

Leaves from a Field Note-Book eBook

Leaves from a Field Note-Book by John Hartman Morgan

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Page 1

THE BASE

I

BOBS BAHADUR

It had gone eight bells on the S.S. *G*——. The decks had been washed down with the hosepipe and the men paraded for the morning's inspection. The O.C. had scanned them with a roving eye, till catching sight of an orderly two files from the left he had begged him, almost as a personal favour, to get his hair cut. To an untutored mind the orderly's hair was about one-eighth of an inch in length, but the O.C. was inflexible. He was a colonel in that smartest of all medical services, the I.M.S., whose members combine the extensive knowledge of the general practitioner with the peculiar secrets of the Army surgeon, and he was fastidious. Then he said "Dismiss," and they went their appointed ways. The Indian cooks were boiling *dhal* and rice in the galley; the bakers were squatting on their haunches on the lower deck, making *chupattis*—they were screened against the inclemency of the weather by a tarpaulin—and they patted the leathery cakes with persuasive slaps as a dairymaid pats butter. Low-caste sweepers glided like shadows to and fro. Suddenly some one crossed the gangway and the sentry stiffened and presented arms. The O.C. looked down from the upper deck and saw a lithe, sinewy little figure with white moustaches and "imperial"; the eyes were of a piercing steel-blue. The figure was clad in a general's field-service uniform, and on his shoulder-straps were the insignia of a field-marshal. The colonel stared for a moment, then ran hastily down the ladder and saluted.

* * * * *

Together they passed down the companion-ladder. At the foot of it they encountered a Bengali orderly, who made a profound obeisance.

"Shiva Lal," said the O.C., "I ordered the portholes to be kept unfastened and the doors in the bulkheads left open. This morning I found them shut. Why was this?"

"Sahib, at eight o'clock I found them open."

"It was at eight o'clock," said the colonel sternly, "that I found them shut."

The Bengali spread out his hands in deprecation. "If the sahib says so it must be so," he pleaded, adding with truly Oriental irrelevancy, "I am a poor man and have many children." It is as useless to argue with an Indian orderly as it is to try conclusions with a woman.



“Let it not occur again,” said the colonel shortly, and with an apology to his guest they passed on.

They paused in front of a cabin. Over the door was the legend “Pathans, No. 1.” The door was shut fast. The colonel was annoyed. He opened the door, and four tall figures, with strongly Semitic features and bearded like the pard, stood up and saluted. The colonel made a mental note of the closed door; he looked at the porthole—it was also closed. The Pathan loves a good “fug,”

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especially in a European winter, and the colonel had had trouble with his patients about ventilation. A kind of guerilla warfare, conducted with much plausibility and perfect politeness, had been going on for some days between him and the Pathans. The Pathans complained of the cold, the colonel of the atmosphere. At last he had met them halfway, or, to be precise, he had met them with a concession of three inches. He had ordered the ship's carpenter to fix a three-inch hook to the jamb and a staple to the door, the terms of the truce being that the door should be kept three inches ajar. And now it was shut. "Why is this?" he expostulated. For answer they pointed to the hook. "Sahib, the hook will not fasten!"

The colonel examined it; it was upside down. The contumacious Pathans had quietly reversed the work of the ship's carpenter, and the hook was now useless without being ornamental. With bland ingenuous faces they stared sadly at the hook, as if deprecating such unintelligent craftsmanship. The Field-Marshal smiled—he knew the Pathan of old; the colonel mentally registered a black mark against the delinquents.

"Whence come you?" said the Field-Marshal.

"From Tirah, Sahib."

"Ah! we have had some little trouble with your folk at Tirah. But all that is now past. Serve the Emperor faithfully and it shall be well with you."

"Ah! Sahib, but I am sorely troubled in my mind."

"And wherefore?"

"My aged father writes that a pig of a thief hath taken our cattle and abducted our women-folk. I would fain have leave to go on furlough and lie in a nullah at Tirah with my rifle and wait for him. Then would I return to France."

"Patience! That can wait. How like you the War?"

"*Burra Achha Tamasha*, [1] Sahib. But we like not their big guns. We would fain come at them with the bayonet. Why are we kept back in the trenches, Sahib?"

"Peace! It shall come in good time."

They passed into another cabin reserved for native officers. A tall Sikh rose to a half-sitting posture and saluted.

"What is your name?"



“H—— Sing, Sahib.”

“There was a H—— Sing with me in '78,” said the Field-Marshal meditatively. “With the Kuram Field Force. He was my orderly. He served me afterwards in Burmah and was promoted to subadar.”

The aquiline features of the Sikh relaxed, his eyes of lustrous jet gleamed. “Even so, Sahib, he was my father.”

“Good! he was a man. Be worthy of him. And you too are a subadar?”

“Yea, Sahib, I have eaten the King’s salt these twelve years.”

“That is well. Have you children?”

“Yea, Sahib, God has been very good.”

“And your lady mother, is she alive?”

“The Lord be praised, she liveth.”

“And how is your 'family'?”

“She is well, Sahib.”

“And how like you this War?”



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“Greatly, Sahib. The *Goora-log*[2] and ourselves fight like brothers side by side. But we would fain see the fine weather. Then there will be some *muzza*[3] in it.”

The Field-Marshal smiled and passed on.

They entered the great ward in the main hold of the ship. Here were avenues of swinging cots, in double tiers, the enamelled iron white as snow, and on the pillow of each cot lay a dark head, save where some were sitting up—the Sikhs binding their hair as they fingered the *kangha* and the *chakar*, the comb and the quoit-shaped hair-ring, which are of the five symbols of their freemasonry. The Field-Marshal stopped to talk to a big *sowar*. As he did so the men in their cots raised their heads and a sudden whisper ran round the ward. Dogras, Rajputs, Jats, Baluchis, Garhwalis clutched at the little pulleys over their cots, pulled themselves up with painful efforts, and saluted. In a distant corner a Mahratta from the aboriginal plains of the Deccan, his features dark almost to blackness, looked on uncomprehendingly; Ghurkhas stared in silence, their broad Mongolian faces betraying little of the agitation that held them in its spell. From the rest there arose such a conflict of tongues as has not been heard since the Day of Pentecost. From bed to bed passed the magic words, “It is he.” Every man uttered a benediction. Many wept tears of joy. A single thought seemed to animate them, and they voiced it in many tongues.

“Ah, now we shall smite the *German-log* exceedingly. We shall fight even as tigers, for Jarj Panjam.[4] The great Sahib has come to lead us in the field. Praised be his exalted name.”

The Field-Marshal’s eyes shone.

“No, no,” he said, “my time is finished. I am too old.”

“Nay, Sahib,” said the *sowar* as he hung on painfully to his pulley, “the body may be old but the brain is young.”

The Field-Marshal strove to reply but could not. He suddenly turned on his heel and rushed up the companion-ladder. When halfway up he remembered the O.C. and retraced his steps. The tears were streaming down his face.

“Sir,” he said, in a voice the deliberate sternness of which but ill concealed an overmastering emotion, “your hospital arrangements are excellent. I have seen none better. I congratulate you. Good-day.” The next moment he was gone.

* * * * *

Five days later the colonel was standing on the upper deck; he gripped the handrail tightly and looked across the harbour basin. Overhead the Red Cross ensign was at half-mast, and at half-mast hung the Union Jack at the stern. And so it was with every

ship in port. A great silence lay upon the harbour; even the hydraulic cranes were still, and the winches of the trawlers had ceased their screaming. Not a sound was to be heard save the shrill poignant cry of the gulls and the hissing of an exhaust pipe.



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As the colonel looked across the still waters of the harbour basin he saw a bier, covered with a Union Jack, being slowly carried across the gangway of the leave-boat; a little group of officers followed it. In a few moments the leave-boat, after a premonitory blast from the siren which woke the sleeping echoes among the cliffs, cast off her moorings and slowly gathered way. Soon she had cleared the harbour mouth and was out upon the open sea. The colonel watched her with straining eyes till she sank beneath the horizon. Then he turned and went below.[5]

FOOTNOTES:

[1] A jolly fine show.

[2] The English soldiers.

[3] Spice.

[4] King George the Fifth.

[5] The writer can vouch for the truth of this narrative. He owes his knowledge of what passed to the hospitality on board of his friend the O.C. the Indian hospital ship in question.

II

AT THE BASE DEPOT

Any enunciation by officers responsible for training of principles other than those contained in this Manual or any practice of methods not based on those principles is forbidden.—*Infantry Training Manual*.

The officers in charge of details at No. 19 Infantry Base Depot had made their morning inspections of the lines. They had seen that blankets were folded and tent flies rolled up, had glanced at rifles, and had inspected the men's kits with the pensive air of an intending purchaser. Having done which, they proceeded to take an unsympathetic farewell of the orderly officer whom they found in the orderly room engaged in reading character by handwriting with the aid of the office stamp.

"I never knew there was so much individuality in the British Army," the orderly officer dolefully exclaimed as he contemplated a pile of letters waiting to be franked and betraying marked originality in their penmanship.



“You’re too fond of opening other people’s letters,” the subaltern remarked pleasantly. “It’s a bad habit and will grow on you. When you go home you’ll never be able to resist it. You’ll be unfit for decent society.”

“Go away, War Baby,” retorted the orderly officer, as he turned aside from the subaltern, who has a beautiful pink and white complexion, and was at Rugby rather less than a year ago.

The War Baby smiled wearily. “Let’s go and see the men at drill,” he remarked. “We’ve got a corporal here who’s A1 at instruction.” As we passed, the sentry brought his right hand smartly across the small of the butt of his rifle, and, seeing the Major behind us, brought the rifle to the present.



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We came out on a field sprinkled with little groups of men in charge of their N.C.O.'s. They were the "details." These were drafts for the Front, and every regiment of the Division had sent a deputation. Two or three hundred yards away a platoon was marching with a short quick trot, carrying their rifles at the trail, and I knew them for Light Infantry, for such are their prerogatives. Concerning Light Infantry much might be written that is not to be found in the regimental records. As, for example, the reason why the whole Army shouts "H.L.I." whenever the ball is kicked into touch; also why the Oxford L.I. always put out their tongues when they meet the Durhams. Some day some one will write the legendary history of the British Army, its myth, custom, and folklore, and will explain how the Welsh Fusiliers got their black "flash" (with a digression on the natural history of antimacassars), why the 7th Hussars are called the "White Shirts," why the old 95th will spitefully use you if you cry, "Who stole the grog?" and what happens on Albuera day in the mess of the Die Hards. But that is by the way.

The drafts at No. 19, having done a route march the day before, had been turned out this morning to do a little musketry drill by way of keeping them fit. A platoon lay flat on their stomachs in the long grass, the burnished nails on the soles of their boots twinkling in the sun like miniature heliographs. From all quarters of the field sharp words of command rang out like pistol shots. "Three hundred. Five rounds. Fire." As the men obeyed the sergeant's word of command, the air resounded with the clicking of bolts like a chorus of grasshoppers. We pursued a section of the Royal Fusiliers in command of a corporal until he halted his men for bayonet exercise. He drew them up in two ranks facing each other, and began very deliberately with an allocution on the art of the bayonet.

"There ain't much drill about the bayonet," he said encouragingly. "What you've got to do is to get the other fellow, and I don't care how you get 'im as long as you knock 'im out of time. On guard!"

The men in each rank brought the butts of their rifles on to their right hips and pointed with their left feet forward at the breasts of the men opposite. "Rest!" The rifles were brought to earth between twelve pairs of feet. "Point! Withdraw! On guard!" They pointed, withdrew, and were on guard again with the precision of piston-rods.

"Now watch me, for your life may depend upon it," and the corporal proceeded to give them the low parry which is useful when you are taking trenches and find a *chevaux-de-frise* of the enemy's bayonets confronting you. Each rank knocked an imaginary bayonet aside and pointed at invisible feet. The high parry followed. So far the men had been merely nodding at each other across a space of some twelve yards, and it was hot work and tedious. The sweat ran down their faces, which glistened in the sun. "Now I'm going to give you the butt exercises"; they brightened visibly.

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“I am pointing—so!—and ’ave been parried. I bring the butt round on ’is shoulder, using my weight on it. I bring my left leg behind ’is left leg. I throw ’im over. Then I give the beggar what for. So!” The words were hardly out of his mouth before he had thrown himself upon the nearest private and laid him prostrate. The others smiled faintly as No. 98678 picked himself up and nonchalantly returned to his old position as if this were a banal compliment. “Now then. First butt exercise.” One rank advanced upon the other, and the two ranks were locked in a close embrace. They remained thus with muscles strung like bowstrings, immobile as a group of statuary.

“That’ll do. Now I’ll give you the second butt exercise. You bring the butt round on ’is jaw—so!—and then kick ’im in the guts with your knee.” Perhaps the section, which stood like a wall of masonry, looked surprised; more probably the surprise was mine. But the corporal explained. “Don’t think you’re Tottenham Hotspur in the Cup Final. Never mind giving ’im a foul. You’ve got to ’urt ’im or ’e’ll ’urt you. Kick ’im anywhere with your knees or your feet. Your ammunition boots will make ’im feel it. No!”—he turned to a young private whose left hand was grasping his rifle high up between the fore-sight and the indicator—“You mustn’t do that. Always get your ’and between the back-sight and the breech. So! The back-sight will protect your fingers from being cut by the other fellow. Now the third butt exercise.”

As we turned away the Major thoughtfully remarked to me, “There isn’t much of that in the Infantry Manual. But the corporal knows his job. When you’re in a scrap you haven’t time to think about the rules of the game; the automatic movements come all right, but in a clinch you’ve got to fight like a cat with tooth and claw, use your boots, your knee, or anything that comes handy. Perhaps that’s why your lithe little Cockney is such a useful man with the bayonet. Now the Hun is a hefty beggar, and he isn’t hampered by any ideas of playing the game, but he’s as mechanical as a vacuum brake, and he’s no good in a scrap.”

We returned to the orderly room. The orderly officer had a pile of letters on his right impressed with a red triangle, and contemplated the completion of his labours with gloomy satisfaction. “But it’s very interesting—such a revelation of the emotions of battle and all that,” I incautiously remarked. “Oh yes, very revealing,” he yawned. “Look at that”; and he held out a letter. It ran:

DEAR MOTHER—I’m reported fit for duty and am going back to the Front with the new drafts. I forgot to tell you we were in a bit of a scrap before I came here. We outed a lot of Huns. How is old Alf?—

Your loving son, JIM.

The “bit of a scrap” was the battle of Neuve Chapelle. The British soldier is an artist with the bayonet. But he is no great man with the pen. Which is as it should be.



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III

THE WILTSHIRES

"You talk to him, sir. He zeed a lot though he be kind o' mazed like now; he be mortal bad, I do think. But such a cheerful chap he be. I mind he used to say to us in the trenches: 'It bain't no use grouching. What mun be, mun be.' Terrible strong he were, too. One of our officers wur hit in front of the parapet and we coulden get 'n in nohow —'twere too hot; and Hunt, he unrolled his puttees and made a girt rope of 'em and threw 'em over the parapet and draw'd en in. Ah! that a did."

It was in one of the surgical tents of "No. 6 General" at the base. The middle of the ward was illuminated by an oil-lamp, shaped like an hour-glass, which shed a circle of yellow radiance upon the faces of the nurse and the orderly officer, as they stood examining a case-sheet by the light of its rays. Beyond the penumbra were rows of white beds, and in the farthest corner lay the subject of our discourse. "Can I talk to him?" I said to the nurse. "Yes, if you don't stay too long," she replied briskly, "and don't question him too much. He's in a bad way, his wounds are very septic."

He nodded to me as I approached. At the head of the bed hung a case-sheet and temperature-chart, and I saw at a glance the superscription—

Hunt, George, Private, No. 1578936 B Co. — Wiltshires.

I noticed that the temperature-line ran sharply upwards on the chart.

"So you're a Wiltshireman?" I said. "So am I." And I held out my hand. He drew his own from beneath the bedclothes and held mine in an iron grip.

"What might be your parts, sir?"

"W—— B——."

His eyes lighted up with pleasure. "Why, zur, it be nex' parish; I come from B——. I be main pleased to zee ye, zur."

"The pleasure is mine," I said. "When did you join?"

"I jined in July last year, zur. I be a resarvist."

"You have been out a long time, then?"

"Yes, though it do seem but yesterday, and I han't seen B—— since. I mind how parson, 'e came to me and axed, 'What! bist gwine to fight for King and Country, Jarge?'



And I zed, 'Yes, sur, that I be—for King and Country and ould Wiltshire. I guess we Wiltshiremen be worth two Gloster men any day though they do call us 'Moon-rakers.' Not but what the Glosters ain't very good fellers," he added indulgently. "Parson, he be mortal good to I; 'e gied I his blessing and 'e write and give I all the news of the parish. He warnt much of a preacher though a did say 'Dearly beloved' in church in a very taking way as though he were a-courting."

"What was I a-doin', zur? Oh, I wur with Varmer Twine, head labr'er I was. Strong? Oh yes, zur, pretty fair. I mind I could throw a zack o' vLOUR ower my shoulder when I wur a boy o' vourteen. Why! I wur stronger then than I be now. 'Twas India that done me."



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“Is it a large farm?” I asked, seeking to beguile him with homely thoughts.

“Six 'undred yackers. Oh yes, I'd plenty to do, and I could turn me hands to most things, though I do say it. There weren't a man in the parish as could beat I at mowing or putting a hackle on a rick, though I do say it. And I could drive a straight furrow too. Heavy work it were. The soil be stiff clay, as ye knows, zur. This Vlemish clay be very loike it. Lord, what a mint o' diggin' we 'ave done in they trenches to be sure. And bullets vlying like wopses zumtimes.”

“Are your parents alive?” I asked.

“No, zur, they be both gone to Kingdom come. Poor old feyther,” he said after a pause. “I mind 'un now in his white smock all plaited in vront and mother in her cotton bonnet—you never zee 'em in Wiltshire now. They brought us all up on nine shillin' a week—ten on us we was.”

“I suppose you sometimes wish you were back in Wiltshire now?” I said.

“Zumtimes, sir,” he said wistfully. “It'll be about over with lambing season, now,” he added reflectively. “Many's the tiddling lamb I've a-brought up wi' my own hands. Aye, and the may'll soon be out in blossom. And the childern makin' daisy-chains.”

“Yes,” I said. “And think of the woods—the bluebells and anemones! You remember Folly Wood?”

He smiled. “Ah, that I do: I mind digging out an old vixen up there, when 'er 'ad gone to earth, and the 'ounds with their tails up a-hollering like music. The Badminton was out that day. I were allus very fond o' thuck wood. My brother be squire's keeper there. Many a toime we childern went moochin' in thuck wood—nutting and bird-nesting. Though I never did hold wi' taking more'n one egg out of a nest, and I allus did wet my vinger avore I touched the moss on a wren's nest. They do say as the little bird 'ull never go back if ye doant.”

His mind went roaming among childhood's memories and his eyes took on a dreaming look.

“Mother, she were a good woman—no better woman in the parish, parson did say. She taught us to say every night, 'Our Father, which art in heaven'—I often used to think on it at night in the trenches. Them nights—they do make you think a lot. It be mortal queer up there—you veels as if you were on the edge of the world. I used to look up at the sky and mind me o' them words in the Bible, 'When I conzider the heavens, the work o' Thy vingers and the stars which Thou hast made, what is man that Thou art mindful of him?' One do feel oncommon small in them trenches at night.”

“I suppose you've had a hot time up there?”

“Ah that I have. And I zeed some bad things.”

“Bad?”



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“Cruel, sir, mortal cruel, I be maning. ’Twur dree weeks come Monday.[6] We wur in an advance near Wypers—’bout as far as ’tis from our village to Wootton Bassett. My platoon had to take a house. We knowed ’twould be hot work, and Jacob Scaplehorn and I did shake hands. ‘Jarge,’ ’e zed, ’if I be took write to my wife and tell ’er it be the Lard’s will and she be not to grieve.’ And I zed, ’So be, Jacob, and you’ll do the same for I.’ Our Officer, Capt’n S—— T——, d’you know ’en, sir? No? ’E com from Devizes way, he wur a grand man, never thinking of hisself but only of us humble chaps—he said, ‘Now for it, lads,’ and we advances in ’stended order. We wur several yards apart, just loike we was when a section of us recruits wur put through platoon drill, when I fust jined the Army an’ sergeant made us drill with skipping-ropes a-stretched out so as to get the spaces. And there wur a machine-gun in that there house—you know how they sputters. It cut down us poor chaps loike a reaper. Jacob Scaplehorn wur nex’ me and I ’eerd ’un say ’O Christ Jesus’ as ’e went over like a rabbit and ’e never said no more. ’E wur a good man, wur Scaplehorn”—he added musingly—“and ’e did good things. And some chaps wur down and dragging their legs as if they did’n b’long to ’em. I sort o’ saw all that wi’out seeing it, in a manner o’ spaking; ’twere only arterwards it did come back to me. There warn’t no time to think. And by the toime we got to thic house there were only ’bout vifteen on us left. We had to scrouge our way in through the buttry winder and we ’eerd a girt caddle inside, sort o’ scuffling; ’twere the Germans makin’ for the cellar. And our Capt’n posted some on us at top of cellar steps and led the rest on us up the stairs to a kind o’ tallet where thuck machine-gun was. And what d’ye think we found, sir?” he said, raising himself on his elbow.

“What?”

“There was a poor girl there—half daft she wur—wi’ nothing on but a man’s overcoat. And she rushed out avore us on the landing and began hammering with her hands against a bedroom door and it wur locked. We smashed ’en in wi’ our rifle-butts, and God’s mercy! we found a poor woman there, her mother seemingly, with her breast all bloody an’ her clothes torn. I could’n mak’ out what ’er wur saying but Capt’n ’e told us as the Germans ’ad ravished her. We used our field-dressings and tried to make the poor soul comfortable and Capt’n ’e sent a volunteer back for stretcher-bearers.”

“And what about the Germans?” I asked.

“Ah, I be coming to that, zur. Capt’n says, ’Now, men, we’re going to reckon with those devils down below.’ And we went downstairs and he stood at top of cellar-steps, ’twere mortal dark, an’ says, ’Come on up out o’ that there.’ And they never answered a word, but we could ’ear ’em breathing hard. We did’n know how many there were and the cellar steps were main narrow, as narrow as th’ opening in that tent over there. So



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Capt'n 'e says, 'Fetch me some straw, Hunt.' 'Twere a kind o' farmhouse and I went out into the backside and vetched some. And Capt'n and us put a lot of it at top of steps and pushed a lot more vurther down, using our rifles like pitchforks and then 'e blew on his tinder and set it alight. 'Stand back, men,' he says, 'and be ready for 'em with the bay'net.' 'Tweren't no manner o' use shooting; 'twere too close in there and our bullets might ha' ricochayed. We soon 'eerd 'em a-coughing. There wur a terrible deal o' smoke, and there wur we a-waiting at top of them stairs for 'em to come up like rats out of a hole. And two on 'em made a rush for it and we caught 'em just like's we was terriers by an oat-rick; we had to be main quick. 'Twere like pitching hay. And then three more, and then more. And none on us uttered a word.

"An' when it wur done and we had claned our bay'nets in the straw, Capt'n 'e said, 'Men, you ha' done your work as you ought to ha' done.'"

He paused for a moment. "They be bad fellows," he mused. "O Christ! they be rotten bad. Twoads they be! I never reckon no good 'ull come to men what abuses wimmen and childern. But I'm afeard they be nation strong—there be so many on 'em."

His tale had the simplicity of an epic. But the telling of it had been too much for him. Beads of perspiration glistened on his brow. I felt it was time for me to go. I sought first to draw his mind away from the contemplation of these tragic things.

"Are you married?" I asked. The eyes brightened in the flushed face. "Yes, that I be, and I 'ave a little boy, he be a sprack little chap."

"And what are you going to make of him?"

"I'm gwine to bring un up to be a soldjer," he said solemnly. "To fight them Germans," he added. He saw the great War in an endless perspective of time; for him it had no end. "You will soon be home in Wiltshire again," I said encouragingly. He mused. "Reckon the Sweet Williams 'ull be out in the garden now; they do smell oncommon sweet. And mother-o'-thousands on the wall. Oh-h-h." A spasm of pain contracted his face. The nurse was hovering near and I saw my time was up. "My dear fellow," I said lamely, "I fear you are in great pain."

"Ah!" he said, "but it wur worth it."

* * * * *

The next day I called to have news of him. The bed was empty. He was dead.

FOOTNOTE:



[6] This story is here given as nearly as possible in the exact words of the narrator.—
J.H.M.

IV

THE BASE

If G.H.Q. is the brain of the Army, the Base is as certainly its heart. For hence all the arteries of that organism draw their life, and on the systole and diastole of the Base, on the contractions and dilatations of its auricles and ventricles, the Army depends for its circulation. To and from the Base come and go in endless tributaries men, horses, supplies, and ordnance.



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The Base feeds the Army, binds up its wounds, and repairs its wastage. If you would get a glimpse of the feverish activities of the Base and understand what it means to the Army, you should take up your position on the bridge by the sluices that break the fall of the river into the harbour, close to the quay, where the trawlers are nudging each other at their moorings and the fishermen are shouting in the *patois* of the littoral amid the creaking of blocks, the screaming of winches, and the shrill challenge of the gulls. Stand where the Military Police are on point duty and you will see a stream of Red Cross motor ambulances, a trickle of base details, a string of invalided horses in charge of an A.V.C. corporal, and a khaki-painted motor-bus crowded with drafts for the Front. Big ocean liners, flying the Red Cross, lie at their moorings, and lofty electric cranes gyrate noiselessly over supply ships unloading their stores, while animated swarms of dockers in khaki pile up a great ant-heap of sacks in the sheds with a passionless concentration that seems like the workings of blind instinct. And here are warehouses whose potentialities of wealth are like Mr. Thrale's brewery—wheat, beef, fodder, and the four spices dear to the delicate palates of the Indian contingent. Somewhere behind there is a park of ammunition guarded like a harem. In the railway sidings are duplicate supply trains, steam up, trucks sealed, and the A.S.C. officer on board ready to start for rail-head with twenty-four hours' supplies. Beyond the maze of "points" is moored the strangest of all rolling-stock, the grey-coated armoured-train, within whose iron walls are domesticated two amphibious petty officers darning their socks.

In huge offices improvised out of deal boarding Army Service Corps officers are docketing stupendous files of way-bills, loading-tables, and indents, what time the Railway Transport Officer is making up his train of trucks for the corresponding supplies. The A.S.C. uses up more stationery than all the departments in Whitehall, and its motto is *litera scripta manet*—which has been explained by an A.S.C. sergeant, instructing a class of potential officers, as meaning "Never do anything without a written order, but, whatever you do, never write one." For an A.S.C. court of inquiry has as impassioned a preference for written over oral evidence as the old Court of Chancery. So that if your way-bill testifies:

Truck No.	Contents
19414	Jam 36 x 50

and from the thirty-six cases of fifty pots one pot of jam is missing on arrival at rail-head, then, though truck 19414 arrived sealed and your labels undefaced, it will go hard with you as Train Officer unless you can produce that pot.

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For the feeding of the Army is a delicate business and complicated. It is not enough to secure that there be sufficient "caloric units" in the men's rations; there are questions of taste. The Brahmin will not touch beef; the Mahomedan turns up his nose at pork; the Jain is a vegetarian; the Ghurkha loves the flesh of the goat. And every Indian must have his ginger, garlic, red chilli, and turmeric, and his chupattis of unleavened bread. One such warehouse we entered and beheld with stupefaction mountainous boxes of ghee and hogsheds of goor, rice, dried apricots, date-palms, and sultanas. Storekeepers in turbans stood round us, who, being asked whether it was well with the Indian and his food, answered us with a great shout, like the Ephesians, "Yea, the exalted Government hath done great things and praised be its name." To which we replied "Victory to the Holy Ganges water." Their lustrous eyes beamed at the salutation.

Great, indeed, is the Q.M.G. He supplies manna in the wilderness, and like the manna of the Israelites it has never been known to fail. It is of him that the soldier in the trenches says, in the words of the prophet, "He hath filled my belly with his delicates." And his caravans cover the face of the earth. You meet them everywhere, each Supply Column a self-contained unit like a fleet. It has its O.C., its cooks, its seventy-two motor lorries, with three men to each, and its "mobiles" or travelling workshops with dynamo, lathe, drilling machine, and a crew of skilled artificers, ready to tackle any motor-lorry that is put out of action. I take off my hat to those handy-men; many times have they helped me out of a tight place and performed delicate operations on the internal organs of my military car in the inhospitable night. It is a brave sight and fortifying to see a Supply Column winding in and out between the poplars on the perilously arched *pave* of the long sinuous roads, each wagon keeping its distance, like battleships in line, and every one of them boasting a good Christian name chalked up on the tail-board. For what his horses are to a driver and his eighteen-pounder to a gunner, such is his wagon to the A.S.C. man who is detailed to it. It is his caravan. Many a time, on long and lonely journeys from the Base to the Front, have I been cheered to find a Supply Column drawn up on the roadside in a wooded valley, on a bare undulating down, or in a chalk quarry, while the men were making tea over a blue wood fire. If you love a gipsy life join the A.S.C.

Within this one-mile radius of the A.S.C. headquarters at the Base are some twenty military hospitals improvised out of hotels, gaming-houses, and railway waiting-rooms. For the Base is the great Clearing House for the sick and wounded, and its register of patients is a kind of barometer of the state of affairs at the Front. When that register sinks very low, it means that the atmospheric conditions at the Front are getting stormy,

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and that an order has come down to evacuate and prepare four thousand beds. Then you watch the newspapers, for you know something is going to happen up there. And in those same hospitals men are working night and day; the bacteriologists studying “smears” under microscopes, while the surgeons are classifying, operating, “dressing,” marking temperature-charts, and annotating case-sheets. And in every hospital there is a faint mysterious incense, compounded not disagreeably of chloride of sodium and iodised catgut, which intensifies the dim religious atmosphere of the shaded wards. If G.H.Q. is the greatest of military academies, the Base hospitals are indubitably the wisest of medical schools. Never have the sciences of bacteriology and surgery been studied with such devotion as under these urgent clinical impulses. Here are men of European reputation who have left their laboratories and consulting-rooms at home to wage a never-ending scientific contest with death and corruption. They have slain “frostbite” with lanoline, turpentine, and a change of socks; they have fought septic wounds with chloride of sodium and the ministries of unlimited oxygen; they have defied “shock” after amputation by “blocking” the nerves of the limb by spinal injection, as a signalman blocks traffic. They have called in Nature to the aid of science and have summoned the oxygen of the air and the lymph of the body to the self-help of wounds.

High up on the downs is the Convalescent Camp. Here the O.C. has turned what was a swamp last December into a Garden City, draining, planting, building, installing drying-rooms of asbestos, disinfectors, laundries, and shower-baths, constructing turf incinerators and laying down pavements of brick and slag. Borders have been planted, grass sown, and shrubs and trees put up—all this with the labour of the convalescents. There is a football ground, of which recreation is not the only purpose, for the O.C. has original ideas about distinguishing between “shock,” or neurasthenia, and malingering by other methods than testing a man’s reflexes. He just walks abstractedly round that football ground of an afternoon and studies the form of the players. In this self-contained community is a barber’s shop, a cobbler’s, a library, a theatre. In two neighbouring paddocks are the isolation camps for scarlet fever and cerebro-meningitis, and as soon as a man complains of headache and temperature he is segregated there, preparatory to being sent down to No. 14 Stationary to have his spinal fluid examined by the bacteriologists. Here, in fact, the man and his kit, instead of being thrown on the scrap-heap, are renewed and made whole, restored in mind, body, and estate, his clothes disinfected and mended, the “snipers” treated to a hot iron, and his razor and tooth-brush replaced.

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For true it is that at the Base they study loving-kindness, and chaplains and doctors and nurses are busy with delicate ministries seeking to cure, to assuage, and to console. Alas! on what tragic errands do so many come and go; parents like Joseph and Mary seeking their child, and wives their husbands, in hope, in fear, in joy, in anguish, too often finding that the bright spirit has returned to God Who gave it, and that nothing is left but to follow him behind the bier draped with the Union Jack to the little cemetery on the hill... But for one that is buried here a thousand lie where they fell. Those stricken fields of Flanders! nevermore will they be for us the scene of an idle holiday; they will be a place of pilgrimage and a shrine of prayer. I well remember—I can never forget—a journey I made in the company of a French staff officer over the country that lies between Paris and the river Aisne. We came out on a wide rolling plain, and in the waning light of a winter's day we suddenly saw among the stubble and between the oat-ricks, far as the eye could reach, thousands of little tricolour flags fluttering in the breeze. By each flag was a wooden cross. By each cross was a soldier's kepi, and sometimes a coat, bleached by the sun and rain. Instinctively we bared our heads, and as we walked from one grave to another I could hear the orderly behind us muttering words of prayer. That lonely oratory was the battlefield of the Marne. Seasons will come and go, man will plough and sow, the earth will yield her increase, but those graves will never be disturbed by share or sickle. They are holy ground.

So it is with the fields of Flanders. In those fields our gallant dead lie where they fell, and where they lie the earth is dedicated to them for ever. Of the British Expeditionary Force that landed in France in August 1914 perhaps not 10 per cent remain. Like the dead heroes whose ghostly voices whispered in the ears of L'Aiglon on the field of Wagram, they haunt the plains of France. But their voices are the voices of exhortation, and their breath and finer spirit have passed into the drafts that have taken their place. Their successors greet Death like a friend and go into battle as to a festival, counting no price—youth, health, life—too high to pay for the country of their birth and their devotion. The nation that can nurture men such as these can calmly meet her enemy in the gate. Verily she shall not pass away.

* * * * *

The moon was at the full as I climbed the down where the shepherd was guarding his flock behind the hurdles on the short turf and creeping cinque-foil. Far below, whence you could faintly catch the altercation of the pebbles on the beach under the importunities of the tide, I saw an oily sea heaving like shot silk in the moonlight, the lonely beacon was winking across the waste of waters, strange signals were flashing from the pier, and merchantmen were coming up Channel



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plaintively protesting their neutrality with such a garish display of coloured lights as to suggest a midnight regatta of all the neutral nations. A troop train was speeding north and a hospital train crawling south, their coming and going betrayed only to the ear, for they showed no lights. The one was freighted with youth, health, life; the other with pain, wounds, death. It was the systole and diastole of the Base.

V

A COUNCIL OF INDIA

“And I said, ‘Nay, I who have eaten the King’s salt cannot do this thing.’ And the *German-log* said to me, ‘But we will give you both money and land.’ And I said, ‘Wherefore should I do this thing, and bring sorrow and shame upon my people?’”

It was a Sepoy in the 9th who spake, and his words were exceeding clear as Holy Writ.

“And what did they do then?”

“They took my *chupattis*, sahib, and offered me of their bread in return. But I said, ‘Nay, I am a Brahmin, and cannot touch it.’ And they said thrice unto me, ‘We will give you money and land.’ And I thrice said, ‘Nay.’ Then said they, ‘Thou art a fool. Go to, but if thou comest against us again we will kill thee.’ And I got back to my comrades.”

“Yea, to me also they said these things.” It was a jemindar of the 129th who spoke. “Yes, a German sahib called to me in Hindustani, ‘*Ham dost hein—Hamari pas ao—Ham tum Ko Nahn Mareng.*’” Which being translated is, “We are friends, come to us, we won’t kill you.”

“And you, Mula Sing, what think you of this war?”

The Woordie-Major replied: “Sahib, never was there a war like this war, since the world began. No, not even the Mahabharata when Kouro fought Pandu.”

Then spoke up a subadar of the Pioneers, a tall Sikh with his beard curled like the ancient Assyrians. He had shown me the five symbols of the Sikh freemasonry—nay, he had taken the *kangha* out of his hair and shown me the two little knives, also the hair-ring and the bracelet, and had unwound the spirals of his unshaven locks. Therefore we were friends. “All wars are but *shikkar* to this war, sahib.” “Shikkar?” “Yea, even as a tiger-hunt. But this, this is an exceeding great war.”

“Nay, this is a fine war—a hell of a fine war.” The speaker was an Afridi from Tirah, whose strongly marked aquiline features reminded me of nothing so much as a Jewish



pawnbroker in Whitechapel. He lacks every virtue except courage, and his one regret is that he has missed the family blood-feud. There have been great doings in his family on the frontier in his absence—two abductions and one homicide. “If I had not come home,” his brother has written reproachfully to him from Tirah, “things had gone ill with us. But never mind about all this now. Do your duty well.” And even so has he done.

“And how like you this war?”



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“Sahib, it is a fine war, a hell of a fine war, but for the great guns.”

“And wherefore?”

“Because we cannot come nigh unto them. But I, I have slain many men.”

“And what is your village?” asks my friend, Major D——, of the I.M.S.

“Chorah.”

“Why, I was there in the Tirah campaign.”

“Even so, sahib.”

The Ghurkhas looked on in silence at our symposium, their broad Mongolian faces inscrutable. But Shiva Lal, a Brahmin surgeon, who all this while has been eager to speak, for he is a pundit, and loves the sound of his own voice, here thrust forward his quaint countenance, whose walrus-like moustache conceals a row of teeth projecting like the spokes of a wicker-basket. Softly he rubs his hands and thus he speaks in English: “Sahib, I had charge of a German sahib—wounded. And I said unto him, ‘How is it that you, who are Christians, treat the Tommies so? We’ (Major D—— looks at me with the hint of a twinkle in his eye—for has he not told me at mess of that surprising change in the Indian vernacular whereby their speech is no longer of “Goora-log” and “Sahib-log” but of “We,” which fraternal pronoun is significant of much)—‘we shave you and feed you, we wash you and dress your wounds, even as one of ourselves, and you kill our wounded Tommies, yea, and do these things and worse even unto women. Are you not Christians? We’ (there is a return to old habits of speech)—‘we are only Indians, but I have read in your Bible that if one smite on the one cheek’—here Shiva Lal, who has now what he loves most in the world, an audience, and is easily histrionic, smites his face mightily on the right side—“one should turn to him the other. Why is this?”

“And what said the German officer, Shiva Lal?”

“Nay, sahib, he said nothing.” We also say nothing. For Shiva Lal needs but little encouragement to talk from sunset to cock-crow. Perhaps the unfortunate German officer divined as much. But the spell of Shiva Lal’s eloquence is rudely broken by Major D——, who takes me by the arm to go elsewhere. And the little group squatting on their haunches at their mid-day meal cease listening and dip their *chupattis* in the aromatic *dhal*, in that slow, ruminant, ritualistic way in which the Indian always eats his food.

“*Ram, Ram! Tumhi kothun alle?*” said my friend Smith, turning aside to a lonely figure on my right. A cry of joy escapes a dark-featured Mahratta who has been looking mournfully on from his bed of pain, comprehending nothing of these dialogues. We



have, indeed, been talking in every language except Mahrathi. And he, poor soul, has lost both feet—they were frostbitten—and will never answer the music of the charge again. But at the sound of his own tongue he raises his body by the pulley hanging at the head of his cot, and gravely salutes the sahib. Like Ruth amid the alien corn, his heart is sad with thoughts of home, and he has been dreaming between these iron walls of the wide, sunlit spaces of the Deccan. As his feverish brain counts and re-counts the rivets on the ship-plates, ever and anon they part before his wistful eyes, and he sees again the little village with its grove of mangoes and its sacred banyan on the inviolable *otla*; he hears once again the animated chatter of the wayfarers in the *chowdi*.



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“Where is thy home?”

“Sahib, it is at Pirgaon.”

“I know it—is not Turkaran Patal the head-man?”

The dark face gleams with pleasure. “Even so, sahib.”

“Shall I write to thy people?”

“The sahib is very kind.”

“So will I do, and, perhaps, prepare thy people for thy homecoming. I will tell them that thou hast lost thy feet with the frostbite, but art otherwise well.”

“Nay, sahib, tell them everything but that, for if my people hear that they will neither eat nor drink—nay, nor sleep, for sorrow.”

“Then will I not. But I will tell them that thou art a brave man.”

The Mahratta smiles mournfully.

“And have you heard from your folk at home?” I ask of the others, leaving Smith and the Mahratta together.

“Yea, sahib, the exalted Government is very good to us. We get letters often.” It is a sepoy in the 107th who speaks. “My brother writes even thus,” and he reads with tears in his eyes: “‘We miss you terribly, but such is the will of God. I have been daily to Haji Baba Ziarat’ (it is a famous shrine in India), ‘and day and night I pray for you, and am very distressed. I am writing to tell you to have no anxiety about us at home, but do your duty cheerfully and say your prayers. Repeat the beginning with the word “Kor” and breathe forty times on your body. Your father is well, but is very anxious for you, and weeps day and night.’”

“I also have received a letter.” The speaker is a Bengali, and, though a surgeon and non-combatant, must have his say. “My brother writes that I am to enlighten the names of my ancestors, who were tiger-like warriors, and were called Bahadurs, by performing my duties to utmost satisfaction.” This is truly Babu English.

“And you will do the same?”

“Yea, I must do likewise. My brother writes to me, ‘If you want to face this side again, face as Bahadur.’ And he saith, ‘Long live King George, and may he rule on the whole world.’ And so say we all, sahib.”



“And you?” This to a Shia Mahomedan whose right hand is bandaged.

“Ah, sahib, my people can write to me, but write to them I cannot. Will the honourable sahib send a word for me who am thus crippled?”

“Yea, gladly; what shall the words be?”

“Say, then, oh sahib, these words: ‘Your servant is well and happy here. You should pray the God of Mercy that the victory may be to our King, Jarj Panjam. And to my lady mother and my lady the sister of my father, and to my brother, and to my dear ones the greetings of peace and prayer. And the sum of fifty rupees which I arranged for my family’ (his wife) ‘will be paid to you every month.’ The sahib is very kind.”



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"The sahib would like to hear a story?" The speaker is a jemadar of the 59th. "So be it. Know then, sahib, that I and twelve men of my company were cut off by the *German-log*, and I, even I only, am left. It was in this wise. My comrades advanced too far beyond the trenches, and we lost our way. And the *German-log* make signs to us to surrender, but it is not our way and we still advance. And they open fire with a machine-gun—so!" The speaker makes sounds as a man who stutters. "And we are all hit—killed and wounded, and fall like ripe corn to the sickle. And I am wounded in the leg and I fall. And the German officer, he come up and hitted me in the buttock to see if I were dead. But I lay exceeding still and hold my breath. And they pull me by the leg" (can it be that the jemadar is pulling mine?), "a long way they pull me but still I am as one dead. And so I escaped." He looks round for approval.

"That was well done, jemadar." His lustrous eyes flash with pleasure. "And how is it with your food?"

"Good" ("*Bahout accha*"), comes a chorus of voices. "The exalted Government has done great things. We have *ghee*"—a clarified butter made of buffalo or cow's milk—"and *goor*"—unrefined sugar. "And we have spices for our *dhal*—ginger and garlic and chilli and turmeric. Yea, and fruits also—apricots, date-palms, and sultanas. What more can man want?"

"It is well." But it is time for me to go. Smith is still talking to the Mahratta, whose eyes never leave his face. "Come on, old man," I say, "it is time to go." Smith turns reluctantly away. As I looked over my shoulder the Mahratta was weeping softly.

VI

THE TROOP TRAIN

We were standing in the lounge of the Hotel M—— at the Base. "I'll introduce you to young C—— of the Guards when he comes in," the Major was saying to me. "He is going up to the Front with me to-night by the troop train. You don't mind if I rag a bit, do you, old chap? You see he's only just gazetted from Sandhurst, a mere infant, in fact, and he's a bit in the blues, I fancy, at having to say good-bye to his mother. He's her only child, and she's a widow. The father was an old friend of mine. Hulloa, C——, my boy. Allow me to introduce you."

A youth with the milk and roses complexion of a girl, blue eyes, and fair hair, well-built, but somewhat under the middle height—such was C——, and he was good to look upon.

Introductions being made, we filed into the *salle a manger*.



“Chambertin, Julie, s’il vous plait,” said the Major. “There’s nothing like a good burgundy to warm the cockles of your heart.” He had the radiant eye of an Irishman, and smiled on Julie as he gave the order.

“So you’re leaving your hospital to go up and join a Field Ambulance?” I said.

“That’s so, old man. There was a chance of my being made A.D.M.S. at the Base some day if I’d stayed on, but I wanted to get up to the Front, and I’ve worked it at last. Besides I’m not too fond of playing Bo-peep with my pals in the R.A.M.C. Beastly job, always worrying the O.C.’s. Talking about A.D.M.S.’s, did I ever tell you the story of how I pulled the leg of old Macassey in South Africa?”



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“No,” I said, although B—— had a way of telling the same stories twice over occasionally. The one story he never told, not even once, was how he got the D.S.O. at Spion Kop. I had heard it often enough from other men in the service, and could never hear it too often. And let me tell you that to know B—— and have the privilege of his friendship, is to be admitted to the largest freemasonry of officers in the British Army.

“Well, it was like this,” continued B——. “The A.D.M.S. was a thorn in the side of every O.C. at the Base, walking up and down like the very devil, seeking whose reputation he might devour, and ordering every O.C. to turn his hospital upside down. He took a positive delight in breaking men. You know the type, the kind of man who breaks his wife’s heart not because he’s bad, but because he’s querulous. The nagging type. Nothing could please him. So one day he came to Simpson’s show, where I was second in command. “How many patients have you got accommodation for here?” he asked me, Simpson being laid up with a recurrence of his malaria. “Four hundred and fifty, sir,” I said. “Very good, have accommodation for a thousand to-morrow night,” said Macassey with a cock of his eye that I knew only too well. We were not full up, as it was, although pretty hard-worked, being short-handed and with a devil of a lot of enteric, and there wasn’t the remotest likelihood of any more patients arriving, as they were switching them off to Durban. However, it was no use grousing, that only made old Macassey more wicked than ever, but I thought I’d have it in black and white; so I saluted and said, ‘Bad memory, sir, my old wound in India, d’you mind writing the order down?’”

“My dear B——,” I interrupted, “you know you’ve the memory of a Recording Angel.”

“So I do, my son, and so I did. Also I knew that Macassey’s memory, like that of most fussy men, was as bad as mine was good. I thought I’d catch him out sooner or later. He and I went round the camp, and, after about half-an-hour of the most putrid crabbing, he suddenly caught sight of some double-roofed Indian tents that Simpson had got together with great difficulty for the worst cases. You see we’d mostly tin huts, and in the African heat they’re beastly. ‘Ah, I see,’ said Macassey wickedly. ‘I see you have some good double-roofed tents here; let me have eight of them sent to me to-morrow night.’ That left us with four, and how we were to shift the patients was a problem. ‘Very good, sir,’ I said, ‘but I may forget the number. D’you mind?’ And I held out my Field Note-book, having turned over the page.” (There are not many people who can say ‘No’ to B——.) “He didn’t mind, So he wrote it down. Naturally I took care of those pages. Next day old Macassey must have remembered that he had issued two contradictory orders in the same day. Ordered me to expand and contract at the same time, like the third ventricle. And he knew that I had first-class documentary evidence, and that I guarded his autographs as though I were going to put ’em up for sale at Sotheby’s. He never troubled us any more.”



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“That was unkind of you, Major,” I said insincerely.

“Not so, my son. You see, I knew he’d been worrying old Simpson, and he wasn’t fit to undo the latchet of Simpson’s shoes. Why! have you never heard the story of Simpson and the giddy goat?”

“The goat?” said the sub.

“Yes, the goat. Useful animal the goat, if a trifle capricious. It was like this. Old Simpson, who’s got a head on his shoulders big enough to do all the thinking for the Royal College of Physicians, and ditto of Surgeons, with a good few ideas left over for the R.A.M.C., determined to get to the bottom of Mediterranean Fever—a nasty complaint, which had worried the Malta garrison considerably. Now the first thing to do when you are on the track of a fever is, as they say in the children’s picture-books, ‘Puzzle: Find the Microbe.’ It occurred to Simpson to suspect the goat. Why? Well, because he’d noticed that goat’s milk was drunk in Malta and Egypt. So he began to study the geographical distribution of the goat with the zeal of an anthropologist localising dolicocephalic and brachycephalic races. He found eventually that wherever you could ‘place’ a goat you would find the fever. Wherefore he took some goat’s milk and cultivated it assiduously in an alluring medium of Glucose-nutrose-peptone-litmus.”

“Dot and carry one. Please repeat,” I interjected.

“Glucose-nutrose-peptone-litmus,” repeated the Major.

“Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar-man, thief,” soliloquised the subaltern, who was brightening up.

“Quite so,” said the Major with a benignant glance. “Well, he then got a culture.”

“A what?”

“Culture. Poisonous growth; hence German ‘Kultur,’” said the Major etymologically. “To proceed. He then inoculated some guinea-pigs. No! I don’t mean directors in the City, though he might have done worse. And lo! and behold! he found the fever. You know the four canons of the bacteriologist? One, ‘get’; two, ‘cultivate’; three, ‘inoculate’; four, ‘recover.’”

“Well done, Simpson,” I said.

“You may say that, my friend. And now there’s old Simpson down at the Base in charge of No. 12 General saving lives by hundreds and thousands. You know while the bullet slew its thousands, septicaemia has slain its tens of thousands. How did he stop it? Why, by doing the obvious, which, you may have observed, no one ever does till a wise man comes along. He got wounds to heal themselves. He promoted a lymphatic flow



from the rest of the body by putting suppositories of chloride of sodium inside drainage-tubes in the wound. The heat of the body melts them, you see. There are three great medical heroes of this war—Almroth Wright, Martin-Leake, and Simpson.”

I could have named a fourth, but I held my tongue.

“Time to get on our hind legs,” the Major now said monitorily. “Julie, *l’addition* s’il vous plait.”

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“Bien, monsieur,” said Julie, who had been watching the Major admiringly without comprehending a word of what he said. Women have a way of falling in love with the Major at first sight.

We stumbled along between the rails and over the sleepers, led by the Major, who carried a hurricane lamp, and by the help of its fitful rays we leapt across the pools of water left in every hollow. We passed some cattle-trucks. The Major held up the lamp and scrutinised a legend in white letters—

Hommes 40. Chevaux 12.

“Reminds me of the Rule of Three,” said the Major meditatively. “If one Frenchman is equal to three and one-third horses, how many Huns are equal to one British soldier?”

“They are never equal to him,” said the subaltern brightly. “If it wasn’t for machinery we’d have crumpled them up long ago.”

“True, my son,” said the Major, “and well spoken.”

The men were grouped round the cattle-trucks, each man with his kit and 120 rounds of ammunition. They had just been through a kit inspection, and the O.C. in charge of details had audited and found it correct by entering up a memorandum to that effect in each man’s pay-book. Though how the O.C. completes his inventory of a whole draft, and certifies that nothing from a housewife to thirty pairs of laces per man is missing, is one of those things that no one has ever been able to understand. Perhaps he has radiographic eyes, and sees through the opaque integument of a ground-sheet at one glance. Also the Medical Officer at the Base Depot had endorsed the “Marching Out States,” after scrutinising, more or less intimately, each man’s naked body, with the aid of a tallow candle stuck in an empty bottle. A medical inspection of three hundred men with their shirts up in a dark shed is a weird and bashful spectacle. An N.C.O. was supervising the entraining at each truck; the escort was marching up and down the permanent way on the off-side. The R.T.O. handed the movement orders to the senior officer in command of drafts, and I saw that they were going to get a move on very soon.

We were now opposite a first-class compartment, and a slim figure loomed up out of the darkness.

“Halloa! is that you, C——? I thought you were gone on ahead of us, my boy.”

“So I was, sir, but some of my men are missing, and I’m sending a corporal to hunt them up. We’re off in a few minutes. I met young T—— just now. I’ve been trying to cheer him up,” he added. It was evident that the subaltern was now understudying the Major



in his star part of cheering other fellows up. “He’s feeling rather blue,” he continued. “Depressed at saying good-bye to his friends, you know.”

“Oh, that’s no good. Tell him I’ve got a plum-pudding and a bottle of whisky among my kit. Yes, and a topping liqueur.”

I looked at B——’s compartment. His servant, a sapper, was stowing the kit in the racks and under the seat, with the help of a portable acetylene lamp which burnt with a hard white light in the darkness, a darkness which you could almost feel with your hand.



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"I say, B——," I asked as I contemplated a hay-stack of things, "what's the regulation allowance for an officer's luggage? I forget."

"One hundred pounds. Oh yes, you may laugh, old chap, but I got round the R.T. officer. Christmas! you know. And I can stow it in my billet. Cheers the other fellows up, you know."

B——'s kit weighed, at a moderate computation, about a quarter of a ton, and included many things not to be found in the field-service regulations. But it would never surprise me if I found a performing elephant or a litter of life-size Teddy Bears in his baggage. He would gravely explain that it cheered the fellows up, you know.

"Major," I said, "you are a 'carrier'!"

"Carter Paterson?" said the Major, with a glance at his luggage.

"No, I didn't mean that. You are not as quick in the uptake as usual, especially considering your medical qualifications. What I meant was that you remind me, only rather differently, of the people who get typhoid and recover, but continue to propagate the germs long after they become immune from them themselves. You're diffusing a gaiety which you no longer feel."

It was a bold shot, and if we hadn't been pretty old friends it would have been an impertinence. The Major put his arm in mine and took me aside, so that the subaltern should not hear. "You've hit the bull's-eye, old chap," he said, in a low voice. "But don't give me away. Come into the carriage."

He was strangely silent as we sat facing each other in the compartment, each of us conscious of a hundred things to say, and saying none of them. The train might start at any moment, and such things as we did say were trivial irrelevancies. Suddenly he pulled out a pocket-book, and showed me a photograph.

"My wife and Pat—you've never seen Pat, I think? We christened her Patricia, you know?"

It was the photograph of a laughing child, with an aureole of curls, aged, I should say, about two.

"Pat sent me this," the Major said, producing a large woollen comforter. She had sent it for Daddy to wear during the cold nights with the Field Ambulance. I handed back the photograph, and B—— studied it intently for some minutes before replacing it in his pocket-book. Suddenly he leaned forward in a rather shamefaced way. "I say, old chap, write to my wife!"



“But, my dear fellow, I’ve never met her except once. She must have quite forgotten who I am.”

“I know. But write and tell her you saw me off, and that I was at the top of my form. Merry and bright, you know.”

We looked at each other for a moment; and I promised.

There was the loud hoot of a horn and a lurch of the couplings, as C—— sprang in. I grasped B——’s hand, and jumped on to the footboard of the moving train.

“Good-bye, old chap.”

“Good-bye, old man.”

B—— had gone to the front. I never saw him again.



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* * * * *

Three weeks later I was sitting at *dejeuner* in the Metropole, when a ragamuffin came in with the London papers, which had just arrived by the leave-boat. I took up the *Times* and looked, as one always looks nowadays, at the obituary column. I looked again. In the same column, one succeeding the other, I read the following:

Killed in action on 8th inst., near Givenchy, Arthur Hamilton C——
of the —— Guards, 3rd Battalion, only child of the late Arthur C.
and of Mrs. C. of the Red House, Little Twickenham, aged 19.

Behold! I take away the desire of thine eyes with a stroke.

Killed in action on the 8th inst., while dressing a wounded soldier
under fire, Major Ronald B——, D.S.O., of the Royal Army Medical
Corps, aged 42.

Greater love hath no man than this.

II

THE FRONT

VII

THE TWO RICHEBOURGS

We had business with the *maire* of the commune of Richebourg St. Vaast. Any one who looks at a staff map of North-West France will see that there are two Richebourgs; there is Richebourg St. Vaast, but there is also Richebourg l'Avoue, and although those two communes are separated by a bare three or four kilometres there was in point of climate a considerable difference between the two. In those days we had not yet taken Neuve Chapelle, and Richebourg l'Avoue, which was in front of our lines, was considered "unhealthy." Richebourg St. Vaast, on the other hand, was well behind our lines and was considered by our billeting officers quite a good residential neighbourhood.

We had left G.H.Q., and after a journey of two hours or so passed through Laventie, which had been rather badly mauled by shell-fire, and began to thread our way through the skein of roads and by-roads that enmeshes the two Richebourgs. The natural features of the country were inscrutable, and landmarks there were none. The countryside grew absolutely deserted and the solitary farms were roofless and



untenanted. Eventually we found our road blocked by a barricade of fallen masonry in front of a village which was as inhospitable as the Cities of the Plain.

A vast silence brooded over the landscape, broken now and again by a noise like the crackling of thorns under a pot. As we took cover behind a wall of ruined houses we heard a sinister hiss, but whence it came or what invisible trajectory it traced through the leaden skies overhead neither of us could tell. Silence again fell like a mist upon the land; not a bird sang, not a twig moved. The winter sun was sinking in the west behind a pall of purple cloud in a lacquered sky—the one touch of colour in the sombre greyness. The land was flat as the palm of one's hand, its monotony relieved only

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by lines of pollarded willows on which some sappers had strung a field telephone. Raindrops hung on the copper wire like a string of pearls, and the heavy clay of the fields was scooped and moulded by the rain into little saucer-like depressions as if by a potter's thumb. Behind us lay the reserve trenches, their clay walls shored up with wickerwork, and their outskirts fringed with barbed wire whose intricate and volatile coils looked like thistledown. The village behind whose walls we now sheltered lay in a No Man's Land between the enemy's lines and our own, and the sodden fields were not more desolate.

A tornado of artillery fire had swept over it, and of the houses nothing was left but indecencies, shattered walls and naked rafters, beneath which were choked heaps of household furniture, broken beds, battered lamps, and a wicker-chair overturned as in a drunken brawl. What had once been the street was now a quarry of broken bricks, with here and there vast circular craters as though a gigantic oak-tree had been torn out of the earth by the roots. And now the weird silence was broken by sounds as of some one playing a lonely tattoo with his fingers upon a hollow wooden board, but the player was invisible, and as we looked at each other the sound ceased as suddenly as it began. Our practised ear told us that somewhere near us a machine-gun was concealed, but these furtive sounds were so homeless, so impersonal, that they eluded us like an echo.

It was this complete absence of visible human agency that impressed us most disagreeably, as with a sense of being utterly forlorn amid a play of the elements, like Lear upon the heath. There came into my mind, as our eyes groped for some human sign in the brooding landscape, the thought of the prophet upon the mount amid the wind and the earthquake and the fire seeking the presence of his God and finding it not. And here too all these assaults upon our senses were fugitive and ghostly, and we felt ourselves encompassed about as by some great conspiracy. We walked curiously up the little street until we reached the last house in the village, and came out beyond the screen of its wall. At the same instant something sang past my ear like the twang of a Jew's harp, my foot caught in a coil of wire, and I fell headlong. My companion, lagging behind and not yet clear of the friendly wall, stopped dead and cried to me not to stand up. I crawled back among the rubbish to the cover of the house. We took counsel together. To retreat were perilous, but to advance might be fatal. We lowered our voices as, cowering behind walls, and picking our way delicately among the *debris*, we crept back to our car behind the entrance to the village. The driver started the engine and we moved forlornly along the narrow causeway, skirting the unfathomable mud that lay on either side, until we spied a ruined farmhouse where a company had made its billet and mud-coloured knots of soldiers stood



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round braziers of glowing coals. We had some parley with the company commander, who was of the earth earthy. His words were few and discouraging. As we crawled on, darkness enveloped us, but we dared not light our head-lamps. Suddenly the car slipped on the greasy road, staggered, and lurched over into the morass, hurling us violently upon our sides. We clambered out and contemplated it solemnly as we saw our right wheels over the axles in mud. No friendly billet was now in sight, and as we stood profanely considering our plight the darkness behind us was split by a long shaft of greenish light, and the whole landscape was illuminated with a pallid glow, as the German star-shells discharged themselves over the fan-like tops of the elms silhouetted against the sky. The jack was useless in the soft mud, it sank like a stone, and as we shoved and cursed we awaited each fresh discharge of the star-shells with increasing apprehension, for we presented an obvious target to the enemy's snipers. On the seat of the car was my despatch-box, and in that box was a little dossier of papers marked "O.H.M.S. German Atrocities. Secret and Confidential." "If the Germans catch us there'll be one atrocity the more," remarked my Staff Officer grimly, "but they'll spare us the labour of recording it."

Our futile efforts were interrupted by the sound of feet upon the causeway as a column of reliefs loomed up out of the darkness. A hurried altercation in low tones, a subdued word of command, and a dozen men, their rifles and entrenching tools slung over their shoulders, applied themselves to the back of our car, and slowly it slithered out of the mud. The column broke into file to allow us to pass, my companion went on ahead with a tiny electric torch to show the way, and with infinite caution we nudged slowly along the rank, the faint light of the torch bringing face after face out of the darkness into *chiaroscuro*, faces young and fresh and ruddy. Not a word was spoken save a whispered command carried down the rank, mouth to ear, "No smoking, no talking"—"No smoking, no talking"—"No talking, no smoking." Mules, carrying sections of machine-guns and packs of straw, loomed up out of the darkness as we passed, until the last of the column was reached and the frieze of ghostly figures was swallowed up into the night. We drew a long breath, for we knew now from the colonel of the battalion whose men had delivered us from that Slough of Despond that we had been within 150 yards of the German lines. We had mistaken Richebourg l'Avoue for Richebourg St. Vaast.

VIII

IDOLS OF THE CAVE



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Like the Cyclopes they dwelt in hollow caves, and each Colonel uttered the law to his children and recked not of the others except when the Brigadier came round. True there were two and a half battalions in their line of 2700 yards, but all they knew was that the next battalion to their own was the Highlanders; it was only when the five days were up and they were marched back to billets that they were able to cultivate that somewhat exclusive society. Their trenches were like the suburbs, they were faintly conscious that people lived in the next street, but they never saw them. Their neighbours were as self-contained and silent as themselves, except when their look-outs or machine-guns became loquacious. Then they too became eloquent, and the whole line talked freely at the Germans 200 yards away. By day the men slept heavily on straw in hollows under the parapet, supported with crates and sprinkled with chloride of lime; by night they were out at the listening posts, in the sap-heads, or behind the parapet, with their eyes glued to the field of yellow mustard in front of us. They had watched that field for three months. They knew every blade of grass therein. No experimental agriculturist ever studied his lucerne and sainfoin as they have studied the grasses of that field. They have watched it from winter to spring; they have seen the lesser celandine give way to pink clover and sorrel, and the grass shoot up from an inch to a foot. They have, indeed, been studying not botany but ethnology, searching for traces of that species of primitive man known to anthropologists as the Hun. They have never found him except once, when one of our look-outs saw something crawling across that field about midnight and promptly emptied his magazine. In the morning they saw a grey figure lying out in the open; the days passed and the long grass sprang up and concealed it till nothing was left to attest its obscene presence except a little cloud of black flies. Their horizon is bounded by rows of sand-bags, and their interest in those sand-bags is only equalled by their interest in the field in front of them. Occasionally one of our men finds them more than usually interesting. There is a loud report, the click of a bolt, and the pungent smell of burnt cordite. Then all is still again.

The tangent-sight on the standard of their machine-gun is always at 200, and they have not altered the range for three months. Occasionally at night the N.C.O. seizes the traversing-handles, and with his thumb on the button slowly sweeps that range of sand-bags, till the feed-block sucks up the cartridge-belt like a chaff-cutter and the empty cartridge-cases lie as thick round the tripod as acorns under an oak. The Huns reply by taking a flashlight photograph of us with a calcium flare, and then all is still again. In such excursions and alarms do they pass the long night.

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Though five-sixths of them slept stertorously in their holes by day, by night they were as wakeful as owls, and not less predatory. Life in the trenches is one long struggle for existence, and in the course of it they developed those acquired characteristics whereby the birds of the air and the beasts of the field maintain themselves in a world of carnage. They learnt to walk delicately on the balls of their feet as silently as hares, to see in the dark like foxes, to wriggle like the creeping things of the field, to lower their voices with the direction of the wind, to select a background with the moonlight, and to stand motionless on patrol with muscles rigid like a pointer when the star-shells dissolved the security of the night. They studied to dissemble with their lips and to imitate the vocabulary of nature. They grew more and more chary of human speech, and listening posts talked with the trenches by pulls on a fishing-reel. They never sheathed their claws, and working-parties wore their equipment as though it were the integument of nature. Bayonets were never unfixed unless the moon were very bright. At night they scraped out their earths like a badger, and, like the badger's, those earths were exceeding clean. The men were numbered off by threes from the flank, and one in three watched for two hours while the other two worked, repairing parapets, strengthening entanglements, and filling sand-bags. Every half-hour the N.C.O. on duty crept round to report, or to post and relieve, while now and again a patrol went out to observe. All this was done stealthily and with an amazing economy of speech. Night was also the time of their foraging, when the company's rations were brought up the communication trench and handed over by the C.Q.M.S. to each platoon sergeant, who passed them on to the section commander, and he in turn distributed them among his men in such silence and with such little traffic that it seemed like the provision of manna in the wilderness. At dawn pick-axe and spade were laid aside, the rum ration was served out, and all men stood to, for dawn was the hour of their apprehension.

Two miles behind them is a battery of our field guns, and they have with them an observing officer who talks intimately to his battery on the field telephone in that laconic language of which gunners are so fond, such as "One hundred. Twenty minutes to the left." Then the shells sing over their heads with a pretty low trajectory, and the Huns, beginning to get annoyed, reply with their heavy guns. There is a low whistle up aloft, a noise like the fluttering of invisible wings, and the next moment a cloud of black smoke rises over the village of X— Y—, behind the trenches. The Smoke Prevention Society ought to turn their attention to "Jack Johnsons"; their habits are positively filthy.

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These things, however, disturbed them but little and bored them a great deal. So they set to work to make their particular rabbit-warren into a Garden City. They held it on a repairing lease, and were constantly filling sand-bags, but that was merely to prevent depreciation, and didn't count. They first of all paved their trenches with bricks; there was no difficulty about the supply, as the "Jack Johnsons" obligingly acted as house-breakers in the village behind our lines, and bricks could be had for the fetching. Then the orderly transplanted some pansies and forget-me-nots from the garden of a ruined house, and made a border in front of the company commander's dug-out. The communication trench had been carried across a stream with some planks, and one day a man with a gift for carpentry fixed up a balustrade out of the arms of an apple-tree, which had been lopped off by shell, and we had a rustic bridge. When May came, water anemones opened their star-like petals on the surface of the clear amber stream, the orchard through which the communication trench had been cut burst into blossom, the sticky clay walls of the trench became hard as masonry in the sun, and one morning a board appeared with the legend "Hyde Park. Keep off the grass."

With these amenities their manners grew more and more refined. I have read somewhere, in one of those dull collections of sweeping generalisations that are called sociology, that each species of the *genus homo* has to go through a normal sequence of stages from barbarism to civilisation, and that we were once what the South Sea Islanders are now. Which may be very true, but as regards that particular primitive community I can testify that their social evolution has in three months gone through all the stages that occupy other communities three thousand years. They began as cave-dwellers and they end by occupying suburban villas—the captain's dug-out has a roof of corrugated iron, a window, a book-shelf, a table, and even chairs, and his table manners have vastly improved. They have progressed from candles stuck in bully-beef tins to electric reading-lamps. Three months ago they were hairy men whose beards did grow beneath their shoulders, and their puttees were cemented with wet clay; to-day they are clean-shaven and their Burberrys might be worn in Piccadilly. They slept with nothing between them and the earth but a ground sheet what time they were not, like the elephant, sleeping on their feet and propped against a trench wall. Now they sleep on a bed with a wooden frame. I have read somewhere that for a thousand years Europe was unwashed. It may be so, but I know that this particular tribal community progressed rapidly through all such stages, from a bucket to a shower-bath in billets, in about six weeks, and you can see their men any day washing themselves to the waist near the support trenches—men who a month or two ago had forgotten how to take their clothes off. They are, in fact, a highly civilised



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community. Some traces of their aboriginal state they still retain, and they cherish their totem, which is a bundle of black ribbons, rather like the flattened leaves of an artichoke, attached to the back of their collars. It is the badge of their tribe. Also at night some of them develop the most primitive of all instincts and crawl out on their stomachs with a hand-grenade to get as near as may be to the enemy's listening posts and taste the joy of killing. But by day they are as demure and sleepy as the tortoiseshell cat which has taken up its quarters in the dug-out.

Such is their life. But they are quietly preparing to get a move on. Some R.G.A. men have arrived with four pretty toys from Vickers's, and one fine morning they are going to disturb those sand-bags opposite them with a battery of trench mortars; our field guns will draw a curtain of shrapnel in front of the German support trenches, and then they will satisfy their curiosity as to what is behind those inscrutable sand-bags.

IX

STOKES'S ACT

An offender when in arrest is not to bear arms except by order of his C.O. or in an emergency.—*The King's Regulations*.

I

The President of the Court and the Judge-Advocate stood in private colloquy in one of the deep traverse-like windows of the Hotel de Ville over-looking the Place. A heavy rain was falling from a sullen sky, and the deserted square was a dancing sea of agitation as the raindrops smote the little pools between the cobbles and ricocheted with a multitudinous hiss. Now and again a gust of wind swept across, and the rain rattled against the windows. On the opposite side of the square one of the houses gaped curiously, with bedroom and parlour exposed to view, as though some one had snatched away the walls and laid the scene for one of those Palais Royal farces in which the characters pursue a complicated domestic intrigue on two floors at once. That house, with its bed exposed to the rain dripping from the open rafters, was indeed both farcical and indecent; it stood among its unscathed neighbours like a pariah. The rain was loud and insistent, but not so loud as to dull the distant thunder of the guns. The intermittent gusts of wind now and again interrupted its monotonous theme, but the intervals were as brief as they were violent, and in this polyphonic composition of rain, wind, and guns, the hissing of the raindrops came and went as in a fugue and with an inexpressible mournfulness.



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Inside the room was a table covered with green baize, on which were methodically arranged in extended order a Bible, an inkstand, a sheaf of paper, and a copy of the *Manual of Military Law*. Behind the table were seven chairs, and to the right and left of them stood two others. The seven chairs were for the members of the court; the chair on the extreme right was for the “prisoner’s friend,” that on the left awaited the Judge-Advocate. About five yards in front of the table, in the centre of an empty space, stood two more chairs turned towards it. Otherwise the room was as bare as a guard-room. And this austere meagreness gave it a certain dignity of its own as of a place where nothing was allowed to distract the mind from the serious business in hand. At the door stood an orderly with a red armband bearing the imprint of the letters “M.P.” in black.

“I have read the summary pretty carefully,” the Judge-Advocate was saying, “and it seems to me a clear case. The charge is fully made out. And yet the curious thing is, the fellow has an excellent record, I believe.”

“That proves nothing,” said the Colonel; “I’ve had a fellow in my battalion found sleeping at his post on sentry-go, a fellow I could have sworn by. And you know what the punishment for that is. It’s these night attacks; the men must not sleep by night and some of them cannot sleep by day, and there are limits to human nature. We’ve no reserves to speak of as yet, and the men are only relieved once in three weeks. Their feet are always wet, and their circulation goes all wrong. It’s the puttees perhaps. And if your circulation goes wrong you can’t sleep when you want to, till at last you sleep when you don’t want to. Or else your nerves go wrong. I’ve seen a man jump like a rabbit when I’ve come up behind him.”

“Yes,” mused the Judge-Advocate, “I know. But hard cases make bad law.”

“Yes, and bad law makes hard cases. Between you and me, our military law is a bit prehistoric. You’re a lawyer and know more about it than I do. But isn’t there something for civilians called a First Offenders Act? Bind ’em over to come up for judgment if called on—that kind of thing. Gives a man another chance. Why not the soldier too?”

“Yes,” replied the Judge-Advocate, “there is. I believe the War Office have been talking about adopting it for years. But this is not the time of day to make changes of that kind. Everybody’s worked off his head.”

Eight officers had entered the room at intervals, the subalterns a little ahead of their seniors in point of time, as is the first duty of a subaltern whether on parade or at a “general,” and, having saluted the President in the window, they stood conversing in low tones.



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The Colonel suddenly glanced at his left wrist, walked to the middle chair behind the table, and taking his seat said, "Now, gentlemen, carry on, please!" As they took their places the Colonel, as President of the Court, ordered the prisoner to be brought in. There was a shuffle of feet outside, and a soldier without cap or belt or arms, and with a sergeant's stripes upon his sleeve, was marched in under a sergeant's escort. His face was not unpleasing—the eyes well apart and direct in their gaze, the forehead square, and the contours of the mouth firm and well-cut. The two took their places in front of the chair, and stood to attention. The prisoner gazed fixedly at the letters "R.F.," which flanked the arms of the Republic on the wall above the President's head, and stood as motionless as on parade. A close observer, however, would have noticed that his thumb and forefinger plucked nervously at the seam of his trousers, and that his hands, though held at attention, were never quite still. The escort kept his head covered.

At the President's order to "bring in the evidence," the soldier on duty at the door vanished to return with a squad of seven soldiers in charge of a sergeant, who formed them up in two ranks behind the prisoner and his escort. And they also stood exceeding still.

The President read the order convening the court, and, as he recited each officer's name and regiment, the owner acknowledged it with "Here, sir." When he came to the prisoner's name he looked up and said, "Is that your name and number?" The escort nudged the prisoner, who recalled his attention from the wall with an immense effort and said "Yes, sir."

"Captain Herbert appears as prosecutor and takes his place." As the ritual prescribed by the Red Book was religiously gone through, the prisoner continued to stare at the wall above the President's head, and the rain rattled against the window-panes with intermittent violence. Having finished his recital, the President rose, and with him all the members of the court rose also. He took a Bible in his hand and faced the Judge-Advocate, who exhorted him that he should "well and truly try the accused before the court according to the evidence," and that he would duly administer justice according to the Army Act now in force, without partiality, favour, or affection.... "So help you God." As the colonel raised the book to his lips he chanted the antiphon "So help me God." And the Judge-Advocate proceeded to swear the other members of the court, individually or collectively, three subalterns who were jointly and severally sworn holding the book together with a quaint solemnity, as though they were singing hymns at church out of a common hymn-book. Then the Judge-Advocate was in turn sworn by the President with his own peculiar oath of office, and did faithfully and with great earnestness promise that he would neither divulge the sentence, nor disclose nor discover any votes or opinions as to the same. Which being done, and the President having ordered the military policeman to march out the evidence, the sergeant in charge cried "Left turn. Quick march. Left wheel," and the little cloud of witnesses vanished through the doorway.



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The President proceeded to read the charge-sheet:—

“The accused, No. , Sergeant John Stokes, 2nd Battalion Downshire Regiment, is charged with Misbehaving before the enemy in such a manner as to show cowardice, in that he at , on October 3rd, 1914, when on patrol, and when under the enemy’s fire, did run away.”

All this time the prisoner had been studying the wall, his eyes travelling from the right to the left of the frieze, and then from the left to the right again. It was noticeable that his lips moved slightly at each stage of this laborious visual journey. “Forty-seven.” “Forty-nine.” “Forty-eight.” Stokes was immensely interested in that compelling frieze. He counted and recounted the number of figures in the Greek fret with painful iteration. Apparently he was satisfied at last, and then his eyes began to study the inkstand in front of the President. The President seemed an enormous distance away, but the inkstand very near and very large, and he found himself wondering why it was round, why it wasn’t square, or hexagonal, or elliptic. Then he speculated whether the ink was blue or black, or red, and why people never used green or yellow. His brain had gone through all the colours of the spectrum when a pull at his sleeve by the escort attracted his attention. Apparently the Colonel was saying something to him.

“Do you plead guilty or not guilty?”

The prisoner stared, but said nothing. The escort again pulled his sleeve as the Colonel repeated the question.

Stokes cleared his throat, and looking his interlocutor straight in the face, said, “Guilty, sir.” The members of the court looked at each other, the Colonel whispered to the Judge-Advocate, the Judge-Advocate to the Prosecutor. The Judge-Advocate turned to the prisoner, “Do you realise,” he asked, not unkindly, “that if you plead ‘Guilty’ you will not be able to call any evidence as to extenuating circumstances?” The prisoner pondered for a moment; it seemed to him that the Judge-Advocate’s voice was almost persuasive.

“Well, I’ll say ‘not guilty,’ sir.”

He now saw the President quite close to him; that monstrous inkstand had diminished to its natural size. Nothing was to be heard beyond the hissing of the rain but the scratching of the Judge-Advocate’s quill, as he slowly dictated to himself the words “The —prisoner—pleads—’not guilty.’” But why they had asked him a question which could only admit of one answer and then persuaded him to give the wrong one, was a thing that both puzzled and distressed John Stokes. Why all this solemn ritual, he speculated painfully; he was surely as good as dead already. He found himself wondering whether the sentence of the Court would be carried out in the presence of only the firing party, or whether the whole of his battalion would be paraded. And he fell to wondering whether



he would be reported in the casualty lists as “killed in action,” or would it be “missing”? And would they send his wife his identity-disc, as they did with those who had fallen honourably on the field? All these questions both interested and perplexed him, but the proceedings of the Court he regarded little, or not at all.



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Meanwhile the Prosecutor was unfolding the charge in a clear, even voice, neither extenuating nor setting down aught in malice. In a court-martial no Prosecutor ever “presses” the charge; he may even alleviate it. Which shows that Assizes and Sessions have something to learn from courts-martial. The case was simple. Prisoner had gone out on the night of the 3rd with a patrol commanded by a subaltern. An alarm was raised, and he and the greater part of the patrol had run back to the trenches, leaving the officer to stand his ground and to return later with his left arm shattered by a German bullet.

All this Stokes remembered but too well, though it seemed to have happened an immense time ago. He remembered how the subaltern had warned him that the only thing to do when a German flare lit up the night was to stand quite still. And he had not stood still, for one of the most difficult things for a man to believe is that to see suddenly is not the same thing as being seen; he had ducked, and as he moved something seared his right cheek like red-hot iron, and then—but why recall that shameful moment? A paradoxical psychologist in a learned essay on “the Expression of Emotion” has argued gravely that the “expression” precedes the emotion, that a man doesn’t run because he is afraid but is afraid because he runs. Sergeant Stokes had never heard of psychology, but to this day he believes that it was his first start that was his undoing. He had begun to run without knowing why, until he knew why he ran—he was afraid. Yes, that was it. He had had, in Army vernacular, “cold feet.” But why he ran in the first instance he did not know. It was true he hadn’t slept for nearly three weeks, and that his duty as N.C.O. to go round every half-hour during the night to watch the men and stare at that inscrutable field, and to post and relieve, had made him very jumpy. And then a young subaltern had died in his arms the day before that fatal night—he could see the grey film glistening on his face like a clouded glass. How queer he had felt afterwards. But what had that to do with the charge? Nothing at all.

And while the prisoner pondered on these things he was recalled by the voice of the President. Did he wish to ask the witness any questions? His company commander had been giving evidence. No; he had no questions to ask. And as each witness was called, and sworn, and gave evidence, all of which the Judge-Advocate repeated like a litany and duly wrote down with his own hand—the prisoner always returned the same answer.

Now the prisoner’s friend, a young officer who had never played that *role* before, and who was both nervous and conscientious, had been studying Rule 40 in the Red Book with furtive concentration. What was he to do with a prisoner who elected neither to make a statement nor to put questions to witnesses, and who never gave him any lead? But he had there read something about calling witnesses as to character,



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and, reading, recollected that the company commander had glanced at the prisoner with genuine commiseration. And so he persuaded Stokes, after some parley, to call the captain to give evidence as to character. The captain's words were few and weighty. The prisoner, he testified, was one of the best N.C.O.'s in his company, and, with the latitude which is characteristic of court-martial proceedings, the captain went on to tell of the testimony borne by the dead subaltern to the excellent character of John Stokes, and how the said John Stokes had been greatly affected by the death of the subaltern. And for the first time John Stokes hung his head. But beyond that and the quivering of his eyelashes he made no sign.

And it being a clear case the Judge-Advocate, as a Judge-Advocate may do, elected not to sum up, and the prisoner was taken to the place from whence he came. And the Court proceeded to consider their finding and sentence, which finding and sentence, being signed by the President and the Judge-Advocate, duly went its appointed way to the Confirming Authority and there remained. For the General in Chief command in the field was hard pressed with other and weightier matters, having reason to believe that he would have to meet an attack of three Army Corps on a front of eight miles with only one Division. Which belief turned out to be true, and had for Sergeant John Stokes momentous consequences, as you shall hear.

II

When John Stokes found himself once more in charge of a platoon he was greatly puzzled. He had been suddenly given back his arms and his belt, which no prisoner, whether in close or open arrest, is supposed to wear, and his guard had gone with him. He knew nothing about Paragraph 482 of the King's Regulations, which contemplates "emergencies"; still less did he know that an emergency had arisen—such an emergency as will cast lustre upon British arms to the end of time. But that strange things were happening ahead he knew full well, for his new unit was as oddly made up as Falstaff's army: gunners, cooks, and A.S.C. drivers were all lumped together to make a company. Some carried their rifles at the slope and some at the trail, some had bayonets and some had not, certain details from the Rifle Brigade marched with their own quick trot, and some wore spurs.

Of one thing he was thankful: his old battalion, wherever they were, were not there. And the company commander coming along and perceiving the stripes on his sleeve, had, without further inquiry, put him in charge of a platoon, and thereafter he lost sight of his guard altogether.

He knew nothing of where he was. Few soldiers at the Front ever do: they will be billeted in a village for a week and not know so much as the name of it. But that big

business was afoot was evident to him, for they were marching in column of route almost at the double, under a faint moon and in absolute silence—the word having gone forth that there was to be no smoking or talking in the ranks.

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Not a sound was to be heard, except the whisper of the poplars and the tramp of the men's feet upon the *pave*. The road was so greasy with mud that it might have been beeswaxed, and Stokes's boots, the nails of which had been worn down, kept slipping as on a parquet floor. As they passed through the mean little villages not a light was to be seen; even the *estaminets* were shut, but now and again a dog barked mournfully at its chain. Once a whispered command was given at the head of the column, which halted so suddenly that the men behind almost fell upon the men in front, and then backed hastily; and these movements were automatically communicated all down the column, so that the sections of fours lurched like the trucks of a train which is suddenly pulled up. At that moment something flashed at the head of the column, and Stokes suddenly caught a glimpse of the faces of the captain and the subaltern in an aureole of light lit by the needle-like rays of an electric torch as they studied a map and compass.

But in no long time their ears told them they were nearing their destination, even as a traveller learns that he is nearing the sea. For they heard the crackle of musketry following upon the altercation of guns. All this passed as in a dream, and it seemed little more than a few minutes before Sergeant Stokes, having passed through a curtain of shrapnel, had his platoon extended in some shallow support trenches to which the remnants of the regiment whom they were called upon to stiffen had fallen back. It was a critical moment: our first trenches were in the hands of the enemy, and the whole line was sagging under the impact of the German hordes. Somehow that trench had to be recaptured—to be recaptured before the Germans had converted the *parados* into an invulnerable parapet and had constructed a nest of machine-guns to sweep with a crossfire the right and left flanks, where our line curved in like a gigantic horse-shoe. Of all this Sergeant Stokes knew as little as is usually given to one platoon to know on a front of eight miles.

As dawn broke and the stars paled, the word came down the line, and, in a series of short rushes, stooping somewhat in the attitude of a man who is climbing a very steep hill, they moved forward in extended order about eight or ten paces apart carrying their rifles with bayonets fixed. A hail-storm of lead greeted them, and all around him Sergeant Stokes saw men falling, and as they fell lying in strange attitudes and uncouth—some stumbling (he had seen a hare shot in the back dragging its legs in just that way), others lying on their faces and clutching the earth convulsively as they drummed with their feet, and some very still. Overhead there was a sobbing and whimpering in the air. A little ahead to the left of him a machine-gun was tap-tapping like a telegraph instrument, and as it traversed the field of their advance the men went down in swathes.



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If only he could get to that gun! On the right a low hedge ran at right angles to the German trench, and making for it he took such little cover as it afforded, and ran forward as he had never run before, not even on that night of baneful memory. His heart was thumping violently, there was a prodigious “stitch” in his side; and something warm was trickling down his forehead into his eyes and half blinding him, while in his ears the bullets buzzed like a swarm of infuriated bees. The next moment he was up against a little knot of grey-coated figures with toy-like helmets, he heard a word that sounded like “Himmel,” and he had emptied his magazine and was savagely pointing with his bayonet, withdrawing, parrying, using the butt, his knees, his feet. He suddenly felt very faint....

That is all that John Stokes remembers of the first battle of Ypres. For the next thing he knew was that a voice coming from an immense distance—just as he had once heard the voice of the dentist when he was coming to after a spell of gas—was saying something to him as he seemed to be rising, rising, rising ever more rapidly out of unfathomable depths, and then out of a mist of darkness a window, first opaque and then translucent, framed itself before his eyes, and he was staring at the sun. The voice, which was low and sweet—an excellent thing in woman—was saying, “Take this, sonny,” and the air around him was impregnated with a faint odour of iodoform. Then he knew—he was in hospital.

III

“Yes, a curious case,” said one officer to the other as he sat in a certain room at Headquarters, staring abstractedly at the list of Field Ambulances and of their Chaplains attached to the wall. “A very curious case. It reminds me of something Smith said to me about bad law making hard cases. It was jolly lucky the findings of the Court were held up all that time. If the C.-in-C. had confirmed them and the sentence had been promulgated, Stokes would now be doing five years at Woking. Whereas, there he is back with his old battalion, holding a D.C.M., and not reduced by one stripe.”

“Not so curious as you think, my friend,” replied the other. “Why, I saw forty men under arrest marching through H.Q. the other day singing—singing, mind you. There’s hope for a man who sings. Of course, field punishment doesn’t matter much; it is only a matter of a few days and a spell of fatigue duty. Though, mind you, I don’t say that cleaning out latrines isn’t pretty hard labour. But when it comes to breaking a man with a clean record because he has fallen asleep out of sheer weariness—well, what’s the good of throwing men like that on the scrap-heap? Of course, you must try them, and you must sentence them, but you can give them another chance. You know Stokes’s case fairly made us sit up, and we haven’t let the grass grow under our feet. Look at that.”



The Judge-Advocate read the blue document that was pushed across the table: “An Act to suspend the operation of sentences of Courts-martial.” He studied the sections and sub-sections with the critical eye of a Parliamentary draughtsman. “Yes,” he said, after some pertinent emendations, “it’ll do. But the title is too long for common use at G.H.Q.”



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“Why!” said the other with a certain paternal sensitiveness, “what do you suggest?”

“I suggest,” said the Judge-Advocate pensively,—“I suggest we call it Stokes’s Act.”

* * * * *

Now this story has one merit—if it has no other. It is true. And as for the rest of the Act and its preamble, and its sections and its sub-sections, are they not written in the Statute Book? In the Temple they call it 5 & 6 Geo. V. cap. 23. But out there they call it “Stokes’s Act.”

X

THE FRONT

Persons of a rheumatic habit are said to apprehend the approach of damp weather by certain presentiments in their bones. So people of a nervous temperament—like the writer—have premonitions of the approach to “the Front” by a feeling of cold feet. These are usually induced by the spectacle of large and untimely cavities in the road, but they may be accentuated, as not infrequently happened, by seeing the process of excavation itself—and hearing it. The effect on the auditory nerves is known as “k-r-rump,” which is, phonetically speaking, a fairly literal translation. The best thing to do on such occasions is to obey the nursery rhyme, and “open your mouth and shut your eyes.” The intake of air will relieve the pressure on your ear-drums. I have been told by one of our gunners that the gentle German has for years been experimenting in order to produce as “frightful” and intimidating a sound by the explosion of his shells as possible. He has succeeded. Cases have been known of men without a scratch laughing and crying simultaneously after a too-close acquaintance with the German hymnology of hate. The results are, however, sometimes disappointing from the German point of view, as in the case of the soldier who, being spattered with dirt but otherwise untouched, picked himself up, and remarked with profound contempt, “The dirty swine!”

The immediate approach to the trenches is usually marked by what sailors call a “dodger,” which is to say, a series of canvas screens. These do not conceal your legs, and if you are exceptionally tall, they may not conceal your head. Your feet don’t matter, but if you are wise you duck your head. Nine out of ten soldiers take an obstinate pride in walking upright, and will laugh at you most unfeelingly for your pains. Once in the communication trench you are fairly safe from snipers, but not, of course, from shrapnel or high-angle fire. A communication trench which I visited, when paying an afternoon call at a dug-out, was wide enough to admit a pony and cart, and, as it has to serve to bring up ration-parties and stretcher-bearers as well as reliefs, it is made as wide as is consistent with its main purpose, which is to protect the approach and to localise the

effect of shell-fire as much as possible, the latter object being effected by frequent "traversing." To reach the fire-trenches is easy enough; the difficulty

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is to find your way out of them. The main line of fire-trenches has a kind of loop-line behind it with innumerable junctions and small depots in the shape of dug-outs, and at first sight the subaltern's plan of the estate was as bewildering as a signalman's map of Clapham Junction. And the main line is complicated by frequent traverses—something after the pattern of a Greek fret, whereas such French trenches as I have seen appeared to prefer the Norman dog-tooth style of architecture. A survey of these things makes it easy to understand the important part played by the bomb and the hand-grenade in trench warfare, for when you have "taken" part of a trench you never know whether you are an occupier or merely a lodger until you have fully explored what is behind the traverses to the right and left of you. The delivery of a bomb serves as a very effective notice of ejection. The back of the trench is protected by a ridge of earth commonly known as a *parados*. My servant, whose vocabulary was limited, called it a paradox, and was not very wide of the mark.

Somewhere behind the trenches at varying distances are the batteries. The gunners affect orchards and copses as affording good cover for their guns, and if none are to be found they improvise them. Hop-poles trailed with hops or cut saplings will do very well. Usually there is a delectable garden, which is the peculiar pride of the men. Turf emplacements are constructed for the six guns, and turfed dug-outs house the telephone-operator and the gunners. The battery officers are billeted some way back, usually in a kind of farmhouse, whose chief decorative feature is a midden-heap; in England it would promptly be the subject of a closing order by any Public Health authority.

There is nothing more admirable than a field-gun. As a ship answers her helm or an aeroplane its controls, so does an eighteen-pounder respond to every turn of her elevating and traversing gear. Watch a gunner laying his gun on a target he cannot see; observe him switch the gun round from the aiming point to the target; remark the way in which the sight clinometer registers the angle of sight and the drum registers the range; and then ask yourself whether the smartest ship that ever sailed the high seas could be more docile to a turn of the wheel. With perfect simplicity did a man in the R.F.A. once say to me, "We feel towards our gun as a mother feels to her child; we'd sooner lose our lives than our gun." In that confession of faith you have the whole of the gunner's creed.

The heavy guns are generally to be found in splendid isolation; one such I visited and I marvelled at its appearance; it resembled nothing so much as the mottled trunk of a decayed plane-tree except for its girth. "Futurist art," explained the major deprecatingly as I stared at its daubed surface; "it makes it unrecognisable." It certainly did. Close by were what looked at a distance like a bed of copper cucumbers. "More gardening?" I asked. "Yes, market gardening," replied the major; "if we lay the shells like that with

sand-bags between them we prevent their igniting one another in case of accidents. It helps us to deliver the goods.”



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A mile or two from the battery headquarters at X—— Y—— was the observing station. The battery-major and myself were accompanied thither by a huge mastiff who in civil life was a dairyman by profession and turned a churn, but had long since attached himself to the major as orderly. We duly arrived at a deserted farm, but at this point the mastiff stopped dead and declined to come any further. I thought this churlish, and told him so, but he merely wagged his tail. When we entered the farmyard I understood. It was pitted with shell-holes, and they were obviously of very recent excavation. As a matter of fact the Huns suspected that farm, and with good reason, and treated it to intermittent "Hate." The mastiff therefore always waited for the battery-major at what it judged, quite erroneously, to be a safe distance. We clambered up into a loft by means of unreliable ladders. In the roof of the loft some tiles had been removed, and leaning our arms on the rafters we looked out. "You see that row of six poplars over there?" said the Major, pointing to a place behind the German trenches. I recognised them, for the same six poplars I had seen through a periscope in the trenches the day before. "Well, you see the roof of a house between the second and third tree from the right? Good!" He turned to the telephone operator in the corner of the loft. "Lay No. 2 on the register! Report when ready!" The operator repeated the words confidentially to the distant battery, and even as he spoke the receiver answered "Ready!" "Fire!" I had my eyes glued to the house, yet nothing seemed to happen, and I rubbed my field-glasses dubiously with my pocket-handkerchief. Had they missed? Even as I speculated there was a puff of smoke and a spurt of flame in the roof of the house between the poplars. We had delivered the goods.

If one of those ruinous farms does not contain a battery mess the chances are that it will shelter a field ambulance or else a company in billets. Field ambulances, like the batteries, are somewhat migratory in their habits, and change their positions according as they are wanted. But a field ambulance is not, as might be supposed, a vehicle but a unit of the R.A.M.C, with a major or a colonel in charge as O.C. The A.D.M.S. of a division has three field ambulances under him, and when an attack in force is projected he mobilises these three units at forward dressing stations in the rear of the trenches. They are a link between the aid-posts in front and the collecting stations behind. From the collecting stations the wounded are sent on to the clearing hospitals and thence to the base. It sounds beautifully simple, and so it is. The most eloquent compliment to its perfection was the dreamy reminiscence of a soldier I met at the base: "I got hit up at Wipers, sir; something hit me in the head, and the next thing I knew was I heard somebody saying 'Drink this,' and I found myself in bed at Boulogne." Every field ambulance has



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an attendant chaplain, and a very good sort he usually is. Is the soldier sick, he visits him; penitent, he shrives him; dying, he comforts him. One such I knew, a Catholic priest, six feet two, and a mighty hunter of buck in his day, who was often longing for a shot at the Huns, and as often imposing penances upon himself for such un-ghostly desires. He found consolation in confessing the Irishmen before they went into the trenches: "The bhoys fight all the better for it," he explained. He was sure of the salvation of his flock; the only doubts he had were about his own. We all loved him.

There is one great difference between life in billets and life in the trenches. In billets the soldier "grouses" often, in trenches never. This may be partly due to a very proper sense of proportion; it may also be due to the fact that, the necessity for vigilance being relaxed and the occasions for industry few, life in billets is apt to become a great bore. The small Flemish and French towns offer few amenities; in our mess we found our principal recreation in reunions with other fraternities at the *patisserie* or in an occasional mount. Of *patisseries* that at Bethune is the best; that at Poperinghe the worst. Besides, the former has a piano and a most pleasing Mademoiselle. In the earlier stages of our occupation some of the officers at G.H.Q. did a little coursing and shooting, but there was trouble about *delits de chasse*, and now you are allowed to shoot nothing but big game—namely, Germans—although I have heard of an irresponsible Irishman in the trenches who vaulted the parapet to bag a hare and, what is more remarkable, returned with it. Needless to say, his neighbours were Saxons. As for the men, their opportunities of relaxation are more circumscribed. Much depends on the house in which they are billeted. If there is a baby, you can take the part of mother's help; one of the most engaging sights I saw was a troop of our cavalrymen (they may have been the A.V.C.) riding through Armentieres, leading a string of remounts, each remount with a laughing child on its back. Or, again, you can wash. If you are not fortunate enough to be billeted at Bailleul, which has the latest thing in baths, enabling men to be baptized, like Charlemagne's reluctant converts, in platoons, you can always find a pump. The spectacle of our men stripped to the waist sousing each other with water under the pump is a source of standing wonder to the inhabitants. I am not sure whether they think it indecent, or merely eccentric; perhaps both. But then, as Anatole France has gravely remarked, a profound disinclination to wash is no proof of chastity. Besides, as one of the D.M.S.'s encyclicals has reminded us, cleanliness of body is next to orderliness of kit. If you take carbolic baths you may, with God's grace, escape one or more of the seven plagues of Flanders. These seven are lice, flies, rats, rain, mud, smells, and "souvenirs." The greatest of these is lice, for lice may mean cerebro-meningitis. Owing to their unsportsmanlike and irritating habits they are usually called "snipers." But, unlike snipers, they are not entitled to be treated as prisoners of war (their habits partake too much of espionage), and when captured they receive a short shrift from an impassive man with a hot iron in the asbestos drying-room.



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But it may well happen that in spite of babies, and baths, and brass bands, and footballs, and boxing-gloves, and playing marbles (the General in command of one of our divisions told me he had seen six Argyll and Sutherland sergeants playing marbles with shrapnel bullets in some support trenches), the men get bored. They are often very crowded, and crowding may develop fastidious animosities. A man may tolerate shrapnel in the trenches with equanimity, and yet may find his neighbour's table-manners in billets positively intolerable. Men may become "stale" or get on each other's nerves. When a company commander sees signs of this, he has one very potent prescription; he prescribes a good stiff route march. It has never been known to fail. Many a time in the winter months, when out visiting Divisional Headquarters, did I, in the shameful luxury of my car, come across a battalion slogging along ruddy and cheerful in the mud, and singing with almost reproachful unctiousness:

Last night I s-s-aw you, I s-saw you, you naughty boy!

Some one ought to make an anthology (for private circulation only) of the songs most affected by our men, and also of the topographical Limericks with which they beguile the long hours in the trenches. And if the English soldier is addicted to versifying it may be pleaded in his behalf that, as Mommsen apologetically remarks of Caesar, "they were weak verses." Not always, however, I have seen some unpublished verses by a young officer on the staff of the late General Hubert Hamilton, a man beloved by all who knew him, describing the burial of his dead chief at night behind the firing-line, which in their sombre and elegiac beauty are not unworthy to rank with the classical lines on the burial of Sir John Moore. And there is that magnificent *Hymn before Battle* by Captain Julian Grenfell, surely one of the most moving things of its kind.

With such diversions do our men beguile the interminable hours. After all it is the small things that men resent in life, not the big ones. I once asked a French soldier over a game of cards—in civil life he was a plumber, whom we shall meet again^[7]—whether he could get any sleep in the trenches amid the infernal din of the guns. "Oh, I slept pretty well on the whole," he explained nonchalantly, "mais mon voisin, celui-la"—he pointed reproachfully to a comrade who was imperturbably shuffling the pack—"il ronflait si fort qu'il finissait par me degouter."

FOOTNOTE:

[7] See Chapter XV.

XI

AT G.H.Q.^[8]



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|           Billet de Logement.           |
|                                           |
|  Mme. Bonnard, 131 rue Robert le Frisson, logera les sous-dits,   |
| savoir: un officier, un sous officier, deux hommes; fournira le lit, |
| place au feu et a la chandelle, conformement a loi du 3 juillet, 1877. |
|   Delivre a la Mairie,                                           |
|   le 31me Janvier, 1915.                                         |
|   Le Maire ----                                                 |
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The Camp Commandant, who is a keeper of lodging-houses and an Inspector of Nuisances, had given me a slip of paper on which was inscribed the address No. 131 rue Robert le Frisson and a printed injunction to the occupier to know that by these presents she was enjoined to provide me with bed, fire, and lights. Armed with this billeting-paper and accompanied by my servant, a private in the Suffolks, who was carrying my kit, I knocked at the door of No. 131, affecting an indifference to my reception which I did not feel. It seemed to me that a rate-collector, presenting a demand note, could have boasted a more graceful errand. The door opened and an old lady in a black silk gown inquired, "Qu'est-ce que vous voulez, M'sieu'?" I presented my billeting-paper with a bow. Her waist was girt with a kind of bombardier's girdle from which hung a small armoury of steel implements and leather scabbards: scissors, spectacle case, a bunch of keys, a button-hook, and other more or less intimidating things. "Jeanne," she called in a quavering voice, and as the *bonne* appeared, tying her apron-strings, they read the billeting-paper together, the one looking over the shoulder of the other, Madame reading the words as a child reads, and as though she were speaking to herself. The paper shook in her tremulous hands, and I could see that she was very old. It was obvious that my appearance in that quiet household was as agitating as it was unexpected. "Et votre ordonnance?" she asked, with a glance at my servant. "Non, il dort dans la caserne." "Bien!" she said, and with a smile made me welcome.

It was soon evident that, my credentials being once established, I was to be regarded as a member of the household, and nothing would satisfy Madame but that I should be assured of this. Having shown me my bedroom, with its pompous bed draped with a tent of curtains, she took me on a tour of her *menage*. I was conducted into the kitchen, bright with copper pans and the *marmite*—it was as sweet and clean as a dairy; the resources of the still-room were displayed to me, and the confitures and spices were not

more remarkable than the domestic pharmacy in which the herbs of the field had been distilled



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by Madame's own hands to yield their peculiar virtues, rue for liver, calamint for cholera, plantain for the kidneys, fennel for indigestion, elderberry for sore throat, and dandelion for affections of the blood. Then I was shown the oak presses full of linen white as snow and laid up in lavender. This inventory being concluded, I was presented with a key of the front door to mark my admission into the freedom of the house, and invited to take a glass of Burgundy while Sykes was unpacking my kit upstairs.

Madame, it seemed, was a widow of eighty-five years of age, without issue, and if her eyes were dim and her natural force abated, her teeth, as she proudly told me, were her own. She obviously belonged to that *rentier* class who spend the evening of their days in the quiet town which serves as G.H.Q.—a town which has a kind of faded gentility, and which, behind its inscrutable house-fronts, conceals a good deal of quiet opulence in the matter of old china, silver, and oak. In her youth Madame had kept a *pension* and had had English demoiselles among her charges. She had never been to England but she had heard of "Hyde Park." Did I know it? She received my assurance with obvious gratification as though it established a personal intimacy between us. "Avez-vous tue des Allemands?" My negative answer left her disappointed but hopeful.

"La guerre, quand finira-t-elle?" interjected the *bonne*, who, I afterwards found, had a husband at the war. Those interrogatories were to become very familiar to me. Every evening, when I returned from my visits to Divisional and Brigade Headquarters, mistress and servant always put me through the same catechism:

"Avez-vous tue des Allemands?"

"La guerre, quand finira-t-elle?"

The immense seriousness, not to say solicitude, with which these inquiries were addressed to me eventually led me into the most enterprising mendacities. I killed a German every day, greatly to Madame's satisfaction, and my total bag when I came away was sufficiently remarkable to be worth a place in an official *communique*. I think it gave Madame a feeling of security, and I hoped Jeanne might consider that it appreciably accelerated the end of the war. But "Guillaume," as she always called him, was the principal object of Madame's aversion, and she never mentioned the name of the All-Highest without a lethal gesture as she drew her tremulous hand across her throat and uttered the menacing words: "Couper la gorge." She often uttered these maledictions to Sykes in the kitchen, as she watched him making the toast for my breakfast, and I have no doubt that the "Oui, Madame," with which he invariably assented, gave her great satisfaction. Doubtless it made her feel that the heart of the British Army was sound. Sykes used to study furtively a small book called *French, and how to speak it*, but he was very chary of speaking it, and seemed to prefer a deaf-and-dumb language of his own. But



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he was naturally a man of few words, and phlegmatic. He described the first battle of Ypres, in which he had been “wounded,” in exactly twenty-four words, and I could never get any more out of him, though he became comparatively voluble on the subject of his wife at Norwich and the twins. He was an East Anglian, and made four vowels do duty for five, his e’s being always pronounced as a’s; he had done his seven years’ “sarvice” with the colours, and was a reservist; he was an admirable servant—steady, cool, and honest. I imagine he had never acted as servant to any of his regimental officers, for on the first occasion when he brought up my breakfast I was not a little amused to observe that the top of the egg had been carefully removed, the rolls sliced and buttered, and the bread and butter cut into slender “fingers,” presumably for me to dip into the ochreous interior of the egg; it reminded me of my nursery days. Perhaps he was in the habit of doing it for the twins. I gently weaned him from this tender habit. He performed all his duties, such as making my bed, or handing me a letter, with quick automatic movements as though he were presenting arms. Also his face, which was usually expressionless as though his mind were “at ease,” had a way of suddenly coming to “attention” when you spoke to him. He had a curious and recondite knowledge of the folk-lore of the British Army, and entertained me at times with stories of “Kruger’s Own,” “The White Shirts,” “The Dirty Twelfth,” “The Holy Boys,” “The Saucy Seventh,” having names for the regiments which you will never find in the *Army List*. In short, he was a survival and in a way a tragic survival. For how many of the old Army are left? I fear very few, and many traditions may have perished with them.

In his solicitude for me Sykes had jealous rivals in Madame and Jeanne. Madame reserved to herself as her peculiar prerogative the deposit of a hot-water “bottle” in my bed every night, such a hot-water bottle as I have never seen elsewhere. It reminded me of nothing so much as the barrel of one of the newer machine-guns, being a long fluted cylinder of black steel. This was always borne by Madame every night in ritualistic procession, Jeanne following with a silver candlestick and a night-light. The ceremony concluded with a bow and “good-night,” two words of which Madame was inordinately proud. She never attained “good-morning,” but she more than supplied the deficiency of English speech by the grace of her French manners, always entering my room at 8 A.M. as I lay in bed, with the greeting, “Bon matin, M’sieu’, avez-vous bien dormi?” Perhaps I looked, as I felt, embarrassed on the first occasion, for she quickly added in French, “I am old enough to be your mother”—as indeed she was. She had at once the resignation in repose and the agitation in action of extreme old age. I have seen her dozing in her chair in the salon, as I passed through the hall, with her gnarled



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hands extended on her knees in just that attitude of quiet waiting which one associates with the well-known engraving in which Death is figured as the coming of a friend. But when she was on her feet she moved about with a kind of aimless activity, opening drawers and shutting them and reopening them and speaking to herself the while, until Jeanne, catching my puzzled expression, would whisper loudly in my ear with a tolerant smile, "Elle est tres VIEILLE." Jeanne had acquired a habit of raising her voice, owing to Madame's deafness, which resulted in her whispers partaking of the phonetic quality of those stage asides which, by a curious convention, while audible at the very back of the dress circle, are quite inaudible to the other characters on the stage. Whether Madame ever overheard these auricular confidences I know not. If she did, I doubt if she regarded them, for she was under the illusion, common to very old people who live in the society of a younger generation and were mature adults when their companions were merely adolescent, that Jeanne, who had entered her service as a child, had never grown up. If Madame seemed "tres vieille" to Jeanne, it was indisputable that Jeanne continued "tres jeune" to Madame. She was, indeed, firmly convinced that she was looking after Jeanne, whereas in truth it was Jeanne who looked after her. For Jeanne was at least thirty-five, with a husband at the war, in virtue of whom she enjoyed a separation allowance of one franc a day, and a boy for whom she received ten sous. Her husband, a *pompier*, got nothing. It never occurred to her to regard this provision as inadequate. And she was as capable as she was contented, and sang at her work.

It was often difficult to believe that this quiet backwater was within an hour or two of the trenches. G.H.Q. was indeed situated well back behind "the Front," which, however precise the maps in the newspapers may affect to make it, is, like the Equator of our school-books, a more or less "imaginary line drawn across the earth's surface." Imaginary because if a line be, as we were taught with painful reiteration, length without breadth, then "the Front" is not a line at all, much less a straight line in the sense of the shortest distance between two points. It is not straight, for it curves and sags and has its salients and re-entrant angles; and it is not a line, for it has breadth as well as length. Broadly speaking, the Front extends back to the H.Q. of the armies (to say nothing of the H.Q. of corps, divisions, and brigades), and thence to G.H.Q. itself, which may be regarded as being "the Back of the Front," to vary a classical expression of *Punch*. The Front is, indeed, to be visualised not as a straight line but as a fully opened fan, the periphery of which is the fire-trenches, the ribs the lines of communication, and the knob or knuckle is General Headquarters. When we extend our Front southwards and take over the French trenches we just expand our fan a little more. When we come to make a general advance all along the periphery, the whole fan will be thrust forward, and the knuckle with it, for the relative distances of General Headquarters, and minor Headquarters, from this periphery and from one another are a more or less constant quantity, being determined by such fixed considerations as the range of modern guns and the mobility of transport.



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From G.H.Q., the brain of the Army, the volitional centre of the whole organism, radiate the sensory and motor nerves by which impressions at the Front are registered and plans for action transmitted. It is the home of the Staff, not of the Armies, and contains more “brass hats” than all the other Headquarters put together. Beyond the “details” in the barracks it contains few of the rank and file, and its big square betrays little of the crowded animation of the towns nearer the fighting line, with their great parks of armoured cars, motor lorries, and ammunition waggons, their filter-carts, and their little clusters and eddies of men resting in billets. The Military Police on point-duty have a comparatively quiet time, although despatch-riders are, of course, for ever whizzing to and fro with messages from and to the Front. It is as full of departmental offices as Whitehall itself—some 153 of them to be exact—each one indicated by a combination of initial letters, for staff officers are men of few words and cogent, and it saves time to say “O.” when you mean Operations, “I.” for Intelligence, “A.G.” for Adjutant-General; a fashion which is faithfully followed at the other H.Q., for D.A.A.Q.M.G. saves an enormous number of polysyllables.

Hence the proximity of hostilities has left but little outward and visible sign upon the ancient town. The tradesmen have, it is true, made some concessions to our presence, and one remarks the inviting legends “Top-hole Tea” in the windows of a *patisserie* and “High life” over the shop of a tailor. Four of us made a private arrangement with a buxom housewife, whereby, in return for four francs per head a day and the pooling of our rations, she undertook to provide us with lunch and dinner, thereby establishing a “Mess” of our own. Many such fraternities there were in the absence of a regular regimental mess. But these arrangements were more private than military, the only obligation on the ordinary householder being the furnishing of billets. Occasionally the cobbled streets became the scene of an unwonted animation when young French recruits celebrated their call to the colours by marching down the streets arm-in-arm singing ribald songs, or a squad of sullen German prisoners were marched up them on their way to the prison, within which they vanished amid the imprecations of the crowd. One such squad I saw arriving in a motor lorry, from the tailboard of which they jumped down to enter the gates, and one of them, a clumsy fellow of about thirteen stones, landed heavily in his ammunition boots from a height of about five feet on the foot of a British soldier on guard. The latter winced and hastily drew back his foot, but beyond that gave no sign; I wondered whether, had the positions been reversed and the scene laid across the Rhine, a German guard would have exhibited a similar tolerance. I doubt it.

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The town itself seemed to be living on its past, for indubitably it had seen better days. An ancient foundation of the Jesuits now converted into the Map and Printing Department of the R.E.'s, a church whose huge nave had been secularised to the uses of motor transport, a museum which served to incarcerate the German prisoners, all testified to the vanished greatness, as did also the private mansions, which preserved a kind of mystery behind their high-walled gardens and massive double doors. There was one such which I never passed at night without thinking of the *Sieur de Maletroit's* door. The streets were narrow, tortuous, and secretive, with many blind alleys and dark closes, and it required no great effort of the imagination—especially at night when not a light showed—to call to mind the ambushes and adventures with the watch which they must have witnessed some centuries before. The very names of the streets—such as the *Rue d'Arbalette*—held in them something of romance. To find one's billet at night was like a game of blind man's buff, and one felt rather than saw one's way. Not a soul was to be seen, for the whole town was under *droit de siege*, and the civilian inhabitants had to be within doors by nine o'clock, while all the entrances and exits to and from the town were guarded by double sentries night and day. Certain dark doorways also secreted a solitary sentry, and my own office boasted a corporal's guard—presumably because the Field-Cashier had his rooms on the first floor. The sanitation was truly medieval; on either side of the cobbled streets noisome gutters formed an open sewer into which housewives emptied their slop-pails every morning, while mongrel dogs nosed among the garbage. Yet the precincts were not without a certain beauty, and every side of the town was approached through an avenue of limes or poplars. But in winter the sodden landscape was desolate beyond belief, these roads presenting just that aspect of a current of slime in a muddy sea which they suggested to the lonely horseman on the eve of Waterloo in that little classic of De Vigny's known to literature as *Laurette*.

Such was the country and such the town in which we were billeted. Now upon a morning in February it happened that I was smoking a cigarette in the little garden, bordered by hedges of box, while waiting for my car, and as I waited I watched Jeanne, with her sleeves rolled up to her elbows and a clothes-peg in her mouth, busy over the wash-tub. "Vous etes une blanchisseuse, aujourd'hui?" I remarked. She corrected me. "Non, m'sieu', une lessiveuse." "Une lessiveuse?" For answer Jeanne pointed to a linen-bag which was steeping in the tub. The linen-bag contained the ashes of the beech-tree; it is a way of washing that they have in some parts of France, and very cleansing. To specialise thus is *lessiver*. As we talked in this desultory fashion I let fall a word concerning a journey I was about to undertake



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to the French lines, a journey that would take me over the battlefield of the Marne. “La Marne! Helas, quelle douleur!” said Jeanne, and wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron. “But it was a glorious victory,” I expostulated. Yes, but Jeanne, it seemed, had lost a brother in the battle of the Marne. She pulled out of her bosom a frayed letter, bleached, stained, and perforated with holes about the size of a shilling, and handed it to me. I could make nothing of it. She handed me another letter. “Son camarade,” she explained, and no longer attempted to hide her tears. And this was what I read:

Le 10 sept., 1914.

CHERE MADAME—Comme j’étais tres bon camarade avec votre frere Paul Duval et que le malheur vient de lui arriver, je tient a vous le faire savoir, car peut-etre vous serai dans l’inquietude de pas recevoir de ces nouvelles et de ne pas savoir ou il est. Je vous dirai que je vient de lui donner du papier a lettre et une enveloppe pour vous ecrire et aussitot la lettre finit il l’a mis dans son kepi pour vous l’envoye le plus vite possible et malheureusement un obus est arriver, et il a etait tue. Heureusement nous etions trois pres de l’un l’autre et il n’y a eut de lui de touche. Je vous envoi la petite lettre qu’il venait de vous faire, et en meme tant vous verrez les trous que les eclats d’obus l’on attrapper. Recevez de moi chere madame mes sincereres salutations.

JULES COPPEE.

Tambour au 151e Regiment d’Inf.,
2e Cie 42e Division, Secteur postale 56.

Crude and illiterate though it was, the letter had a certain noble simplicity. “Tres gentil,” I remarked as I returned it to Jeanne, and thought the matter at an end. But Jeanne had not done, and, with much circumlocution and many hesitations, she at last preferred a simple request. I was going to visit the battlefield of the Marne—yes? I assented. Well, perhaps, perhaps Monsieur would visit Paul’s grave, and perhaps if he found it he would take a photograph. “Why, certainly,” I said, little knowing what I promised. But the request was to have a strange sequel, as you shall hear. Sykes came to say my car was at the door. As I clambered in and turned to wave a farewell, Madame and Jeanne stood on the doorstep to wish me *bon voyage*. “J’espere que vous tuerez plusieurs Allemands,” cried Madame in a quavering voice. “Veillez ne pas oublier, M’sieu’,” cried Jeanne wistfully. I waved my hand, and had soon left rue Robert le Frisson far behind me.

FOOTNOTE:

[8] The town described in this sketch is described not as it is, but as it was some months ago, and nothing is to be inferred from the title as to its present significance.

XII

MORT POUR LA PATRIE



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Two days later a French staff-officer greeted me in the vestibule of the Hotel de Crillon at Paris. It was the Comte de G——; he had been deputed by the Ministry of War to act as my escort on my tour of the French lines. He proved to be a charming companion. He was a magnificent figure of a man six feet three inches in height at least, an officer of dragoons, and he wore the red and white brassard, embroidered in gold with a design of forked lightning, which is the prerogative of the staff. A military car with a driver and an orderly in shaggy furs awaited us outside on the Place de la Concorde. It was a sumptuous car, upholstered in green corded silk, with nickel fittings, and displaying on its panels the motto *Quand meme*, and the monogram of a famous actress. It had been requisitioned. The air was cold—there had been frost overnight—but the sun was brilliant. As we threaded our way through Paris and its suburbs, a Paris chastened and resolute, I caught a glimpse of the barges upon the Seine with the women standing on the convex hatches hanging out clothes to dry—and I thought of Daudet and *La Belle Nivernaise*. As more and yet more men are called up to the colours women take their place, until the houses of business are like nunneries—with a few aged Fathers Superior. Having had business the day before at the Societe Generale, I had had occasion to reflect on these things as I stood in the counting-house watching some fifty girl typists at work, the room resounding with the tap-tap of their machines, as though fifty thrushes were breaking snails upon a stone. A wizened little clerk, verging upon superannuation, had beguiled my time of waiting with talk of the war: how his wife from Picardy had lost fifteen of her *parents*, while of four painters and paper-hangers who had started doing up his flat on the 2nd of July only one—disabled—had returned to finish the job; the rest were dead. Musing on these things as we drove through the Bois de Vincennes I understood the resolution of our Allies and the significance of the things my companion pointed out to me as we drove: here a row of trees felled to provide a field of fire, there a gun emplacement, and reserve trenches all the way from Paris to Soissons. They are leaving nothing to chance.

Our journey was uneventful until we reached Coulommiers, where we had certain inquiries to make which have nothing to do with this narrative. We interviewed the *maire* in his parlour at the Hotel de Ville, a little man, and spirited, who had hung on at his post during the German occupation, and done his best to protect his fellow-townsmen against the lust and rapine of the Huns. Under such circumstances the office of municipal magistrate is no sinecure. It is, in fact, a position of deadly peril, for by the doctrine of vicarious punishment, peculiar to the German Staff, an innocent man is held liable with his life for the faults of his fellow-townsmen, and,



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it may be, for those of the enemy also. Doubtless it appeals to their sinister sense of humour, when two of their own men get drunk and shoot at one another, to execute a French citizen by way of punishment. It happened that during the German occupation of Coulommiers the gas supply gave out. The *maire* was informed by a choleric commandant that unless gas were forthcoming in twenty-four hours he would be shot. The little man replied quietly: "M'eteindre, ce n'est pas allumer le gaz." This illuminating remark appears to have penetrated the dark places of the commandant's mind, and although the gas-jets continued contumacious (the gas-workers were all called up to the colours) the *maire* was not molested. It was here that we heard a shameful story (for the truth of which I will not vouch) of a certain straggler from our army, a Highlander, who tarried in amorous dalliance and was betrayed by his enchantress to the Huns, who, having deprived him of everything but his kilt, led him mounted upon a horse in Bacchanalian procession round the town. As to what became of him afterwards nothing was known, but the worst was suspected. The Huns have a short way and bloody with British stragglers and despatch-riders and patrols, and I fear that the poor lad expiated his weakness with a cruel death.

At Coulommiers we turned northwards on the road to La Ferte-sous-Jouarre, a pleasant little town on the banks of the Marne, approached by an avenue of plane trees whose dappled trunks are visible for many miles. Here we had lunch at the inn—a dish of perch caught that morning in the waters of the Marne, a delicious cream-cheese, for which La Ferte is justly famous, and a light wine of amber hue and excellent vintage. The landlord's wife waited on us with her own hands, and as she waited talked briskly of the German occupation of the town. The Huns, it appeared, had been too hustled by the Allies to do much frightfulness beyond the usual looting, but they had inflicted enormous losses on the pigs of La Ferte. It reminded me of the satirical headline in a Paris newspaper, over a paragraph announcing a great slaughter of pigs in Germany owing to the shortage of maize—"Les Bosches s'entregorgent!" Madame told us with much spirit how she had saved her own pig, an endearing infant, by the intimation that a far more succulent pig was to be found higher up the street, and while the Bosches went looking for their victim she had hidden her own in the cellar. Her pig is now a local celebrity. People come from afar to see the pig which escaped the Bosches. For the pigs whom the Bosches love are apt to die young. But what had impressed her most was the treatment meted out by a German officer, a certain von Buelow, who was quartered at the inn, to one of his men. The soldier had been ordered to stick up a lantern outside the officer's quarters, and had been either slow or forgetful. Von Buelow knocked him down, and then, as he lay prostrate, jumped upon him, kicked him, and beat him about the head and face with sabre and riding-whip. The soldier lay still and uttered not a cry. Madame shuddered at the recollection, "Epouvantable!"



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We crossed the *place* and called on a prominent burgess. He received us hospitably. In the hall of his house was a Uhlan's lance with drooping pennon which excited our curiosity. How had it come here? He was only too pleased to explain. He had taken it from a marauding Uhlan with whom he had engaged in single combat, strangling him with his own hands—so!

I took by the throat the circumcised dog
And smote him, thus!

He held out a pair of large fat hands of the consistency of clay; he was of a full habit and there were pouches under his eyes. In England he would have been a small tradesman, with strong views on total abstinence, accustomed to a diet of high tea, and honoured as the life-long superintendent of a Sunday school. I was more astonished than sceptical, but perhaps, as the Comte suggested in a whisper, the Uhlan was drunk. Here, too, we heard tales of loot, especially among ladies' wardrobes. It is a curious fact that there is nothing the Hun loves so much as women's underclothing. As to what happens when he gets hold of the *lingerie* many scandalous stories are told, and none more scandalous than the one which appeared in the whimsical pages of *La Vie Parisienne*. But that is, most emphatically, quite another story.

From La Ferte we drove on to Lizy, where the gendarme, wiping his mouth as he came hurriedly from the inn, told us a harrowing tale, and then to Barcy, where the *maire*, though busy with a pitch-fork upon a manure heap, received us with municipal gravity. We were now nearing the battlefield of the Marne, and here and there along the roadside the trunks of the poplars, green with mistletoe, were shivered as though by lightning. Yet nothing could have been more peaceful than the pastoral beauty of the countryside. We passed waggons full of roots, drawn by a team of white oxen under the yoke, and by the roadside a threshing machine was being fed by a knot of old men and young women from an oat-rick. The only hints of the cloud on the horizon were the occasional passage of a convoy and the notable absence of young men. As we raced along, the furrows, running at right angles to the road, seemed to be eddying away from us in pleats and curves, and this illusion of a stationary car in a whirling landscape was fortified by the contours of the countryside, which were those of a great plain, great as any sea, stretching away to a horizon of low chalk hills. Suddenly the car slowed down at a signal from my companion and stopped. We got out. Not a sound was to be heard except the mournful hum of the distant threshing machine, but a peculiar clicking, like the halliard of a flagstaff in a breeze, suddenly caught my ear. The wind was rising, and as I looked around me I saw innumerable little tricolour flags fluttering against small wooden staves. It was the battlefield of the Marne, the scene of that immortal order of Joffre's in which he exhorted the sons of France to conquer or



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die where they stood. As he had commanded, so had they done. With an emotion too deep for words we each contemplated these plaintive memorials of the heroes who lay where they fell. Our orderly wept and made no effort to hide his tears. I thought of Jeanne's wistful petition, but my heart sank, for these graves were to be numbered not by hundreds but by thousands. "C'est absolument impossible!" said the Comte, to whom I had communicated my quest. A sudden cry from the orderly, who was moving from grave to grave in a close scrutiny of the inscriptions, arrested us. He was standing by a wooden cross, half draped by a tattered blue coat and covered with wreaths of withered myrtle. A kepi pierced with holes lay upon the grave. And sure enough, by some miracle of coincidence, he had found it. On a wooden slab we read these words:

PAUL DUVAL,
151e Reg. d'Inf.
6 sept. 1914
MORT POUR LA PATRIE.

The sun was fast declining over the chalk hills and it grew bitter cold. I unfolded my camera, stepped back eight paces, and pressed the trigger. We clambered back into the car and resumed the road to Meaux. As I looked over my shoulder the last things I saw in the enfolding twilight were those little flags still fluttering wistfully in the wind.

XIII

MEAUX AND SOME BRIGANDS

We lay the night at Meaux. It was a town which breathed the enchantments of the Middle Ages and had for me the intimacy of a personal reminiscence. Sixteen years earlier, when reading for a prize essay at Oxford, I had studied the troubled times of Etienne Marcel in the treasures of the Bibliotheque de l'Ecole des Chartes, and I knew every kilometre of this country as though I had trodden it. Meaux, Compiègne, Senlis—they called to my mind dreamy hours in the dim religious light of muniment-rooms and days of ecstasy among the pages of Froissart. Little did I think when I read those belligerent chronicles in the sequestered alcoves of the Bodleian and the Bibliotheque Nationale, tracing out the warlike dispositions of Charles the Bad and the Dauphin and the Provost of the Merchants, that the day would come when I would be traversing these very fields engaged in detective enterprises upon the footprints of contemporary armies. To compare the *variae lectiones* of two manuscripts concerning a fourteenth-century skirmish is good, it has all the excitement of the chase; but to be collating the field note-book of a living Hun with the *dossier* of a contemporary Justice de Paix, this is better. It has all the contact of reality and the breathless joy of the hue and cry. And, after all, were things so very different? Generations come and go, dynasties rise and



fall, but the earth endureth for ever, and these very plains and hills and valleys that have witnessed the devastation of the Hun have also seen the ravages of the mercenaries and free companies



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of the Middle Age. As I lay in my bed that night at the inn I turned over the pages of my pocket volume of M. Zeller's *Histoire de France racontée par les contemporains*, and hit on the "Souvenirs du brigand Aimerigot Marches," ravisher of women, spoiler of men, devourer of widows' houses. And as I read, it seemed as though I were back in the department *du Contentieux* of the Ministry of War in Paris deciphering the pages of a German officer's field note-book. For thus speaks Aimerigot Marches in the delectable pages of Froissart distilled by M. Zeller into modern French:

There is no time, diversion, nor glory in this world like that of the profession of arms and making war in the way we have. How blithe were we when we rode forth at hazard and hit on a rich abbe, an opulent prior or merchant, or a string of mules from Montpellier, Narbonne, Limoux, Toulouse, or Carcassonne laden with the fabrics of Brussels or furs from the fair of Lendit, or spices from Bruges, or the silks of Damascus and Alexandria! All was ours or was to ransom at our sweet will. Every day we had more money. The peasants of Auvergne and Limousin provisioned us and brought to our camp corn and meal, and baked bread, hay for the horses and straw for their litter, good wines, oxen, and fine fat sheep, chicken, and poultry. We carried ourselves like kings and were caparisoned as they, and when we rode forth the whole country trembled before us. Par ma foi, cette vie etait bonne et belle.

Is not that your very Hun? He is a true reversion to type. Only, whereas among the French he is a thing of the savage past, among the Germans he is a product of the cultured present. And to turn from the field note-book of the German soldier with its swaggering tale of loot, lust, and maudlin cups, its memoranda of stolen toys for Felix and of ravished lingerie for Bertha, all viewed in the rosy light of the writer's egotism as a laudable enterprise, to the plain depositions of the Justice de Paix, and see the reverse side of the picture with its tale of ruined homes and untilled fields, was just such an experience as it had been to turn from the glittering pages of Froissart to the sombre story of Jean de Venette,[9] a monk of Compiègne, Little Brother of the Poor and chronicler of his times, as he pondered on these things in the scriptorium:

In this year 1358, the vines, source of that beneficent liquor which gladdens the heart of man, were no longer cultivated; the fields were neither tilled nor sown; the oxen and the sheep went no longer to the pasture. The churches and houses, falling into decay, presented everywhere traces of devouring flames or sombre ruins and smouldering. The eye was no longer gladdened as before with the sight of green meadows and yellowing harvests, but rather afflicted by the aspect of briars and thistles, which clustered everywhere. The church bells no longer rang joyously to call the faithful



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to the divine offices, but only to give the alarm to the peasants at the approach of the enemy and the signal for flight.

As it was in the days of Jean de Venette, so it is now. I thought of that mournful passage as I wandered next day among the ruins of Choisy-au-Bac, a village not twenty miles from the place where Jean de Venette was born, and saw old women cowering among the ruins of their burnt-out homes.

If the good Carmelite of the fourteenth century returned to Meaux to-day he would have little difficulty in finding his way about the city, for though she must have aged perceptibly she can have changed but little. The timbered mills on wooden piles still stand moored in the middle of the river like so many ships, just as they stood in the twelfth century, and the cathedral with its Gothic portals and great rose-window—though it has grown in stature and added here and there a touch of the flamboyant in its tracery, even as a man will break out into insurgent adventures when he feels the first chill of age—is stamped with the characters of the fourteenth century. And I think Jean de Venette would find a congenial spirit in my friend the bishop, Monsignor Marbot, for like Jean he is a lover of the poor. It was Monsignor Marbot who went in procession to the battlefield of the Marne with crucifix and banner and white-robed acolytes, and in an allocution of singular beauty consecrated those stricken fields with the last rites of the Church. And it was Monsignor Marbot who remained at his post all through the German occupation to protect his flock while the Hun roamed over his diocese like a beast of prey. Though the Hun thinks nothing of shooting a *maire*, and has been known to murder many an obscure village priest, he fights shy of killing a bishop; there might be trouble at the Holy See. Many a moving tale did the good bishop tell me as we sat in his little house—surely the most meagre and ascetic of episcopal palaces, in which there was nothing more sumptuous than his cherry and scarlet soutane and his biretta.

We lay the night at an inn that must have been at one time a seigneurial mansion, for it had a noble courtyard. I was shown to a room, and, having unpacked my valise, I turned on the taps, but no water issued; I applied a match to the gas-jet, but no flame appeared; I tried to open the window, but the sash stuck. I rang the bell; that at least responded. A maid appeared; I pointed to the taps and made demonstrations with the gas-jet. To all of which she replied quite simply, "Ah! monsieur, c'est la guerre!" I had heard that answer before. With such a plea of confession and avoidance had the boots at the Hotel de la Poste at Rouen excused a gross omission to call me in the morning, and thus also had the aged waiter at the Metropole disposed of a flagrant error in my bill. But this time it was convincing enough; gas-workers and waterworks men and carpenters were all at the war, and in the town of Meaux water was carried in pitchers and light was purchased at the chandler's. In France you get used to these things and imitate with a good grace the calm stoicism of your Allies. For, after all, the enemy was pretty near, and as I retired to my couch I could hear the thunder of their guns.



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FOOTNOTE:

[9] Reputed author of the sequel to the chronicles of Guillaume de Nangis. See M. Lacabane in the *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes* (1e serie), t. iii.

XIV

THE CONCIERGE AT SENLIS

We rose early the next day, and, having paid our reckoning, were away betimes, for we were to visit the French lines and wished also to pay a flying visit to Senlis. As we left Crepy-en-Valois we entered the Forest of Compiègne, a forest of noble beeches which rose tall and straight and grey like the piers of Beauvais Cathedral, their arms meeting overhead in an intricate vaulting through which we saw the winter sun in a sapphire sky. We met two Chasseurs d'Afrique, mounted on superb Arabs and wearing red fez-like caps and yellow collar-bands. They were like figures out of a canvas of Meissonier, recalling the spacious days when men went into action with all the pomp and circumstance of war, drums beating, colours flying, plumes nodding, and the air vibrant with the silvery notes of the bugle. All that is past; to-day no bugle sounds the charge, and even the company commander's whistle has given way to certain soft words for which the German mocking-bird will seek in vain in our Infantry Manual. As for cuirass and helmet, the range of modern guns and rifles has made them a little too ingenuous. And, sure enough, as we drove into Compiègne we found a squadron of dragoons as sombre as our own, in their mouse-coloured *couvre-casques* and cavalry cloaks, though their lances glinted in the sun. Here all was animation. Informal conventicles of Staff officers, with whom we exchanged greetings, stood about the square in front of the exquisite Hotel de Ville, with its high-pitched roof pierced with dormer-windows and crowned with many pinnacles. North and east of Compiègne lie the zones of the respective armies, all linked up by telephone, and here we had to exchange our passes, for even a Staff officer may not enter one zone with a pass appropriate to another. But our first objective was Senlis, which lay to the south of us between Compiègne and Paris.

The sun was high in the heavens as we turned south-west, and, keeping to the left bank of the river, skirted the forest. Faint premonitions of spring already appeared; catkins drooped upon the hazels, primroses made patches of sulphur in the woods, and one almost expected to see the blackthorn in blossom. Silver birches gleamed against the purple haze of the more distant woodlands. The road ran straight as an arrow. As we neared Senlis I was struck by the complete absence of all traffic upon the roads; no market carts came and went, neither did any wayfarer appear. Not a wisp of smoke arose from the chimneys above the screen of trees. We passed up a double avenue of elms—just such an avenue as that along which M. Bergeret discussed metaphysics and theology with the Abbe Lantaigne—yet not a soul

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was to be seen upon the *trottoir*. A brooding silence hung over the little town, a silence so deep as to be almost menacing. As we entered the main street I encountered a spectacle which froze my heart. Far as the eye could see along the diminishing perspective of the road were burnt-out homes, houses which once were gay with clematis and wisteria, gardens which had blossomed with the rose. And now all that remained were trampled flower-beds, tangled creepers, blackened walls, calcined rafters, twisted ironwork, and fallen masonry. And this was Senlis! Senlis which had been to the department of the Oise as the apple of its eye, a little town of quality, beautiful as porcelain, fragrant as a rose, and as a rose as sweet. As I looked upon these desecrated homes it seemed to me that the very stones cried out.

In all this desolation we looked in vain for any signs of life. It was not until we sought out the house of a captain of dragoons, a friend of my companion the Comte, that we found a human being in these solitudes. The house was, indeed, a melancholy ruin, but by the gate was a lodge, and in the lodge a concierge. He was a small man and middle-aged, and as he spoke he trembled with a continual agitation of body as though he were afflicted with ague. He led us into his little house, the walls of which were blackened as with fire and pierced in many places with the impact of bullets. And this was his tale.

One afternoon early in September—it was the second day of the month, he remembered it because there had been an untimely frost over night—he heard the crackle of musketry on the outskirts of the town, and a column of grey-coated men suddenly appeared in the street. An officer blew a whistle, and, as some of them broke through the gates of the mansion, the concierge fled across the lawn with bullets buzzing about his ears and shouts of laughter pursuing him as he ran. In and out among the elms he doubled like a frightened hare, the bullets zip-zipping against the tree-trunks, till he crawled into a disused culvert and lay there panting and exhausted. From his hiding-place he heard the crash of furniture, more shots, and the loud, ribald laughter of the soldiers. And then a crackle of flame and a thick smell of smoke. And after that silence. At dusk he crawled forth from his culvert, trembling, his hands and face all mottled with stinging-nettles and scratched with thistles; he found his master's house a smouldering ruin, and a thick pall of smoke lay over the town of Senlis like a fog. Somewhere a woman shrieked and then was still. About the hour of nine in the evening the concierge heard voices in disputation outside the lodge-gates, and as he hid himself among the shrubberies more men entered, and, being dissatisfied with their work, threw hand-grenades into the mansion and applied a lighted torch to the concierge's humble dwelling. They were very merry and sang lustily—the concierge thought they had been drinking; they sang thus, "*comme ça!*" and the concierge mournfully hummed a tune, a tune he had never heard before, but which he would remember all his life. I recognised it. It was Luther's hymn:



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Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott.

Thus had passed the day. Meanwhile the *maire*, M. Odent, a good man and greatly beloved, had been arrested at the Hotel de Ville. His secretary proposed to call his deputies. "No, no," replied the *maire* tranquilly, "one victim is enough." He was dragged along the streets to the suburb of Chammont, the headquarters of von Kluck, and his guards buffeted him and spat upon him as he went. Arrived there, he was condemned to death. He took his companions in captivity by the hand, embraced them—"tres dignement," the concierge had been told—handed them his papers, and bade them adieu. Two minutes later he was shot, and his body thrown into a shallow trench with a sprinkling of earth. The concierge had seen it the next day; the feet were protruding.

All this the concierge told us in a dull, apathetic voice, and always as he told his body twitched and the muscles of his face worked. And he spoke like a man in a soliloquy as though we were not there. He seemed to be looking at something which we could not see. As we bade him adieu he stared at us as though he saw us not, neither did he return our salutation. We clambered back into our car and turned her head round towards Compiègne. I shall never see Senlis again.

III

UNOFFICIAL INTERLUDES

XV

A "CONSEIL DE LA GUERRE"

Il y a une convenance et un pacte secret entre la jeunesse et la guerre. Manier des armes, revêtir l'uniforme, monter a cheval ou marcher au commandement, *être redoutable sans cesser d'être aimable*, dépasser le voisin en audace, en vitesse, et en grace s'il se peut, défier l'ennemi, connaître l'aventure, jouer ce qui a peu dure, ce qui est encore illusion, rêve, ambition, ce qui est encore une beauté, o jeunesse, voilà ce que vous aimez! Vous n'êtes pas liée, vous n'êtes pas fanée, vous pouvez courir le monde.—RENE BAZIN, *Recits du temps de la guerre*.

Our little town was like the pool of Bethesda—never had I seen such a multitude of impotent folk. The lame, the halt, and the blind congregated here as if awaiting some miracle. I met them everywhere—Zouaves, Turcos, French infantry of the line, in every stage of infirmity. Our town was indeed but one vast hospital—orderly, subdued, and tenebrous. Every hotel but our own was closed to visitors and flew the Red Cross flag, displaying on its portals the register of wounded like a roll-call. The streets at night, with their lights extinguished, were subterranean in their darkness, and the single cafe,

faintly illuminated, looked like some mysterious grotto within which the rows of bottles of cognac and Mattoni gleamed like veins of quartz and felspar. We were, indeed, a race of troglodytes, and we were all either very young or very old. Our adolescence



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was all called up to the colours. There was never any news beyond a laconic bulletin issued from the *Mairie* at dusk, the typescript duplicates of which, posted up at street-corners, we read in groups by the light of a guttering candle, held up against the wall, and husbanded from the wind, by a little old woman of incredible age with puckered cheeks like a withered apple and hands like old oak. We were not very near the zone of war, yet not so far as to escape its stratagems. Only a day or two before an armoured motor-car, with German officers disguised in French uniforms, paid us a stealthy visit, and, after shooting three gendarmes in reply to their insistent challenge, ended its temerarious career one dark night by rushing headlong over the broken arch of a bridge into the chasm beneath. After that the rigour of our existence was, if anything, accentuated; much was “defendu,” and many things which were still lawful were not expedient. Every one talked in subdued tones—it was only the wounded who were gay, gay with an amazing insouciance. True, there were the picture postcards in the shops—I had forgotten them—nothing more characteristically *macabre* have I ever seen. One such I bought one morning—a lively sketch of a German soldier dragging a child’s wooden horse behind him, and saluting his officer with, “Captain, here is the horse—I have slain the horseman” (“Mon Gabidaine, ch’ai due le cavalier, foila le cheval”). It was labelled “Un Heros.”

It was at this little town, on a memorable afternoon early in the war, that I was first admitted to the freedom of the soldiers of France. The ward was flooded with the soft lambent light of September sunshine, and it sheltered, I should say, some twenty-three men. Four were playing cards at the bedside of a cheerful youth, who a few weeks earlier had answered on tripping feet to the cry of “Garçon!” in a big Paris hotel, and was now a *sous-officier* in 321st Regiment, recovering from wounds received in the thick of the fighting round Muelhausen. He was enjoying his convalescence. For a waiter to find himself waited upon was, he confided to me as the orderly brought in the soup, a peculiarly satisfying experience. Charles Lamb would have agreed with him. Has he not written that the ideal holiday is to watch another man doing your own job—particularly if he does it badly? The *sous-officier* nearly wept with joy when, a moment later, the orderly upset the soup. With him was a plumber who was dealing the cards in that leisurely manner which appears to be one of the principal charms of the plumber’s vocation. A paperhanger studied the wall-paper with a professional eye while he appropriated his cards. An Alsatian completed the party. In a distant corner a Turco, wearing his red fez upon his head, sat with his chin on his knees amid an improvised bivouac of bed-clothes and looked on uncomprehendingly. The rest smoked cigarettes and toyed with the voluptuous pages of *La Vie Parisienne*.



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The *sous-officier*, being an artiste in his way, had been giving me a histrionic exhibition of shell-fire. With a long intake and a discharge of the breath he imitated the sibilant flight of the projectiles and followed it up with a duck of his head over the counterpane. He extended his arms in a wide sweep to show the crater they make and indicated the height of the leaping earth.

“*Quinze metres—comme ça, monsieur! Les Allemands? Ah! cochons!* And they shoot execrably. We shoot from the shoulder (*sur l'épaule*)—so! They shoot under the arm (*sous le bras*)—so! And they like to join hands like children—they are afraid to go alone. They came out of the wood crouching like dogs—one behind the other. They are a bad lot—*canaille*. They hide guns in ambulance-waggon and mount them on church-towers. There was one of our sappers—*diable!* they tied him to a telegraph-pole and lit a fire under him.”

“But you make them pay for that?”

He smiled grimly. “*Mais oui!* When they see us they throw everything away and run. If we catch them, they put up their hands and say, ‘*Pas de mal, Alsacien.*’ But we’re used to that trick. We just go through them like butter and say, ‘*Pour vous!*’ A little *etrenne*, you know, monsieur, what you call ‘Christmas-box!’” He laughed at some grim recollection.

“*Deutschen Hunde! Stink-preussen!*” [10] *Ja!*” It was the Alsatian who was speaking.

“*Sie sprechen Deutsch!*” [11] I exclaimed in astonishment.

“*Ja, ich kann nicht anders—um so mehr schade!*” [12] he replied mournfully. He was an Alsatian “volunteer,” he explained, having deserted for the French side at an opportune moment. It was odd to hear him declaiming against the Germans in their own language. It is a way the Alsacians have. Treitschke once lamented the fact. “But,” I interpolated, “it must be very painful for those of you who cannot get away like yourself.”

“Very painful, monsieur; I have two brothers even now in the German army. They watch us—and they put Prussian *sous-officiers* over us to spy. So when we see the *sous-officier* sneaking about, we raise our voices and say, ‘Ah! those beastly French, we’ll give it them.’ But when we are alone—well, then we say what we think.”

And this led us on to talk of German spies and their nasty habits—how they had mapped out France, its bridges, its culverts, its smithies, like an ordnance-survey, and how predatory German commanders betray the knowledge of an Income-tax Commissioner as to the income and resources of every inhabitant who has the misfortune to find himself in occupied territory. Also how the German guns get the range at once. And other such things. All of which the paperhanger listened to in thoughtful silence and then told a tale.



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“An officer in the uniform of your Army, monsieur, strolled up to my company one day. He was very pleasant, and his French was so good—not too good, just the kind of French that you English messieurs”—he bowed apologetically to me—“usually speak. Oh! he was very clever. And he talked with our captain about the battle for a long time. And then our captain noticed something—two things. First, monsieur, the English officer was very troubled with his eyes—he was always applying a large white handkerchief to the pupil. And it occur to the captain that the English officers do not carry white handkerchiefs but ‘khaki.’ What was the matter with the officer’s eye? It could not be a fly—the weather was too cold; it had been raining. It could not be the dust; the ground was too wet. And the German shells—they begin to fall right in the midst of us—they had been so wide before. So the captain was very concerned for monsieur l’officier’s eyes, and he takes him aside very politely and says he had better see the doctor. A *sous-officier* and two men shall take him to the doctor. Which they do. Only the ‘doctor’ was the *liaison* officer with our brigade—an English officer. And he finds that the officer is a spy—a *Bosche*. He have no more trouble with his eyes,” added the paperhanger laconically. It was too good a story to spoil by cross-examination, so I left it at that.

“You like the bayonet?” I asked.

“Ah, yes! we love the bayonet. It is a *bon enfant*,” said the *sous-officier*. “And they can’t fence (*escrimer*), the *Bosches*—they are too *lourds*. I remember we caught them once in a quarry. Our men fought like tiger-cats—so quick, so agile. And you know, monsieur, no one said a word. Nor a sound except the clash of steel.” His eyes flashed at the recollection. “They make a funny noise when you go through them—they grunt, *comme un cochon*.” Perhaps I shuddered slightly. “Ah, yes! monsieur, but they play such dirty tricks (*ruses honteuses*). Of course they cry out in French, and put up their hands after they have shot down our comrades under their white flags.” He gave a snort of contempt.

“What do they cry?”

“Oh, all kinds of things. ‘I have a wife and eight children.’ The German pig has a big litter.” He looked, and no doubt felt himself to be, a minister of justice. And after all, I reflect, the Belgians once had wives and children too. Many of them have neither wife nor child any longer. And so perish all Germans!

The plumber, who had been studying his “hand,” looked up from the cards. “We have killed a great number of the *Bosches*,” he said dispassionately. “Yes, a great number. It was in a beetroot field, and there were as many dead Germans as beetroots. Near by was a corn-field; the flames were leaping up the shocks of yellow corn and the bodies caught fire—such a stench! And the faces of the dead! Especially after they have been killed with the bayonet—they are quite black. I suppose it’s the grease.”



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“The grease?”

“Yes, we always grease our bayonets, you know. To prevent them getting rusty.”

He was a man of few words, but in three sentences he had given me a battle-picture as clearly visualised as a canvas of Verestchagin. The reminiscences of the plumber provoked the paperhanger to further recollections, more particularly the stunning effects of the French shell-fire. He had found four dead Germans—they had been surprised by a shell while playing cards in a billet. “They still had the cards in their hands, monsieur, just as you see us—and they hadn’t got a scratch. They were like the statues in the Louvre.”

“Yes,” said the *sous-officier*, “I have seen them like that. I remember I found a big Bosche—six feet four he must have been—sitting dead in a house which we had shelled. His face was just like wax, and he sat there like a wooden doll with his long arms hanging down stiff—yes! *comme une poupee*. And I couldn’t find a scratch on him—not one! And do you know what he had on—a woman’s chemise! *Ecoutez!*” he added suddenly, and he held up a monitory hand.

Echoing down the corridor outside there came nearer and nearer the beat of a drum and with it the liquid notes of a fife. I recognised the measure—who can ever forget it! It stirs the blood like a trumpet. The door was kicked open and two convalescent soldiers entered, one wearing a festive cap of coloured paper such as is secreted in Christmas “crackers.” He was playing a fife, and the drummer was close upon his heels.

Every one rose in his bed and lifted up his voice:

Allons! enfants de la Patrie!

A strange electricity ran through us all. The card-players had thrown down their cards just as the plumber was about to trump an ace. The others had tossed aside their papers and laid down their cigarettes. The Turco—“Muley Hafid” he was called, because those were the only words of his any one could understand—who had been deploying imaginary troops, with the aid of matches, upon the counterpane, as though he were a sick child playing with leaden soldiers, recognised the tune, and in default of words began to beat time with a soup spoon. Up and down the passage way between the beds marched the fife and drum; louder beat the drum, more piercing grew the fife. What delirious joy-of-battle, what poignant cries of anguish, has not that immortal music both stirred and soothed! To what supremacy of effort has it not incited? It has succoured dying men with its *viaticum*. It has brought fire to glazing eyes. It has exalted men a little higher than the angels, it has won the angels to the side of men:



Tout est soldat pour vous combattre:
S'ils tombent, nos jeunes heros,
La terre en produit de nouveaux
Contre vous tout prêts a se battre.
Aux armes, citoyens! Formez vos bataillons:
Marchons, qu'un sang impur abreuve nos sillons.



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As I gently closed the door of the ward and stole out into the corridor on tip-toe, I heard again the martial chorus swelling into a tumult of joy:

Le jour de gloire est arrive!

It was the note of the conqueror.

FOOTNOTES:

[10] German swine! Stinking Prussians!

[11] You speak German!

[12] Yes, I can no other, more's the pity!

XVI

PETER

My friend T—— and myself were smoking a pipe after dinner in his sitting-room at the Base. He was a staff-captain who had done his term as a “Political” in India, and had now taken on an Army job of a highly confidential nature. He was one of those men who, when they make up their minds to give you their friendship, give it handsomely and without reserve, and in a few weeks we had got on to the plane of friends of many years. As we talked we suddenly heard the sound of many feet on the cobbles of the street below, a street which ran up the side of the hill like a gully—between tall houses standing so close together that one might almost have shaken hands with the inmates of the houses opposite. The rhythm of that tramp, tramp, tramp, in spite of the occasional slipping of one or another man’s boots upon the greasy and precipitous stones, was unmistakable.

“New drafts!” said T——. Instinctively we both moved to the window. We knew that the Army authorities were rushing troops across the Channel every night as fast as the transports could take them, and often in the silence of the sleep-time we had heard them marching up the hill from the harbour to the camps on the downs. As we opened our own window, we heard another window thrown open on the floor above us. We looked down and saw in the darkness, faintly illuminated by the light from our room, the upturned faces of the men.

“Bonjour, monseer,” they shouted cheerfully, delighted to air on French soil the colloquialisms they had picked up from that *vade mecum* (price one penny) of the British soldier: *French, and how to speak it*. It was night, not day, but that didn’t matter.



“Good-night,” came a piping treble voice from the floor above us.

“Good-night”—“Good-night, old chap”—“Good-night, my son”—the men shouted back as they glanced at the floor above us. Some of them gravely saluted.

“It’s Peter,” said T——; “he’ll be frightfully bucked up.”

“Let’s go up and see him,” I said. We ascended the dark staircase—the rest of the household were plunged in slumber—turned the handle of the bedroom door, and could just make out in the darkness a little figure in pyjamas, leaning precipitously out of the window.

“Peter, you’ll catch cold,” said his father as he struck a match. The light illuminated a round, chubby face which glanced over its owner’s shoulder from the window.

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“All right, Dad. I say,” he exclaimed joyfully, “did you see? They saluted me! Did you see?” he said, turning to me.

“I did, Major Peter.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Not a bit of it,” I said, saluting gravely. “They’ve given you commissioned rank, and, the Army having spoken, I intend in the future to address you as a field-officer. Of course your father will have to salute you too, now.”

This was quite another aspect of the matter, and commended itself to Peter. “Right oh!” he said. And from that time forward I always addressed him as Major Peter. So did his father, except when he was ordering him to bed. At such times—there was a nightly contest on the matter—the paternal authority could not afford to concede any prerogatives, and Peter was gravely cashiered from the Army, only to be reinstated without a stain on his character the next morning.

“Come up to the Flying-Ground to-morrow, will you?” said Peter. “I know lots of officers up there. I’ll introduce you,” he added patronisingly. Peter had been a bare fortnight at the Base, it being holiday at his preparatory school at Beckenham, and he had already become familiar and domestic with every one in authority from the Base Commandant downwards. “Thank you,” I said. “I will.” He clambered back into bed at a word from his father. By the side of the bed was a small library. It consisted of *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, *The Cock-House at Fellsgarth*, and Newbolt’s *Pages from Froissart*. Peter was rather eclectic in his tastes, but they were thoroughly sound. On the table were the contents of Peter’s pockets, turned out nightly by the express orders of his father, for this is war-time, and the wear and tear of schoolboys’ jackets is a prodigious item of expenditure. I made a rapid mental inventory of them:

- (1) A button of the Welsh Fusiliers.
- (2) Some dozen cartridge-cases from a Lewis machine-gun requisitioned by Peter from the Flying-Ground.
- (3) A miniature aeroplane—the wings rather crumpled as though the aviator had been forced to make a hurried descent.
- (4) A knife.
- (5) Several pieces of string.
- (6) A coloured “alley.”



(7) Some cigarette-card portraits, highly coloured, of Lord Kitchener, Sir John French, and General Smith-Dorrien.

(8) A top.

(9) A conglomerate of chocolate, bull's-eyes, and acid drops.

For the kit of an officer of field rank in His Majesty's Army it was certainly a peculiar collection, few or none of these articles being included in the Field Service regulations. Still, not more peculiar than some of the things with which solicitous friends and relatives encumber officers at the Front.

The next morning we ascended the downs above the harbour, and Peter piloted me to the Flying-Ground. Here we came upon a huge hangar in which were docked half a dozen aeroplanes, light as a Canadian canoe and graceful as a dragon-fly. Peter calmly climbed up into one of them and proceeded to move levers and adjust controls, explaining the whole business to me with the professional confidence of a fully certificated airman.



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“Hulloa, that you, Peter?” said a voice from the other side of the aeroplane. The owner wore the wings of the Flying Corps on his breast.

“It’s me, Captain S——,” said Peter. “Allow me to introduce my friend ——” he added, looking down over the side of the aeroplane. “He’s attached to the staff at G.H.Q.,” he added impressively. For the first time I realised, with great gratification, that Peter thought me rather a personage.

The Captain and I discussed the merits of the new Lewis machine-gun, while Peter went off to give the mechanics his opinion on biplanes and monoplanes.

“That kid knows a thing or two,” I heard one of them say to the other in an undertone. “Jolly little chap.” Peter has an undoubted gift for Mathematics, both Pure and Applied, and his form master has prophesied a Mathematical Scholarship at Cambridge. Peter, however, has other views. He has determined to join the Army at the earliest opportunity. He is now ten years of age, and the only thing that ever worries him is the prospect of the war not lasting another seven years. When I told him that the A.A.G. up at G.H.Q. had, in a saturnine moment, answered my question as to when the war would end with a gloomy “Never,” he was mightily pleased. That was a bit of all right, he remarked.

Peter, it should be explained, belongs to one of those Indian dynasties which go on, from one generation to another, contributing men to the public service—the I.C.S., the Army, the Forest Service, the Indian Police. Wherever there’s a bit of a scrap, whether it’s Dacoits or Pathans, wherever there’s a catastrophe which wants tidying up, whether it’s plague, or famine, or earthquake, there you will find one of Peter’s family in the midst of it. One of his uncles, who is a Major in the R.F.A., saved a battery at X—— Y——. Another is the chief of the most mysterious of our public services—a man who speaks little and listens a great deal, who never commits anything to writing, and who changes his address about once every three months. For if you have a price on your head you have to be careful to cover up your tracks. He neither drinks nor smokes, and he will never marry, for his work demands an almost sacerdotal abnegation. Peter knows very little about this uncle, except that, as he remarked to me, “Uncle Dick’s got eyes like gimlets.” But Peter has seen those eyes unveiled, whereas in public Uncle Dick, whom I happen to know as well as one can ever hope to know such a bird of passage, always wears rather a sleepy and slightly bored expression. Uncle Dick, although Peter does not know it, is the counsellor of Secretaries of State, and one of the trusted advisers of the G.H.Q. Staff. Of all the staff officers I have met I liked him most, although I knew him least. Some day, if and when I have the honour to know him better, I shall write a book about him, and I shall call it *The Man behind the Scenes*.



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Such was Peter's family. It may help you to understand Peter, who, if he feared God, certainly regarded not man. Now the Flying Corps captain had promised Peter that he would let him see the new Lewis machine-gun. It is a type of gun specially designed for aircraft, rather big in the bore, worked by a trigger-handle, and it makes a noise like the back-firing of a motor-car of 100 horse-power. It plays no great part in this story, except that it was the cause of my obtaining a glimpse of Peter's private correspondence. For, after the Captain had discharged his gun at a hedge and made a large rabbit-burrow in it, Peter proceeded to pick up the cartridge-cases, which lay thick as catkins. This interested me, as Peter already had a pocketful.

"What do you want all those for, Major Peter?" I asked.

"Well, you see," said Peter, "the kids at school"—Peter now calls other boys of the same age as himself "kids," on the same principle that a West African negro who is rising in the world refers to his fellows as "niggers"—"keep on bothering me to send them things, and a fellow must send them something."

He pulled a crumpled letter, to which some chocolate was adhering with the tenacity of sealing-wax, out of his pocket. "That's from Jackson minor," he said. "Cheek, isn't it?"

I began reading the letter aloud.

DEAR OLD PAN—You must be having a ripping time. I see your letter is headed "The Front" ...

I looked at Peter. He was blushing uncomfortably.

... so I suppose you've seen a lot. The whole school's fritefully bucked up about you, and we're one up on Fenner's....

"What's Fenner's?" I said to Peter.

"Oh, that's another school at Beckenham. They're stinkers. Put on no end of side because some smug of theirs won a schol' at Uppingham last term. But we beat them at footer."

We met them at footer the other day, and I told that little boulder Jenkins that we had a fellow at the Front. He said, "Rot!" So I showed him the envelope of your letter with "Passed by the Censor" on it, and one of those cartridge-cases you sent me, and I said, "That's proof," and he dried up. He did look sick. I hope you'll get the V.C. or something—the Head'll be sure to give us a half-holiday. Young Smith, who pretends to read the Head's newspaper when he leaves it lying about—you know how he swanks about it—said the Precedent or General Joffre had given a French kid who was only fourteen and had enlisted and killed a lot of Huns, till they found him out and sent him back to school, a legion of honours or something. Smith said it was a medal; I said that was rot, and



that it meant they'd given him a lot of other chaps to command, and I showed him what the Bible said about a legion of devils, and I got hold of a crib to Caesar and proved to him that legions were soldiers. That shut him up. So, Pan, old man, mind you get the French to let you bring us other fellows out, or if you can't bring it off, then come home with a medal or something.

"Peter," I called out. Peter had turned his back on me and was pretending to be absorbed in a distant speck in the sky.



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“Major Peter,” I said ingratiatingly, with a salute. Peter turned round. He was very red.

“I didn’t mean you to read all that rot,” he said. “I meant what he says at the end.”

I read on—this time in silence:

I say, have you killed any Huns yet? Very decent of the Head to tell your governor you could have an extra week. We miss you at center forward. So hurry up, but mind you don’t get torpedod—we hope they’ll just miss you. It would be rotten luck if you never saw one. We’ve given up German this term—beastly language; it’s just like a Hun to keep the verb till the end, so that you never know what he’s driving at.

Then followed a sentence heavily underlined:

By the way I’ll let you have that knife you wanted me to swop last term if you’ll bring me a bayonet. Only mind it’s got some blood on it, German blood I mean.—Yours to a cinder,

ARTHUR JACKSON.

I handed this priceless missive back to Peter.

“Cheek, isn’t it?” said Peter rather hurriedly. “His old knife for a bayonet!”

“But if you put ‘the Front’ at the top of your letters, Major Peter, you can’t be surprised at his asking for one, you know.”

Peter blushed.

“Well, I heard Dad say we were the back of the Front, and the fellows wouldn’t think anything of me if I hadn’t been *near* the Front,” he said, apologetically. “Hullo, they’re going up!”

An aeroplane was skimming along the ground as a moor-hen scuppers across the water, the mechanics having assisted her initial progress by pushing the lower stays and then ducking under the planes, as she gathered way, and just missing decapitation. It’s a way they have. She took a run for it, her engine humming like a top, and then rose, and gradually climbed the sky. Peter gazed at her wistfully. “And he promised to take me up some day,” he said sadly.

“Yes, some day, Peter,” I said encouragingly. “But it’s time we were getting back. You know you’ve got to catch the leave-boat at four o’clock this afternoon.”

* * * * *



Peter's father and I stood on the quay, having taken farewell of Peter. There was an eminent Staff Officer going home on leave—a very great man at G.H.Q., a lieutenant-general, who inspired no less fear than respect among us all. He knew Peter's father in his distant way, and had not only returned his salute, but had even condescended to ask, in his laconic style, "Who is the boy?"—whereupon Peter's father had, with some nervousness, introduced him. All the other officers going home on leave, from a Brigadier down to the subalterns, stood at a respectful distance, glancing furtively at the hawk-like profile of the great man, and lowering their voices. It was a tribute not only to rank but to power. As the ship gathered way and moved slowly out of the harbour I pulled the sleeve of Peter's father. "Look!" I said. The Lieutenant-General and Peter were engaged in an animated conversation on the deck, and the great man, usually as silent as the sphinx and not less inscrutable, was evidently contesting with some warmth and great interest, as though hard put to keep his end up, some point of debate propounded to him by Peter.



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"T——, old chap," I said, "Peter'll be a great man some day."

Peter's father said nothing, but his eyes grew misty. Perhaps he was thinking of that lonely grave in the distant plains of the Deccan where Peter's mother sleeps.

XVII

THREE TRAVELLERS

(October 1914)

My train left Paris at 1.52 in the afternoon. It was due at Calais at eight o'clock the same evening. But it soon became apparent that something was amiss with our journey—we crawled along at a pace which barely exceeded six miles an hour. At every culvert, guarded by its solitary sentry, we seemed to pause to take breath. As we approached Amiens, barely halfway on our journey, somewhere about 9.30 P.M., we passed on the opposite line of rails a Red Cross train, stationary, and throwing deep rhomboid shadows in the candid moonlight. One glimpse of an open horse-box revealed to me in a flash the secret of our languor. It was a cold, keen night; the full moon rode high in a starless sky, and there must have been ten or twelve degrees of frost. We had left far behind us the diaphanous veils of mist hovering above river banks, out of which the poplars stood argent and fragile, as though the landscape were a Japanese print. Through the open door of the horse-box I saw a soldier stretched upon his straw, with a red gaping wound in his half-naked body. Over him stooped a nurse, improvising with delicate ministries a hasty dressing. In the next carriage the black face of a wounded Senegalese looked out, unearthly in the moonlight. Ahead of us an interminable line of trains (some seventy of them I was told) had passed, conveying fresh troops. Then I knew. The Germans, hovering like a dark cloud some twenty miles away, had been reinforced, and a fierce battle was in progress. The news of it had travelled by some mysterious telepathy to every village along the line, and at every crossing groups of pale-faced women, silent and intent, kept a restless vigil. They looked like ghosts in the moonlight; no cheer escaped them as we passed, no hand waved an exuberant greeting. In the twilight we had already seen red-trousered soldiers, vivid as poppies against the grass, digging trenches along the line, and at one point a group of sappers improvising a wire footbridge across the river. The contagion of suspense was in the air,—you seemed to catch it in the faint susurrus of the poplars.

"Shall we get to Calais?" I asked.

"Bon Dieu! I know not," was the reply of the harassed guard.

We pursued our stealthy journey, reached Abbeville somewhere about midnight, and Boulogne in the small hours. 4 A.M. Calais at last! I joyfully exclaimed. But between



Calais Ville and Calais Maritime a group of officers boarded our train and, for some mysterious reason, we were headed off to Dunkirk. It grew colder and more cold, and I had had no food since noon of yesterday. But my thoughts



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were with our men, the men whom I had lately come to know, now lying out on the bare earth in the moonlit trenches, keeping their everlasting vigil and blowing on their fingers numbed with cold. We reached Dunkirk at 6 A.M. No explanation why the train had played truant at Calais was vouchsafed me, nor was any hope held out of a return. In those days I was travelling as a private person, and was not yet endowed with the prerogatives by which, in the name of a Secretary of State, I could requisition cars and impress men to do my bidding.

At a hopeless moment I had the good fortune to fall in with a King's Messenger, carrying despatches, who was in the next carriage. He produced his special passports, and the prestige of "Courrier du Roi," Knight of the Order of the Silver Greyhound, worked a miracle. Every one was at our service. We were escorted to the military headquarters of Dunkirk—through streets already echoing with the march of French infantry, each carrying a big baton of bread and munching as he kept step, to an office in which the courteous commandant was just completing his toilet. The Consul was summoned, the headquarters hotel of the English officers was rung up, and thither we went through an ambushade of motor-cars in the courtyard.

A lieutenant of the Naval Flying Squadron was ready for us with his powerful Rolls-Royce, and we were soon on the high road to Calais. Everywhere were the stratagems of war: a misty haze of barbed-wire entanglements in the distant fields, deep trenches, earthworks six feet thick masking rows of guns. Time pressed, but every mile or so we were stopped by a kind of Hampton Court maze, thrown across the road, in the shape of high walls of earth and stone, compelling our lieutenant at the steering-wheel to zigzag in and out, and thereby putting us at the mercy of the sentry who stood beside his hut of straw and hurdles, and presented his bayonet at the bonnet as though preparing to receive cavalry. The corporal came up, and with him a little group of French soldiers, their cheeks impoverished, their glassy eyes sunk in deep black hollows by their eternal vigil. "Officier Anglais!" "Courrier du Roi!" we exclaimed, and were sped on our way with a weary smile and "Bonjour! messieurs." Women and old men were already toiling in the fields, stooping like the figures in Millet's "Gleaners," as we raced through an interminable avenue of poplars, past closed inns, past depopulated farms, past wooden windmills, perched high upon wooden platforms like gigantic dovecots. At each challenge a sombre word was exchanged about Antwerp—again that strange telepathy of peril. Calais at last! and a great empty boat with a solitary fellow-passenger.

* * * * *



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He was a London wine-merchant of repute, who had got here at last from Rheims, whither he had gone to pay his yearly inspection of the champagne vintage, only to find the red wine-press of war. Three weeks he had lived like primitive man in the wine-cellars of Rheims, with the shells screaming overhead—screaming, he says, just like the long-drawn sobbing whistle of an express train as it leaves a tunnel. Never has he lived such days before; never, he fervently prays, will he live them again. From his narrative I got a glimpse of a subterranean existence, as tenebrous and fearful as the deepest circle of Dante's *Inferno*, with a river of tears falling always in the darkness of the vaults. A great wine-cellar—there are ten miles of them at Rheims—crowded with four thousand people, lighted only by candles, and swarming with huge rats; the blanched faces of women, the crying of children, the wail of babies at the breast. Overhead the crash of falling masonry—the men had armed themselves with big iron pikes to hew their way out in case the vaults fell in. Life in these catacombs was one long threnody of anguish. Outside, the conscious stone of the great monument of mediaeval aspiration was being battered to pieces, and the glorious company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the martyrs, suffered another and a less resurgent martyrdom. After days of this crepuscular existence he emerged to find the cathedral less disfigured than he had feared. One masterpiece of the mediaeval craftsmen's chisel is, however, irremediably destroyed—the figure of the devil. We hope it is a portent.

* * * * *

The King's Messenger had posted from a distant country, and his way through Dijon had been truly a *Via Dolorosa*. Thirty-six people standing in the corridor, and in his own crowded compartment—he had surrendered his royal prerogative of exclusion—was a woman on the verge of hysteria, finding relief not in tears but in an endless recital of her sorrow. She and her husband had a son—the only son of his mother—gone to the front, reported badly wounded, and for days, like Joseph and Mary, the anxious parents had sought him, only to find him on the threshold of death, with a bullet in his liver. Again and again she beguiled her anguish by chronicles of his miraculous childhood—his precocious intelligence at five, his prescience at six, his unfathomable wisdom at seven. The silent company of wayfarers listened in patience to the twice-told tale. No one could say her nay as she repeated her litany of pain. She was, indeed, the only passenger in that compartment whose eyes were dry. *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*.

XVIII

BARBARA



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It was the Duchess of X.'s Hospital at a certain *plage* on the coast. I had motored thither through undulating country dotted with round beehive ricks and past meadows on which a flock of gulls, looking in the distance like a bed of white crocuses, were settled in platoons. As we neared the coast the scenery changed to shifting dunes of pale sand, fine as flour, and tufted with tussocks of wiry grass. Here clumps of broom and beech, with an occasional fir, maintained a desperate existence against the salt winds from the Atlantic, and the beeches held up plaintive arms like caryatids supporting the intolerable architrave of the sky. The bare needle-like branches of the broom and fir stood out blackly against the biscuit-coloured sand with the sharp outlines of an etching.

I had taken a hospitable cup of tea with the Duchess in the Matron's room. She was clothed in fine linen but without her purple; she wore the ordinary and serviceable slate-coloured dress of a nurse. It was here I had the honour of being introduced to Barbara. She was nursing a doll with great tenderness, and had been asking the Duchess why she did not wear her "cowonet."

"This is Barbara—our little Egyptian," said the matron.

Barbara repudiated the description hotly.

"She was born in Egypt," explained the matron.

"Ah," I said, "that wasn't your fault, Barbara, was it? But it was Egypt's good fortune."

Barbara ignored the compliment with the simplicity of childhood, and proceeded to explain with great seriousness: "You see, Mummy was travelling, and she comed to Egypt. She didn't know I was going to happen," she added as if to clear Mummy of any imputation of thoughtlessness.

"And your birthday, Barbara?"

Barbara and I discovered that both of us have birthdays in March—only six days apart. This put us at once on a footing of intimacy—we must have been born under the same star. Barbara proceeded to inform me that she rather liked birthdays—except the one which happened in Egypt. I had half a mind to execute a deed of conveyance on the spot, assigning to her all my own birthdays as an estate *pour autre vie*, with all *profits a prendre* and presents arising therefrom, for I am thirty-eight and have no further use for them.

"I am afraid there are more than six years between us, Barbara," I said pensively.

Barbara regarded me closely with large round eyes.

"About ten, I fink. I'm seven, you know."



“How nice of you to say that, Barbara. Then I’m only seventeen.”

Barbara regarded me still more closely.

“A little more, p’waps—ten monfs.”

“Thank you, Barbara. I’ll remind you of that some day.” After all, ten years is no obstacle to the course of true love. “But what is the matter with the doll?” Despite a rosy flush the doll has a field-dressing round her auburn locks, and one leg is immensely stout owing to a tourniquet.

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Barbara looked at me rather less favourably than before. It was evident that she now thought poorly of my intelligence, and that I had made a *faux pas*.

"I'm a nurse," Barbara explained, loftily, showing an armlet bearing the ensign of the Red Cross. I was about to remind her of 1 & 2 Geo. V. cap. 20, which threatens the penalties of a misdemeanour against all who wear the Red Cross without the authority of Army Council, but I thought better of it. Instead of anything so foolish, I exhibit a delicate solicitude about the health of the patient. I put myself right by referring to it as "he." A less intelligent observer might pronounce it to be decidedly of the female sex. Still, I reflected, women have enlisted in the Army before now. I proceeded to inspect the injured limb with professional gravity. "A compound fracture, I think, Barbara. He will require careful nursing."

Barbara liked this—no one in the matron's room had ever exhibited such a clinical interest in the case before, and she thinks "fwacture" rather imposing.

"Let me feel his pulse," I said. I held a waxen arm between my thumb and forefinger, and looked at my wrist-watch for some seconds, Barbara gazing at me intently.

"Hum! hum! I think we had better take his temperature," I said, as I held a clinical thermometer in the shape of a fountain-pen to the rosebud lips of the patient. "103, I think."

"Will you wite a pwesciption?" asked Barbara anxiously.

"Certainly, an admirable suggestion, Barbara. Let me see, will this do, do you think?" I scribbled on my Field Note-book, tore out the page, and handed it to Barbara.

Brom. Potass.	3 grs.
Hydrochl.	5 quarts.
Quin. Sulph.	1 pt.

She scrutinised it closely. It puzzled her, though her bewilderment was nothing to the astonishment which that prescription would have excited in a member of the medical profession.

"Fank you," said Barbara, who was no less pleased than puzzled, and who tried to look as if she quite understood. Her little face, with its halo of golden curls, was turned up to mine, and she now regarded me with a respect for my professional attainments which was truly gratifying.



I was transcribing a temperature-chart for Barbara's patient when a tactless messenger came to say that my car was at the door. Barbara hung on my arm. "Will you come again, and take his tempewature—Pwomise?"

I promised.

XIX

AN ARMY COUNCIL

(October 1914)



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All the morning I had travelled through the pleasant valleys of Normandy between chalk-hills crowned with russet beeches. The country had the delicacy of one of Corot's landscapes, and the skies were of that unforgettable blue which is the secret of France. The end of my journey found me at No. — General Hospital. The chaplain, an old C.F. attached to the Base Hospitals, who had rejoined on the outbreak of the war, and myself were the centre of a group of convalescents. They wore the regulation uniform of loose sky-blue flannels, resembling a fitter's overalls in everything except the extreme brilliance of the dye, with red ties tied in a sailor's knot. The badges on their caps alone betrayed their regiments. There were "details" from almost every regiment in the British Army, and one could hear every dialect from John o' Groat's to Land's End. Their talk was of the great retreat.

"Hell it was—fire and brimstone," said a R.F.A. man. "We limbered up, our battery did, and got the guns off in column of route, but we were more like a blooming ambulance than a battery. We had our limbers and waggons chock full o' details—fellers who'd been wounded or crocked up. And reservists wi' sore feet—out o' training, I reckon," he added magisterially.

"Never you mind about resarvists, my son," interjected a man in the Suffolks. "We resarvists carried some of the recroots on our backs for miles. We ain't no chickens."

"No, that we bain't," said a West-countryman. "I reckon we can teach them young fellers zummat. Oi zeed zome on 'em pretty clytenish^[13] when they was under foire the fust time. Though they were middlin' steady, arterwards," he added indulgently as though jealous of the honour of his regiment.

"'Twere all a duddering^[14] mix-up. I niver a zeed anything loike it afore. Wimmen an' childer a-runnin' in and out among us like poultry; we could'n keep sections o' fours nohow. We carried some o' the little 'uns. And girt fires a-burnin' at night loike ricks—a terrible blissey^[15] on the hills. And 'twere that dusty and hot oi did get mortal drouthy in my drawt and a niver had a drop in my water-bottle; I'd gied it all to the childer."

"What about rations?" said the chaplain.

"Oh I were bit leery^[16] i' my innerds at toimes, but oi had my emargency ration, and them A.S.C. chaps were pretty sprack;^[17] they kep up wi' us most times. 'Twere just loike a circus procession—lorries and guns and we soldjers all a-mixed up. And some of the harses went cruel lame and had to be left behind."

"That they did," said a small man in the 19th Hussars who was obviously a Londoner. He was slightly bow-legged and moved with the deliberate gait of the cavalryman on his feet. "Me 'orse got the blooming 'ump with corns."

"Ah! and what do you think of the Uhlands?"



He sniffed. "Rotten, sir! They never gives us a chawnce. They ain't no good except for lootin'. Regular 'ooligans. We charged 'em up near Mons, our orficer goin' ahead 'bout eight yards, and when we got up to 'em 'e drops back into our line. We charges in a single line, you know, knee to knee, as close together as us can get, riding low so as to present as small a target as we can."



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“And you got home with the Uhlans?” I asked.

“Once. Their lances ain’t much good except for lightin’ street-lamps.”

“Street-lamps?” said the chaplain literally.

“Yuss. They’re too long. The blighters ’ave no grip on them. We just parry and then thrust with the point; we’ve giv’ up cutting exercises. If the thrust misses, you uses the pommel—so!” He executed an intimidating gesture with his stick.

“Well, ah’ve had ma bit o’ fun,” interjected a small H.L.I. man irrelevantly, feeling, apparently, it was his turn in the symposium, as he thrust a red head with a freckled skin and high cheek-bones into the group. “Ah ken verra weel ah got ’im. It was at a railway stashon where we surprised ’em. Ah came upon a Jerrman awficer—I thocht he were drunk—and he fired three times aht me with a ree-vol-ver. But ah got ’im. Yes, ah’ve had ma bit o’ fun,” he said complacently as he cherished an arm in a sling.

With him was a comrade belonging to the “Lilywhites,” the old 82nd, now known as the first battalion of the South Lancs, with whom the H.L.I. have an ancient friendship. The South Lancs have also their antipathies—the King’s Liverpools among them—but that is neither here nor there.

“It were just like a coop-tie crowd was the retreat,” he drawled in the broad Lancashire dialect. “A fair mix-up, it were.”

“What do you think of the Germans?”

There was a chorus of voices. “Not much”—“Blighters”—“Swine.”

“Their ‘coal-boxes’ don’t come off half the time,” said the R.F.A. man professionally. “And their shrapnel hasn’t got the dispersion ours has. Ours is a treat—like sugar-loaf.” The German gunnery has become deadly enough since then.

“Their coal-boxes do stink though,” said a Hoxton man in the Royal Fusiliers. “Reminds me of our howitzer shells in the Boer War; they used to let off a lot of stuff that turned yellow. I’ve seen Boers—hairy men, you know, sir—with their beards turned all yellow by them. Regular hair-restorers, they was.”

“I remember up on the Aisne,” continued the Hoxton man, who had an ingenuous countenance, “one of our chaps shouted ‘Waiter,’ and about fifty on ’em stuck their heads up above the trenches and said, ‘Coming, sir.’”

There was a shout of laughter. The chaplain looked incredulous. “Don’t mind him, he’s pulling your leg, sir,” said his neighbour. It is a pastime of which the British soldier is inordinately fond.



“They can’t shoot for nuts, that’s a fact,” said a Rifleman. “They couldn’t hit a house if they was in it. We can give them five rounds rapid while they’re getting ready to fire one. Fire from the hips, they do. I never seen the likes of it.” It was the professional criticism of the most perfectly trained body of marksmen in the world, and we listened with respect. “But they’ve got some tidy snipers,” he added candidly.

“They was singing like an Eisteddfod,” said a man in the South Wales Borderers, “when they advanced. Yess, they was singing splendid. Like a *cymanfa ganu*,^[18] it wass. Fair play.”

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“And what do you boys do?” asked the chaplain. “Do you sing too?”

“Faith, I swore,” said one of the Munsters, “I used every name but a saint’s name.” The speaker was a Catholic, and the chaplain was Church of England, or he might have been less candid.

“There was a mon in oor company,” said the red-headed one, feeling it was his turn again, “that killed seven Jerrmans—he shot six and baynitted anither. And he wur fair fou[19] afterwards. He grat like a bairn.”

“Aye, mon,” said a ruddy man of the Yorks L.I., “ah know’d ah felt mysen dafflin[20] when ah saw me pal knocked over. He comed fra oor toon, and he tellt me hissen the neet afore: ‘Jock,’ ’e said, ‘tha’ll write to me wife, woan’t tha?’ And ah said, ‘Doan’t be a fule, Ben, tha’ll be all right.’ ‘Noa, Jock,’ he tellt me, ‘ah know’d afore ah left heeam ah should be killt. Ah saw a mouldiwarp[21] dead afore oor door; me wife fair dithered[22] when she saw’t.’”

The chaplain and myself looked puzzled. “It’s a kind o’ sign among the fouk in our parts, sir,” he proceeded, enlightening our ignorance. “And ’e asked me to take his brass for the wife. But ah thowt nowt of it. And we lost oor connectin’ files and were nobbut two platoons, and we got it somethin’ cruel; the shells were a-skirling[23] like peewits ower our heids. And Ben were knocked over and ’e never said a ward. And then ah got fair daft.”

There was silence for a moment.

“I found this,” suddenly interrupted a despatch-rider. He was a fair-spoken youth, obviously of some education. He explained, in reply to our interrogatories, that he was a despatch-rider attached to a Signal Company of the R.E. He produced a cap, apparently from nowhere, by mere sleight of hand. It was greasy, weather-stained, and in no respect different from a thousand such Army caps. It bore the badge and superscription of the R.E. We looked at it indifferently as he held it out with an eleemosynary gesture.

“A collection will now be taken,” said the Hoxton man with a grin.

But the despatch-rider did not laugh. “I found this cap,” he said gravely, “on Monday, September 7th, in a house near La Ferte. We stopped there for four hours while the artillery were in action. We saw a broken motor bicycle outside a house to which the people pointed. We went in. We found one of our despatch-riders with an officer’s sword sticking in him. Our section officer asked the people about it, and they told him that the despatch-rider arrived late one night, having lost his way and knocked at the door of the house. There were German officers billeted there. They let him in, and then



they stuck him up against a wall and cut him up. He had fifteen sabre-cuts," he added quietly.

No one laughed any more. We all crowded round to look at that tragic cap. "The number looks like one—nought—seven—something," said the chaplain, adjusting his glasses, "but I can't make out the rest." "Poor lad," he added softly. No one spoke. But I saw a look in the eyes of the men around me that boded ill for the Hun when they should be reported fit for duty.

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The English soldier hides his feelings as though he were ashamed of them. The sombre silence became almost oppressive in the autumnal twilight, and I sought to disperse it.

“I suppose you’re pretty comfortable here?” I said, for the camp seemed to leave nothing to be desired.

But this was to open the sluices of criticism. The British soldier begins to “grouse” the moment he becomes comfortable—and not before. He will bear without repining everything but luxury.

“One and six a day we gets,” cried one of them, “and what’s this about this New Army getting four bob?”

“I think you’re mistaken, my son,” said the chaplain gently.

“Well, there’s chaps in this ’ere camp, Army cooks they calls themselves, speshully ’listed for the war, and they gets six bob. And those shuvvers—they’re like fighting cocks.”

“Well, there seems nothing to complain of in the matter of supplies,” I said. They had been having a kind of high tea on tables laid across trestles on the lawn, and one of them, using his knife as a bricklayer uses his trowel, was luxuriously spreading a layer of apple and plum jam upon a stratum of hard-boiled egg, which reposed on a bed-rock of bread and butter, the whole representing a most interesting geological formation and producing a startling chromatic effect.

“Why, sir, if you read the papers you wud ’a thocht it was a braw pic-nic.” said the red-headed one. “You wud think we were growin’ fat oot in the trenches. Dae ah look like it?”

My companion, the grey-headed chaplain, took the Highlander affectionately by the second button of his tunic and gave it a pull. “Not much space here, eh? I think you’re pretty well fed, my son!”

A bugle-call rang out over the camp. “Bed-time,” said a Guardsman, “time to go bye-bye. Parade—hype! Dis-miss! The orderly officer’ll be round soon. Scoot, my sons.”

They scooted.

The silvery notes of the bugle died away over the woods. Night was falling, and the sky faded slowly from mother-of-pearl to a leaden gray. We were alone. The chaplain gazed wistfully at the retreating figures, his face seemed suddenly shrunken, and I could see that he was very old. He took my arm and leaned heavily upon it. “I have been in the Army for the best part of my life,” he said simply, “and I had retired on a



pension. But I thank God,” he added devoutly, “that it has pleased Him to extend my days long enough to enable me to rejoin the Forces. For I know the British soldier and—to know him is to love him. Do you understand?” he added, as he nodded in the direction the men had gone.

As I looked at him, there came into my mind the haunting lines of Tennyson’s “Ulysses.”

“Yes,” I said, “I understand.”

FOOTNOTES:

[13] Pale.

[14] Confusing.

[15] Blaze.

[16] Empty.



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[17] Smart.

[18] Welsh for a singing meeting.

[19] Mad.

[20] Imbecile.

[21] A mole.

[22] Trembled.

[23] Screaming.

XX

THE FUGITIVES

“But pray that your flight be not in the winter.”

Some four or five miles north of Bailleul, where the *douane* posts mark the marches of the Franco-Belgian frontier, is the village of Locre. Here the clay of the plains gives way to a wooded ridge of low hills, through which the road drives a deep cutting, laying bare the age of the earth in a chronology of greensand and limestone. Beyond the ridge lies another plain, and there it was that on a clammy winter's day I came upon two lonely wayfarers. The fields and hedgerows were rheumy with moisture which dripped from every bent and twig. The hedges were full of the dead wood of the departed autumn, and on a decrepit creeper hung a few ragged wisps of Old Man's Beard. The only touch of colour in the landscape was the vinous purple of the twigs, and a few green leaves of privet from which rose spikes of berries black as crape. Not a living thing appeared, and the secret promises of spring were so remote as to seem incredible.

The man and woman were Flemish of the peasant class; the man, gnarled like an old oak, the purple clots in the veins of his wrists betraying the senility of his arteries; the woman, withered as though all the sap had gone out of her blood. She had a rope round her waist, to the other end of which a small cart was attached; under the cart, harnessed to the axle, two dogs panted painfully with their tongues out; behind the cart the man pushed. It contained a disorderly freight: a large feather-bed, a copper cauldron, a bird-cage, a mattock, a clock curiously carved, a spinning-wheel with a distaff impoverished of flax, and some kitchen utensils, which, as the woman stumbled and the cart lurched, clanked together.

As our car drew up, they stopped, the woman holding her hands to her side as though to recover breath.



“Who are you? Where do you come from?” said my companion, a French officer.

They stared uncomprehendingly.

He spoke again, this time in Flemish:

“Van waar komt gy? Waar gaat gy heen?”

The man pointed with his hand vaguely in the direction of the Menin ridge.

There followed a conversation of which I could make but little. But I noticed that they answered my companion in a dull, trance-like way, as though our questions concerned no one so little as themselves.

“They’re fugitives,” he repeated to me. “Been burnt out of their farm by the Bosches near the Menin ridge.”

“Are they all alone?” I asked.

He put some further questions. “Yes, their only son was shot by the Germans when they billeted there.”

“Why?”



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“They don’t know. The Bosches took all they had and drove the live-stock away. These few sticks are all they have left. Curious, isn’t it,” he added meditatively, “that you never see any Flemish fugitives without their feather-beds?” I had often noticed it. Also I had noticed the curious purposelessness of their salvage, as though in trying to save everything they succeeded in saving nothing that was of any consequence. Perhaps it is that, as some one has remarked, all things suddenly become equally dear when you have to leave them.

“But where are they going?”

The man stared at my companion as he put my question; the woman gazed vacantly at the lowering horizon, but neither uttered a word. The canary in its little prison of wire-work piped joyfully, as a gleam of sunshine lit up the watery landscape. Somewhere the guns spoke in a dull thunder. The woman was pleating a fold of her skirt between thumb and forefinger, plucking and unplucking with immense care and concentration. The man was suddenly shaken with a fit of asthma, and clutched at the cart as though seeking support.

We waited for some reply, and at length the man answered between the spasms of his malady.

“He says he doesn’t know,” my companion translated. “He’s never been outside his parish before. But he thinks he’ll go to Brussels and see the King of the Belgians. He doesn’t know the Germans are in Brussels. And anyhow he’s on the wrong road.”

“But surely,” I hazarded, “the *maire* or the *cure* could have told him better.”

“He says the Germans shot the *cure* and carried off the *maire*. It’s a way they’ve got, you know.”

It was now clear to us that this tragic couple were out on an uncharted sea. Their little world was in ruins. The bells that had called them to the divine offices were silent; the little church in which they had knelt at mass was in ruins; the parish registers which chronicled the great landmarks in their lives had been devoured by the flames; their hearth was cold and their habitation desolate. They had watched the heavens but they might not sow; they had turned their back on the fields which they would never reap. There was an end to all their husbandry, and they had no one left to speak with their enemies in the gate. This was the secret of their heavy lethargy.

My companion and I took counsel together. It were better, we agreed, to maintain them on the road to Bailleul. For we knew that, though Bailleul had been stripped bare by the German hussars before they evacuated it, the French, out of the warmth of their hearts, and the British, out of the fulness of their supplies, would succour this forlorn couple. Many a time had I known the British soldier pass round the hat to relieve the refugees



out of the exiguous pay of himself and his fellows; not seldom has he risked a stoppage of pay or a spell of field-punishment by parting with an overcoat, for whose absence at kit inspection he would supply every excuse but the true one. And, therefore, to Bailleul we directed them to go.



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But as I looked back I saw those bent and dwindling figures still standing in the mud. The woman continued to pluck at her dress; the man gazed at the horizon with the same dull vacancy. They had the weary humility of the figures in Millet's "Angelus," without their inspiration, and in their eyes was a dumb despair.

XXI

A "DUG-OUT"[24]

Driver George Hawkins, of the ——th Battery (K), was engaged in drying one of the leaders of the gun team. The leader, who answered, when he felt so inclined, to the name of "Tommy," had been exercised that morning in a driving rain, and Driver Hawkins was concerned lest Tommy should develop colic with all its acute internal inconveniences. He performed his ministrations with a wisp of straw, and seemed to derive great moral support in the process from the production of a phthysical expiration of his breath, between clenched teeth, resulting in a sibilant hiss. Like most ritualistic practices this habit has a utilitarian origin: it serves to keep the dust of grooming from entering the lungs. But in process of time it has acquired a touch of mysticism, and is supposed to soothe the horse and sustain the man. Had Hawkins not been absorbed in a localised attention to Tommy's fetlocks he would have observed that his charge had suddenly laid his ears back. But being something of a chiropodist he was studying the way Tommy put his foot to the ground, for he suspected corns. The next moment Driver Hawkins found himself lying in a heap of straw on the opposite side of the stable. Tommy had suddenly lashed out, and landed him one on the left shoulder. Driver Hawkins picked himself up, more grieved than hurt. He looked at Tommy with pained surprise.

"I feeds yer," he said reproachfully, "I waters yer, I grooms yer, I stays from my dinner to dry yer, and what do I get for it? Now I ask yer?" Tommy was looking round at him with eyes of guileless innocence.

"What do I get for it?" he repeated argumentatively. "I gets a blooming kick."

"Blooming" is a euphemism. The adjective Hawkins actually used was, as a matter of fact, closely associated with the exercise of the reproductive functions, and cannot be set down here.

"Beg pardon, sir," said Hawkins, saluting, as he caught sight of the Major and myself who had entered the stable at that moment. The Major was trying hard to repress a smile. "Go on with your catechism, Hawkins," he said. It was evident that Hawkins belonged to the Moral Education League, and believed in suasion rather than punishment for the repression of vice.



“I suppose you’re fond of your horses, Hawkins?” I said unguardedly. But no R.F.A. driver wears his heart on his sleeve, and Hawkins’s reply was disconcerting. “I ’ates ’em, sir,” he whispered to me as the Major turned his back; “I’m a maid-of-all-work to them ’orses. They gives me ’ousemaid’s knee, and my back do ache something cruel.”



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“He doesn’t, though,” said the Major, who had overheard this auricular confidence. We had left the stable. “Our drivers are mighty fond of their horses—and proud of them too. It’s quite an infatuation in its way. But come and see the O.T.C. We’ve got them down here for the weekend, by way of showing them the evolutions of a battery. They’ve got their instructor, an N.C.O. who’s been dug out for the job, and I’ve lent him two of the guns to put them through their paces. He’s quite priceless—a regular chip of the old Army block.”

“Now, sir,” the sergeant was saying, “get them into single file.” They were to change from Battery Column to Column of Route.

“Battery...!” began the cadet in a piping voice.

“As y’ were,” interjected the sergeant in mild expostulation. “You’ve got to get it off your chest, sir. Let them ’ear it. So!” And he gave a stentorian shout. It was a meritorious and surprising performance, for he was fat and scant of breath. The sedentary duties of hall-porter at the — Club, after twenty-one years’ service in the Army, had produced a fatty degeneration which no studious arrangement of an Army belt could altogether conceal.

“Battery!” began the cadet, as he threw his head back and took a deep breath.

“Advance in single file from the right. The rest mark time.”

“Rest!” said the sergeant reproachfully. “There ain’t no rest in the British Army. Rear, say, ‘Rear,’ sir.”

“Rear, mark time!” said the cadet uncomfortably.

“Now,” said the sergeant, as he wiped his brows, “double them back, sir.”

“Battery, run!” said the cadet brightly.

“As y’ were! How could yer, Mr. ——?” said the sergeant grievously. “The British Army never runs, sir! They doubles.” The cadet blushed at the aspersion upon the reputation of the British Army into which he had been betrayed.

“Double—march!”

They doubled.

The sergeant now turned his attention to a party at gun drill. It was a sub-section, which means a gun, a waggon, and ten men. The detachment was formed up behind the gun in two rows, odd numbers in front, even numbers behind.

“Section tell off!”



“One,” from the front row. “Two,” from the back. “Three,” from the front. The tale was duly told in voices which ran up and down the scale, tenor alternating with baritone.

“Without drag-ropes—prepare to advance!” shouted the sergeant. The odd numbers shifted to the right of the gun, the evens to the left, but numbers “4” and “6,” being apparently under the impression that it was a game of “musical chairs,” found themselves on the right instead of the left.

“Too many odds,” shouted the sergeant. “The British Army be used to ’eavy hodd, but not that sort. Nos. 4 and 6 get over to the near side.”

“Halt! Action front!” They unlimbered, and swung the gun round to point in the direction of an imaginary enemy.



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The detachment were now grouped round the gun, and I drew near to have a look at it. No neater adaptation of means to end could be devised than your eighteen-pounder. She is as docile as a child, and her “bubble” is as sensitive to a touch as mercury in a barometer.

“No. 1 add one hundred. Two-nought minutes more left!” shouted the sergeant, who, with the versatility of a variety artiste, was now playing another part from his extensive repertoire. He was forward observing officer.

One of his pupils turned the ranging gear until the range-drum registered a further hundred yards, while another traversed the gun until it pointed twenty minutes more left.

As we turned away they were performing another delicate and complicated operation which was not carried through without some plaintive expostulation from the N.C.O.

“It reminds me,” remarked the Major colloquially, as we strolled away, “of Falstaff drilling his recruits. So does the texture of the khaki they serve out to the O.T.C. ‘Dowlas, filthy dowlas!’ But you’ve no idea how soon he’ll lick them into shape. These ‘dug-outs’ are as primitive as cave-dwellers in their way but they know their job. And what is more, they like it.”

As we passed the stables I heard ecstatic sounds—a whinny of equine delight and the blandishments of a human voice. Through the open door I caught a glimpse of Driver Hawkins with his back turned towards us. His left arm was round Tommy’s neck and the left side of his face rested upon Tommy’s head; the fingers of his right hand were delicately stroking Tommy’s nose.

“I forgives yer,” I heard him say with rare magnanimity, “yus, I forgives yer, old boy. But if yer does it again, yer’ll give me the blooming ’ump.”

I passed hurriedly on. It was not for a stranger to intrude on anything so intimate.

FOOTNOTE:

[24] On leave in England.

XXII

CHRISTMAS EVE

(1914)

“Halt! Stop, I mean.”



The ring of choristers in khaki and blue flannel faced with cotton wool looked at their conductor, a sergeant in the Glosters, with intense and painful concentration. They were rehearsing carols in the annexe of a Base hospital on Christmas Eve, and the sergeant was as hard to please as if they were recruits doing their first squad drill. They were a scratch lot, recruited by a well-meaning chaplain to the Forces, from Base “details” and convalescents. Their voices were lusty, but their time erratic, and one ardent spirit was a bar ahead and gaining audibly with each lap despite the desperate spurts of the rest.

“Opened out his throttle—’e has,” whispered an Army driver professionally to his neighbour; “’e’s a fair cop for exceedin’ the speed limit.”

The sergeant glanced magisterially at the offender, a young Dorset, who a year ago was hedging and ditching in the Vale of Blackmore, but who has lately done enough digging for a whole parish.



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“You’ve lost your connecting files, me lad,” he exclaimed reproachfully; “you ain’t out on patrol, yer know. ’Shun! Now again! ’Christians’.”

Christians, awake! Salute the happy morn,
Whereon ...

The familiar melody was shut behind me as I closed the door. Those West-country voices awoke in me haunting memories of my childhood, and, in a flash, I saw once again a ring of ruddy faces on a frosty night, illuminated by the candle in a shepherd’s horn lantern, their breath a luminous vapour in the still air, and my mother holding me up at the window of our Wiltshire house, as I looked out from the casement of the nursery upon the up-turned faces of the choristers below and wondered mazily whether they had brought Father Christmas with them.

A low cry of pain reached my ears as I opened the door of Surgical Ward A.I. A nurse was removing a field-dressing from a soldier just brought down from the Front. The surgeon stood over him ready to spray the wound with peroxide. “Buck up, old chap,” cried the patients in the neighbouring beds who looked on encouragingly at these ministries. Another moan escaped him as the discoloured bandage, with its faint odour of perchloride, was stripped from the raw and inflamed flesh.

“Next gramophone record, please!” chanted his neighbours. The patient smiled faintly at the exhortation and set his teeth.

“That’s better, sonny,” whispered the nurse with benign approval.

“It won’t hurt you, old chap, I’m only going to drain off the septic matter,” interjected the surgeon in holland overalls, with sleeves tucked up to the elbow. “Here, give me that tube.” The dresser handed him a nickel reed from the sterilising basin.

With a few light quick movements the wound was sprayed, dressed, cleansed, and anointed, and the surgeon, like the good Samaritan, passed on to the next case. Only last night the patient was in the trenches, moaning with pain, as the stretcher-bearers carried him to the aid-post, and from the aid-post to the forward dressing station, whence by an uneasy journey (there were no sumptuous hospital-trains in those days) he had come hither. But what of the others who were hit outside the trenches and who lay even now, this Christmas Eve, in that dreadful No Man’s Land swept by the enemy’s fire, whither no stretcher-bearer can go—lying among the dead and dying, a field of creeping forms, some quivering in the barbed wire, where dead men hang as on a gibbet, hoping only for a cleanly death from a bullet before their wounds fester and poison the blood in their veins.

Whereon—the Saviour—of mankind—was—born.



The measured cadence fell on my ear as I left the ward and passed beyond the annexe. The sergeant had now got his section well in hand. I turned up the long winding road towards my quarters. It was a cold moonlight night, and every twig of broom and beech was sharply defined as in a black-and-white drawing. Overhead each star was hard and bright, as though a lapidary had been at work in the heavens, and never had the Great Bear seemed so brilliant. But none so bright and legible—or so it seemed to me—as Mars in all that starry heraldry.



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“Bon soir, monsieur!” It was the voice of the sentry, and came from behind a barricade of hurdles, thatched with straw, on the crest of the road over the downs. His bayonet gleamed like a silver needle in the moonlight, and he was alone in his vigil. No shepherds watched their flocks by night, neither did angels sing peace on earth and goodwill towards men. Only the cold austerity of the stars kept him company. Perhaps the first Christmas Eve was just such a starry night as this; the same stars may have looked down upon a manger in Bethlehem. But on the brow of the hill was one of those wayside shrines which symbolise the anguish of the Cross, and these very stars may have looked down upon the hill of Calvary.

IV

THE FRONT AGAIN

XXIII

THE COMING OF THE HUN

The *maire* sat in his parlour at the Hotel de Ville dictating to his secretary. He was a stout little man with a firm mouth, an indomitable chin, and quizzical eyes. His face would at any time have been remarkable; for a French provincial it was notable in being clean-shaven. Most Frenchmen of the middle class wear beards of an Assyrian luxuriance, which to a casual glance suggest stage properties rather than the work of Nature. The *maire* was leaning back in his chair, his elbows resting upon its arms and his hands extended in front of him, the thumb and finger-tips of one hand poised to meet those of the other as though he were contemplating the fifth proposition in Euclid. It was a characteristic attitude; an observer would have said it indicated a temperament at once patient and precise. He was dictating a note to the *commissaire de police*, warning the inhabitants to conduct themselves “paisiblement” in the event of a German occupation, an event which was hourly expected. Much might depend upon that proclamation; a word too little or too much and Heaven alone knew what innuendo a German Commandant might discover in it. Perhaps the *maire* was also not indifferent to the question of style; he prided himself on his French; he had in his youth won a prize at the Lycee for composition, and he contributed occasional papers to the journal of the Societe de l’Histoire de France on the antiquities of his *department*. Most Frenchmen are born purists in style, and the *maire* lingered over his words.

“Continuez, Henri,” he said with a glance at the clerk. “*Le Maire, assiste de son adjoint et de ses conseillers municipaux et de delegues de quartier, sera en permanence a l’hotel de Ville pour assurer—*” There was a kick at the door and a tall loutish man in the uniform of a German officer entered, followed by two grey-coated soldiers. The officer

neither bowed nor saluted, but merely glared with an intimidating frown. The *maire's* clerk sat in an atrophy of fear, unable to move a muscle. The officer advanced



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to the desk, pulled out his revolver from its leather pouch, and laid it with a lethal gesture on the *maire's* desk. The *maire* examined it curiously. "Ah, yes, M. le Capitaine, thank you; I will examine it in a moment, but I have seen better ones—our new service pattern, for example. Ja! Ich verstehe ganz gut," he continued, answering the officer's reckless French in perfect German. "Consider yourself under arrest," declaimed the officer, with increasing violence. "We are in occupation of your town; you will provide us within the next twenty-four hours with ten thousand kilos of bread, thirty thousand kilos of hay, forty thousand kilos of oats, five thousand bottles of wine, one hundred boxes of cigars." ("Mon Dieu! it is an inventory," said the *maire* to himself.) "If these are not forthcoming by twelve noon to-morrow you will be shot," added the officer in a sudden inspiration of his own.

The *maire* was facing the officer, who towered above him. "Ah, yes, Monsieur le Capitaine, you will not take a seat? No? And your requisition—you have your commandant's written order and signature, no doubt?" The officer blustered. "No, no, Monsieur le Capitaine, I am the head of the civil government in this town; I take no orders except from the head of the military authority. You have doubtless forgotten Hague Regulation, Article 52; your Government signed it, you will recollect." The officer hesitated. The *maire* looked out on the *place*; it was full of armed men, but he did not flinch. "You see, monsieur," he went on suavely, "there are such things as receipts, and they have to be authenticated." The officer turned his back on him, took out his field note-book, scribbled something on a page, and, having torn it out, handed it to one of his men with a curt instruction.

The *maire* resumed his dictation to the hypnotised clerk, while the officer sat astride a chair and executed an impatient *pas seul* with his heels upon the parquet floor. Once or twice he spat demonstratively, but the *maire* took no notice. In a few minutes the soldier returned with a written order, which the officer threw upon the desk without a word.

The *maire* scrutinised it carefully. "Ten thousand kilos of bread! Monsieur, we provide five thousand a day for the refugees, and this will tax us to the uttermost. The bakers of the town are nearly all *sous les drapeaux*. Very well, monsieur," he added in reply to an impatient exclamation from the officer, "we shall do our best. But many a poor soul in this town will go hungry to-night. And the receipts?" "The requisitioning officer will go with you and give receipts," retorted the officer, who had apparently forgotten that he had placed the *maire* under arrest.

* * * * *



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Subdued lights twinkled like glow-worms in the streets as the *maire* returned across the square to the Hotel de Ville. He threaded his way through groups of infantry, narrowly escaped a collision with three drunken soldiers, who were singing “Die Wacht am Rhein” with laborious unction, skirted the park of ammunition waggons, and reached the main entrance. He had been on his feet for hours visiting the *boulangeries*, the *patisseries*, the hay and corn merchants, persuading, expostulating, beseeching, until at last he had wrung from their exiguous stores the apportionment of the stupendous tribute. It was a heavy task, nor were his importunities made appreciably easier by the receipt-forms tendered, readily enough, by the requisitioning officer who accompanied him, for the inhabitants seemed to view with terror the possession of these German documents, suspecting they knew not what. But the task was done, and the *maire* wearily mounted the stairs.

The officer greeted him curtly. The *maire* now had leisure to study his appearance more closely. He had high cheek-bones, protruding eyes, and a large underhung mouth which, when he was pleased, looked sensual, and, when he was annoyed, merely cruel. The base of his forehead was square, but it rapidly receded with a convex conformation of head, very closely shaven as though with a currycomb, and his ears stood out almost at right angles to his skull. The ferocity that was his by nature he seemed to have assiduously cultivated by art, and the points of his moustaches, upturned in the shape of a cow’s horns, accentuated the truculence of his appearance. In short, he was a typical Prussian officer. In peace he would have been merely comic. In war he was terrible, for there was nothing to restrain him.

Meanwhile the officer called for a corporal’s guard to place the *maire* under arrest. “But you will first sign the following *affiche*—by the General’s orders,” he exclaimed roughly.

Le Maire informe ses concitoyens que le commandant en chef des troupes allemandes a ordonne que le maire et deux notables soient pris comme otages pour la raison que des civils aient tire sur des patrouilles allemandes. Si un coup de fusil etait tire a nouveau par des civils, les trois otages seraient fusilles et la ville serait incendiee immediatement. Si des troupes allies rentraient le maire rappelle a la population que tout civil ne doit pas prendre part a la guerre et que si l’un d’eux venait a y participer le commandant des troupes allemandes ferait fusilier egalement les otages.

“One moment,” said the *maire* as he took up a pen, “*les civils*! I ordered the civil population to deposit their arms at the *mairie* two days ago, and the *commissaire de police* and the gendarmes have searched every house. We have no armed civilians here.”

“Es macht nichts,” said the officer; “we shall add *’ou peut-etre des militaires en civil.*”

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The *maire* shrugged his shoulders at the disingenuous parenthesis. It was, he knew, useless to protest. For all he knew he might be signing his own death-warrant. He studied the style a little more attentively. "Mon Dieu, what French!" he said to himself; "'etait,' 'seraient,' 'venait'! What moods! What tenses! Monsieur le Capitaine," he continued aloud, "if I had used such French in my exercises at the Lycee my instituteur would have said I deserved to be shot. Pray allow me to make it a little more graceful." But the Prussian's ignorance of French syntax was only equalled by his suspicion of it. The *maire's* irony merely irritated him and his coolness puzzled him. "I give you thirty seconds to sign," he said, as he took out his watch and the inevitable revolver. The *maire* took up a needle-like pen, dipped it in the ink, and with a sigh wrote in fragile but firm characters "X—— Y——." The officer called a corporal's guard, and the *maire*, who had fasted since noon, was marched out of the room and thrust into a small closet upon the door of which were the letters "*Cabinet*." This, he reflected grimly, was certainly what in military language is called "close confinement." The soldiers accompanied him. There was just room for him to stretch his weary body upon the stone floor; one soldier remained standing over him with fixed bayonet, the others took up their position outside.

Meanwhile a company of Landwehr had bivouacked in the square, four machine-guns had been placed so as to command the four avenues of approach, patrols had been sent out, sentries posted, all lights extinguished, and all doors ordered to be left open by the householders. Billeting officers had gone from house to house, chalking upon the doors such legends as "*Drei Maenner*," "*6 Offiziere—Eingang verboten*," and, on rare occasions "*Gute Leute hier*." The trembling inhabitants had been forced to wait on their uninvited guests as they clamoured noisily for wine and liqueurs. All the civilians of military age, and many beyond it, had been rounded up and taken under guard to the church; their wives and daughters alone remained, and were the subject of menacing pleasantries. So much the *maire* knew before he had returned from his errand. As he lay in his dark cell he speculated painfully as to what might be happening in the homes of his fellow-townsmen. He sat up once or twice to listen, until the toe of the sentry's boot in his back reminded him of his irregularity. Now and again a woman's cry broke the silence of the night, but otherwise all was still. He composed himself to sleep on the floor, reflecting that he must husband his strength and his nerves for what might lie ahead of him. He was very tired and slept heavily in spite of his cold stone bed. At the hour of one in the morning he was awakened by a kick, and he found himself staring at an electric torch which was being held to his face by a tall figure shrouded in darkness. It was the captain. He sat up and rubbed his eyes.



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“*Fusille!* Bien! so I am to be shot! and wherefore, Monsieur le Capitaine?”

“Some one has fired upon us,” said the officer, “one of your dirty fellows; you must pay for it.”

“And the order?” asked the *maire* sleepily; “you have the Commandant’s order?”

“Never mind about the order,” said the officer reassuringly, “the order will be forthcoming at eight o’clock. Oh yes, we shall shoot you most authoritatively—never fear.”

The officer knew that nothing could be done until eight o’clock, for he dared not wake the Commandant, but he did not see why he should deny himself the pleasure of waking up this pig of a *maire* to see how he would take it. The *maire* divined his thoughts, and without a word turned over on his side and pretended to go to sleep again. From under his drooping eyelids he saw the officer gazing at him with a look in which dislike, disappointment, and pleasurable expectation seemed to be struggling for mastery. Then with a click he extinguished his torch and withdrew.

At eight o’clock the *maire* awoke to learn with mild surprise that he was not to be shot. Beyond that his guard would tell him nothing. It was only afterwards he learnt that one of the drunken revellers had been prowling the streets, and, having given the sentries a bad fright by letting off his rifle at a lamp-post, had expiated his adventure at the hands of a firing party in the cemetery outside the town.

For two days the *maire* was unmolested. He was allowed to see his *adjoint*,^[25] who came to him with a troubled face.

“The babies are crying for milk,” he said, “the troops have taken it all. I begged one of the officers to leave a little for the inhabitants, but he said the men did not like their coffee without plenty of hot milk.” The *maire* reflected for a moment, and then dictated an *avis* to the inhabitants enjoining upon them to be as sparing in their consumption of milk as possible for the sake of the “*meres de famille*” and “*les petits enfants*.”

“Tell the *commissaire de police* to have that posted up immediately,” he added. “We can do no more.”

“They have taken the bread out of our mouths,” resumed the *adjoint*, “and now they are despoiling us of our goods. They are like a swarm of bailiffs let loose upon our homes. Everywhere they levy a distress upon our chattels. There is an ammunition waggon outside my house; they have put all the furniture of my *salon* upon it.”

“You should make a protest to the Commandant,” said the *maire*, but not very hopefully.

“It is no use,” replied the *adjoint* despondingly. “I have. He simply shrugged his shoulders and said, ‘*C’est la guerre.*’ It is always so. They have shot Jules Bonnard.”

“Et pourquoi?” asked the *maire*.



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"I know not," said the *adjoint*. "They found four market-gardeners returning from the fields last night and shot them too—they made them dig their own graves, and tied their hands behind their backs with their own scarves. I protested to a Staff officer; he said it was 'verboten' to dig potatoes. I said they did not know; how could they? He said they ought to know. Then he abused me, and said if I made any more complaints he would shoot me too. They have made the *civils* dig trenches."

"Ah," said the *maire*. He knew it was a flagrant violation of the Hague Regulations, but it was not the tithing of mint and cummin of the law that troubled him. It was the reflection that the *civil* who is forced to dig trenches is already as good as dead. He knows too much.

"And the women," continued the *adjoint*, in a tone of stupefied horror, "they are crying, many of them, and will not look one in the face. Some of them have black eyes. And the young girls!"

The *maire* brooded in impotent horror. His meditations were interrupted by the entrance of the captain. "The Commandant wishes to see you *tout de suite*," he exclaimed. "March!" He was conducted by a corporal's guard, preceded by the captain, into the presence of the General, who had taken up his quarters in the principal mansion looking out upon the square. The General was a stout, square-headed man, with grey moustaches and steel-blue eyes, and the *maire* divined at a glance that here was no swashbuckler, but a man who had himself under control. "I have imposed a fine of 300,000 francs upon your town; you will collect it in twenty-four hours; if it is not forthcoming to the last franc I shall be regretfully compelled to burn this town to the ground."

"And why?" exclaimed the *maire*, whom nothing could now surprise, though much might perplex.

The General seemed unprepared for the question. He paused for a moment and said, "Some one has been giving information to the enemy." "No!"—he held up his hand, not impolitely but finally, as the *maire* began to expostulate—"I have spoken."

"But," said the *maire* desperately, "we shall be ruined. We have not got it. And all our goods have been taken already."

"You have our receipts," said the General. "They are as good as gold. German credit is very high; the Imperial Government has just floated a loan of several milliards. And you have our stamped *Quittungen*." He became at once voluble and persuasive in his cupidity, and forgot something of his habitual caution. "You surely do not doubt the word of the German Government?" he said. The *maire* doubted it very much, but he discreetly held his tongue. "And our requisitioning officers have not been niggardly,"

continued the General; “they have put a substantial price on the goods we have taken.” This was true. It had not escaped the *maire* that the receipt-forms had been lavish.



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"I will do my best," said the *maire* simply.

He was now released from arrest, and he retired to his house to think out the new problem that had presented itself. The threat to burn down the town might or might not be anything but bluff; he himself doubted whether the German Commandant would burn the roofs over his men's heads, as long as the occupation lasted. The military disadvantages were too obvious, though what the enemy might do when they left the town was another matter. They might shoot him, of course; that was more than probable.

But how to find the money was an anxious problem and urgent. The municipal *caisse* was empty: the managers of the banks had closed their doors and carried their deposits off to Paris before the Germans had entered the town; of the wealthier bourgeoisie some had fled, many were ruined, and the rest were inadequate. The *maire* pondered long upon these things, leaning back in his chair with knitted brows in that pensive attitude which was characteristic. Suddenly he caught sight of a blue paper with German characters lying upon a walnut table at his elbow. He took it up, scrutinised it, and studied the signature:

Empfangschein.
Werth 500 fr. erhalten.
Herr Hauptmann von Koepenick.

Then he smiled. He got up, put on his overcoat, took up his hat and cane, and went forth into the drizzling rain.

* * * * *

Two hours later he was at the headquarters of the Staff and asked to see the Commandant. He was shown into his presence without delay. "Well?" said the Commandant. "Monsieur le General, I have collected the fine," said the *maire*. The General's face relaxed its habitual sternness; he grew at once pleasant and polite. "Good," he said. The *maire* opened a fat leather wallet and placed upon the table under the General's predatory nose a large pile of blue documents, some (but not all) stamped with the violet stamp of the German A.Q.M.G. "If the *hochgeehrter* General will count them," said the *maire*, "he will see they come to 325,000 francs. It is rather more than the fine," he explained, "but I have made allowance for the fact that they are not immediately redeemable. They are mostly stamped, and—*they are as good as gold.*"

For three minutes there was absolute silence in the room. The gilt clock in its glass sepulchre on the mantelpiece ticked off the seconds as loudly as a cricket on the hearth in the stillness of the night. The *maire* speculated with more curiosity than fear as to how many more of these seconds he had to live. Never had the intervals seemed so long nor their registration so insistent. The ashes fell with a soft susurrus in the grate.



The Commandant looked at the *maire*; the *maire* looked at the Commandant. Then the Commandant smiled. It was an inscrutable smile; a smile in which the eyes participated not at all. There was merely a muscular relaxation of the lips disclosing the teeth; to the *maire* there seemed something almost canine in it. At last the General spoke. "Gut!" he said gutturally; "you may go."



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“You astonish me,” I said to the *maire*, as he concluded his narrative. We were sitting in his parlour, smoking a cigar together one day in February in a town not a thousand miles from the German lines. “You know, Monsieur le Maire, they have shot many a municipal magistrate for less. I wonder they didn’t make up their minds to shoot you.” The *maire* smiled. “They did,” he said quietly. He carefully nicked the ash off his cigar, as he laid it down upon his desk, and opened the drawer of his *escritoire*. He took out a piece of paper and handed it to me. It was an order in German to shoot the *maire* on the evacuation of the town.

“You see, monsieur,” he exclaimed, “your brave soldiers were a little too quick for them. You made a surprise attack in force early one morning and drove the enemy out. So surprising was it that the Staff officers billeted in my house left a box half full of cigars on my sideboard! You are smoking one of them now—a very good cigar, is it not?” It was. “And they left a good many official papers behind—what you call ‘chits,’ is it not?—and this one among them. Please mind your cigar-ash, monsieur! You see I rather value my own death-warrant.”

Moved by an irresistible impulse I rose from my chair and held out my hand. The *maire* took it in mild surprise. “Monsieur,” I said frankly, if crudely, “you are a brave man. And you have endured much.”

“Yes, monsieur,” said the *maire* gravely, as he glanced at a proclamation on the wall which he has added to his private collection of antiquities, “that is true. I have often been *tres fache* to think that I who won the Michelet prize at the Lycee should have put my name to that thing over there.”[26]

FOOTNOTES:

[25] Deputy.

[26] This narrative follows with some fidelity the course of events as related to the writer by the *maire* of the town in question. But for the most obvious of reasons the writer has deemed it his duty to suppress names, disguise events, and give the narrative something of the investiture of fiction. It is, however, true “in substance and in fact.”—J.H.M.

XXIV

THE HILL



It was one of those perfect spring days when the whole earth seems to bare her bosom to the caresses of the sun. The sky was without a cloud and in the vault overhead, blue as a piece of Delft, a lark was ascending in transports of exultant song. The hill on which we stood was covered with young birch saplings bursting into leaf, and the sky itself was not more blue than the wild hyacinths at our feet. Here and there in the undergrowth gleamed the pallid anemone. A copper wire ran from pole to pole down the slope of the hill and glittered in the sun like a thread of gold. A little to our right two circular mirrors,



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glancing obliquely at each other, stood on a tripod, and a graduated sequence of flashes came and went, under the hands of the signallers, with the velocity of light itself. A few yards behind us on the crest of the hill stood a windmill, its great sails motionless as though it were a brig becalmed and waiting for a wind, and astride one arm, like a sailor on a yard, a carpenter was busy, with his mouth full of nails. The tapping of his hammer and the song of the lark were the only sounds that broke the warm stillness of the April day. A great plain stretched away at our feet, and in the fields below women were stooping forward over their hoes.

The white towers of Ypres gleamed ghostlike in the distant haze. The city had the wistful fragility of some beautiful mirage, and looking at it across the pleasant landscape I thought of the Pilgrim's vision of the Golden City shining in the sun beyond the Land of Beulah. Two or three miles away on our right the ground rose gently to a range of low wooded hills, and on their bare green slopes brown furrows showed up like a cicatrice. They were the German trenches. On the crest of the ridge a white house peeped out between the trees. That house seemed an object of peculiar interest to the battery-major at my side. He was stooping behind the "Director" with his eye to the sights as though he was focussing the distant object for a photograph. He fixed the outer clamp, unscrewed the inner clamp, and having got his sights on the house, he reversed the process and swung round the sights to bear on a little copse to our left. "One hundred and five," he said meditatively as he found the angle. The N.C.O. took up the range-finder and measured the distances first to the house, then to the copse. The major took up an adjustable triangle, and with a movement of thumb and forefinger converted it into the figure of an irregular "X." As he read off the battery angle on the "Plotter" the N.C.O. communicated it and the elevation to the telephone operator, who in turn communicated it to the battery in the copse. "Battery angle seventy. Range four thousand." Gunners are a laconic people, and their language is as economical of words as a proposition in Euclid; their sentences resemble those Oriental languages in which the verb is regarded as a superfluous impertinence. Language is to them a visual and symbolical thing in which angles and distances are predicated of churches, trees, and four-storied houses. Now in the copse on our left six field-guns were cunningly concealed, and even as the telephone operator spoke the dial-sights of those six guns were being screwed round and the elevating gear adjusted till they and the range-drum recorded the results of the major's meditations upon the hill. Then the guns in the copse spoke, and the air was sibilant with their speech. A little cloud no bigger than a man's hand arose above the roof of the white house on the ridge. Our battery had found its mark.



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Somewhere behind that ridge were the enemy's batteries and they were yet to find. But even as we searched the landscape with our field-glasses an aeroplane rose from behind our own position and made for the distant ridge, its diaphanous wings displaying red, white, and blue concentric circles to our glasses like the scales of some huge magpie-moth, while a long streamer of petrol smoke made faint pencillings in the sky behind it. As it hovered above the ridge seven or eight little white clouds like balls of feathers suddenly appeared from nowhere just below it. They were German shrapnel. But the aeroplane passed imperturbably on, leaving the little feathers to float in the sky until in time they faded away and disappeared. In no long time the aeroplane was retracing its flight, and certain little coloured discs were speaking luminously to the battery, telling it of what the observer had seen beyond the ridge. Between the aeroplane, the observer, the telephone, and the guns, there seemed to be some mysterious freemasonry. And this impression of secret and collusive agencies was heightened by the vibration of the air above us, in which the shells from the batteries made furrows that were audible without being visible, as though the whole firmament were populated with disembodied spirits. The passivity of the toilers in the field below us, who, absorbed in their husbandry, regarded not the air above them, and the dreaming beauty of the distant city almost persuaded us that we were the victims of a gigantic illusion. But even as we gazed the city acquired a desperate and tragic reality. Voices of thunder awoke behind the ridge, the air was rent like a garment, and first one cloud and then another and another rose above the city of Ypres, till the white towers were blotted out of sight. A black pall floated over the doomed city, and from that moment the air was never still, as a rhythm of German shells rained upon it. The storm spread until other villages were involved, and a fierce red glow appeared above the roofs of Vlamertinge.

Yet the clouds and flame that rose above the white towers had at that distance a flagrant beauty of their own, and it was hard to believe that they stood for death, desolation, and the agony of men. Beyond the voluminous smoke and darting tongues of fire, our field-glasses could show us nothing. But we knew—for we had seen but yesterday—that behind that haze there was being perpetrated a destruction as mournful and capricious as that which in the vision upon the Mount of Olives overtook Jerusalem. Where two were in the street one was even now being taken and the other left; he who was upon the housetop would not come down to take anything out of his house, neither would he who was in the field return to take away his clothes. The great cathedral was crumbling to dust, and saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs were being hurled from their niches of stone, the Virgin alone standing unscathed upon her pedestal contemplating



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the ruin and tribulation around her. And we knew that while we gazed the roads from the doomed city to Locre and Poperinghe were choked with a terror-stricken stream of fugitives, ancient men hobbling upon sticks, aged women clutching copper pans, and stumbling under the weight of feather-beds, while whimpering children fumbled among their mothers' skirts. What convulsive eddies each of the shells, whose trajectory we heard ever and anon in the skies overhead, were making in that living stream were to us a subject of poignant speculation.

But as I looked immediately around me I found it ever more difficult to believe that such things were being done upon the earth. The carpenter went on hammering, stopping but for a moment to shade his eyes with his hand and gaze out over the plain, the peasants in the field continued to hoe, a woman came out of a cottage with a child clinging to her skirts, and said, "La guerre, quand finira-t-elle, M'sieu'?" From far above us the song of the lark, now lost to sight in the aerial blue, floated down upon the drowsy air.

XXV

THE DAY'S WORK

It was dinner hour in the Mess. There were some dozen of us all told—the Camp Commandant, the Deputy-Assistant-Adjutant-General, the Assistant-Provost-Marshal, the Assistant-Director of Medical Services, the Sanitary Colonel (which adjective has nothing to do with his personal habits), the Judge-Advocate, two men of the Intelligence, a *padre*, and myself. Most of us were known by our initials—our official initials—for the use of them saves time and avoids pomposity. Our duties were both extensive and peculiar, as will presently appear, for we were in the habit of talking shop. There was, indeed, little else to talk about. When you are billeted in a small town in Flanders with no amusements and few amenities—neither theatres, nor sport, nor books—and with little prospect of getting a move on, you can but chronicle the small beer of your quotidian adventures. And these be engaging enough at times.

As we sat down to the stew which our orderly had compounded with the assistance of the ingenious Mr. Maconochie, the Camp Commandant sighed heavily. "I am a kind of receptacle for the waste products of everybody's mind," he exclaimed petulantly. "This morning I was rung up on the telephone and asked if I would bury a dead horse for the Canadian Division; I told them I hadn't a Prayer Book and it couldn't be done. Then two nuns called and asked me to find a discreet soldier—*un soldat discret*—to escort them to Hazebrouck; I told them to take my servant, who is a married man with five children. Then an old lady sent round to ask me to come and drown her cat's kittens; I said it was impossible, as she hadn't complied with the Notification of Births Act."



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The Mess listened to this plaintive recital in unsympathetic silence. Perhaps they reflected that as the Camp Commandant is one of those to whom much, in the way of perquisites of office, is given, from him much may legitimately be expected. "Well, you may think yourself lucky you haven't my job," said the Deputy-Assistant-Adjutant-General at length. "I'm getting rather fed up with casualty lists and strength returns. I'm like the man who boasted that his chief literary recreation was reading Bradshaw, except that I don't boast of it and it isn't a recreation—it's damned hard work. I have to read the Army List for about ten hours every day, for if I get an officer's initials wrong there's the devil to pay. And I spent half an hour between the telephone and the Army List to-day trying to find out who 'Teddy' was. The 102nd Welsh sent him in with their returns of officers' casualties as having died of heart failure on the 22nd inst."

"Well, but who is 'Teddy,' anyhow?" asked the Camp Commandant.

"He is the regimental goat," replied the D.A.A.G. "I suppose they thought it amusing. When I tumbled to it I told their Brigade Headquarters on the telephone that I quite understood their making him a member of their mess, as they belonged to the same species."

"Wait until you've had to track down a case of typhoid in billets," said the R.A.M.C. man who looks after infectious diseases. "I've been on the trail of a typhoid epidemic at La Croix Farm, where a company of the Downshires are billeted, and it made me sad. They had their filters with them and they swore they hadn't touched a drop of impure water, and that they treasured our regulations like the book of Leviticus. And yet the trail of that typhoid was all over my spot chart, and the thing was spreading like one of the seven plagues of Egypt. At last I tracked it down to an Army cook; the rotter had had typhoid about five years ago and simply poisoned everything he touched. He was what we call a carrier."

"What did you do with him?" said the A.D.M.S.

"He won't do any more cooking; I've sent him home. The fellow's a perfect leper, and ought to be interned like an alien enemy."

"Well, I'd rather have your job than mine even if prevention is more honourable than cure," said he whom we know as "Smells," and who has a nose like a fox-terrier's. "I am the *avant-garde* of the Staff, and you fellows can thank me that you are so merry and bright. If I didn't make my sanitary reconnaissances with my chloride of lime and fatigue parties, where would you all be?"

"We should all be home on sick-leave and very pleased to get it," said the A.P.M. ungratefully.

“The *maire* thinks I’m mad, of course,” continued ‘Smells,’ “and I can’t make him understand that cesspools and open sewers in the street are not conducive to health.”



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"I expect they think we're rather too fond of spreading broad our phylacteries," said the Assistant Provost Marshal. "Now I'm a sort of licensing authority, Brewster Sessions in fact, for this commune, and the *estaminet* proprietors think I'm a Temperance fanatic," he said, as he put forth his hand for the whisky bottle. "One of them told me the other day he preferred a German occupation to a British one, because the Huns let him sell as much spirits to their men as he liked. And yet I'm sure the little finger of a French provost-marshal is thicker than my loins any day."

"Yes," said the Camp Commandant, "it's our melancholy duty to be impertinent. I'm supposed to read all you fellows' letters before I stamp them. I'd be rather glad if they were liable to be censored again at the Base or somewhere else *en route*; it would relieve me of any compunction about the first reading, the text and preamble of the envelope would be good enough for me. You fellows write abominably."

"I'm something of a handwriting expert myself," said the A.P.M., ignoring the aspersion. "They have changed the colour of the passes again this month, and so I'm engaged in a fresh study of the A.G.'s signature; I believe he changes his style of handwriting with the colour of the pass. I wonder what is the size of the A.G.'s bank balance," he murmured dreamily; "I believe I could now forge his signature very artistically."

"I wish some one would start a school of handwriting at G.H.Q.," said the A.D.M.S. "I believe I receive more chits than any man on the staff." "Chits," it should be explained, are the billets-doux of the Army wherein officers send tender messages to one another and make assignations.

"Did you hear about that chit the Camp Commandant at the Headquarters of the ——th Corps sent to the A.Q.M.G.?" asked the A.P.M. "No? Well, the A.Q.M.G. of the other Army wrote to Ferrers asking if they had made use of any Ammonal and, if so, whether the results were satisfactory. Ferrers sent it on to the Camp Commandant for report and the Camp Commandant wrote back a chit saying plaintively, 'This is not understood. For what purpose is Ammonal used—is it a drug or an explosive?' Ferrers told him to ask the Medical Officer attached to Corps headquarters, which he did. Thereupon he wrote back another chit to Ferrers, saying that the M.O. had informed him that 'Ammonal' was a compound drug extensively used in America in cases of abnormal neurotic excitement, and that, so far as he knew, it was not a medical issue to Corps H.Q. He therefore regretted that he was unable to report results, but promised that if occasion should arise to administer it to any of the Corps H.Q. *personnel* he would faithfully observe the effects and report the same. When the A.Q.M.G. read the reply he betrayed a quite abnormal degree of neurotic excitement; in fact, he was quite nasty about it."

"What the devil did he mean?" asked the A.D.M.S.

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“Well, that points the moral of your remarks about handwriting,” said the A.P.M. encouragingly. “The Camp Commandant had written what looked like an ‘o’ in place of an ‘a.’ Ammonol is a drug; ammonal is an explosive.”

“Well, I wish some one would teach the Huns how to write decently.” The speaker was Summersby of the Intelligence Corps. The Intelligence are a corps of detectives and have to estimate the strength, the location, and the composition of the enemy’s forces. Everything is grist that comes to their mill and they will perform surprising feats of induction. They can reconstruct a German Army Corps out of a Landwehr man’s bootlace, his diary, his underclothing, or his shoulder-strap—but the greatest of these is his diary. “I’ve been studying the diaries of prisoners until I feel a Hun myself. They remind me of the diary I used to keep at school, they are all about eating and drinking. The Hun is a glutton and a wine-bibber. But I found something to-day—’Keine Gefangene’ in an officer’s field note-book.”

“Translate, my Hunnish friend,” said the A.P.M.

“No prisoners,” replied Summersby shortly.

“I hope you handed the swine over to the P.M.,” said the Camp Commandant.

“Well, no,” said Summersby. “You see he had a plausible explanation—by the way, what perfect English those German officers talk; I’ll bet that man has eaten our bread and salt some time. He said it was a Brigade order to the men not to make the taking of prisoners a pretext for going back to the rear in large parties but to leave them to the supports when they came up. The curious thing is that that officer belongs to the 112th and we’ve our eye on the 112th. One of their men, a fellow named Schmidt, who surrendered on the 19th of last month, said they’d had an order to take no prisoners but kill them all. His regiment was the 112th,” he added darkly.

“The filthy swine!” we cried in a chorus, and our talk grew sombre as we exchanged reminiscences.

“What pleases me about you fellows,” said Ponsonby, who had been listening with a languid air, and who was formerly in the F.O. where he composed florid speeches in elegant French for Hague Plenipotentiaries, “is your habits of speech. In diplomacy we contrive to talk a lot without saying anything, whereas Army men manage to talk little and say a great deal. You’ve got four words in the Army which seem to be a mighty present help in trouble at H.Q. Their sustaining properties are remarkable and they seem to tide over very anxious moments. When you are in a hole you say ‘Damn all,’ and when you are asked for instructions you cry ‘Carry on.’ I suppose it’s by sitting tight and using those words with discrimination that you fellows arrive at greatness and attain Brigadier rank. That seems to be the first thing a third-grade staff-officer learns.”



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“The first thing a third-grade staff-officer learns is to speak respectfully of his superiors,” said the A.P.M., as he hurled a cushion at Ponsonby, who caught it with a bow. Ponsonby is irrepressible and, in spite of his supercilious civilian airs, much is forgiven him. He turned to the D.A.A.G. and said, “Hooper, you’ve forgotten to say grace. For what we have *not* received”—he added, with a meaning glance at a Stilton cheese which the A.A.G.’s wife has sent out from home and which remained on the sideboard—“the Lord make us truly thankful.” This was an allusion to the D.A.A.G.’s sacerdotal functions. For the Adjutant-General and his staff, who know the numbers of all the Field Ambulances, can lay hands—but not in the apostolic sense—upon every chaplain attached thereto; the A.G. is the Metropolitan of them all and can admonish, deprive, and suspend.

The D.A.A.G. ignored the plaintive benediction. “I think we’ve fixed it up with those Red Cross drivers,” he said complacently. The A.G.’s department had been wrestling with the disciplinary problem presented by these birds of passage on the lines of communication. “We’ve decided that they are Army followers under section 176, subsection 10, of the Army Act, and that you ‘follow’ the British Army from the moment you accept a pass to H.Q. My chief called some of them together yesterday, and being in a benevolent humour told them that they were now under military law and might be sentenced to anything from seven days’ field-punishment to the punishment of death. This was *pour encourager les autres*. They looked quite thoughtful.”

“That’s a nice point,” commented Ponsonby pensively. “Should an Army follower be hanged or is he entitled to be shot? I put it to you,” he added, turning to the Judge-Advocate. “I want counsel’s opinion.”

“I never give abstract opinions,” retorted the man of law. “But the safest course would be to hang him first and shoot him afterwards.”

“Your counsel is as the counsel of Ahithophel,” said Ponsonby. “I’ll put you another problem. Is a carrier-pigeon an Army follower? Because Slingsby never has any appetite for dinner” (this was notoriously untrue), “and I have a strong suspicion that he converts—that’s a legal expression for fraud, isn’t it?—his carrier-pigeons into pigeon-pie. What is the penalty for fraudulent conversion of an Army follower?” Slingsby, who in virtue of his aquiline features is known as *Aquila vulgaris*, has charge of the carrier-pigeons and takes large baskets of them out to the Front every day; he is supposed to be training them by an intimate use of pigeon-English not to settle when the shells explode. Unfortunately his pigeons are usually posted as “missing,” and go to some bourne from which no pigeon has ever been known to return. Ponsonby glances suspiciously at Slingsby’s portly figure.



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But the Judge-Advocate had stolen away to study a dossier of “proceedings,” and his departure was the signal for a general dispersion. “Come and have a drink,” said Ponsonby to the “I” man. “Can’t, you slacker,” was the reply. “I’ve got to go and make up an ‘I’ summary. ‘Notes of an Air Reconnaissance. Distribution of the enemy’s forces. Copy of a German Divisional Circular. Notes on the German system of signalling from their trenches.’ You know the usual kind of thing. Just now we’re trying to discover how many guns they’ve got in the batteries of their new formations. We’ve noticed that their 77-mm. projectiles now arrive in groups of four, and we suspect that two guns have been withdrawn. But it may be only a blind.”

As we turned out into the darkened street to make our way to our respective offices a supply column rumbled over the *pave*, each of the seventy-two motor-lorries keeping its distance like the ships of a fleet. Despatch-riders with blue and white armlets whizzed past on their motor-bicycles, and high overhead was the loud droning hum of the aeroplane going home to roost. The thunder of guns was clearly audible from the north-east. The D.A.A.G. turned to me and said, “It’s Hill 60 again. My old regiment’s up there. And to-morrow the casualty returns will come in. Good God! will it never end?”

XXVI

FIAT JUSTITIA

PARQUET

du

Tribunal de Iere Instance

d’Ypres

At last I had found it. I had spent a mournful morning at Ypres seeking out the *procureur du roi*, and I had sought in vain. He was nowhere to be found. Ypres was a city of catacombs, wrapt in a winding-sheet of mortar, fine as dust, which rose in clouds as the German shells winnowed among the ruins. The German guns had been threshing the ancient city like flails, beating her out of all recognition, beating her into shapes strange, uncouth, and lamentable. The Cloth Hall was little more than a deserted cloister of ruined arches, and the cathedral presented a spectacle at once tragic and whimsical—the brass lectern still stood upright in the nave confronting a congregation of overturned chairs as with a gesture of reproof. The sight of those scrambling chairs all huddled together and fallen headlong upon one another had something oddly human about it; it suggested a panic of ghosts. Ypres is an uncanny place.

We returned to Poperinghe, our way choked by a column of French troops, pale, hollow-eyed, their blue uniforms bleached by sun and rain until all the virtue of the dye had run out of them. Before resuming our hunt for the *procureur du roi*—who, we now found,

had removed from Ypres to Poperinghe—we entered a restaurant for lunch. It was crowded with French officers, with whom a full-bosomed, broad-hipped Flemish girl exchanged uncouth pleasantries, and it possessed a weird and uncomely boy, who regarded A——,



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the Staff officer accompanying me, with a hypnotic stare. He peered at him from under drooping eyelids, flanking a nose without a bridge, and my companion didn't like it. "He is admiring you," I remarked by way of consolation, as indeed he was. "What do you call it?" said A—— petulantly to a R.A.M.C. officer who was lunching with us. The latter looked at the boy with a clinical eye. "Necrosis—syphilitic," he said dispassionately. "And he's handing us the cakes!" A—— exclaimed with horror. "Fetch me an ounce of civet." We declined the cakes, and, having paid our *addition*, hastily departed to resume our quest of the *procureur*.

Eventually we found the legend set out above. It was a placard stuck on the door of a private house. We entered and found ourselves in a kitchen with a stone floor; japanned tin boxes, calf-bound volumes, and fat registers, all stamped with the arms of Belgium, were grouped on the shelves of the dresser. A courteous gentleman, well-groomed and debonair, with waxed moustaches, greeted us. It was the *procureur du roi*. With him was another civilian—the *juge d'instruction*. They politely requested us to take a seat and to excuse a judicial preoccupation. The *juge d'instruction* was interrogating an inhabitant of Poperinghe. The *procureur* explained to me that the *prevenu* (the accused), who was not present but was within the precincts, was charged with *calomnie*[27] under Section 444 of the *Code Penal*. "But," I exclaimed in astonishment, "are you still administering justice?" "Pourquoi non?" he asked in mild surprise. It was true, he admitted, that his office at Ypres had been destroyed by shell-fire, the *maison d'arret*—in plain English, the prison—was open to the four winds of heaven, and warders and gendarmes had been called up to the colours. But justice must be done and the majesty of the King of the Belgians upheld. The King's writ still ran, even though its currency might be limited to the few square miles which were all that remained of Belgian territory in Belgian hands. All this he explained to me with such gravity that I felt further questions would be futile, if not impertinent. I therefore held my tongue and determined to follow the proceedings closely, being not a little curious to observe how the judgment would be enforced.

The witness took the oath to say the truth and nothing but the truth ("rien que la verite"), concluding with the solemn invocation, "Ainsi m'aide Dieu." The parties had elected to have the proceedings taken in French.

"Your name?" said the judge, as he studied the proces-verbal prepared by the *procureur*.

"Jules F——."

"Age?"

"Cinquante-cinq."

“Profession?”

“Cordonnier.”

“Residence?”

“Rue d’Ypres 32.”



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This preliminary catechism being completed, the prosecutor unfolded his tale. He had been drinking the health of His Majesty the King of the Belgians and confusion to his enemies in an *estaminet* at the crowded hour of 7 P.M. The accused had entered, and in the presence of many of his neighbours had said to him, "Vous etes un Bosche." "Un Bosche!" repeated the witness indignantly. "It is a gross defamation." With difficulty had he been restrained from the shedding of blood. But, being a law-abiding, peaceful man and the father of a family, he volubly explained, he had laid this information ("denonciation") before the *procureur du roi*.

The judge looked grave. But he duly noted down the testimony, after some perfunctory cross-examination, and, it being read over to the witness, the judge added "Lecture faite," and the persisting witness signed the deposition with his own hand. The prosecutor having retired, two other witnesses, whom he had vouched to warranty, came forward and testified to the same effect. And they also signed their depositions and withdrew.

The magistrate ordered the usher to bring in the accused, who had been summoned to appear by a *mandat d'amener*. He was a stout, dark, convivial-looking soul, with a merry eye, not altogether convinced of the enormity of his delict, and inclined at first to deprecate these proceedings. But the dialectical skill of the magistrate soon tied him into knots, and reduced him to a state of extreme penitence.

"Where were you on the 3rd of April at 7 P.M.?" began the magistrate, making what gunners call a ranging shot. The accused appeared to have been everywhere in Poperinghe except at the *estaminet*. He had been to the butcher's, the baker's, and the candlestick-maker's.

"At what hour did you enter the Cafe a l'Harmonie?"

The accused tried to look as if he now heard of the Cafe "A l'Harmonie" for the first time, but under the searching eye of the magistrate he failed. He might, he conceded, have looked in there for a thirsty moment.

"Do you know Jules F——?" the magistrate persisted. The accused grudgingly admitted the existence of such a person. "Is he a German?" asked the magistrate pointedly. The accused pondered. "Would you call him a Bosche?" persisted the magistrate. "I never *meant* to call him 'a Bosche,'" the accused said in an unguarded moment. The magistrate pounced on him. He had found the range. After that the result was a foregone conclusion. The duel ended in the accused tearfully admitting he thought he must have been drunk, and throwing himself on the mercy of the magistrate.

"It is a grave offence," said the magistrate severely, as he contemplated the lachrymose delinquent. "An *estaminet* is a public place within the meaning of Section 444 of the Code Penal. Vous avez mechamment impute a une personne un fait precis qui est de



nature a porter atteinte a son honneur.” “And calculated to provoke a breach of the peace,” he added. “It is punishable with a term of imprisonment not exceeding one year.” The face of the accused grew long. “Or a fine of 200 francs,” he pursued. The lips of the accused quivered. “You may have to go to a *maison de correction*,” continued the magistrate pitilessly. The accused wept.



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I grew more and more interested. If this was a “correctional” offence, the magistrate must in the ordinary course of things commit the prisoner to a *chambre de conseil*, thereafter to take his trial before a Tribunal Correctionnel. But chamber and tribunal were scattered to the four corners of the earth.

Here, I felt sure, the whole proceedings must collapse and the magistrate be sadly compelled to admit his impotence. The magistrate, however, appeared in nowise perturbed, nor did he for a moment relax his authoritative expression. He was turning over the pages of the *Code d’Instruction Criminelle*, glancing occasionally at a now wholly penitent prisoner trembling before the majesty of the law. At last he spoke. “I will deal with you,” he said with an air of indulgence, “under Chapter VIII. of the Code. You will be bound over to come up for judgment at the end of the war if called upon. You will deposit a *cautionnement* of twenty francs. And now, gentlemen, we are at your service.”

“Fiat justitia ruat coelum,” whispered A—— to me, as the prisoner, deeply impressed, opened a leather purse and counted out four greasy five-franc notes.

FOOTNOTE:

[27] Defamation. It is a misdemeanour according to Belgian law.

XXVII

HIGHER EDUCATION

British Headquarters must, I think, be the biggest Military Academy in the world. It has its Sandhurst and its Woolwich and even its Camberley. It ought long ago to have been incorporated by Order in Council as a University with Sir John French as Chancellor. It has more schools in the Art of War than I can remember, and every School has an Instructor who deserves to rank as a full-time Professor. To graduate in one of those schools you must get a fortnight’s leave from your trenches or your battery, at the end of which time you return to do a little post-graduate work of a very practical kind with the aid of a machine-gun or a trench-mortar. At the beginning of the war higher education at G.H.Q. was somewhat neglected, and the company officer who desired to improve himself in the lethal arts had to be content with private study. Company officers went in for applied chemistry by making flares out of a test-tube full of water, delicately balanced in a bully-beef tin containing sodium. The tins were tied to the barbed-wire entanglements in front of our trenches, and when the stealthy Hun, creeping on his stomach, bumped against the wire the test-tube overflowed into the tin and a lurid patch of greenish flame revealed the clumsy visitor to our look-outs. That was before we were supplied with calcium flares. Then, too, the sappers went in for experimental research by making trench-mortars out of old stove-pipes.



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To-day all that is changed. A chemical corps has come out to join the sappers, and the gunners have received some highly finished trench-mortars from Vickers's. A trench mortar is a kind of toy howitzer and very useful when you want to try conclusions with a neighbouring trench at short range. The mortars are not exactly things to play with, and so two "schools" of mortars have been instituted to teach R.G.A. men how to handle them. Every morning at nine o'clock two young subalterns meet their class of fifty pupils in a chateau, and explain with the aid of a diagram on a blackboard the internal economy of the mortar and its 50-lb. bomb, the adjustment of angles of elevation to ranges, and the respective offices of fuse, charge, and detonator. When the class have had enough of this they go off to a neighbouring field to simulate trench warfare and hold a demonstration. This is real sport. They have dug a sector of trenches, duly traversed, and at some two or three hundred yards distance have dug another sector and decorated it realistically with barbed-wire entanglements. Thither one afternoon we conveyed the mortar to the first trenches on an improvised carriage, placed it behind one of the traverses, and duly clamped it down. The subaltern took up a periscope and got the thread-line on the target—you find the range without instruments and by your own intuitions. "Three hundred, I think," he remarked pensively. A pupil adjusted the range indicator at 71.30 to get the elevation, and his assistant took up what looked like a huge jar of preserved ginger. It was the bomb. Having put the tail to it he inserted the detonator. "Fuse at 27." He set the indicator with as much care as if he were setting the hands of his watch. The man took the fuse delicately, put in the test-tube and attached the lanyard. These operations had been closely followed by the class, who made a circle round the bomb like a football "scrum." It was now time to line the trenches, for the "tail" of the bomb is apt to kick viciously when the thing is fired. As they spread out, the man removed the two safety-pins in the top of the fuse and pulled the lanyard. There was a voice of thunder and a sheet of flame, followed by what seemed an interminable pause. We scanned the brown furrows in front of us and suddenly the earth shot skywards in a fan; a cloud of dirty-black smoke floated over our target. The whole class leapt the parapet and streamed away across the furrows like a pack of hounds in full cry, until they suddenly disappeared below the surface of the earth. We followed and found them standing in a huge crater whose sides were hollowed out as neatly as those of a cup. "Done it again," said the subaltern complacently, "we've never had a blind."



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At the Machine-gun School they do things on a larger scale, and Wren's could teach them nothing in the art of cramming. The Instructor reckons to put his class of 200 officers and men through a six months' course in a fortnight. There is need for it. The Germans started this war with eleven machine-guns (it is now anything from twenty to forty) to a battalion. We started with two. For years they have enlisted, trained, and paid a special class of men to man them. Consequently we had a great deal of leeway to make up. We are making it up, hand over fist, thanks to the Instructor, one of the most brilliant and devoted officers I know, and a man who spends his nights in inventing or perfecting improvements. He has got a pocket edition of a machine-gun made of tempered steel and weighing only 27 lb., as against our old one, which is of gun-metal and weighs 58 lb.—a material difference when it is a question of an advance. The new one, he explains somewhat illogically, with paternal pride, can be carried into action "like a baby." Having decided to give it a trial we carried it tenderly to a quarry and proceeded to "feed" it with a belt of cartridges. The Instructor set up a small stick against the bank of a gravel quarry and returned and adjusted the tangent-sight at 100 on the standard. He got the fore-sight and back-sight in a line on the stick, seized the traversing-handles, released the safety-catch, and pressed the button with his right thumb with the persistency of a man who cannot make the waiter answer the electric bell. "Tap—tap—tap." There was a series of explosions as though the sparking plug of a motor-bicycle was playing tricks. The target danced like a thing possessed. It hopped and skipped and curtsied under that deadly stream of bullets. Then he slowly swept that gravel bank with the traversing handles till the pebbles jumped like hailstones. "I think she'll do," he remarked appreciatively as he folded up the tripod.

The R.E. is the Army's school of technology. To do a survey or make a bridge or lay a telephone is all in the day's work. But your sapper is a man of ideas, and is for ever seeking out new inventions. So he has turned his attention to chemistry, and "R.E." has a chemical corps which has put aside the blow-pipe and the test-tube at home to come out and study the applied chemistry of war. Just now they are engaged in discovering the most effective method of laying noxious gases. Copper vessels of ammonia in a trench to disperse the gas when it gets there are all very well, but by that time you may have more pressing attentions of the enemy to engage you; the thing is to prevent the gas getting there. Hence ingenious minds are considering how to project with a spray something upon the advancing fog which will bring it to earth in the form of an innocuous compound. Spray that something over the parapet, and if you can spray it far enough and wide enough you may precipitate the deadly green and brown mists into chlorides or bromides which will be as harmless as bleaching-powder and not less salubrious.



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Others have turned their attention to automatic flares. You can get a startling illuminant if you suspend a test-tube containing sulphuric acid in a vessel of chlorate of potash, and it will be all the better if you add a little common sugar and salt. You balance your test-tube in the hollow of a bamboo stick and fill the top knot of the stick with the chlorate of potash; then you plant your sticks, not too securely, outside your barbed-wire entanglements, and string them together with a trip-wire. As for the patrolling Hun who bumps against that trip-wire, it were better for him that a millstone were hung round his neck.

This is Higher Education and post-graduate research. But elementary education is not neglected. At the H.Q. of the —th Corps is an O.T.C. where privates in the H.A.C. and the Artists practise the precepts of the *Infantry Manual* and study night operations in the meadows within sound of the guns.

Truly it is, in the words of the stout Puritan, a nation not slow and dull but of a quick, ingenious and piercing spirit, acute to invent, subtle and sinewy, not beneath the reach of any point the highest that human capacity can soar to.

XXVIII

THE LITTLE TOWNS OF FLANDERS AND ARTOIS

The little towns of Flanders and Artois are Aire, Hazebrouck, Bethune, Armentieres, Bailleul, Poperinghe, and Cassel. They are known in the Army vernacular as Air, Hazybrook, Batoon, Arm-in-tears, Ballyhool (occasionally Belial), Poperingy, and Kassel. The fairest of these is Cassel. For Cassel is set upon a hill which rises from the interminable plain, salient and alluring as a tor in Somerset, and seems to say to the fretful wayfarer, "Come unto Me all ye that are weary, and I will give you rest." For upon the hill of Cassel the air is sweet and fresh, the slopes are musical with a faint lullaby of falling showers, as the wind plays among the birches and the poplars, and over all there is a great peace. The motor-lorries avoid the declivities of Cassel, and the horsemen pass by on the other side. Some twenty windmills—no less and perhaps more—are perched like dovecots on the hill, lifting their sails to the blue sky. Some day I will seek out a notary at Cassel and will get him to execute a deed of conveyance assigning to me, with no restrictive covenants, the freehold of one of those mills, for I have coveted a mill ever since I succumbed to the enchantments of *Lettres de mon moulin*. True, Flanders is not Provence, and the croaking of the frogs, croak they never so amorously, among the willows in the plains below is a poor exchange for the chant of the *cigale*. But these mills look out over a landscape that is now dearer to me than Abana and Pharpar, for many a gallant friend of mine lies beneath its sod.



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Cassel is approached by a winding road that turns and returns upon itself like a corkscrew, and is bordered by an avenue of trees. It has a bandstand—what town in Flanders and Artois has not?—and a church. Cheek by jowl with the church is a place of convenience, which seems to me profane in more senses than one. I have never been able to make up my mind whether such secularisation of a church wall is the expression of anti-clerical antipathies, or of a clerical common-sense peculiarly French in its practical and unblushing acceptance of the elementary facts of life. But about Cassel I am not so sure. The sight of that shameless annexe is too familiar in France to please our fastidious English tastes—it seems to express a truculent nonconformity, it is too like a dissenting chapel-of-ease.

Wherever God erects a house of prayer
The devil always builds a chapel there.

I have never had the courage to solve my uncertainties by buttonholing a Frenchman and asking him what is the truth of the matter. I am sure Anatole France could supply me with any number of whimsical explanations, all of them suggestive, and not one of them true.

But, except for this sauciness, Cassel is a demure and pleasant place.

Bailleul is mean in comparison, though it has a notable church tower in which there are traces of some Byzantine imagination brought hither, perhaps, by a Spanish Army of occupation. Also it has a tea-room which is the trysting-place of all the officers in billets, and the *chatelaine* of which answers your lame and halting French in nimble English. On the road to Locre it has those Baths and Wash-houses which have become so justly famous, and whence hosts of British soldiers come forth like Naaman white as snow, but infinitely more companionable. Almost any day you may see a bathing-towel unit marching thither or thence in column of route, their towels held at the slope or the trail as it pleases their fancy. And in a field outside Bailleul I have seen open-air smithies and the glow of hot coals, the air resounding with the clink of hammers upon the anvil—a cheering spectacle on a wet and inclement winter's day. But Bailleul has few amenities and no charms. It is, however, occasionally visited by that amazing troupe of variety artistes, known as the Army Pierrots, who provide the men in billets with a most delectable entertainment for 50 centimes, the proceeds being a "deodand," and appropriated to charitable uses. For all that, Bailleul stinks in the nostrils of fatigue-parties.

Bethune is like the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land, for it is the rendezvous of the British Army, and men tramp miles to warm their hands at its fires of social life. Its *patisserie* has the choicest cakes, and its hairdresser's the most soothing unguents of any town in our occupation. It has a great market-place, where the peasants do a thriving business every Saturday, producing astonished



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rabbits by the ears from large sacks, like a conjuror, and holding out live and plaintive fowls for sensual examination by pensive housewives. Also it has a town-hall in which I once witnessed the trial by court-martial of a second-lieutenant in the R.A.M.C. for ribaldry in his cups and conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman—a spectacle as melancholy as it is rare, and of which the less said the better. It has a church with some lurid glass of indifferent quality, and (if I remember rightly) a curious dovecote of a tower. The transepts are hemmed in by shops and warehouses. To the mediaevalist there is nothing strange in such neighbourliness of the world and the Church. The great French churches of the Middle Ages—witness Notre Dame d’Amiens with its inviting ambulatory—were places of municipal debate, and their sculpture was, to borrow the bold metaphor of Viollet-le-Duc, a political “liberty of speech” at a time when the chisel of the sculptor might say what the pen of the scrivener dared not, for fear of the common hangman, express. Bethune is not the only place where I have seen shops coddling churches, and the conjunction was originally less impertinent than it now seems. It was not that the Church was profaned, but that the world was consecrated; honest burgesses trading under the very shadow of the flying buttresses were reminded that usury was a sin, and that to charge a “just price” was the beginning of justification by works. But I have not observed that the shopkeepers of Bethune now entertain any very mediaeval compunction about charging the British soldier an unjust price.

Armentieres is on the high road to Lille, but at present there is no thoroughfare. It’s a dispiriting town, given over to industrial pursuits, and approached by rows of mean little cottages such as you may see on the slopes of the mining valleys of South Wales. Two things stand out in my memory—one, the spectacle of a corporal being tried for his life in the Town Hall by a court-martial—there had been a quarrel over a girl in billets and he had shot his comrade; the other the sight of a regiment of Canadians (“Princess Pat’s,” I believe), drawn up in the square for parade one winter afternoon before they went into the trenches for the first time. And a very gallant and hefty body of men they were.

Poperinghe is a dismal place, and to be avoided.

Hazebrouck is not without some pretentiousness. It has the largest *place* of any of them, with a town-hall of imposing appearance, but something of a whited sepulchre for all that. I remember calling on a civilian dignitary there—I forget what he was; he sat in a long narrow corridor-like room, all the windows were hermetically sealed, a gas-stove burnt pungently, some fifty people smoked cigarettes, and at intervals the dignitary spat upon the floor and then shuffled his foot over the spot as a concession to public hygiene. Therefore I did not tarry. The precincts of the railway-station



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are often crowded by batches of German prisoners, villainous-looking rascals, and usually of the earth earthy. I watched some of them entraining one day; with them was a surly German officer who looked at his fellow-prisoners with contempt, the crowd of inhabitants with dislike, and (so it seemed to me) his guards with hatred. No one spoke to him, and he stood apart in melancholy insolence. Perhaps he was the German officer of whom the story is told that, being conducted to the Base in a third-class carriage in the company of some of his own men, and under the escort of some British soldiers, he declaimed all the way down against being condemned to such low society, until one of his guards, getting rather "fed up" with it all, bluntly cut him short with the admonition: "Stow it, governor, we'd have hired a blooming Pullman if we'd known we was going to have the pleasure of your society. Yus, and we'd have had Sir John French 'ere to meet you. But yer'll have to put up with us low fellows for a bit instead, which if yer don't like it, yer can lump it, and if yer won't lump it, where will yer have it?" and he tapped his bayonet invitingly. Needless to say, the speaker's pleasantry was impracticable. But the officer did not know that; he only knew the way they have in Germany. Wherefore the officer relapsed into a thoughtful silence.

Hazebrouck has a witty and pleasant *procureur de la Republique*, who once confided to me that the English were "irresistible." "In war?" I asked. "*Vraiment*," he replied, "but I meant in love."

But the towns occupied by our Army are monotonously lacking in distinction. To tell the truth they wear an impoverished look, and are singularly unprepossessing. I prefer the villages, the small chateaux built on grassy mounds surrounded by moats, and the timbered farm-houses with their red-tiled roofs and barns big enough to billet a whole company at a pinch. The country is one vast bivouac, and every cottage, farm, and mansion is a billet. Near the edge of the Front you may see men who have just come out of action; I remember once meeting a group of Royal Irish, only forty-seven left out of a Company, who had been in the attack by the 8th Division at Fleurbaix, and I gazed at them with something of the respectful consternation with which the Babylonians must have regarded Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego after their ordeal in the fiery furnace. Yet nothing of their demeanour betrayed the brazen fury they had gone through; they sat by the hedge cleaning their accoutrements with the utmost nonchalance. They reminded me of the North Staffords, one of whose officers, whom I know very well, when I asked him what were his impressions of a battle, replied, after some reflection: "I haven't got any; all I can remember of a hot corner we were in near Oultersteen was that my men, while waiting to advance, were picking blackberries." It was a man of the North Staffords who, according to the same unimpeachable authority, was heard shouting out when half the trench was blown in by a shell, and he had extricated himself with difficulty: "'Ere, where's my pipe? Some one's pinched my pipe!"



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But it isn't always quite as comforting as that. The servant of a friend of mine, a young subaltern in the Black Watch, whom, alas! like so many other friends, I shall never see again, in describing the church parade held after the battle of Loos, in which his master was killed by a shell, wrote that when the chaplain gave out the hymn "Rock of Ages" the men burst into tears, their voices failed them, and they broke down utterly. And I remember that on one occasion when some four-fifths of the officers of a certain battalion had gone down in the advance, and the shaken remnant fell back upon their trenches, deafened and distraught, one of the officers—he had been a master in a great public school before the war—took out of his pocket a copy of the *Faerie Queene*, and began in a slow, even voice to read the measured cadences of one of its cantos, and, having read, handed it to a subaltern and asked him to follow suit. The others listened, half in wonder, half in fear, thinking he had lost his senses, but there was method in his madness and a true inspiration. The musical rhythm of the words distracted their terrible memories, and soon acted like a charm upon their disordered nerves.

And on his breast a bloody cross he bore,
The dear remembrance of his dying Lord,
For whose sweet sake that glorious badge he wore,
And dead (as living) ever him adored:
Upon his shield the like was also scored,
For sovereign hope, which in his help he had:
Right faithful true he was in deed and word;
But of his cheer did seem too solemn sad:
Yet nothing did he dread, but ever was ydrad.

Clusters of men in billets; men doing a route-march to keep them fit; Indian cavalry jogging along on the footpath with lances in rest; herds of tethered horses in rest-camps; a string of motor-buses painted a khaki-tint; a "mobile" (a travelling workshop) with its dynamo humming like a top and the mechanics busy upon the lathe; an Army Postal van coming along, like a friend in need, to tow my car, stranded in the mud, with a long cable; sappers, like Zaccheus, up a tree (but not metaphorically); despatch-riders whizzing past at sixty miles an hour—these are familiar sights of the lines of communication, and they lend a variety to the monotonous countryside without which it would be dull indeed. For it is a countryside of interminable straight lines—straight roads, straight hop-poles, and poplars not less straight, reminding one in winter of one of Hobbema's landscapes without their colouring. But to the south of the zone of our occupation, as you leave G.H.Q. for the Base, you exchange these plains of sticky clay and stagnant dykes for a pleasant country of undulating downs and noble beech woods, and one seems to shake off a nightmare of damp despondency.

It may be remarked that I have said nothing of Ypres. The explanation is painfully simple. Ypres has ceased to exist. It is merely a heap of stones, and the trilithons on Salisbury Plain are not more desolate.



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XXIX

THE FRONT ONCE MORE

A witty subaltern once described the present war as a period of long boredom punctuated by moments of intense fear. All men would emphasise the boredom, and most men would admit the fear. The only soldiers I ever met who affected to know nothing of the fear were Afridis, and the Afridi is notoriously a ravisher of truth. But the predominant feeling—in the winter months at any rate—was the boredom. There was a time when some units, owing to the lack of reserves, were only relieved once every three weeks, and time hung heavy on their hands. Under these circumstances they began to take something more than a professional interest in their neighbours opposite. The curiosity was reciprocated. Items of news, more or less mendacious, were exchanged when the trenches were near enough to permit of vocal intercourse. Curious conventions grew up, and at certain hours of the day and, less commonly, of the night, there was a kind of informal armistice. In one section the hour of 8 to 9 A.M. was regarded as consecrated to “private business,” and certain places indicated by a flag were regarded as out of bounds by the snipers on both sides. On many occasions working parties toiled with pick and shovel within talking distance of one another, and, although it was, of course, never safe to presume upon immunity, they usually forbore to interfere with one another. The Bedfords and the South Staffords worked in broad daylight with their bodies half exposed above the trenches, raising the parapet as the water rose. About 200 yards away the Germans were doing the same. Neither side interfered with the navy-work of the other, and for the simplest of all reasons: both were engaged in fighting a common foe—the underground springs. When two parties are both in danger of being drowned they haven’t time to fight. To speak of drowning is no hyperbole; the mud of Flanders in winter is in some places like a quicksand, and men have been sucked under beyond redemption. A common misery begat a mutual forbearance.

It was under such circumstances that the following exchange of pleasantries took place. The men of a certain British regiment heard at intervals a monologue going on in the trenches opposite, and every time the speaker stopped his discourse shouts of guttural laughter arose, accompanied by cries of “Bravo, Mueller!” “Sehr komisch!” “Noch einmal, Mueller!” Our men listened intently, and an acquaintance with German, so imperfect as to be almost negligible, could not long disguise from them the fact that their Saxon neighbours possessed a funny man whose name was Mueller. Their interest in Mueller, always audible but never visible, grew almost painful. At last they could restrain it no longer. At a given signal they began chanting, like the gallery in a London theatre, except that their voices came from the pit:

We—want—Mueller! We—want—Mueller! We—want—Mueller!

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The refrain grew more and more insistent. At last a head appeared above the German parapet. It rose gradually, as though the owner were being hoisted by unseen hands. He rose, as the principal character in a Punch and Judy show rises, with jerky articulations of his members from the ventriloquial depths below. The body followed, until a three-quarter posture was attained. The owner, with his hand upon his heart, bowed gracefully three times and then disappeared. It was Mueller!

It is some months since I was in the British trenches,[28] and I often wonder how our men have accommodated themselves to the ever-increasing multiplication of the apparatus of war. The fire trenches I visited were about wide enough to allow two men to pass one another—and that was all. Obviously the wider your trench the greater your exposure to the effects of shell-fire, and if we go on introducing trench-mortars, and gas-pumps, and gas-extinguishers, to say nothing of a great store of bombs, as pleasing in variety and as startling in their effects as Christmas crackers, our trenches will soon be as full of furniture as a Welsh miner's parlour. But doubtless the sappers have arranged all that. Some of these improvements are viewed by company officers without enthusiasm. The trench-mortar, for example, is distinctly unpopular, for it draws the enemy's fire, besides being an uncanny thing to handle, although the handling is done not by the company but by a "battery" of R.G.A. men, who come down and select a "pitch." I have seen a trench-mortar in action—it is like a baby howitzer, and makes a prodigious noise. Our own men deprecate it and the enemy resent it. It is an invidious thing. The gas-extinguisher is less objectionable, and, incidentally, less exacting in the matter of accommodation. It is a large copper vessel resembling nothing so much as the fire-extinguishing cylinders one sees in public buildings at home. About our gas-pumps I know nothing except by hearsay. They are in charge of "corporals" in the chemical corps of the sappers, and your corporal is, in nine cases out of ten, a man whose position in the scientific world at home is one of considerable distinction. He is usually a lecturer or Assistant-Professor in Chemistry at one of our University Colleges who has left his test-tubes and quantitative analysis for the more exciting allurements of the trenches. I sometimes wonder what name the fertile brain of the British soldier has found for him—probably "the squid." He has three gases in his repertoire, each more deadly than the other. One of them is comparatively innocuous—it disables without debilitating; and its effect passes off in about twenty minutes. The truth is that we do not take very kindly to the use of this kind of thing. Still, our men know their business, and our gas, whichever variety it was, played a very effective part in the capture of the Hohenzollern Redoubt.

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For the greater part of the winter months the “Front” was, to all appearances above ground, as deserted as the Sahara and almost as silent. Everybody who had to be there was, for obvious reasons, invisible, and the misguided wayfarer who found himself between the lines was in a wilderness whose intimidating silence was occasionally interrupted by the sound of projectiles coming he knew not whence and going he knew not whither. The effect was inexpressibly depressing. But a mile or two behind our lines all was animation, for here were Battalion and Brigade Headquarters, all linked up by a network of field telephones, which in turn communicated with Divisional Headquarters farther back. Baskets of carrier-pigeons under the care of a pigeon fancier, who figures in the Army List as a captain in the R.E., are kept at these places for use in sudden emergency when the wires get destroyed by shell-fire. The sappers must, I think, belong to the order of Arachnidae; they appear to be able to spin telephone wires out of their entrails at the shortest notice. Moreover, they possess an uncanny adhesiveness, and a Signal Company man will leg up a tree with a coil of wire on his arm and hang glutinously, suspended by his finger-tips, while he enjoys the view. These acrobatic performances are sometimes exchanged for equestrian feats. He has been known to lay cable for two miles across country at a gallop with the cable-drum paying out lengths of wire. The sapper is the “handy man” of the Army.

The location of these Headquarters on our side of the line is a constant object of solicitude to the enemy on the other. Very few officers even on our side know where they all are. I had confided to me, for the purpose of my official duties, a complete list of such Headquarters, and the first thing I did, in pursuance of my instructions, was to commit it to memory and then burn it. To find out the enemy’s H.Q.—with a view to making them as unhealthy as possible—is almost entirely the work of aeroplane reconnaissance. To discover the number and composition of the units whose H.Q. they are is the work of our “Intelligence.” Of our Intelligence work the less said the better—by which I intend no aspersion but quite the contrary. The work is extraordinarily effective, but half its effectiveness lies in its secrecy. It is all done by an elaborate process of induction. I should hesitate to say that the “I” officers discover the location of the H.Q. of captured Germans by a geological analysis of the mud on the soles of their boots, in the classical manner of Sherlock Holmes; but I should be equally indisposed to deny it. There is nothing too trivial or insignificant to engage the detective faculties of an “I” man. He has to allow a wide margin for the probability of error in his calculations; shoulder-straps, for example, are no longer conclusive data as to the composition of the enemy’s units, for the intelligent Hun has taken of late to forging shoulder-straps with



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the same facility as he forges diplomatic documents. Oral examination of prisoners has to be used with caution. But there are other resources of which I shall say nothing. It is not too much to say, however, that we have now a pretty complete comprehension of the strength, composition, and location of most German brigades on the Western front. Possibly the Germans have of ours. One thing is certain. Any one who has seen the way in which an Intelligence staff builds up its data will not be inclined to criticise our military authorities for what may seem to an untutored mind a mere affectation of mystery about small things. In war it is never safe to say *De minimis non curatur*.

If "I" stands for the Criminal Investigation Department (and the study of the Hun may be legitimately regarded as a department of criminology) the Provost-Marshal and his staff may be described as a kind of Metropolitan Police. The P.M. and his A.P.M.'s are the *Censores Morum* of the occupied towns, just as the Camp Commandants are the *Aediles*. It is the duty of an A.P.M. to round up stragglers, visit *estaminets*, keep a cold eye on brothels, look after prisoners, execute the sentences of courts-martial, and control street traffic. Which means that he is more feared than loved. He is never obtrusive but he is always there. I remarked once when lunching with a certain A.P.M. that although I had already been three weeks at G.H.Q., and had driven through his particular district daily, I had never once been stopped or questioned by his police. "No," he said quietly, "they reported you the first day two minutes after you arrived in your car, and asked for instructions; we telephoned to G.H.Q. and found you were attached to the A.G.'s staff, and they received orders accordingly. Otherwise you might have had quite a lively time at X——," which was the next stage of my journey. G.H.Q. itself is patrolled by a number of Scotland Yard men, remarkable for their self-effacing habits and their modest preference for dark doorways. Indeed it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than to get into that town—or out of it. As for the "Society ladies," of whom one hears so much, I never saw one of them. If they were there they must have been remarkably disguised, and none of us knew anything of them. A conversational lesson in French or English may be had gratuitously by any Englishman or Frenchman who tries to get into G.H.Q.; as he approaches the town he will find a French sentry on the left and an English sentry on the right, the one with a bayonet like a needle, the other with a bayonet like a table-knife, and each of them takes an immense personal interest in you and is most anxious to assist you in perfecting your idiom. They are students of phonetics, too, in their way, and study your gutturals with almost pedantic affection for traces of Teutonisms. If the sentry thinks you are not getting on with your education he takes you aside like Joab, and smites you under the fifth rib—at least I suppose he does. If he is satisfied he brings his right hand smartly across the butt of his rifle, and by that masonic sign you know that you will do. But it is a mistake to continue the conversation.



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Still, holders of authorised passes sometimes lose them, and unauthorised persons sometimes get hold of them and “convert” them to their own unlawful uses. The career of these adventurers is usually as brief as it is inglorious; when apprehended they are handed over to the French authorities, and the place that knew them knows them no more. They are shot into some mysterious *oubliette*. The rest is silence, or, as a mediaeval chronicler would say, “Let him have a priest.”

We have taught the inhabitants of Flanders and Artois three things: one, to sing “Tipperary”; two, to control their street traffic; and three, to flush their drains. The spectacle of the military police on point duty agitatedly waving little flags like a semaphore in the middle of narrow and congested street corners was at first a source of great entertainment to the inhabitants, who appeared to think it was a kind of performance thoughtfully provided by the Staff for their delectation. Their applause was quite disconcerting. It all so affected the mind of one good lady at H—— that she used to rush out into the street every time she saw a motor-lorry coming and make uncouth gestures with her arms and legs, to the no small embarrassment of the supply columns, the confusion of the military police, and the unconcealed delight of our soldiers, who regard the latter as their natural enemy. Gentle remonstrances against such gratuitous assistance were of no avail, and eventually she was handed over to the French authorities for an inquiry into the state of her mind.

Drains are looked after by the Camp Commandant, assisted by the sanitary section of the R.A.M.C. It is an unlovely duty. I am not sure that the men in the trenches are not better off in this respect than the unfortunate members of the Staff who are supposed to live on the fat of the land in billets. In the trenches there are easy methods of disposing of “waste products”; along some portion of the French front, where the lines are very close together, the favourite method, so I have been told, is to hurl the buckets at the enemy, accompanied by extremely uncomplimentary remarks. In the towns where we are billeted public hygiene is a neglected study, and the unfortunate Camp Commandants have to get sewage pumps from England and vast quantities of chloride of lime. Fatigue parties do the rest.

The C.C. has, however, many other things to do.

Finding my office unprovided with a fire shovel, I wrote a “chit” to the C.C.:

Mr. M. presents his compliments to the Camp Commandant, and would be greatly obliged if he would kindly direct that a shovel be issued to his office.

A laconic message came back by my servant:



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No. 105671A. The Camp Commandant presents his compliments to ----- Mr. M., and begs to inform him that he is not an
2 ironmonger. The correct procedure is for Mr. M. to direct his servant to purchase a shovel and to send in the account to the C.C., by whom it will be discharged.

The Commandant, quite needlessly, apologised to me afterwards for his reply, explaining mournfully that the whole staff appeared to be under the impression that he was a kind of Harrods' Stores. He could supply desks and tables—the sappers are amazingly efficient at turning them out at the shortest notice—and he could produce stationery, but he drew the line at ironmongery. But his principal task is to let lodgings.

The Q.M.G. and his satellites, who are the universal providers of the Army, have already been described. Their waggons are known as “transports of delight,” and they can supply you with anything from a field-dressing to a toothbrush, and from an overcoat to a cake of soap. And as the Q.M.G. is concerned with goods, the A.G. is preoccupied with men. He makes up drafts as a railway transport officer makes up trains, and can tell you the location of every unit from a brigade to a battalion. Also, he and his deputy assistants make up casualty lists. It is expeditiously done; each night's casualty list contains the names of all casualties among officers up till noon of the day on which it is made out. (The lists of the men, which are, of course, a much bigger affair, are made up at the Base.) The task is no light one—the transposition of an initial or the attribution of a casualty to a wrong battalion may mean gratuitous sorrow and anxiety in some distant home in England. And there is the mournful problem of the “missing,” the agonised letters from those who do not know whether those they love are alive or dead.

It is only right to say that everything that can possibly be done is done to trace such cases. More than that, the graves of fallen officers and men are carefully located and registered by a Graves Registry Department, with an officer of field rank in charge of it. Those graves lie everywhere; I have seen them in the flower-bed of a chateau used as the H.Q. of an A.D.M.S.; they are to be found by the roadside, in the curtilage of farms, and on the outskirts of villages. The whole of the Front is one vast cemetery—a “God's Acre” hallowed by prayers if unconsecrated by the rites of the Church. The French Government has shown a noble solicitude for the feelings of the bereaved, and a Bill has been submitted to the Chamber of Deputies for the expropriation of every grave with a view to its preservation.



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The Deputy Judge-Advocate-General and his representatives with the Armies are legal advisers to the Staff in the proceedings of courts-martial. The Judge-Advocate attends every trial and coaches the Court in everything, from the etiquette of taking off your cap when you are taking the oath to the duty of rejecting “hearsay.” He never prosecutes—that is always the task of some officer specially assigned for the purpose—but he may “sum up.” Officers are not usually familiar with the mysteries of the Red Book,[29] however much they may know of the King’s Regulations; and a Court requires careful watching. One Judge-Advocate whom I knew, who was as zealous as he was conscientious, instituted a series of Extension lectures for officers on the subject of Military Law, and used to discourse calmly on the admissibility and inadmissibility of evidence in the most “unhealthy” places. Speaking with some knowledge of such matters, I should say that court-martial proceedings are studiously fair to the accused, and, all things considered, their sentences do not err on the side of severity. Even the enemy is given the benefit of the doubt. There was a curious instance of this. A wounded Highlander, finding himself, on arrival at one of the hospitals, cheek by jowl with a Prussian, leapt from his bed and “went for” the latter, declaring his intention to “do him in,” as he had, he alleged, seen him killing a wounded British soldier in the field. There was a huge commotion, the two were separated, and the Judge-Advocate was fetched to take the soldier’s evidence. The evidence of identification was, however, not absolutely conclusive—one Prussian guardsman is strangely like another. The Prussian therefore got the benefit of the doubt.

The prisoner gets all the assistance he may require from a “prisoner’s friend” if he asks for one, and the prosecutor never presses a charge—he merely unfolds it. Moreover, officers are pretty good judges of character, and if the accused meets the charge fairly and squarely, justice will be tempered with mercy. I remember the case of a young subaltern at the Base who was charged with drunkenness. His defence was as straightforward as it was brief:

I had just been ordered up to the Front. So I stood my friends a dinner; I had a bottle of Burgundy, two liqueurs, and a brandy and soda, and—I am just nineteen.

This ingenuous plea in confession and avoidance pleased the Court. He got off with a reprimand.

The *liaison* officers deserve a chapter to themselves. Their name alone is so endearing. Their mission is not, as might be supposed, to promote *mariages de convenance* between English Staff officers and French ladies, but to transmit billets-doux between the two Armies and, generally, to promote the amenities of military intercourse. As a rule they are charming fellows, chosen with a very proper eye to their personal qualities as well as their proficiency in the English



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language. Among them I met a Count belonging to one of the oldest families in France, an Oriental scholar of European reputation, and a Professor of English literature. The younger ones studied our peculiarities with the most ingratiating zeal, and one of them, in particular, played and sang “Tipperary” with masterly technique at an uproarious tea-party in a *patisserie* at Bethune. Also they smoothed over little misunderstandings about *delits de chasse*, gently forbore to smile at our French, and assisted in the issue of the *laisser-passer*. Doubtless they performed many much more weighty and mysterious duties, but I only speak of what I know. To me they were more than kind; they gave me introductions to their families when I went on official visits to Paris and to the French lines; zealously assisted me to hunt down evidence, and sometimes accompanied me on my tour of investigation. Among the many agreeable memories I cherish of the *camaraderie* at G.H.Q. the recollection of their constant kindness and courtesy is not the least.

One word before I leave the subject of the Staff. There has been of late a good deal of pestilential gossip by luxurious gentlemen at home about the Staff and its work. It is, they say, very bad—mostly beer and skittles. I have already referred to these charges elsewhere; here I will only add one word. A Staff is known by its chief. He it is who sets the pace. During the time I was attached to it, the G.H.Q. Staff had two chiefs in succession. The first was a brilliant soldier of high intellectual gifts, now chief of the Imperial Staff at home, who, although embarrassed by indifferent health, worked at great pressure night and day. His successor at G.H.Q. is a man of stupendous energy, commanding ability, and great force of character, who has risen from the ranks to the great position he now holds. By their chiefs ye shall know them. Under such as these there was and is no room for the “slacker” at G.H.Q. He got short shrift. There were very few of that undesirable species at G.H.Q., and as soon as they were discovered they were sent home. I sometimes wonder whether one could not trace, if it were worth while (which it isn’t), these ignoble slanders to their origin in the querulous lamentations of these deported gentlemen, whence they have percolated into Parliamentary channels. But it really isn’t worth while. The public has, I believe, taken the thing at its true valuation. In plain speech it is “all rot.”

NOTE.—The last paragraph was written before the recent changes at G.H.Q. and at the War Office, but the reader will not need any assistance in the identification of the two distinguished Chiefs of Staff here referred to.—J.H.M.

FOOTNOTES:

[28] The writer’s experience of the trenches is described in some detail in Chapter VIII.

[29] *The Manual of Military Law*.



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XXX

HOME AGAIN

Sykes had finished packing my kit and had succeeded with some difficulty in re-establishing the truth of the axiom that a whole is greater than its parts. When I contemplated my valise and its original constituents, it seemed to me that the parts would prove greater than the whole, and I had in despair abandoned the problem to Sykes. He succeeded, as he always did. One of the first things that an officer's servant learns is that, as regards the regulation Field Service allowance of luggage, nothing succeeds like excess.

Sykes had not only stowed away my original impedimenta but had also managed to find room for various articles of *vertu* which had enriched my private collection, to wit:

(1) One Bavarian bayonet of Solingen steel.

(2) Two German time-fuses with fetishistic-looking brass heads.

(3) A clip of German cartridges with the bullets villainously reversed.

(4) A copper loving-cup—*i.e.*, an empty shell-case presented to me with a florid speech by Major S—— on behalf of the ——th Battery of the R.F.A.

(5) An autograph copy of *The Green Curve* bestowed on me by my friend "Ole Luk-Oie" (to whom long life and princely royalties).

(6) The sodden Field Note-book of a dead Hun given me by Major C—— of the Intelligence, with a graceful note expressing the hope that, as a man of letters, I would accept this gift of *belles-lettres*. (7) A duplicate of a certain priceless "chit" about the uses of Ammonal[30] (original very scarce, and believed to be in the muniment-room of the C.-in-C., who is said to contemplate putting it up to auction at Sotheby's for the benefit of the Red Cross Fund). (8) An autograph copy of a learned Essay on English political philosophers presented to me by the author, one of the *liaison* officers, who in the prehistoric times of peace was a University professor at Avignon.

(9) A cigarette-case (Army pattern), of the finest Britannia metal, bestowed on me with much ceremony by a Field Ambulance at Bethune, and prized beyond rubies and fine gold.

(10) A pair of socks knitted by Jeanne.[31]



To these Madame[32] had added her visiting-card—it was nearly as big as the illuminated address presented to me by the electors of a Scottish constituency which I once wooed and never won—wherewith she reminded me that my billet at No. 131 rue Robert le Frisson would always be waiting for me, the night-light burning as for a prodigal son, and steam up in the hot-water bottle.

I had said my farewells the night before to the senior officers on the Staff, in particular that distinguished soldier and gallant gentleman the A.G., to whose staff I had been attached (in more senses than one), and who had treated me with a kindness and hospitality I can never forget. The senior officers had done me the honour of expressing a hope that I should soon return; their juniors had expressed the same sentiments less formally and more vociferously by an uproarious song at their mess overnight.



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The latter had also, with an appearance of great seriousness, laden me with messages for His Majesty the King, the Prime Minister, Lord Kitchener, the two Houses of Parliament, and the ministers and clergy of all denominations: all of which I promised faithfully to remember and to deliver in person. Sykes, with more modesty, had asked me if I would send a photograph, when the film was developed of the snapshot I had taken of him, to his wife and the twins at Norwich.

My car, upon whose carburettor an operation for appendicitis had been successfully performed by the handy men up at the H.Q. of the Troop Supply Column, stood at the door. I held out my hand to Sykes, who was in the act of saluting; he took it with some hesitation, and then gave me a grip that paralysed it for about a quarter of an hour.

"If you be coming back again, will you ask for me to be de-tailed to you, sir? My number is ——. Sergeant Pope at the Infantry Barracks sees to them things, sir."

I nodded.

"Bon voyage, monsieur," cried Madame in a shrill voice.

"Bon voyage," echoed Jeanne.

I waved my hand, and the next moment I had seen the last of two noble women who had never looked upon me except with kindness, and who, from my rising up till my lying down, had ministered to me with unflinching solicitude.

* * * * *

At the Base I boarded the leave-boat. Several officers were already on board, their boots still bearing the mud of Flanders upon them. It was squally weather, and as we headed for the open sea I saw a dark object gambolling upon the waves with the fluency of a porpoise. A sailor stopped near me and passed the time of day.

"Had any trouble with German submarines?" I asked.

"Only once, sir. A torpedo missed us by 'bout a hund-erd yards."

"Only once! How's that?"

For answer the sailor removed a quid of tobacco from one cheek to the other by a surprisingly alert act of stowage and nodded in the direction of the dark object whose outlines were now plain and salient. It was riding the sea like a cork.

"Them," he said briefly. It was a t.b.d.



At the port of our arrival the sheep were segregated from the goats. The unofficial people formed a long queue to go through the smoking-room, where two quiet men awaited them, one of whom, I believe, always says, "Take your hat off," looks into the pupil of your eyes, and lingers lovingly over your pulse; the other, as though anxious to oblige you, says, "Any letters to post?" But his inquiries are not so disinterested as they would seem.



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The rest of us, being highly favoured persons, got off without ceremony, and made for the Pullman. As the train drew out of the station and gathered speed I looked out upon the countryside as it raced past us. England! Past weald and down, past field and hedgerow, croft and orchard, cottage and mansion, now over the chalk with its spinneys of beech and fir, now over the clay with its forests of oak and elm. The friends of one's childhood, purple scabious and yellow toad-flax, seemed to nod their heads in welcome; and the hedgerows were festive with garlands of bryony and Old Man's Beard. The blanching willows rippled in the breeze, and the tall poplars whispered with every wind. I looked down the length of the saloon, and everywhere I saw the blithe and eager faces of England's gallant sons who had fought, and would fight again, to preserve this heritage from the fire and sword of bloody sacrilege. Fairer than the cedars of Lebanon were these russet beeches, nobler than the rivers of Damascus these amber streams; and the France of our new affections was not more dear.

Twilight was falling as the guard came round and adjured us to shut out the prospect by drawing the blinds. As we glided over the Thames I drew the blind an inch or two aside and caught a vision of the mighty city steeped in shadows, and the river gleaming dully under the stars like a wet oilskin. At a word from the attendant I released the blind and shut out the unfamiliar nocturne. Men rose to their feet, and there was a chorus of farewells.

"So long, old chap, see you again at battalion headquarters."

"Good-bye, old thing, we meet next week at H.Q."

"To-morrow night at the Savoy—rather! You must meet my sister."

As I alighted on the platform I saw a crowd of waiting women. "Hullo, Mother!" "Oh, darling!" I turned away. I was thinking of that platform next week when these brief days, snatched from the very jaws of death, would have run their all too brief career and the greetings of joy would be exchanged for heart-searching farewells.

* * * * *

I was dining at my club with two friends, one of them a young Dutch attache, the other a barrister of my Inn. We did ourselves pretty well, and took our cigars into the smoking-room, which was crowded. Some men in a corner were playing chess; the club bore, decent enough in peace but positively lethal in war, was demonstrating to a group of impatient listeners that the Staff work at G.H.Q. was all wrong, when, catching sight of me, he came up and said, "Hullo, old man, back from the Front? When will the war end?" I returned the same answer as a certain D.A.A.G. used to provide for similar otiose questions: "Never!"

"Never! Hullo, what's that?"



Every one in the room suddenly rose to their feet, the chess players rising so suddenly that they overturned the board. "Damn it, and it was my move, I could have taken your queen," said one of them. Outside there was a noise like the roaring of the lion-house at the Zoo; your anti-aircraft gun has a growl of its own. "They're here," said some one, and we all made for the terrace.



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I looked up and saw in the dim altitudes a long silvery object among the stars. As the searchlights played upon it, it seemed almost diaphanous, and the body appeared to undulate like a trout seen in a clear stream. Jupiter shone hard and bright in the southern hemisphere, and suddenly a number of new planets appeared in the firmament as though certain stars shot madly from their spheres. Round and about the monster came and went these exploding satellites. Then another appeared close under her, and like a frightened fish she swerved sharply and was lost to view among the Pleiades.

“Let’s go and see what’s happened,” said one of my friends. “I hear she’s dropped a lot of bombs down——.”

As we went down the street I saw that for about two hundred yards ahead it was sparkling as with hoar-frost. Suddenly the soles of our boots “scrunched” something underfoot. I looked down. The ground was covered with splinters of glass. As we drew nearer we caught sight of a cordon of police, and behind them a great fire springing infernally from the earth, and behind the fire a group of soldiers, whose figures were silhouetted against the background. Our way was impeded by curious crowds, among whom one heard the familiar chant of “Pass along, please!”

We stopped. Close to us two men were stooping with heads almost knocking together and searching the ground, while one of them husbanded a lighted match against the wind.

“Blimey, Bill,” said one to the other, “I’ve found ’un!”

“What have you found?” we asked of him.

“A souvenir, sir!”

Truly, they know not the stomach of this people.

FOOTNOTES:

[30] See Chapter XXV.

[31] See Chapter XI.

[32] *Ibid.*

THE END

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