think of going on to the terrace at home before breakfast and seeing some jolly little new flower out, with the Golden Valley behind, all grey-blue and woody.

It's all working well here, and, being the representative of the corps, I have a certain status which is pleasant. They think that I may or may not give them a good character to the Powers that be. Quite fun.

They are awfully nice fellows. The only two I knew before were Eric and Bill Vivian. Bill I have known for a very long time, and during the war I've seen a great deal of him, and was very fond of him. He was brought down by Archie yesterday in our lines. Burnt to death. Dead when they reached him. Yesterday night at mess we were all quite gay. Only one man showed that his heart was as heavy as lead. And it seemed bad form. Heaviness of heart is bad form. No gentleman should have a heavy heart. A sign of weakness, of ill breeding.

*February 17.*

To-day has been one of the jumpy, anxious days again, because something is to happen



## LETTERS TO HELEN

shortly, and those concerned are ringing up all the time asking me this and that about the Boche trenches, etc. And they want maps of this and plans of that and t'other. It's these times before some event that are so wearing. The smaller the event, the more wearing very often, because it's just some one or two officers, perhaps, who are doing the show, and, of course, half their success or failure depends on whether an unhappy intelligence officer can tell them exactly what they are up against, and exactly where it is and so on. I always go on the principle of assuming the worst. If I think there *may* be a minny to meet them, I tell them there *is* a minny, and probably two. It may not be very cheering to them. But if the minny is there, well, then I've put them on their guard; and if it isn't there, well, they can laugh at the work of the staff, and there's no harm done. People don't realize the awful strain and responsibility and hard work of staffs. It's sometimes a nightmare. Think of it in this way: I make a slip. A dozen men get killed. When the Push comes, I make another slip, and a hundred men get killed. Perhaps more. All the work of the lazy and incompetent staff! But if the staffs are lazy and incompetent, then, for goodness' sake, let's put more energetic and more competent people in their places. But where are these more competent people? In the divisions? in the



## THE WILD DUCK

battalions ? But that is exactly where the present staffs came from ! And they are the very people who originally jibed at the staffs ! Well, anyhow, the war will end some day.

*February 21.*

*Re America.* It doesn't look much as if they were coming in now, does it ? However, one of the Scots Guards gave me June as the end of the war. He offered me 10 to 1 in francs ; but, as I am always rather muddled as to whether that means that he gives me 10 francs if I win, or I give him 1 franc if I lose, or what, I declined to bet. I expect he thinks I don't bet on principle. But, anyway, let's hope he wins.

Leave is off at present.

The worst of this game is that now I feel I want to do it all myself. I really do know a fair amount about the Boche lines, and I long to spend a day wandering about there taking notes !

I was up yesterday afternoon trying to find out a certain T.M. battery, and what should fly by quite close and quite unconcerned but a duck ! We were not very high, and it was very misty. The duck just appeared, with his neck stretched out, eager and oblivious. And then vanished into the mist again. I was thinking about that



## LETTERS TO HELEN

duck too much to find out what I wanted. Anyway, it was a fruitless journey. But flying amongst clouds is very beautiful. Sometimes we got above the clouds, to where the sun was functioning away as efficiently as ever. The clouds looked like millions of feather beds.

*March 2.*

I have been doing some drawings of R.F.C. officers. They love being "took" out here, and my office is rapidly degenerating into a club, which makes work no easier.

Well, you see from the papers what is happening. The Boche retires to the Hindenburg Line, and we follow.

I should so love to tell you all about it, but Mum's the word. A great moral defeat for poor Fritz, anyway.

The cavalry are sharpening their swords.

The aeroplanes sail high up in the blue, like hungry hawks.

*March 5.*

I am probably going off to-morrow. Now, where do you think? Paris? Madrid? Anything of that sort?

Wrong again. Shall I tell you?

VICTORIA.



## THE HUN RETREAT

I'll send you a telegram directly I get across the briny.

And I plead for no "back from the war tea-parties," please!

\* \* \* \* \*

*March 22.*

The Hun rearguards are now well beyond —. I knew the place so intimately from photographs, and from high up in the air, that a view of it from terra-firma promised to be quite interesting.

So with great eagerness, some sandwiches, and the faithful sketchbook, I sallied forth. Harry came, too. A glorious day of brilliant sun and brief snowstorms.

From the aerodrome through all this devastated country, past wrecked villages, orchards laid waste, dug-out camps, bivouac camps, R.E. dumps, light railways, battered trollies lying on their sides, and all the ugly confusion of old wire rusted a red-hot colour, bits of corrugated iron, bits of netting screens, more wire, dead horses, dead men in all stages of decomposition, legs, hands, heads scattered anywhere, dead trees, mud, broken rifles, gas-bags, tin helmets, bully-beef tins, derelict trenches, derelict telephone wires, grenades, aerial torpedoes, all the toys of



## LETTERS TO HELEN

war, broken and useless. Tommy, the dear hairies, and the R.E. dumps, to remind you what vast stores of everything are still being accumulated.

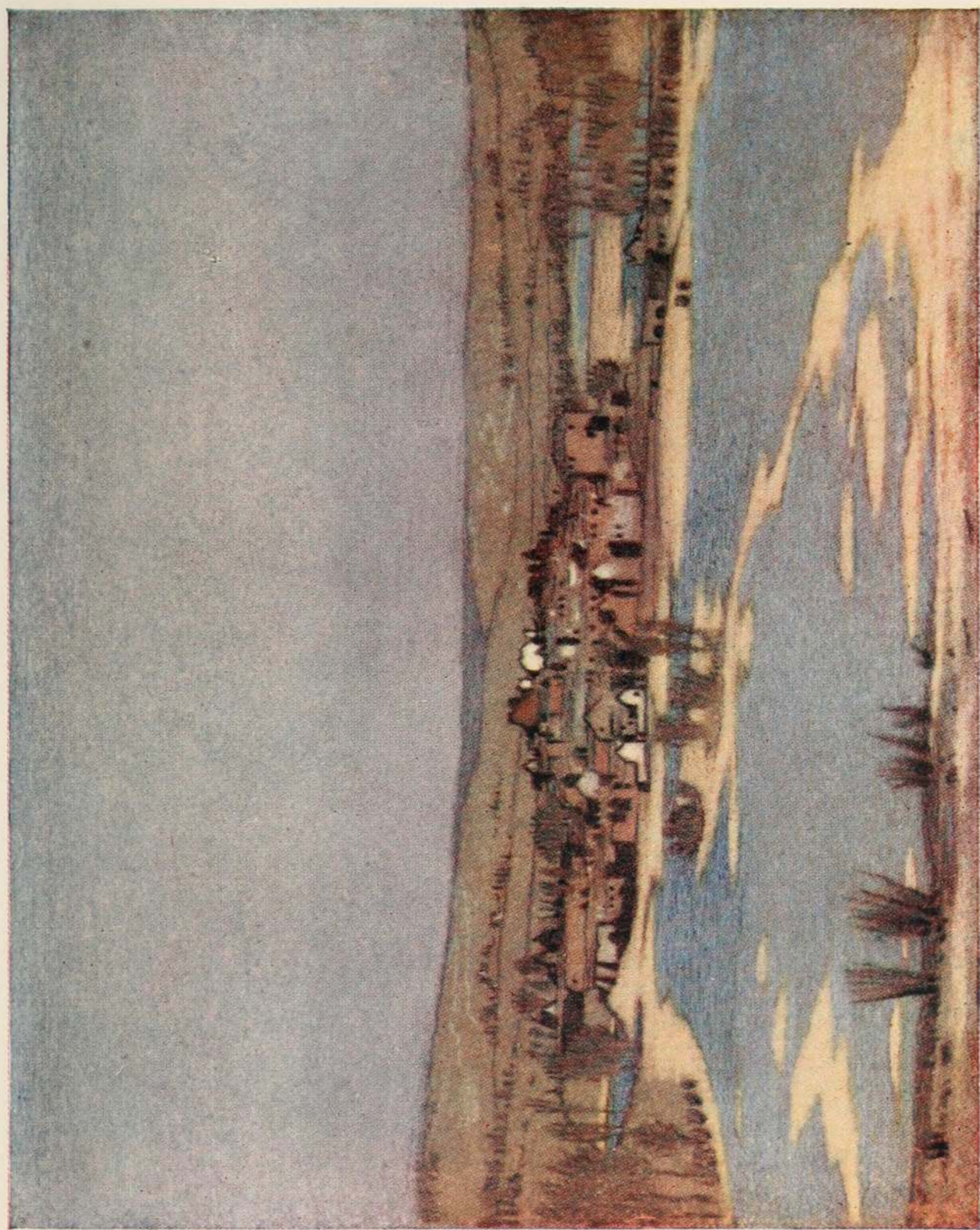
The ground becomes more and more like boiling porridge as you approach no-man's-land. Of no-man's-land itself, perhaps, the less said the better. No-beast's-land—call it that rather. And yet men have been very brave, very tender, in no-man's-land. Next we come to those Hun trenches that I have peered at from a distance so long and mapped so often. It all seems rather futile now.

Past the support trenches. Past the second line. Damn it! how much larger and deeper that old emplacement is than I thought! The country is less pitted, too. Of course, it hasn't been fought over like our back areas. Why; here are trees scarcely knocked about at all. A recognizable field there. How real that stream looks! And, oh Jemima! a blue tit.

A little distance farther. Over that gentle rise, and there behold —. Surely one of the loveliest towns in France, on its low hill surrounded by the quiet waters of the Somme. From a distance it looks all right; though somehow, the smoke still ascending from it doesn't look natural.

As you approach you realize that what looks











## PERONNE

so charming is just empty, shelled, charred, and broken. The Huns have destroyed every single house, all the bridges, and the cathedral, too. The cathedral that once crowned the town now stands a pale crushed ghost in the deserted market-place.

Some of the streets are almost amusing. Imagine Rye with the pretty alleys so encumbered and piled up with roofs, sofas, the contents of wardrobes, dormer-windows, smashed mirrors, rubble, and dust, that it's quite impossible to proceed. Very well, that's —.

Go into the houses, and there it's just as it is in the streets. Everything crushed to atoms. Images of saints have been hurled out on to garbage-heaps, and in the cathedral huge pillars are lying about in clumsy confusion amongst chairs, organ pipes, and gilded flowers.

On a huge notice board in the Grande Place the Hun has written :

NICHT ARGERN : NUR WUNDERN !

(Don't argue : only wonder ! We the Huns did this. Why discuss what we have done ? We have destroyed your city. Gape and stare, stupid fools ! What does it matter to us ? We took your precious town from you, because we wanted it. Now we don't want it any more. Here it is



## LETTERS TO HELEN

back again. With our love.) Some merry soldier wrote that up, I suppose. It was a pity.

There were French officers in —— to-day. I spoke to one. He answered with a quiet, simple bitterness and determination that would have turned even a Hohenzollern pale, I think. Unhappy Emperor! he must be feeling decidedly uneasy nowadays.

Another odd sight was a tub full of water, with a little dog trying to get out. But the little dog was dead. A crump evidently landed somewhere near, and just petrified him, as it were. You often see men like that, struck dead in the middle of some act. Men are usually turned a dull purplish or greenish black. So was this little dog. We ate a delicious lunch on the battlements, our legs dangling 50 feet above the reedy water. Lots of moorhen and coot swimming about.

The sun was warm. We enjoyed ourselves immensely. What a heavenly world it is!

*April 6.*

After a hectic day comes this chance of writing to you. Eleven-thirty p.m.

Would you like to hear about night flying? I didn't go, but I sketched the others going. And these are some notes. A bombing raid.



## NIGHT FLYING

It had been ordered in the morning. A raid on —. After a cheery dinner we trooped out, singing foolish songs. The hangars a few hundred yards away across the mud. They looked huge and eerie, looming up from the dark ground, all stately in the moonlight. The moon had a halo, but was very bright, bright enough to sketch by.

Six flares were flickering at intervals round the aerodrome. A vivid orange colour against the dim blue sky. The horizon was greyer, and little flames flashed intermittently from it. There were the aeroplanes waiting.

It was very cold. Soon the mechanics were starting the machines. The usual loud spurting and fizzing till presently the first machine begins to move. A big semi-luminous beetle lurching forward; then faster and faster and away, lifting up, up, up into the night. Only the lights visible now, but you can hear the hum of the engines a long way off. Other machines follow. The sky is full of twinkling fairies. They circle about for a bit, and then all head towards the east. Gradually the humming dies away in the distance. Look out for yourselves, you sleeping Huns!

A long while afterwards the humming again. The first aeroplane is coming home. There



## LETTERS TO HELEN

he is. Gradually lower and nearer. The machine descends smoothly on to the ground, turns and "taxi," spitting angrily towards the hangar where it lives. Muffled figures get out, and the mechanics take in the machine tail first to its home. What? oh yes, quite successful. Smashed the place to blazes. Anyone got a cigarette? Other machines begin coming in. It's such a clear night that we still stand about in groups waiting for the last one to arrive. Damn it all! where can old Rupert have got to? We'll just wait till he comes back, and then bundle off to bed. Anxious? Good Lord, no! What about?

Suddenly a small sharp flash high up in the night. Another and another. The Huns! They are coming. Archie is shelling them. Now another Archie poops off nearer here. Quick! Where's the orderly officer?

In a couple of minutes all is dark. Gradually the drone of the Huns, high up in the air, becomes audible. No. They seem to be steering more towards——. Searchlights from three different directions grope slowly to and fro. Where the devil are the Huns? The searchlights cannot find them. They must be cruising somewhere up above those thin cirrus clouds. Are they going to drop bombs on us? No, their



## THE END

direction is too far south. The searchlights cannot find them.

No sign of Rupert yet. Probably he has landed at another aerodrome. Dear old Rupert. One of the very best in this world. He'll be all right. Come on. It's too cold. Let's turn in.



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BILLING AND SONS, LIMITED  
GUILDFORD, ENGLAND









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