

**NO
HERO
— THIS**

Warwick Deeping

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MAD BARBARA

LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

NO HERO—THIS

By

WARWICK DEEPING

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

IN a human record such as this, in which characters having some shadow of reality are mingled with those which are wholly imaginary, an author must feel profoundly responsible for the memories of others.

Therefore, it seems necessary to confess that such characters as Colonel Cleek and Lt.-Colonel Skinders and Captain Carless are pure creations.

There were Cleeks and Skinderses in the War, but in this record they are types who serve to emphasize the maleficent influence that can be exercised by such men in authority. It is the kind of authority which can make war-service so shabby and shameful a business, coercion of the good by personalities crudely and meanly selfish.

Colonels Frost and Fairfax are the more happy and familiar figures to us all, men of courage and of magnanimity who helped other men to transcend their fear.

NO HERO—THIS

LET me try to be truthful in this journal, and observe and describe myself and others as a clinician is taught to describe a case in a hospital ward. That the ego is prejudiced in its own favour is a platitude, and patriotism may be the massed prejudices of communal egos, self-interest tinged with emotion.

The little world in which I work has become saturated with emotion.

I hear a brass band playing a march, and I tell myself that my soul should strut and swagger, but somehow it refuses to fall in and follow the band.

I am a country doctor, aged thirty-five, in partnership with a man of fifty-three, whose kindness and wisdom have made me more than respect him. I am married. My marriage has been a happy one, and perhaps I have been tempted to be sentimental about it. Mary and I have always understood each other, perhaps because the problems we have had to face have been simple and actual. As yet we have no children. We had decided to wait for a time before having children. I suppose I am a somewhat unadventurous person. My work in this corner of Sussex has satisfied me.

I do not want to go to the War.

Let me be honest about it. What is it that makes me shrink? Fear, yes, some fear, but of what? A doctor may never pass into the danger zone. On the other hand he may be with a battalion in the trenches. Fear of what? Death, mutilation, or of a strange new anonymous life full of alien faces, a kind of going back to school like some raw but sensitive child? Am I so old at thirty-five that I fear change, insecurity, the stripping of one's comfortable self on the edge of this sinister, dark sea? I am a somewhat separative creature. I cannot laugh easily, and smack shoulders, and lay my head on the breezy world's buxom bosom. I am apt to become mute in a crowded room, and to retreat into a corner.

Mary says nothing.

I often wonder what the secret Mary thinks about the war. I am beginning to realize that this blinding universal rage has brought a kind of silence between us. We talk the conventional stuff about Belgium and Ypres, and the Russian Steamroller, and the Miracle of the Marne, and of the heroism of our men in Flanders, but I notice that we both shrink from intimate personal confessions. I seem to be divining some other and essentially secret creature in my wife.

We saw Roger off last night at the station. A dead, December dusk, a few gas jets glazed and solitary. His people did not come, which I understood. Roger is thirty-eight, and an old volunteer. He goes to an infantry battalion somewhere in Dorsetshire. Roger very quiet, but with a look in his eyes that hurt me. We stood there fidgeting in a kind of dreadful silence, waiting for his train to come in. I felt that he was yearning for that train to arrive. So was I.

Afterwards, in the car, Mary said to me, "I feel that he won't come back."

I tried to be cheerful, and she added, "And Roger knows it."

I had nothing to say.

Surgery. Warmth and lights, the familiar odour of drugs, the rows of bottles like friendly faces. Randall, my partner, has gone to bed with one of his attacks of migraine, and all the work is mine. I am glad of it, for it seems to safeguard something in myself, and to justify my being here. The waiting-room is full. It has been raining, and the stuffy room smells of warm, damp clothes. I have little Freddie Lavender in with his mother, a nasty compound fracture of the bones of the forearm. My case and doing excellently. I am pleased. Old Bannister up with his eternal cough. He has a nasty habit of coughing in one's face. Dispense medicines, and wrap up and seal bottles. The smell of the hot wax is curiously reassuring.

Write up books and records. Wash out measuring glasses. I notice that I have dropped some sealing wax on the dispensing counter which is brown and stained with use and age. Clean it off with a spatula. Randall is apt to be fussy about small things, and completely serene when the big things come along.

I go out into Brackenhurst High Street. My home is a little Georgian house beyond the church. It has a white door and a graceful fanlight. There is a smell of cooking as I open the door. This perfume from the kitchen is always a delicate offence to Mary, but to me it is somehow homely and pleasant, especially on a dead, December night. Steak and onions, and a raspberry tart.

The boy in me is active. Mary rather silent.

We sit by the fire. There are oak logs on it. I have a book and a pipe. Our drawing-room looks out on the long garden with its low hedges and high walls. In this room it is very silent at night, save when a wind is blowing. No footsteps, no sound of traffic. Mary has a book, but I notice that she keeps putting the book down in her lap to stare at the fire. Her face has a kind of tense, inward stillness. I wonder, and am vaguely uneasy.

Suddenly, she looks at me almost like a stranger; it is only for a moment. Her eyes are back gazing at the fire.

She tells me that she has been with Roger's wife, and helping to bath the children. I ask about Norah, and am puzzled at the way she eludes my question. Why doesn't she want to talk about Norah? Roger's wife is a particularly transparent and happy person, so bright and sane, not the sort of woman to dissolve into emotion. I am sure that Norah has been utterly brave. Mary says something about sacrifice. Sacrifice? A kind of embarrassment seems to stumble in between us. I find that my pipe has gone out. I relight it. Mary picks up her book and goes on reading. A wind seems to spring up from nowhere, and I hear it making a little restless moaning in the chimney.

A sunny day, one of those rare days in winter when the air is like iced hock. But I remember that hock is a German wine, and therefore undrinkable. I am driving to Thornhill Place to see Lady Hazzard about the fitting up of Thornhill as an auxiliary hospital. Both the sky and the woods are wonderful, the Scotch firs red-throated and intensely and darkly green. Even in winter the pointed buds on the great beech trees shine like spicules of pale gold. The wet bracken is almost red. I can see the Downs in the distance like grey smoke. This damned war seems to make one more sensuously alive to beauty, but it is a beauty that hurts. I find Lady Hazzard rather like a tall, thin figure in ivory, distant and delicate, with enigmatic, ice blue eyes. She tells me that Layton of St. Helen's is to take charge of the surgical cases, and that he will drive over daily. I feel snubbed and wonder if her Lady Superior's air is fortuitous or wilful.

We have a Kitchener battalion billeted in the town. The men come mainly from some industrial area in the Midlands. One company is in khaki, the rest in dark blue suits and Glengarry caps. I saw them coming in from a route march this morning, and the business depressed me. The physique is very poor, and in some cases grotesque. Many of the men were very done. Poor thin, straining necks, and little pinched faces. A strapping second lieutenant swinging along

at the rear of a company looked to me to be about the only man with a straight back and squared shoulders.

As I came out of The George after seeing the lessee, who is in bed with bronchitis, I found the battalion paraded on the Abbey Green. Half the town looking on. I fall in with the Misses Ponsonby, large, handsome young women in tailor-made tweeds and hard hats. These young women remind me of supercilious, aristocratic horses. They have been very active in all patriotic alarms and excursions. The Ponsonby family dominate the town socially. Two brothers are in the Guards, good-looking young men with small heads and very pale blue eyes. I take off my hat to the Misses Ponsonby, and pause by them. They look at me in a queer, oblique way, and I notice that both of them seem to have deeply cut nostrils.

Honorina says to her sister, "I hear this battalion hasn't yet got a medical officer. It's a perfect scandal."

I dare to correct Miss Ponsonby. The battalion has a medical officer, a little Glasgow man rather like a gruff and self-satisfied Scotch terrier. He called on me yesterday in khaki, and was so conscious of it that I found him rather offensive.

Miss Ponsonby gives me another oblique look. Both of them are very head in air. I hear her say to her sister, "I'm glad someone has a sense of duty."

I edge away, feeling hot about the ears. Duty! I can almost see those handsome wenches taking men by the collar and marching them to the recruiting station. But I am to have an uncomfortable morning. I run into Rob Guthrie at the corner of Mont Street. Guthrie is an histrionic person who wears large hats and a flamboyant manner, the amateur country gentleman in clothes and colour. He is aged about fifty, possesses one of those brown-bread faces and a drooping moustache. He has an offensive breath and, as I happen to know, it is the breath of alcoholic dyspepsia. Guthrie cocks his head at me and stops. He is the sort of man who makes emotional and bathotic speeches at political meetings.

He says, "Doesn't that thrill you, Brent?"

He points with his stick down the street.

"Lads who are not afraid of the muck and the shells. It is hell in Flanders."

I say that things are not so bad as all that, and that the Germans are held.

He tells me that he has volunteered to drive an ambulance in France. I want to say that I am sorry for the ambulance. He goes on to assert that if the young

men don't go, others who are older, but who have more guts, will have to fill the ranks.

Piqued, I retort that many of the men who are going will not be in at the death.

"The Germans have shot their bolt."

He looks at me with his little red eyes and says, "Bosh!"

I walk on, realizing that he had considered it to be his duty to be offensive to me. If all the Guthries in the world were twenty years younger there might be less of this rage for pushing other people into a kind of bottomless pit. Guthrie is so safe. Neither in age nor in physique is he fit for anything but to strut about and hector the young. It makes me angry that I should be admonished by Guthrie, a man whom I despise. I have work to do; I have to control my appetites and my temper, and yet I can be shot at by this sot.

I wish this winter would pass. To me it is a dead and dreadful winter, full of a feeling of strangeness and suspense. I go about like a man troubled by perpetual qualms, and as though nothing would digest itself sweetly inside me. All the familiar things, places and faces, seem to become mistrustful and unfriendly. One's impressions of life seem distorted as in a cracked mirror.

People talk of nothing but the war. I hear of men who have gone, and even more so of men who have not. This crowd complex makes people cruel.

German atrocities! I wonder about them. On one occasion in public I dared to question the evidence, and there was a kind of shocked and hostile silence.

Mary is so much more silent than she used to be.

There are wounded at Thornhill. I go there to look round the wards and to give anæsthetics for Layton. These wounded men who have suffered are so much more human than the people at home. The one thing that hurts me most is their cheerfulness. I question it, and should like to question them. Can they smile because they hope that they will not have to go back? Or do they think that they have to play up to all these women?

But they do not look at me coldly with eyes of reproach. They have faced the ultimate horror of the great reality, and perhaps they know in their vitals what is the truth.

Lady Hazzard said to me rather frigidly this morning, "We are very glad to have your services, Dr. Brent, until we can arrange for an older man to help Dr. Randall with the wards."

Randall is in charge of the wards. There seems to have been some mutual and private arrangement about this, but Randall has said nothing to me about it. After all, I am thirty-five and married, and not particularly robust, and I am working ten hours a day. I suppose that if I was functioning in some urban area my work would be justified, but here in this country community there are so many people who seem to consider it their duty to make one feel naked and ashamed. This little town has the atmosphere of one of those ridiculous but disconcerting dreams in which you find yourself dining with the Ponsonbys in nothing but your shirt.

And the Ponsonby women would not even leave you your shirt.

Something has upset Mary. I was in early for tea, and sitting in front of the fire with the lights out, waiting for her. She came into the room, and I saw her reflection darkly in the long mirror. She stood a moment, quite still, staring at nothing. She had not realized my presence. I sat up in the chair, and she gave a kind of gasping cry.

“I didn’t know you were here.”

Vague anger and resentment! But why? She turned on the lights, took off her hat and coat, and rang for tea. Her face looked cold, and the weather was not cold.

I asked her where she had been, and she answered rather curtly, “O, to the Red Cross working-party.”

I felt that she did not want to be questioned. Has some good woman been hinting that I ought to be in khaki?

Randall and I are in the surgery together, he at the desk writing up the day-book, I at the sink washing out a medicine bottle. I have the feeling that someone is watching me. I turn and meet Randall’s eyes. Our consciousnesses seem to cross for a moment like a couple of swords. Randall looks suddenly uncomfortable, and resumes his scribbling. I can hear the surgery clock ticking.

“O, Stephen.”

I stand holding the bottle.

“I have been meaning to speak to you about something. It isn’t my business, and yet, in a sense, it is ours. Besides, in a way, being the senior _____”

He pauses awkwardly.

“You have always been very loyal to me. If it is consideration for me that

is holding you back——”

I understand. He is trying to tell me that I can and ought to be spared. I feel stubborn and miserable.

“Do you think I ought to go?”

“It’s your choice, my dear man, not mine.”

“I don’t want to go.”

He gives me a glance of affection.

“Does anybody want to go, really? Do you mind if I say something?”

“I’ll take anything from you.”

“Thanks, Stephen. It isn’t only your now, but your afterwards.”

“You mean, people——?”

He nods, and goes on writing.

“The women, and old men like Guthrie? Wait a bit. I think I see. The practice, I, as your partner.”

“I am not thinking of the practice, Stephen, nor of all the damned gossips and war-mongers and old women of both sexes. But——”

“I shouldn’t be persona grata? People wouldn’t want to have their tongues inspected by a shirker? Which means, that I should be letting you down.”

“No, Stephen. I am trying to be completely impartial. This war may be a bloody, silly business, muck and misery, but would you be quite happy in the future if you hadn’t had a share?”

I turn to the shelves and reach for a bottle.

“It’s cowardice, either way, to be afraid to go or to be afraid not to go.”

“It’s a choice every man has to make. Why not talk it over with Mary?”

“Mary!”

“Yes. Women can be curiously brave in hurting themselves in such a crisis.”

I make my confession to Mary in the drawing-room before dinner. Mary has been entertaining the Red Cross working-party, and signs of its activities are still apparent. I tell Mary quite casually that Randall and I have been talking it over, and that I think of joining the R.A.M.C. Mary is on the tuffet by the fire, and looking tired, but as I tell her, her face suddenly becomes fresh and tender. She jumps up, puts her arms round my neck, and kisses me.

“O, my dear, I’m so proud, so glad.”

Strange things women! Is Mary as conventional as the rest of them, or have all these other women sneered her into sacrificing to Moloch? I sit down in my chair, and she slips on to my knees.

“I’m not going to be afraid, Stephen.”

“Nothing to worry about.”

“After all, it isn’t so dangerous for a doctor. You may be in a hospital all the time.”

I realize how final the choice is, and that Mary will go about with a kind of new radiance, unashamed before all these other women. Why had I not understood this before? The strangeness between us, the silence.

I lie awake, feeling depressed and most unheroic. I am a coward, and I have surrendered to the more immediate threat of social coercion. Mary is asleep. Some of her last words to me were, “It’s so splendid to be able to help.” The words comfort me a little, for they are tinged with emotion, and emotion does oil the creaking joints of an illusion. Moreover, I am not so complete an egoist, and so inhuman as not to feel that I want to help, and I shall be doing the work that I love.

I cling to this thought.

But there is a sense of chilliness within me. I realize, if vaguely so, that I am surrendering that which is most precious to man, his freedom of will and of action. I am not a determinist, but in becoming one of an organized crowd I shall be accepting fatalism. I shall have no voice in where I am sent, or why. Someone in an office will tick my name off, and I shall be despatched somewhere like a parcel. It makes the sensitive, individual I shiver and feel cold.

II

THE thing is done.

Sir Eric Burnham gave me an introduction to an important person at the War Office. The important person passed me to the proper authority. I was interviewed by a large, tired and tolerant man who treated me rather like an idiot child. I was quite without enthusiasm; so was he. My commission as a temporary lieutenant in the R.A.M.C. would be put through. Meanwhile, I could order my kit and uniform and go home and wait until I received the notice to report myself for duty.

When I came out of the building a band was playing in Whitehall, and trailing along with it a desultory crowd. I was conscious of a stomachic thrill, of the blare of the brass and the rumble of the drums. My loins and legs reacted. Almost, I felt a little swagger in me. And then I remembered that I was to be a doctor, a patcher up of the bodies that the war would smash. The soldier's business is to kill. There may be a savage ecstasy in killing, especially when the other people have been making life for you an inferno, but, my work, if I get into or near the trenches, will be cold and deliberate, with no excitement save fear and the chance of escaping it or controlling it. I shall be like one small scavenger in the world's shambles.

But how amazing, what a bloody and beastly anachronism! Organized murder and the organized collecting and reconditioning of those who have failed to become corpses! The silliness of it makes me feel nauseated. But, in the army will one be allowed to think?

I am in khaki, and in spite of myself tempted to show off my plumage. Mary is quite brazen in her eagerness to display me. She appears to think that the British Army has received a most important reinforcement. I hear that the Ponsonbys have asked us to dinner. We go, and those masterful wenches congratulate me.

I find that the atmosphere of Brackenhurst has changed. It is genial and approving, and almost I begin to feel a fine fellow.

Officially, to be correctly dressed I am supposed to wear spurs, and in my innocence I wear them. I know nothing about horses, and I find that the damned things scratch the insides of my boots as I walk.

I meet Guthrie in the High Street. He has had a dram, and is offensive and silly and patronizing. He pats me on the shoulder.

“By Jove, my boy, that's better. Splendid!”

He almost shoves his face into mine, and I smell his breath.

“You’ll be quite a lad with the girls, Brent.”

He looks me over, leers, and suddenly with elaborate and mysterious friendliness he takes me by the arm and manoeuvres me into the gateway beside Hayward’s, the grocers.

“I say, Brent, my dear chap, your spurs!”

I explain that they are supposed to be official, if superfluous.

“Quite, quite, but you have got ’em on upside down.”

I feel petulant and foolish. Does the ass expect me to sit down on somebody’s doorstep, and rectify the error? I manage to laugh, a little self-consciously. I thank him for his interest in my appearance. But Guthrie does not react to irony.

“That’s all right, my dear chap. Just a word to the wise.”

But that was the last occasion upon which I wore spurs. I left the damned things behind in the bottom of the hall cupboard, and when Mary posted them on to me at Southcliffe I took them out into the garden of my billet and poked them into a big euonymus bush.

I receive my instructions to report to the O.C. Military Hospital, Southcliffe, on April 1st.

April 1st! Almost the date suggests that I am to join the great and noble company of fools.

But the nearness and the finality of the event seems to fall like a stone into the life that Mary and I have shared. A peculiar sadness possesses me. Mary is very tender to me, and I feel very tender towards her, and to all the things that are associated with us, our bedroom, the garden where the daffodils are out, Mary’s chair. I do not trouble to call myself a sentimentalist. Even the mirror in the bathroom at which I shave is like the face of a pathetic and melancholy friend. I wander about the garden. The singing of the birds is a sort of sweet anguish. I know that I ought to go round saying good-bye to people, but I do not want to say good-bye. It is too depressing.

On our last day Mary and I take the car and drive up to Ling Hill. Splendid country, high and serene, with sailing firs and great beeches, scrolls of grassland and sheets of heather. It is a soft, serene Spring day. We spread a rug under an old fir and sit down. We can see the Downs and the sea. The gorse is in flower. We hold hands like lovers. We have little to say.

On the way back to the car Mary picks primroses and I help her. It seems a childish and simple but satisfying thing to do. When one feels rather forlorn and uprooted, one seems to revert to childish things, nursery days when there

were no responsibilities, and our little fears could be conjured away by some compassionate and reassuring presence.

For me, an agnostic, there is no such presence, save perhaps Mary's, and that is being taken from me.

The morning of my going. Randall is coming to drive me to the station in his car. We are wilfully and insincerely cheerful at breakfast. I tell Mary that if I am quartered at Southcliffe for any length of time she will be able to come and stay. I suspect that she believes that I shall be rushed over to France tomorrow!

Then begins that dreadful period of waiting. My train is at ten. Mary is not coming to the station. She helps the maid to clear away the breakfast things, while I go into the garden and light a pipe. Mary wants to feel busy, and I understand. Another serene Spring day. Some of the polyanthus are in flower like crimson and gold brocade. The almond tree is past its prime. The incipient floweriness of the garden saddens me, and I go back to the drawing-room and leave the french window open.

Mary comes in. We are both restive and restless, like people in pain. I want to say all sorts of things to her, and am mute. My pipe is finished; I knock it out and put it in my pocket. I tell Mary that I will send her a cheque every week, half my pay. She says, "Yes, dear," and smiles.

I try to be cheerful, but this damned waiting seems to stick in my throat.

The bell! Randall at last. I kiss my wife with a kind of passionate casualness. "Good-bye, my dear, don't worry."

I make for the door. I leave the door open, and in the hall I turn and look back.

I see Mary against the window. Her shoulders are giving little jerks, and her face is the face of a woman trying not to cry.

I rend myself from the impulse to rush back to her. We are both so near uncontrolled emotion.

"O, damn!"

I get hold of my kit-bag and open the front door. I see Randall's kind, red face. I splurge something at him with banal cheerfulness.

"Here we are, off on the great adventure!"

He tries to take my kit-bag from me, but I won't let him. I am forgetting my valise, which lies like a great green sausage by the oak chest. Also, my greatcoat.

Randall says gently: "Aren't you going to take your bed, Stephen?"

I laugh, put on my greatcoat, get hold of the valise, and heave it into the

car. Randall closes the front door.

One's vanity has a very naïve quality. My volunteering for service had been such a shock in my quiet country life that I suppose I assumed my reporting at Southcliffe would be a serious and official affair. I travelled down to Southcliffe with a fat and vulgar little man also very newly uniformed and wearing the sign of Æsculapius. He started talking to me almost at once with complete candour. I had his life history in five minutes. Apparently, for him this war business was to be no end of a binge. He was the third partner in a colliery practice somewhere in the north, and in joining up he admitted that he was getting out of a groove, the daily round, domesticity and all that.

"Besides, I wasn't such a fool as to sign on for foreign service."

It had not occurred to me to do anything else. Bunce, that was his name, must have reacted to my questioning "Oh!" He stretched out his fat legs in their very new yellow gaiters.

"Any place where there are plenty of wenches will do me all right. Nurses are better than nothing. Wine and women, my lad, and not too much war."

I am acutely disliking Bunce. I want to get rid of him, but at Southcliffe there is only one taxi, and we share it. We are driven up to an ugly red building on a hill. We and our baggage are deposited at the main entrance. We find an office full of khaki-clad clerks. Bunce swaggers in. The clerks do not appear inclined to take much notice of us, but Bunce is not a negligible person.

We are told to wait in the corridor. A clerk goes off to announce us, and returns with a very large and impressive-looking man wearing much ribbon, and in my innocence I salute him. He looks amused in a sneering and superior sort of way.

We say that we have been ordered to report for duty. Apparently, the hospital has not been notified. Nothing is known about us.

The large man, who makes me think of a big, white, enigmatic Tom Cat, takes our names.

"Better go down to the local pub, gentlemen, and report again to-morrow."

Bunce looks heated.

"This is a damned funny way of doing business."

The large man puts his moustache in order.

"War is a funny business, sir. Try the Crown."

We go out and look at our baggage, and feel both it and ourselves superfluous.

The Crown accepts us. It is an old inn that has been modernized in raw red brick, and is excessively new and hideous and depressing. I am anxious to shed Bunce, for though I am feeling homesick and lonely, his tumescent fleshiness nauseates me, but at dinner they place us at the same table. Bunce asks me if I am coming hunting. Hunting? Yes, little bits of fluff over at Shellstone which is only two miles away. Foolishly I tell him that I have letters to write and he guffaws. I suppose he thinks me an uxorious, sentimental poop.

I try a walk along the Southcliffe front, but there are too many Tommies who salute me.

I go back to the Crown, write to Mary, get out a military manual, and read up stretcher-drill.

At ten o'clock I go to my room. The bed feels very cold and hard.

About midnight someone comes up the stairs, noisily and clumsily intoxicated. I suppose it is Bunce. I hear him swearing foolishly, and blundering about in the room next to mine.

I elude Bunce next morning by breakfasting early, and set out to report again at the hospital. The porter at the hotel has told me that there is a short cut up the hill. I find the path at the end of Trafalgar Terrace, a row of pleasant, late Georgian houses. The path slants up a steep, grassy slope, and as I climb it, with the sea covered with crinkles of light below me, I suppose that it will be my fate to be attached for training to some Field Ambulance. The hospital spreads itself amorphously on the plateau above. Orderlies are parading on the road leading to the administrative offices. I am shy, and feeling very raw and apologetic. I manage to sneak past the back of the parade, and so to the main door.

The large person happens to be in the corridor with a sheaf of papers in his hand. He deigns to smile at me. I realize that he is some sort of autocrat, and that he may be my friend.

“You can report to the colonel, sir, in five minutes.”

He opens a door and ushers me into a common-room that is full of strange officers who stare at me casually. I feel like a new boy at school. All the chairs are occupied, and I go and stand self-consciously by a window. An elderly officer with great grizzled moustaches and a kind, weather-worn face, gets up and comes across to talk to me. I am grateful to him. He is a paternal person. He asks me whether I have found a billet, and when I tell him I am at the Crown, he suggests that I should join him and two other officers at No. 7 Trafalgar Terrace. I thank him, and welcome the offer.

The White Cat reappears and calls me by name.

“Mr. Brent, please.”

I find myself in the presence of a crumpled old gentleman with a pale and puckered face. Somehow he suggests to me perpetual bewilderment and irritability. He is so like a peevish and flatulent infant. I salute. The White Cat purrs at the old gentleman behind the desk, and suddenly the great man screams at him.

“Don’t fuss, Bisgood, don’t interfere.”

White Cat smiles at him with indulgence.

“I was only giving you the necessary information, sir.”

Colonel Barter screws up his little, currant-bun eyes at me.

“Any experience, what?”

“No, sir.”

“None of you have, none of you have. What do they expect me to do with a pack of raw civilians. Bisgood.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Detail Mr.——”

“Mr. Brent, sir.”

“Be quiet, man. Detail Mr. Brent for hospital duties. Wait a moment. Isn’t the A.D.M.S. of the 19th Division asking for an M.O.?”

“Yes, sir, but there is another officer due to report, sir, who——”

“Damn it, man, am I in charge here, or are you?”

“I was only trying to save you trouble, sir. Major Keyes is so busy boarding men that he wants to hand over the Venereal Wards.”

“All right, all right, all right. You will take over the Venereal Wards, Mr. Brent.”

I salute.

“Very good, sir.”

So, my first patriotic effort is to spend itself on Syphilis and Gonorrhœa!

I wait about in the corridor for Major Keyes who is to hand over the Venereal Wards to me. Bunce has gone into the Colonel’s office to report and to be detailed for duty. He comes out with S.-M. Bisgood. He begins to argue with the S.-M.

“But I’m a home service doctor. What’s the use of posting me to a battalion?”

Sergeant-Major Bisgood looks amused.

“The division isn’t ordered overseas yet, sir.”

“But it’s damned silly. When they do go they’ll have to take a strange doctor man with them.”

“There will be plenty of time, sir, for you to change your mind.”

I catch the S.-M.'s eye over the top of Bunce's cap, and it twinkles at me. Even autocrats and Sergeant-Majors are human, and I wonder whether my blunder in saluting him had both amused and pleased the great man. At all events he had slipped me into a less dangerous niche, though I feel that my job would have suited Bunce's pornographic soul.

The S.-M. re-enters the Colonel's office, and Bunce comes down the corridor looking sullen.

"Where are you being shoved to?"

I tell him that I have been put in charge of the Venereals. It seems to amuse him for a moment. "Gosh, that's funny!" I wonder why it should seem funny to Bunce, unless he regards me as a kind of simple and sweet virgin. But disgust with his own fortune brings that look of sullen loutishness back to his face.

"Shoved me out to some filthy little town nine miles from nowhere. Place called Billing."

I can only suppose that in Billing the cooing will be too competitive, and shared by a thousand or so other men. This is my last meeting with Bunce, and I do not regret it.

Major Keyes, who is a regular soldier, with good looks and an assured manner, rushes me into the Venereal Block, gives me a curt three minutes' introduction, and leaves me to my own devices. It is a rather disgusting business. I find that there are two circumcisions to be done, and a number of mercury injections to be given. I bungle one of the injections. The sergeant in charge is a realist, with a loud voice and a bad-tempered mouth. My fumbling does not seem to impress him either way. But when, feeling nervous and self-conscious, I try to joke with one of the patients, and there is a gurgle of laughter in the ward, he shouts fiercely, "Silence."

Afterwards, in the corridor, he attends to my education.

"You'll excuse me, sir, but it's an offence against discipline. They are all crime cases."

"Crime?"

"Yes, sir, a man in the army who makes himself unfit for duty is crimed, sir."

"I see."

I understand that I am not to regard my venereal cases as patients, but as men who have sinned against military efficiency. I suppose there is reason in the Spartan code, but why not "Crime" the women who gave the disease to them?

I ask the sergeant this, and he looks at me with his fiercely stupid eyes.

“Quite right, sir, but it isn’t easy to catch the sluts. Besides, there isn’t a law to prevent a man being ’uman.”

“So it is only the results that matter?”

“Quite so, sir.”

My new friend Captain Macartney waits for me in the staff room, and takes me down to see No. 7 Trafalgar Terrace. Macartney is the Quartermaster, and a regular, a man who has risen from the ranks, and the rugged and humorous serenity of his kind old face more than consoles me for the loss of Bunce! I am to learn many things from Macartney. As we go down the hill towards the sea I am moved to ask him why he should trouble to be kind to a raw recruit. The skin crinkles up round his kind Scots eyes as he answers me with equal candour.

“You looked just like a homesick bairn.”

I confess that I have been feeling like one, which should be absurd in a man of five and thirty.

No. 7 Trafalgar Terrace is a Jane Austen of a house kept by two old maids known as Bicky and Bertha. I gather that Macartney exercises a kind of censorship over the officers who are promoted to a billet in No. 7. Bunce would have been an offence to the atmosphere of the house, which is clean and peaceful and gently austere. Bicky and Bertha are good old things, shrewd and kind, and the commissariat is excellent. I am introduced to Bicky, who shows me a top-floor room overlooking the sea. I decide at once to take it, if she will accept me.

She says, “If you are a friend of Captain Macartney’s, sir, that is good enough for me.”

Macartney arranges to have my baggage transferred from the Crown to No. 7. At dinner I meet my fellow lodgers, Malim, a physician and bacteriologist, and Dartnell, who is acting as assistant to the surgical specialist. Malim is a rather colourless, grave, self-absorbed person, Dartnell one of those very dark men with a radiant skin, chockful of vitality. Dartnell is a tease. He asks me how I like my first job in the army, and asserts that Bicky and Bertha had better not know that I am the venereal expert.

“They are so careful of the morals of Tom the cat.”

I have met Tom on the stairs, a sleek Tabby, in fine condition.

“Yes, they keep him in at night. Bicky says it makes such a difference.”

I lie in bed and listen to the sea. The night is supremely peaceful, and I ask myself whether it is cowardice that makes me yearn so passionately for peace.

I have been fortunate, and I am tempted to wonder whether I may not be able to hide myself from the official world in Southcliffe, and remain actively and contentedly forgotten? I am not an adventurous spirit. After all, I have volunteered for foreign service, and if the powers that be do not send me abroad, need I agitate for the ordeal that I dread?

My thoughts are with Mary before I fall asleep.

I am beginning to make discoveries. Southcliffe is not only the receiving hospital for all the troops in the district, but it also is the headquarters of No. 12 Co. R.A.M.C. The Company numbers about a thousand men. Some three hundred are quartered at Southcliffe, and the rest are scattered in detachments all over the country. Most of the men are recruits from the St. John Ambulance, and are partially trained, which is a good thing, for there is no one here to train them.

I realize that none of us know anything, save as doctors.

Macartney is too busy with his quartermastering to be able to help. Besides, officially it is not his duty.

Major Keyes is an elusive and charming person who seems to spend his life in boarding the scores of men who are sent up as unfit.

Colonel Barter, who is a dug-out, has forgotten everything he knew. He never leaves his office, but sits and fumes and fusses.

S.-M. Bisgood is the only man whose large and patient hands seem to grasp reality. I come to understand that Bisgood is the autocrat, and the king behind the king. He manages Barter as a large and capable nurse controls a froward and peevish child.

But no one is given the opportunity to learn anything about the various functions of the Corps. We remain just doctors, and supremely ignorant of everything save the routine of ward work. If I were posted to a Field Ambulance I should not even know what were the constituents of such a formation. The interior economy of it all is a closed book to us.

No one here can teach us anything.

I find that nearly half the medical officers here have signed on only for home service. This both astonishes and worries me. I am what the men call an Overseas Officer, and I realize that it makes my position here more precarious.

Just at the foot of the hill and growing in the back garden of the last house in Trafalgar Terrace a very old pear tree is in blossom. It is a magnificent tree and magnificent in its floweriness. I look at it with pleasure as I pass, and also

with sadness, for it seems to be a symbol of the world that was mine before the war. Spring is here, and this horror of death and of fear persists. I know that my essential self is always trying to escape in secret from these new and violent realities, and to create for itself a kind of inward sanctuary. I try to convince myself that this war-phase is impermanent, and that the only permanent and enduring things are peace and beauty and the life I have lived and shall live with my wife and my work. I reproach myself with not having understood my previous happiness.

Also, I reproach myself for being so much myself. How is it that I cannot see this war as a crusade, or as a splendid and human adventure? I seem to be such a wistful and poignant little egoist, so obsessed with my own safety, and my own little interests and affections. Why cannot I lose myself in this great human tragedy, and feel sustained and inspired by a sense of comradeship and of sacrifice? Is it that I have a mean and miserable little soul?

There are times when I suffer from intense nostalgia and a sense of impending doom.

I feel like an animal in a trap, and that I shall not escape alive from this horror.

I wonder about the other men. None of us ever discuss these secret and intimate qualms. We carry about with us a shell of brittle cheerfulness. Some of us even pretend that we are anxious to be at the front whither all the blood and the guts of the country are tending. I look at the sea and wonder whether I shall cross it, and if so whether I shall return.

III

THEY have made me Company Officer. Why, God knows, nor do I know anything of the duties of such a person. I have a suspicion that I owe this to Macartney and Bisgood.

I understand that I am responsible for the company accounts, and the men's pay. I have been relieved of all ward-work, though I occasionally give anæsthetics. The beastly venereal business has been thrust upon a newcomer. I hand over to him without regret, and dare to hope that my new responsibilities will be permanent. I am both secretly exultant and ashamed.

The Company Office is part of a one-storied brick building. I have a sergeant and four clerks under me. Cooper the sergeant is an engine-driver in civil life, one of those quiet, steadfast sort of men, with honest eyes and a drooping moustache. I am to develop affection and respect for Sergeant Cooper. Apparently there have been three different and successive company officers in six months, all equally ignorant, and according to hints I receive from Cooper all equally bored and casual. Cooper has managed to worry out some of the intricacies of army finance, but the Impress Account has lived in a state of chaos for the last few months. I know nothing about book-keeping and double entry, but Cooper and I sit up till ten at night, chasing elusive half-pennies. It seems to be a peculiar job for a medical man.

I have to pay the men. The pay table is arranged with piles of silver on it. Previously, I have been to the local bank with a stout orderly to draw the pay. Cooper stands with the pay-roll and calls the names. I am not very quick to begin with, either with my head or my fingers. I am interested and a little bothered by the faces of all these unknown men. Is my only duty to them that of handing out cash?

At the end of the first pay day we find that we are ten shillings on the wrong side. Cooper looks worried. He is such a quietly conscientious creature. I tell him that I am responsible, and that the error must have been mine, and I take a ten-shilling note from my breast pocket, and make good the deficiency.

Cooper looks at me gratefully. Why should he be grateful?

I ask Macartney to tell me what my duties should be. I avoid the Colonel's office, for Barter seems to live perpetually in a state of irritable bewilderment, and Bisgood keeps his knowledge to himself. So long as everybody else is ignorant, his autocracy is unchallenged. Macartney tells me that I should be responsible for the men's training, their kits and messing and discipline. Their

training! Good God, I don't even know how to tell them to form fours!

I announce that I will hold a kit inspection, but what does a man's kit consist of? I obtain a list from Macartney. The orderly sergeant for the day accompanies me to the men's quarters. They are standing at attention beside their beds. I like these men. There is something friendly even in their formalism. With extreme conscientiousness I check kits.

One tall private, who wears pince-nez and looks literary, informs me that he has a pair of boots that are useless to him, and that he is minus a toothbrush.

I tell him to go to the Quartermaster Stores and hand in the spare boots in exchange for a toothbrush.

At lunch old Macartney has a crumpled and mischievous face. He asks me if I have a wicked plan for stopping the war. I ask him what the trouble is.

"My boy, boots are boots, and a toothbrush is a toothbrush. I can't hand out a toothbrush in exchange for boots?"

"Why not? The exchange ought to be in your favour."

He chuckles.

"That's not the army way. A man has to have two pairs of boots, and he must die with those boots, even if he can't wear 'em. And a toothbrush is a toothbrush. I can issue toothbrushes as toothbrushes, but the man must keep his damned boots."

"And supposing he can't wear them?"

"That's quite another matter. But don't muddle up boots and toothbrushes. It can't be done. It would wreck my whole department."

I decide to inspect the men's messing arrangements. The orderly sergeant and I enter the mess-room. The sergeant calls them to attention. I want to say, "Please sit down. I am here just as an interested person and a friend." I see that some men have plates, and that others are eating off pieces of newspaper. One fellow is using his fingers and a pocket-knife. It is messing in more senses than one.

I ask the sergeant if there is a shortage of plates. He tells me that there is a shortage of everything, about a hundred old chipped plates to serve three hundred men. But why? Hasn't anything been done about it? The answer is that nobody has bothered, and that I am the first officer to interest myself in the men's messing.

I have discovered in another ledger various mysterious accounts, Canteen Account, etc. I ask Macartney what they are for, and whether they can be used for the men. He says, "Of course." But why has not anybody done anything about it? He supposes that everybody has been too ignorant and too busy. Or is

it apathy, the strange apathy that descends upon men when they cease to be individual?

I go off in the afternoon to Shellstone and manage to buy a hundred or so plates, mugs, cheap knives and forks. I feel rather pleased with myself. After tea I return to the Company Officer to wrestle with accounts. An orderly appears with a message.

“The C.O. wants to see you, sir.”

I go to Barter’s office. Bisgood is with him. The old man sits back in his chair and screams at me.

“You have been neglecting your duties, sir. I sent for you this afternoon and you were not to be found. I won’t have it. You will report at this office three times a day.”

I feel myself going hot about the ears. I am not accustomed to being screamed at.

“If you will excuse me, sir, I had a reason——”

“What reason? You were absent from duty.”

“I was in Shellstone, sir.”

“Shellstone! Who gave you permission to go to Shellstone?”

“I went to buy mess equipment.”

“Mess equipment?”

“Yes, for the men, sir. Some of them were eating off newspaper, and there was about one mug for three men.”

I catch Bisgood’s eye, and there is approval and incitement in it. Colonel Barter has an air of sudden deflation.

“In that case, Mr. Brent——”

“If I have to buy more equipment, sir, I will come and report to you why I shall be absent.”

“That’s all right, Brent, quite all right.”

“But I think it due to me, sir, that——”

“That’s quite in order, Brent.”

Still feeling hot about the ears, I salute and walk to the door. Bisgood opens it, and winks at me as I go out.

I get the impression that I am popular with the men. Is it just because I have bought them dinner plates? How easy it should prove to be popular.

We are admitting a number of cases of gas gangrene. Deplorable cases. Carrington the surgical specialist takes me to see the latest method of amputating a gangrenous limb. The result suggests a butcher’s cleaver and a

section across a leg of mutton.

Two patients come into the office to draw their pay. One of them, a big, strapping, red-headed corporal, is on crutches, having lost a leg. The other man has one eye and the remains of a face. I am shy of looking at this mutilated mask. Sergeant Cooper questions them as they produce their pay-books. They were wounded at Neuve Chapelle.

“Funny show—that,” says Cooper.

“I should say so,” said the Corporal, who has bitter and angry eyes, “we sat in the ruddy mud for four hours doing nothing.”

“German shells?”

“No, our own ruddy guns.”

He turns and looks at me defiantly, as though as an officer I represent the official muddle that still fills him with inward rage. He does not care what I think. I nod at him and smile gently.

When they have gone Cooper gives a tug to his mild moustache, and says to me, “That’s war.”

Carrington the surgical specialist has been ordered to Malta. We are living on Dardanelles rumours, and the gas attack at Ypres. Carrington’s place is taken by a large and hefty young man, unmarried, who has been a junior medical officer at a County Asylum. Malim has some cynical things to say about this appointment.

I go up in a sad Spring dusk to watch Canadian reinforcements march off to embark for France. They are to fill the gaps in the Canadian Corps made by the German gas. They are big, fierce, husky men, and as the brown column swings off into the chilly twilight they begin to sing.

“We won’t, we won’t, we won’t be badgered about.”

Old Macartney, who is with me, looks whimsical.

“Between you and me, Brent, that’s what life in the army is, being badgered about.”

“Always and everywhere?” I ask.

He grunts philosophically. “Oh, one gets used to it.”

Mary is coming for the week-end. I have discovered another inn that is less

hygienic and hideous than the Crown, the White Hart, a little, funny old place in white and brown, with a garden going down to the sea. I have booked a big and pleasant room on the first floor with a window overlooking the garden and the sea.

This week-end should be like a second marriage and a second honeymoon, save that we shall not suffer from the embarrassments and shy inhibitions of the first intimate and physical contacts. My longing for Mary is a mixture of tenderness and sexual excitement. This war business has so stirred up the elementals that we men who are crowded together in a purely male community are vexed by the flesh. Possibly, if all petticoats were removed from sight, sex might go to sleep in us. One has only to wander out at night to realize how rampant raw sex is.

I order flowers for Mary, a special dinner and champagne. I expect her by the 3.30 train at Southcliffe station. I go up to the hospital after lunch to clear up some correspondence in order that I may be free. At twenty minutes to three I am called to the colonel's office. Damn the old man! How much is one at the mercy of the machine. I go in feeling rebellious, to find that Colonel Barter is asking me to dinner.

"To-night, sir?"

"Yes, Brent."

"It is very kind of you, sir, but my wife is coming for the week-end."

Barter's currant-bun eyes twinkle.

"Well, let us make it next Saturday, Brent."

I thank him, and go out realizing that Barter is by no means senile and inhuman, and that he can refrain from persevering in petty social authority.

I rush off to the station, and this May day feels flowery and bridal. I am ten minutes before time, and the train is five minutes late. I see Mary standing at a window. She seems to be in some sort of uniform, or a dress that suggests a uniform, dark blue and austere and practical. I remember that she is the commandant of a new auxiliary hospital that has been opened at Brackenhurst, but the sentimental man in me is disappointed. I don't want a uniform, but something feminine and sensuous.

Mary passes me her suitcase. I have arranged for a taxi. I kiss her, and she gives me her cheek, and it has some of the clean chilliness of a cold May morning.

It is absurd, but both of us seem slightly embarrassed.

Is this coming together again an anticlimax after that leave-taking six weeks or so ago, when life seemed so tragic and final?

Later I discover the woman beneath the uniform. Mary kisses me differently when she has seen the flowers in our bedroom. She is pleased with the White Hart. I tell her there is a special dinner, and she opens her suitcase and shows me an evening frock.

I kiss her again, and want to lead her to the bed. Her face has the secret glow of the woman who understands. She puts a hand over my mouth, and says, "Presently."

It is over. I am lying with my head on her shoulder with my heart beating as though I had run a race. She caresses me.

"Lie still a minute."

I kiss her, and with a strange feeling of deflation, turn on my side.

We begin to talk, and while we are talking I marvel at the illusion of the crude sexual act. It seems to be nothing more than a physiological urge, which, when satisfied, leaves one like an emptied sack. But this woman to whom I am talking is the other Mary, not the pretty lady of a night, but a creature of sensitive understanding, and my dear comrade. She is a spirit inhabiting a body, not mere flesh, and I am conscious of how profoundly she matters to me. I can talk to Mary as I can talk to no one else; she is quick to catch all the subtle shades of meaning, impressions that may be either infantile or sophisticated, prejudices and predilections that it may be difficult to express.

Presently I put her hand to my lips.

"I am sorry I behaved like that."

She answers, "I would rather you wanted to be like that with me than with any other woman."

Sunday is fine and warm. I have my work in the morning, but in the afternoon we sit on the beach and watch the sea and the ships. They do not look like things of steel, but softly coloured and diaphanous shapes growing out of the limpid blueness. The peaceful atmosphere is illusive. The sea may hide violence and death, and many of those ships are as Malim puts it "Going Dardanelling." But we do not want to talk of the war. The beach is warm, and the sky cloudless, and Mary talks to me of home. She has learnt to drive the car, and is helping old Randall with the dispensing and book-keeping. I feel that she is talking to me of dull and simple and homely things because she knows that I am glad to hear of a life that is not in khaki.

Mary has gone. I am feeling horribly alone and homesick, and I am back at No. 7. I do not mention my week-end with my wife, and the other men seem to

understand my reticence. At all events they talk nothing but shop.

Dartnell begins to tell a bawdy story, but it seems to fizzle out and become pointless. Perhaps my silly, sorrowful face did not encourage bawdy humour.

I go to bed, and am even more conscious of my loneliness.

IV

THE Spring becomes Summer, and our lives seem to have subsided into pure routine. We bathe; I have even had a game or two of tennis. I am still struggling to penetrate the mysteries of military formalism, but I have not much spare time. I am taking my turn at admissions, as well as functioning in the Company Office.

Macartney tells me that I am approved of by Barter. I am considered to be a conscientious and hard-working officer. Does anyone suspect that I am furiously eager to cultivate this reputation, with the idea of making myself seem somewhat indispensable? Every morning at ten o'clock I report to Colonel Barter, and though I have nothing of importance to tell him, he appears to derive satisfaction from the ritual. There is no more screaming. He treats me with a courtesy and a kindness in which there seems to lurk a little serpent of suspicion.

Macartney tells me that Barter's one fear is that "someone should sell him a pup." For a superannuated old gentleman he is drawing very good pay and allowances, and he dreads any scandal that might cause Olympus to thunder. I begin to understand old Barter. Like myself, he wants to stay put. There are other men who are ready to push him off his comfortable perch, and he clings to it like a scolding old parrot. But I like him, perhaps because he approves of me. In one's innocent beginnings one did not suspect that life in the army would be fiercely competitive and self-protective. One is ready to snarl over one's particular job and growl, "My bone. Keep off!"

I can remember speculating in my student days as to what was the ultimate fate of the many casual young men of limited intelligence who contrived to scrape through their examinations, often after much coaching, and who departed to exercise their skill upon a confiding public. It would have filled me with dismay to contemplate trusting anyone I cared for to the rather fumbling hands of these men who were lacking both in character and efficiency.

We appear to be rediscovering some of these botchers and their work here. While acting as admissions officer I am confronted by the most extraordinary cases in the way of diagnosis. I discuss the matter with other members of the staff, and find that their experience has been the same as mine.

There is one M.O. in charge of a battalion who has become notorious for

his careless and incredible blunders. The man is either grossly ignorant or bored, perhaps both.

One morning I find a case sent in for admission by him, diagnosed as acute lumbago. The patient is collapsed, pinched, and clay coloured, and to me an obvious and acute abdominal. I bring Dartnell in to check my diagnosis. He is shocked and scornful.

“Lumbago! It’s a perforating duodenal. I’ll swear to it.”

Within an hour or so the man is operated on, and our diagnosis found to be correct. They manage to save him.

Dartnell says to me later in the common-room, “That fellow So-and-So ought to be chucked out into the street.”

But what right have I to despise any man for being inefficient and without conscience? My own conscience is none too clear. I am doing my best here, but what is the esoteric significance of my striving? Is it the work for the work’s sake, the fine frenzy of professional idealism, or am I hiding behind my work and trying to make of it a protective shell? No, I have no right to cast stones at other men, for my own glasshouse is so very fragile and transparent.

My house of glass begins to tremble.

Mary has been with me for another week-end, and we have been happy together. On the Monday, after she has gone, I hear the news. Bisgood has passed it to Macartney. Colonel Barter is to be suspended, just why nobody appears to know.

I go in to report and find him shuffling his papers in decrepit agitation. He is lachrymose, and quite lacking in dignity or reticence.

He says, “They have sacked me, Brent.”

I say that I am sorry, which is true, though my sorrow is largely selfish, and tinged with apprehension. I feel that my fate may be in strange, new, and unfriendly hands.

And I despise myself.

The new C.O. has arrived, a Field Ambulance colonel who has been invalided from France, and given a home service post. His name is Parker Steel. I go in to report and find myself in the presence of a man not much older than myself. He is very fair, very tall, very thin, with an alert and jejune face and peculiarly pale blue eyes. He is sitting behind the desk, reading a letter; he

looks up at me with a kind of cold quickness, and goes on reading. I have saluted and I stand there and wait, observing him, disliking him. Even his small fair moustache, and his long, deliberate fingers are supercilious. I feel myself to be the complete amateur, and rather like a boy dragged before the head master.

He puts down the letter, stares at me, but does not speak. His deliberate and critical poise is disconcerting. I gather that he is waiting upon his dignity for me to explain myself.

“I am the Company Officer, sir.”

His face remains cold and unfriendly. He glances at his wrist-watch.

“In future, you will report to me daily at nine o’clock.”

“Yes, sir.”

“How long have you been here?”

“About four months, sir.”

“Are you one of the home service heroes?”

“No, sir.”

He is staring at the buckle of my Sam Browne belt.

“I wish to inspect the men. You will parade them at ten. I shall also inspect kits and billets.”

“Very good, sir.”

I dislike him more and more, and I have a feeling that the antipathy is mutual.

“That is all for the moment, Mr. Brent.”

I salute and turn to go, and suddenly he calls me back.

“Has anyone ever taught you to salute?”

“No, sir.”

“Things seem to have been rather fortuitous and happy-go-lucky here. You will remind me to arrange for an officers’ parade.”

“Very good, sir.”

“I will inspect the men at ten.”

In the corridor I run into S.-M. Bisgood, but a very different Bisgood. He is in a hurry, and looking hot, angry and flustered. His blue eyes are standing out on stalks, and the complacent crown of the autocrat no longer adorns him. He gives me a peculiar look, hesitates, and with a blink of the eyes passes on. I gather that he too has been receiving shocks.

I am afraid our parades have been much too informal, friendly affairs with a roll-call and a passing inspection of buttons and chins. The good feeling between the men and myself has been such that any criticism I have had to make has taken the shape of a paternal request. I have even had smiles on

parade when I have twitted some offender.

It is a blazing August day, and already the tarred road upon which we parade outside the Company Office is feeling the heat. The men are standing at ease. Colonel Steel appears, and I call the men to attention. I turn and salute him, and in return he gives me a casual lift of the hand. His face is as cold as the morning is sultry.

He takes the parade from me.

“Stand at ease! Shun!”

The feet do not come together with a crisp and simultaneous click. There is some lagging and shuffling.

“As you were!”

His voice rasps out stimulating brevities. It is a quiet voice, but it has an edge that cuts. I realize that this parade is to be a ferocious business, and the men’s faces become wooden.

“Is Sergeant-Major Bisgood on parade?”

“No, sir.”

“Why not?”

I explain that Bisgood has been a busy satellite revolving round Colonel Barter.

“Is that so. Send a sergeant for S.-M. Bisgood.”

He proceeds to inspect the men with a merciless and minute thoroughness that is disconcerting. The sergeant who accompanies us is ordered to produce a notebook. Some twenty men need their hair cutting. Belts and buttons are not what they should be, and certain pairs of boots are a disgrace. Sergeant-Major Bisgood joins us, flushed and apologetic, but Steel ignores him. The excoriating of Bisgood is to be reserved for a more private occasion.

I share in it. When the parade has been dismissed, I and Bisgood are ordered to report at eleven o’clock in the Colonel’s office. I can appreciate the fact that Steel is a new broom sent down to sweep away the Barter cobwebs, but the symbol of the broom is not adequate. Steel suggests metal at white heat, or a pale and flaring torch. Bisgood and I stand before his desk. There is no senile screaming. His words sting.

Later, in the Common Room, I find myself involved in an atmosphere of restlessness and anger. Nearly everybody is feeling a little hot and humiliated. Old Macartney is unusually quiet. Dartnell, with his high colour and quick temper, is not to be repressed.

“Supercilious swine.”

Old Macartney reproves him. Steel is only doing his job, and it may not be an easy one. Besides, he is our commanding officer.

Malim is the only man whose toes have not suffered, but Malim is a cool customer, and inexorably efficient.

“He did not get any change out of me. I suggested that he should squint down my microscope.”

“And did he?”

“Yes.”

“Any results?”

“O, yes, I found out that he hadn’t the faintest notion of what he was looking at.”

There is a ruthlessness about this man that both frightens and impresses me. It is the first time that I have come into contact with such ruthlessness, and though I can respect it and appreciate its efficiency, I hate the man who exercises it. Sometimes it is difficult to suppress the civilian in myself. I am inwardly shaken with an anger that is tinged with fear. But I suppose these regular soldiers have their problems, and that Steel regards us as a crowd of undisciplined civies who have to be tamed.

The man is indefatigable and tireless. His strenuous pallor is deceptive. He is everywhere, in the wards and the kitchens; he even appears in the operating theatre and watches Smythe explore an abdomen. Smythe is furious about it, and says that he would like to have taken a bloody hand out of the patient’s belly and smacked Steel’s face. I am ordered to produce for inspection all my pay-books and accounts. Steel sits up with me till half-past twelve, exploring and checking figures. He tells me frankly that my handwriting is slovenly, and that I had better detail a clerk to make all the entries in the Impress Ledger. Apparently I have not understood the essential duties of an officer. It is not my business to play about with pothooks, but to supervise, stimulate, control.

I go down to Trafalgar Terrace, tired and discouraged. I feel that my peaceful days are ended, and that this man regards me as a shirker, and that I shall be bundled overseas. But can I complain? Steel is a soldier, and we are at war, and as a realist he is justified in his ruthlessness for the obtaining of results. I suppose he has ideals of his own, and he does not spare himself.

But could it not be done more kindly? Or is it necessary to exercise fear in order to compel men to face death and wounds. We are not free men any longer, and slavery is founded upon fear. If we were conscripts——? But is there any essential difference between the volunteer and the conscript when once they have been fed into the hopper of the war-machine? Why did I

surrender my freedom? Through fear. Because I was afraid of being despised by my neighbours, and was conscripted by public prejudice. Thousands of men must have been coerced by a cowardly conscience.

Bisgood stops me in the corridor with an air of almost servile yet mysterious politeness. He has become servile under the metal of Steel's tongue, and so, in a sense, have I. Men like Steel manufacture servility. I loathe myself and him for being tempted to propitiate him, as a slave may fawn before the man who holds the whip of authority.

Bisgood says to me, "Just a word, sir. If I were you I'd apply for leave."

I thank him for the hint, and realize with an inward shock that my time is running short, and that I shall soon cease to be *embusqué*. But what do I fear, death or wounds, or is it the dreadful uncertainty, the realization of one's complete helplessness, the knowledge that one can be pushed hither and thither like a piece on a board? It is the sensitive, individual I that protests and struggles.

I ask Colonel Parker Steel for leave. I feel that I am asking a favour of him, and that if he grants it it will be as a favour. My request hardly seems to command his attention. He is signing returns, and he goes on signing them.

"Take seven days while you can, Mr. Brent."

"When shall I go, sir?"

"To-morrow. I am expecting you to be warned for overseas service."

I stand hesitant.

"I suppose you cannot tell me, sir, when I shall be sent?"

He looks at me for a moment with his cold eyes.

"I have not the least idea."

Nor does he care. But why should he care, why should any man care? This war has stripped us of so many comfortable illusions, the superstition that one's individual fate seriously matters to more than two or three people. Even in this communal crowd, and in the thick of all the guff about comradeship, one is conscious of a dreadful isolation, and of a loneliness that is Arctic. My people are dead; I have a few uncles and aunts and cousins, but when blood is to be spilt, it may be no more than water.

I suppose there is no one but Mary who will care.

But what an egoist I am!

It is a day early in September, and I have opposite me in the first-class carriage a combatant officer who is also going on leave. I look at the peaceful

country, and marvel at the infinite and sweet greenness of it. There is a tinge of gold in the green. The harvest is in. I watch the cattle and the trees, and villages and isolated farms, and the pointed caps of oast-houses. I have a conviction that I am saying good-bye to all this, and that I must look at it with hungry tenderness.

But the man opposite me wants to talk. He has a soft, pink, otiose face, and facetious manner, but his eyes and hands are uneasy, and his cheerfulness is thin ice. I realize that he is just as obsessed with the war and his individual fate in it as I am. He is secretly afraid, and afraid of all sorts of things, of being killed, and perhaps of making a shameful fool of himself.

He says, "In the infantry we're such utter amateurs. It's easier for you doctors. You do know your job. We don't, and we expect to be pushed out soon."

I sympathize with him, but confess that I have felt equally bewildered, and horribly unsure of things. His eyes set in a stare. He is looking into the future.

"You know what Kitchener said about our crowd."

"What?"

"That it would be our job to tear the guts out of the Germans."

He sniggers, and his mild, fat face is utterly unferocious.

"Nice job, what! And we're as raw as unhung meat. It isn't only the bloody mess we're in for, but the bloody mess we may make of it. The C.O. and the adjutant are the only regulars in our crowd, and the C.O. is sixty-three. Sometimes I feel so horribly sure that the Huns will do the gut-pulling."

I am ceasing to feel sympathetic. I wish he would stop talking about the war. I ask him what his job is in civil life. He tells me that he is a schoolmaster. But he reverts to the great obsession.

"There is one comfort, we have a priceless little doctor man. If you are going to be smashed up, you do think of these things."

Pathetic forethought! But why had not my selfish little soul grasped the human fact that we doctors may help these poor devils who must suffer?

My companion leaves the train at Pondbridge and I wish him good luck, and travel on alone. The country is becoming dear and familiar with its high woods and secret valleys, but the empty seat opposite me retains a presence, humanity in the shape of the average man. How little of the essential savage is left in most of us! We ask neither to kill nor to be killed, and yet we are involved in this bloody and senseless butchery. I find that I have been touched, and perhaps inspired by the schoolmaster's ingenuous confession, and I so badly need inspiration. If I can feel convinced that I can help, and that my knowledge may be of use to some of these martyred men, I may attain to courage, the courage that quakes but endures.

Brackenhurst station. I lean out of the window and look for Mary, and with a sudden pang of disappointment realize that she is not there. Has my wire reached her? These tremblings of the heart-strings make one terribly exacting. I find old Sellers and his ancient fly in the station yard; he touches his hat to me.

“Glad to see you, sir.”

I gather that he has been sent to meet me, and I get into the vehicle that smells faintly of horsey things, straw and dung, the odours of the stable. Sellers wears a straw hat. He has always worn a straw hat over his whiskered face in summer ever since I remember him, and there is something both consoling and poignant in changelessness when the whole world is in flux. Sellers cracks his whip, and his horse goes clop-clopping up the hill towards the church. I see the squat stone tower and the high elms, and the profiles of cottages and houses that seem to emerge like friendly and familiar faces out of my subconscious. I pass our postman, and the vicar’s groom, and they salute me, lucky fellows who have not suffered change. I get a glimpse of old Vance in his butcher’s shop, rather like a burly red joint dressed up in blue, and busy hacking at some mass of meat with a cleaver. The elms are like ascending billows of green smoke. The cab stops outside my door, and Sellers gets down to manhandle my kit-bag. I open the familiar white door, and Sellers puts my bag inside and I pay him.

The house seems strangely silent and I had not expected silence. Is Mary in? Surely——? I hear a door open, and a maid appears. I have not seen her before. She stares at me.

“Is Mrs. Brent in?”

“Dr. Brent, sir?”

How queer not to be recognized in my own house!

“Yes. I sent a telegram.”

“Mrs. Brent asked me to say that she has been kept at the hospital, sir, but that she would be back any minute.”

I leave my kit-bag in the hall, and go through into the drawing-room and out into the garden. How familiar all this is, and yet how strange! But I am a little piqued and hurt. This coming home has meant so much to me, and Mary is not here. I wander round the garden, and sit down under the lime tree at the end of the lawn. The borders are full of flowers; the grass has been cut, and the shadow of the tree lies gently upon the mown turf. I sit there, and look about me, and watch the french window. I see the sunlight on the leaves of the vine that covers the wall.

Mary appears at the french window. She is dressed in that dark blue

uniform and a kind of cap, and to me she looks taller and thinner. I rise and go towards the house, and we meet in the middle of the lawn.

“I’m so sorry, dear; we had a convoy in, and I had to stay.”

I kiss her, not on the lips but on the cheek, for I am conscious of a cold and active cheerfulness in Mary; she has become a woman of affairs, almost an official, and liking her new authority. She is more of the matron, and less the mother, and my secret self has been such a babe at the breast.

“Did Sellers meet you?”

“Yes.”

I tell her that the garden is looking unusually lovely. Obviously, the man who gives three days a week to our garden has not yet volunteered. I find myself inwardly questioning his lack of patriotism, but, good God, am I becoming one of those who would push other men into the shambles? I remember that Carter is thirty-nine, married, and with four children. Meanwhile, the new maid appears at the window and tells us that tea is ready.

Mary is very full of her new hospital. I want to talk about my affairs, and particularly about the advent and significance of Colonel Parker Steel, but Mary is so interested in her new responsibilities that I let her talk. Surely I should be interested in what interests her? Yet I am conscious of being a little peeved, and selfishly so, for I suppose that to my wife I want to appear the hero. It is the first time that our personalities have clashed, but Mary is not aware of it, or my sense of secret hostility. Am I jealous because my wife is interested in activities that are hers and not mine?

I feel that I want to impress her. She is pouring me out a second cup of tea when I break the news that this is my last leave before going on active service. Her hand is stretched out with the cup and saucer; I see it tremble and her face change.

“O, Stephen, I didn’t know.”

I am filled with sudden remorse and shame. I have been behaving like an unpleasant child who in the passion for self-expression will hurt its mother in order to obtain raw self-satisfaction.

“I’m sorry, I ought to have warned you.”

“When is it to be, dear?”

“Any day, I think.”

“And where?”

“I don’t know. The last fellow was sent to France.”

She appears to forget all about her precious hospital, and comes and sits by me on the sofa. We are silent with the silence of two people who feel suddenly close to each other, so close that each self is inarticulate. I am still feeling

ashamed, because it is obvious to me that Mary's nature is so much more positive and generous than mine. I feel that I have played a rather mean trick on her, and that the judgment of Solomon is against myself.

She says, "It may be a hospital in France. And yet, Stephen, when I have seen these wounded men I wonder whether one ought not to want to be——"

She hesitates and I supply the words.

"In the thick of things?"

She nods, and touches my sleeve.

"Yes. I don't believe that you will be satisfied with less."

How little she knows me!

"Is that how you would feel, Mary?"

"Somehow, yes. Even if it hurt me, and terrified me, I feel I should want to share some of the danger."

"And understand it?"

"Yes."

I put my arm round her, draw her to me, and kiss her.

"Thanks, my dear. I'll remember. What you have said has helped me, perhaps more than you know."

About six o'clock I go up to see old Randall, and on the way I meet Guthrie, red and flamboyant and foolish as ever. By way of greeting me he says, "Hallo, Brent, not abroad yet?" I smile a little homicidal smile at him, and say that I expect to be sent overseas in a very few days. I feel like asking him to put his tongue out, and suggesting that he cuts off some of the whisky. It would be no more impertinent than the attitude he adopts to me.

I find Randall in the surgery. He is looking tired, and to me, older, but his face and eyes light up when he sees me.

"Hallo, Stephen, well this is good. Bring Mary round and have some supper with us."

He grips my hand hard, and his eyes are full of affection. I am glad that he does not know what a petty, self-centred little egoist I am. The outer room is full of people waiting to be seen, and I turn to and help Randall. I am still thinking over Mary's words, and the particular message they have for me. I had been more deeply moved by them than she will ever know. Who was it who said that emotion is like alcohol, in that it stimulates the animal appetites without exercising any positive effect upon our intelligent and social actions? I don't believe it. With me emotion seems to be like a flame setting one's willing of the good alight. I cannot do things coldly. I must be touched, warmed by emotion before that which is creative and consciously purposeful in me is capable of the higher courage and the more selfless striving. Is this

childishness? If so, it explains why I am rendered inert and sullen by the supercilious matureness of an intellectual adult like Parker Steel. Randall is so different, like rich, good, simple soil, and that is why I have found it easy to work with and for him.

Each day of my leave seems to pass more swiftly than its predecessor. Too much loafing encourages too much thinking, and I am coming to the conclusion that in these mass upheavals it may be more comfortable to diminish cerebration, and sink oneself in the careless crowd. War is a primitive business, and one should adapt by becoming primitive. I turn to and work, and drive round visiting some of my old patients. They are kind to me and tell me they will be glad to have me back.

My God, how I wish I was home for good, and part of this gentle English landscape, this Sussex that I love.

Randall has had no holiday, nor does a holiday for him seem possible. I suggest that he goes away for three days or so while I carry on. He smiles at me and says that he is not afraid of being tired provided that his temper remains sweet. Work is a sedative.

“Saves me from thinking too much about things I can’t alter.”

So, he too is feeling how futile it seems for any individual to attempt a solution of this riddle of the Sphinx. I suppose the only ultimate and valid solution will be the refusal of all the workers in the world to allow their old men to muddle them into war. There must be a universal strike against war. The individual who rebels is sure to be crucified. Our autocrats cannot crucify a whole continent.

On the fifth day of my leave I receive a telegram from Southcliffe.

“Report immediately.”

So, the call has come. This must mean that I am detailed for foreign service.

Mary decides to go with me. We reach Southcliffe about three o’clock in the afternoon, and drive to The Chequers and secure the same room there. I walk up to the hospital to report. The first person whom I meet is Bisgood, and he assumes a sympathetic air, and tells me that the C.O. expects me. I enter the office and salute. Steel pulls a paper towards him, and then glances at me.

“You are to report at Chester to-morrow, Brent.”

“Chester, sir?”

He pushes the order towards me, and I read it mechanically.

“Why Chester, sir?”

“For Liverpool, I expect.”

“What does that mean?”

“Gallipoli, probably.”

I am conscious of a sagging of the stomach. Gallipoli! It seems so dreadfully far and strange.

“You had better clear up everything in the Company Office to-night.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Don’t fail to report at Chester before six. It is important.”

I hurry off to the Company Office, and find Cooper alone there. He has heard the news, and appears depressed. I sit down in my chair, and suddenly there is a crash, and the splintering of glass. I start up and look round, and so does Cooper. A picture has fallen, the photograph of some pre-war group of officers and N.C.O.s that had been relegated to the Company Office. The thing has fallen on its face, and broken glass litters the floor behind my chair.

Cooper has a shocked face.

“The cord must have rotted, sir.”

I know that he is thinking of the old superstition, and I try to say something facetious. Cooper is busy picking up glass.

“I have got to clear up other things, Cooper, to-night.”

“That’s all right, sir. I’ve got everything in order for you.”

“You always have.”

I feel that I must rush down and warn my wife, and I tell Cooper that I shall be back after tea. Moreover, I have some kit to collect from No. 7, and I want to say good-bye to Bicky and Bertha, and thank them for all their kindness. As I go down the hill I realize that I need not tell Mary about Gallipoli; I can assume that I shall be detailed for Malta or Egypt.

It is nearly five o’clock when I reach The Chequers. Mary has waited for tea. She looks at me steadfastly for a moment, and then sits down on the large sofa.

“When do you go?”

“To-morrow.”

“Where?”

“Chester, for Liverpool, I think.”

Her hands lie clasped in her lap.

“Liverpool. O, Stephen, that means the Dardanelles!”

I sit down beside her.

“O, possibly. But it may be Egypt or Malta.”

We are both very unhappy. I tell her that I have to go back and clear up all

the work in the Company Office, and that she is not to wait dinner for me. She says, "Of course I shall wait. When have we to be at Chester?" Does she want to come with me on the last stage? She does, and though I know that it will mean a prolongation of the pain for us both, I want her with me to the last.

I go up to the hospital, find old Macartney and say good-bye to him. Cooper is alone in the Company Office. He has everything ready for me. I sign chits and letters, with Cooper standing by me. His manner is curiously gentle and paternal. I notice that he has cleared away the broken picture.

We finish. I push my chair back, and get up. I put out my hand to Cooper. "Good-bye, Cooper. We've been good friends here."

He wrings my hand, and I go quickly to the door. Something makes me look back. Cooper is blubbing in a corner by his pay-books.

There are a number of R.A.M.C. officers on the train to Chester, and it strikes me that we all look very new and raw. Mary and I travel with a delicate, black and white little man who also has his wife with him, and we strike up a conversation, and compel ourselves to seem cheerful. My fellow M.O.'s name is Clayton. Worry and sadness stick out of his eyes, and I feel protective towards him. He has been in uniform for just three weeks, and the situation in which he finds himself is as strange as his clothes. His outfitters have supplied him with an immense pair of brown leather field-boots, very loose in the upper part of the leg, incongruous, Charles I contraptions. Clayton keeps looking at them as though he is worried about these boots.

At Chester we all four of us crowd into a taxi and drive to the Grosvenor Hotel. It is teeming with R.A.M.C. officers. I go to the office and ask if they can let us have a double room for the night. The reception clerk seems wise as to the situation. Have I a lady with me? I have. She suggests that a single room may suffice.

Does this mean that officers are to be accommodated in barracks? I leave Mary in the lounge, and hurry out to report. I have no need to ask the way, for R.A.M.C. officers are coming and going like bees in flight to and from a hive. I find myself at the door of a semi-Gothic looking building, and go in. An orderly directs me to a room on the ground floor where an officer and clerk are sitting at tables. I salute the officer, and give my name.

He says nothing at all, but pushes across the table a scrap of paper that appears to have been torn from a piece of foolscap. On it is scribbled in pencil, "Secret. You will embark to-night at Liverpool on the *Gigantic*."

I crumple up the piece of paper and go out. It seems to me an extraordinary way of giving one an order, an order that to me is so abrupt and significant. It means that I am to leave poor Mary alone in a strange hotel. I hurry back wishing that I had not brought her with me. Surely, the official world might have a little more human understanding? But how foolish of me to feel aggrieved! Wives are accessories that cannot be trailed about on active service.

I find Mary in the crowded lounge. I suppose my wretched face betrays the bad news to her, for I see her give me a little, flinching smile.

“Is it to-night?”

“Yes. I’ll go and book your room. I’m sorry I dragged you down here.”

“But you didn’t, dear. I wanted to come.”

We dine in the hotel. The train for Liverpool leaves soon after nine. It is a dreadful dinner, mute and anguished, and I do not notice what I am eating. I have ordered a bottle of claret, but Mary hardly touches the wine. The room is crowded and noisy, and brittle with artificial excitement. Two tough-looking officers are drinking champagne at the next table. They keep glancing at us, and I feel that they think me an uxorious sop to have brought my wife with me. Damn them! More than one man in the room has had more drink than is good for him. I see Clayton in a corner looking like a lost child.

Dinner is over, and we sit in the lounge. I find myself looking at the clock. This waiting is unbearable. Mary is very white and still, and I realize that I am making her suffer.

“I think I had better be going. Don’t come to the station.”

She gives me a poignant look. She is grateful to me for understanding that she cannot bear much more and retain her self-control. She comes with me to the lounge entrance. We kiss, and turn quickly away. I cannot bear to look at her again.

I find Clayton in the vestibule. He too is alone. He tells me that he has ordered a taxi, and offers me a lift.

“Thanks, old man, I will.”

I am glad of Clayton, and he is glad of me. As the taxi moves off he says, “I hope I shall never see that damned hotel again.”

At Chester station the platform is crowded with R.A.M.C. officers and their kit, and quite a number of them are drunk. Clayton and I withdraw to a quiet part of the platform. His eyes are infinitely sad, yet scornful.

“What swine, Brent, what swine!”

Liverpool. Clayton and I are tramping along a quay, with a couple of amateur porters carrying our kit. It is very dark and dim. I see nothing but

granite setts and railway lines, and a few obscure gas-lamps. Other men are making their way along the quay, most of them like silent ghosts. I hear the clatter of boots on the granite setts. Someone behind us is noisy and intoxicated and begins to sing.

“She wore a wreath of roses
And no knickers on her legs!”

He is told to shut up, and becomes argumentative and quarrelsome.

I see Clayton’s face in the light of a lamp. It is bleached and strained.

Something vast and black and cliff-like looms up. We are approaching a large open building that appears to be all pillars and roof. The vast blackness is the side of a ship. I see gangways, and piles of baggage, and a few Tommies sitting on their kits. A voice shouts instructions in this great hollow building. “Report at the office, gentlemen, for cabins.”

There is a stampede towards the office at the far end of the great shed. Our draft of R.A.M.C. officers becomes a mob. It is like a crowd trying to rush the gates of a football ground. An elderly major who appears to be in charge of the embarkation shed tries to restore order and decency. He shouts indignantly, “Gentlemen, gentlemen, remember you are officers.” But his protests have no effect, and Clayton and I stand and watch the scrimmage outside the office. It is like a hospital rag indulged in by men who have reverted to irresponsible loutishness. We wait until the scramble is over, for neither of us has any desire to share in it. With a few others of the more tame or more sensitive members of the flock we approach the office.

The elderly officer who has tried to instil decency and discipline into this crowd of doctors is standing in the doorway. He smiles at us, but I divine in him an anger and contempt that are not appeased.

He speaks to the N.C.O. who is handing out cabin numbers.

“Now that the others have stampeded, we will attend to the gentlemen.”

It is a case of virtue rewarded. The worst cabins have been assigned to the pushers and the greedy. Clayton and I find ourselves in a three berth and outside cabin. We have asked to be together, and we have the cabin to ourselves.

Clayton sits down on his bed, and takes off his haversack. He looks infinitely weary.

He says, “What a business, Brent. It seems strange that men should want to be drunk and rowdy on a night like this.”

I unhitch my haversack and hang it on a hook.

“It seems to have been one of those rare cases when pushing doesn’t pay.”

Clayton bends over and looks at his boots.

“Why did I buy these damned things? Do you know, Brent, I thought that it was all going to be so different.”

V

FOR two days I am dreadfully sick. This huge, beast of a boat seems to roll with a horrible and rhythmic persistence. I lie in my bunk and do not care what happens to me or the war or humanity. I am quite shamelessly bed-ridden. Clayton is not sick at all, but he tells me for my comfort that the *Gigantic's* troop-decks, there are seven of them, are a shambles of disconsolate khaki and vomit. Were we to be attacked and torpedoed not half the men would ever get to their boat-stations. Would it matter? If they are feeling like I am they might almost bless the Hun and his submarine.

My steward, a brisk, perky little man, brings me in things on trays and takes them away again. Everything seems to creak, and jingle, and roll. Clayton's greatcoat, hanging on a hook, swings to and fro as though mocking me. I hate that coat, but I am nearer tears than curses. What bloody use shall I be in a war?

It is the third morning. Clayton has gone to breakfast. The steward comes in briskly, and with an air of authority.

"You can get up, sir, now."

He has tea and toast, and I protest, but he is firm, and I feel he despises me.

"You will feel much better if you get up, sir. We are out of the rough stuff."

I drink the tea, eat the toast, sit on the edge of my bunk, and feel nauseated and giddy. But I must make an effort. I make that effort and feel better and better. I manage to shave, and my morale improves. The steward was right. In an hour I am on deck and feeling the sea wind on my face.

We pass Gibraltar at night, and see nothing but a vague swelling against the sky. We are in the Mediterranean. Sunny, serene weather. We have no duties to perform. We sit about and read, and walk the decks. We are sumptuously fed, and waited upon by white-coated stewards. The wine, if you order it, is iced. It seems incredible that one should be going to a war in this luxury liner.

A G.O.C.'s parade. There are nearly a hundred R.A.M.C. officer reinforcements on the *Gigantic*, and we parade at our boat stations. We are a strange crowd, not only raw in our discipline but in our manners. One large man near me is smoking a calabash pipe and carrying a walking-stick. The G.O.C. and his staff appear, and the regular officer in charge of us calls us to attention. There is a sort of casual, shuffling response. The large man is still puffing cheerfully at his pipe. I can see the G.O.C.'s face. It is a pleasant, ruddy face. Fortunately the great man has a sense of humour. He is amused by this hotch-potch crowd of medicos.

He says, "Gentlemen, I do not smoke on parade, and I do not expect you to."

The pipe and odd cigarettes are put away. We are inspected with paternal tolerance. I wonder what this great gentleman must think of our sense of the fitness of things, or our lack of it. Even Clayton's ridiculous boots are passed over without comment. We are just doctors, and very raw at that.

Clayton says to me afterwards, "What a crowd! Did you see that fellow with the pipe? If a man can be as stupid and as insensitive as all that, what can he give to his patients?"

I admit that one has not much cause to be proud of some of the members of the profession.

We get glimpses of the mysterious African coast; sometimes it is grey blue or grey purple. If one could only land and linger there? Now, there is nothing but sea, a crumpled, sun-polished vastness. I feel cut off from everything even in this crowded troop-ship. We have some five thousand men on board, five thousand strangers. My little self refuses to merge itself in this mass of humanity. I am horribly homesick, and conscious of a sense of tension. Even the assumption of cheerfulness conceals what I know to be anxiety and secret fear. Every hour this huge ship is carrying us nearer and nearer to our crisis.

Gossip has it that we are to share in the last and final push towards Constantinople.

In the dining-saloon I sit between Clayton and a bumptious little man from Yorkshire named Cosser, who seems to regard the whole affair as a cynical joke. He persists in asserting that we are bound for Alexandria, and that whatever may be the fate of the combatants on board we doctors are intended for hospital work in Egypt. I gather that Cosser, who is young and unmarried, does not care a damn what may happen to the combatants. But do I? Yes, for when I watch some of these lads parading the decks I am filled with profound pity.

We pick up the crew of a French collier that has been torpedoed earlier in the day. We crowd the rails and watch the ship's boat come alongside. There are about a dozen men in it, a rough-looking lot in strange clothes. The captain is a fat, sallow little man with a pointed black beard. The *Gigantic* seems stuck in water that oozes round her like dark oil. Cosser is beside me, and he remarks, "Damned silly stopping like this for a boat-load of pirates. If that submarine is anywhere about, we are giving her a sitting target." A part of me may agree with Cosser, but I am glad that we have rescued those French sailors.

They are aboard, and the ship is gathering speed. The Frenchmen's white boat has been left adrift on the blue water. I watch it for a long while, looking rather like a white bird afloat on the sea.

We are attacked. I am sitting in a deck-chair reading when the syren sends out its poignant, urgent blasts. I realize that, contrary to orders, I have left my life-belt in the cabin. I rush downstairs. The whole ship seems to be crawling with khaki, like some insect nest that has been disturbed, but all this multitudinous movement is soundless. I snatch my jacket and run back along the corridor. I have a glimpse of a broad staircase below packed with a solid mass of men all struggling upwards like brown grease oozing out of a tube. I notice their white, tense faces all straining up towards the light. I get a feeling of compressed and struggling anguish, of life trapped below and fighting its way up into the air. I reach our parading place and find Clayton. He fastens on my jacket for me. Nearly all of us are here. A machine-gun crew is getting its gun into position just in front of us by the rails. I am aware of the great ship throbbing, and straining as though some fierce pressure were being put upon her. We are turning. The man squatting behind the machine-gun pushes his cap back, laughs, and cocks out his elbows.

A gun fires. I feel something jump inside me. It is as though a tense cord had been let go with a vibrant twang. Clayton is next me, and I feel him wince. Someone says, "That's one of our guns." I stand in a strange stillness, watching the machine-gun crew. They are a fair-haired lot, young yeomen, and they appear to be enjoying the show.

How extraordinarily silent everything is, almost like the hush before dawn.

The silence continues. We stand there in the sunlight waiting for the shock of an explosion. Sea and sky are completely peaceful. The *Gigantic* appears to have turned almost in her own length, and we can see the track of her wash like the trail of an immense sea-serpent. We are steaming at full speed in the

direction from which we have come. We wait, and nothing happens. I meet Clayton's eyes and we smile at each other.

The ship's siren warns us that the emergency is over, and that we can break ranks. The machine-gun crew clear away their gun. One fair-haired lad laughs and says, "No luck!" I am very glad there was no luck. At dinner that evening the news goes round that we stumbled upon an Austrian submarine and that the surprise was mutual. We fired at her, and she submerged, and launched a torpedo that missed us by five yards.

I go to sleep that night with my life-belt lying ready to hand on the floor beside my bunk.

Mudros. It is early in the morning, a calm, opalescent day, with a suggestion of faint mist, and the sea like glass. We steam slowly into the great harbour which resembles an immense lake surrounded by rocky hills. The place is packed with ships, cruisers, battleships, freighters, transports. I am not a master of fine writing, and I cannot describe adequately the significance and splendour of this scene. The water is very blue, the shore the colour of a lion's skin. Some of the nearer hills are a goldish green, the most distant grey and black. I notice a row of quaint windmills on a ridge. We pass a French transport packed with French colonial troops, and we cheer and wave to each other.

Clayton is at my elbow, and his face has a gentle melancholy.

"Rather marvellous!"

"Amphibious might," and as I utter the words I feel that I have descended to journalistic claptrap, for, to me this Greek island and its assembled ships are embalmed in a great sadness. Somehow I divine failure. Or is this feeling of futility in the midst of the pageant of power a personal mood? My glance rests on a white hospital ship with her red cross like a bloody symbol splashed upon her side.

Clayton speaks softly.

"Well, now we know, Brent. No corn in Egypt for us," and then he adds, "Perhaps we shall get letters here."

Letters from home, a letter from my wife! God, how far away England seems! The greenness of England in September! And suddenly I loathe this Greek island with a profound and bitter loathing. I have no spirit of adventure in me; I do not want to land and explore. A kind of dreadful apathy descends upon me, a feeling of fatalism. I am not free to choose, and I shall sit and wait for the fate others will impose upon me.

We are at anchor. Nothing seems to be happening, and there are no orders for us. We hear that the regular R.A.M.C. captain who is in charge of us is mysteriously sick in his cabin, and that a temporary captain has gone off to report.

I lean on the rail and watch a small motor-launch draw up to the side. It is in charge of an Australian soldier in khaki drill and a slouch hat. His bare knees, arms, neck and face are burnt to a wonderful colour. He looks so clean, and capable and tough that I feel a gutless, flabby, tame creature. This man is a veteran. There is nothing in me that can compare with him. I shall never make a soldier.

At dinner the stewards apologize for the absence of ice. All the ice has gone to the hospital ships. Do they expect us to feel aggrieved?

Word is passed along the tables that we are to assemble in the library after dinner. The cynical Cosser, as usual, appears to possess private information.

“They didn’t expect us, hadn’t been notified! A consignment of a hundred or so doctor men nicely packed in a crate! Don’t know what to do with us! Funny, isn’t it?”

After dinner we gather in the library. The temporary captain who is now in charge of us, stands behind a table and explains the situation. I notice that he has a number of slips of paper on the table, and I am reminded of the incident at Chester.

“Gentlemen, you are to be allowed to detail yourselves for duty either at Helles, Anzac or Suvla on the peninsula, or at Mudros. Will each officer please write on a slip of paper where he wishes to go, and return the slip to me.”

We look at each other. This seems a very peculiar and unfair way of saddling us with the responsibility. Clayton and I collect our slips of paper and withdraw to a table. We decide to put ourselves down for Helles, and hope to remain together. I am aware of other men with worried faces sitting hesitant before signing their own fate.

Someone says, “Well, I call this the limit! We have volunteered, and the people who should give us orders funk it, and tempt us to funk it.”

We hand in our slips of paper and make our way to the smoking-room. I run up against Cosser. I ask him how any man with any sense of honour could put himself down to stay behind at Mudros. Cosser looks sheepish, and says nothing. It leaks out later that forty per cent, or so have volunteered to remain behind at Mudros, and that Cosser is one of these heroes.

We are warned at breakfast to be ready to embark with our kits for Helles at eleven o’clock. Clayton has paid a hurried visit to the Ordnance Depot ship,

and contrived to supply himself with a pair of boots and officer's puttees to replace his monstrous field-boots. We who are for Helles parade at 10.40. There are about thirty of us, and I notice that Sanders, a very large and fat fellow, has an equally large revolver in his holster. We chip him about it, but he insists on wearing the revolver. What the devil does he expect to do with it? A small steamer attaches herself to the bulk of the *Gigantic*. We have to manhandle our own kits on board her, for we appear to be nobody's children. We share this boat with a crowd of infantry reinforcements. Our little steamer casts off, and we suppose that the great adventure has begun, but not a bit of it. She transfers herself to the flank of another ship, the famous *Aragon* where the staff reside, and we remain attached peacefully to the *Aragon* for three hours.

Clayton and I go below in search of lunch. In the small saloon we find other officers interviewing a laconic person in shirt sleeves who is busy in what was once the pleasure-boat's bar. The laconic person assures us that there is no food to be had on board. The crew alone is catered for officially.

"Haven't you gents got your rations?"

In our innocence we have not thought of such casual things, and no one has troubled to think of them for us. Sanders, the fellow with the revolver, produces money, and shows it.

"Here, you can manage bacon and eggs."

The laconic person turns his back on us.

"Nothing doing."

The contrasts of active service strike me as humorous. Iced wine and a table d'hôte dinner one evening, and empty stomachs the next. Clayton and I go on deck and compare resources. He has a packet of chocolate; I have nothing. He gives me half his chocolate. The infantry have their rations, but we unwise virgins must suffer empty bellies.

We leave Mudros harbour late in the afternoon, and we sit and watch its mountains sink below the horizon. The sea is very calm, but we raw civilians begin to suffer from inward qualms. It is ridiculous how hungry one can feel when there is nothing to eat. Clayton goes exploring. He comes back to tell me that he has seen a couple of slices of bread on a shelf in the cuddy. We look at each other guiltily. Can we disgrace ourselves by an attempt to pinch that bread?

I go and look. I can see no bread; nothing but empty shelves. I return to Clayton and break the news to him. He smiles whimsically.

"Well, that puts us out of the way of temptation. Someone else has fallen before us."

A rhapsodical sunset ushers in the dusk, but we are not at all interested in the sunset. The sky's gastric membranes may flush, but ours are starved and

pale. We go down to the saloon, but the place is in darkness, for we are allowed no lights. We sit in the darkness. I am aware of Clayton getting up and gliding off like a ghost. Presently he comes back to me and whispers.

“I’ve found something.”

He takes me to where a crowd of Tommies are sprawling on the deck. A half-empty barrel stands against the wall of a deck-house. Clayton dips into it; so do I. We sneak away each with a handful of broken ration biscuits. That is our dinner. We sit and crunch them. I hear Clayton say, “How one’s social morality wilts after half a day’s starvation!”

It is a night of black velvet pricked with stars; the sea is black silk, the silence utter, save for the boat’s movement through the water. I have heard no orders given as to silence, but no one on board seems to be talking. It is a ghostly business, and the night air is growing cold. Clayton and I have put on our coats and are leaning over the ship’s rail, watching the water slide by like a sheet of black glass. I am conscious, not only of hunger, but of a feeling of inward tension, for, in an hour or two we shall be treading a shore that has become terrible and historic. Helles! There is beauty in the name, but I wonder what beauty I shall find in this tragic land.

Clayton speaks to me.

“I hope we shall be able to keep together.”

I feel his sleeve touching mine. He is such a fragile, sensitive creature that I wonder how he will stand the strain of active service. And how shall I?

“I suppose we shall be attached to some field ambulance. Do you know anything about ambulance work, Brent?”

“Very little. But I suppose one soon has one’s face rubbed in reality.”

We become aware of movement on board, voices, the stirring of men to whom something has become visible in the darkness. We see lights, like pin-holes in black cardboard, hundreds and hundreds of yellow pricks. We are puzzled. A shadowy figure joins us. We ask it to explain all those strange lights. He is an officer who has been wounded and who is being returned to duty.

“That’s the nightly candle show at Helles.”

“But are lights allowed?”

“Those are lights in the dug-outs along the cliffs.”

The land looms nearer, dimly substantial. Our steamer oils her way in to what appears to be an improvised quay. She ties up, and we wait for orders to disembark. The night is strangely silent, secret and surreptitious. No gunfire, nothing. An officer comes on board and tells us that we are not to disembark before the morning.

We all gather in the saloon where someone has lit a candle. Where do we sleep? O, where we can. There is a scramble for places. Clayton and I lie down on a saloon table with our haversacks under our heads. Tables and seats are all requisitioned. Will it be possible to sleep on this hard board, with hunger active inside me? There are uneasy stirrings, heavings, sighs of resignation.

I begin to feel drowsy. Someone starts to snore with catastrophic and complacent energy. A man on the bench behind me curses the snorer.

“Damn that fellow!”

But the fellow goes on snoring. I lie very still and try to will myself to go to sleep. I want to sleep, to forget. I remember that I have been constipated for two days, and had meant to take a pill. Well, I suppose that is reality!

I wake soon after dawn, stiff, depressed and hungry, and through the saloon window I get my first daylight glimpse of Gallipoli, an improvised pier, sand, brown earth, piles of stores, a few figures in khaki. Everything but the water seems to be some tint of brown. The saloon is full of uneasy awakenings. We are a towsled, morose crowd. There appears to be no chance of our washing or shaving, for we have not so much as a tin mug between us.

We are ordered ashore. It is a serene and sunny morning, the sea like glass. Our kits are brought off for us, and Clayton and I sit on our valises close to a pile of stores. I am beginning to feel faint and giddy with hunger, and Clayton’s face is like the face of a corpse. How we soft civilians wilt after a day’s semi-starvation! No one takes any notice of us. We sit and wait, and watch our steamer being unloaded. My head begins to ache.

Someone who is irritable with hunger begins to swear.

“Well, this is a bloody sort of side-show. We might be sacks of potatoes. What the hell do they expect us to do?”

The irritable person storms off towards an officer who appears to be supervising the landing of stores. We watch them. The irritable person comes back.

“He says we had better report to Corps Headquarters. It’s up above there somewhere.”

Leaving our kits we climb the low, brown cliff by a dusty track that brings us to a plateau that is scarred and pock-marked with trenches and holes. We see the white tents of a hospital away on our right, and in the distance, beyond the soundless sea, the coast of Asia. We have been put ashore at Lancashire Landing. We stumble about, searching for authority, and I feel that I am going to be sick. The irritable person continues to be our guide and energizer. He accosts a Tommy who looks at us without interest, but who puts us on our way.

We come suddenly upon Corps Headquarters secreted in a kind of rabbit-

warren, a series of underground shanties. The D.D.M.S.'s office is our goal. We find it, and stand crowded together in mute and hungry depression. A staff-officer comes out and looks at us.

“Who and what are you?”

The irritable person informs him that we are officer reinforcements, and that our principal interest is breakfast, and a shave. I gather that our arrival is unexpected, and somewhat unwelcome.

“Better not hang about up there. Come down and I'll take your names. Then you can go across to the hospital and see if they can feed you.”

He takes our names, and tells us to report later for orders. We leave him smoking a cigarette and looking vaguely amused. I suppose we must appear a somewhat grotesque and helpless lot to a man who is neat and shaved and in authority. We tramp across to the white tents and marquees of the hospital. I hear someone say, “What the hell are we doing here? No one seems to want us.” My head is beginning to crack, and I am sick with hunger, and this strange brown world seems to heave under my feet. But the hospital takes immediate pity on us, and with an efficiency that salves our souls. An officer comes out to meet us. He seems to understand our case. We are told to squat, and that breakfast will be improvised for us. Some of us cheer.

Breakfast. We crowd into a marquee, and sit on benches at a trestle table. There is bully beef, bread, marmalade, strong tea. Never has the animal in me been so unashamedly gross and greedy. My headache departs. We sit in silence, gorging. I see the colour come back to blanched faces. Clayton, who is next me, gives a sigh like a surfeited schoolboy.

“Afraid I can't manage any more.”

Gorgeous sense of repletion! We light pipes and cigarettes and become genial. I remember my constipation, and my urge is to relieve it. Everybody's urge seems to be towards the latrines.

Corps Headquarters has decided upon our fate. Clayton and I are to be separated, though, when giving in our names we had asked, if possible, to be sent to the same unit. I suppose these obscure friendships cannot be recognized in a war. I and fat Sanders of the revolver are to report to the A.D.M.S. of the North Lancs Division; Clayton is to become a Scotsman and to serve with the 52nd. Our staff-officer informs us that motor-ambulances will be evacuating cases to the hospital, and that they will provide us with transport to our respective divisions.

We walk back to the hospital and sit down on the brown soil in the sun. The hospital has sent orderlies to collect our kit. I am sorry to be separated

from Clayton, for we understand each other and are sympathetic towards each other's idiosyncrasies.

"I think that damned fellow might have listened to us."

Clayton gives me a wise and whimsical look.

"I am discovering, old man, that one should not get involved in a war unless one is able to exercise some sort of authority."

Sanders and I are making our first journey into this fantastic world, a world of dust and of dun-coloured earth and shabby scrub and heather. Looking back from the ambulance as through a spacious window we can see the sea and Asia, and the brown road, a few miserable olive trees, and a disorder of shallow trenches and holes roofed with ground-sheets, and men in grey shirts and brown trousers or shorts loafing in the sun. The road follows the line of the cliff, but at a little distance from it, and the ambulance rolls and bumps. I look at my valise and am struck by the thought that that green thing has known the interior of my English home, and has travelled all this way with me. I regard it as a mute and melancholy friend.

Helles seems all sunlight and silence. I have not yet heard the sound of a gun.

"There doesn't seem much war on," says Sanders.

The ambulance descends the spirals of a hill, and we find ourselves close to the sea, and near the mouth of a huge cleft in the plateau. The ambulance stops and the orderly comes round to tell us that we have arrived. He is an undersized Lancashire lad with a swollen and bumpy forehead and an infantile face. He points out Divisional Headquarters to us at the mouth of the Great Gully. It reminds me of the descriptions of some ancient, monkish settlement in an Egyptian desert. We climb a narrow, winding path and arrive at the office of the A.D.M.S. It suggests a home-made fowl house tucked into an earthy recess, with open windows looking towards the sea.

A grey-haired officer with a pleasant, weather-worn face is sitting at a rough table made of boards laid upon ammunition boxes. He is without his cap and going bald. He looks at us with shrewd, kind eyes as we salute and stand waiting in the doorway. I am aware of innumerable flies, and of an orderly clattering away at a typewriter. I see the colonel glance at Sanders's revolver, and smile far back in his cool blue eyes.

"Come in, gentlemen."

We present our order. He reads it, eyes us kindly but critically, and asks us what experience we have had. We confess to our lack of experience, and again I see him glance at Sanders's revolver. That, at all events, should be a symbol

of Sanders's utter and infantile greenness.

"Hirst."

"Yes, sir?"

"Draft a letter to Colonel Frost of the 3rd. Say that Lieutenants Brent and Sanders are to be attached to his ambulance for training and duty."

"Very good, sir."

"And send someone down with these officers to Colonel Frost's headquarters."

"Yes, sir."

Our guide takes us back to the sea and an embryo pier. We turn to the right along an earth road that runs between the sea, and the immediate and tawny cliffs. The 3rd North Lancs Field Ambulance is located about a hundred yards along this dirt track. I see a cookhouse, stores, a sandbagged structure roofed with tarpaulins, and cut in the cliff tiers of little terraces carrying rude shelters and dug-outs. Between the sandbagged structure and the store-shed is a narrow, oblong space with a table and benches, and covered in with canvas. On its side towards the road it is open to the sea.

Three officers are sitting at the rough table in this recess, and to me all three of them have a bleached look like fabric that has been exposed too long to the sun. Their drill tunics and shorts, and their shirts and collars are a light, biscuit colour. Their faces give me the impression of having lost their sun-tan and become waxy and almost corpse-like. Even their eyes are pale. These men strike me as being profoundly discouraged and cynical and tired. They look at us with silent unfriendliness. I notice that the enamelled plates and mugs on the table are chipped and shabby, and that this miserable little mess is swarming with flies.

We salute, and I present the A.D.M.S. chit to the man who is nearest to me, and who by his badges I know must be Colonel Frost. He has a broadish face, hair the colour of sand, pale eyes that are neither green nor blue. It is a hard face with a compressed mouth, and broad nostrils. I notice that everything about him is meticulously neat and clean, and I gather that whatever he has suffered, the surface of him is like polished alabaster.

He reads the order, lays it beside his plate, sniffs, and looks at us cursorily and with cold eyes. I see him glance at Sanders's revolver, and his nostrils spread. The two junior officers are spooning up rice and tinned apricots, and their interest in us seems perfunctory. One of them has a sallow, baby face; the other is lean and dark with very intelligent eyes.

There is a pause, an unfriendly silence, and we wait there self-consciously. I get the impression that we are regarded as unwelcome strangers thrust upon a close community of three.

Frost sniffs at us. It appears to be a habit of his, and not a method of expression.

“No previous experience, I suppose?”

“No, sir.”

“Had lunch?”

“No.”

Frost shouts for Smart. He has a rather high-pitched, metallic voice, a voice that produces hasty obedience in other men. Smart is the mess-orderly, a frightened, puffy lad who looks as though he had suffered from adenoids as a child.

“Lunch for two officers.”

Smart looks at us blankly and disappears. We are not asked to sit down, but we insinuate ourselves into the narrow space and squat at the shady end of the table. The wall on that side is soil. Smart comes back, and speaking as though he had a marble in his mouth, asks for our mess-plates. We explain that we have none. Frost sniffs.

“Find something, Smart.”

“Yessir.”

We sit in embarrassed silence, and I feel that it is paradoxical that we should have travelled all these hundreds of miles to find ourselves so unwelcome to other Englishmen. Are we regarded as useless and untrained intruders? Smart reappears with two battered plates, and upon each plate a cube of bully-beef, and a slice of bread. We have nothing to drink out of, and no knives and forks. Frost has lit a cigarette and sits sniffing its aroma. He appears aloofly conscious of our lack of experience and of such necessities as knives and forks. I feel that he wishes us to realize how raw we are.

The dark man with the intelligent eyes becomes suddenly restless.

“Smart.”

“Sir?”

“Didn’t Captain Jordan and Mr. Homes leave their mess things behind?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, hunt them out.”

Colonel Frost stares sharply at my neighbour. There seems to be some tension between these two, but the colonel gets up, walks across the earth road to the beach and stands gazing at the sea. He is a well-built and powerful person, with a compact neck over which his hair grows in crisp little tufts. Are these other men afraid of him? I glance at my new friend whose name is Makins, and smile faintly. He returns the smile.

“Things are a bit tight here.”

“So it seems. Everything is rather new to us.”

“O, you’ll soon find out.”

Smart reappears with mugs, and knives and forks, meanwhile, I keep moving the flies off my bully beef. The baby-faced officer has been studying us across the table. He has what I should describe as an expression of perpetual fear concealed beneath a surface of cheerful cheekiness.

“Either of you play Bridge?”

“We both play Bridge.”

“Well, that’s something in your favour.”

Colonel Frost returns from contemplating the impersonal calmness of the sea. I am to discover all sorts of unexpected qualities in this hard-faced man. He drops the end of his cigarette into a tin that serves as an ash-tray, sniffs, and curtly addresses Sanders.

“Which one are you?”

“I’m Sanders, sir.”

“Very well, Mr. Sanders, when you have finished your lunch you will throw that toy pistol of yours into the sea.”

Sanders looks up at him as though eager to propitiate him and to share the joke against himself, but Frost is not joking.

“I don’t want the men laughing at an officer.”

He walks off, and Sanders, suddenly deflated, asks Makins a question.

“Do I really have to do that?”

Roberts of the baby face grins at him.

“Better do it before he asks you whether you have done it.”

Sanders says, “Well, I’m damned,” but he extracts that absurd weapon from his belt, and going down to the beach, tosses the thing into the sea.

VI

So, this is Gallipoli!

I have been handed over to Makins to be lodged and lectured. Makins takes me up a path to a row of small sandbagged and tin-roofed dug-outs strung along a narrow terrace cut in the cliff. Three of these dug-outs are vacant, and Makins puts me into the one next to his. My kit is carried up by two R.A.M.C. privates, and I find that there is just room for my camp-bed, and space to stand beside it.

I ask Makins to show me the latrine. He points out a structure like a sentry-box perched just below our terrace, open to the sea and the gaze of men. Have I got to sit there? I decide to make the experiment after dark. Makins squats on my camp-bed while I unpack. There are some shelves in the dug-out. Makins both interests and attracts me; he has an air of strained courage and of laconic and almost bitter candour.

“Care for a walk before tea?”

A walk? Does one go for country walks on active service? But, perhaps he has been ordered to show me round and get me hardened off.

“I have to go up to our A.D.S. in the Gully. Roberts is on duty here.”

“It seems very quiet. Are there many wounded?”

“We get about three a day. Scores come down with dysentery and epidemic jaundice, and trench sores.”

“Have you been here long?”

“Since May. I was off for six weeks. A shrapnel bullet through the thigh.”

I look at him with increased respect, and perhaps I begin to understand why he appears so thin and strained, but I have more to learn of the why and the wherefore. As to any illusions I may have had with regard to a last and splendid offensive that will carry us to Constantinople, they too can be considered as food for the flies. Makins tells me that this is a dead show, a tragic and muddled adventure that has become sick and stagnant. He says, “We had our chances, and we chucked them away. We just squat here and wait for dysentery and jaundice. You may as well know.”

I see Colonel Frost and Sanders below in a little space under the cliff where three tents are pitched. Sanders’s kit is being carried into one of the tents, and I wonder why he has not been given one of these dug-outs. Makins, too, is watching Frost with a queer look in his eyes.

“See that?”

“You mean the C.O. and Sanders?”

“Quite so. Well, never mind. One of those tents means a trial trip. I expect Sanders is being taken for a walk.”

The significance of the suggestion eludes me, but wisdom comes to me later. Meanwhile, a curious and dreamy expression has settled on the face of my new friend; he is looking out across the sea with a smile that one might see on the face of a woman.

“That’s Imbros over there. Rather lovely. You should see her when she is flushed with the dawn.”

I divine in this other man a poignant craving for beauty, and the things that are not soiled by blood and dust and flies.

We start on our walk, meeting a crowd of men carrying towels, two companies of infantry on a bathing parade. Some of the men look cheerful, others sullen and sick. Makins eyes them with hostility. “That means we shall not be able to sit on our beach for a day.” I ask him why, and he answers curtly, “Lice.” Near the derelict pier a stone incinerator is consuming rubbish, empty tins and the like, and its sour reek is to become associated in my mind with this accursed country. We turn into the Great Gully which cuts its way like a canyon into the yellow-brown plateau. Its walls are earth cliffs or steep slopes covered with scrub. Men live in and upon these cliffs, and the gully itself is packed with horses and mules, transport, and stores, tents, rude shelters and huts, latrines, cookhouses. Its sandy bottom, which forms the road, is in wet weather a watercourse. The great cleft wriggles like a snake. Sometimes we are in the sunlight sometimes in deep shadow. It is very hot and stuffy in this gully and flies swarm.

A sudden rushing menacing sound overhead, and something bursts on the right-hand cliff. I am aware of Makins ducking with a kind of cringing movement. I glance at him quickly, and he looks pinched and angry. I gather that his shrinking from the sound of the shell was involuntary, a kind of reflex action. My first shell, and I have not flinched. I feel a little pleased with myself, but am moved to wonder whether I shall flinch like Makins when I have had more experience of shells. Also, I suppose that when a man has been wounded he may become more jumpy. Is the veteran idea another illusion?

Makins quickens his pace.

“Searching for our howitzers up there.”

His long lean brown legs are like wires, and I find it difficult to keep up with him in this sand and the heat. I am flabby and out of condition. His face has a fierce and hunted look. Why, if he feels like this, are we taking this absurd walk? I ask him, and he answers me almost rudely.

“O, for the good of one’s soul. One can’t cringe under a cliff. Besides, it’s an order. Someone has to visit the A.D.S. each day.”

Another shell comes over, and there is a strange sneer on my new friend’s face.

“Doesn’t seem to worry you.”

“Not exactly. I’m innocent perhaps.”

“Well, it’s only Abdul’s bloody shrapnel. Wait till you’ve been near an eight-inch H.E.”

He seems to be walking faster than ever, and suddenly he whips a question at me.

“What do you think of Frost?”

How am I to answer such a question? but there is no need for me to answer it, for words come seething from Makins’s mouth.

“He’s a devil, a devil with no fear. The one man I’ve never seen afraid. But that’s not fair. He’s a great man in his way, the best ambulance officer in this show. But, my God, to serve under a man who is never afraid! It whips one, it scorches one. It’s hell.”

I am shocked by his vehemence.

“No fear?”

“Exactly.”

“Does it make a man cruel?”

But Makins is breathing in little gasps, the breathing, not of mere exhaustion, but of fierce emotion.

“O, what a mean swine I am! War can make one so filthily mean. No, Frost’s not cruel. He’s never afraid. He’s damnably efficient. He insists and quite rightly on us being full of guts and efficiency. He’s right, utterly right. But, my God, it does tear one to tatters having to live up to such a standard. I’m sorry. Perhaps I shouldn’t have said this to you, but perhaps it’s as well.”

I am sweating and out of breath.

“Thanks. I’m glad to know.”

“O, you’ll soon know many things. The humiliations, the self-shame, the hatreds, the wretched little funk in you that wants to cringe. Sometimes I wish I could shoot my own damned pride. Well, we’re here.”

A crumpled edge of earth projects into the gully. We climb a zig-zagging path, and suddenly find ourselves in a minor gully that ends most queerly in an almost circular cutting in the cliff. It is as though a torrent had cut a huge pot-hole out of the rock, and left it dry. A tent is pitched in this cool corner. I see a sandbagged dressing-station and men’s quarters farther to the right. The sandy soil muffles our footsteps, and we surprise the two occupants of the tent. Both

of them are lying on their camp-beds, one reading, the other asleep.

“Hallo, Mac!”

The officer who is asleep wakes up with a kind of groan.

“Hell! O, damn you, Mac; I was dreaming. Such a dream about a girl.”

I am introduced to Milsom and Sturges. Milsom is a pleasant-faced, thin, brown lad, Sturges, spectacled and stocky. I hear a sound of water dripping, and the place is exquisitely cool. I take off my cap; I am sweating, but Makins, in spite of the tearing pace he has set, looks dry as parchment.

“Have a drink?”

“Better stay for tea. How’s Brighton by the Sea?”

But Makins, though sitting on an ammunition box, is still restless, and I feel that I have nothing to say to these young veterans in their drill knickers and bleached shirts.

“No, thanks, got to get back. If there isn’t a Bridge four after tea, the war will stop.”

Milsom laughs. He has fine white teeth.

“How much did he lose last night?”

“About a thousand.”

“I know I got sent up here because I’m such a bloody fool at cards. Play Bridge, Brent?”

“Yes.”

“Cultivate it and you’ll be popular.”

Makins asks them if there is anything they want in the way of medical stores. Milsom laughs again and tells Makins that he would like a supply of romantic love. I like Milsom; he is debonair and comely. Sturges looks too dour and professional. Makins gets up, and standing in the doorway of the tent, seems to be listening. There are no flies in this cool, dim place. Again I am aware of the drip of water.

“You will be washed out of here one night.”

Milsom laughs.

“Who cares! Abdul can’t get a shell into this sweet spot.”

Makins walks less furiously on the way back to headquarters, and I ask him to explain the daily routine of a field ambulance and the method of evacuating the sick and wounded. He gives me a lecture, and the lecture lasts until we reach Gully Beach. I see Colonel Frost sitting in a deck-chair close to the sea, and the deck-chair surprises me. This might be Bournemouth beach, but whence the deck-chair? Makins shows me the main dressing-station, the sandbagged and tarpaulined shelter fitted with stretchers. The place is empty at the moment. It occurs to me to go and look up Sanders, and I find him in his

tent under the cliff, sitting on his camp-bed and stripped to the waist. I am to see many men who have been badly frightened, but I am never to forget Sanders's face, fat and blanched and sweating, and the scared indignation in his eyes.

"My God, Brent, I've had a doing."

"What's happened?"

"That fellow took me to a football match."

"A football match!"

"Yes, we English are strange people. There is a divisional league or something. They play the game on a piece of ground close to a howitzer battery. That fellow took me."

"Colonel Frost?"

"Yes. And half-way through the game the Turks started shelling the battery. We had one shell within thirty yards of where we were squatting, and we just went on sitting. Yes, they went on playing and finished the game. That fellow's got the nerve of—— Well, I came back here in a muck sweat. I believe he did it on purpose."

Tea in the mess. The tea tastes of chlorine, and the flies are interested in our jam. After tea an army blanket is spread on the table by Smart and cards are produced. Makins has disappeared to write letters, and Frost, Roberts, Sanders and I cut for partners. I am to partner Frost, and I find myself hoping that I shall hold good hands and be able to please him. Good God, how humiliating is this desire to please a man who holds one's fate in his hands! I am lucky in my cards. Frost is an aggressive player, and I am able to back him and we win. I see him smile.

"Let's give them their revenge, Brent."

We are in the middle of the next rubber, and still winning when an orderly calls Roberts.

"Case in, sir."

I had seen something bloody carried by on a stretcher, and Roberts gets up, and I ask if I may go with him. Frost smiles at me and nods. It is a rather ghastly case, high explosive, the left arm in shreds and the thorax crushed. The poor devil is conscious, and worried about his false teeth. He keeps asking for them. Roberts gets busy, though the case is hopeless, and I help. The cocky young sergeant on duty says something about a tally.

I have never seen a tally, and I say so. The young sergeant calls to an orderly, "Smith, bring a tally book. There's an officer here who hasn't seen a tally."

The wounded man is left lying there with a piece of gauze over his face to keep off the flies. It is useless to evacuate him, as he is dying. Roberts and I go back to the mess. He squats quickly and picks up his hand. "What are trumps? Anybody called?" I am shocked by the seeming callousness of the thing, though I am to learn that men grow hard. Also, that poor bloody mess which is gasping out its last breaths so near to us, has filled me with pity, nausea and fear. What if I should be smashed and torn like that? I play the next hand badly and we lose. Frost sniffs, and enters up the score against us, and I realize that I have let him down. But my next hand is prodigious. I go no trumps; Roberts pushes me up to three and doubles. I bring it off, and I see a little pleased smirk on Frost's face.

"We seem to be a good combination, Brent."

I smile at him, but I am still thinking of that poor bloody mess on the stretcher.

Sunset. The darkness seems to come very suddenly here. There was a wonderful light over Imbros and the tawny cliffs of the peninsula seemed to turn pink. I walk along the road by the sea, and marvel at what has been crowded into this one day, and at the strangeness of it all. My self seems to have shed a skin and to shiver in these unfamiliar and sinister surroundings. I feel acutely homesick, and wonder when I shall get a letter from Mary.

The sea is very black and calm and making a monologue of its own along the beach. Lights are pricking the darkness; the incinerator near the pier still glows and spreads its sour reek around. I hear men's voices. Someone is singing in a dug-out on the cliff to the accompaniment of a tin whistle, a thin, melancholy piping. Dim figures pass me. I hear one man say to another, "Yes, lad, but one gets fed oop with being fed oop." There is philosophy in that saying. I come to the mouth of the Great Gully; there are lights in its crumpled and cavernous gloom, and as I watch these lights I become aware of a strange sound. I realize that it is rifle fire, crashing and continuous. I stand and listen in vague alarm.

Are the Turks attacking? I hurry back to the mess and find Roberts alone censoring the men's letters by candlelight. I tell him what I have heard, and ask if it means an attack. He chucks me a wad of letters to censor.

"O, that's nothing. Goes on every night. Both sides loosing off and making sure. Besides, it's always worse when the windy brigade is in."

I sit down with my share of the letters.

"The windy brigade?"

"Yes, the thousand and something. We'll get to that in time if the war lasts. Two of our brigades are good, the other rotten. I expect Milsom and Sturges will have to do a bunk one night from the A.D.S. They keep their loins girded

when the Windies are holding the line.”

He seems extraordinarily casual about it, and I ask him what would happen if the Turks attacked and our people ran.

“O, just a bit of a bloody mix up in the Gully. The rest of the Div. would have to pitchfork Abdul back, or we might have a free trip to Constantinople.”

I am reading one of the letters. The man is writing home to his wife, and I am touched by the magnanimity and courage of this very simple letter. There is no grouching; its message is full of cheer. His wife is not to worry; he is in the pink, and all the lads are champion. May I attain to the courage and restraint of this simple man.

Since the darkness has veiled that too public niche upon the cliff I go and sit there and struggle with my inert interior. A sudden wind has sprung up, and the sky is brittle with stars, and the voice of the sea is rising. I sit and sit, but nature will not be relieved. I am aware of someone moving along the narrow terrace; the figure descends the path; a torch is flashed upon me.

“Oh, it is you, Brent. No hurry.”

I recognize Frost’s voice.

“Sorry, sir.”

“Don’t get up, man.”

“Nothing doing, sir.”

I make way for him, go to my dug-out, and light a candle and sit down on the camp-bed. Presently I hear footsteps and Frost’s figure appears framed in the oblong opening. He leans forward and looks in, and the candlelight illumines his face and seems to soften it.

“Got everything you want?”

“Yes, sir, thank you.”

He hesitates, sniffs, and then comes in and sits down on the box beside my bed. His eyes have a hungry look. I have a feeling that he wants to talk, and that he is not a man to whom words come easily.

“Married, Brent?”

“Yes.”

“Any children?”

“Not yet.”

“Feeling homesick?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Is it the effect of the candlelight, or has an extraordinary change come over his face? And suddenly I seem to divine in this hard man who has the

reputation of being so ruthlessly efficient and without fear a desolating loneliness.

“It’s more than a year since I saw my wife and kid.”

“Then it is harder for you, perhaps.”

“Now, yes. One can put such things behind one for a time, and then it all comes back and is worse. You see, none of these youngsters understand. They have nothing but themselves.”

“I think I understand.”

He looks at me intently for a moment, and I begin to wonder how it was that I had thought his face hard. This man has been repressing things in himself, and his hardness is the shell of authority. I can suppose that he has prides and ideals of his own, and that their very bleakness and strength put him apart from all these other men. His grip on himself has become so tense that it makes him something of an autocrat to others.

I say, “It seems so much more hard to give up the whole of yourself when you have left other people behind.”

He gets up, stands for a moment in the doorway of my dug-out, and almost I can feel his unbearable emotion.

“Care to look at photos?”

“Yes.”

I am not the hypocrite or Agag, for the idea of making contact with this other man’s emotional life is somehow consoling and real.

“Come to my dug-out, Brent.”

I go with him, and he lights two candles and makes me sit down on his bed. He takes a despatch case from under it, and raising the lid reveals to me a mass of letters, obviously letters from home. He has preserved them all. His strong hands pick out some photos. He passes them to me. I see a woman and a child, a woman with a pleasant, gentle face.

“That’s my wife.”

I grope about for something to say, but my sympathy in its silence seems to be sufficient. He is watching my face. He begins to talk and I let him talk about all the silly simple things that the very clever people do not seem to understand. But I do, and my fear of this man grows less. Even his passion for card-playing may be a kind of drug that helps him to forget his human cravings.

But, before the other men he maintains his air of hard aloofness. Does he suspect that he is hated because he neither spares himself nor others? But is hatred the right word?

At breakfast, over our porridge, he gives me an order.

“Mr. Brent, you will report to me in the orderly tent at nine.”

“Yes, sir.”

I catch Sanders silently chortling over his porridge plate. I am not drawn to Sanders; he is too eagerly and brightly servile, and I have begun to suspect the inspiration of it. Makins has warned me that our sojourn with the ambulance may be brief, and that after a little experience we shall be sent to relieve other ambulance officers who are doing temporary duty as battalion medical officers. Has Sanders summed up the situation and set his pawky soul to the task of ingratiating himself with Frost, so that if an officer is called for, I shall be the first to go?

He says to me when we are left alone in the mess, “You’re for it to-day, my lad.”

I reply, casually, that if we are to be broken to active service, the sooner the better. He laughs, and sucks at his pipe.

“Well, it’s your turn, anyway. I’ve heard all about Frost’s nice country walks.”

I report at nine in the orderly room tent, and stand waiting while Frost reads through some returns. The sergeant-major is in attendance, a well-set-up, blond, clean-cut man. We go out to inspect the men in their billets, queer little cubbyholes and shelters scattered about the face of the cliff. I am impressed by the scrupulous neatness and cleanliness of these little places, the bright mess-tins, the piled kits. The men are as clean as their billets, and again I realize that all this efficiency is Frost.

He says to me as we come down a cliff path, “If one isn’t absolutely and ruthlessly clean, Brent, in a crowded, flyblown place like this, men rot. People may think a C.O. a tyrant, but tyranny is better than dysentery. Latrines may be more deadly than gas.”

My impression has been that the men do not resent his thoroughness. They understand it and respect him for it. So do I.

About ten o’clock we start for one of Colonel Frost’s country walks. The sun is hot upon land and sea. Frost calls at Divisional Headquarters on his way, and Colonel Thomas, the A.D.M.S., comes out of his glorified chicken-house to talk to him. I salute him, and he smiles at me and remembers my name.

“Finding your feet, Brent?”

“I hope so, sir.”

I gather that these two men like and respect each other, and Makins has told me that whenever some difficult and dangerous work had to be done Frost’s ambulance was given the job. From Divisional Headquarters we take a

path that leads us to the plateau above. There is no cover here, nothing but bare earth and scrub and heather under a vast and cloudless sky. I wonder where the trenches are and whether our country walk is to be taken across this naked landscape, but I am in Frost's hands. He speaks of Colonel Thomas the A.D.M.S. and of the example set by him in the matter of a serene austerity. This elderly soldier sleeps in army blankets on a wire-netting bed, drinks no alcohol, and lives on the simplest of food. He is not an office-soldier who delegates danger to his subordinates, but is always up the line, visiting his battalion medical officers and seeing for himself the conditions under which the men live.

Frost makes for a slight rise in the ground ahead of us, and pausing there points out to me Achi Baba, and Krithia, and Morto Bay and the coast of Asia. He tells me that when they first landed this desiccated, dusty land was brilliant with flowers. There were one or two farmhouses, and vineyards, but all gentler things have been swept away. We go on, and I see ahead of us a little copse of young fir trees, green and pleasant amidst all these earthly tints. We come to an old trench and cross it by plank bridge. I see a few shells bursting in the distance, and I wonder whether the Turks will trouble to shell two officers walking in the open.

We are making for the trenches of the Division on our right. Frost says he has a friend serving in one of their battalions and he wants to look him up. I feel more and more like a naked man courting what may prove to be embarrassing attention. Frost has begun to talk again of home, and hospital days, and the last holiday he had before the war. He seems quite oblivious to the chances of our being shelled, and his calmness reassures me.

At last we are off the naked earth, and walking up a shallow communication trench. We come to a fire-trench that is full of Tommies; it is a battalion in support, and the men are sitting about or sleeping, and they look almost the same colour as the soil. I see one or two with their shirts off, picking lice. Frost stops to question a N.C.O. who tells us that the battalion we are visiting is holding the front line.

It is very quiet here, but as we enter another communicating trench I hear unpleasant sounds ahead of us, queer, stinging explosions. Frost is walking ahead of me, and his firm neck and strong shoulders are deliberate and unhesitating. We come nearer and nearer to those most unpleasant sounds. The things, whatever they are, are bursting with a kind of sharp "Zing."

Frost throws a few words back over one shoulder.

"Bombing. It may be interesting."

Interesting! It proves more than that, for almost before I realize what is happening, we are in a strangely empty piece of trench and looking down a

kind of blind alley which ends in what appears to be a rough, wooden wall. I see two brown bodies lying in this sap, one or two heads protruding from holes in the earth, and a queer spidery contraption lying smashed close to the two figures in khaki. One of these figures is groaning and making strange, squirming movements.

I see Frost walk straight into this sap, get hold of the wounded man and drag him back towards the main trench. I am standing quite still, watching Frost, and suddenly I am moved by the urge to help him. I rush forward, almost colliding with a private who emerges suddenly from one of the niches in the sap wall. He has his bayonet fixed, and it misses me by inches. His face looks yellow and pinched.

“Look out, sir.”

I hear a kind of sizzling sound and something bursts up above on the earth that has been thrown out of the sap. I am too intent on helping Frost to be concerned about the narrowness of our escape. I get my hands under the wounded man’s shoulders, and between us we carry him back into the shelter of the main trench.

More bombs burst, and a file of men headed by a hot and grim-looking sergeant appear from nowhere, and scramble round and over us as we bend over the wounded man. He has been hit in the chest and abdomen. Frost, fiercely calm, shouts after the sergeant.

“Hallo, you there, send stretcher-bearers along.”

The sergeant turns on Frost with the face of a man whose inclination is to be insolent.

“We’ve got to hold the sap, sir. He may be coming over.”

“You heard what I said. Send one of your men.”

“Very good, sir.”

There is a sudden splutter of rifle fire from somewhere. Frost is kneeling by the wounded man.

“Waste of time pulling him about here, Brent, besides, he is better left alone. These bomb wounds are pretty nasty.”

I am aware of him looking up into my face as though its expression interested him.

“That was a pretty narrow shave, Brent.”

“Was it, sir?”

He smiles at me.

“It may be good to be innocent. I’m glad it occurred to you to rush in and give me a hand.”

Stretcher-bearers arrive, and that, for us, is the end of the incident, for Frost

seems to think that we have had enough of adventure for one morning. We make our way back by the way we have come, and I begin to feel that I have some right to be pleased with myself. But was it not a case of innocence rather than of courage?

As we climb out of the communication trench into the open country, Frost takes off his cap and wipes his forehead. Both of us have been sweating.

“How’s the constipation, Brent?”

He seems completely serious, and not pulling my leg.

“I took castor oil last night, sir. Nature was moved before breakfast.”

VII

To be lonely, yet never alone, save at night when I snuggle down into my flea-bag! Hitherto I have not been conscious of being a separative and solitary soul, but this almost communal and crowded life presses too closely upon one's sacred self. There are times when I feel that we men hate each other. A crude and elemental cheerfulness may conceal irritations and secret repulsions. I dare say we vex each other in that crowded little mess. I know that Sanders irritates me, his very foul pipe and the way it smells and bubbles, and the peculiar habit he has of covering his mug with one hand when there is whisky in it. Does he expect one of us to take surreptitious drinks from his wretched little tin pot?

Also, it is possible that I feel challenged by his competing with me for Frost's favours, though all the active competition comes from him. He is both stupidly subservient and aggressively complacent, and he does not appear to see that Frost dislikes him, and that his servility increases that dislike.

Sometimes there are squabbles in the mess. Makins has a tart tongue and uses it, and he and Roberts bicker. Makins is not well, and is looking very yellow.

He complains of Sanders's pipe, and I support him. Sanders becomes flatly ironical.

"Makins has got a liver, but you're a Fanny, Brent. So refined and squeamish."

He tries to stroke my head, and I give him a push that sends him backwards off the bench. The three of us laugh, but Sanders gets up swollen and raging. He makes a grab at me, but Frost happens in, and the storm is stilled.

"What's the trouble here?"

Roberts says that it is Sanders's pipe which is more foul than any incinerator. Frost sniffs and looks at Sanders.

"I agree. Burn it, Sanders, and try the canteen."

I have had no letters yet, and I am hungry for news, and for a sense of contact with Mary. Even a letter from her will make me feel her presence. Frost's wife writes to him twice a week, and I get to know when he has had a letter from her. He seems softened, and suffused with some secret satisfaction.

But I feel so unsure of things, and the peaceful and domesticated creature in me yearns for permanence and a corner that I can call mine. This passion to

preserve and possess an individual something becomes concentrated in my little dug-out. I fit up shelves, and a small hanging cupboard contrived out of an ammunition box. I line the corrugated iron roof with newspapers supported on string. I have Mary's photo pinned up on the sandbags above my bed. I like to retreat to this little cell of my own, and sit with the ground sheet that covers the door drawn back, and watch Imbros and the sea, and the coming and going on the road below. These moments of apartness seem to soothe and strengthen one, and I can dream of the future when all this fear and unrest shall have passed away.

Fear! Yes, fear is never far away. It seems to alternate with a terrible apathy that grips all of us, for this is a dead and a decaying show.

I am sitting here reading my first letter from Mary when a huge howitzer shell grazes the cliff and bursts on the beach below. I see men scurrying and throwing themselves flat. There are sudden screams.

I am on duty, and I push poor Mary's letter into my pocket, and go down to deal with the mess, feeling shaken and sick.

Poor Makins is more yellow, and becoming fretful with it. He has jaundice, but refuses to plead sick. In the mess his quick tongue tires us. He has become strangely unfriendly to me, and I do not understand his unfriendliness until he comes and sits by me on the beach.

"How is Frost's new pet feeling?"

I smile off the insult, for Makins cannot rub me on the raw; I like and respect him too well. Also, he is a sick man, and refusing to surrender to his sickness, and the poison in his blood colours his moods.

He puts his head into my dug-out that evening, and apologizes to me.

"Sorry, Brent, I was such a swine."

"That's all right, old man. It's not you, but this accursed place."

For, our world is a sick world, flyblown and diseased. Hundreds of men are coming down through the ambulance with dysentery and epidemic jaundice. The troopers of the yeomanry who were on the *Gigantic* with me seem to stand the conditions less well than these tough and undersized little Lancashire weavers. The C.O. of one of the other ambulances says to Frost during Bridge that if the rate of evacuation goes on we shall not have enough men to hold the line. Not one man in twenty is completely fit, and the prevailing depression seems to lower everybody's resistance. So poor is the condition of some of the infantry that if a man knocks his hand against the wall of a trench a septic sore results, a stagnant and chronic point of inflammation that will not heal.

Frost comes into my dug-out before dinner, and sits down on my bed.

He says, "I'm sending Makins off."

I tell him that the decision is kind and wise. Frost is so much less hard than he seems.

"Makins has done damned well, and much of it on his nerves. A month or two in Egypt will put him right."

I ask Frost whether he has ever been sick.

"No, not for a day. It doesn't seem to happen to me, Brent. There are only about a dozen of us in the whole Division who haven't been either sick or wounded since we landed."

"Are you proud of it?"

"What's there to be proud of? Might I not have welcomed something that would have taken me home?"

Makins has gone. He walked up to the ambulance at the top of the cliff, and we all went with him to see him off.

We are building a new mess of stone and sandbags and corrugated iron, for there are disturbing rumours as to the roughness of the weather here in winter. The sea has been behaving like a comfortable cat purring on a cushion, but I wonder what will happen to our dressing-station if Oceanus becomes angry with us for trespassing on this precarious ledge of earth. One bad gale and a night of hungry waves might wash away our little improvisations.

My third letter from Mary; also two parcels. I had run out of my particular tobacco, and in one of the parcels I find two half-pound tins of it.

Bless her!

A windy sunset over Imbros, followed by a keen night brittle with stars. We put on greatcoats in the mess, and draw the canvas curtains, but the sound of the sea grows more and more insistent. The wind is getting up, and our wretched shelter flaps and rocks. The waves seem to be washing quite close to the mess, and Frost puts down his cards and goes out. I follow him.

The sea is tumbling up in great rollers. There are dark hollows in the earth road, and we stand and watch sections of soil sliding down into the spume. The dressing-station stands at the top of a three-foot earth wall, and already the wash of the waves is splashing against the foot of the wall. If that wall should go, and the sandbags be undermined, the whole dressing-station will dissolve.

There is nothing that we can do, but Frost and I sit up till nearly midnight to watch the earth wall and its facing of stones. One small section of it slides down, but the main portion holds. The wind has dropped with the same suddenness with which it had risen, and the sea retreats. For the moment the danger is over.

Next morning we inspect the damage and confront the danger of our being washed out. The shore is littered with boulders and pieces of rock, and I suggest to Frost that if we collect all the available stone and build a rough wall or ramp it will break the scour of the sea. He is a little sceptical, but he agrees to the experiment, and places me in charge of a working party. It is warm and still and sunny after nature's attack of hysteria and the men enter into the job with zest. One or two of them take off socks, puttees and breeches and recover boulders from the shallow water. I shed my tunic and work with the men.

I hear the remark passed, "Mr. Brent's a bit of a surprise-packet," and I feel flattered.

But there is one person who scoffs, Sanders. He is orderly officer for the day, and he comes and stands at the top of the wall, with his belly stuck out, and his swarthy, fat face smeared with irony.

He calls me Balbus, and Canute, and asks me whether I think our pebble ramp is going to stop a winter gale.

I like Sanders less and less. He seems so ready to hope that I shall make a fool of myself.

Our wall grows. About twelve o'clock Colonel Thomas, the A.D.M.S., pays us a visit, and finding us at work, comes down to talk to me. He realizes the danger to our site, and such moderately shell-safe sites are rare in the Peninsula. He does not crab the experiment, but encourages us, and gives us some advice. Also, he seems to approve of an officer turning to with his coat off.

"Well, try it, Brent, try it. If you can muzzle the sea, we'll get you mentioned in despatches!"

He has a jocund and pleasant sense of humour, and we go on with the work.

There has been a sudden and remarkable change of heart in Sanders. Apparently he has realized that a scoffing scepticism is not good policy, and

that my attempt to thwart the sea has brought me favour. This does not suit his inclination to remain with the Ambulance while I, his chief competitor, am pushed on to a battalion. Next morning I find him in fierce competition with me, strutting up and down, giving orders to the men, ordering a stone to be moved here, another to be dumped there. But he does not take his tunic off, nor do the men pay very much attention to him. They seem to regard me as the prime architect and man in authority.

I see Frost up above, standing outside his dug-out and watching us. When I go up to wash before lunch he says to me with a dry smile, "So, Sanders thought your egg was a rather good one." He appears to have no illusions about Sanders, and at lunch I ask Sanders if he is willing to be christened Balbus Junior, but he does not seem to appreciate the joke.

He says, "I'm first and foremost a surgeon. One has to think of one's hands."

This is an aspect of life upon active service which the patriots and the sentimentalists at home are not likely to discover. They expect us all to be competing for the leading of forlorn hopes, whereas much of the competition is the possession of some better hole. Hence, the more generous spirits are penalized, and as Frost confesses to me, even among heroes a man with a good job is a dog with a bone. He may have to teach himself to snarl at other dogs who are eager to relieve him of it.

A M.O. from one of our battalions comes down to be evacuated with dysentery. He has a highish temperature, but is almost maudlin in his cheerfulness. He says, "I feel lovely. Alex for me."

This gives me furiously to think. One of the duties of a Field Ambulance is to supply medical officers, temporary or otherwise, to replace casualties, and as this casualty has occurred in our Brigade, I suppose our ambulance will have to find a substitute.

We are at tea when an orderly appears with a chit from Divisional Headquarters. Frost reads it, sniffs, and glances at Sanders.

"You are to report to the O.C. of the 7th North Lancs."

Sanders looks sick.

"Me, sir?"

"Yes. Get your kit packed. The 7th are out in rest. You'll find them in the Gully."

"How shall I manage about my kit?"

“I’ll detail a couple of men to carry it for you.”

Sanders finishes his tea, but I can feel that he is seething with resentment against me, and God forgive me, but I am glad that I am to be left in this more comfortable and secure place a little longer.

The new mess is finished. It has two windows and a fireplace and we move into it like house-proud women. I am told that it inspires bitterness in some of the infantry who pass to their so-called rest billets along the cliff. But, after all, why should we not exercise forethought and make ourselves comfortable? Exposure to the weather does not make for efficiency.

The A.D.M.S. has come down to dine and play Bridge. We are in the middle of the first rubber when something arrives with a terrifying crash on the iron roof of the mess. We all duck, and then look at each other and feel foolish. Frost gets up with a fierce face, rushes out, but I realize that he has no chance of discovering the objector who had hurled that missile from the cliff above. Frost finds fragments of it lying in the road. Some jealous soul had lobbed an empty rum-jar on to our offending roof.

The war as it concerns us grows more and more stagnant. Both officers and men feel exiled and forgotten here, and there is much bitterness and criticism. As Roberts says: “We are just a ruddy lot of amateurs,” but from what I hear and see these amateurs would have made good had the staff work been more intelligent and active. This Territorial Division has a record to be proud of and, judging by Frost’s ambulance, these Territorials are the first people who have impressed me with their efficiency.

We are receiving very few wounded, many sick, and hardly any shells. An enemy ’plane comes over early most mornings, surveys our scene, is shot at and returns safely home. We are afflicted most strangely by a peculiar phenomenon, dropping bullets at night. It would appear that the Turk has so many rounds to dispose of, and he fires his rifle into the air, and the bullets descend on us. One can hear them plopping into the sea. Frost has a spent bullet through the roof of his dug-out and it bounces on the table beside his bed. A man in the 2nd Ambulance is killed in his sleep. Hardly a night passes without a casualty coming in as a result of these bullets dropping out of the air.

The A.D.M.S. orders us to spread a layer of shingle on the roofs of our quarters, and we are reinforcing the men’s dug-outs with wire netting and earth.

Whenever I go out at night I wonder whether I shall receive one of these

Turkish offerings through the crown of my cap!

Our world has a social life of its own. We have guests to dine with us, and we go out to dine and play cards. The Football League flourishes. We pay and receive calls. The bright lads from Divisional Headquarters go out in a boat and bomb fish for dinner.

We are full of rumours. Tipson, or Tippie as he is called, is our arch rumour-monger. He comes along to us most days from the 2nd Ambulance, bringing with him his characteristic enthusiasm for the latest news. He is the first person to assure us that the Peninsula is to be evacuated, and that we are all going to Jerusalem. Tippie's imaginative interludes are welcome to us in this sick and stagnant world. We wish to believe what we want to believe.

Bulgaria has joined the Central Powers.

For us this denotes the prospect of more shells, and an absence of eggs. I hear that our breakfast egg has been Bulgarian.

Our breakfasts are gargantuan, porridge, eggs and bacon, masses of toast, tinned butter and marmalade. I marvel at the way the A.S.C. feeds us. I am beginning to believe that they are the most efficient people on our side, and with full bellies we may yet win the war.

I have had a strange experience. Frost and I walked over to call on the officers of the new Stationary Hospital that has been erected on the plateau. It presents itself against the dun-coloured earth and the blue sky as an acre of white canvas. Its site has been wired in, and the Red Cross flag is flying. This hospital is in full view of the Turks, but when one passes within the wire fence one has the feeling of being in a sacred acre, serene and secure.

We look over the hospital and have tea in the officers' mess. They tell us that one solitary shell has fallen in the hospital bounds since the tents were put up, and that the Turks had apologized for the discourtesy. The shell had been intended for a battery farther back.

The Turk is a gentleman.

When Frost and I leave this sanctuary he pauses outside the fence and looks at Achi Baba.

"Did you get that extraordinary feeling of peace, Brent?"

"Yes."

He goes on to say that after this war the world will have to found some educative centre like this hospital, a core of sanity and peace in the apple of international mistrusts and discords.

Yes, such a conception should be inevitable.

I am glad of my friendship with Frost. He is merciful to me, and I do not find his almost fanatical thoroughness too heavy for my courage. Moreover, I gather that our life under the cliff is calm and mild compared with what it was in the more strenuous days of the offensive. I suppose the human element enters into the relationship of senior to junior as in everything else, and that it is easier to be efficient and somewhat courageous in the service of a man whom one likes and respects. In wanting Frost to think well of me I am helped into thinking well of myself.

The younger officers do not understand him, or the loneliness of a man in authority. I think the rank and file understand him better, and that his authority presses less heavily on the humbler individual. An officer's responsibilities are tuned to a higher note, and the strain may be more exacting.

I like these Lancashire men. I fancy that they are apt to regard a southerner with suspicion, and to expect from him airs and graces, but if they decide that you are not smeared with snobbery, they become your friends. Spencer, my batman, is quite paternal in his attitude. He brings me early morning tea, and is quite fussy about my underclothing. I even suspect him of airing it before the cookhouse fire. His favourite adjective is champion. He applies it to all things and situations. The morning is champion, and so is his small boy at home.

The N.C.O.s are a very intelligent crowd. I fell into talking economics in the dressing-station with Sergeant Simpson, and he soon had me out of my depth. We have one corporal who produces poetry. He presented me with a copy of one of his poems, typed on the orderly-room typewriter by some sympathetic and accommodating clerk.

The weather has broken. There is more rain than wind, but the rain is a deluge. We watch our sea-wall and are relieved to find that it curbs the wash of the sea. Frost and I sit in the mess and write letters home and listen to the rattle of rain upon the roof. It seems to be a world of running water; we can hear it gurgling down the cliffs.

Frost says that the tame stream in the Great Gully will become a torrent, and that people who have not taken precautions will be washed out.

About ten o'clock the deluge ceases and we go out on a tour of inspection. There are puddles in the dressing-station, but no falls of earth. We visit the terraces where the men are housed and find that, thanks to the drainage trenches that have been cut, the men's dug-outs have not been flooded. Our own quarters are lower down the cliff, and Frost flashes his torch into his dug-out; but for a puddle or two it is dry and clean. We go to look at my cell. Frost

turns his torch on my bed, and I see that it is a smother of yellow slime. A hole in the sandbags is still spouting this foul mess over my bed. It has run down over Mary's photo. The floor is a yellow bog.

I stand in silent disgust and sorrow, but Frost is moved to strange anger.

“What a damned dirty trick of Nature to play.”

It is as though the inward tension and repression that he has suffered for months breaks out against the impartial and callous beastliness of this world.

“You had better shift into one of the other dug-outs. There is a wire bed in No. 2.”

He turns back the flap of my valise and finds that the yellow muck has oozed into the flea-bag.

“You'll want some blankets.”

But I am looking at the slimed and obscured picture of my wife.

Is this an omen?

VIII

I SUPPOSE I shall never forget this particular incident and its setting, and the significance it has had in casting a shadow. The sun is setting beyond Imbros in a whorl of fire. The sea is calm, and there is a feeling of frost in the air. I am on duty, and sitting alone in the mess, and watching through the open doorway that Homeric sea, and the black island aflame and the splendour of the sky. Figures pass, and they are like silhouettes against the sea and sky, or the shades or ghosts of men crossing the stage of a Greek tragedy. Some water-fowl go winging across the sea, flying fast and low, birds migrating to happier lands.

I see a stretcher carried by four bearers go by against the sunset. Its horizontal blackness is humped by something under a blanket. I see it only for a moment, but the glimpse is so vivid and sinister and sad that it seems to have some dark and personal message for me.

It has.

I hear an orderly coming.

“Case, sir.”

I go out into the quick twilight, and under the black canopies of the dressing-station I see that the lanterns have been lit. A sergeant meets me; it is Sergeant Simpson, and his kind fresh face has a shocked look.

“It’s Captain Hibbert, sir, of the 15th North Lancs.”

I echo the name—“Hibbert.” He is, or was, the M.O. of the 15th North Lancs, and only yesterday he came down to have tea with us.

“Pretty bad, sir, shrapnel in the head. A shell burst over the roof of his dug-out.”

I too am conscious of shock. I stand and look at the thing on the stretcher. Hibbert is unrecognizable. Yesterday he was laughing in his quiet way, a fair man with one of those very English faces, rather downy and boyish, but with a calm maturity in its blue eyes. Now, he is pulp. He has been hit in the face and head; his lips blubber blood, and his breathing is stertorous and harsh. His fair hair is a mat of blood, and as I bend over him I see brain substance protruding.

Someone joins me, but on the other side of the stretcher. It is Frost. His face has a kind of fierceness. He grasps Hibbert’s wrist, stares, and looks suddenly at me.

“Pretty hopeless.”

I nod.

“Is there a chance?”

“We’ll rush him to the Stationary. They may operate. He shall have his chance.”

But it is not to be. Something seems to happen to Hibbert’s breathing even while we are standing beside him. It becomes irregular, a kind of shallow gasping.

We look at each other.

“Hopeless. He wouldn’t stand the journey. I don’t like the idea of him dying on the way.”

We go out and walk up and down by the sea in silence. There is nothing to be said, and the dying light beyond Imbros seems symbolical, a torch that is being quenched. This thing has moved Frost as I have not seen him moved before, and I, God forgive me, am thinking of Hibbert’s empty dug-out up the line, and whether it will be my fate to fill it.

A figure approaches us as we walk back towards the ambulance. It is Sergeant Simpson. He salutes and says, “Captain Hibbert has gone, sir.”

My mood is one of profound depression. I have been shocked by Hibbert’s death, but for me it has a personal and selfish significance. I go up to my dug-out possessed by a presentiment that my sojourn under the cliff is at an end, and that very shortly I shall be among strange faces and in a strange, new world. The real horror of this war business is one’s feeling of helplessness and insecurity; one has no hold over one’s own fate. I have heard one Tommy describe the army as “The Sausage Machine.” Live men are fed into the hopper and corpses are extruded at the other end. It is a long time before I can go to sleep, and my sleep is shallow and restless, and overlaid with dreams.

Spencer has a solemn face when he brings me my early cup of tea from the cookhouse. His air of depression also seems ominous.

We are at breakfast when a chit is brought to Frost from the orderly tent. He opens the envelope, reads the order, sniffs, and lays it aside. I have a feeling that my fate is recorded on that piece of paper. Roberts, who is orderly officer for the day, finishes his breakfast, lights a cigarette, and hurries off to be first at the latrine.

Frost helps himself to marmalade.

“I am sorry, Brent, but this order concerns you.”

I try to keep a bright face.

“I rather expected it, sir.”

“You are to replace Hibbert. You are detailed by name, and I have no choice in the matter. The order is for you to report at once to the O.C. 15th

North Lancs.”

“Then I had better go and get my kit together.”

“You can leave some of it here. We can store it. I am sorry, Brent.”

“So am I, sir. You have been very good to me.”

There is silence for a moment, and I hurry through my breakfast with a feeling of inward tension. Frost seems to be reflecting upon some problem.

“I want to tell you something, Brent. It isn’t very encouraging, but I think it is kinder to warn you. And this is in confidence.”

I wait while he lights a cigarette.

“Your new O.C., Colonel Skinders, is a rather difficult man to serve under. Poor Hibbert had a good deal of trouble with him. I happen to know.”

“What exactly is the trouble?”

“Do you know his nickname, Brent?”

“I know nothing about him, sir.”

“Fuss and Fury. It is rather brutally descriptive. Take my advice, Brent, and stand up to the little swine. I’m sorry you have to go to this particular unit.”

“It’s just the way the wheel happens to turn.”

“If we receive any more officer reinforcements, I will try to get you replaced and ask for you back.”

“That’s good of you, sir, but wouldn’t it be rather hard on the other man?”

Frost gives me a look which I do not forget.

“When any chance comes to you in the army, Brent, snap it up, or some other fellow who is less sensitive than you are will choose you out of it. When the gods are kind, be thankful. This hero business does not last long with us.”

I go up to my dug-out to pack my kit. Poor Mary’s soiled photograph looks at me sadly. I am sorry to leave this little place which in a few weeks has somehow become mine, but it is no use being sentimental about a photograph and a few bookshelves, and the individual touches one has added to a temporary home. I suppose I shall grow hard in time, but at the moment my tail is down, and I am obsessed by the feeling that trouble lies ahead of me. What is this man Skinders like? Skinders!

Frost gives me a couple of men to carry my kit. One of them knows the particular part of the line that the 15th North Lancs are holding. Frost walks with me as far as the mouth of the Gully.

“Good luck, Brent. Don’t forget.”

I manage to smile at him, salute, and go upon my way.

I am standing in the doorway of a dug-out cut in the earth wall of a sap. It is the 15th Headquarters Mess. Its interior is dark, but I can distinguish a man sitting at a table with a glass and bottle beside him. Another and younger man is standing behind him.

I salute and ask, "Colonel Skinders?"

He is a little, sallow man whose face reminds me of the head of a bad-tempered terrier. He has a hungry, irritable look, and teeth that project under a rat-tailed moustache. They are discoloured teeth. His eyes are very near together and pin-bright under a mean forehead. His face is vellum-coloured save for a patch of redness over each cheekbone, and these patches meet on the bridge of his nose.

He snarls at me, "Who the hell are you?"

My ears grow hot. I feel that I should like to address him by his nickname, Colonel Fuss and Fury. So, this is the man under whom I am to serve.

"I'm the new medical officer, sir."

He stares at me insolently.

"O, the new pill-merchant. What's your name?"

"Brent, sir."

"Had any experience?"

"I have been with the Field Ambulance for some weeks."

"That doesn't mean much. I asked them not to send me a pup."

The almost incredible rudeness of the man astonishes me. I happen to look at the officer who is standing behind him, Carfax the Adjutant, and there is something in his eyes that makes me realize that he despises this snarling little beast as much as I dislike him. I stand silently waiting.

Skinders reaches irritably for the glass beside him. All his movements are jerky and restless, and I wonder whether his flaring rudeness is the result of strain. If so it will not be a very consoling or helpful savagery to live with.

"Better see to it, Carfax. Show him in. Has there been any sick parade yet?"

"No, sir."

Skinders glances up truculently at me.

"One word, doctor, there has been too much skrim-shanking in this battalion. No slush, mind you. You have got to keep a tight hold on the men. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I don't want you to sit about on your bum in some corner. I want every latrine inspected twice a day. You understand?"

“Quite, sir.”

Carfax comes out to me, and I see brittle scorn in his grey, strained eyes. He leads the way along the main trench and turns into a kind of blind alley. It is packed with men, squatting or leaning in attitudes of boredom and depression against the earth walls. A harsh voice calls them to attention and I am aware of their eyes fixed on me like the eyes of animals as I pass them. The regimental aid-post is a sandbagged recess cut into the earth. Carfax walks past it and stops outside a dug-out.

“This is your hole, doc.”

Instinctively I look at the roof of ground-sheets, and see holes in those sheets. This must have been Hibbert’s dug-out, the place in which he was hit, and I am conscious of faint nausea and qualms of fear. Am I to sleep in this horrible slit in the soil where my predecessor received his death wound? Carfax appears to divine my hesitation and to sympathize with me.

“I’ll have the roof made good, doc.,” and he adds, “it ought to be a safe spot. Things like that don’t happen twice.”

I give him a forced smile.

“I suppose not. What about my kit?”

“I’ll have it sent along.”

“Is that my sick parade?”

“Yes.”

“Rather a crowd.”

He gives me a shrewd look.

“It’s your first, you see, doc., and from the men’s point of view a bit of an experiment.”

I understand him. I am a new man, and perhaps raw and gullible, and capable of being fooled or cajoled by some of these poor devils who may be feeling as homesick and disillusioned as the man who is to be their judge. The sergeant in charge of the aid-post is waiting for me with the sick lists. He is a somewhat foxy-faced person with a reddish moustache and shifty eyes. He is exceedingly polite to me, but abrupt to the men.

“Now then, fall in.”

I sit down on the official box in the aid-post, and prepare to deal with that long file of men. I remember Skinders’s threat, for I had taken it to be a threat. Am I to propitiate my new master by adopting a ruthless attitude towards the battalion’s sick? I can quite understand that men must not be allowed to wangle, and that a battalion’s medical officer’s prime problem may be the detecting of the malingerer.

The first man has trench sores on his hands; they are blue and congested

and chronic, and I ask him how long he has been on the Peninsula.

“Since we landed, sir.”

“Been sick before?”

“No, sir, not officially.”

“How long have you had these?”

“For weeks, sir.”

The man is blanched and in poor condition, and I know that those sores will remain with him unless he is sent off for a change and a rest. I mark him for hospital. He gives me a queer, and almost grateful look, and turns quickly away. But that is only the beginning of my problem. Half the men complain of diarrhoea and of passing blood, and I know that unless I see their stools I shall not be in a position to say how genuine each case is. I decide to hedge on this first morning, to cultivate a certain severity. I find three men with jaundice, two with temperatures of uncertain causation, and I mark them to be sent down. Six evacuations out of a parade of forty-three. That ought not to exasperate Skinders.

When the parade is over I ask the red-moustached sergeant whether he is familiar with the medical routine. He is; I am not. There are various returns to be made, medical stores to be checked and indented for, a weekly report to be made to the A.D.M.S. Also, I have to make my daily inspection of the trenches with an eye to their sanitation, and Sergeant Shrimpton will accompany me.

“About these diarrhoea cases, sergeant?”

“Mostly wangles, sir.”

“What did Captain Hibbert do about it?”

“He had a special latrine, sir, for men complaining of diarrhoea, with an orderly in charge. A man had to prove he was passing blood.”

“I see. We will carry on in the same way.”

I decide to go and unpack my kit, and tell Shrimpton to report to me in half an hour, but he looks at me with a little superior smile and remedies my innocence.

“The C.O. expects you to report to him, sir, after sick parade.”

“Did Captain Hibbert do so?”

“Yes, sir.”

I make my way back to the mess, and find Skinders there like a dangerous dog in a kennel. He watches me as though I were a rat.

“How many on parade?”

“Forty-three, sir.”

“What! And how many did you let through?”

“Six, sir.”

“Six!”

He is furious, quite unreasonably furious. I have to describe every case to him and explain my reasons for sending the men down.

He lights a cigarette and nibbles at it, while my loathing for him increases with every minute.

“Do you know what our parade strength is, Mr. Brent?”

“No, sir.”

“Four hundred and twenty-three. We haven’t had a draft for six weeks, and the last one was rubbish. Six men a day means about one hundred and eighty men in a month. How are we to carry on? This is a war, not a hospital outpatient department.”

“I suppose I have to exercise my discretion, sir.”

“What!”

“If I decide that a man is unfit to stay in the line?”

“Unfit! Damn it, man, we’re all more or less unfit. I tell you it’s no use your trying the grandmother game up here. I have got to keep a fighting unit together. Do you understand?”

“Quite, sir. I have no intention of allowing malingering, but——”

He snarls at me.

“ ‘But’ isn’t a word I’ve any use for.”

I have completed my tour of the trenches we hold. They are comparatively clean, and the battalion’s sanitary squad appears to be working efficiently. I visit the various company headquarters, and introduce myself to the officers in command of the companies. They are a tough crowd, but are kind to me, with the exception of the man in command of B Coy, who treats me with curious suspicion. In nearly all cases the welcome is the same.

“Have a drink, doc.”

Having drunk with A Coy, I refuse B’s temptation. As I leave he says, “Our losing Hibbert was a nasty knock,” which causes me to wonder whether Hibbert’s successor has failed to impress him.

I return to my dug-out and find that new ground sheets have been fixed on the roof. My kit has been placed on the wire bed, and Sergeant Shrimpton, who is still with me, tells me that Hibbert was hit while lying on that bed.

I say, “Is that so? How interesting,” and dismiss the man.

I sit down on that wire bed, and something in me shudders. Can I sleep here where that other man received his death wound? I look round this wretched hole in the earth and feel as though I were in a grave and waiting to

be buried. I have no inclination to unpack my kit, and the sour, stale smell of the place disgusts me.

But I realize that this morbid mood will not do. I unstrap and unroll my valise, and put my shaving kit, etc., on a shelf that is supported on pegs driven into the earth wall. I am loth to touch anything in this dug-out, for it suggests blood. I sit down again and wonder if I can ask Skinders to let me settle myself somewhere else; but probably there is no somewhere else, and he would despise me. Besides, we are not here for ever. We shall be relieved and go into rest billets.

Lunch. Our mess consists of Skinders, Carfax, Blount the Intelligence Officer, and myself. I have brought my mess kit with me in a haversack and I hand it over to the mess orderly. Skinders sits at the head of the table, and he talks incessantly, and perhaps for that very reason the others are silent. He talks with his mouth full, and he eats so that one has a public view of the process of mastication. He tears bread with dirty fingers.

There is something loathsome to me in this man. His crudeness is only equalled by his irritable complacency. He appears to possess a store of dirty stories, and his masticating mouth with its sensual, biting hungriness is foul both as to teeth and to language. I wonder whether he has ever employed a dentist, and where he has been educated and how. But his conversation is not all smuttiness. He pours forth boring, snappy platitudes, gives us little bits of historical information, often inaccurate, and appears to assume that as our C.O. he can not only stuff orders down our throats but compel us to swallow both his bawdiness and his half-baked views upon life in general.

I am interested in Carfax's face and attitude. He sits opposite me, eating pickles and bully beef with fastidious deliberation, and looking as though he had learnt to despatch his secret soul into other worlds. He attends to Skinders, but without attention. He suggests a man who is infinitely but resignedly weary, but who suffers, because he must, the chatter of this ominous little monkey. Blount, the Intelligence Officer, laughs mechanically at Skinders's stories, and when presented with some piece of information, says with *éclat*, "Is that so, sir? How extraordinary!"

Skinders fastens on me. Have I ever read the life of Napoleon? But why Napoleon? It appears that Skinders has a peculiar passion for the Corsican. He gives us a little lecture on Napoleon's first Italian campaign, and mentions Austerlitz as its critical battle.

I watch Carfax's eyes across the table. Their tired cynicism warns me that a commanding officer's historical errors are better left uncorrected, and I gather that this little cad must be allowed to mutilate life and history as he pleases.

Assuredly, this is the most shameful and humiliating of the human

relationships, when one is compelled to suffer the authority of a man whom one hates and despises. It prompts me to question all authority, or to reserve its privileges and potencies for the very few. Skinders disgusts me, and yet if I betray my feelings he is in a position to make life still more unpleasant for me. My only defences are a conventional courtesy and silence, but he is sufficiently cunning to divine my dislike of him.

Carfax tells me that in civil life Skinders was a minor provincial official in some insurance company, and that as a pre-war territorial officer his promotion to a command became inevitable. He appears to be universally feared and hated, and the hatred is all the more intense because Skinders's physical courage is not beyond reproach. He spends nearly all his time in the mess or orderly-room, delegating danger, but reserving to himself the right to snarl and to tyrannize over his juniors.

Carfax lets his soul loose to me.

"You know, doc., it is pretty horrible to feel that you could kill the man whom you are supposed to serve and respect. One used to hear stories of bullying sergeants being shot in the back, and I understand now how such things happen. But what disgusts me most is the way this man slavers and fawns upon the powers above. He is terrified of our Brigadier, who happens to be a gentleman. It makes one sick."

I ask him why he doesn't ask to be transferred.

"O, well, probably I shall do. I stayed on because of Hibbert. Hibbert was the one man who stood up to this little swine, and who had some influence over him. In a way it was Hibbert who held the battalion together. We're not a happy crowd. One of the things this war is teaching me is the power of personality for good or evil. Given a good C.O. the essence of him seems to spread right down even to the fellows who empty the latrine buckets. Skinders poisons the whole crowd of us. It's so bad that I don't like to think sometimes what might happen if our battalion found itself in a tight corner. Morale is a queer thing, doc. Men who will fight like hell under a man they like and respect, will chuck up and panic under some savage little cad."

I am beginning to realize that my dislike of Skinders is returned by him with interest.

Moreover, he has me at a disadvantage, as I do not possess the experience or the prestige that was Hibbert's, and Skinders can bluff and hector me more or less as he pleases. He is vulgarly facetious to me in the mess, and I have more than a suspicion that his plan is to provoke me to some outburst. Such loss of control on my part would put me even more at his mercy. He interferes in everything I do, makes me come and report to him in the orderly-room, and lectures me before the orderly-room staff.

Have I any right of appeal to the A.D.M.S.? I think of going to see Frost and of explaining my troubles and asking his advice, but such a confession of weakness seems rather despicable. My best plan is to carry out my work to the best of my ability, and try to keep my self-respect unashamed.

One morning just as we have finished breakfast, and I am due to take sick parade, the Turks start shelling our lines. The enemy guns are spraying shrapnel round about our headquarters, but the mess has a sandbagged roof, and is proof against shrapnel. I can assume that common sense justifies me in waiting until the morning hate is over, and I fill my pipe and prepare to light it.

Skinders is fussing with a cigarette.

“What about your sick parade, doctor?”

I light my pipe, glance at my wrist-watch, and remain seated.

“I am just going, sir.”

“I suppose you understand, doctor, that your sick parade is waiting for you. I expect my officers to set a proper example.”

Something flames in me. So, he is sufficiently clever to get me in the wrong, and to hint that I can sit in a funk-hole while the men on sick parade have to stand in a trench. But I manage to control myself. I rise, knock my pipe out against the sandbags, and put it in my pocket.

“I quite see your point, sir.”

And then I am tempted to say a most unwise thing. Skinders has been suggesting that I am still letting too many men away, and that he will come down and inspect the sick in person. Whether he has any right to exercise such interference I do not know. I pause in the mess doorway and say to him, “Perhaps you would like to see me take the sick parade this morning, sir.”

I am aware of Carfax looking up at me sharply. Skinders’s stained teeth show in a sudden snarl.

“I don’t accept impertinence from my subordinates, Dr. Brent. If it occurs again I shall report you.”

“I was not conscious of being impertinent, sir.”

“Indeed! Then you had better be a little more careful in the future.”

I go down the trench realizing that though I may have scored a hit, the reaction may not be a happy one for me. The shelling is still going on, and a shrapnel bullet plops into the parapet close to me, but my rage against Skinders is more dominating than the immediate danger. I find a very small sick parade, half a dozen men flattened against the sap wall. Sergeant Shrimpton has taken cover in the aid-post.

“Not many men reporting sick, sergeant.”

He grins and shows me the company lists.

“Most of ’em thought better of it, sir.”

I don’t blame them.

Skinders has changed his attitude towards me. He is polite, ironically polite, and I feel that he is like a treacherous dog waiting for his opportunity to bite.

How absurd and strange it is that two men who are engaged on what is supposed to be a crusade should behave to each other like a couple of snarling dogs. But this war is proving how much of the animal there is in all of us; and it seems to exaggerate our fundamental antipathies and hatreds. Nor were the crusaders Galahads, but fierce gentlemen ready to fly at each other’s throats, or to join savagely in the sacking of Byzantium. It is more and more obvious that there will be no sacking of Byzantium for us.

I am seeing much of Carfax. He comes and sits in my dug-out and talks. He is an Oxford man and a barrister, whose delicate sense of humour has been unable to survive months of contact with Skinders. He warns me against Skinders, and especially so in his present mood.

“You got him on the raw, Brent, and he will never forgive you.”

And then, Carfax laughs, but there is no mirth in his laughter.

“How pretty-pretty all that life seems before the war. We may have thought ourselves witty and wicked in a small, lispng way, but for those of us who survive what a burying there will be of old illusions. One has met out here so many splendid people, and a few creatures like Skinders. You know, I have a horrid suspicion, Brent, that too much of our industrial world is run by people like Skinders.”

I confess that the type is somewhat new to me.

“Yes, and so it was to me, but we were nice, protected people, Brent; we didn’t see life in the raw. Our world was so gentlemanly and well tailored. What about the world that has to be employed by men like Skinders? They are so damned complacent and hard, and they seem to think that what I would describe as commercial cunning is the ultimate intelligence. War brings out the good and the bad in one, but one is horrified by the discovery how bad the bad can be. Yes, in one’s self. Mean fear, and careful selfishness, and all that.”

“I haven’t seen much of it in you.”

“My dear man, I spend my days trying to say, ‘Get thee behind me, Satan.’”

Our tour in the trenches is over. We are relieved and trail away down that valley of hell, the Great Gully. A grey sky slides by overhead, and rain is coming. We wonder what our luck will be. I march at the tail of the battalion, and I realize how stale the men are. Even this comparatively short tramp produces pinched faces and straggling feet.

We arrive at Gully Beach and turn left up the road to the top of the cliff, and slogging on arrive at a dirt patch that may once have been a cultivated field. The wind blows wet and cold, but thank heaven this colder weather has put the infernal flies to sleep. We find our rest billets in a collection of trenches and holes and slits in the earth. It is a dreary prospect, but I hear one irrepressible Tommy remark, "The same ruddy old hole, lad. What price Blackpool beach?"

The cheerfulness of some of the plain men is a virtue that makes me marvel, but perhaps they have had more to bear in civil life than we refined people wot of.

It is beyond poetic licence to call this muddy, wind-swept plateau a rest camp. More shells are in the air since Bulgaria joined in against us, and it begins to rain. Our mess is a semi-underground shack into which yellow mud and water seeps. But the men are in much worse case, for their holes and shelter trenches become waterlogged with this pouring rain. One can see them fishing for their drowned equipment, and rigging up ground-sheets over new and shallower holes. But they are never dry, and I imagine that if this wet weather continues my sick parade will cause Skinders to throw a fit. I can't understand why we are not provided with corrugated iron and more sandbags and allowed to work on erecting winter quarters, but they tell me that corrugated iron is worth five pounds a sheet out here. Perhaps our sojourn here is so transitory that more substantial planning is not thought worth while, but I am beginning to think that in the war of the Greeks against Troy, the Homeric show was not submerged in mud.

I go down to Gully Beach to see Frost. He has two new officers posted to his ambulance, one of them a somewhat celebrated gynæcologist who appears to suffer this new world with bored and depressed bewilderment. Petticoats are unknown entities in Gallipoli, though doubtless they are dreamed of as symbols by sex-starved men. Personally I find that the sex in me has gone to sleep. I remember discussing the phenomenon with Frost.

He asks me how I am getting on, and I strive to maintain a shallow cheerfulness. I am not going to whimper, for I feel quite the veteran in the presence of these two new men. They are just as astonished as I was at

discovering the apathy and stagnation which embalm this dead body of a war.

Frost shows me a letter from some cheerful fool at home. It is full of brass-band tosh and pompous optimism. How impossible it seems for the people at home to understand what war is in its elementals.

News. I get it from Carfax. There is a stunt on and we are to be the stunt-merchants. A mine is to be blown and our crowd are to seize the crater and attack and occupy a section of a Turkish trench. Riddle of B Company is to be in charge of the actual attack. He is a tough if turgid soul.

Carfax is looking glum. I ask him what can be the use of such a show, sacrificing lives to possess ourselves of a few square yards of ground when our situation here is one of complete frustration.

“Oh, morale, doc., keeping up the offensive spirit, blooding the new men. If you ask me, I think it is just damned silly.”

“Isn’t it rather more than that?”

“I’m not supposed to say. Organized suicide, if you like, but war can be a sort of suicide club run by charming old gentlemen who do not have to share in the throat-cutting.”

“Shall we have many casualties?”

“Perhaps a hundred or so. It will depend upon how our friend Abdul reacts. If he is feeling nasty, things may be a bit sticky, but the men will get their rum!”

The news worries me. What will my share be in the show? I suppose I shall be kept busy dressing wounded in my aid-post, but as the space in a battalion aid-post is limited, I may have to work in the trench. It has been impressed upon me that wounded must be passed on as quickly as possible to the Field Ambulance, and that a bearer post may be established in the line to help me. I hope it will not rain, and I hope the Turks will not shell my aid-post. Skinders asks me whether I have indented for an additional supply of dressings, and I tell him that I have done so. He is in a state of fuss and flurry. But why have they chosen Skinders and our crowd to perform this stunt? Is it flattery or punishment?

Carfax tells me privately that he has long suspected the powers that be of wanting to break Skinders. They would like to get rid of him, but in spite of his windiness he clings to office, and is quite convinced that some day he will command a brigade.

The attack is to be staged to take place at dusk. The nearer I approach it, the less I like the prospect. I suppose I am windy, but I am obsessed by the feeling that I am to be involved in some tragedy. A parcel from Mary reaches

me on the night before the battalion returns to the line. It contains a cake, tobacco, a new pipe, and a packet of safety-razor blades. Mary does not yet know that I have left the Field Ambulance, and she writes very cheerfully.

If I could only see her and speak with her before this show, but I suppose such a meeting would only make us both suffer.

I feel dreadfully homesick.

I take the cake to the mess for tea. Skinders deigns to eat two large slices of it, but half the cake is left, and I present the remaining half to Sergeant Shrimpton and my battalion stretcher-bearers.

I spend part of the evening in writing to my wife. It is a long letter, but I do not tell her that I am with a battalion and that we are to make an attack, but when I read the letter through I realize that it is too emotional, and may make her suspect something. I tear it up, and write a second letter, and try to keep my emotional self out of it.

We are back in the line. The attack is timed for to-morrow at dusk. Our guns and the monitors are to share in a brief and furious bombardment of the Turkish trenches. Poor devils, do they suspect? I go to see Riddle to wish him luck, and find him in a confident and arrogant mood. No doubt he is a tough customer and the right man for the job.

“If I get hit, doc., you’ll ruddy well see that I get a good ticket.”

Carfax is depressed and his depression affects me. He tells me that half the attacking party is to consist of men who joined us in the last draft. They are raw and inexperienced, and the ordeal will be an ugly one for them. Carfax hints that he rather dreads a panic. The attack itself may prove a straightforward affair, but holding the ground under concentrated shell fire and bombing may be a bloody business for new men to suffer.

I sometimes wish that Carfax wouldn’t be so candid.

I have everything ready in the aid-post. The ambulance is sending up bearers to help in the evacuation of wounded. I have had the trench outside the aid-post widened so that I can dress men there if things become too congested.

I receive a message saying that Colonel Skinders wants to see me. I find him alone in the mess. He tells me that he has asked for a Field Ambulance officer to be sent up to take over the aid-post, and that I am to follow the storming party into the crater.

I stand and stare at him. This is a horrible prospect! What can I do in a dark and dirty hole crowded with men, and full perhaps of fear and confusion?

I say, "Do you think that will help, sir?"

He stares at me.

"Those are my orders."

Has he the right to give me such orders? But I have no time to appeal, and I know that if I argue the question he will accuse me of trying to shirk my duty. He has me in a cleft stick, and Carfax's warning was justified.

I say, "Very well, sir. Do I take my stretcher-bearers?"

"Of course. Your proper place will be with your bearers."

Half-past four, and a clear, cold steely sky. I am terribly strung up, but less scared than I had expected to be. The men who are to attack are assembled waiting for the fireworks to go up. I and Shrimpton and the bearers wait in a sap. Milsom has come up and taken over the aid-post. When I told Milsom what Skinders had ordered me to do, he had said, "Why didn't you ask him to mind his own business?" Shrimpton and I have haversacks full of dressings, also a monkey-box and morphia. Immediately outside our sap a party of men are waiting with picks and shovels ready to dig a communication trench to the mine crater. The order is "No talking."

Noise, sudden, terrifying, stunning noise. Shells rush over our heads and burst on the Turkish trench. The twilight seems torn with this winged death. There are other shells, huge things that make a sort of snoring sound as they come, and whose explosions are like the erupting of a volcano. These are the monitors' shells. There is a rumbling roar; the earth shakes, and I can see a cloud of dust and debris billowing up into the sky. The mine has been fired. I hear Shrimpton say, "Now they're over the top."

My mouth feels dry, and my stomach tight as a drum. I realize that our turn has come.

I am aware of scrambling over the parapet, with Shrimpton pushing me behind. Will there be rifle fire? The crater is only a few yards away. We stumble across in the half darkness; a few bullets go stinging by, but no one is hit. I find myself slithering down the soft earth into the crater. It is full of confused and crowded activity. I hear Riddle's voice shouting, "Dig, you blighters, dig like hell. Come on with those sandbags. Now then, the trench party forward. Come on."

I find myself in the bottom of the crater. Shrimpton has slipped and come rolling down against my legs.

I shout, "Any wounded?"

Nobody pays any attention to me. Apparently there are no wounded. Riddle and half the storming party have gone on into the Turkish trench to

clear a section of it and block it. The men left behind are working furiously to consolidate the crater.

It is difficult for me to give an adequate description of this most horrible night. It has become suddenly and strangely quiet. Our guns have ceased firing. There are no sounds but those made by the spades of the men who are working furiously in this great saucer of earth. I hear heavy breathing, grunts, an occasional curse, one of the stock army adjectives. How absurdly quiet it is! I sit down in my mackintosh on the soft soil, and wonder whether I should be justified in going back. There is nothing here for me to do. But if I venture back over the open I may be hit by a stray bullet; moreover, I suppose that I am intended to stay here. The working party is digging the new communication trench to link up the crater with our front line, and that, in the end, will be a safer way home.

I hear Riddle's voice again, and I get up and manage to find him in this dim hollow.

"Any wounded?"

"That you, doc.?"

"Yes."

"Not yet. Abdul did a bunk. But the fun is only just beginning."

How right he proves. There is the report of a gun in the distance, and the sound of a shell coming nearer and nearer, and the beastly thing bursts just outside the crater.

"Heavy stuff, doc. Better get down under the bank where my chaps are digging."

I go and squat there. More heavy shells burst outside the crater, making the earth quake, and raining down clods on us. It is horrible this waiting. A man near me complains of a bruised back and I am in the act of getting up to see whether he has been hit by a shell fragment or a clod when a shell bursts just inside the crater. I throw myself down. Earth flies; something strikes the soil above me; I hear a sharp cry, groans. Now, there are wounded.

Shrimpton and I get busy as best we can, but my hands are so shaky that I fumble. I hear the sergeant say, "They are through with the new trench. We can get 'em back, sir, to the aid-post." He shouts for stretcher-bearers.

It is at this point that I become confused. There is more noise, explosions, shouts. Somebody yells, "He's coming over." Bombs are being thrown. There is a sudden rush of men and I hear Riddle cursing. I find myself involved and hustled away in a bullocking stampede, and I am swept out of the crater by this human flood and along the new communication trench to the old front line. I am like a sheep among sheep crowding and jostling in a lane. Something flashes on my face, the light of a torch. I hear Skinders's voice.

“Get back, you damned cowards! Doctor, what are you doing here?”

I blurt out something about having been carried along in the scrimmage.

He says sarcastically, “So I see.”

His torch is unsteady, and its light wavers across my face. I cannot see Skinders’s face, but my impression is that he is savage and scared, a dangerous mixture. His voice snarls at me.

“I’ll speak to you later, Brent. Get back to the aid-post and tell Captain Milsom to come up here. I want someone who can be of use.”

The darkness is no respecter of persons. We are hustled apart by a sudden back-rush of the men who have panicked. Skinders is screaming, “Get back, you swine.” Then I hear Carfax’s voice, so much more calm and compelling. “Get back, you men, get back into the crater.” I am flattened against the trench wall, and Skinders’s wavering torch shows me Carfax brushing past; he has his revolver out. “Get back, you men, or I’ll shoot!” I let Carfax go by. I am bewildered, and possessed by a feeling of profound humiliation. Skinders has me skewered. He can accuse me of cowardice, and of deserting my post. How much of me was consenting when that rush of scared cattle swept me out of the crater? What was it Skinders ordered me to do? Go and fetch Milsom. I make my way in a kind of stupor of shame to the aid-post, and find Milsom dressing a wounded man. He looks up at me and his eyes seem to grow narrow and bright. Is it my face that shocks him?

“Hallo, Brent!”

I cannot speak for a moment, and my voice, when it comes, is not my voice.

“Skinders told me to tell you to go up there.”

His face grows thin and sharp.

“I see. Better carry on here, Brent.”

He gives me a glance of unfriendly pity, and goes out.

I manage to regain my self-control, and for the next hour I am kept busy dressing wounded and trying to get them away. I cannot keep pace with the cases, and the trench outside the aid-post is crowded with casualties. One of Riddle’s second lieutenants is brought in with his right leg blown off below the knee. He is blanched, and strangely quiet, and he looks up at me with large and frightened eyes.

“I don’t want to die, doc.”

My hands grow steady as I do my best for him.

Presently, Milsom comes back, and without a word joins me in the work. His silence is significant, and I can find nothing to say to him. My consciousness seems to be functioning in a kind of swamp of shame and of

failure, but I do thank God that the man who was called to take my place has come back unscathed. But what is Milsom thinking, what will other men think?

At last this silence becomes unbearable.

“Is it all over up there?”

He answers me laconically.

“Yes. Stout man, Riddle. Got his men going again, and put Abdul back in his proper place. Bit sticky while it lasted.”

I am aware of blood on my hands.

Some time in the night when everything is over, I sneak like a dog to its kennel, and lie down in my clothes. Almost I wish that I could die on this wire bed as Hibbert died. No one comes near me. I try to sleep, but my feeling of dreadful failure is like a pain that will not pass.

Daylight, and a clear sky. My man brings me water, and I find that it is tepid. I wash and shave. I know that I must go to the mess, but I shrink from confronting those other men. I sit on my bed, but at last I compel myself to get up and go out. I pass a squad of men shovelling up earth. They pay no attention to me. I arrive outside the sandbagged wall of the mess, and hear voices. Skinders is saying something to Carfax, and Carfax replies to him. “Well, sir, probably he was telling the truth.” Skinders snaps at him, “A case of sheer ruddy funk. I won’t have that sort of rotter in my mess. Get that letter off at once.” I stand in the mess doorway, and there is sudden silence. I take my place at the table, and the silence continues. Skinders ignores me. I meet Carfax’s eyes, and there is kindness and compassion in them, but I realize that I am in perilous disgrace. Skinders can make it as nasty for me as he pleases.

Skinders has finished his breakfast. He lights a cigarette, gets up, and says to Carfax, “I’ll see to that letter myself.” As he is going out, he turns and speaks to me.

“I am having the sick parade postponed. You can wait in your dug-out until you are relieved. I am applying for an officer to replace you immediately.”

So that is it! Does this mean that there will be an official inquiry into my conduct?

I leave my breakfast to go back to my dug-out. Carfax follows me. He says, “I’m sorry, Brent; I don’t believe you could help what happened, but our friend was waiting to catch you out. I’m sorry.”

IX

How pleasant to be at the mercy of a man like Skinders! I pack my kit, and begin to feel that I have some right to be rebellious. After all it was a piece of flagrant and stupid tyranny for Skinders to send a medical officer to deal with wounded in a place like that mine crater. Can he justify it, and can I be condemned for being the victim of a momentary panic?

I sit down again on the wire bed and wait. I seem to sit there for hours. At long last I hear footsteps and Sturges's solemn and spectacled face appears in the doorway of the dug-out.

He says, "I have been sent up to relieve you."

Sturges is not pleased, and I am not surprised. I don't suppose he welcomes the prospect of serving under Skinders. He takes an official envelope from the pocket of his trench coat, and hands it to me.

"The fellows who carried my kit up can hump yours down."

I am reading the order. It is from the A.D.M.S.'s office.

"You will report to Colonel Frost of the 3rd Field Ambulance."

I do not like Sturges, but I feel that I want to tell him that I am sorry to have let him in for this job, but Sturges's spectacled sulkiness does not encourage conversation. He has his kit carried in by two field ambulance bearers, and he tells them to remove my valise.

"Better blow off, Brent. I hear I have your sick-parade to do."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, I'd get along if I were you."

I take his curt and unfriendly hint, and leave him there and make my exit from the line as speedily as possible. We reach the Gully, and to me it is a great Valley of Shadow. Just before arriving at Gully Beach I meet Loundes, the D.A.D.M.S. He stops me.

"O, Brent, the A.D.M.S. will want to see you later. I have been sent up to interview a certain person."

He looks at me kindly, and I am grateful.

"Am I to report to the A.D.M.S. at once?"

"No, later, after I have got back."

I am on the road along Gully Beach. The sea is tranquil, ironically so, and it costs me an effort to walk along that familiar road. Every man in the ambulance will be able to infer that I have been returned to them as bad

money. As we near the mess Frost himself comes out. He gives me one curious and somewhat enigmatic look, but his voice is the voice of a friend.

“Come into the mess, Brent.”

I follow him in, feeling that I am very much in some other sort of mess. We are alone. He sits down, but I remain standing.

He looks up at me quickly.

“Sit down, Brent. Now, what has the trouble been? Tell me everything.”

I sit down, and tell him the whole story, and his face takes on an expression of grimness. Is he condemning me, or does he understand the clash of personalities, and the prejudices to which I have been subjected?

“He gave you orders to go into the crater and dress wounded?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ruddy fool.”

Am I the ruddy fool? Frost sniffs, and his nostrils are fierce.

“That’s the sort of thing Skinders would do. He went behind me in having Milsom sent up. An M.O.’s proper place is his aid-post. We have had that point thrashed out on other occasions. If Thomas had known the facts——”

He pauses and smiles at me suddenly.

“I shall see Colonel Thomas; also, I shall see Colonel Skinders. I can say what you can’t say, Brent.”

I shall never cease to be grateful to Frost for the kindness he showed me that morning, and his manner of showing it before the men. He tells me that the dug-out next to his is vacant. “Come along, I’ll settle you in.” As we walk towards the cliff path he takes my arm, and draws me gently aside. A working party of ambulance men is mending the road, and Frost and I go and watch them. He still holds my arm.

“You see your sea-wall is still standing.”

I manage to smile at the men, and one or two of them smile back at me. Frost and I go up to the cliff path to the line of dug-outs. He pulls aside the door-sheet like a host showing a guest to his room.

“I’ll have your kit sent up, Brent.”

I want to say all sorts of things to Frost, but all that I can get out is, “You are being awfully decent to me, sir.”

But his magnanimity does not diminish my secret sense of failure, and my interview with Colonel Thomas causes me to suspect that these men are being merciful. Colonel Thomas takes me to his dug-out, and tells me to give him my version of the affair. He says, “I am going to be quite frank with you, Brent, because it is part of my business to stand up for my officers. Colonel Skinders accuses you of shirking your duty and of disobeying orders. You

might, if you wished it, demand an inquiry, but let us hear what you have to say.” I tell him the truth, and his shrewd, kind eyes watch my face. I feel more than ready to leave my fate in his capable and impartial hands.

He smiles at me. “Things are largely how we look at them, Brent, and we vary according to the attitude of people who may be in control of circumstances. I think I am going to take a strong line over this case of yours, but if you will follow my advice you will not try to make more trouble for yourself.”

“I am more than ready to leave it to you, sir.”

“Very good, Brent. Certain people can be peculiarly vindictive and they are capable of making an affair appear far more serious than it is. I think it would be unwise of you to give that person this opportunity.”

“I quite understand, sir.”

“I will post you again to Colonel Frost’s ambulance. I think you were happy there.”

I cannot help smiling over the word he uses.

“One seems able to do better work for a particular man, sir.”

“Yes, it is easier to take orders from a gentleman than from a cad, Brent. Let that be a generalization.”

His humorous, shrewd eyes smile at me.

“Thank you, sir.”

I salute him in the spirit as well as in the flesh, and go back to my old home feeling both helped and humbled, for it should be a source of humiliation to me that I have been brought low by a cad like Skinders. Not only have I failed to transcend circumstances, but I have been made to appear little by a man whom I despise.

But I am beginning to feel dreadfully tired and sleepy. My eyes itch and are heavy. I join the others in the mess for lunch, and I gather that the two new men know nothing of my sorry adventure. I find Frost regarding me with a physician’s eyes. At the end of the meal he says to me, “Go and doss down, Brent; get into your pyjamas and sleep the clock round.”

Yes, sleep is the one thing that both spirit and body crave for.

Someone pulls back the ground sheet covering my doorway, and lets in the light. It is Frost, stripped to the waist and towelling his hard head and big shoulders.

“Slept well, Brent?”

So I have slept right through to the morning, and as Frost stands aside I can see Imbros and a placid sea. It is one of those pearly, tranquil days. How good to be under the shelter of this benign cliff and of a man who can be both just

and merciful. But, Frost, still towelling his head, has other reasons for waking me.

“Get up, Brent, and come and look at something you may never forget.”

I come out in my pyjamas, and following Frost’s pointing hand, see in the distance along the coast a column of smoke like the smoke of some vast funeral pyre.

“Suvla. We’ve gone. Stores burning.”

“Suvla evacuated!”

He stands with the towel over his shoulders.

“Yes, and Anzac.”

“Did you know?”

“I had more than a suspicion. I wonder how many men we have lost.”

His face has a sadness, as he stands head in air.

“It might have been so different.”

Our world becomes a place of strange rumours, and a hall of the promise of great happenings. We are told that the evacuation of Suvla and Anzac was carried out with less than half a dozen casualties. At first we cannot believe it, and if the thing is true we can only ascribe it to tacit collusion on the part of the Turks.

But what is to happen to us at Helles?

A sententious semi-official announcement appears, stating that Helles will be held as a species of eastern Gibraltar.

What a pleasant prospect! Tippie, dropping in on us for the daily gossip, has no enthusiasm for this pompous proposal. He declares that we shall have a lovely time sitting on this bit of the earth, while the Turks bring up all their Suvla and Anzac guns and blow the beaches to blazes.

“I believe it’s a bluff, Brent.”

“Do you think we are going off?”

“I do.”

“But shall we get off? We can’t spoof them twice.”

Tippie looks glum.

“I don’t like it, Stevie, I don’t like it at all.”

Frost may know the truth, but he keeps it to himself. Meanwhile, Roberts has gone sick and been evacuated, and Truman, one of the new men, has joined Milsom in the Gully A.D.S. Frost and I and Gregson the gynæcologist are left alone. Gregson is a matronly person who continues to survey this strange scene with an air of reflective bewilderment. There is nothing here upon which he can exercise his particular craft, and Frost refers to him as the midwife. But he is a solid, likeable person who makes one feel that England

and the English still exist. Nor does he in any way add to my secret sense of failure, and to the humiliation that lies close to my soul. I am afraid that my one thought is to say farewell to this accursed place, and I have more than a suspicion that nine men out of ten share my yearning to escape.

Frost calls me into the mess. He has a sombre, serious air.

“I have rather a queer job for you, Stevie. I have had orders to supply a working party of thirty men to dig a stretcher trench down to the cliff about half a mile along the coast. Yes, to-night. You’ll be in charge. Better take Gregson with you for experience. Corporal Hands knows the place. You will meet an R.E. officer up there and report to him.”

“A stretcher trench? How deep do we dig?”

Frost gives me a significant look.

“The R.E. people will know.”

After dark Gregson, Corporal Hands and I set out with our thirty men, plus picks and shovels. We trail along the beach for some distance until we strike a path slanting up the face of the cliff. Corporal Hands leads the way. It is a still and peaceful night, quite warm and windless. I give the order, “No smoking, no talking.” We arrive on the plateau above. Our feet brush through heather. Something zips into the heather close to me, and I realize that we are out in the open somewhere behind our trenches, and that stray bullets are coming over from the Turkish line.

I am strung up, but curiously unafraid, though why this night’s mood should be good I cannot say. We find that a short section of trench has been dug and where it peters out into nothing we discern two dim figures waiting for us. They are the R.E. officer and a sergeant.

He speaks to me in a low voice.

“R.A.M.C. working-party?”

“Yes.”

“Right’o. String your men out along here. Tell ’em to get down to it. Bullets coming over. My sergeant will stay here and see you get things right.”

He is a particularly calm person, and he strolls off leaving me to the job. I get the men strung out and tell them to put their backs into it, but there is no need for me to inspire them. Those angry zippings in the air are a sufficient inspiration. Never have I seen men work so strenuously, picks and shovels going like flails, but before they have been at it five minutes I hear a curse. One sweating wielder of a pick has applied the business end to the backside of the man working in front of him.

Breeches down, a field-dressing applied, and the injured party is returned

damaged to headquarters. He goes off growling. Had his gluteus maximus been penetrated by a bullet there might have been dignity and hope in the event.

I walk up and down in the darkness. The danger somehow excites me, and I feel that I am showing these men that I am not the complete coward. The R.E. sergeant strolls up to me; he is a paternal person with a walrus moustache.

“No need to walk about, sir. Nothing like a few bullets for making chaps jump to it.”

I laugh and thank him, and suddenly I remember that Gregson is missing. Surely he hasn't been hit? I walk along to the other piece of trench, and in the dim light I become aware of a hunched-up figure sitting in it. I jump down beside Gregson. He says nothing, but I catch the faint gleam of his eyes. He looks all tucked up and cold in his overcoat, and instantly I understand what is the matter with him. It is his first experience of acute, physical fear, and it has paralysed him, and he is squatting there overwhelmed by the fierceness and the shame of it.

I feel for my pipe.

“All right to smoke here. The men are getting on like one o'clock. Funny sort of job for a doctor, this.”

He looks at me strangely in the dim light, and makes no reply. I leave him alone and fill and light my pipe.

Suddenly he gets up.

“I'm going to walk about a bit, Brent.”

“No need, old man.”

“I must.”

I understand him, and respect him. He gets out of the trench and disappears in the darkness, and I do not interfere, for I know how he is feeling, and that his pride is whipping him to overcome crude fear. I puff at my pipe and listen to the occasional hiss of bullets overhead. They pass like solitary and swift and angry insects. I can hear the faint toiling of the men as they tear down and fling out the soil, and I think how some common emotion brings us all to earth.

I hear footsteps in the heather and Gregson comes back. He slithers down into the trench, and feels for his pipe. But now he does not sit hunched up, and I can divine the man in him giving thanks for the thing that he has done.

“My God, Brent, what a worm one can be!”

I feel warm and protective towards him.

“How are the men doing?”

“Sweating and grunting. They are more than knee deep. I just walked about a bit.”

“Tobacco tastes good, what?”

“I should say so. What do you think this damned trench is really for, Brent?”

“I don’t know, but I rather fancy it must be part of a scheme for evacuation.”

He looks at me sharply.

“Do you really think we are going off?”

“Only lunatics would stay here.”

“But one has to remember that the great men who are responsible seem to suffer sometimes from senile dementia.”

I laugh.

“Not all of them. But I shouldn’t be sorry to go. One so soon becomes proof against the mock heroic stuff. What about you?”

“Me? I think I should feel like a woman who has just got rid of her first baby.”

Frost has a serious face these days, but whatever the secret is he keeps it loyally to himself. I feel more and more under the shadow of suspense, and I find that all those precious ties that I have left at home tug at me and tempt me to play for safety. There is more liveliness on both sides, and the Turks are beginning to demonstrate the fact that a generous ration of shells will make life impossible here. We hear that the people at W Beach are having a hell of a time, and that Corps is being strafed daily. I overhear some cynical person say, “Well, that will make ’em sit up and think.” A shell explodes on the beach close to the mess, blows in our windows, and kills one of our men. I find myself loth to leave the shelter of the cliff, and I even avoid the mouth of the Great Gully. This waiting to go and wondering whether one will escape in safety, must be worse in some ways than waiting to attack. All one’s urges are negative, and push one in the wrong direction.

I remember a vivid sunset and much noise. Our heavies are firing furiously up above. An aeroplane circles. The cliffs are vivid and tawny against the sunset, and the sky green blue. A sense of stress and of imminent tragedy possesses me. I walk up and down and listen, not so much to the crack of our own guns but for that other and more sinister sound, the coming of an enemy shell. I know now that a howitzer shell can just graze the edge of the cliff and burst on the beach close to us.

I hear someone calling me. I turn and see Frost in the mess doorway, and he beckons.

“Oh, Brent, you are to take a party of men off to-night.”

“To-night, sir?”

He closes the door, and sits down with his elbows on the table.

“Yes, fifty men. You will have to leave in an hour. You report at W Beach, and pick up a guide who will take you across to V Beach. You embark from there at about ten o’clock.”

His face is hard and expressionless as though he has set himself to confront some desperate crisis.

“But why should I go, and not Gregson?”

“You’re married.”

“And you?”

He looks up at me with his very blue eyes.

“I stay on to the last.”

“But you are married.”

“That’s neither here nor there in my case, Brent. You will have to leave your kit. Take a pack and a haversack. You had better go and pack at once.”

I am tempted to ask him to let me stay, but before the words can come I am assailed by the thought that they are sending me off because my nerve is not to be trusted. I am not the man for a forlorn hope. I hesitate for a moment, but a feeling of frustration and of secret shame seem to drag me down into surrender. I turn to the door, look back and find his eyes fixed on me. He is sending me away to safety, but he has to stay here, and I can divine what is in his mind.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

He says to me almost sharply, “Go and pack.”

I climb to my dug-out and begin to bundle my belongings into my valise. Does Frost despise me? Do I despise myself? Yes, and yet I am trembling with secret and shameful exultation. I am leaving this accursed place. To-night I shall be on the sea, safe from my fear of shells. I put my washing things and razor and a pair of pyjamas and an extra shirt into the infantry pack that I have scrounged. Socks, and brushes, and my letters, tobacco, pipes and a stick of chocolate go into my haversack. I take down poor Mary’s soiled photo, and slip it into the breast pocket of my tunic.

It is dark. I go down to the road, and see dim figures parading, the men who are to go with me. Frost is speaking to the sergeant in charge, young Rogers. Possibly Rogers may be a more reliable person on such an occasion than an officer who is under a cloud. I go into the mess, and find tea still there. I gulp a cup of stewed tea, and eat some cake.

I hear Frost’s voice.

“Brent.”

“Coming, sir.”

“You had better push off at once. The men have got a goodish tramp, and they’re stale for marching.”

I put out a hand to Frost.

“Good luck, sir.”

But he does not seem to see my hand. He is staring at his dispatch box on the table. It is full of letters from home.

This is one of the strangest walks I have ever taken. We climb the road up the cliff and set out for Lancashire Landing. The night is soundless save for the distant rattle of rifle fire from the trenches. No shells. Rogers and I walk at the head of the men, and I cannot remember saying anything to him. We arrive at W Beach. It is utterly dark, and to me a chaos of guns, wagons, motor-cycles, forage, water-carts and every sort of obstruction. I get the impression of immense activity in the midst of this black and seeming chaos. But where is our guide? I make the men sit down; they need it; they are in poor condition after all these months.

I start blundering about amid wagons and piles of stores until I hear an authoritative voice giving orders. I approach the voice.

“Excuse me, sir, can you help me?”

The voice replies, “Who the hell are you?”

I explain, and he shouts into the darkness: “Guide for the R.A.M.C. party.” A figure appears; it is our guide. The men scramble up, and we set out for V Beach over what to me seems to be a wild upland. Our guide has nothing to carry, and he walks fast. I can hear sounds of distress coming from the men; they begin to straggle, and Rogers waits to energize them. He rejoins me carrying a man’s pack.

“Some of them are pretty done already, sir.”

I look anxiously at the illumined dial of my wrist-watch.

“How much farther, guide?”

“About a mile, sir.”

We climb, and at the top of a hill I have to halt the men and let them lie down. Several are almost done. The guide grows impatient.

“It’s all downhill now, sir.”

“Come on, fall in.”

The men straggle along behind me. I can see the sea, and vague shapes below. There is a distant detonation, and a bugle blows.

“What’s that?”

“Asiatic Annie, sir. When she pops off, the Frenchies blow a bugle. It gives one time to get under cover.”

The great shell arrives with a crash in the gloom below. Please God, we shall be lucky. Something looms up on our left, the half-ruined walls of Seddul Bahr castle. Someone in authority is waiting there.

“Who are you?”

“R.A.M.C. party for embarkation.”

“Get your men down under the walls for ten minutes.”

We lie down and again that ghostly bugle blows, and we listen to the coming shell and wonder where it will burst. It lands somewhere amid that collection of huts and food dumps and forage stores. The voice of authority says, “Now then, get along, straight down to the pier and the *River Clyde*.” We hurry down the hill, and as we near the shore some other voice in authority hails us. “Here, you, if the bugle blows when you reach the jetty, run like hell for the *Clyde*.”

The bugle does blow just as we reach the causeway. I start to run, shouting to the men to follow. They seem quite incapable of a last sprint. We stampede for the black bulk of the old *Clyde* and reach it just as the shell bursts somewhere on the beach. We enter the *Clyde* through one of those tragic portholes cut in her side through which the Dublins and the Munsters rushed to their death on that perfect day in April.

The iron shell of the ship is crowded with men, and I wonder what the effect would be were a shell from Asia to burst inside it.

A trawler places herself beside the *Clyde*. We scramble down into her and sit packed on the deck like sacks of potatoes. We wait. Asiatic Annie continues to bombard the beach. At last we are moving. The black bulk of the *Clyde* slips away from us. The sea is like glass, and I can watch the dim outline of Helles fading into the night.

The trawler steams out and brings up beside an anchored ship. A voice orders us to climb up over her rails, and to be brisk about it. We need no such encouragement. The men are herded below, and I find myself in the saloon packed with officers who are hilarious and noisy. There are no regrets here. We drink, we are given an excellent dinner, but I find that there is nowhere for me to sleep. Every corner appears to have been bespoken.

I lie down on the floor of the saloon with my pack under my head. I am conscious of a feeling of infinite relief, and I sleep like the dead.

Mudros again. The morning is cold, grey and windless, and the great harbour so much more empty than as I remember it in September. Our one-

time pleasure steamer berths herself at a wooden pier, and we are ordered to parade according to our units. A nice old gentleman comes on board, asks me a few questions, and tells me that our goal is Sarpi Camp. He points it out, a collection of shanties and tents in a waste of brown earth. We disembark and march off. The men are in excellent spirits, and I let them chatter and joke about Alex. and Cairo, and the redness of the paint they will employ if the chance is given them. Even the grim hills of this Greek island seem friendly. We stodge across the muddy flat to our camp, and the first person I sight is Tipson of the 2nd Ambulance looking as though he had breakfasted well and was finding life good.

“Hallo, I didn’t know you were off.”

“Came off the night before last, Stevie. Which proves how secret the show is.”

He points us out a row of tents where the men can quarter themselves, and takes me to a ramshackle of boxes and canvas and tarpaulin which is the mess. Apparently we are nobody’s children at the moment, and can work our own sweet will, but this freedom has its disadvantages, for there is no one to issue blankets or rations. Tippie has found a canteen; he is a great man at messing, but our present problem appears to be how we shall draw rations for the men.

There are two other officers of the 2nd with Tipson. We sit on boxes in that flimsy erection, in our greatcoats, and swap experiences. None of us regret our escape, and we are supremely cheerful, but the mess is damned cold. We have no flea-bags or blankets, and I wonder where we are going to sleep.

Tippie is facetious.

“Survey the world, Stevie. Hundreds of tents, desirable bijou residences. Take your choice.”

It appears that Tipson and the other officers are sharing a tent, and they have managed to scrounge three stretchers, but my desire is to be alone. I choose an isolated tent, and dump my pack and haversack in it, and go to see how the men are getting on. They have brought two days’ rations with them, thanks to Frost’s forethought, and have discovered a vacant cookhouse. Fuel appears to be non-existent, but Rogers is a sly optimist. “We’ll scrounge it from somewhere, sir.” I suppose they will. But I am feeling cold, and I start out for a walk towards one of the hills whose blackness is patched with gold-green lichen. The exercise warms me, but I have a feeling that it is going to freeze. The earth for one’s bed in an empty tent may be no pleasant prospect, but I am so full of rejoicing over this reprieve, that hardships are of no great significance.

I want to write to Mary, and warn her I am safe, but when I go back to the mess Tippie tells me that no letters will be forwarded for a fortnight. We are to

be muzzled, and our people at home left in suspense.

“How do you know?”

“Because I did a tramp, my dear, to try and post a letter, and an official person snubbed me.”

“I think it’s a damned shame.”

“Well, I suppose they are afraid that nasty things will be said, and they want to be in first with the eye-wash.”

Tippie has discovered a better mess, an Indian marquee, with a yellow lining, and since no one is there to say us nay, we move into it. Just before tea we are surprised to see a body of men marching across the muddy soil towards us.

“By Jove, it’s the C.O. and the rest of the unit.”

Tipson and the others rush across to welcome their C.O. and the Field Ambulance. I suppose they must have embarked very early in the morning, or been on a ship all night. Their C.O., Colonel Kent, is a little, hard-bitten man with eyes that show the strain of the last months. He comes into the marquee, nods and smiles at me, and throws off his haversack and greatcoat.

“Tippie, we’ve got to celebrate. What can you do about it?”

“I’ll manage somehow, sir. We’ve got a bottle of whisky.”

So, that night we celebrate our farewell to Gallipoli and I am granted the unique spectacle of seeing the commanding officer of a unit swarming up a tent pole, and giving voice to his exultation.

“What price Cairo, boys?”

Tippie and another officer seize him by the legs, get him on their shoulders, and carry him round the marquee.

Some time before midnight I go in search of my own tent and spend ten minutes in exploring a series of empty tents before I find my own. I bend down and feel the ground; it seems hard and dry and I realize that it is frozen. I arrange my pack, take off my collar and tie, and lie down dressed in my greatcoat. The soil of this Greek island is damned inhospitable. I try to sleep, only to realize that I am getting colder and colder, and that the chill of the soil seems to be gripping my kidneys. This is impossible. I get up and open the flap of the tent and find the moon shining, and I wander out and look for anything to place between my body and that frozen soil. I am lucky. I come upon a marquee whose yellow lining has been left lying on the ground. I get hold of the thing and drag it towards and into my tent, and make a mattress of it, but I am still terribly cold. Again I get up, open out my improvised bed, lie down, and pull the folded ends over me. I feel warm for a while, and fall asleep, only to wake up again two or three hours later, feeling that the small of my back is frozen. In all my life I have never felt so completely chilled; it is as though my

very muscles were filled with spicules of ice.

X

THOUGH I write in the present tense, these happenings are immediately behind me, for I have been and am in hospital, an Australian hospital. The night in that freezing tent put me down with pneumonia, but now as I lie here and scribble, all that breathless and semi-delirious business is both blurred and vivid. I am at peace in this marquee, with oil stoves burning, and a hot bottle to my feet, and with six other men at peace near me. I feel deliciously relaxed in this actual bed, knowing that the crisis is past, and that I am getting well.

These Australians are great people. Outside, the weather has been doing its damndest, with a howling wind blowing rain against the canvas and threatening to tumble us into the sea, but we lie padded and protected against the elements by a pragmatism, cheerfulness and efficiency that transcend the tempestuous moods of nature.

I have seen a woman for the first time for three months or more, the Australian sister in charge of this canvas ward. She is very fair and tall, the colour of a cornstalk with cornflower eyes, and she treats us all with an impersonal and calm candour that makes us feel like children. I like to lie and watch her moving about the tent, for to me she is more than woman, no mere symbol of sex, but a young priestess whose hands are helping to open the gates of freedom.

It is January. At the end of March I shall have completed my year's contract. In less than three more months I shall be a free man, and no longer at the mercy of any cad who happens to wear a crown and a star. I lie and gloat over the prospect of going home. April in England, the Sussex country, gorse in flower, primroses, work, woman.

Frost has been to see me. He was one of the last men to leave Helles, scrambling off when the weather was breaking, but he does not tell me this. I hear it later from Gregson. Luckily there were no wounded, or Frost and his remnant would have had to stay behind to become prisoners with the Turks. The evacuation of Helles was as amazingly successful as that of Anzac and Suvla.

Frost looked tired and drawn.

"Afraid we shall have to leave you behind, Brent. They are shipping us off to Egypt."

"Won't you get leave, sir, now?"

"God knows!"

I can remember the way he looked at me, almost as though he hated me.

“You are one of these damned contract men. I suppose you will go home.”

“Perhaps.”

“If they let you home.”

I suppose I must have looked scared, for he smiled at me.

“O, yes, I expect they will let you home. We Territorials have to stick it, but that’s not your fault. Never give away anything in the army; the chance is too rare.”

But I wanted to thank Frost for many things, not only for the kindness he had shown me, but for the stark example of his hard-headed courage. With a few Frosts in high places the tragedy of Gallipoli might not have been. But the Australian sister came in and with pragmatism and serenity gave Frost his marching orders.

“You mustn’t stay too long.”

Frost sniffed, gave her an amused look, and got up. He laid his hand on my shoulder.

“Well, good luck, Brent.”

“Thank you for everything, sir.”

“What the devil have you to thank me for?”

“More than you know, sir.”

“Oh, rot.”

They have put me on a hospital ship and I am on my way to Alexandria. The Mediterranean is in a winter mood, but I feel that I am on a pleasure cruise, for I can lie in my bunk and read and dream. As we near Africa the sea calms itself and the sun appears. Through my porthole I see a very blue sea and a lighthouse, and white buildings in the distance. Alexandria! So, Cæsar came here, and must have seen the great pharos shining at the mysterious gateway of the ancient land.

Being officially sick is a silly business. My chest has not quite cleared up, a little dry pleurisy remains. They are keeping me in hospital in Alexandria, and I have time to reflect upon the comparative futility of my year’s service in the army. At Southcliffe I did work that could have been performed more efficiently by a capable clerk. Beyond dressing a few wounded and inspecting a great number of sick men and automatically passing them on, I have contributed to the allied cause no activities of serious value. My one dramatic adventure ended in failure and disgrace. I have been liberally paid and carried free of cost upon a species of circular tour, and I am ending my year as a sick parasite. This feeling of futility and frustration oppresses me, and leads me to

wonder whether war is not essentially futile, ordered yet chaotic destruction in which the individual becomes less significant than an ant working upon the communal nest. Of course, one can make the supreme contribution of death, but that again is negation. My ideal is to help bring life into the world and to try to keep it there instead of assisting in its dissipation.

I long more and more to be out of the clutches of this damned machine. No one can protest while one is part of the machine, or it crushes one while peeling patriotic pæans like an organ. What must one do? Suffer the supreme stupidity of it all, and try to console oneself with the thought that this unhappy generation is involved in one of those periodic and inevitable world tragedies.

I discuss this problem with my neighbour, an A.S.C. captain. He tells me of an incident on one of the beaches. He was watching a party of men who had been crimed, unloading stores, a compulsory fatigue. He heard one bitter little, middle-aged private exclaim in a moment of disillusionment, "British army, there ain't no British army; we're just a ruddy crowd of slaves."

Slaves! Yes, we men are slaves, to superstition, prejudice, passion, the conventions. War is a convention which man must overthrow.

This hospital bores me. February, and I am allowed up. The sun shines, and from the windows I can see mimosa in flower, and a purple creeper whose name I do not know, painting patches of brilliant colour on the white walls of a building opposite. Everyone is bright and efficient and kind, and as an officer who has seen the real thing in war I am treated with respect by other doctors who have known no fear. They do not understand that I regard myself as a futile creature and that I sometimes envy those positive persons who do not develop beyond the age of eighteen, and to whom this war business is like the games tradition at a public school.

"Playing the game!" O yes, but need the game be so crude and silly?

I am out at last, or rather transferred to a sort of annexe for convalescent officers. I am allowed out in Alexandria. It disappoints me, or is it my secret disappointment with myself that colours my moods? Really, one's egoism ends in futility. Can one be overdeveloped in the matter of sensitiveness? War is hell to the sensitive, so where is the sin, in war, or in one's own revolted soul?

I manage to wangle three days' leave to Cairo. The Gallipoli fiasco seems to have imbued our world with cheerful cynicism, and I feel that it would be a pity to have come all this way and endured so much discomfort without seeing

Cairo, the Sphinx and the Pyramids! I put up at the Continental Hotel, and eat table d'hôte dinner. Cairo is supposed to contain all the wickedness of war; wine I can buy, and women I could buy, if I knew where to look for them, but my sentimental soul is sacred to my wife. Cairo is very full of Australians; they give one the impression of possessing the city. I have tea at Groppi's, go to the club, and find Gregson there, reading *The Times* in a club chair. He has been removed from the Field Ambulance and been given a surgical post at one of the hospitals.

He tells me that the division was camped near the Pyramids, and has now moved to the Canal near Suez. He gives me an amusing description of the first night in camp, and how every officer rushed off to Cairo. Frost was left alone in the mess.

"All the pretty ladies in Egypt must have been working overtime, Brent."

"Frost did not go?"

"Stayed behind writing letters home."

"But he let the others go."

"Yes."

I realize how necessary to the army in Egypt is the word "Imshi." One is pestered by Cairene cadgers, and irrepressible urchins. I see one small boy hanging on to the arm of a drunken Australian, and squealing for pennies. The Australian drops him into the gutter, but the urchin, quite undiscouraged, gets up and follows the unsteady figure. Cairo is rather like a show at Olympia specially prepared for the army. Even the banks are trustful and obliging, cashing officers' cheques without the blink of an eyelid. I visit the Citadel and the bazaar, but khaki is everywhere, and to me the colour of it has a tinge of yellow. As a soldier I am disillusioned with myself. I hire a taxi and drive to Mena, and the Pyramids. Even the desert is stippled with white tents and crowded with troops. It may have a splendour of tawny and blue, but this land has lost its mystery. There is nothing mysterious in ragged eucalyptus trees, and a few palms. Moreover, my taxi-driver has put the wind up me, he was a reckless devil who treated the long straight road like a racing track, and missed trees and camels by inches.

What a surly, disillusioned-looking brute the camel is!

The Pyramids are not the sky-cleaving masses of stone I expected them to be, and the Sphinx needs a new face.

I return to my taxi, and the orgy of speed and of recklessness is repeated. I presume that I shall have to pay for shattered nerves. I do pay.

The truth of it is that all my thoughts are in England, and that I am

yearning with a very great yearning for that green land. There is so little of the nomad or the buccaneer in me. I crave for quiet places, and an ordered and self-controlled day, things that I can do because the I in me chooses to do them and knows that the doing of them is necessary. This war business is so much wanton yet impotent waste.

Also, sex is stirring in me, perhaps because I have once more set eyes upon women, but is sublimated into a tenderness that makes my craving for Mary more than a mere animal urge. There is something so satisfying in giving to and taking from one who is particularly dear.

Does my wife desire me as I desire her?

March. I return to my convalescent rest-house and feel that the journey from Cairo to Alexandria is the first stage of my journey home. Twenty-seven more days. My kit, mysteriously salvaged from Gallipoli, had rejoined me in hospital. I am vetted and passed as fit, and am ordered to report to the R.A.M.C. depot on the outskirts of Alexandria.

I have an amusing and suggestive experience. I walk into the O.C.'s office and confront a coincidence. The O.C. Depot is Templeman, a doctor who, before the war, spent his winters as a physician on the Riviera, and in the summer rented a little place outside Brackenhurst. He is a tall, dark, dignified person with a supercilious manner, in rank a captain. I stand at the other side of the table and smile upon Templeman. I expect him to say, "Brent! Well, I'm damned!"

He does nothing of the kind. He stares at me with hauteur.

"What name?"

"Brent, sir."

I realize that I have not saluted Templeman, though to me the formality had seemed unnecessary. But that is not his view. I had always judged Templeman to be a somewhat elevated person who had doctored eminent people at Cannes or Monte Carlo, and who had regarded country doctors as good bumpkins, but this austere, unsmiling loftiness is a revelation. Is it possible for a man to take himself with such Olympian seriousness? Apparently it is.

He asks me for the details of my contract, and I give them. I presume that I am to be sent home and say so.

"Your contract, Mr. Brent, terminates on March 31st."

"In London."

"That is a matter of official opinion. Seven days would be an adequate period to be allowed for travelling. It is now March 3rd."

"I believe so."

“Very good. You will billet yourself at the Hotel Cleopatra in Alexandria, and await orders from me.”

Supercilious devil! But a moment later he is asking me to lunch, though the invitation has the flavour of an order. Am I to understand that he has given me a dignified and graceful snubbing for having walked into his office without honouring him with the respect and courtesy of a salute? It may be so, and no doubt Templeman, the physician to the aristocracy of wealth, regards his temporary post as more than a minor throne, and me as a very provincial person.

I accept his invitation, and after looking at his wrist-watch he gets out of his chair, puts on his cap, and collects a pair of gloves and a cane. I see that he is wearing a very smart pair of riding-boots, plus spurs.

“Care to see the depot, Brent?”

“I should, sir.”

He may be ten years my senior, and carry one more pip than I do, but has he so much right to feel so very much more important? He pauses at the doorway of his orderly room.

“I am going to lunch, Sergeant Smith.”

The sergeant knows his Templeman. He springs to his feet, and clicks.

“Very good, sir.”

We got out to a sandy space which is the parade ground for R.A.M.C. details, and crossing it is an R.A.M.C. orderly with a bucket of debris. The bucket is too full, and it is spilling some of its contents on the sand.

Templeman shouts at the man.

“You, there, what the hell do you think you are doing?”

The man looks frightened, while Templeman rates him with sarcastic insolence, and I realize that my fellow physician has caught the authority disease very badly. Also he may be showing off to me, and giving me a demonstration of discipline and how things should be done in an efficiently bullied depot. My slack, civilian method of address has suggested to him that I am no soldier, and Templeman is a super-soldier. It is all rather ridiculous and petty.

We lunch alone, after a tour of the depot, Templeman having sent an orderly to warn his mess-servant that there will be a visitor to lunch. The man is more engaging than the food, a delicate, fair, frightened-looking fellow who apologizes for the meal being a little primitive owing to the shortness of the notice. Templeman appears to have everyone about him well scared. He snubs the man.

“We are not at the Ritz, Jackson.”

“No, sir, of course not, sir.”

“I don’t believe in wallowing on active service, though I hear that on the Peninsula, Mr. Brent, some of you did yourselves very well.”

“Not so badly.”

“With the assistance of medical comforts, I suppose!”

I presume that it is usual for Templeman to lunch alone in state, and that having me for an audience he is pleased to grasp the opportunity of talking. The meek and frightened Jackson stands at attention behind Templeman’s chair, while he gives me his views on the Gallipoli campaign, and especially so with regard to its moral and psychological aspect. He speaks very scornfully of those in authority, and with almost equal scorn of the rank and file.

“Too much cowardice, Brent, not enough of that courage which takes the final risks. Yes, cowardice.”

He looks at me with sallow hauteur as though daring me to contradict him, and I want to contradict him, and do.

“I don’t think that is quite accurate. The conditions——”

“O, yes, I know all about the conditions.”

“You were there?”

“I volunteered to go, but they told me I should be more useful here. Discipline was needed. But I dare say that I know more of the material facts than you do. We English seem to have lost our old toughness, and our sense of duty. Take Suvla, for instance, apathy, cowardice, lack of discipline, a mob of raw civilians scrambling for water when they should have been fighting.”

“But what about the 29th Division and the landing?”

He gives me a little snicker of a smile.

“Do you know how many Turks there were at Helles?”

“No.”

“Well, I had the figures from a Turkish prisoner who was in hospital under me, an officer. He happened to know. About two battalions, Brent.”

“Two battalions!”

“Yes, and a couple of pom-poms and some four machine-guns. Those two battalions of Turks scattered about the toe of the Peninsula held up your crack 29th Division.”

It seems to give him pleasure, and though I hate the whole war business and am no Jingo, his attitude of supercilious scorn annoys me. What right has a man who has never been under shell fire or experienced the reactions of elemental fear to sit and sneer and criticize? Cowardice, indeed!

I say, “Well, you know, Templeman, things are so different under shell fire. Honestly, I suppose most of us are afraid. Wind-up may be a more or less

chronic condition. All the more honour to the men who carry on.”

“So you were afraid?”

“Terribly so, at times.”

But my candour only seems to increase his complacency.

“Doesn’t that rather prove my point? You see, I have lived abroad a good deal, Brent, and I’m sorry to say that the feeling on the Continent about England and the English wasn’t very flattering.”

“Oh?”

“Fat and flabby and too prosperous. Yes, flabby, Brent, flabby in the face of those elemental crises. We haven’t the cold fury of the French.”

“Perhaps because we haven’t quite the same urge to be furious.”

“Yes, we’re tame, Brent, too tame. Socialism, and all that sort of defeatism. Wellington’s troops were made of different stuff.”

“Most of them were blackguards.”

“But they could use the bayonet, Brent. Our England talks too much Utopian tosh, and is soft.”

I contradict him flatly.

“I don’t believe it. We shall win the war.”

“Not by Gallipoli methods.”

“We are being blooded. We shall learn.”

“This time we may learn too late. One can’t always be the world’s complacent fool.”

We part on rather brittle terms, and I take a tram back to Alexandria, realizing that Templeman is in authority over me and that I have failed to flatter him by playing the Agag to his absurd vanity. The vanity of man can be amazing, and when there is combined with it a passion to exert authority, the result, as in Templeman’s case, is fantastic and sinister. I move myself and my kit to the Hotel Cleopatra, a white building in the modern quarter. It is kept by a Levantine, supported by a fat wife and a handsome daughter who sits in the office and stares at one with huge, smoky black eyes. I find the hotel packed with R.A.M.C. officers, and after a day or two at the Cleopatra I am told that there are at least a hundred doctors loafing about Alexandria with nothing to do. One of them assures me that he has not done a day’s work since he joined the army, and he is indignant about it. “First they rushed me to Malta, and I wasn’t wanted; then they rushed me to Cairo, and I was superfluous. Then they pushed me back here, and I’ve been loafing here for a month. What makes me mad is that I left two elderly partners up to their necks at home in a colliery practice. No, I’m not seeing the joke.”

On the second night I allow myself a half-bottle of the Levantine’s red

wine, and regret it. If his daughter is of that vintage some fool-man will be disillusioned. The wine is like so much acid. I lie awake on my protesting tummy whose peristaltic spasms suggest two ferrets fighting in a sack. I get up and drink water. About one in the morning my next-door neighbour comes home furiously drunk. I hear, through the communicating door, his silly cursings and his belchings and blunderings, and the rage in my tummy becomes a fury. I cannot sleep, but that is not thanks to him. I get up and hammer on the communicating door.

“Shut up, damn you.”

By way of retort a boot is thrown at the door.

“Sh’t up, y’self, you swine.”

I feel like breaking down the door and getting at this gentleman.

“You drunken beast, other people want to sleep.”

“Sleep. Don’t b’silly.”

Later, I hear him being sick, and later still I hear him snoring, and I wonder in the morning whether there will be a catastrophic row between us, but nothing of the sort happens. In spite of his orgy he gets up bright and whistling. He is a fat and stocky fellow with a thick neck to whom life is a dish of eggs and bacon.

But I am like a homesick schoolboy at the end of his first term, counting the days until the school breaks up. Life has bored and bullied me not a little, and some of it has disgusted me, like the atmosphere of this Levantine hotel. Glancing back through the pages of my record, I accuse myself of being a pessimist, and something of a prude, a Simple Simon who expects the world’s pie to be so much better than it is. But what right have I to feel self-righteous? Deep down in me, and somehow associated with that yearning for home, lies the consciousness of failure. I have no reason to be proud of my year in the army, and, like the coward that I am, I am in a hurry to escape from a part which has been so indifferently played.

I have finished breakfast and am smoking a pipe when an orderly arrives with a chit from the depot. I am to report immediately, and I rush off in a state of excitement. This must mean that a boat is sailing and that Templeman has arranged for my passage home.

I find him in his office, and this time I salute. I would salute the Devil himself on this happy occasion. Templeman keeps me waiting for half a minute.

“O, Mr. Brent, you will embark on the *Taranto* at 11.30 and report to the O.C. ship for duty.”

I smile at him.

“Yes, sir. As far as Marseilles?”

He looks at me in a peculiar way, and pushes across the table a little bit of paper.

“The *Taranto* is bound, I believe, for Salonica.”

Salonica! I pick up the little bit of paper and read scribbled on it in pencil, “You will complete duty, and return and report to O.C. Depot, Alexandria.”

Something seems to drop in my tummy. I look at Templeman and understand that he is demonstrating to me the power of authority, and that he has not forgotten my failure to salute him.

“I thought I was going home, sir.”

“I will embark you for England, Brent, when you have completed this tour of duty. You had better hurry up. The *Taranto* sails at 11.30.”

I go out with my little bit of paper, feeling sick and shocked. How I am beginning to fear and to loathe these little bits of paper, leaves from the tree of authority that drift down into your lap just when you are beginning to feel a little secure and happy. I bitterly resent the fact that a man like Templeman can mess me about, and perhaps indulge in a supercilious chuckle. Another pleasure trip across the sea with the chance of being submarined! But if I am to catch the *Taranto* I shall have to hurry. I race back to the Hotel Cleopatra, pay my bill, collect my kit, hire a carriage and drive down to the docks. How different is this embarkation to be from what I had expected. Egyptian porters howl and run beside my carriage, and compete with each other noisily for my patronage, but I am too depressed to curse them, or to remember the magic word “Imshi.”

My driver finds the quay where the *Taranto* is tied up. She is a shabby, black, obsolete-looking boat, and her appearance adds to my depression. I notice a gun mounted on her stern deck. I pay my cabman, and two porters bundle me and my baggage up the gangway. Three or four officers are leaning over the rail; one of them is a Colonel, and I salute him.

“Excuse me, sir, I am to report to the O.C. ship.”

“I’m your man, doctor. You are coming with us for duty?”

“Yes, sir.”

We have a battery of artillery on board, odd details, and Territorials who are time expired. Colonel Praed is going home on leave. He is a charming person, one of those easy, kindly people who put one at ease. I find a cabin and dump my belongings, and join the gunner officers on deck. They too put me at ease, for they have developed the camaraderie of active service. I stand next to the O.C. of the battery, a tall, blond, regular soldier with a clean and confident face.

“I hear we are for Salonica.”

He gives me a whimsical look.

“Someone been making the usual mystery, doc.?”

“Well, I was told so.”

He laughs quietly.

“Colonel Praed is going on leave, and we are supposed to be for France. I know we do funny things in the army, but Salonica would be a little out of the way.”

I have Templeman’s piece of paper in my pocket, and I keep it there. Has he been amusing himself at my expense, letting me go as far as Marseilles in order to drag me back?

“What’s your goal, doc.?”

I feel apologetic.

“Going home at the end of my year. I left an elderly partner with all the work.”

“Lucky man, doc.”

“I may join up again, later.”

“Where were you?”

“Helles.”

“That ought to last you for a while.”

The *Taranto* steams out of harbour, and we go to lunch in the saloon with the ship’s officers. The captain, a turgid, swarthy little man, sits at the head of the table. I notice that all these sailors have strained eyes, and I am soon to discover the reason of it. Our old tub has no wireless, and cannot steam more than twelve knots, and on her last journey to Marseilles she was attacked and shelled by a submarine. She escaped, due to Captain Cox’s handling of her, and to the fact that a lucky shot from her own gun burst so near the submarine that she became cautious, and submerged. These sailor men have been bucketing to and fro between Alex. and Marseilles for the last nine months, without respite or leave, and I do not wonder that they are feeling the strain of watching eternally for the death that may rise out of the sea.

I like these gunners, especially Henderson, a tall, lean, sandy man who left the Canadian Mounted Police to join the battery. There is a simple, laconic humanity about him that gets me. Our voyage is uneventful, the sea calm. I spend quite a lot of time in the medical office pulling teeth. The news of one successful extraction spreads all over the ship, and my dental practice booms. We carry our cork jackets about with us, and sleep with them close to hand, and at night I wonder whether I shall wake to hear the *Taranto*’s siren squealing the alarm.

It fascinates me to watch a red-headed sailor in the ship’s crow’s nest,

continually turning his head this way and that like some mechanical figure. Sometimes he eats up there, but his head continues to move and his eyes to scan the treacherous sea. Always he seems to be the man on duty there. Perhaps he has unusual sight. I feel confidence in him, and a kind of gratitude for his vigilance.

Templeman's chit remains in my pocket. I have shown it to no one, and every time I finger the wretched little thing I feel rebellious.

It is quite certain now that we are bound for Marseilles, for we have passed Malta in the night and are steaming north-west. It is blue weather with more wind, and my little surgery over the ship's screw sways up and down so vigorously that I have to discontinue the pulling of teeth. I am no better sailor than I am soldier, and having got into a deck-chair I stay there for the good of my stomach, but I am rather pleased to find that that tough nut Henderson is a worse sailor than I am.

Our gunner reports sick. I find he has a temperature; it is probably 'flu, and I tell him he ought to keep in his bunk.

"Not me, doctor, not ruddy likely. I'm the only man who can lay our gun."

Stout fellow! I give him aspirin and tell him to lie down and keep warm until the alarm sounds!

Please God it won't, for we are within a day's steaming of Marseilles.

I hear that we shall make port early in the morning, and I have still not decided what to do with Templeman's ruddy little chit. I am up early, and watching the French coast rise out of an ultramarine sea. We are going to pass the famous Château d'If. I can see a gold-domed church high on a hill, and the terraced whiteness that is Marseilles. I find Colonel Praed beside me.

"What are you going to do, doctor?"

"I suppose, sir, I shall have to report to the R.A.M.C. authorities at Marseilles."

"Quite. I am going as far as Abbeville in charge of this crowd. Why not do duty with us?"

A sudden decision comes to me.

"I would like to, sir."

"Well, I'll give you a chit to the authorities, and apply for you as M.O. on the train. I'm just going to get my things together."

He leaves me alone by the ship's rail, and with a feeling of exultant recklessness I take Templeman's little bit of paper from my pocket, tear it into small pieces, and present it to the sea.

Marseilles. It seems very gay and sunny and debonair, and unvexed by the war. I find that there is an A.D.M.S. Marseilles, and with Colonel Praed's chit

in my pocket I go and report. The face of authority is bland and unsuspecting. There is no suggestion that the *Taranto* will need a medical officer on her return journey, and I am assigned to Colonel Praed as his M.O. train. I go forth feeling like a bad boy who has fooled the head master. Damn Templeman and his little bit of paper! If he should ever wonder what has become of me I shall be out of the jaws of the machine, an obscure country doctor driving his car along Sussex lanes.

The troops are still on board the *Taranto*, and I am met by Captain Marsden who tells me that I have to hold a venereal inspection before the men are allowed ashore. I hold it on the lower deck, and on the side away from the quay, so that no one shall be shocked, though this war is acting as an analgesia against shock. The men amuse me; some are shy, others ironic, a few brazen, but I find the whole crowd clean. Thomas has not so many opportunities for the sex adventure as have his officers, though I cannot picture either Marsden or Henderson in a brothel.

Colonel Praed and I go and explore Marseilles, and lunch at a restaurant on the Cannebière. Marseilles with its va-et-vient, and its almost exotic shops and suggestions of feminine prevalence, does not appear to be war conscious. Praed, who speaks French, remarks upon the apparent normality of this southern city to the little hunchbacked waiter who attends to us. He gives a little cynical smirk and says, "They are so far away from the front here, gentlemen," and he, too, is safe and secure, thanks to that old tuberculous spine of his.

Late in the afternoon we entrain at a suburban station. The battery is without its guns and horses, so the entraining is a simple affair. Colonel Praed and I share a first-class compartment, Marsden and his officers another.

The men are in the ordinary French closed trucks. We crawl off about sunset. Dinner is an improvisation, plus a bottle of red wine. We are going to be fairly comfortable, as we can open our valises on the seats and lie down.

Praed asks me where my home is. Sussex. He is a Somerset man, and I should imagine very much the country gentleman in a world of horses and of dogs. The type is so English and pleasant, but somewhat out of favour in this war, perhaps because there is a prejudice against the country tradition, which associates itself with Red Hats and is credited with being tragically stupid. Praed is anything but stupid. He realizes how the old things are passing, and that he and his may disappear in this fierce solvent which is both so democratic and enslaved.

When we turn in I lie and listen to the complaining of the wheels, and think

of the life to which I am returning. I shall be able to send Mary a telegram from Abbeville and tell her to meet me at the Lancaster Hotel in York Street. We will have a celebration; a little dinner, a little wine, and then, to bed.

This train journey across France is a deliberate business. We are let out now and again to relieve nature, and for an opportunity of getting hot food. Shaving water comes from the engine. We contrive to obtain hot coffee from occasional station buffets. The atmosphere becomes more tense and austere as we travel north. Marsden and Henderson join us sometimes, and we play Bridge. Marsden impresses me immensely. He will be in this ruddy show till death or the end, and yet you would think that he was a man going down into the country for a week's shooting. His calmness is amazing, and I feel that this man has ideals, and a secret religion of his own. His stark serenity makes me feel very small.

Abbeville at last. I say good-bye to these good friends of passage, dump my kit at the station, and go off in search of authority. Praed has given me a chit. I find that there is an A.D.M.S. in Abbeville, and I present my chit and explain my situation, and receive without demur one of those precious yellow tickets. I can travel to-morrow and embark at Boulogne. I hurry out in search of the Abbeville post office and send Mary a wire.

“Meet me Lancaster Hotel to-morrow. Book room. Love.
STEPHEN.”

I do not remember much of that night at Abbeville. The hotel is full of youngsters in khaki making the most of the food and the wine, and becoming noisy over it, but I do not mind their noise. All my thoughts and desires are across the water, but next day the dream is actual. I recover my kit, entrain, arrive at Boulogne, and embark on the leave boat. Everything is grey save the mood of that home-going crowd. The sea is choppy and it begins to drizzle, but no one seems to be sick. The spirit of the occasion transcends such physical lapses. I sit on the boat-deck and watch for England, and see it as a streak of a more sombre greyness above the grey sea. There is a boyish exultation in me. Everything is marvellous and good, and even conventional Folkestone on a drizzly day in March has the face of romance. I get a seat in a Pullman car, and eat my first English tea and watch Kent sliding by. For me it has a beauty that no words can express.

London in the dusk, lights, a dim squalor of innumerable little houses and

back yards. The Thames. We are sliding into Victoria station. Will Mary be there, or will she be waiting for me in the hotel? I find my kit dumped on the platform, but porters are scarce, and I have to wait ten minutes before I can secure one.

“I want a taxi.”

My porter is a gruff soul.

“You may be lucky, sir, and you may not.”

Just beyond the barrier I pause, looking for Mary in the crowd. An elderly man accosts me. “Excuse me, can you tell me whether Captain Sangster is on the train. He was coming from Egypt.” I smile and confess that I do not know anything about Captain Sangster, and my old gentleman smiles back. “You see, I thought you must be from Egypt, by your face. Such a colour. You’ll excuse me.” I smile at him tolerantly, and still scanning faces, follow my porter. No, Mary is not here. My porter has managed to commandeer a taxi, and I get in and we drive off. My impression of London is that it is strangely dark and empty, a city that does not share my excitement and my exultation, but pulls its cap down over its eyes, and suffers the war and the raw March drizzle. I keep saying to myself, “I am in England.” Oxford Street is incredibly familiar, for my old hospital is not three hundred yards away. We pass the particular Lyons where I used to lunch and tea as a student. My taxi turns into York Street, and pulls up outside the Lancaster Hotel.

A porter comes out and opens the door.

“Room booked, sir?”

“I hope so.”

“No use getting out, sir, unless you have booked.”

His attitude annoys me. Damn it, this is not the sort of salutation that one welcomes!

“All right. My wife should be here.”

But he refuses to remove the luggage, and I shoulder past him and go in and look round the lounge. It is crowded, but I cannot see Mary. Surely she must have received my wire? I go to the office and ask if a room has been booked in the name of Brent, and a bored and anæmic woman examines a ledger.

“Lieutenant and Mrs. Brent?”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“No. 77.”

I hurry out and curtly give the porter his orders.

“Yes, No. 77. Take the stuff off. You people seem to be a little spoilt here.”

He gives me a surly look and drags my valise across the pavement, holding it by one strap.

I ask for the key of 77, and being told that the lady must have it I assume that Mary is upstairs, unpacking. The lift-boy takes me to the third floor, and feeling like the passionate lover I walk along the corridor, find room No. 77 and knock. There is no answer. I try the door, and of course it is locked. A chambermaid appears, and I explain the situation, and ask her to let me in. She does so, and turns on the lights for me, and I find myself in the conventional and anonymous hotel bedroom, shabbily pink and white. One small suitcase lies on the luggage stand at the foot of the bed, but Mary has not unpacked any of her things and the room retains its air of unfriendly strangeness.

I am conscious of disappointment, the chill of the room and its anticlimax.

I go downstairs and look into the drawing-room and writing-room, but Mary is not there. Has she gone to the station and missed me? I return to the lounge, and as I enter it I see my wife coming in through the hotel doorway. She is in some sort of dark blue uniform and wearing a pleated, helmet-like hat. She is carrying a brown-paper parcel.

Again, I am conscious of vague disappointment. I am sick of uniforms. I have been visualizing my wife as a woman in a pretty frock.

Her face lights up, but the kisses we exchange are public and austere, and a strange muteness seems to possess us both.

“I have been hunting the whole hotel. You haven’t been to the station?”

“No, I had to go and buy something before the shops shut.”

I glance at her dangling parcel and she explains it with a gravity that is almost official and humourless.

“So silly of me. I packed in a hurry, and forgot my nightdress. Have you seen our room, dear?”

“Yes.”

We go upstairs, but there is a feeling of restraint between us, as though these months of separation had made us partial strangers. I feel a passionate urge to break down this intangible barrier, and as I close the bedroom door my impulse is to take Mary in my arms. She has placed her parcel on the bed, and is bending over her suitcase. She opens it, takes something out, and says brightly, “O, I brought you some letters, Stephen.”

I take them from her and am about to toss them on the bed when there are sounds of activity in the corridor, and someone knocks. It is my luggage. I shout, “Come in,” and sit down on a hard chair with my letters while my kit is carried in by a little alien porter. Mary is unpacking her suitcase; I see a sponge bag in her hand. Mechanically I look at my letters. The first one happens to be one of those unpleasant and official communications in a buff-coloured

envelope. I open it. The Inland Revenue authorities are asking me rudely and peremptorily about a certain trivial detail that concerns my return of a year ago. I had received a communication on this subject at Gallipoli and had replied, giving an explanation, but obviously they have not troubled to read my letter intelligently, and curtly demand an immediate payment.

“Well I’m damned!”

Mary is extracting various articles from her sponge bag.

“What’s the matter, dear?”

“These people make me sick. They seem to think themselves ruddy little autocrats.”

I tear the thing up and chuck it into the empty grate. Mary looks faintly shocked.

“My dear!”

“To come back from the war and strike that sort of thing!”

I am aware of her looking at me anxiously, and with a scrutiny that is almost unfriendly.

“Sorry, dear.”

I get up, put my arms round her, and kiss her, and suddenly she turns and clings to me.

“O, Stephen, you’re not different, are you?”

“My dear——”

I kiss her on the mouth.

“I have been thinking of this for months. One gets a bit strung up. No, I’m not different.”

“I’ve been like that, too.”

“My darling.”

I hold her close, pressing her to me.

“We’ll stay up here a night or two, what, and celebrate? A little dinner and a little wine, and a theatre to-morrow. Got a party frock?”

I hold her off, and put a finger on her bosom.

“Rather official, this.”

“I’m sorry, dear. I only got your wire late, and I came as I am.”

“No feathers! Well, it doesn’t matter. We’ll buy a frock to-morrow. Besides, you don’t go to bed in this.”

She colours up, and looks suddenly confused. Is the sex in me too rampant and sudden? Also, I have been living among men who do not talk like curates, and to whom life has become a thing of stark reality.

“All right. I’m in love with you, Mary, you know.”

She presses her face against my shoulder.

“Yes, dear, I know.”

I cannot help feeling that Mary is a little shy of me, and that during this year of independence and authority she has developed a new entity of her own, or rather her individuality has been by itself, and slipped into the habit of giving orders. She is inclined to be gently bossy, and as we sit at dinner and I consider the mature and comely woman in her, her faint perfume of dominance seems to provoke the male in me. Am I like a savage sailor come back from the sea?

XI

I HAVE reported to the necessary authority, and though nearly a fortnight of my year is still to run, they discharge me and send me home.

In the train, Mary and I decide that this fortnight's pay shall be given to Mary's hospital.

How good this England is even in March with the grass still winter grey, and the ploughed fields looking frozen, and the woods black under a hurrying sky. There is no greenness yet, and even the willow is asleep. It strikes me as a land in miniature, but how lovable and kind and secure. Brackenhurst on its hill looks almost mediæval grouped about the square tower of the church and the tall, sky-brushing elms.

We drive in an old closed fly to our home, and hold hands. I do not want to see anybody yet. The familiar white door with its lion-headed knocker and my brass plate welcome me. Old Sellars carries in my kit.

"Glad to be back, sir?"

Does he know how glad I am, how this little house has for me a particular warmth, perfume, and peace? I follow Mary into the drawing-room, drawing deep breaths. Tea is ready. We stand a moment before the fire, hands interlocked, and then I draw her to the french window. Our garden. It is still very wintry, with three pale daffodils daring the wind, and a string of crocus down the edge of one border. We stand a moment in silence, gazing.

"How utterly good everything is."

We have tea in front of the fire, and there are logs of Sussex oak, a present I hear from old Rob Guthrie. I feel kindly disposed even to Guthrie and his dyspeptic breath. Is he still talking of driving an ambulance in France? Mary laughs and tells me that Guthrie spends his time making patriotic speeches and sitting on committees. But enough of Guthrie. I light my pipe and get deep into my arm-chair, and find that I can talk to Mary as I have not talked to her before. Has she divined the secret shames and humiliations and meannesses of this war business? I think not.

I take her photo from my tunic pocket; it is still soiled with Gallipoli mud.

"That is one of the dirty tricks the war played on me."

She bends forward into the firelight to look at her own photo.

"Were you in mud like that?"

“It arrived one night in my dug-out and in my bed.”

“I want to keep this, Stephen.”

“A war relic! The fact is, Mary, happily married men don’t make good soldiers.”

“I’m sure you were——”

“No, not to the uttermost. You see, there is always something pulling a man towards safety, holding him back from taking risks. One’s so terribly keen to survive and to come home. One does not give oneself utterly.”

She slips down on to her knees by the fire.

“But Colonel Frost? You wrote——”

“Frost is a rather unique sort of person, much tougher than I am. Besides he had a command. Then you are a sort of symbol to other men.”

“Yes, I understand. In my way I was trying to help you, dear.”

“Your letters.”

“Yes. Would it have been easier without letters?”

“Good God, no. They helped to keep one sane, and in touch with peaceful and lovely things. But how’s old Randall?”

“Really wonderful. A little tired.”

“I can take things off his shoulders. I suppose he has had no holiday?”

“Not a day.”

“And there were scores of doctors knocking about in Egypt doing nothing! What news of Roger?”

“He’s somewhere in France, and a major now. Second in command of his battalion.”

“Poor old Roger. I’ll bet home things are pulling him rather badly.”

When my pipe is finished I wander round the garden. The buds of the big ribes where the path turns down into the vegetable garden are showing pink. I examine the fruit trees for their promise of blossom. The almond in the Sayles’s garden next door has a few flowers out on its lower branches. I go to the old coach-house which serves as a garage and say how-do-you-do to my car. One of the rear wings has a bad crumple in it, Mary’s war-driving I suppose. I sit in the familiar seat and play with the steering-wheel and controls. I decide to have the car repainted, but in the same colours, cream picked out with green.

Mary has gone to her hospital for an hour, and I carry up my kit to my dressing-room and unpack. Same old chest of drawers, same old tallboy which I use as a wardrobe, with its wayward lock that opens when you tread on a particular board in the floor. Deliberately savouring the process I unpack, only to realize that my civilian clothes are there ready for me, and that there is no

place for khaki. Shall I change into mufti? I do, and feel strange in the familiar clothes. I find room for my two tunics and overcoat in the cupboard beside the chimney, and hang my Sam Browne belt beside them. How that belt used to irk me, and now I find that I miss it.

I take a look out of the window and see the sunset hanging in the church elms. Surgery time. I decide to wander along and see old Randall and give him a hand. How pleasant it is gathering up all these threads.

Brackenhurst High Street in the March dusk. Allgoods's, the grocers, is just the same; Mullins's window is full of tools and ironmongery, guns and cartridges. I meet familiar faces and stop and shake hands. "Glad to see you back, doctor." My reply is to everybody, "I'm glad to be back." I enter the surgery by the yard door, pass through the waiting-room with its little crowd of club patients, and find Randall dressing a whitlow in the surgery. He looks at me, drops the bandage, and his face lights up. He is wearing spectacles, and they make him look much older.

"Stephen!"

He grips my hand, and clasps my arm with the other hand.

"Well, this is good."

"More than good."

I stoop and recover the bandage and re-roll it. Both of us remember the patient, an old grizzled farm labourer with a face that is all blue eyes and hair.

"What have you been doing, Spray?"

"Pricked he on a bit of barbed wire, ssir. My boy he do write that he be messin' 'bout with t'same mucky stuff out there in France."

I take over Spray's case and leave Randall free to deal with one of the others.

When the surgery is empty he drags me off into his den, produces whisky and a syphon and glasses, and we drink. It is very rarely that Randall touches whisky.

"War habit, Stephen. Find I need it sometimes. You look fatter."

"Lazy life. I expect you have been having rather a devil of a time."

"Not too bad, Stephen. Old Merriman of St. Helen's has come back into harness, and has been helping me."

"Pretty good at his age."

"Sixty-five. But I have had to do all the night work."

"And the hospitals?"

"Oh, the St. Helen's men do most of that, Murchison and Viner. Well, here's luck again. You see I have taken to gig-lamps."

"They suit you."

“They make me look like an owl.”

I suppose this first week back in harness has been one of the happiest weeks of my life. We have had a March blizzard; two elms are down in the churchyard, and one of the rectory cedars has lost two huge branches. The wind was extraordinarily fierce, and in Hammer Pool Lane there was a snow-drift five-feet deep. I shall have cause to remember it, because I had a midwifery case at one in the morning at the Old Forge; a moon was shining and the surface of the snow was so deceptive that I drove my car into the drift, and had to leave her there all night. I got back home at about five in the morning, with the church elms like huge besoms trying to sweep the stars out of the sky.

But it was a very beautiful world, Sussex under snow, and I am well content with it and its people. I seem to be spending most of my time among working folk, and I feel like a shepherd in the lambing season.

My Old Forge mother says to me, “Doctor, I’m praying that my boy will never be taken for a soldier,” and I can echo that prayer.

These working folk do not seem to want to talk about the war, and my whole desire is to forget it, and to submerge myself in the doing of simple, useful things, but the people of my own class are different, especially the few who, though brought up on Waterloo, Balaclava and Kipling, have a suspicion that all is not well. Even the rector corners me and tries to pump me. What is the truth about the Gallipoli affair?

I tell him one or two truths, and he looks shocked. I realize that these people do not want the truth; they ask to be reassured, and be made to feel comfortable by the promising of comfortable things.

“I’m afraid you must be rather a pessimist, Brent. I don’t think one ought to let oneself appear a defeatist.”

I am reproved.

“Quite so, sir, but you asked me——”

“Yes, yes,” and he looks at me over the tops of his pince-nez, “of course I understand that mistakes are made in every war.”

I realize that he and all the others understand nothing of the war, and that if one is wise one will not attempt to unsettle their illusions. The men are splendid, everything is splendid, everyone courts wounds and death, everyone is supremely unselfish, all wounded men are thirsting to be back in the blood-bath. One or two old ladies still believe in the Angel of Mons. No one understands the horror and the slavery, the petty intrigue, the callous necessity that treats men like cattle. There is splendour, yes, but there is a dumb anguish

in this human splendour.

Randall is one of the few people who is not Waterloo-minded. He questions me tentatively.

“What’s the spirit, really, Stephen?”

“Do you want me to be quite honest?”

“My dear chap!”

“Well, I’m afraid most men discover that they have a horrid objection to being maimed or killed, even for the sake of their country.”

“All, Stephen?”

“Most, if they are honest. The glory idea is mischievous and ruddy rubbish. I suppose a doctor sees the negative side of it. No blood lust and fury for us.”

“You mean, men have to be driven?”

“Yes, but also by something inside them. This modern war business is all against nature. It’s organized murder at a distance. My feeling about it is that the crowd, when it has got away from the Brass Bands and the Press, is rather like a sullen and bewildered drove of beasts who somehow dread the shambles but know there is no escape.”

“Unless——?”

“You wangle, or can work a wangle.”

He looks at me sadly.

“Yes, I suppose it’s rather like a dissecting-room. No one can know what a dissecting-room is like save those who have fished their own bit of salted human meat out of the spirit-locker.”

April comes suddenly and sweetly, and as I drive on my rounds I seem to see this Sussex world anew. It is rolling country under great skies mountainous with white clouds. My awareness of things is like a mirror in which little pictures are brilliantly reflected. I see old and shaggy orchards like ancient men putting on spring garlands. Coldbank Mill seems always visible like a great white pharos against the very blue sky. The banks are pied with primroses and violets. The larch plantation in the Great Wood is like a goblin city of a thousand crowded green spires. Windflowers are blinking in the coppices. I have to drive every day to Burntshaw and the great beech woods sheltering the park move me to strange emotion. Soon every odd corner will be green and feathery with chervil. I have a case at the Abbey Mill, and here, above the old stew ponds the woods will soon be a sheet of bluebells. I see lambs playing, and on the high meadows the gorse is still ablaze. From Coldbank Hill one can see the blue curve of Rye Bay, and in the north-west beyond the pines of Town Toy the faint outline of Blueborough.

But there are little specks of dust upon the surface of this mirror.

I run up against Rob Guthrie. I don't know why I have not met him before. He is full of patriotic self-importance and that strange complacency that crowns like a halo some of these elderly gentlemen who are so busy at home. He seems to have become a sort of public censor.

"What, Brent, back again? How did they manage to let you out of the army?"

Guthrie appears to have a secret grievance against me, but why? Is it that these older men feel themselves to be brave dogs when all the younger men are in exile, and that they resent our return? I explain that doctors can enlist on a yearly contract.

"Very peculiar. I was unaware that any citizen was allowed to barter his services for a year and a day."

"Well, it is so."

"So they must think old ladies' tongues more important than our wounded."

He is an offensive fool, and pottering about on platforms seems to have made him even more of a gasbag. Perhaps my year in the army has caused me to be a little more fierce and frank, but I let fly at Guthrie.

"How's the flatus?"

"What do you mean?"

"Wind. A little gentian and soda seems indicated."

His mouth hangs open for a moment under that huge and untidy moustache.

"Are you trying to be offensive, Brent?"

"I was merely giving you a dose of your own medicine, Guthrie. May I tell you that we people who have seen the real thing haven't much use for the windy guff they talk at home."

He is furiously offended. He glares at me, nibbles like a rabbit, and passes on.

There are some new people at Lingwood. I have to drive over there every other day. One morning in the sunken road beyond Burntshaw I am confronted by a pony trap with two girls in it. I slow up, for there is not much room, and smile, though they are strangers to me. One of them, a pert young blonde, makes a mouth at me and says, "Go to the war."

Little fool! But I have a feeling that this sort of thing should not be allowed to pass. I pull up, get out, and hail their trap.

"Excuse me a moment."

They stop, and I walk along the lane, and raise my hat. Both their faces are solemn and smug.

“Did I hear you say ‘Go to the War’?”

The blonde nods at me.

“May I suggest that this sort of thing makes you look silly. You see, I happen to be back from the war.”

Her face confronts me dumbly like a little pale, sour bun. She does not say she is sorry. What she does say is, “How do I know that you aren’t bluffing?”

That makes me laugh.

“I am sorry that you can pin neither the lie nor the white feather on me, but please don’t do this sort of thing again. It only makes you look silly. Good morning.”

I raise my hat and leave them both looking sullen and dumb-saucy, and as I turn and walk away I hear the bun-faced one say, “I don’t believe he’s ever been in khaki. He doesn’t look like it.”

So the last word rests with them.

Why should these petty incidents possess any significance for me? And why should the skin of my soul be so hypersensitive? Is it that I am trying to repress that secret sense of failure that still rankles in me? I know that I am not proud of my soldier’s year, and that in my heart of hearts I am ashamed of it. It provoked in me the mean and bitter revolt of my egotism. Why should I suffer?

Even the beauty of this spring comes to have a wounding poignancy. I am trying to drink it in like an opiate and to convince myself that it is the one reality, that and my daily work, but I cannot escape from the feeling of universal tragedy. I ask for permanence, peace, security, and the face of this beautiful world is whimsical and sad. There is no permanency even in nature. Things pass, the apple blossom falls, the bluebells become grey ghosts, all the exquisite shades of green begin to merge into the heavier foliage of summer. Even when I open the friendly white door of my house and go in I have a sense of sneaking into some funk-hole.

I catch Randall looking at me questioningly in the surgery. Is it that he thinks me moody and irritable? Perhaps I am. This secret dissatisfaction with one’s self is like some chronic pain in one’s stomach, or rather, qualms and a perpetual uneasiness.

Mary is so very full of her hospital. It seems to be the new nucleus of Brackenhurst’s life, and I have no share in it. It is a Murchison-Viner show, and I rather resent the intrusion of these two men. And from Mary I get the

impression, though I know she is innocent of any ulterior purpose, that their work is the real work, while I, as Guthrie had said, am looking at old people's tongues.

I am hearing so much about Murchison. No doubt he is an able surgeon and doing good work, but need Mary always come back and tell me about Murchison's operations?

He is a rather superior person, tall, dark and debonair, with a supremely confident manner. Gossip has whispered that his lady patients always fall in love with Murchison.

Surely I am not jealous of the fellow?

I come into lunch tired and depressed. Mary is absent. She hurries in late with a kind of grave, Madonna face.

"I'm so sorry, Stephen, we've had a terrible case."

"Oh?"

"An abdomen that had gone wrong. They had to operate."

"Murchison?"

"Yes."

"What result?"

"Oh, I think they have saved the boy. Randall gave the anæsthetic."

I feel huffed. Why hadn't they asked me to give the anæsthetic?

But Mary's enthusiasm is in full flower.

"It is really rather wonderful to be able to do things like that. It's so real and good."

"You mean, being able to cut in and patch up?"

She looks at me quickly as though I had dropped a plate on the floor.

"Yes."

"It's all in the day's work."

"But what work?"

Yes, I am jealous of Murchison, not of the man and his looks and his sex appeal, but of the work he is doing and the position he holds. He is skilful and complacent and secure, while I seem to be a poor, disgruntled fumbler, unable to possess my soul in peace. Murchison is immune from criticism. He is the right man in the right place; moreover he is not of military age. This bloody business cannot affect him; it only endows him with more kudos.

Damn Murchison! Why am I not in his place? Because I have neither the skill nor the confidence. But I regard him bitterly as an interloper, and despise my mean little soul for feeling in this way.

My gardener has had to join up. I get out the mowing machine in the evening and cut grass. I try to lose my bitterness and discontent in my garden, but somehow the work irks me. Pottering about among weeds while another man is performing major operations, and other men—— I can remember one evening behaving like an angry child. I had been nailing up a board in the fence, and I hit my thumb with the hammer. Sudden blind rage! I threw the hammer into the middle of the raspberry canes.

Afterwards, I had to go and recover it.

Mary brings me a message. Could I find time to go round the wards three times a week, and do some of the more serious dressings?

“For Murchison?”

“Yes, dear; he is so terribly rushed.”

I flare.

“I’m damned if I am going to be Murchison’s bottle-washer.”

She looks at me with sudden, shocked intentness. Almost, I divine compassion and some secret comprehension in that look, and it exasperates me.

“It’s only the work, Stephen, I was thinking of. But if you are feeling like that——”

“I’ve quite enough to do as it is.”

She is silent.

The instinct for self-preservation. It seems to me that it is the strongest of all the elemental urges, stronger than sex and than hunger, and that I have been and am the slave of my natural self. Nature wills us either to be cowards or to fight, and to run away from or towards one’s enemy are both legitimate and natural actions. It depends upon how big one’s enemy bulks, and how shrewd and right one’s fear is.

But society, even in its most elementary phases, sets itself to condemn and to coerce the natural urges of the individual, if the urge is anti-social. We must fight for our clan or our country, and no high metaphysical argument will save us from being damned and scorned as cowards if we dare to value the one self more than the stark need of the many. Societies must protect themselves. But they will help us to dress up our own cowardice in shining and noble armour, and call it by high-sounding names, patriotism, sacrifice, the pride of a manly self-regard.

I have no illusions now. I am not of the blood of martyrs. The crowd man is right when one of these crowd catastrophies ravages the earth. Your merely clever person is better silent and under the bed, unless he can strip himself of his ingenious excuses and cease from being superior.

I am not feeling superior.

I am feeling a wretched failure, and my self-regard is like a moping hen.

I realize that my first surrender was a surrender to my neighbours, to a convention, to social pressure. I wanted to be alone, my one self in the world, and as the world is constituted at present that is impossible, unless one has immense vanity and courage. Perhaps vanity is needed more than courage. But what if my self-regard is a reality, and sacrifices one of the spiritual essentials in this mysterious pageant of death and of life? Must a man renounce everything and go forth to embrace his particular cross? And for what? That there may be peace in the world?

Will there ever be peace?

But can I hide behind scepticism? Is not the very voice of my embittered vanity the one voice to which I should listen? Let me put ideals aside for the moment. However bloody silly this war may seem, my country and my friends are trapped in it. It may be a dirty ditch, but can I stand on the edge of it and pretend to be superior while my country is struggling in the mud?

I both value myself too highly, and I value myself not at all.

I wish I could talk to Mary about it, but somehow I cannot. These secret agonies, like an ache in one's belly, are resolvable only by the tissues of one's own soul. I don't suppose my wife has any suspicion of the secret shames and urges that are contending in me. Besides, why should she suffer? It would be even greater cowardice to involve her in the scufflings of my conscience.

But what does all this mean? That I, who only a few weeks ago escaped from a life that I loathed, and who put off the livery of war with joy and exultation, am being driven by something in myself to return to the life that I hate!

How extraordinary!

How strange that it should happen to me like this! Stranger still, I am realizing that a part of me, my pride, wants to go back. There is nothing heroic about it. I am still a cowardly person, but it is not any fear of society that coerces me. I know that as things are ordered at present I have presented my sop to Cerberus, and that I can remain here without public shame. There may be thousands of shirkers, but I shall not be accounted one of them. If I cared to I could adopt an air of patronage to men like Murchison and Viner, and parade

my services by telling stories. “When I was in Gallipoli——” Yes, it would be so easy, and seemingly legitimate, but my urge does not lie that way.

Is it that I want to feel friends with the thing one calls one’s soul? Is it vanity? Has Murchison made me feel like a small boy whose tricks are not worth notice?

No, I don’t think it is that. They tell us that all motives are mixed, but there must be some particularly potent constituent in mine.

XII

ROGER is home on leave, and Mary and I drive up to Firecross Hill to tea. Roger had chosen the site of his house so wisely, and in all ways I have found him wise.

Roger has changed. He looks bigger, fiercer, rougher, as though the surface of him had been rubbed over with a harsh leather. There is a little knot of wrinkles between his eyebrows, and his eyes look strained. He is wearing on his sleeve a blue emblem in wool in the shape of a grenade, and on the back of his tunic below the collar a blue and white tab.

Roger greets me with affection.

“Hallo, old man.”

His eyes do not reproach me for being out of khaki, but I know he must envy me. There is no escape for Roger, and his face is the face of a man who is confronting the inevitable starkness of what may be. We have tea in the loggia, and the children come down and play on the lawn. Roger watches them with fierce, sad eyes. Norah is bright and brave, and tries to talk about the garden, and how Tom, the eldest boy, is becoming useful with his toy wheelbarrow.

After tea Mary and Norah and the children go round the garden. Roger and I are left alone to smoke.

We have had the Jutland business, and it has depressed us all, and Roger tells me that it is a shock to the men in the trenches.

“We did think the Navy could give Fritz a knock. We can’t at present. He is a damned thorough and tough old fighter is Fritz.”

“You respect him?”

“I should say so. Whatever we try to do, Stephen, he does it a bit better. I know we’re a lot of amateurs, and he is teaching us. The men are keen enough, but they are not as wise as the Boche. I don’t see any end yet to this damned war.”

“Attrition?”

“Yes, my dear man, but some of us have a horrible feeling that our lot haven’t the brains. No imagination. They’ll just chuck us away against barbed wire and machine-guns. Butting like goats at stone walls. Come on, let’s go round the garden. One wants to try and forget.”

Roger has gone back.

It is perfect weather, what the people who write in the papers call “Flaming June.” Serene, still mornings, the distances hazed with heat, hills softly blue, the whole world smelling of hay and of roses. Mary keeps the vases full of flowers.

I remember her saying to me after tea at Firecross, “I have a dreadful feeling, Stephen, that Roger will never come back.”

“Do you think Norah feels like that?”

“Norah is amazingly brave.”

It is rather horrible on these still and perfect days to hear and feel those vibrations in the air. Faint thuddings and rumblings. We all know what they are, our guns on the Somme. The noise seems incessant. It disturbs me, seems to stir something deep in my vitals. What a horror it must be over there. Earth and human flesh and blood stirred up into a sort of ghastly porridge.

I stop my car one morning in the middle of the Burntshaw beeches. The peace of these magnificent and stately trees seems so profound. It is like a cathedral with the grey pillars supporting arcades and vaults of green through which the sunlight transfuses itself. Not a leaf is stirring. Yet as I stand here, even this almost sacred place is not proof against those distant rumblings. They seem to grow louder and more disturbing in this silent wood like echoes of the sea in a deep cave.

I meet Guthrie by the church. He is looking jaunty, with his hat cocked, and his ragged moustache brushed up. He accosts me.

“Heard the news, Brent?”

I see that he is full of private information, and peculiarly proud of it. Flatus!

“We have taken their first line on a front of twenty miles.”

He seems to blow out his moustache at me.

“Don’t you wish you were there? By God, if I was twenty years younger!”

But his words seem to pass over me. I am thinking of Roger, and those others.

“Cheer up, Brent. Isn’t this a moral tonic?”

I look at his foolish face.

“I’m thinking of what we must have lost.”

“Damn it, man, you’re a regular Jonah!”

Mary tells me that all hospitals have been warned to prepare for a rush of casualties. All minor cases and convalescents are to be passed on to lesser hospitals. Murchison is the man of the moment. They will have to try and mend the many whom our war has smashed.

Mary and I both seem to be feeling restless, and yet we cannot confess to each other the things that are hurting us. It is a strangely dumb phase. I ask her if she would like a drive. I have to go out beyond Burntshaw in the afternoon, and I suggest that we look up Norah on the way home.

“Yes, Stephen. I feel I want to get away, for a little, from everything. Poor Norah!”

I know what is in her mind.

Mary packs a tea basket, and we drive out along the Old Pike road which gives one a view over the weald with the downs in the distance. They are like silver smoke. We pass through Burntshaw Park, and after I have visited my case, we go on to High Ling. The view is marvellous from here, but landscape painting in words has always seemed to me a rather futile business and an occasion for literary struttings and posings. We settle down in the ling in the shade of a Scotch fir that had shaped itself like a great candlestick with many branches. One can smell the tree, and its cones lie scattered on the ground. Mary has brought a spirit-lamp, and we boil our own hot water.

“It’s good being children again.”

I say, “What a pity we can’t remain children. One can’t imagine organized murder in a nursery.”

I see her face wince.

“Oh, don’t let’s speak of the war.”

Perhaps she is realizing like I am how impossible it is to forget it.

After tea I get the rug and cushions out of the car and make a bed in the ling, and we lie there side by side and look at the sky through the branches of the fir. We have little to say, perhaps because on this serene day we feel strangely and intimately in touch with one another. I feel very tender towards this dear and sensitive comrade, and my thoughts seem to go back over the years we have spent together.

“All my good things seem to have come to me through you, Mary.”

She turns her head and smiles at me.

“Do you remember that garden party at Mrs. Brailton’s?”

“You had your hair down.”

“And your tie and your socks didn’t match, Stevie.”

“And we played croquet. And I cheated to let you and your partner win.

That made up for the socks.”

“I didn’t mind the socks. I thought it rather sweet.”

“What, my loutishness?”

“No, the shy and sudden way you fell in love with me. It wasn’t loutish. It was rather beautiful.”

“Were you laughing at me?”

“I hope I was never that sort of little beast.”

She gives me her hand to hold.

“Well, it is one of those things a man thinks of just before he——”

I feel her fingers close on mine.

“Don’t say that, Stephen, don’t. It sounds as though—— Oh, let’s just look at the sky.”

It is after five when we pack up and drive back. I have the surgery to remember, and if we are to stop at Firecross we shall not have too much time.

The white gate of Firecross is open. I turn the car into the drive and we see Roger’s kids with their nurse playing in the rough grass of the little orchard. The nurse gets up and comes quickly across to us as I turn the car by the house.

“Is Mrs. Hyde in?”

The nurse’s face has a queer, set look.

“She’s not seeing anyone, madam. Haven’t you heard?”

“What?”

“About Mr. Roger. He’s killed.”

I am conscious of sitting there leaning over the steering wheel and feeling mute and shocked. The woman excuses herself and hurries back to the children. I hear a sound beside me. It is Mary weeping. She sits there crying without bothering about such a thing as a handkerchief, and her tears run down her cheeks and into her lap. She speaks to me in a choked voice.

“Oh, poor Norah! And his children playing there! And all these trees he planted!”

I can find nothing to say.

“It’s brutal, Stephen, and all so wicked and senseless. Why must men be such fatal fools?”

I am walking in my garden in the cool of the evening, and to me it has become a kind of Garden of Gethsemane.

I know now that I must go back. Roger’s death has made it inevitable, for when your friend has made the supreme sacrifice, no little mean self can

continue to haggle and debate. If it is emotion and not reason that moves me to make my choice, well, let it be so. I have watched one or two men in the neighbourhood reason themselves into nice, secure niches. Roger was not like that. He was not at all clever, and it cost him much sweating to pass his law exams, but he had that which is so much more potent than cleverness, courage, a kind of wisdom.

I am conscious of a strange sense of relief, almost of serenity, as I walk up and down the grass. This time I shall not be surrendering to social pressure; it is something in myself that goes out to share in this human tragedy. We are all involved in this world madness, we and our enemies, and maybe we must suffer this mania before sanity and vision can return.

But to tell Mary! Does she suspect? Will it upset her terribly? But, after all, my danger will not be Roger's danger. A doctor has his perils, but they are not so stark as those of the man with the rifle. I realize that I must tell Mary immediately, and as I turn towards the house I see her standing at the french window.

I am aware of a sensitive flickering of her lashes as I come near to her, but her eyes watch me steadfastly, whereas I am half afraid to look at her.

She says, "You didn't drink your coffee."

Damn it, how hard it is tell her! She steps back, and I follow her into the room. She sits down on the sofa.

"What is it, Stephen?"

"Roger's death. It has made me realize that I must go back."

"Must you, Stephen?"

"Dear, forgive me, but I must."

Her face looks frail and small. She sits there looking at me with her hands clasped.

"I think I know. I won't stand in your way. It's very brave of you, dear."

"No, not brave. I'm no hero."

"Yes, it is, because I know how you loathe all that. But I think you are right. I don't want to say that you are right, and yet, I must."

I sit down beside her and draw her to me.

"This unhappy generation! Why should we have to bear it, yet bear it we must."

"Yes, dear."

"One can't make a bargain with fate. Roger didn't, and his danger was so much greater than mine will be."

“I feel about Norah as you do about Roger.”

“Poor Norah. But she’ll face it.”

We sit in silence for a while as the dusk begins to fill the room. I have a feeling that Mary wants to tell me something, and I wait, but no confession comes from her. Her breathing is tranquil and steady, and the hand I hold is damp and warm.

“When shall you go, Stephen?”

“I’d rather go soon.”

“I understand.”

“I will try and get into some Territorial Field Ambulance. There are one or two divisions that have not yet gone out. It must rather help one to be in the same family from the beginning.”

“You feel more part of it.”

“Yes.”

I am thinking of my khaki put away in a cupboard, and how I had imagined that it would be food for the moths, but this time my putting it on will be different.

“I must look out your things, Stephen.”

“There is not so much haste as all that.”

“What will poor old Randall say?”

“I think he will understand.”

She puts her head on my shoulder and there is a long silence.

“I’m trying to give too, Stephen, even if—— Well, we’ve been very happy. I’m glad we had yesterday.”

“Oh, I shall come through all right, dear. We’ll just go through with it, and think of the days to come. This war can’t last for ever.”

Randall is more upset about my going out a second time than I had expected him to be. I am frank with him about it; I tell him that I was not satisfied with my first year’s service, that I resented the surrender of my freedom, and being at the mercy of other men, but that Roger’s death has made me feel quite differently about the war.

Randall is worried and put out. He surprises me by taking an unexpected view of Roger’s tragedy.

“But why pity poor Roger? What a splendid death, to fall leading your men, mad with excitement and exultation.”

I look at him helplessly. Does Randall really think that death comes to a man like Roger in that way?

“But what about Norah?”

“She has the children and a good memory to cherish. Besides, she has an income of her own, and her people are well off. And she may marry again.”

“I don’t think she’ll easily forget a man like Roger. Besides, my dear man, you are proving my own case for me, though things would be rather straitened for Mary if I got knocked out.”

“Does she want you to go?”

Really, Randall is being very myopic!

“She agrees with me about my feeling about going.”

Randall grunts, takes off his spectacles and polishes them.

“I suppose you haven’t considered?”

“Oh, yes, I have. I know that I am letting you in for a heavy time, but can’t we arrange with one of the St. Helen’s men to help you? After all, if this war goes on, that’s what it will come to. The profession will have to organize itself.”

He looks at me suddenly with whimsical affection.

“All right, Stephen. After all, I’m taking no risks. And if you are feeling like this about it, I suppose there is no more to be said. What are your plans?”

“I want to join a Territorial unit. I’m not going to be nobody’s child again, a sort of spare part to be labelled and put in the post. War’s a sorry enough game without other humiliations.”

“Humiliations?”

“Yes, my dear man. Some day perhaps I will put them on paper.”

Randall stands by the surgery desk and enters up some cases in the day-book.

“Well, why not try old Sir Miles Harker? His brother is commanding a division somewhere in England. I believe they are at Ebchester.”

“Which division?”

“I think it is the eighty something, but I’m beginning to lose count. He might put you in touch with someone.”

“I’ll try it.”

I take Randall’s advice, and write to Sir Miles Harker asking him if he can help me. I receive a charming letter in reply telling me to come and see him at Netherhurst. I go and explain my wishes and he is very kind. Sir Miles is a stately old person with a sense of humour like old wine. He has no illusions about the war, and also no illusions as to the inevitableness of service.

“No one has any right to feel too superior about helping to clear up this mess.”

He promises to write to his brother General Harker, and I leave Netherhurst

feeling heartened and reassured. How much less like a butcher's shop life seems when it is managed by a gentleman.

A few days later Sir Miles writes to me to say that the 202nd Field Ambulance of the 81st Division is in need of officers, but that its O.C. would like to see me before having me posted to his unit. Sir Miles suggests that I should go down to Ebchester and meet Colonel Fairfax. This sounds to me an excellent proposition. I would rather deal with a man who appears to be proud of his unit and does not want to accept a pig in a poke.

I talk it over with Mary and decide to go.

The 81st is in barracks at Ebchester, and retained temporarily for home defence. I reach Ebchester in the afternoon, and taking a taxi to the Golden Crown Hotel leave my suitcase there. Ebchester is crowded with men of the 81st Division. I walk to the barracks, acres of ugly red brick and gravel and grass, and meeting an R.A.M.C. sergeant I ask him to direct me to the orderly room of the 202 F.A. Apparently he belongs to the unit, and puts me on my way. I enter a brick building which is exactly like all the others, completely hideous and utilitarian and depressing. I address myself in the orderly room to a fair, slim and remarkably good-looking young staff-sergeant. I tell him that I have come to see Colonel Fairfax.

"Is it Dr. Brent?"

"Yes."

"Will you come upstairs, sir?"

I like his intelligence and his manners, and the introduction seems a good one. He takes me upstairs, knocks at a door, and opens it.

"Dr. Brent, sir."

A large and pleasant voice says, "Come in."

I don't think my impression of any man has ever been so immediately happy and satisfying. Colonel Fairfax is sitting behind a desk. I see a big blond head and a fresh and handsome face in which the vivid blueness of the eyes is matched by their kindness. Fairfax rises from his chair, and puts out a hand. I realize how big he is, and how splendidly made. There is a charming shrewdness about him, a dignity that reassures me. I feel that there is no meanness in this man.

He tells me to sit down, and we talk. He asks me about my previous service and experience, and I realize that he is summing me up, but his blue-eyed scrutiny does not trouble me. I feel at ease with him. It is as though some

instant sympathy had made us friends. I feel that I can work for this man.

He asks me when I can join up.

“At once, sir, if you will take me.”

He smiles.

“I shall be glad of an officer who has had active experience. None of my officers have been out. We expect to be ordered abroad within the next three months.”

“I shall be very glad to join you, sir. Do I leave all the formalities to you?”

“Yes, Brent, I’ll arrange everything. But you ought to join as a captain after your year’s service. I’ll take the matter up with our A.D.M.S. Let’s go and have some tea. You can go back home until we notify you.”

He takes me down to the mess. There are two other officers there, Margetson, a little stout sandy man who I am to find is known as Margery, and Hallard, who smiles at me and shows many teeth under a black moustache. I like both of them, for they are easy and friendly. Another officer comes in with a great, round, genial baby face and a sleek cap of reddish hair. This is Gibbs, a junior. He is immensely strong, and gives me a grip that almost hurts. I have a feeling that I shall not be treated as a stranger here, or be subjected to jealousies and petty intrigues. Fairfax strikes me as being too big a man for that sort of thing. He can be one with us, joke and tease, without losing either his touch or his dignity.

I feel that I have fallen into a happy crowd.

“Where are you staying the night, Brent?”

“At the Golden Crown, sir.”

“Dreary hole. Better come up and dine with us.”

I do.

How mysterious and provoking are one’s likes and dislikes! My impression is that I like Fairfax because he is my opposite, deliberate where I am impetuous, jocund and ironic over some business that makes me angry. He is like a very large dog, good-tempered and serene, and wise. He can tease, but there is never any venom in his teasing. It is a sign of affection.

It is the naturalness of the man, a kind of spacious simplicity that attracts me.

I suppose that is why I have always disliked your reformer Socialist, or what not. One may agree with some of his theories, and dislike the theorist. People with urges are apt to be superior, and to provoke one with their assumption of high rectitude and moral ardour. It is so obvious that they wish to possess the world, and that the theory may seem of more importance than

the practice and I, like many others, object to being lectured and labelled. Also, one is suspicious of the fellow's smell, the essential odour that seems to attach itself to the very righteous.

Any sort of sacerdotalism repels me, especially the sacerdotalism of Socialism, but the man in the surplice is often more repellent than the priest.

I have a suspicion that all this regimentation, this classifying and numbering of men, and their being treated like cattle, and all this growth of ministries and officials promises to interfere with our future freedom. The country will be dominated by what one might call "The Ministry of Interference." We shall be at the mercy of the Schoolmaster Mind, of a clique whose passion is to exert authority, to instruct, and to make such a wordy mystery of their new Whitehall Bible that no plain man can understand it or challenge its authority.

I make this note in my journal, for in the F.A. Mess on that first night the subject somehow came up for discussion. I think it was Hallard of the ironic mouth and vigorous masseter muscles who started it. He is Fairfax's adjutant, and as such, is in closer contact with authority and its official fuss.

"It is going to be a world of Paper Pushing, and its god and autocrat will be a sort of glorified Inspector of Taxes. You will have to make returns, sir, on how many bottles of gentian and soda you have prescribed per week. And you will have to report whether the proletarian mothers have changed their babies' nappies properly six times a day."

I remember Fairfax's jocund, sceptical laugh.

"Get along with you, Hallard. Do you think this country is going to stomach that sort of thing?"

"Wait and see, sir. This paper-pushing game can spread like a blizzard. We shall be so busy trying to sweep our own particular doorstep that we shan't even have time to go and hang the paper-mongers."

I travel back next day after interviewing the A.D.M.S. of the 81st Division, a tall person with cold and cynical eyes. He is curt with me, especially when I hint to him that Colonel Fairfax has suggested that I ought to join with the rank of captain. A Territorial M.O. has to serve six months before obtaining his captaincy, and I have already served a year.

"Fudge, man. You temporaries seem to expect to have it every way."

"I shall not be a temporary officer, sir."

"No, my lad, you won't. You'll be in for the duration, as it should be. You

will be treated as an ordinary Territorial officer.”

“Very good, sir.”

But my journey home is on the whole a happy one, for the personality of my new C.O. has heartened and reassured me. If one has to serve, the secret of happy service rests with the man under whom you serve. Instead of being the tyrant he can stand between you and tyranny.

Mary is waiting for me. She looks anxiously at my face, but I imagine my countenance must be cheerful, for that searching look goes out of her eyes.

“Anything arranged, Stephen?”

“Colonel Fairfax is taking me. I don’t think I have ever liked a man better on first impressions.”

She kisses me.

“I’m so glad. It must make all the difference.”

“All the difference in the world, my dear.”

My second going promises to be less poignant than my first. We are both of us much more calm about it, and it is not till the evening before my leaving that Mary shocks me with the news of something she has been hiding.

She is pregnant.

So, that is why I have had the feeling that she had something to confess. But what a blind and self-centred ass I have been not to have suspected. It is only the second month, but even then——!

“Why didn’t you tell me, dear? I’ve no apologies to make.”

“I didn’t want to——”

“Put anything in my way?”

“Yes. And, after all, Stephen, there is something in me that is deeply glad. You know, we always——”

“Yes, I know. But now——! I hate the idea of leaving you to all this.”

“Are we exceptions?”

“One is always inclined to regard one’s own case as the exception. But I’ll have a talk to Randall.”

She smiles at me.

“I’m a normal woman, Steevie. We are not going to get in a panic over what is normal. You are not to worry.”

“All right. I’ll take my orders. But you make me feel a little ashamed.”

“Oh, no. Why not feel glad with me?”

“If you are glad, so am I.”

XIII

HERE, in Ebchester, reading through my journal, I accuse myself of being a sentimentalist, and of not having recorded certain human reactions.

Since no one will see this scrawl, or trouble to read it should it survive me, I may as well be a truthful and exact historian.

I was jealous of that fellow Murchison. Though Mary may not have been conscious of it I suspect that he had touched her imagination, and part of my restlessness was a reaction due to jealousy. I may have felt that by rejoining the army I was taking the stage again and was appearing as the plumed hero to impress the feminine soul.

I have argued in favour of emotion, but how base it can be.

I was worried by the thought of having to leave a pregnant wife behind.

I was reassured by the thought that a pregnant woman is less likely to be physically attractive to a man like Murchison.

We have nice minds!

One may turn and kick the elemental Adam downstairs, but one can never forget that he is smirking and leering in the basement.

Will the problem of the elemental Adam ever be solved? Are those people right who argue that he should be stripped even of his fig-leaves and allowed to wander openly and without shame in our highways and by-ways, churches and law-courts? Is it our hypocrisy that gives Pan cloven hoofs?

But again I sit with these new friends round the mess table, and we are all good fellows together. It might be regarded as a perfect partnership, with Fairfax as the senior member. There appear to be no jealousies. He is too wise and impartial to show favours.

But we are in no danger here.

What of the acid test of danger? What of those crises when ugly jobs have to be handed out? I know how the little, mean, self-preserving ego can assert itself when bloody occasions have to be faced. Shall we remain such good friends, one with another, or shall we hate each other in secret, and hope that fate will favour one of us at the expense of the others?

I hope not. I have sworn to myself that whatever my fear may be I will not suffer it to be mean.

Moreover, there are other distractions, or rather one particular elemental distraction in a town like this that vexes one's crude flesh. Ebchester is a garrison town, and I suppose such a town is accustomed to satisfying the hunting male, but the war appears to have reversed the order of things. It is the women who hunt and solicit. A large part of the feminine population seems to have abandoned all the subtleties of self-restraint. In the evening hundreds of girls seem to parade the place, and to invite adventure.

Since the garrison accommodation is limited I am billeted out in a little house near the Abbey. It looks a discreet, sober, straight up and down little place with a neat back garden, and an aspidistra in the front window, and its parlour furnished with a cheap suite in red plush. My landlady is a stoutish, bustling, black and white woman in the middle thirties whose husband, a builder's foreman, is on active service. My impression of her is that she is a motherly sort of person, a little inclined perhaps to be fussy and familiar. I always seem to be meeting a large and succulent smile, and a person that appears somewhat undressed like that of a woman ready to give the breast to a child. Whenever I come in she seems to be crowding the passage or the stairs.

I suppose she does not appeal to me physically, and no doubt she thought me shy, but when I woke up one night to find her in my bedroom and sitting on my bed, I'm afraid the occasion was not satisfying to her vanity, and that we said certain embarrassing things to each other. At all events she bundled out of my room in a rage, leaving an insult behind her.

"I thought you were a man!"

I packed up next morning and sent my servant for my kit, but when I confessed in the mess to the adventure, I realized that I should not hear the end of it. And how, in my prose, I am mixing the past and the present! Hallard teases me unmercifully, talking of lost opportunities, and of poor starved women denied adequate sex expressions. From what I hear Hallard's youth was a hectic and strenuous orgy, but now he sits down daily and writes long letters to his wife and kids. He is full of the most septic stories, and his life is that of a domestic celibate.

But I do not want this sort of thing. I ask Fairfax if there is any reason why my wife should not join me in rooms here. I assure him that it will make no difference to my work.

"By all means, Brent."

I have insisted on Mary giving up her commandantship. She can rest and be quiet here, and at the moment she has two elderly servants who can be trusted to look after the house. She seems glad to join me, and I manage to find comfortable rooms in a farmhouse on the outskirts of Ebchester. It means

biking in and out, but that's no hardship. We have a garden and an orchard to sit in, and khaki does not crowd too close upon us.

Though the khaki world is my world, and I am working hard to make it so. This unit is thorough, and though Fairfax may be the most tolerant of C.O.s, he can be fierce for efficiency. That pleases me. I have no further use for myself as an amateur. I have been given C Section, but my knowledge of drill does not exist. I cannot even move the men off in fours, but after a month's mugging of infantry-and stretcher-drill, and of watching a very capable sergeant at work, I get the hang of the thing. I have my section out and drill it myself. At my first attempt, with all those eyes watching me to see if I shall make an ass of myself, I feel horribly nervous, but I do not make an ass of myself, and I feel master of my voice and of the men.

I wish to be completely efficient in my knowledge of a Field Ambulance's functioning and of its interior economy. I memorize the equipment, how many stretchers we have, how many blankets, and hot-water bottles and plates and what not. I make myself familiar with the contents of all the panniers. There is something beautiful and reassuring in this thoroughness, in being able to fit all the detail instantly and correctly into the pattern. I give my men gas-drill and stretcher-drill, and I invent war-games and make the men deal with hypothetical wounded. I find that they respond to my keenness. I want C Section to be *the* section in the 202 F.A.

Hallard as adjutant has A Section, Margetson B, with Gibbs under him. Margetson is rather a shy person, and mute on parade; he is prone to stammer in public, and sometimes his orders are fantastic. Gibbs has a stentorian voice and much confidence, but like many large, strong men he is apt to be lazy. We can beat B Section as we like on a field day, but A and Hallard are worthy rivals.

Simpson, my senior sergeant, is a man after my own heart, fresh-faced and forty and thickset, with a temper that never wears thin. I shall be glad of Simpson over there.

My two corporals are contrasts: one, Block, a little, bright, wiry fellow with mischievous eyes; the other, Saintly, a rather refined, vain and supercilious young man who looks as though he should be a social reformer. He is somewhat of a weed physically. I don't like him, and I rather doubt whether he will prove reliable when guts are more important than vapourings.

Horses! We are supposed to be mounted officers. Fairfax is a good horseman and used to hunting; Hallard and Gibbs are both keen, but I have never been astride a horse.

The S.-M. of our Transport agrees to give me private riding lessons, and I go out early in the morning before breakfast, and when the business is not too public. It is a form of exercise that chastens my pride. Besides, formal occasions may demand my appearance on horse-back.

S.-M. Banyard has chosen for me a quiet beast, but the wretched animal seems to divine my innocence. It will respond to a word from Banyard, but it treats me with deliberate inattention.

I bring Bob sugar and try to ingratiate myself.

Banyard assures me that I am getting on splendidly, but I always wish I could get off. Also, my posterior seems more sensitive than it should be.

Pride goes before a fall. I ride round one morning to Holly Farm and show myself off to Mary. Bob behaves like a gentleman and has his nose stroked. Next day we parade and march out on one of those formal occasions. My place is with my section. The whole division is out for a route march and an inspection, and for the first mile Bob's behaviour is flawless.

I don't know what irks the wretched beast. Perhaps he is bored. I hear later that he and Fairfax's mount are particular friends. He sets off with me at a canter up the line of march. I can't stop the animal, and all the men's heads are turning. Bob carries me to the head of our column, and places himself placidly beside Fairfax's Tom.

Fairfax turns a startled head and looks at me reproachfully.

"What are you doing here, Brent?"

"Don't ask me, sir, ask my damned horse!"

He is able to see the joke, but my position is impossible on so formal an occasion. The General is waiting for us up the road.

"You had better get off and fall out, Brent, unless you can manage the brute."

I pull angrily at Bob's mouth, but without effect. I give him the spurs, and for the next minute or two I am absorbed in a scramble in and out of a hedge. The unit goes by, and I am aware of grinning faces. Bob and I are left to settle the matter, for the Field Ambulance is at the tail of the Brigade. But my blood is up. I'm not going to be made a fool of by this creature. I use spurs and crop and language, and suddenly Bob becomes as meek as mutton. I suppose he could have pitched me off had his blood been up like mine, but I am to discover that Bob, like many men, is just a bluffer and trying it on. Apparently, he decided that this funny business is not worth while.

Victory! He trots respectably up the road after those swinging legs and slogging boots. He suffers me to put him in his place, and he remains there, walking debonairly. I am saved. We have not yet passed the Great Man.

There is some chatter among the men. They are marching at ease. I turn in

the saddle, catch Sergeant Simpson's eyes and smile.

I say, "I hope everybody enjoyed the circus stunt."

There is laughter, but I feel it is with me, not at me.

The command comes down, "March at attention."

I give C Section the order. A minute later I am giving the "Eyes right," and saluting the great man on his horse. He returns my salute. Bob walks doucely like an old ruffian who has signed the pledge.

But, for days, my battle with Bob is one of the jokes of the mess. I do not mind, for I know that the last laugh was with me.

What a lot of platitudes I am producing in this journal, but never mind. I am a plain man, and not a literary gent. The powers of our adaptation are marvellous. Man seeks to control his environment even in a mud-hole, and here are Mary and I settled in our farmhouse as though we were to be here for ever. Possibly we pretend a little, but even the pretence comes to possess an air of permanence. I go down to Brackenhurst one evening, and drive my car up by night, and we garage it in the wagon shed. Mary and I picnic on the river, tying up under the willows and watching the sunlight reflected from the water playing on the green bank and the leaves of the trees. I take Mary for drives. We get to know some of the Ebchester people, and I find myself playing tennis. We give one or two informal little parties to which we ask Fairfax and Hallard. Mary and my C.O. are instantly friends. She likes him as much as I do.

Almost it would seem as though we were here for the duration of the war, and this summer weather adds to the illusion. Apparently those in authority are still afraid of invasion or of a disastrous raid, and the 81st is one of the last trained divisions left in England. It is made up of English county battalions from the Midlands, Notts and Derby and Staffords, Warwicks and Northamptons; good stuff, though some of the latest recruits are rather young and weedy, and not yet hardened to a long march in full equipment. Rumour is busy, but our quiet, orderly life goes on. We have Divisional sports and a horse-show. Fairfax and Tom take a prize, but I do not exhibit myself with Bob.

I am cycling through the barracks one morning on my way to the 202 F.A. Headquarters when I meet our A.D.M.S., Colonel Cleek. I salute him, and am riding on, when he hails me.

"Mr. Brent."

I dismount and wheel my machine back to him. He has one of those bloodless, cold jejune faces that suggest a harsh keenness that is quite without intelligence.

“Are you living in barracks?”

“No, sir.”

“Who gave you permission to live out of barracks?”

“Colonel Fairfax, sir. I have my wife with me.”

“Indeed!”

He is a sarcastic devil.

“I don’t expect my officers to introduce their families into their work. You will come into quarters.”

I salute him and he stalks on, leaving me feeling snubbed and rebellious. Why should authority trouble to interfere in my private life provided that I do not neglect my work? It is damned tyranny, and Cleek’s way of impressing his sarcastic self upon his subordinates.

I find Colonel Fairfax alone in his office, and I tell him of my clash with Colonel Cleek. The man is rather like that particular club. Also, I and my fellow-officers know that Fairfax and the A.D.M.S. are not sympathetic towards each other.

Fairfax’s blue eyes come out on stalks, a trick of theirs when he is angry.

“You stay where you are, Brent. I gave you permission, and it is my quarrel.”

Fairfax is a very popular C.O. and a personal friend of the General’s.

“I don’t want to cause trouble, sir, but it does seem rather unreasonable.”

“Absolutely. Leave it to me, Brent.”

That is one of the things we like about Fairfax. He will stand up for his unit and his officers and never seek a victim. He goes off at once to tackle Cleek, and when I meet him later in the mess his fresh face wears a look of amused serenity.

“It is all in order, Brent. You can stay where you are.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He smiles at me mischievously, and no more is said.

Captain Bliss, the D.A.D.M.S., Colonel Cleek’s understudy, is a little man whom Cleek keeps in scolded subjection. Bliss dines in our mess on occasions and plays Bridge with us, but even after a couple of whiskies he retains an alert and watchful air, and a habit of turning his head quickly and looking over his shoulder. It is common knowledge that Cleek hectors him before the office

staff, and Hallard has nicknamed Bliss, The Henpecked Husband.

Bliss is a good little man whose inclination is to help everybody, and to maintain peace. He dines with us a few nights after Fairfax's interview with Cleek. One of our rags is to tickle Bliss. He is absurdly ticklish, and will dodge round chairs, giggling and protesting like a girl.

"Shut up, Gibbs."

"Say, give over, darling, and kiss me."

There is a delicious primness about Bliss that provokes everybody to tickle him.

"Do stop it, Gibbs, or I won't tell you anything."

"What is the secret, dearie?"

"A surprise stunt to-morrow. But for God's sake don't give me away."

We know these surprise stunts. Their purpose is to prove that the Division is capable of moving at short notice to deal with a hypothetical raid, but I am afraid we are rather inclined to regard them as monkey-tricks upon the part of authority. Someone may be caught, in vulgar parlance, with his breeches down.

I see Fairfax look sharply at Bliss.

"Official?"

"Absolutely. But don't give me away, sir."

Fairfax's smile is significant. When Bliss has gone he becomes for a moment the C.O.

"Just a word to the wise. You had better, all of you, be within easy call. I think you understand."

We do. Some of these alarums are sounded in the middle of the night, and after a few words with Fairfax I decide to doss down for the night in the orderly officer's room. I get on my bike, ride down to Holly Farm and warn Mary, and I am back in barracks by eleven.

Surely enough we get the order to stand by at 2 a.m. We tumble out, and by 2.30 the unit is on parade, and ready to move off. We are standing at ease and in grumpy silence, for the men hate these shows, when I hear Colonel Cleek's strident voice. So, he has come along to play Paul Pry.

"Colonel Fairfax."

"Yes, sir."

"All your officers on parade?"

"Yes, sir."

Fairfax gives the order "Officers, fall out," and we double round and stand to attention in front of him and the A.D.M.S. I feel that I have my tongue in my cheek, for though the pettiness of the thing may appear unbelievable, I am

sure that Cleek hoped to catch me absent, and to catch Fairfax through me.

“Let me see, how many officers have you, Colonel Fairfax?”

“We are three under strength, sir.”

“Is Captain and Quartermaster Bond on parade?”

“Yes, sir.”

I can only suppose that Cleek counts our dim figures, and has to be satisfied with the result. It would be giving his game away were he to ask for me by name, and yet, but for Bliss’s hint, Cleek would have had us frozen.

“That is all for to-night. You can dismiss the men, Colonel Fairfax.”

We go to the mess for a drink, and I am afraid we are bad boys who gloat over the flouting of Solomon. Before turning in I ask Fairfax a question, but not before the others.

“Do you really think, sir, he hoped to catch me absent?”

Fairfax chuckles.

“I don’t think, Brent! One is not supposed to think in the army. But I suppose we owe Bliss a good tickling and a bottle of whisky.”

It is incredible that such petty jealousies should influence men at a time like this. I can imagine every sort of intrigue permeating the life of a little garrison town in peace time, with a collection of She-Colonels competing for social kudos, but that a man like Cleek should plot to toss a poor junior like myself seems a paltry adventure. Though, of course, it is Fairfax of whom he is jealous; it is a case of the sly, lean wolf and the mastiff. We remain such animals in our individual make-up, though Mary, who is something of an astrologer, places Fairfax under Leo, and Cleek under the sign of the Ram. But will this sort of pettiness continue on active service, and shall we be, not only in conflict with the Germans, but also concerned in defending ourselves from attacks in the rear by Cleek? This man should not be in the possession of authority.

We have all been very excited about Rumania, and the ultimate catastrophe depresses us.

Also, it is obvious that the bloody scuffle on the Somme is ending in misery and mud. Will this war go on for ever? November is with us, and I am preparing to send Mary home for her ordeal. She is very calm and brave about it, but I am worrying, for I suppose a doctor knows too much, but I do pray that we shall not be sent abroad before her child is born. I shall feel so much more easy in my mind if the business is over before I have to face my second self-surrender as a soldier.

Christmas. Fairfax has gone home on leave to Cheshire. We have a merry evening in the mess, for Mary has insisted on my being a social person. The men have fed on turkey and plum-pudding and much beer, and are having a sing-song of their own. We have been invited as guests and we join them for an hour. Gibbs is persuaded on to the platform and sings *Yip-ai-addy* with a voice like a fog-horn. Our funny man, Briggs, appears as Pavlova, wearing two halves of a mess-tin where his breasts should be. He is really very funny and vulgar, and there is immense applause and shouts for an encore. He gives us a vocal rendering of two cats making love.

I am biking home, and Hallard walks with me as far as the barrack gate. I like Hallard more and more; there is a sardonic sincerity about him that should wear well on active service.

“I wonder where we shall be next Christmas, Steevie?”

I say, “On the knees of the gods.”

I see Hallard’s prominent teeth white under his black moustache. He has a hungry look.

“Damned nobbly knees, old man, like old Cleek’s. I wonder why I so hate that man? Can you hate, Steevie?”

“I can.”

“Is it because an old goat like Cleek can butt us when and how he pleases?”

“Perhaps. But more than that. Fairfax is different.”

“Yes, thank God for a good C.O.”

“You’ll find out how much that means when we go over yonder.”

“I get you.”

Mary is sitting up for me, and she is looking rather drawn and tired. She has been suffering from pressure and indigestion, and I know that her time must be coming near. Fairfax will be back on Monday, and he has given me leave to travel down into Sussex with my wife. I am taking her in the car, and I shall drive like a man with a crate of delicate china. Fairfax has examined Mary twice, and assured me that everything is normal.

How I wish that the state of the world was normal, and not a kind of chronic delirium shot through with bad dreams.

I have brought my wife home and left her in Randall’s hands. Randall is really a marvellous person. He talked to me like a father, but a father with understanding. I am not to worry. He will send me a wire directly the business is over. But how I hated leaving her alone in our house, though the two elderly maids are kind without being fussy.

“I’ll try and get leave and come down to you, dearest.”

She seems to have so much more courage than I have. Or is a woman supported at such times by the inspiration of the other life that is in her?

Mary has a daughter. Randall wires that all is well. I show the telegram to Fairfax, and he promises to put me up immediately for three days' leave.

A curt chit comes back from the A.D.M.S.'s office.

"Please state how often this officer has been absent from duty during the last six months."

Fairfax puts on his cap and his battle face and goes off with the chit in his pocket. I wait for him in his office, and I have not to wait long.

"Off you go, Brent. Three clear days."

"I'm awfully grateful to you, sir."

"Not a bit. I took my jigger and laid Cleek a stymie."

I have seen my daughter, and I cannot pretend that the creature has any beauty. Its queer crumple of a face is mottled and red, and there is hardly any hair on its head; its eyes are a vacuous blue. The women, of course, are in ecstasies, and assure me that they can discover a likeness to me in this puckered monkey. And yet I feel a queer tenderness towards the grotesque piece of proud flesh. A part of me has gone to the making of it, and I suppose that in a year or two, if I survive, I shall be trailing small Joan round by the hand, and feeling myself a large and wonderful fellow.

And perhaps, twenty years hence, I shall be suffering the inevitable fate of most fathers. My daughter will be tolerant, but brightly patronizing!

It is otherwise with Mary. She has the pallor and beauty of a tired serenity. Her hair looks so much more black than usual. She seems content to let me sit there and hold her hand.

"Are they really looking after you properly, dear?"

"Of course. Though I don't pretend to be of any importance."

Her eyes smile at me.

"It is extraordinary how silly women can become over a baby."

"It would be rather extraordinary if they didn't."

"I suppose so. But it is all rather a barbaric business, Stephen."

"Did you have a very bad time?"

"No, not that. But it is rather like imposing upon one's modern mood something out of the stone age. Part of one is so terribly uncomfortable and sore, and part of one is filled with absurd, primitive satisfactions."

“Quite like the war.”

I see her wince, and I reproach myself. Why drag in the war after she has just endured the battle of child-bearing?

“Sorry. But I was quite wrong.”

“Quite wrong, Stephen. It may sound absurd, but a woman does feel that she has produced something positive.”

“And so she has. Still keen on the same names?”

“Yes, Joan Phyllis.”

“Joan Phyllis Brent. If you saw that name in the paper you would picture to yourself a slim, upstanding, debonair young woman.”

“Twenty years hence.”

“Twenty years!”

I think of myself as fifty-seven, bald and paunched, and wearing spectacles. But no, it is quite impossible to visualize oneself otherwise than one is, still full of the essential I, and showing a face that has grown old so gradually that its texture looks the same.

“It must be a funny business growing old.”

My wife says a wise thing.

“I suppose it is like everything else, one just grows into it.”

I am back in Ebchester, and billeted in barracks. Holly Farm is an anachronism without Mary. Also, the winter is taking itself with extreme seriousness. We have had six inches of snow, and it is lying. Biking to and from Holly Farm would have been too superfluous, and I have left the car at Brackenhurst. I prefer the male comfort of the mess, and its human contacts. I have more than a feeling that our time is growing short here, and that we men will soon be together where our happy family will be put to the supreme test.

Rumour is becoming actual. Fairfax and other senior officers have been dispatched to France on a Cook’s Tour.

We have had steel helmets issued to us—hideous things both to look at and to wear. I try sitting in mine to accustom myself to the weight and pressure of this soup plate, and I find that it gives me a headache. I expect that will pass.

Box respirators are issued.

Hallard, who is in command, shows me a chit from the A.D.M.S. ordering officers to be given leave in succession. He sends off Margie and Gibbs. My turn should come last, for I had three days in January.

Two new officers arrive. The powers that be have been withdrawing officers from the Mounted Field Ambulances on the East Coast, and attaching them to our three ambulances to bring us up to establishment. Neither I nor Hallard are very favourably impressed by these new men, Captains Carless and Chiffinch. Carless is a good-looking, debonair, flashy fellow whose riding-breeches are smartly cut, and whose salute is exceedingly impressive, but I do not trust the texture of him. Chiffinch is an insignificant little man in pince-nez, with a poky face, talkative and nervous. He grumbles at having been detached from his own unit, and boasts of having been in command of it for three months.

As a Territorial, Chiffinch is senior to me, though I now have my captaincy. Does it mean that he will take over my section? The prospect does not please me.

Fairfax returns from his tour. He says that we are going into the line near a place called Béthune.

In the mess I can feel him summing up Carless and Chiffinch.

He tells me that I am to remain in charge of C section.

“Oughtn’t Chiffinch to have it, sir?”

He says, “I am putting Chiffinch under Hallard in A. You can have Carless. Does he know much?”

“He can’t take a parade, sir, or move the men about?”

“Yes, he looks that sort. Rub his nose in it, Brent. Tell him to live up to his breeches!”

Fairfax has a terse sense of humour when the occasion requires it.

Margetson and Gibbs are back, and Hallard and the two new men go on leave. The division is to be dispatched by brigades to France, and our day for entraining is scheduled for March 3rd. We are to embark at Southampton for Havre. Fairfax tells me that he and I can go on leave when Hallard returns. The nearness of actual service abroad seems to be drawing Fairfax and me closer together.

He says to me one evening, “I feel that I am going to be very glad of you, Stephen, over there. You are the one man who knows what the real thing is like. I’m beginning to feel rather horribly responsible.”

“I don’t think you need worry, sir.”

“The fact is, Stephen, as between man and man, I don’t think Cleek is going to be much help to us. He is the sort of man who is always thinking of

his own position, and imagining that someone else is going to let him down. Just at the moment I don't want to go into his office. Nothing but fuss and fury."

"Perhaps he'll grow tame, sir."

"I want to ask you one thing, Stephen. You are our most experienced officer, and I may ask you to take on some of the more nasty jobs to begin with. Shall you understand?"

"I'm ready to do anything, sir."

"I feel you won't let me down."

"I promise you I won't do that, sir. Besides, perhaps you don't realize that it won't be hard for us to back you loyally in every way we can."

He looks at me with affection.

"Thanks, Stephen. I feel that too, about you and Hallard and Gibbs. Well, enough said. I want everybody to share alike in any of the unpleasant things that I may have to hand out."

"I think we know that, and that's why we are not worrying."

Fairfax asks me to check all the equipment. I spend days going through it with Bond and the Sergeant-Major.

Everything is O.K.

Hallard comes back looking rather grim, as though something in him was gnawing at stifled emotion.

Fairfax and I go on leave.

I don't think I can write anything about my last few days at home. I am not sure but that I am coming to agree with Mary about emotion and its fallacious effects. Some sorts of emotion can be insanitary. Moreover, Mary is nursing our small daughter, and emotion is disturbing to the mysteries of milk and to infant metabolism, and I behave like a grandfather. In fact I feel restless and bored, not with my wife, but with this interlude, for I am like an athlete in training for a race. Actually, I take out my car and help Randall on the winter rounds; he needs help, for there is much 'flu about.

Sussex is looking all black and grey in this February weather, and I cannot believe it is nearly a year since I came back from Gallipoli and Egypt, and with secret gloating put off my khaki. I would not do it now even if the honourable chance were offered me. I am one of a community, a little brotherhood, and it is of profound importance to me that these other men should think well of me, especially Fairfax.

I go up and see Norah. She is still in black for Roger, and looking so much older. She can talk quite calmly now about Roger's death and the future.

Apparently, Roger could not have suffered. He was shot through the head almost before he had cleared our parapet, and was killed instantly.

Norah speaks of going out when the war is over to see his grave. They buried him in what had been an orchard, just behind our old front line.

My leave is at an end. I go off quite casually as though I were starting on a country round. I leave Mary on the sofa with Joan Phyllis in her lap. That's as it should be, perhaps. Just as one trains one's body to endure, so one should harden one's soul to bear these stresses without whimpering.

XIV

WE entrain at seven o'clock in the evening in a drizzle, a somewhat dismal hour, but the men are extraordinarily cheerful. It is a great adventure to them, and though some of the realism of war may have come to them in gossip, they have yet to experience the reality. It is so very different from the stuff that appears in the papers, and the first time your precious self is involved the reactions can be so stark and surprising. Elemental fear is a humiliating and a shameful thing, and the first shock of it brings self-revelations.

Fairfax himself has supervised the entraining of the transport. He and Hallard and Margetson and I occupy one first-class compartment, Gibbs, the two new men, and Bond are in another. We take off boots, collars and ties, and doze in our corners. The night seems interminable. I keep waking up and listening to the turning of the wheels. I think of Mary in bed, with Joan Phyllis in a cot beside her.

We reach the docks at Southampton about dawn. It is grey and raw, and I am furiously hungry. We detrain, and having seen the men disposed of in a shed where hot tea is served, we think of breakfast. Gibbs has discovered a little café-restaurant on the quay, and we storm in.

My recollections of the morning centre round the huge breakfast I put away, two helpings of bacon and eggs, three cups of tea and etceteras. Gibbs looks like an overfed baby. Our morale is excellent.

Embarkation is a lengthy business. We are sharing our transport with one of the battalions of the Brigade, and the whole day seems to be spent in loafing and shouting and slinging horses and wagons and limbers on board. We do not sail till after dark. My recollections of the day are somewhat dim and hazy like the sky over these dreary docks. I am afraid the sea and its ships have no fascination for me, and such Englishmen as I am would have achieved no Trafalgar.

Chiffinch has a cold in the head, and his poky little face has a wet and depressed futility. We are all rather bored with Chiffinch, for even between his sneezings he maintains a peevish grousing. He attaches himself to me, perhaps because we belong to the same section, and yet I am also the recipient of his complainings.

"I'm senior to you, Brent, really. I don't know why I should be treated like a junior."

I am fed up with Chiffinch, and I tell him to go and ask the colonel.

But I do not want to spend the night in a cabin with Chiffinch and his cold. I get hold of Hallard, and we rout around and find a two-berth cabin. There are no mattresses on the wire beds, but our batmen lug in our valises and open them up. My batman, Finch, is a cheerful, bandy-legged little fellow with a face like a Dutch cheese. He does not seem to suffer from any sort of complex, and he will be the kind of man to bless God for under primitive conditions. He has an amusingly frank way of passing on to me the opinions of the rank and file. I gather from him that I am regarded as a posh officer.

I am pleased.

Our transport oils her way out in the dusk, and we are picked up by our escort. None of us trouble to hang about and see the last of England. It is going to be rough, as the wind is getting up, and Hallard confesses that he is a rotten sailor.

“Same here,” say I.

We decide to turn in and cheat the sea from giving us queasy tummies.

“You and I seem much of a muchness, Steevie.”

“I’m quite content.”

“Same here. Who’s got that little catarrhal creature Chiffinch?”

“I believe he’s gone in with Carless.”

“I wonder if Carless will take off his superfine breeks?”

“For Chiffinch?”

“Don’t be vulgar, Steevie.”

“I’m not feeling vulgar, but completely solemn.”

“I say, old man, ever had wind up?”

“I should say so.”

“Is it very bad?”

“In bits.”

“I’m glad you have felt like that. It consoles me.”

“You’ll be all right, my dear man.”

“Shall I? I wonder. I suppose one’s interior can be a bit of a surprise packet. I don’t want to dirty my breeches.”

“You won’t.”

Another grey sad morning, a French morning in French docks. Havre is a replica of Southampton, *pavé*, railway lines, trucks, dumps of coal, but the blessing of being the member of a definite unit is that one has less time and inclination to be highbrow and morbid. Self-analysis is not *à la mode*; one is responsible to other men both for the temper of one’s soul and the cheerfulness of one’s face. Besides, we are a cheerful crowd, and Tommy’s attitude is good philosophy, to turn ugly things into laughter, and only to grouse when there is

nothing serious to grouse about. We are kept busy disembarking our gear. Our goal is to be a base-camp on the hills above Havre. I see Carless swaggering about in his cream-coloured breeches, and doing nothing with an air of debonair grace. Chiffinch is wetter than ever and hinting that he has a temperature. I should not be sorry to see Chiffinch left behind. I wish someone would say to him, "Blow your nose, man, and have faith in God."

We march through Havre and up the hill to our camp. I feel that the men are swinging along with a self-conscious swagger, but nobody pays any attention to us. No flowers, no waving hands. Havre has had a surfeit of khaki, and I suppose the French are somewhat weary of this double occupation, ours and the Boches. How would Sussex like a French occupation, with thousands of strange and alien men behaving as though the place was theirs?

The rank and file are in huts, the officers in private billets. I find myself in a terrace house occupied by a delicate, black-bearded Frenchman and his wife and child. They are quiet, kind, melancholy people; I suppose the man is a clerk and unfit for the army, but a more sad and gently disillusioned creature I have never seen. We all mess at a house run by a bustling, kinky-haired young woman with a very full bosom and hard, brown eyes. She is the obvious commercialist, and her attitude to the male is as severely practical as her collecting of our cash. Carless tries to flirt with her, and has a door banged in his face, which makes us laugh.

Says Fairfax, "It is not the cut or the colour of your breeches, my lad, but the cash value of the case. Take it to heart."

I divine that Carless is to be our sex play-boy. I have a small daughter, and somehow I am not interested in promiscuous adventure.

We remain three days at Havre and then entrain for the area where the Division is to assemble before being put in the line. It is cold and the carriages are draughty and unheated. Margetson, as mess president, has laid in a supply of Fortnum and Mason extras, and we picnic in our carriages. I discover that there is a tendency to leave Chiffinch and his cold tucked up in a greatcoat in a solitary corner. But we must feed the little creature, and I take him in hot tea and tongue, but he is peevish and self-sorry.

"I can't eat anything, Brent."

"Don't be an ass. Catch hold."

"I suppose you are trying to be sympathetic."

"Not a bit. Just practical."

I do not remember much about the journey save the rather beautiful name of one place we pass through—Yvetot. I have a recollection of little, low white houses, and secret orchards, and a girl in a blue apron feeding chickens in one of the orchards. It is all rather green and dim and transient, like a picture that

one passes and glances at in a quiet gallery before returning to the roar and turmoil of a street.

We play Bridge, uproarious low-brow Bridge, slapping the cards down on the army blanket that is spread over our knees. No one would think that we are on our way to that other game of blood and wounds. Do we think? I am sure that Hallard is thinking behind the sardonic face he shows to the world.

Our approach to the war is strangely gradual and indirect, as though those in authority were playing a game of hide-and-seek with all the various units of the Division. It is a mysterious business, pontifical and arbitrary, and never to be questioned, but now I feel myself one of a community to be messed about and not a lone individual. We can grouse in chorus, or be sarcastic by numbers, and if the whole Field Ambulance is lost, as it is for two days, my soul is not vexed. Bond, our quartermaster, a little florid cock of a man, is the one to be worried, for he has had somehow and somewhere to draw our rations since we detrained at a dirty little French station in a colliery district.

We discuss the brains of the army in mess when Clapp, the mess orderly, is not present.

Gibbs puts it succinctly, "Are they really cleverer than we know, or bloodier fools than we fear?"

Already I notice that the communal language is becoming more colourful and descriptive, especially so Bond's, who is eternally chasing food and forage in obscure French villages.

We are moving by road now, and at last our maps advise us that we are approaching our destination. A queer black church tower with eyes like an owl's stares at us over the flat country with its willows and poplars. We are coming to Béthune, and our pleasant period of innocence is over. We run into authority, or rather it runs into us, in the shape of a Ford ambulance, from which emerges the long, lean, jejune form of Colonel Cleek. We happen to be marching at ease, and Hallard and Gibbs and I are riding in a bunch with Fairfax, and Cleek has his opportunity.

"Send your officers to their proper places, please."

We go, leaving Fairfax and Cleek together by the Ford. I have never seen Cleek on a horse. I hear him say to Fairfax, "You really must maintain better marching discipline. A Fred Karno's unit. Understand that you are now in the divisional area."

Obviously so! Cleek is here on the tee, polished and pragmatism. Fairfax rejoins us. He halts the unit and orders the men to fall out.

"Gentlemen, we seem to have been getting a little slack. I realize that it must not happen again."

We have arrived. We find ourselves crowded into a tawdry little colliery

village called Rougeville with one of the Field Ambulances of the outgoing Division. They are staying on for a couple of days to show us in. We find our motor-ambulances waiting for us here, four Daimlers and two Fords. The people who are to hand over to us are a laconic, hard-bitten lot. They tell us that their particular sector is a rest-cure, very little shelling, but plenty of mud. They encourage us by saying that Fritz, knowing that a new and innocent division is being put in for experience, may play up and provide us with a firework show.

Rougeville is a hideous little place, industrialism at its ugliest, acres of poisonous red brick. It is newish and clean, which somehow makes it appear worse, like civilization's abdominal organs neatly dissected and exposed to view. There is hardly a tree in the place, or any green thing, and Rougeville's only recommendation is that it is never shelled. The Boche big guns pay their compliments to Béthune.

Our headquarters are situated in a barrack of a building that was originally a Jesuit school. We mess in an inflamed red brick villa in a room paved with blue and yellow tiles. Our chairs make a melancholy squeaking on this ceramic floor, and grotesque family photographs decorate the walls. Lower middle-class æsthetics seem to be as dastardly here as in England. It is a sort of fungoid growth, not like the old country cottages that seem to grow out of the soil.

But we are kept very busy, settling in and taking over from our predecessors. Our brigade is going into the line on the La Bassée sector, and we are to take over the Advanced Dressing Station at Semelles. The 203 F.A. is to function on the other and quiet side of the Canal. The 201 F.A. are to be in still more placid quarters and in charge of the Divisional Rest Station at La Bouche. We have been given the most septic job, and I wonder whether it is a compliment to us on Cleek's part, or whether he is exercising secret spite against Fairfax.

Fairfax is sleeping at the villa. He calls me up to his bedroom before dinner and tells me that he wants me to take charge of the Dressing Station at Semelles. I shall have one of the other Ambulance's officers with me for two days to act as foster-parent, and when he departs Margetson will join me. Fairfax's way of putting it is like asking a friend to do him a favour.

"I warned you, Stephen, that I should be glad to use your experience."

"I'm glad to be of use, sir, to you."

"I believe you really mean that, my dear man."

"Absolutely and completely."

He is sitting on his bed, unlacing his field-boots.

"Fact is, Stephen, I think we are regarded by Cleek as his bad boy. We

shall have to be on our toes. Prejudice is a queer and poisonous thing.”

I smile at him.

“Yes, and under these circumstances. Has Colonel Cleek had any active experience?”

“None at all.”

“Well, if there is any bluffing to be done I ought to be able to do it.”

I and details of C Section, plus Sergeant Simpson and Corporal Block, depart in two motor-ambulances for Semelles. I sit beside the driver of the leading ambulance. It is a grey day, and there is a kind of squalor everywhere that merges into the more sinister squalor of a country that has been shelled. We come to a straight road that is bannered with strips of camouflage and I see before me a long low dismal horizon rising to a dirty sky, and in the valley the hotch-potch of ruins that was once Semelles. There comes to us one of those sudden splurges of noise that break out in such places, like the baying and yapping of scores of brazen-mouthed dogs. Our guns are loosing off, and my tummy suddenly grows tense, and seems to vibrate with those detonations. We turn left into a kind of courtyard that is surrounded by broken walls and debris. This is the A.D.S. and its site a brewery where the cellars are good. The noise rises abruptly to a crescendo. Some anti-aircraft guns near us have become active, and their beastly, abrupt slammings seem to hit one’s ear-drums. I get the feeling of universal turbulence and horror and unrest, though all this noise is being made by the British army.

As I get down I see an officer standing in a hole in the wall, bare-headed, hands in breeches pockets, a cigarette pendent from the corner of his mouth. I detect on his face an expression of amused and quizzical interest. No doubt he thinks us very raw meat, and is feeling full of patronage.

I cross the yard towards him, wondering whether all this noise will not provoke our friend Fritz to retaliation. I have a horrid desire to get under cover, but I will myself to appear casual.

“Good morning. I hope we’re not late for lunch?”

His face seems to button up. He gives me a less quizzical look.

“We’re being rather noisy this morning. Damn those Archies. One can’t hear oneself speak.”

“Quite a good orchestra.”

He takes out a cigarette-case and offers me one.

“Come inside. Get your men in. We had a 5.9 in the middle of the yard yesterday. Yes, the ambulances had better blow off. I’ve nothing to send back.”

I stroll across the yard, and tell Simpson to get the men and equipment into

the dressing-station, and I dismiss the ambulances. I wait outside until all the men are in, smoking the cigarette my predecessor has given me. I hear a shell arrive and burst somewhere among the remnants of the village. Another and a more menacing one follows it.

I walk slowly towards the hole in the wall, and find Simpson waiting for me. He is looking a little pinched. My host has disappeared below. He is old and war-wise.

“Better come in, sir, hadn’t you?”

“I am coming. Those damned Archies are going to be a bit of a nuisance to us, Simpson.”

“Draw fire, sir?”

“No, the noise. There is one blessing, they won’t bark at night.”

I see Simpson’s stiff face loosen into a smile.

“That’s a consolation, sir. If they were cats!”

“Yes, but there don’t seem to be any tiles left in this sweet place.”

I find Carson, the captain in charge, waiting at the top of a flight of brick steps. It is very dark here, and I see the end of his cigarette glowing. He reaches up and touches something.

“Gas curtain here.”

“I see.”

“I’ll show you all the gas defences presently. He’s been spraying gas shells around rather freely of late.”

“Phosgene?”

“O, a mixture. Any of your crowd been out before?”

“No, but I have.”

“Rather thought so. Well, this isn’t a bad sort of hole, though it’s a damned long carry for stretchers from our bearer-posts and the Aids. Two feet of muddy water in places. Got good field-boots?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve scrounged a pair of waders. I’ll leave ’em behind for you.”

“Thanks.”

He shows me over the station. Its series of cellars provide a small mess, a bedroom for two officers, a dressing-room for the wounded, and quarters for the men. The accommodation for storing casualties if shelling is heavy is inadequate, but Carson explains that no active trouble is ever to be expected in this sector. The method of admitting stretcher-cases is down a gas-curtained shoot that was used originally for barrels of beer. The cellars have small, semicircular windows or air-holes high up in the thickness of the walls. A little light filters in, but all work has to be done by candlelight or with acetylene

lamps.

Carson is reassuring.

“Direct hits most unlikely. There is a big old wall on the Boche side that catches any ordinary shell and bursts it, and all you get is a cartload of brick on the vaulting. I shouldn’t let the men mess about in the yard if there is any hate on, but probably they won’t.”

I smile at him understandingly.

“Probably not.”

We lunch in the cellar-mess on bully, pickles, and tinned pineapple. Carson is taking me up the line to show me the bearer posts. Simpson comes with us, and Finch, my batman. We traverse the ruins of Semelles, and as we pass close to a broken wall one of our howitzers, which is concealed in the basement of a ruined building, looses off. I jump, and feel as though I had been smacked on the head. I curse.

“Damn the filthy thing!”

Carson laughs.

“I ought to have warned you. Keep to the track. It’s not safe to go looking for wild flowers.”

I turn and smile at Simpson.

“Make a note of that, Simpson. No daisy parties.”

Finch, my man, guffaws. He tells me afterwards that he jumped a good six inches when that gun went off.

I think this is the only ultimate and logical attitude towards war, to make a joke of it, though the joke may at times be pinched and grim.

The communication trench opens out at the back of a ruined house. It is fairly dry to begin with, but later becomes a waterlogged yellow stodge. My field-boots just top the water, but Simpson and Finch are in puttees. I think of sending them back, but already they are well soused, and this is war. I say to Finch, “You’ll have some work on my field-boots, my lad,” and again he guffaws. I feel that I am making a good impression on these two men. We arrive at a Company Headquarters and some old deep dug-outs, and we put our heads in for a moment, and pass the time of day. Our bearer-post is about two hundred yards up the trench, a flimsy erection in a sap, and covered with one layer of rotting sandbags. It will accommodate four men.

“Not exactly the Ritz.”

Carson has grown pretty hard.

“It keeps the rain out. Better than a shell-hole.”

He goes on to show me a semi-derelict deep dug-out that has been used at one time as a reserve aid-post. Its gas curtains are rotten and its steps covered

with slime. The place is known as “Jock’s Grave,” for above it is a grave with a crooked wooden cross. Vanity makes me scramble up to look at the cross.

“You’re snipeable up there,” says Carson.

I come down.

“Well, I don’t think much of the view.”

We slosh back down the communication trench, and return to Semelles that has become quiet and peaceful, if such a horror of devastation can deserve the adjective. We have tea. I decide to take a stroll among the ruins, and as I emerge I hear two men in conversation, and one of them is Finch.

“Captain Brent’s a bit of all right.”

That pleases me. I don’t want these men to suspect that I am not at all brave, or that fear can gnaw at my vitals.

Carson and his people have gone, and Margetson has joined me. Margy is senior to me in the unit, but he is not a competitive person, and he adopts an attitude that suggests that in experience I am the senior. Margetson is a lovable person, but the first day in our cellar depresses him badly. It is a noisy day, with Fritz shelling our guns, and I realize that Margy is feeling like a rabbit in a burrow, and dreading going out. We all get this feeling at times, and the only antidote is action.

I am in the mess, censoring letters, when Block rushes down to say that the A.D.M.S. is up above. It is a quiet morning with the sun shining, and I hurry out to find Colonel Cleek in gas-mask and tin hat, looking aggressively official. The tin hat seems to accentuate the narrowness of his bloodless face. He has come to inspect, and, with Cleek, inspection postulates a search for trouble. He points with his cane at some stretchers propped on end against a wall.

“What’s this, Brent? Is that how you store your stretchers?”

I explain that the stretchers were mud-caked, and they have been washed, and put out to dry.

“Where’s Captain Margetson?”

“Seeing some sick men, sir.”

“I want Captain Margetson. He is the senior officer here.”

I send Block for Margy. Meanwhile, Cleek struts round the yard like a lean old cock who feels like crowing on this quiet morning.

“Are your gas defences in order, Captain Brent?”

“Quite, sir.”

Margetson arrives, looking flustered, with his tin hat on the back of his

head. He has shaved rather indifferently, and Cleek gazes pointedly at his chin.

“I want this yard cleaning up, Captain Margetson. Too much rubbish. What are these old tins doing here?”

Margetson looks at me, and I explain that the dump of tins in the corner has been left by previous units.

“Have them buried.”

“Very good, sir.”

Cleek enters the station, and begins by banging his steel hat against the vaulting at the top of the stairs. I want to guffaw in the Finch fashion, but say, “Not much headroom, sir.” Cleek puts his tin hat straight; he is not very accustomed to these soup plates. He inspects the mess and our bedroom, and the dressing-room, and then suggests that we officers are occupying too much space. We can eat and sleep in one cellar. Damn him! Let him come out of his comfortable house in Béthune and try it himself!

We are ordered to parade the men in the yard, and he inspects them. He falls on two men for having dirty buttons; boots and puttees are not sufficiently smart. I find myself wishing that Fritz would send something over so that I may have the satisfaction of seeing how Cleek reacts.

He ignores me, and takes Margetson off to a corner of the yard. I hear him say, “I’m not satisfied, Captain Margetson. You must tighten things up. More attention to detail.”

I am feeling mischievous, and when they come back I ask Colonel Cleek whether he wishes to go up the line and inspect our bearer-posts.

“I’m afraid it’s rather muddy, sir.”

He snubs me.

“That is your province more than mine, Captain Brent. I have an important conference at twelve. When I do inspect the posts I shall expect to find them clean and in order.”

We salute as he gets into his Ford ambulance.

“Good morning, sir.”

He does not reply, but sits there solemn and stark while the driver turns the Ford in the yard.

Margetson’s face has an absurdly wistful look.

“Authority doesn’t seem out to help us much.”

I cannot help laughing.

“What do you expect, Margy, from an old blighter like that?”

Margetson looks shocked. He is a rather pious creature.

“Ssh, the men, Brent!”

“Tut-tut, they’ll be thinking what we say and worse.”

We have had a bit of a smash-up.

Fritz obtained a direct hit on the station with a 5.9 howitzer shell just before tea. I was dressing a case, and Margy was in the mess writing letters. The shell landed on the pile of brick rubble just above the mess, blew a hole in the vaulting, but did not penetrate. I heard Finch shouting to me, "The mess has been hit, sir." I rushed along the passage and found the door jammed by brick rubble. Finch and I forced it open. The cellar was in utter darkness, and full of fumes and dust and smoke. I shouted for Margy, and got no reply. When we got a candle lit we found brick rubble all over the place, tea things smashed, and Margetson on the floor with his hands over his face.

I thought at first he had been hit, but he was only shocked and stunned. I found him strangely rigid, and for the moment incapable of articulate speech. He mumbled at me.

"All right, old man, all right."

We got him into his bunk, and he lay there with his arms spread, utterly still, and like a cataleptic. I examined him again, but could find no mark on him. It is a case of shock.

I send a chit to Fairfax by the ambulance that is returning to headquarters with three casualties, and then go out to look at the damage. The shell has blown a hole in the pile of broken brick, but with the hole plugged with a few sandbags and the rubble packed in with an old piece of corrugated iron over the top the place is as weather-proof, and almost as shell-proof as before. I tell Sergeant Simpson to put men on the job, and go back to Margetson. Finch is cleaning out the mess. He is facetious.

"Best china broken, sir."

"Scrounge something, Finch. Borrow us a couple of tin mugs. I don't mean to miss my tea."

I am not feeling like tea. The business has shaken me, and filled me with queasy fears. My confidence in the supposed security of our cellar has been rudely shattered, and though the shell did not penetrate, my feeling of being in a safe hole has gone. I find Margy in the same attitude. I shake him gently, and reassure him.

"All right, old man. No harm done."

I have seen cases of hysteria in women, but this is the first case of the kind I have seen in a man. Margetson begins to shake, and to make humanly inhuman noises. He clutches me, and babbles. The shock and the horror of the thing have dissolved his self-control. I try to soothe him, and the only effect is

to produce tears and uncontrollable emotion.

This rending of a man's self is rather horrible. I don't want anyone but myself to see Margetson as he is.

"Just lie quiet, old man, and I'll get you something."

He whimpers and clutches me.

"That's all right. Be back in a moment."

I say nothing to anybody, but go for the morphia solution and a hypodermic and I give Margy a dose.

"Now, you go to sleep. You'll wake up feeling O.K."

Fairfax arrives in an ambulance just before dusk. He has received my message and come down at once, and I am glad of his big, blond calmness. I tell him about Margy, and that I have put him to sleep, and in the candlelight of the mess he looks at me closely.

"You all right, Stephen?"

"Quite, sir."

"Tough man. I'll come down early to-morrow. Do you think Margy ought to be relieved?"

"I rather think so, sir, but we shall know to-morrow."

"Hallard and Gibbs are at Wigmore Street. Which would you rather have, Chiffinch or Carless?"

"Chiffinch, I think."

"Any other damage?"

"Tea-cups, sir."

He smiles at me.

"I'll bring you a fresh tea-service."

I have had a bad night, or rather, a hopeless dawn, with Margy. He woke up fighting and screaming like a child roused from a bad dream. I had to sit by him and try and calm him. The terrible part of it is that the rational half of him realizes that he has broken down, and he is fighting his elemental, hysterical self.

I try to give him more morphia, but he resists. He keeps on saying, "I'm all right, I'm all right. Let me alone. I'm all right, Steevie." He insists on getting up, and trying to shave himself, but his movements are jerky and tremulous. He uses a safety razor, otherwise I feel that I should have to try and take the thing away.

Fairfax arrives with Chiffinch soon after breakfast. Chiffinch's little face looks pinched and scared under its tin hat. I take Fairfax down to the mess. I

am afraid of a scene, for poor Margy is rather like a drunken man who is both fractious and emotional, but Fairfax is master of the occasion. His kindness and sympathy have an immediate effect on Margy. He becomes pathetically mute and docile, and gets up and goes with Fairfax like a child.

Chiffinch is not a cheerful little animal to have about the house. He gives one the impression of being in a perpetual state of fright, and I catch him glancing surreptitiously at the scar in the brick vaulting. I know that he is thinking that if another shell should arrive in the same place, the result might not be so happy for us. It is only too easy for one to become obsessed by this kind of fear, especially so when one is living in a state of semi-darkness, and has not enough to occupy one's mind. Casualties are few, and one could sit and yawn for hours.

This war-game can be so terribly boring.

I feel I must get Chiffinch out of this rabbit-hole, and I take him with me to visit our bearer-posts, and the aid-post of one of the battalions in the line. We have a quiet passage, but I can hear Chiffinch panting through the mud behind me. I can get along pretty fast, being lean and wiry, and one does not linger on these expeditions.

I find the men at the posts well and cheerful. It must be pretty dreary for them, poor devils, for the weather is filthy, and we have had scuds of snow.

"Manage to keep warm?"

"Champion, sir."

"It must be a bit chilly at night. I'm relieving you to-morrow."

Their faces are friendly to me, but I see them glancing a little critically at Chiffinch, who keeps fidgeting and poking at the sap wall with his stick. I know the feeling quite well; he wants to be back and under cover, but this is a temptation that one has to fight with prayer and sweat and self-cursings. We go on to the aid-post and find Garner the battalion M.O. dressing a case. He is a stolid and comforting person, and jokes with the man whose wound he is dressing.

"Real posh blighty for you, my lad."

We hurry back, for I realize that the A.D.S. should not be left without an officer, but circumstance has played me a scurvy trick. Cleek has arrived in our absence. I find him sitting in the mess, still wearing his tin hat, and I know from the way he looks at me that I am in for trouble.

"I want to speak to you alone, Captain Brent."

He rows me savagely. What the devil do I mean by leaving the A.D.S. without an officer in charge? It is useless for me to explain that I had gone out

to show Chiffinch round.

“That’s no excuse, Captain Brent. Haven’t you any N.C.O.s?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Well, damn it, man, use ’em. I won’t have this sort of casual gadding about. You will not leave the station without an officer in charge. You understand?”

“Quite, sir.”

“Not so much French leave, Captain Brent. I shall have to take this matter up with your C.O.”

Damn him! He will be able to score off Fairfax on my account, but then God delivers him into my hands. He informs me that he proposes to inspect the bearer-posts and aid-posts. I look at my watch. I happen to know that for the last week or two Fritz has been indulging in one of those queer and mischievous “shoots,” with the communication trench and the reserve company headquarters as his objective. He must think we have a trench-mortar in the company headquarters sap. But he varies his time, with noon as the centre point of his space-time pattern.

I do not tell Cleek this. I am so furiously eager to see how his sour dignity will stand shelling that I feel that I do not care a damn about the danger. We set off in grim and austere silence, and I listen to Cleek’s big feet sucking at the mud behind me.

“Disgraceful state these trenches are in.”

I make light of the mud, but run in the reality that our bearers’ boots and puttees are apt to get a little dirty.

“Do you dry your men’s boots, Brent?”

“We do the best we can, sir.”

Everything is peaceful, and I am wondering whether Fritz is going to refrain on this particular morning. We pass Company Headquarters, and reach our first bearers’ post. Cleek pokes the sandbagged roof with his stick.

“Rotten, Captain Brent, disgraceful. These men have plenty of time, haven’t they?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Indent for sandbags, and have this post repaired.”

“We have an indent in, sir. We are going to sandbag the whole post in properly.”

“Get it done, man, get it done. I have no patience with excuses.”

We pass on, and suddenly I realize that Fritz is not asleep. The centre of the trench is duckboard here, and we are close to the old deep dug-out, “Jock’s Grave.” Fritz has varied both his time and his range, and when I hear the first

shell coming I know that it is going to be a near thing. I shout to Cleek, and throw myself down on the duckboards.

“Get down, sir, get down.”

I hear a splash behind me. The shell bursts on one side of the trench. We shall have a few seconds before the next one will arrive, and I scramble up and look over my shoulder at Cleek.

“Quick, sir; there is cover here.”

I reach the mouth of the dug-out and flatten myself against the wall to let Cleek past me. I realize that he is all mud from face to toes. In taking his safety dive he must have missed the duckboards. Another shell. He blunders past me, and almost takes a header down the dug-out steps. I can hear his rasping breathing. We sit down on the steps of the dug-out. Cleek’s face has a yellow tinge.

“One of the daily hates, sir.”

I realize that he is pretty badly scared.

“Is this place safe?”

“Passably.”

He gets up and descends farther into the darkness, and I can see his face looming up at me. I remain up above, wickedly gloating. I take out my pipe and pouch, fill the pipe and light it. Jerry is pitching shells nicely along the communication trench, and working down towards Company Headquarters.

“I think we can go on now, sir.”

“Better wait a minute or two, Brent.”

His voice sounds quite polite.

“I mean, on to the aid-post, sir. He is shelling down, not up.”

I am aware of a grotesque figure trying to remove some of the mud with long, flipper-like hands.

“I’m afraid you have got in rather a mess, sir. Why not go on to Battalion Headquarters, and have a clean up?”

I make my voice sound debonair and completely respectful.

“I think I’ll leave the aid-posts to-day, Brent. I’m inclined to sciatica.”

“Then I think we had better move, sir. I think the funny business is over. He gives us about a dozen, and then stops.”

“Have you counted them, Brent?”

“Not actually, sir.”

“There might be thirteen to-day.”

Move him I cannot. He insists on staying down below for another twenty minutes, and when I do persuade him to emerge I am almost sorry for the man. He is soaked and shivering, and his tremors are partly dreadful agitation. All

his sour arrogance has gone for the moment.

“Do you think it is safe now, Brent?”

“Quite, sir.”

He takes the lead and goes storming on his long legs down the trench. When the duckboards end we flounder and stodge through the mud and water. Cleek sets a furious pace, and as I look at his long, thin neck I see it growing pink. He is sweating, and I am moved to wonder whether this unseemly affair will not be bitterly remembered against me. I have seen authority with its shirt hanging out and its dignity disgracefully dirtied.

When we emerge from the trench I draw level with Cleek. His forehead is beaded with sweat under his tin hat. He is muddied even to his tabs.

“Would you like a clean up at the A.D.S., sir?”

He shows his fangs in a kind of snarling smile.

“I’ll get straight back, Brent, thanks.”

And he does, bolting into the waiting ambulance as though to escape publicity. But some of the men have seen him, and as I stroll back across the yard after the ambulance has swung out, I am aware of grinning faces, and I hear a voice say, “The old blighter’s got a mouthful of mud.”

XV

FAIRFAX comes down about half-past eleven to go round the posts, but I am careful of Fairfax; I keep him to lunch and persuade him to take his country walk at the quiet hour when men have been fed and are feeling peaceful and somnolent.

Fairfax is precious to me. And why? Do I cherish his safety because he stands armed between me and meddling authority, and can preserve me from being pushed hither and thither like a pawn on a board? Does my little, mean self love him for that alone? I know that it is not so, and that my affection for this large, lovable creature is somewhat selfless.

There is a breath of spring in the air. This stricken country is sun-steeped and almost peaceful. One can hear birds singing. The communication trench is drying up, and we do not hurry, and I am conscious of the sky and the clouds overhead. We can talk intimately here, without Chiffinch's suspicious and poky little face obtruding itself upon our friendship.

"How's poor old Margy?"

"Rather shaky still. I am keeping him at headquarters for a while. The 203 have already had to send one man down."

"Sick?"

"Nerves, Stephen. A shell crumpled up a house near his billet. I suppose we are going through the weeding out process."

Suddenly he pauses, turns and faces me, and with one of his large laughs, asks me a question.

"What have you been doing to Cleek, Steevie?"

"Why? Any complaints?"

"We have had a hell of a shemozzle. He came along and tried to row me about the A.D.S. He even hinted that you had inveigled him into a small shell storm."

The fool! I would not have conceived it possible for a man in Cleek's position to give himself away so fatuously by blurting out an accusation of that sort. The fool! "Did he say that?"

"Hinted it."

"The idiot. But as a matter of fact I was feeling rather mischievous."

"What happened?"

I give Fairfax a description of my morning with Colonel Cleek, even to his

ventral plunge into the mud, and his disinclination to emerge from the dug-out. I can feel that Fairfax is chuckling, but he assumes a solemn air and pretends to reprove me.

“Brent, I am sorry to find that you have not sufficient reverence for authority.”

“That depends upon the authority, sir. But surely the man wasn’t such a naïve ass as to accuse me of having spoilt his dignity?”

“He did not put it quite so crudely.”

“How, sir?”

“He said that you did not appear to consider the personal safety of a senior officer, and that you had no tact.”

“Incredible! If Cleek is a man with so little sense of the fitness of things!”

“I’m afraid you have made an enemy, Steevie.”

“I’m sorry if I have involved you, sir.”

“No. I think you know that, for some reason, Cleek and I are up against each other. I’m not afraid of the man. I knew he could be a nasty person, but I did not think he was so exceedingly unsubtle. All the same, it is not helpful to the unit.”

“I’ll be mild as milk in future, sir.”

“Just be your self, Steevie. I think I have enough influence in this crowd to stand up against prejudice. By the way, I’m going to relieve you next week.”

“I’m quite all right, sir.”

“You may be, but Hallard and Gibbs have got the hang of the work at ‘Wigmore Street.’ It’s a rest-house there. I’m sending Gibbs down here. You will come back to headquarters for a week. Bath and a bed, Stephen, and perhaps a little dinner somewhere.”

“That sounds good, sir.”

I am pleased with myself. It seems to me that I am learning my lesson, that a man’s happiness may rest in his striving to be the master of his soul. I have been afraid, but somehow I have managed to put fear under my feet, and even to conceal it from these other men. My night-terrors are less hideous and haunting. I am learning to assume a facile cheerfulness, and in wearing this shield I find fear less capable of penetrating to my vitals. Moods of morbid depression can be laughed out of countenance.

I am beginning to hope that unless I am tried too sorely I shall be able to live this life and keep my self-respect. Besides, Fairfax is a man who will try to save one from being tried too sorely. I feel that he understands, and perhaps

that is why I love him.

I have had a hot bath, a real hot bath, not just two inches of water in a green canvas saucer. It is a tin structure, scrounged from somewhere by Bond, who is proving himself a resourceful lad as a quartermaster, and this bath is loaned in succession to our officers. I hear that Hallard has christened it "The Cream Tart." The implication is obvious. I get into clean undies and slacks, and sit on the bed which I am to occupy. This war does make one appreciate the elementals.

I find a new officer in the mess, a large, sallow, sullen young man, with a truculent face and a self-assured manner. He has been sent to us as a reinforcement, and his name is Bamborough Brown. The Bamborough strikes me as being pretentious, the Brown alone would be adequate.

I do not like him.

But no matter. Gibbs is back for a night, and Fairfax has ordered an ambulance and a dinner at a famous little place in the neighbourhood. He and I and Gibbs and Margy set off on our merry evening, leaving Carless and B.B. in charge. Already, Carless and Brown are trying to outboast each other in the stories of their sex-adventures. Let them.

We have a merry evening. Fairfax stands champagne. We are waited on by a pleasant French m'amselle, and Gibbs gets quite googly about her. Margy is very talkative and excited, and laughs too easily and too much. I see Fairfax watching him with wise and kind comprehension. I feel that Margetson will not be with us long. It is not his fault. Men can be the victims of temperament, and of a mental physique that is too sensitive.

Gibbs becomes uproarious, and with one arm over the back of my chair, reels off the vulgar medical student tags.

Fairfax laughs and reproves him.

"Be quiet, Gibby, be quiet."

But Fairfax's jocund air of shocked modesty only makes Gibby worse. He is beginning to sing, and to be ridiculously sentimental when we get him into the ambulance. He is a broth of a boy and a supreme sportsman, the kind of man who never lets you down.

I have a strange desire to see spring flowers, and in this particular French village there are no flowers. If one could cook or preserve daffodils or violets I suppose the French would grow more of them. Margy asserts that the Frenchman's only idea of floral things is presenting a bunch of carnations to another man's wife. This, of course, is nonsense. But I find my spring flowers by wandering forth along a dusty little track that is decorated with

Rougeville's domestic debris, and which leads to the cemetery. The place has four pollarded limes sheltering an iron cross; it is surrounded by an ugly brick wall, but in the cemetery I find my flowers intermingled with those tawdry crosses and wreaths made of wire and coloured beads which the French taste cultivates.

I discover a clump of primroses, some violets and, in the shade of a ragged cypress, a few blue hepaticas.

Lovely things! But somehow they hurt me, and produce in me strange, poignant pangs. I remember that I have to go back to that devastation where death waits for one amid the torn earth and the broken walls. I want to go home. I want to be with my wife and child——

But this will not do. One must not suffer one's self to look too tenderly at peaceful things, or to grow sentimental about them.

I close the iron gates of the cemetery and walk away.

Margetson asks me whether I have found any flowers. I tell him of the cemetery. Just before dinner I happen to go into Margy's room to borrow a book he has promised to lend me. I find him sitting on the bed holding a tin mug in which are stuck three primroses and a few violets. He has a peculiar smile on his face, and I realize that these flowers have affected him as they had affected me.

He looks up at me wistfully.

"These things do make war seem silly and awful, Stephen."

I want to take the mug away from him. It is as though it contained sweet poison, and the edge of Margy's self-control has worn too thin.

Hallard is back at Headquarters. I go to take his place at Wigmore Street. This ruined village has a bizarre and sinister beauty. It is not too completely ruined, and the spidery skeletons of roofs stick up against the sky amid mutilated trees that are attempting a little greenness. The A.D.S. is situated in a ruined house that still retains a large walled garden in which a few gooseberry and currant bushes are putting out leaves. Some horticultural soul has been trying to grow young lettuces, and Finch discovers strawberry plants. He talks, if we remain here, of dishing up strawberries and Ideal milk, but I am pretty sure that those strawberries will not fruit for us.

This is a comparatively peaceful place. Jerry registers on a ruined house about three hundred yards away, and occasionally he shells the church. We receive about one wounded man per day.

I have seen the great Richthofen or one of his circus, a most dramatic show. I was strolling along the road when I heard a burst of rifle and machine-gun fire, and saw suddenly a red 'plane flying low over our trenches. It seemed to be less than fifty yards from the ground, and sailed along like a huge scarlet dragon-fly.

Cheeky devil! But being what I am I admire the fellow's courage. I hear later that he got away unscathed. I am glad.

Fairfax pays me a visit. He is looking worried, which is unusual for him. He tells me that Chiffinch has made a mess of an affair at Semelles. The Boche has been in a rather nasty mood, and he landed a big shell in the headquarters dug-out of some gunners and made a bloody mess. They sent to the A.D.S. for help, and apparently Chiffinch diddled about and funk'd going out until an officer came for him. Carless was up the line. But the gunners put in a complaint to our Divisional Headquarters, and Cleek has been on his hind legs about it.

We are a rather unlucky unit.

I say to Fairfax, "Well, it wasn't your fault, sir."

"Everything like that is a C.O.'s fault, Stephen. But that isn't what I have come about. I have orders to withdraw Chiffinch, and send my most experienced officer down to Semelles. It doesn't seem quite fair to you, Stephen."

I understand him.

"If you want me to go, sir, you know that I'm only too ready."

He gives me a look of gratitude.

"Good man. But just one word, Stephen, I'll consider you later when the others have had more experience."

"That's all right, sir. It isn't only a matter of obeying orders."

How curious that Chiffinch should be the first man to be wounded in our unit, and how unexpected the manner of his wounding. The little man had pleaded to be allowed to stay on with me at Semelles, and I did not realize how badly he was feeling about that other affair until this other thing happened. There has been a good deal of shelling, and we were having tea when an orderly rushed in with a message.

"R.E. dug-out hit, sir, down the road."

Chiffinch was up in a flash and grabbing his tin hat and box-respirator.

"I'm going, Brent."

"Wait a moment."

“No, let me go.”

I sit glued to my box and he rushes out, and I remain and reflect upon the soul of Chiffinch, and the courage that has moved him to efface a horrid memory. I finish tea, and light a pipe, knowing that in a few minutes I shall have cases to deal with, shocking cases probably. Chiffinch has taken bearers with him. It seems only a few minutes since the little man has left me when I am called. The first case is in; there are others to follow. A sweating and white-faced bearer tumbles down the steps.

“Captain Chiffinch has been hit, sir.”

“Good lord! Badly?”

“In the leg, sir. They are bringing him in.”

My feeling towards Chiffinch has changed completely. When the stretcher on which he is lying appears on the “shoot,” I go to it quickly. I am aware of Chiffinch’s small face, minus its pince-nez, somehow radiant and very pale.

“Much pain, old man?”

He smiles at me.

“Not much, Brent. Got it in the leg, rather badly. I don’t mind somehow.”

I am very tender with Chiffinch. I plug morphia into him. His right leg is a horrid mess, but he lies quite still and does not make a sound while I apply dressings and splints. I feel that the little man’s spirit is both exultant and at peace. This ends the war for him, and the end is good.

“You ought to get a decoration for this, Chiff.”

“Me?”

“Yes, I’ll see Fairfax puts it up.”

He smiles at me.

“A tally with a nice red edge will be good enough for me. We got those other fellows out all right.”

“You did.”

When the work is done I cover him with a blanket, and stick a cigarette in his mouth.

“How are things outside now, Block?”

“Pretty quiet, sir.”

“Good. Ambulance in?”

“Yes, sir.”

I go up into the yard and see Chiffinch and the three others placed in the ambulance. I tuck the blanket under his chin, and pat his shoulder.

“Good luck, old man. You can go home proud.”

He can, and I, as a man who may have been tempted to scoff, have received a salutary lesson.

Our ambulance has been relieved by the 201 F.A. who have been put into the line to gain experience. We are moved to the other sector across the canal, and our headquarters are at Hameau Farm.

I shall never forget this place or my first glimpse of it after Rougeville and the ruins of Semelles. We see across the flat fields what appears to be a green cloud supported above the earth on silver pillars. Splendid white poplars. An avenue of them leads up to the farm. I see a moat snowed over with water-crowfoot, and an old orchard, some of whose trees are still in bloom. We march in through a funny old brick and tile gatehouse, and find ourselves in an immense yard surrounded on every side by buildings. There is the usual vast manure pit in the centre, but the smell of it is not too aggressive. One becomes accustomed to the odour, and even associates it with pleasant, peaceful things.

The mess is a great big sunny room floored with tiles. My bedroom, has a window looking on the moat, and through the poplars to the placid fields. It is remote and still and at the end of a corridor, and is simply furnished. The bed has a feather mattress. Finch comes up with my kit, and his face is rosy.

“Bit of all right, this, sir.”

I unpack and arrange my belongings and prepare to spread myself and feel at home. The post has come in, and I have a parcel and two letters from Mary.

The charm of this place is inexpressible. Fairfax and I wander out into the orchard after tea, where all the young green growth of the year is beginning to spread itself. Ducks are swimming on the moat, and beyond the poplars a field of wheat is brilliant in the sunlight. Fairfax is a countryman, and his face looks all smoothed out and serene. He says that he means to try and get hold of a tent and sleep out here in the orchard.

The men are in great spirits. Bond has gone off to Merville to buy beer, and whatever Cleek's prejudices may be, the unit feels that it has done its first job creditably. There will be competitions for fresh eggs and milk, and Murray the Sergeant-Major is preparing to open a canteen, and to organize a concert party.

There are other forms of competition. The owner of Hameau Farm is on active service, but his wife, a big, broad, buxom woman is carrying on. She sits sewing at a window with an air of deliberate and amused aloofness. Already, Carless and Bamborough Brown are in competition for her favours. They challenge each other in the mess as to who shall be the first to consummate the seduction. The idea nauseates me.

I tell Brown to shut up, and he turns on me, and tries to upset me and my chair. But he has not reckoned with Gibbs, who has been waiting for a chance to chasten this truculent young Juan. Gibbs intervenes, picks Brown up like a baby, carries him out into the yard, and holds him sprawling over the manure

pit.

“Want to go in, my lad?”

That settles the question as to who is the strong man in our mess, and whenever B.B. shows signs of arrogance we have only to say, “Want a bath, my lad?” and he dries up.

I lie in this comfortable French bed and watch the moonlight shining through the poplars, and try to imagine how I should feel if there were no more war and this was my home. What is the Frenchman like whose home it is, and do his bowels yearn for it as mine do for my own home? And does he suspect that two lustful young Englishmen are proposing to seduce his wife? Sex seems full of treachery. Or is it the false idea of sex that is born of a sentimental and false delicacy?

I am of the same flesh as Carless and Brown, but I resist and struggle, and strive to subdue the elemental man in me.

Am I right? Is there virtue in refraining, or am I a fastidious fool?

I lie on my back and watch the moonlight and think of my wife.

Surrender seems so much more final and utter in a woman. But why should it be so?

I lie there and desire my wife.

Uxorious ass, but I have her letters under my pillow!

Poor Margy has had to be sent down sick. He was spending his time mooning about the fields here like a love-sick girl. The very peace of this place seems to have exaggerated his emotional strain. Hallard found him in his bedroom one afternoon, kneeling by the bed, praying aloud, and in tears. Fairfax, Hallard and I held a kind of private medical board upon his case, and we decided that for his own sake and for the good of the unit it would be better to send him down.

Fairfax went to see Cleek about Margy’s case, and Cleek’s idea of treatment was a ruthless exposure of Margy to what he called, “The discipline of danger,” but Fairfax stuck to his guns, and Cleek gave way.

Apparently, he said to Fairfax, “You are creating a dangerous precedent. If any other officer of yours thinks he can snivel himself into safety——” Fairfax came back to us with his blue eyes on stalks. “By God, Stephen, I nearly asked him why he hadn’t indulged in more self-discipline on that occasion when he took a mud-bath in the trenches above Semelles.”

Our Advanced Dressing Station on this sector is known as Country Cottage, and that is what it is, a little, low, single-storied white house in which a very hairy and misanthropic old Frenchman still occupies the kitchen. You come to the place by a country lane between rows of pollarded willows, and clouds of aspens. There are a few cattle in the fields, and some of the land is cropped with wheat or tobacco. Nearly opposite to our cottage is another house in which a Frenchman, his wife and two children are living. He has been released from the army on account of wounds, and is cultivating his land, and from our window I can see him and his family weeding the tobacco crop. In appearance he is just like one of our Sussex labourers, blue eyed and fresh of face, and with flowing, fair moustachios. Still farther down the lane in a minute red-brick cottage lives an unexpected and anomalous creature, a youngish woman with a bold, broad face, and jocund eyes that look at one slantingly. Rumour has it that the mysterious lady is a spy, but I rather credit her with being an obscure member of the oldest profession, and as a rustic courtesan functioning within a mile or two of the reserve trenches she must have sold many a kiss to men who now are dead. One passes her cottage as one goes up to the line, and often she is sitting in her doorway, sewing, and as I pass she gives me a Mona Lisa smile.

Just beyond her cottage and before the green and ruined wilderness begins, the lane is made strange and sweet by a bank of great red thorn trees which are in flower. It is difficult to believe in the actuality of these fragrant trees. They are like Mademoiselle Hortense of the cottage, somehow incredible and disturbing in their suggestions. The meadow behind them is full of old shell-holes, and across the lane the ruined houses of Rosambert are just visible between the trees of a derelict orchard.

Carless is with me. We sleep and feed in the same room together, and I have to suffer Carless and his nudities. He goes to bed in blue and white silk pyjamas, and in the morning seems to spend an unconscionable time over his toilet. His getting up is an almost feminine business, and one morning I time him by my watch while he is attending to his hair. It has a wave to it, and it has to be oiled and glossed and brushed until it is just so. He dedicates seven and a half minutes to this ritual.

But he is a good-natured lad, and I suppose one must allow him his looks and his vanity. Moreover, he has been educated, and he provides one with surprises in the way of temperament. He has quite a nice taste in music, and he tells me he has composed one or two songs. Love songs, of course. Sex must sing and display itself. But Carless is relatively easy to live with, and he does not seem to suffer from nerves. His manners can be almost too exquisite, like

his hair and his breeches and his salute.

Carless has discovered M'amselle Hortense. I suppose this was inevitable. He comes in with a lyrical air, and tells me he has been promoted to be her medical attendant. Apparently she suffers from migraine, and I suggest to Carless that her indisposition may be due to the overpowering perfume of the may trees.

“You’re jealous, daddy.”

“Don’t you know what she is, a sort of Belle Dame Sans Merci who kisses men before they die.”

Carless passes a hand over his hair.

“That’s rather pretty, daddy. And so is she, and sweetly scented with sin. Besides, she’s woman.”

“Don’t be an ass, man.”

“Sententious old dear!”

But when I wake up in the night, and hear a sound of movement in the room, and see by the light of the moon Carless pulling on a pair of slacks over his pyjamas, I feel it my business to be sententious.

“Carless.”

“Hallo! Thought you were asleep.”

“So I was. Look here, man, you’re not going——”

“Dry up, daddy, a doctor must visit his patient.”

“Don’t be an ass. Damn it, as a doctor you ought to be wise.”

“Got all the necessary precautions with me, daddy.”

“But don’t you realize she has had scores of other men?”

“Makes her more interesting. It means she knows her job.”

I lie down again.

“O, well, it’s your funeral, my lad.”

He steals out, and I feel strangely jealous of him, and angry with myself for feeling so. Moonlight, and the scent of may trees in flower, and a woman! Does it matter how often a woman has been enjoyed? Carless may be right. She may be wise as to all the profound provocations. After an hour of restlessness I go to sleep, and I wake in the morning to find Carless back in bed, and sleeping like a serene child.

I am shaving when he comes to life. He yawns, stretches, and smiles at me like some sleek and satisfied young animal.

“Good morning, daddy.”

I am apt to be peevish when I am shaving.

“Patient doing well?”

“Gorgeously, old thing.”

“Why not make a nice drawing-room ballad of it?”

“Petulant fellow! That sort of song is only sung in the singing. Don’t be jealous, daddy. Now, you’ve cut yourself. I was afraid you would.”

I cannot help laughing with him and at myself.

“Perhaps I’m a damned humbug, my lad, but as doctor to doctor——”

“Cheerio, Brent, I’m not quite such a damned fool as you seem to think.”

“Enough said. You ought to know.”

“That’s a good, kind daddy.”

Hallard has come down to have tea with me, and since Carless has gone to visit one of the battalions, Hallard and I are alone. We sit out in the Frenchman’s garden by a big lilac bush which is in flower, and Finch brings us tea there. Hallard, like Fairfax, is a man after my own heart; we belong to the same generation and can talk to each other without restraint. I tell him about Carless and Hortense, and he laughs.

“We’re lookers-on at that game, Stephen. In my youth I was a bigger imp than Carless will ever be.”

“Did King Hal ever cease from lusting?”

“It’s only that one has other affections and feels responsible. It seems rather beastly to go whoring when you have kids. Being a family man does tame one.”

“I know.”

Hallard’s lean face is in the shadow. Almost it is the face of an ascetic, or rather of a man whose teeth no longer tear at life. He lights a cigarette.

“Besides, the real hell lies before us. All this is like a prep, school. We don’t know what the real bloody business is like yet, Stephen. At least, I don’t.”

I understand him, and the tense deep lines in his sardonic face.

“Yes, that’s true.”

“When the Division is pushed over the top, and the whole world is shelled to blazes! I’ve got that ordeal on my mind. It gives one to think. Other things pull at one so.”

I light my pipe.

“Yes, this is just a pause. And, yet, if you had your choice, and could funk it and go home?”

He gives me one of his grim smiles.

“I should be packing my kit.”

“O, no, you wouldn’t. There’s something about the horror of this show that grips one and won’t let one shirk. I wanted to shirk, and somehow, I couldn’t.”

“Same here, Stephen. One tries to keep one’s poor damned shivering soul in training for the thing that one funks. We older men have to go in with our eyes open.”

“If the world had its eyes open these savageries wouldn’t happen.”

“Will the world ever have its eyes open? I doubt it.”

“Then, civilization, as we know it, is better dead.”

One of our battalions is to make a raid on the German trenches. The proposition is out of sympathy with this peaceful place, but the offensive spirit has to be stimulated or simulated. Blessed are the trees, which, rooted in the earth, cannot be dispatched with bomb and bayonet to slaughter other trees. How supremely ridiculous and ghastly it all is.

The M.O. of the battalion is to open an advanced aid-post nearer to the front line, and the regular aid-post is to become a dressing-station. Fairfax details Hallard for the job, and I ask if I may join him.

Fairfax hesitates for a moment.

“Do you expect me to risk both my senior officers, and the only married men?”

“In a way, that’s my reason, sir.”

“Keeping Hallard in countenance?”

“He won’t need that. Just my feeling about the thing.”

“All right, Stephen. I understand.”

The raid is to be a night affair and Hallard and I stroll up towards the line after having tea with Carless at Country Cottage. Mademoiselle Hortense’s door is shut, and the red petals have fallen from the may trees, but on this serene evening in June, with the deserted fields and orchards merged into a green wilderness, violence and death seem such absurdities. Our nursing-orderlies and bearers are following us in small parties, so as not to attract the attention of any interested Boche observer. We cross the track of a light railway; half a dozen trucks have been put at our service for the use of the wounded. Fairfax himself, with Gibbs and Carless, is to receive them at the A.D.S.

“Funny sort of evening for organized murder, Stephen.”

“I suppose we shall get hardened to the idea.”

“I wonder?”

We made our way across derelict fields and along a shallow trench screened by wire netting to the rampart of the Old British Line. It is a bank of sods and rotting sandbags, and full of dug-outs whose openings look like large rat-holes. The aid-post consists of two steel "Elephants" side by side, tucked up against the vallum, but quite unprotected in the rear towards the open country. The track of the light railway passes just behind it, and half a dozen trollies are standing ready.

We put our men and stretchers under cover, dump our supply of dressings in the steel shelters, and stroll along to the headquarters of the battalion making the raid. It is a sandbagged structure, and outside it someone has made a rather pathetic attempt to create a small garden. One or two rose bushes have been retrieved from the ruins of Festubert, and some pansies are in flower. Heart's ease! We hear laughter and a burble of voices coming from the mess, and we find it crowded with officers. Gains, their M.O., drags us in and introduces us. Drinks are going round, and I gather that these lads who are laughing and joking with exaggerated cheerfulness are the officers who are to be in charge of the raid. I notice in particular one fair, good-looking lad with wavy hair and a Cupid's mouth. He has put a pansy in the lapel of his tunic. Heart's ease!

I suppose all this assumed gaiety is admirable, but it makes me sad. The C.O. is a hard-bitten regular whose business it is to fan the flame of courage. We are offered drinks, and accept them, lest we should appear even more sinister shadows than we are, prospective patchers-up of broken bodies. Surreptitiously I pinch Hallard's backside, and he understands the signal. We excuse ourselves.

"Good luck, everybody."

The boy with the pansy turns to us and laughs.

"You won't see me in your little surgery. I've got a lucky flower."

Gains comes out with us, and briefly we discuss our arrangements. We tell him to rush his casualties back to us and that we will deal with them. He is a stout little man who persists in being cheerful, though his position up yonder in a sort of crazy rabbit-hutch would not appeal to me.

We go back to our "Elephants," and prepare for the show. There are two sets of rough trestles upon which stretchers can be laid, and a bench upon which dressings can be arranged in readiness, but we realize that with ourselves and our orderlies these shelters are going to be difficult places to work in by lamplight, especially if they become clogged with wounded. Hallard and I discuss the situation, and having made our plans, call in the sergeant in charge of the bearers. We impress upon him the necessity for getting the wounded away as quickly as possible, and that if he finds himself short of trollies, he is to try and scrounge some extra ones.

He is a laconic, lean, capable person.

"I know where to get 'em, sir. There are a dozen down by the R.E. dump."

"Don't stand on ceremony, Sykes."

"I won't, sir."

A brilliant sunset, and then darkness. This night is to be full of incidents, both ridiculous and tragic. The first incident blows in on us just before the barrage is due, in the person of a perspiring and enthusiastic padre. He is large and big with emotion, and he brings into our steel cave a smell of sweat and a suggestion of simmering excitement. He sits down on a pile of dressings and confronts us with a shiny red face hot with perspiring enthusiasm.

"I felt I must be here, to help these dear brave boys."

Hallard and I look at him askance. What are we to do with this large, clumbering, emotional person in our crowded quarters? Besides, this dear creature is the sort of officious and busy idiot who will get in everybody's way and make himself a religious nuisance. I am afraid our welcome is cheerless and cold. The padre has a parcel with him, boxes of cigarettes. He proceeds to unpack them, and plants them amid our dressings.

I see Hallard's teeth becoming more prominent.

"I'm sorry, padre, I'm afraid we can't have them there."

In fact there is no vacant place for anything here, not even for cigarettes. I am conscious of the good man's face growing less genial. He takes off his tin hat and mops himself.

Hallard makes a suggestion.

"Why not empty all the cigarettes into your helmet?"

He is serious, but the padre eyes him with gradual suspicion. Are we treating him with irreverence? But he does empty the cigarettes into his tin hat, and squats with it between his knees. Hallard and I are sitting on a stretcher. There is an awkward silence, and I hear one of our orderlies tittering.

The padre's face grows a deeper red. He looks solemnly at Hallard, and in a throaty and tonsillar voice asks him a question.

"Doctor, I am going to ask you to be quite candid with me. Do you think I shall be more use here, or at the main dressing-station?"

For a moment Hallard hesitates.

"Well, to be quite frank, I think you would be more use where there is more room, padre. You see, if we——"

But there is no need for him to finish the sentence. The padre is on his feet, and holding his helmet full of cigarettes. I appreciate his dilemma. Is he to abandon the cigarettes, or the helmet, or both? I take off my own tin hat, and offer it as a receptacle. But again he takes offence, and mumbling something

about keeping the fags for the dear boys at the main dressing-station, he disappears like Peter into the night.

Hallard grins at me.

“I’m afraid that’s torn it. He’s gone off with the offertory and an insulted soul.”

We hear later that he blew into the Country Cottage station, and complained to Fairfax that his officers had treated him most cavalierly and turned him out of the aid-post. Well, I suppose, in a sense, we had.

The night has been extraordinarily silent, but the dark silence is shattered like a sheet of glass by the sudden detonations of our guns. The steel shelter vibrates, and the shells rush over us. We sit and listen and wait. I smoke my pipe and wonder if Hallard is thinking as I am, whether there will be retaliation. This structure is not proof against a direct hit, and a shell-burst in this steel cave crowded with orderlies and wounded is a horror that does not bear thinking about. I try not to think. I sit and crave to be busy, to be able to forget in merciful action my own selfish fears, but the business is only just beginning, and we wait and wait.

I grow acutely restless, and I go outside to speak to Sergeant Sykes, and to see that the bearers are under cover. I find them squatting with their backs to the sandbagged wall.

“Anything coming over, Sergeant Sykes?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“Did you get those other trollies?”

“I did, sir.”

“Any objection from the R.E.s?”

“We just annexed them, sir.”

“Good man.”

The first wounded are dribbling in. They are walking cases, men who were hit in crossing No Man’s land, and not too seriously. They are all very cheerful, as befits men who have escaped with their limbs and their lives. Gains has managed to dress some of them so capably that after examining the dressings we pass them down. Most of them are able to walk.

Our guns have ceased firing, and but for a stray shell nothing seems to have come our way. I don’t like this silence. It may be merciful to us, in this aid-post, but it seems to suggest that the cunning old Boche has prepared something more deadly for our people than mere noise.

Sykes puts his head in.

“Stretcher cases, sir.”

“Many?”

“We seem to have got it in the neck.”

What a night! Cases begin to pour in upon us. There are men lying on stretchers outside waiting to be dealt with. The wounds are mostly due to machine-gun bullets. From fragments of gossip we can piece together the complete picture. The Germans were prepared for the raid. They evacuated their front line, and let our men come over, but they had massed machine-guns on each flank, and when our raiding party turned to come back, Fritz shot them to pieces.

The heat in this steel cave is terrific. The place smells of blood and sweat and foul wet khaki. Hallard is working in one section, I in the other, but the pressure is so intense that we have to leave some of the less serious cases to be dressed by the orderlies. Hallard calls for me to help him try and stop hæmorrhage from a wounded artery; we manage to stop it. I go back to my section to find an officer being carried in. He has had a bullet through the head, and his face and hair are all blood, and the brain is protruding. A hopeless case. And then I notice something—a little faded patch of colour on the lapel of his tunic. It is the lad with the pansy. Heart’s ease! No lucky flower this.

I realize that I can do nothing, and the space is needed. He is breathing in snoring gasps, and it seems heartless to put him outside to die, but I have no alternative. I tell two bearers to carry him out and put him in some quiet place close to the trench wall.

An excited and emotional lad rushes in.

“Has my pal Todd come through?”

I have no time to spare for other humanities. I tell an orderly to look through the tally list, and order the boy to wait outside. No, his pal Todd has not passed through our hands, and I hear a voice say, “He’s out in No Man’s land. I’m going back.”

Apparently he does go back in a mad and magnanimous search for his friend, and half an hour later he is brought in to us shot through the chest, and dying.

I have no consciousness of the passing of time, nor any feeling of being tired. Wounded come in and wounded go, trundled away on the trollies. Their fortitude touches me; not a whimper, hardly a moan. I do not know how many wounded I have dressed, or what the hour is. I might have been working for five minutes or for five hours.

At last there is a lull. I wash my hands in a bucket of water, light a cigarette, and look in on Hallard. He is dealing with a case, and his face looks

grey and grim. I go outside and am astonished to find that the dawn is breaking, a sweet, grey, stealthy dawn. Two bearers are starting off with two stretcher cases on a trolley, and the wheels make a gentle rumbling. The sky is primrose coloured in the east, and the roofs of the steel shelters and the bulk of the rampart stand out blackly. I see Sykes bending over something near the wall. It is the body of the boy with the pansy.

“Gone, Sykes?”

The sergeant straightens, turns sharply, and his face has a harsh, starved look. He is very tired.

“Yes, sir.”

“Any idea what our losses are?”

“We have had a hundred and thirteen cases through, sir.”

“How many killed? Heard?”

“I had a word with their S.-M. About thirty, sir. And not one ruddy German did they see.”

I stand looking at the dead boy. We have had about a hundred and fifty casualties, occupied an abandoned trench for twenty minutes, and killed nothing. The profit and loss account makes bad reading. And how silly it all seems!

Hallard comes out in his shirt sleeves, with a cigarette stuck in his mordant mouth, and his eyes like two hard marbles. He sniffs the morning air, for its freshness is very sweet after hours of fug in the aid-post.

“By God, Stephen, someone made a summer morning, but it was not man. Sykes!”

“Yes, sir?”

“Could you possibly raise a cup of tea?”

“I’ve got a dixie on, sir.”

“Great man.”

I realize that we have had no food since a meat-tea of yesterday, but for the moment I am beyond hunger. Moreover, we have one last duty to perform, to go through the pockets of the dead lad with the pansy, make a list of his poor possessions, and tie them up in a bag of lint. We have him carried into the aid-post. Sergeant Sykes empties all the dead man’s pockets and spreads the things on a stretcher, a cigarette-case, a pencil, a little tin of throat lozenges, a wrist-watch, a wallet in which we find two ten-franc notes and three five-franc notes, and an envelope containing a piece of dark hair and three photos of a girl. There are some letters, too, in his inner pocket. I pick the faded flower from his tunic, drop it into one of the envelopes, and call the items over while Hallard jots them down.

“This is going to help the war a hell of a lot, Stephen. Sykes, you and the men must be pretty done up. Get them back to headquarters and let ’em sleep.”

“Very good, sir.”

“You’ve done damned well.”

Sykes’s fierce, tired face suddenly softens.

“Thank you, sir. I feel I could sleep the clock round.”

“That’s the idea.”

The thing that strikes me as most strange about this summer morning is that no one in authority comes near us from the battalion whose wounded we have dressed. I can only suppose that gloom and depression prevail, and yet I do feel that the hard-bitten colonel might have walked along to inquire about the men who have been hit. The raid may have been a tragic fiasco, and there is nothing for authority to preen itself about, but that was not the fault of the men. Even Gains, their M.O., remains invisible. I hear later that this bloody adventure was ordered by higher authority, even against the advice of that hard-bitten C.O., and that they are all savage and sick about it, and sulking in their dug-outs.

It is ten o’clock when Hallard and I leave the empty aid-post and make our way back down the shallow communication trench to the lane leading to Country Cottage. It is a perfect morning, but to my tired eyes too full of glare. I am conscious of the beginnings of a cracking headache, and this green world seems to flicker. I look at Hallard, and notice that his face is all lined and bleached.

“Feel a bit swimmy in the head, Steevie?”

“Yes.”

“Same here.”

When we come to the willows and the group of little white houses we find Fairfax and Gibbs waiting for us in the road. Fairfax looks at us both like a father. He tells us afterwards that we were all eyes, and that both of us walked like men who were mildly drunk.

“Well done, you two. The bus is waiting.”

Gibbs puts an arm round me.

“Twelve hours’ sleep for you, my child.”

We get into a waiting ambulance and are driven to Hameau Farm. A cold lunch is on the mess table, but I have too much of a head to eat anything. I go upstairs to that quiet room at the end of the corridor, pull my clothes off, draw the curtains, and get into bed. I do not remember anything more. Every cell in me is crying out for sleep.

XVI

THE war goes on.

We have left Hameau Farm and the land of poplars and of flat fields for chalkland country that makes me think of Wiltshire. Before leaving Hameau we heard the mines go up at Messines, and I think it must have made any human sound seem so small and irrelevant that I have not felt moved to produce infantile noises on paper. I suspect that I should soon come to despise the craft of the scribbler. It must be so full of poses and struggles for effect, the search for the precious word and phrase, and of an insincere urge to be original and different.

How many of us would be celebrities did we love our precious selves with a passion which could inspire us to transcend other men's scorn? But it is heavy summer in this Somme country, and we dwellers amid the ruins left by the Germans after their retreat to the Hindenburg Line, know that this interlude is to be transient. The Division is in training for the ultimate offensive, and every morning in a field across the road I see boys in their grey shirts and brown trousers being perfected in bayonet fighting. They are taught to jab at the throat and to utter fierce cries, and look savage, and the grunts and the snarls that they utter come strangely and unconvincingly from those almost childish faces. I wonder if they will snarl like that at the German infantry when they meet them in wrecked trenches and shell-holes.

This ruined village lies in a deep valley between the chalk hills, like a ship wallowing in a great trough of the sea and waiting for the hill above to roll down upon it. It is hot and shadeless and dusty. All the trees have been felled, and even the fruit bushes in the garden at the back of the derelict brewery we occupy have been pulled up by the roots. The German is a thorough person even in his devastation. He has not left a single roof in the village, nor a fruit tree that has not been mutilated.

One has too much time here to think. We know that what we have suffered is a mere phlebotomy compared with the major operation that is before us. I am a man; I have a reputation for sang-froid, and I cultivate an air of casual humour, but this mask is a thing of gossamer. I have to struggle in secret with moods of profound depression.

Hallard feels as I do.

"I wish they would shove us in and have done with it."

I can see him sitting in the mess and writing those long letters daily to his

wife and kids. You would not think that his calm, sardonic face concealed so much of the little secret tortures of suspense. With a bright facetiousness we ask each other domestic questions.

“How’s Irene to-day?”

“And how’s Joan Phyllis?”

Mary’s letters are both a source of comfort and of provocation. I am beginning to think of leave. Dare one think too much of such human things? Ten days of escape, and then the coming back. There are times when I feel that I do not want to go home until the war is over.

We have lost Bamborough Brown. He has been posted to a battalion as its M.O.

We have another officer in place of Brown, a dry, quiet, responsible lad named Harker, a junior partner in a Hampshire practice. Harker is something of an archæologist, and he spends some of his time hunting hint tools. How much more pleasant this war might be if we were armed with *coups de poing*.

The great offensive at Ypres is in full blast. The weather has broken; it has begun to rain and it continues to rain. We hear rumours of our people being badly bogged up there. But why go on fighting in a bog? Our strategy seems so bovine and inflexible. We hear tales told of the German pillboxes. They are spoken of as though the Boche had sprung a surprise upon us. Did our directing brain know of their existence? If not, how lamentable! This sort of thing does not reinforce one’s confidence in authority. Fritz was more wise with his reinforced concrete.

August, and we are still here in this land of silvery hills and of devastation. The Division is supposed to be in high fettle, and straining at the leash. Are there any men who are passionately eager for the bloody business, and who lust to go out and kill? I suppose such men exist, to whom the killing of Germans is a sacred duty. “The only good Hun is a dead Hun.” Do the German women say the same of us?

All of us attend the Divisional Boxing Competition. Our General gives away the prizes, and makes an abrupt and a characteristic speech.

“I have seen some hard hitting, and punishment given and taken in right sporting spirit. I have no doubt that when we go in to play that other game the men of the 81st will show the same spirit.”

I often wonder whether there is any background to the minds of those who control our fate. Are they just simple and kindly gentlemen, the products of our public schools, naïvely conventional, and convinced that the uttering of a few platitudes can meet all crises? Do they blunder blandly and complacently into a cataclysm that is beyond their comprehension? Or are they more subtle than they seem, and planning above our poor heads some profound and splendid

finale?

I do so yearn to believe in the brains of our supermen. If there is vision in their planning, then all these poor dead will not feel bitter in their graves. Also, I might feel more resigned to the making of my own sacrifice, should it so happen.

Our own Zeus is very active on this quiet sector. We see quite a lot of Colonel Cleek. He comes to dine with us, but I always feel that he has a third and sinister eye in the back of his head, and that his cold friendliness is not to be trusted. Also, I suspect that he has not forgotten that muddy incident near "Jock's Grave," and that he will not be merciful to me should the occasion serve him.

Men in authority should not be capable of spite.

But then, human nature is a morass in which all philosophies are doomed to stick and flounder. Our prejudices are stronger than our principles. Often they are our principles.

Fairfax has had another row with Cleek. We do not know what has caused it, and he does not tell us, so I can only infer that it has been a kind of Lion and Unicorn affair. I can think of nothing that Cleek can condemn in our unit, but when a man of authority of Cleek's calibre desires to find fault he has only to assert that what is round should be square.

But Fairfax does confide in Hallard and me to the extent of telling us that he suspects Cleek of plotting to break him.

"I think I can prophesy that when our big show is staged this ambulance will have the post of honour. To put it vulgarly, Cleek means to rub our noses in it, and if there should be any breakdown in the evacuation of wounded, I shall be the man to be tarred and feathered."

What a pleasant prospect! To have the Huns shelling us in front, and an old goat like Cleek waiting to butt us in the back! But we can assure Fairfax that we shall do all that is humanly possible to prevent any such breakdown.

We rather suspect Cleek of having a pup of his own whom he wishes to put in Fairfax's place.

September, serene, still weather, cold in the early morning almost to the point of frost.

We are for it at last.

A Division that has been badly knocked about up at Ypres is relieving us here.

We are going north by train. We pass through Hazebrouck, and are pushed out at what appears to be an improvised station in the midst of nowhere. We can hear the rumble and bumping of guns. Our destination is “Heliotrope Camp.” What a name, and who was the fanciful soul who christened it? We find Heliotrope Camp in what had once been a grass field, but is now a mangy expanse of boot-worn turf and caked mud. We are quartered in a collection of huts that have been tarred, and have a black and funereal look.

Fairfax tells me that he is taking a Ford ambulance to report at Divisional Headquarters at Ypres. Would I care to go with him? I am glad to go. This Flemish country is inexpressibly dreary, in spite of the September sunlight. Even beyond the shelled zone it has a shabby, soiled look, and it fills one with strange sadness. Ahead of us we see avenues of dead and mutilated trees, and the remnants of buildings. The place stinks of the war, and crawls with khaki. We pass horse-lines, transport parks, dumps, hutments. The jagged outline of Ypres rises against a faint blue sky. It makes one think, somehow, of a mouthful of decayed and broken teeth.

We pass through the ruined town. One sees nothing but grotesque fragments of wall, banks of rubble, and the black hollows of slimy cellars. The place fills me with a horrid feeling of foreboding. Ambulances and transports pass us. We cross the Grand Place with its now historic ruins, but they do not interest me. We arrive at the ramparts by the Menin Gate, and beyond it stretches a vista of unimaginable ruin. Just dirty road and devastation, and anonymous men in brown.

Divisional Headquarters is tucked away in the ramparts. Fairfax gets out, and I follow him, but not to headquarters. I am moved to wander along the road, and here I am confronted by one of those strange coincidences that clash like cymbals. I see a man coming towards me, an R.A.M.C. sergeant. I look at him and he looks at me. His swarthy, fierce face is somehow familiar, and suddenly I remember him. He was one of Frost’s sergeants at Gallipoli.

“Sergeant Fosdyke?”

He remembers me.

“Fancy meeting you, sir.”

“Is the old crowd near here?”

“Up the road, sir.”

“Colonel Frost?”

“Yes, sir. Our div. is just coming out. The 81st is relieving us.”

“Well, I’m damned, that’s my crowd! How’s the war going? Judging by the noise our guns are making we must be winning it.”

The face of this man becomes suddenly evil with anger. His thin lips writhe, his nostrils expand, his eyes are fierce.

“We’re not winning the war, sir, we’re losing it.”

I am a little shocked by his fierce candour.

“O, no, Fosdyke, surely not?”

But he is in no mood to respect either places or persons. I realize that the truth is blazing in him with a ferocity that is beyond control. It is not merely that he has been through hell, and been scared by the horror of it. His rage is against the cynical stupidity of the pseudo-supermen who sit upon Olympus.

“I don’t care if all the red hats hear what I say. They are losing the war for us, sir. Send us to fight in a bloody bog against concrete and machine-guns. Do you know what our Div.’s losses were in the last show? Four thousand men or so, and what did we get for it? About an acre of bog-holes.”

He pauses, draws breath through fierce, whistling nostrils, and lets fly again like some furious Hebrew prophet.

“No brains. Just butting like bullocks at a gate. They boast at home of our having guns wheel to wheel, but our ruddy generals are wrecking the British army. Just getting it butchered. All the blood and guts of the country being blown into shell holes. I tell you they are losing the war for us, sir. What about next year? Where will they get the men to fight like the men they have wasted here, and on the Somme? It’s just bloody, brainless butchery.”

I am conscious of a kind of secret and profound dismay, for I feel that I am listening to a man who is inspired beyond fear to utter the truth terribly. I do not doubt what he says. His rage is not hysteria. And suddenly I am aware of his face growing tired and old, and pinched like the face of a corpse.

“Sorry, sir. Afraid I’ve gone off the deep end.”

“Don’t be sorry, Fosdyke. I understand what’s boiling in you. And one’s so helpless.”

Almost his eyes become gentle.

“I’m glad of that, sir. Most officers seem to drug themselves. They’ll neither see nor think. I know Colonel Frost would be glad to see you.”

“How far?”

“Three minutes, sir. I’ll show you.”

“I’m waiting for my C.O. but I think I can manage three minutes.”

I find Frost sitting alone in a steel shelter tucked into the basement of a ruined house. His face shocks me; it looks so grey and old and grave. He does not recognize me for a moment, but when he does he gives me a little, frosty gleam of the eyes. Almost, he strikes me as being beyond smiling.

“Brent! Well I’m damned!”

He makes me sit down and offers me a whisky, but I explain that I have only a few minutes and that I have rushed along just to see him.

“What do you belong to, Stephen?”

“An ambulance of the 81st.”

Frost looks at me sharply.

“Why, you’re relieving us. Are you the forward ambulance?”

“I don’t know, sir, yet.”

“If so you will be here.”

He sniffs, just as he used to do, and taps on the table with the fingers of one hand, a new trick.

“You are coming in to attack?”

“I suppose so, sir. What are the conditions like?”

“O, pretty sticky. I lost two officers, one killed, one wounded. Our bearers had a perfectly bloody time. Eight men to a stretcher sometimes.”

I am aware of an unpleasant, sinking feeling in my stomach. Frost does not let himself go like Fosdyke, but I suspect that he has no illusions.

“Well, if we have to take over from you, sir, I shall see you again. My C.O.’s at Divisional Headquarters. I came with him. I mustn’t keep him waiting.”

Frost gives me a kind look.

“What sort of C.O. Stephen?”

“Oh, a white man, the sort of man you can work for.”

“Good.”

I salute him and smile, though my smile is like crackle ice, and I make my way back along that desolate road to the Menin Gate.

Fairfax appears just as I reach the Ford ambulance. His face is infinitely serious.

“It’s as I thought, Stephen; we are to have the job.”

I try to confront the occasion with a bright face, but my tummy feels down in my boots.

“Well, that’s that, sir.”

But I am thinking of the casualties in Frost’s ambulance: one officer dead, one wounded.

Two days later. It is raining when Fairfax, Hallard and I go up to the dressing-station on the Menin Road to be shown the posts we are to take over. I can still see Frost buttoning up his raincoat and adjusting his box-respirator as he talks to Fairfax. Frost is taking us round himself; it is the sort of thing he would do.

“I haven’t seen anything of your A.D.M.S., Fairfax.”

“No?”

Frost and Fairfax are liking each other, and as they go on ahead I hear them talking intimately.

“I shouldn’t risk more of your officers than you can help up at the posts. It’s pretty sticky. Does your A.D.M.S. know anything, or does he just adhere to a chair in his own office?”

“Rather adhesive.”

“I wonder what his operation orders will be like? Unless a man goes and looks at things for himself he can land you in no end of a mess. Our man sees everything.”

We come to that salubrious spot called Hell Fire Corner, and take to a duckboard track. It is supposed to be a quiet day, and the desolation is supreme, nothing but wreckage and shell-holes, miles of muddy craters lying lip to lip. Most of them are full of muddy water, and without the wooden track it would be impossible to traverse this infernal country. I see nothing but an expanse of yellow-brown soil that seems to merge into the grey sky. Strange desolation. No human figure is visible, though thousands upon thousands are secreted up yonder in the pock-marked and seamed earth. We four men appear to be the only living creatures in the landscape. The horror of the place seems to eat into one’s bones and belly.

Hallard is ahead of me, and he turns and shows me that sardonic smile.

“Strange sort of place to choose for a battle, old man.”

“Isn’t it a case of, ‘We’re not to ask them why. We’re only damned sheep to do and die’?”

Hallard walks on.

“I suppose all the wounded have to be humped for miles down this wooden tapeworm.”

“I suppose so.”

We see fountains of yellow mud spurting regularly in the near distance. The damned things seem very near the duckboard track, but Frost does not hesitate. He knows the lie of the land. I hear him say that Jerry is searching for one of our batteries. Are there guns up here in this morass, and how the devil did they get them here? We continue. I wish to God the Huns would cease from sending over those plunging shells. They are bursting about a hundred yards from the track, and the great geysers seem to soar fifty feet up into the air. I hear Frost say that the beastly things are pretty harmless, as the burst is smothered by mud, but that if we hear him shout and go flat, we are to flop on our bellies *instantly*. I get a glimpse of part of the battery, a gun wallowing in a sandbagged shell-hole. Not a man is to be seen. They are all under cover.

We go on and past those damned yellow geysers. I want to duck every time

one goes up. We top a low ridge and see more desolation, an expanse of shell-holes, lip to lip. Here and there a grey, box-like structure squats in the mud, captured German pillboxes. We diverge towards one, and a duckboard track leads to it. The place is known as Bourne End, and it is one of our posts. We find one of Frost's officers, and half a dozen men there. The pillbox has a fearsome crack in it, the result of a direct hit, and from our point of view the door faces the wrong way. It has been protected by a wall of sandbags, but the flimsy barrier is not very reassuring.

The officer is a stranger to me. I notice that his eyes are red, and that he has not shaved for a couple of days.

"Anything doing to-day, Petter?"

"No, very quiet, sir. He put a few gas shells round us after breakfast. Rations came up rather muddy. The carriers fell into a shell-hole."

We have another post farther on the right, and Frost gets us going again. This second post is even more like a little hell than its predecessor. It lies in a swampy hollow surrounded by dead and mutilated trees, and has the appearance of a huge brick oven, or a vaulted cellar that has been pushed up into the air by an upheaval of the ground. A bank of earth shelters it on the German side. All sorts of debris is littered about, and I notice what appears to be a bloated body half-submerged in one of the sjudges of water.

Frost warns us.

"Mind where you step. Two dead Huns are buried in front of the door. I put my foot in one's belly the last time I was up here."

The officer here is also a stranger to me, a mild-faced, frightened little man in spectacles, whose breeches are caked with mud. But he beams upon us; we are God's messengers heralding a relief. He points out to us a narrow, muddy track that once was a road, and tells us that our bearers who collect from the right-hand aid-post on this sector, use that track. This post is known as "The Bakery."

We turn back, with the little man in spectacles still beaming on us, and I hear Frost say to Fairfax, "Looks rather like a frightened fœtus, doesn't he? But he is a great little man in a sticky corner."

The Menin Road dressing-station is ours. Our Division has taken over the Lancashire line on a brigade front. One of our other brigades is to attack on the third day; the remaining brigade is to go through and exploit a successful advance.

September's fine spell has passed. The weather is filthy. What a life it must be for the infantry, lying out in shell-holes!

Cleek has come in to interview Fairfax. I happen to be dressing some wounded, and I can hear their voices in the orderly-room, which is next door. I hear Cleek say, "You have been over your ground, Fairfax? Good. I want experienced officers in charge of the collecting posts. I shall assign you advanced posts for use when the line goes forward." He sounds very throaty and pompous, like a man issuing decreets, and who would regard any question as an impertinence.

"You will get my operation orders to-night. Of course you will go over the ground again with your officers before zero hour."

When Cleek has departed Fairfax calls me out into the road. He is looking fierce.

"Do you know what we are up against, Stephen?"

"What, sir?"

"Neither Cleek nor Bliss has been over the ground. He is going to issue orders from a chair. It's absolutely damnable."

"It doesn't seem possible, sir."

"But that's the situation. I am to be responsible. One more point. I am to send two of my most experienced officers up. I shall send Gibbs and either you or Hallard. I want you and Hallard to toss or cut cards for it."

"Very good, sir."

"That's fair to both of you."

"It couldn't be fairer, sir. Shall I tell Hallard, or will you?"

"Oh, I'll tell him."

Hallard and I tempt our fortune after tea. Gibbs holds the cards, and it is agreed that we shall each draw one, and that he who draws the lower of the two shall go up to the collecting post. Hallard draws first. His card is the nine of clubs and he lays it on the mess table. It is rather damnable that one should be in competition with one's friend, but for the moment the self in me is dominant. I draw a card, turn it over, and display the Queen of Hearts.

I see Hallard's eyes half close. Then he looks straight at me across the table and smiles.

"The lady fancies you, Steevie. Good luck."

I am conscious of a spasm of shame.

"No, I'll take it on, old man. You have more to think of than I have."

"Rats! You'll do nothing of the sort. Nothing could be fairer."

Cleek's operation orders have come in. Fairfax brings them into the mess, and spreads the typed sheets on the table. He begins to read them over to himself, and I see his eyes grow big and his forehead run into creases.

"Good God!"

We sit and wait upon his words.

“He has given us map references for the advanced collecting posts.”

“Map references!”

“Incredible but true. Map references in a sea of shell-holes.”

We sit and look at each other. We have to relieve Frost’s officers and men at Bourne End and the Bakery to-morrow. Fairfax is profoundly and obviously worried.

“I wonder if I ought to protest? But going to headquarters above one’s senior—— No, I suppose it can’t be done.”

Hallard makes the obvious suggestion.

“Hadn’t we better go and scout around for Cleek’s map references, and see what sort of blind man’s hole he has pricked on the map?”

Fairfax agrees. After all, one must be sure of one’s ground before registering any protest.

“We’ll go up at dawn to-morrow and reconnoitre. You had better come with me, Hallard, and you, Gibbs.”

I ask to join them.

“Isn’t it just as well I should know the ground, in case——?”

Fairfax nods at me, and goes on reading the operation orders.

“Two officers of the 203 F.A. are to reinforce us at headquarters with bearer sections. Wait a moment. Well, I’m damned. Cleek has disposed of one more bearer section than we possess.”

He pushes the papers across to me, and after reading the orders carefully I see that it is so.

“Incredible carelessness.”

“Shall you notify him, sir?”

Fairfax looks grim.

“No; we’ll keep that up our sleeves. I’ll use one of the 203 Section’s. Let somebody stew.”

We go up before dawn next morning with the sergeants who will be in charge of the bearers. Our party is rather a large one, and we string ourselves out, Fairfax and Hallard leading. The morning is strangely still, and a slight drizzle is falling. Our first quest is for Cleek’s map reference in advance of Bourne End. We find ourselves stodging about between immense shell-holes, and realize that Cleek’s advanced post is nothing but an imaginary point in a wilderness of mud and water.

We get down into a more or less dry shell-hole, and confer. I remark that we shall have to be in touch with the M.O.s of the battalions in the line, and that we might ignore Cleek’s references, and if there is an advance, take over

the aid-posts as collecting stations. Fairfax jumps at the idea.

“That’s a brain-wave, Stephen. It will solve the whole problem. Our bearers will have some idea where the new posts are, and so will the battalion bearers. Come on, while peace reigns.”

We stodge about through this desolation, getting muddied up to the knees. We are somewhat unsure of the position of our lines, and no enterprising soul is taking a country walk as we are. Hallard slips half into a shell-hole and curses. I suppose we are making too much noise, and also bunching up together, for a head in a tin hat pops up out of the ground.

“What the hell do you think you are doing here? You’ll be spotted, and we shall get the consequences. And who the hell are you, anyway?”

Fairfax laughs and explains.

“We are looking for the battalion aid-post on the left of this sector.”

“This is it.”

We wade forward and descend into two large shell-holes that have been joined together and partly roofed with ground-sheets. The M.O. apologizes when he sees Fairfax’s badges.

“Sorry, sir.”

But he is able to help us considerably. He is an old hand, and when we explain the problem he approves of my solution, and points out a narrow track which his bearers have used and marked with discarded rifles stuck butts upward in the mud. We thank him, and hurry back to Bourne End, and making our way to the Bakery, get Frost’s officer, who has not yet been relieved, to give us a guide to the other aid-post. He comes with us himself, and guides us to the second post which is a shallow recess dug into a bank and roofed on one side with rubber sheets.

I am appalled at the idea of having to deal with wounded in such a mud-hole, but we realize that our one aim must be to get the wounded back out of this morass to some place where they can be properly dressed. But we have seen the ground and made our plans, and eliminated Cleek’s map references. Also, Frost’s man warns us that this peaceful interlude will not last, and that if we are wise we shall leg it homewards for all we are worth.

We do so. We are all of us hot and sweating after stodging and floundering about among the shell-holes, and when we reach the duckboard track we do not dally, but we are fated to sweat more furiously and poignantly before we escape from this devil’s country. Fritz elects to shell the duckboard track, and for half an hour we have to abandon it and take refuge in shell-holes. My shirt seems to be sticking to my back, and my knees are all mud. Sweat is running down from under my tin hat, and my heart is thumping like a hammer. Hallard and I are together, and I see he has a mud splash on one cheek.

“Nice morning walk, Stephen.”

He shows his teeth in a smile that is like a snarl.

“Rum idea, isn’t it, civilization coming to this.”

“Well, we are all in it up to the neck.”

“By God, I wish we had old Cleek here.”

The shelling dies away, and we emerge like rabbits and leg it down the track. Sections of it have been blown away, and we have to slither round the ruins of shell-holes. I fall back and walk with Sergeant Simpson, who looks pretty done. He is an oldish man for this game, and rather short in the neck.

“I could do with a bath and some breakfast, Simpson.”

I see that he is almost too distressed to answer me, but we are close to the road now, and our morning’s agony is nearly over, but I am thinking of the men who will have to carry other men, perhaps at night, across this damnable morass. It has been done before and will be done again; but, truly, man—plain man—is a marvellous creature.

XVII

LOOKING back upon the happenings of the last few days I am moved to set them down in the simplest of language, for such language alone, like a few broken words spoken over a grave, can draw the breath of sincerity. We want neither the parson nor the poet here. The conscious cleverness of the professional scribbler would be an impertinence, and disgust one.

Hallard is dead.

But let me get back to the present tense. It seems to help me to put things down on paper.

Our Division, after lying out for two days in the rain in shell-holes, attacks. To be able to attack after two days of such misery is a tribute to any troops. It is quite a long time before wounded begin to come down to us at the main dressing-station, and they are muddied to the eyes. We pick up bits of gossip from them, and divine that the attack has not progressed too well, and that the awful conditions of the ground have held our men up.

Fairfax takes Carless and his batman with him and goes up to the posts to see how the scheme of evacuation is working. Hallard is at the Bakery, Gibbs at Bourne End. Fairfax returns with the look of a man who has been badly frightened. He is splashed with mud, and very tired. He has left Carless to help Gibbs, who appears to be feeling most of the pressure.

Fairfax calls me into the mess.

“Get me a drink, Steevie, old man.”

I pour him out a whisky and make it a strong one.

“Things pretty bad up there?”

“Indescribable. Some of our bearers are pretty done up already. It’s an awful business getting stretcher cases back. I shall have to ask Cleek for extra bearers.”

“Anyone hit?”

“Yes, little Sissons has been killed, and Corporal Wood wounded. He’s coming down now.”

Fairfax gulps whisky. I have never seen him so distressed, and my compassion is roused.

“Shall I draft a letter to Cleek?”

“Wait a moment, Stephen. I think I’ll wait upon circumstances. Luckily there has not been much shelling round our posts, and so far as I can judge the advanced post won’t be needed. Our men only advanced about two hundred yards. They got farther, but a counter-attack pushed them back. Most of their rifles were clogged with mud. Same with the Lewis guns.”

Fairfax is in the act of finishing his whisky when a muddy and exhausted corporal bursts into the mess. He is in a highly emotional state, and shaking with fear and exhaustion.

“Captain Hallard’s been killed, sir.”

I am conscious of a profound silence, a kind of voiceless horror. I watch Fairfax put his glass down on the table, and into my mind has flashed the inevitable significance of this tragic news. Hallard dead! And on me will fall the duty of going up to replace my dead friend. I feel my belly dropping, and my mouth going dry.

Fairfax grabs the bottle and pours the man out a drink.

“Toss that down, Sparks. What happened?”

“He began shelling round our post, sir, and got one of our stretcher squads just when it was coming in. Captain Hallard rushed out to help.”

“Another shell?”

“Yes, sir.”

The man drinks with a sort of shuddering gulp.

“Blew Captain Hallard’s head off, sir. Monk and Barker were killed, and Lamb and Higson wounded. The battalion sent a runner down to say they have scores of wounded lying in shell-holes. Sergeant Frost’s almost off his head, sir. I thought I ought to come back and report.”

Fairfax looks at the man.

“I see. Things a bit disorganized?”

“Absolutely, sir. Captain Hallard being killed——”

Fairfax’s eyes meet mine. My tongue seems stuck in my mouth. My knees are shaking, and my stomach feels like a cold wet rag.

“I had better go up, sir.”

“Will you, Stephen?”

“Yes, sir, and take up some reserve bearers. It sounds as though the evacuation has broken down. I’ll try and put things straight.”

He gives me a look of gratitude.

“Thank you, Stephen.”

But this tragedy is to claim yet another actor on the stage. I am standing outside the mess telling Corporal Sparks to warn Sergeant Simpson to get his

men together while I go and collect a few things from my dug-out when I see Colonel Cleek coming from the direction of the orderly room. The look of the man warns me of further storm and stress. I salute him, and he nods at me smilelessly.

“Colonel Fairfax in the mess, Captain Brent?”

“Yes, sir.”

Cleek storms in with a face like a blizzard and slams the flimsy door, and I am moved to loiter there for a few seconds and listen, for what concerns Fairfax concerns me. I hear Cleek’s voice furiously scolding like the voice of some angry termagant. There has been a complaint from the Brigade that the wounded are not being got away. A scandalous business.

“Your officers are not doing their duty, Fairfax.”

I wait for Fairfax’s reply. His voice is under control, deliberate and courteous.

“I resent that accusation, sir. One of them has done his duty so completely that he is dead.”

But Cleek is an angry and scared official, and not a man. He is afraid of the scandal settling upon his shoulders.

“That means that one of the posts is without an officer.”

“Brent is going up at once.”

“These wounded must be got away, Fairfax. You understand? I hold you responsible. If I receive any further complaint it will be a very serious matter for you.”

“I quite realize my responsibility, sir.”

“You had better go up yourself and supervise the evacuation. And you will report to me when all the wounded have been dealt with.”

“Very good, sir.”

I am seething. Why doesn’t the old swine go up himself and see and help? He has no idea of the conditions up there. Apparently he does not care a damn about men like Hallard being killed provided that his own reputation does not suffer. I rush off to my dug-out and put on my trench coat and cram a pipe, tobacco, matches and some chocolate into my pockets. Finch’s dutch-cheese face appears in the doorway.

“Are we taking your valise, sir?”

His enthusiasm touches me.

“No, Finch, no luxuries like that. If you can manage an extra blanket and ground sheet. And fill a flask with whisky.”

“It’s terrible about Captain Hallard, sir. The men are glad you are going up, sir. They feel all right with you.”

Glad to be going up! I am thinking of poor Hallard's premonitions, and his sardonic, quiet courage. A headless Hallard! The horror seems to stick in my consciousness. I find Simpson parading the men in the road. Harker and the two 203 F.A. men are acting merely as evacuating officers, as all the wounded are being rushed to the Corps Main Dressing Station between Ypres and Poperinghe. I see Fairfax emerging from his dug-out in his muddy trench coat. He is coming up with us.

I cross over to him.

"You're not coming, sir?"

"Orders, Stephen. We're both in the mud and the soup."

"But you've only just been up, sir."

"After what has been said to me I could walk to Berlin."

Some of our motor-ambulances have pushed up as far as Hell Fire Corner and are being loaded there. We pass squads of our bearers coming down the track, and stand aside to let them pass. They are covered with mud, and look pinched and dead-eyed. It is an exhausting business. Fairfax speaks to them as they pass, and they brighten to his words. Half-way up we come upon a party who have floundered into a shell-hole with stretcher and case. We help them out, Corporal Block getting down into the shell-hole and taking one end of the stretcher. I am going to be glad of Block.

The Bakery! Shelling has ceased for a while, but the place looks more horrible and desolate than ever. The post is surrounded with wounded, some lying on stretchers and waiting to be got away. I have a glimpse of other bodies ranged in a row, the toes of their boots sticking up. Dead men. I fancy that I can distinguish a headless body at the far end of the row. Hallard! Just an anonymous piece of flesh. But the business is obvious and urgent. We set half our bearers on the job of clearing these stretcher-cases away along the duckboard track. There are a certain number of walking wounded who can tramp down with them. I take Block and the rest of the bearers and go forward to try and collect the cases who are supposed to be lying out in shell-holes. After stodging and floundering through the mud I manage to find a regimental M.O. He and the battalion bearers have collected a number of wounded in two large craters. He is almost voiceless with suppressed fear and fatigue.

"Thank God you chaps have come along. I've been cursed to hell for not getting the men down. What's happened?"

"Rather a sticky business at our post. One officer there was killed. If you ask me I think the people to be cursed are those who staged this show here."

"My God, yes. But why doesn't somebody in authority say so?"

We load up our stretchers and go back. I help with one of the stretchers, and I soon discover that though the carry is not a long one, the strain on the

men is tremendous. I find that Fairfax has managed to get most of the stretcher-cases away, but it is obvious to us both that we need more bearers. If possible it should be arranged that they could work in relays, with a rest, sleep, dry socks, and a hot meal in between.

“Why not go back, sir, now, and see Cleek? The other ambulances can spare us men.”

“It seems a dastardly business leaving you, Stephen.”

“I shall be all right, sir.”

The Germans are counter-attacking. The whole world seems to be plastered with shells. I am at work in the post dressing the worst of the cases as they come down. This infernal noise is shattering. Shells keep exploding in the mud all round us, and screaming overhead, but we are not hit.

How long has this been going on? I don't know.

I feel that if this shelling continues much longer, I shall lose control of myself and scream.

There is a horrible crash just outside this pile of old bricks. The whole place shakes; chunks of earth hurtle in. I hear shrieks and moans, and for the moment fear paralyses me. I realize that a shell must have burst among the stretcher-cases lying outside. I know that I ought to go out; I can't go out. I must go out.

I hear Corporal Block's voice. He is cursing. “Blast your bloody eyes. Come back here, damn you, and help. What are you, a lot of filthy cowards?”

Those fierce words might have been addressed to me. I go out, and see a sight I shall never forget. I will not attempt to describe it. Some of our bearers who were waiting have been hit, as well as the poor devils who were lying on stretchers. But what is far more ugly is the stampeding of some of our men. They have bolted along the duckboard track, or what is left of it.

I rush after them, cursing. It is a relief to curse. I see that most of them are men from the other ambulance.

“Come back, damn you. Haven't you any guts?”

They hesitate, eye me sullenly, and begin to return.

“I know it's no bloody children's party, but we've got our job to do.”

I feel better. I see Block grinning at me.

“That's the stuff to give 'em, sir.”

God bless Corporal Block.

There is another lull, and I seize the opportunity to work outside and to clear up the shambles. At last we seem to be coping with the flow of wounded, and the pool of pain lying about the Bakery grows less and less. I hear Finch's voices saying, “Here's a cup of tea, sir.”

A cup of tea! How the devil did he manage to produce it? But both cup and tea are actual, and so are the biscuits he serves me on the lid of a tin.

“Good man, Finch. You’ve saved my life.”

He grins at me lovingly. Are these men loving me? Do they suspect how near I was to screaming?

But my hands are filthy. I cannot touch the biscuits with my bloody fingers.

“It can’t be done, Finch.”

“Do you mind if I pop ’em in, sir? I’ve ’ad a wash in a shell-hole.”

I laugh, and sit down on somebody’s tin hat in the mud while he feeds me, for suddenly I have a furious hunger and I do not mind his fingers.

“We couldn’t get along without you, sir.”

“Don’t make a song about me, Finch.”

I go on working, feeling refreshed, and with my tail up. I am bending over a stretcher-case when I hear a voice addressing me, a pleasant, friendly voice.

“Are you the medical officer in charge here?”

I turn and look up and find an elderly officer standing behind me. He has a fresh, handsome face, a grizzled moustache, steady blue eyes. I recognize Colonel Gretton, the Divisional G.S.O.1.

I salute him.

“Yes, sir.”

“Things have been a little sticky here.”

“Very sticky, sir, but I think we have nearly cleared our cases.”

He looks at me kindly and shrewdly.

“Just a moment, Captain——”

“Brent, sir.”

“I want a word or two.”

I accompany him to the back of the Bakery where the dead are lying.

“I hear that one of your officers has been killed.”

I glance half-furtively at a headless body.

“Yes, he’s there, sir. My particular friend.”

Colonel Gretton prods the ground with the ash stick he is carrying.

“I suppose your C.O. has been up here?”

“O, yes, sir, we came up together to put things straight after Hallard had been killed.”

“Evacuation going smoothly now?”

“I think so, sir. It’s not easy in the mud.”

“Hardly. I want you to answer this question carefully. Has either Colonel

Cleek or his D.A.D.M.S. been up here?"

"No, sir."

"Never?"

"No, sir; he has never been near us. We were given map references in operation orders."

He gives me a quick, shrewd stare.

"And what was their exact significance?"

"Just points on the map, sir. It wasn't possible to use them. We had arranged to take over the aid-posts as collecting posts, had it been necessary."

"Just points on the map, Captain Brent. Was there anything to distinguish them, mark their existence?"

"Nothing but shell-holes, sir."

He gives me another shrewd look, and I feel that I have helped to cook Cleek's goose for him. I more than suspect that our G.S.O.1 has come up to investigate and to report upon the situation. And, probably, Colonel Cleek has been attempting to offer up Fairfax as a victim.

Colonel Gretton surveys the horizon, prods the earth with his stick, smiles at me suddenly, and turns to go.

"I am glad you have cleared up the situation, Captain Brent. I shall be able to report on it favourably, and you."

"Thank you, sir."

I salute him, and he gives me a paternal wave of the hand.

"Good-bye, Brent."

"Good-bye, sir."

Two of the 203 F.A. officers, and fresh bearers come up to reinforce us. We officers have to crowd into the Bakery, and having scrounged some spades we make the men dig themselves rabbit-scratches in the bank.

I am feeling done-up. I have been up here a night and a day. I have had poor Hallard's body sent down. We could not find the head.

Somehow I am beginning to feel the shock of his death more now. The reaction is upon me. I am all jumps and ready to shake at nothing. Self-control is like putting oneself on the rack. I haven't had any sleep yet.

If there is much more shelling I shall break down and disgrace myself. I feel I must do something. I take Block and Finch and flounder up to the nearest aid-post to see if they are getting many casualties in. No, things are quiet.

Sergeant Simpson and Block come up to me.

“You ought to get some sleep, sir.”

“Sleep!”

“Yes, sir. Finch has managed a bed.”

They do not touch me, but I feel the goodwill and the kindness of these two men compelling me towards that vaulted shelter. I go in. I see Finch, and a clean stretcher laid out, with a blanket covering it. The two other officers are squatting on boxes. Finch makes me lie down. He unlaces and pulls off my muddy field-boots, and covers me with the blanket. I have a strange feeling of being a child in the hands of a strong, and capable nurse.

“That’s it. You have a nap, sir.”

I must have slept for hours, like a drugged creature, and I wake to find Fairfax sitting on a box beside my stretcher bed. I sit up, and he puts out a big hand and gently pushes me back. I realize that I feel giddy and rotten, and that my head is aching.

“Sorry, sir. I shall be all right in a minute.”

He sits and looks at me with strange affection. We are alone together.

“What time is it?”

“To you, to-morrow morning, Stephen. I am taking you back with me. You have done more than enough.”

A feeling of infinite relief descends on me. Does he understand that I am near breaking-point? I know, somehow, that he does, and that my poor silly pride is saved.

Finch comes in with a cup of tea, and some bully beef and bread.

“’Ere’s your breakfast, sir.”

He gets behind me, and props me up while I eat and drink. Fairfax lights a cigarette and speaks to Finch.

“We are going down in ten minutes, Finch.”

“What about Simpson and Block and the rest, sir?”

“They are coming, too. The 203 people can carry on. You have all done damned well.”

Finch goes out, and I manage to smile at Fairfax.

“Any news of Cleek?”

“You’ve stymied him, Stephen, and given me the hole. Do you think I don’t realize what I owe to you?”

“O, rot, sir.”

“It’s not rot, Stephen; it’s just the truth.”

I don't remember very much of that long tramp back to the Menin Road and peace. I was feeling too done up and seedy and stodging along in a kind of haze, but within me fluttered a little flame of exultation. Half-way down Fairfax gave me whisky from his flask, and I believe that at one place where the track had gone Finch took me on his back and carried me for fifty yards.

Peace. How strange that this rabbit-warren beside a devastated road should suggest peace! I have a queer feeling that somehow I have returned to headquarters as a little muddy hero. I, a hero! All I know is that Finch shinned on ahead of us, and when I got in there was a hot bath ready in my dug-out. I strip and get into the green canvas trough and soap myself and feel good. I am ready for more sleep. Finch has made my bed, and he appears with a hot-water bottle clasped to his tummy. It is an equipment bottle.

This little man's devoted service touches me.

"Look here, Finch, you go and doss down. You must be done to the world."

"I'm feeling champion, sir."

I get into bed, and the Mess orderly pulls the blanket aside and puts his head in.

"There's steak and onions for lunch, sir. Can you manage some?"

"Steak and onions! How did you manage it, Field?"

"Special occasion, sir. And tinned peaches and milk."

I have finished my lunch when Fairfax comes in. He sits down on the box beside my bed.

"You'll stay there, Stephen, till to-morrow morning. How's the head?"

"O, better now, sir."

"Here's some news to sleep on. The G.S.O.1 dropped in this morning. I am to put up the officer in charge of the Bakery for a decoration."

"That ought to be poor Hallard, sir."

Fairfax lays his hand on my shoulder.

"Yes, that hurt me badly, old man. It has hurt both of us. I have written to his wife."

"A pretty horrible thing to have to do."

"Yes."

"I can see him now writing one of those daily letters. He drew the unlucky card."

"Hold on, Stephen. It doesn't do to think too much. You go to sleep. The Division is coming out of the line to-morrow. We're going back to quiet country."

"Any idea what we have lost, sir?"

“Between three and four thousand killed and wounded.”

“And captured a small strip of mud.”

“A very small strip, Stephen.”

He leaves me, and I lie and think of Sergeant Fosdyke’s furious outburst.

Is he right? Are we losing the war because our supermen are not superlative as to brains?

XVIII

WE are out in rest; Fairfax has gone on leave, and I am in command.

Authority has its advantages. Man is a good beast, but a noisy one, and must bray his soul out under one's window, but I have so arranged things that Gibbs and I are sleeping at the farm where we mess, some three hundred yards from the farm where the unit is quartered. I am glad of Gibby and his stout, serene humour, for the death of Hallard is still with me, and though this war makes one incredibly callous, Hallard was a man to whom one could uncover one's soul. Again, the ego, and its passion for self-expression! But there are other things here to tranquillize one, a most splendid avenue of white poplars suddenly and strangely yellow under autumn skies, and framing in the distance the mysterious hill of Cassel. It is like looking along the nave of a cathedral and into a gilded choir whose great east window is filled with grey-blue glass.

It is a dim place this farm, full of burrowing passages and low rooms and country smells. We are supposed to be here for a month while the Division is rested and reinforced before being fed again into the sausage-machine. It is possible that the weather and winter may intervene and prevent our supermen from making war in that slough of despond. Most devoutly do I pray that the mud may prove too potent even for their saurian strategy.

There is a big, bouncing girl here to whom Finch is making furious love. They are as square as spades these Flemings, and not too friendly. I meet Monsieur occasionally as I go to and fro, and I salute him, and he gives me a grunt or a snarl. He is rather like a black boar, and his wife suggests a large white sow. I have seen her working a churn in the yard, and the calves of her legs come down to her slippers. As objects in the landscape they are in complete contrast to the towering, stately trees.

I am full of the thought of leave. It should be good and complete and satisfying after the ordeal I have gone through. Perhaps I am too pleased with myself, yet ready to admit how narrow is the margin between what is called heroism and absolute poltroonery. I seem to have escaped the latter by the breadth of a hair.

Life is packed with surprises.

There's a platitude for you!

I am in our farm just before tea when one of the orderly-room clerks brings me a message.

"The A.D.M.S., sir."

“Colonel Cleek?”

“Yes, sir, at headquarters.”

What can Cleek want with us? Just an official visit, I suppose, but I have not seen the man since we left the Menin Road. I put on my cap and British-warm, and half-way down the lane I see Cleek coming towards me. His shoulders are down, and his lean white face seems to poke forward out of the dusk. A melancholy figure this, somehow sick and shaken, and shorn of all its bristling assurance.

I salute him, and wonder at his dead eyes.

“Afternoon, Brent. I am just paying you a last visit. I’m afraid I’m a sick man.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

He looks at me almost like a beaten dog, to whom even a gesture of sympathy may suggest a kick.

“Yes, sciatica.”

We stand for a moment in that dim, wet lane, and I am wondering whether his nerve trouble is actual or a beneficent excuse. He gives me a queer, slanting look; his chin is a little tremulous, and suddenly the essential weakness of the man is revealed to me. He is starving for sympathy, and is so shamelessly greedy for it that he can even come to me and whimper. It seems incredible that any man can be so sorry for himself, so incapable of self-analysis, so crudely childish.

“Yes, they have broken me, Brent.”

He blurts out the truth like some poor simpleton who is ready to uncover himself to the first creature whom he meets in the village.

“Most unfair. Prejudice. I had a cabal against me. No account taken of abnormal conditions.”

I do not know what to say to him. Has the man no pride, no perceptions? Has he never suspected how we cursed him for leaving us to confront those same abnormal conditions? I can only suppose that Cleek is more emotional than he appears, and since sanity is—in a sense—the control of emotion, Cleek is not quite sane.

It is not a text-book case, and I suppose the manifestations of a wounded self-regard can be classed as a war-neurosis, but this man’s shameless touting for sympathy is almost prostitution.

“Won’t you come and have some tea, sir?”

“No, Brent, thank you. I have to go on and say good-bye to Clayton of the 3rd. You see, they may break me, but I am not ashamed, not ashamed.”

That is the most peculiar part of his reaction. I gather that there is a

difference between humiliation and shame, and that though his lean self-love shivers in the wind, he is convinced that he is the victim of a conspiracy. I walk back with him to headquarters, and all the way he bleats to me about being “Stellenbosched” as he calls it.

“I am going down sick to-morrow after more than thirty years’ service. Of course, you temporaries, Brent, can’t be expected to appreciate my feelings.”

His bleatings are beginning to bore me. And I had regarded this man as a sinister and dangerous enemy! He had the power to make life unpleasant for his subordinates, and now he is no more than a petulant and innocuous pantaloon. Almost I look for the dewdrop at the end of his long nose. He is still talking about himself and his disaster when I walk across the farmyard with him and see him into his Ford ambulance.

“I ought to have asserted myself more, Brent. No; I don’t know who my successor is. I can’t say that I envy him the job.”

My last glimpse of Cleek is of a soul-sick man huddled up beside the driver of the Ford. I salute him for the last time, and he gives me a wintry little smile and a stilted jerk of the hand. Exit Colonel Cleek! I walk back through the autumn dusk to the mess, and surprise Finch and the fat girl busy behind a door. I assume blindness, and go in to find Gibbs and Carless—who have been shopping at Cassel—eating buttered toast.

I tell them the news, and Gibbs’s large, pink face remains incredulous.

“I can imagine a man being caught with his breeches down, Steevie, but do you mean to say Cleek took his down to you? Tell me another.”

I make sure of the last piece of toast.

“It was an official leave-taking, my dear, and I happen to be C.O.”

“Well, I’m damned! What’s the camouflage, senility?”

“No, sciatica.”

“I should like to have filled up his tally for him.”

I pour myself out tea.

“No, you wouldn’t have done anything of the kind, Gibbie. You’re much too soft-hearted.”

“Shut up. You’ll soon be calling me a sentimentalist.”

“So we are, all of us, in bits. The man was pathetic.”

“O, get along with you!”

“Yes, just because he didn’t seem to realize how filthily pathetic he was.”

The new A.D.M.S. has arrived. His name is Colonel Rankin, and he is a Territorial, which should be helpful.

Fairfax has obtained an extension of leave, and I am still acting C.O. Responsibility has its advantages, for as C.O. I can arrange my day a little as I please. It is very extraordinary how one adapts oneself to communal coercion, but I am afraid my conviction is that in the Communist State the only pleasant position must be that of commissar.

Russia is letting us down very badly.

The new A.D.M.S. walks into our orderly-room one morning. He is a red-headed, well-set-up man in the early forties with a ruddy, vital face, and brown eyes that have tawny lights in them. I like him immediately. We are all standing, and with a smile he tells the staff to carry on, and then suggests that I take him round our quarters.

“You are Captain Brent?”

“Yes, sir.”

He is a man who combines authority with friendliness. Also, I feel that there will be no finking and sitting about in chairs on the part of this red-headed, virile person. I show him our brigade hospital, and the men’s quarters, and our transport lines, horses and wagons. He has a quick eye for everything. He examines our harness, and compliments the Transport S.-M. on the condition of the horses.

“Someone here, Brent, is a little horse proud.”

I tell him that Fairfax is a hunting man and knowledgeable about horses.

“And you, Brent?”

I smile at him.

“I am not much of a horseman, sir.”

He returns my smile, and I discover a little gleam of humour in his brown eyes.

“By the way, I have some news for you. Rather a pleasant introduction, Brent. Your M.C. has come through.”

I am conscious of flushing.

“Has it, sir?”

“Don’t say that it is more than you deserve!”

“I won’t, sir! But when one thinks of what the infantry have to suffer——”

“Dressing wounded under shell fire is a pretty nasty test of one’s courage. No adventitious excitement.”

“Except funk, sir.”

Again he smiles at me. I like this man; he is human, and not a creature of red tape.

“You can put up the ribbon, Brent. I believe the official letter is in your orderly-room. I left it on the table.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Going on leave soon?”

“I hope so, when Colonel Fairfax comes back.”

“Well, it ought to be arranged for you to be invested. Buckingham Palace, Brent.”

He is wearing the ribbon of the D.S.O., and I glance at it.

“Is it a very formal affair, sir?”

“No, quite easy. I rather expect that when this war is over it may become the fashion to scoff at these so-called baubles.”

“Do you think so, sir?”

“Yes, because the scoffers will be the gentlemen who were *embusqué* under beds.”

When I return to the orderly-room after seeing off Colonel Rankin I become aware of what I might describe as a conspiracy of clerkly silence. The orderly-room sergeant stands up, and lays a letter on the table. He has a pawky, sly look.

“Official communication for you, sir.”

I assume an air of casualness. I know that the news must be out *sub rosa*. I read the letter, and pass it back to him.

“Quite pleasant news.”

“I suppose it should be put ‘in orders,’ sir?”

“I suppose so.”

“The men will be very pleased, sir.”

“Will they? It’s very good of them.”

I detect one of the clerks making secret signs to somebody and, turning, discover Finch’s red face at the window. It disappears with grinning abruptness. Dinners are about to be served, and I see the men collecting with plates and mess-tins in the farmyard. I hear someone shouting.

“Come on, C Section, come on, the boys.”

I feel suddenly shy, and wise as to what is brewing. Informal demonstrations are not encouraged in the army. Sergeant-Major Jones comes into the orderly-room. He salutes me and tries to suppress a smirk.

“Captain Carless should be inspecting dinners, sir, but the orderly sergeant

can't find him."

"I'll take dinners, Sergeant-Major."

I go to the door of the farmhouse, and find the whole of C Section crowding round the doorway as though the occasion was somehow theirs. Men of the other sections are massing behind them. I see Finch in the front row. He waves a tin plate in the air.

"Congratulations, sir."

I stand and smile.

"Three cheers for Captain Brent, M.C., and for good old C Section."

Really, this sort of thing ought not to happen. It is too like vaudeville, or one's maiden aunt's idea of the family hero. I look at these men waving their plates, and cheering, and I realize that this show does mean something to them, and to me. I assume an air of severity and fix my gaze on Finch.

"Finch, you'll have seven days C.B. for this."

"Righto, sir. But I ain't the only one."

A voice says, "Seven days C.B. for the whole of C Section."

I laugh, and try not to look embarrassed.

"I think I'll let you all off that. I might even persuade the S.-M. to issue a double rum ration. All the same, I do thank you. I'm not much good at making speeches, any more than I am on a horse."

There is a roar of laughter at this, but it is friendly laughter.

I hear a voice say, "It ain't so much the breeches as the pills that are inside 'em."

I pretend not to hear the remark, but turn to S.-M. Jones.

"I think we'll take dinner, Sergeant-Major, and adjourn to the cookhouse."

He salutes me.

"Very good, sir."

I have written the news to Mary.

We have a lurid night in the mess. In the afternoon I took an ambulance to Cassel with Bond the Quartermaster, and managed to buy a barrel of beer for the men and two bottles of champagne for ourselves. There are only five of us but we make a great deal of noise. We even persuade Monsieur and Madame to come in and drink healths in whisky. I have invited the sergeants across for a drink, and about nine o'clock they arrive at the farmhouse door. Glasses are produced and Gibbs pours out the whisky. I notice that someone is being kept rather in the background, as though his state necessitated repression. It is Mills, the transport sergeant. He refuses to be repressed.

“Three cheers for the Old Man.”

Someone points out to him that Colonel Fairfax is not present.

“Tell me another. I ain’t so blind as all that. Three cheers for the Old Man.”

We drink Fairfax’s health in his absence, and again Mills gives tongue.

“Three cheers for the Little Un.”

That, I suppose, is me. Anyhow, my health is drunk, and S.-M. Jones makes a short, set speech which is interrupted by Mills falling over something in the yard while attempting a *pas seul*. He has cut his head against a bucket that has been left there, and has to be taken back to headquarters to have his head dressed by Gibbs. The incident suggests to me that discipline has been sufficiently and humanly relaxed for the evening, and I feel suddenly very sober and rather tired.

Carless suggests opening another bottle of whisky. He has become utterly sentimental and is singing of love.

“Have another spot, daddy, M.C.”

I say that I am going to bed.

“O, rot, daddy. Why this thusness?”

“I have had enough,” say I, and Carless mocks me.

“I’ll tell you what M.C. stands for in your case, daddy. Mono-gam-atic celibate. Tootle-oo. Just one last spot.”

But I want to be alone for a while, and my bedroom is the only place where I can be alone. I leave Carless turning the handle of the gramophone and putting on a record. More noise. I feel suddenly irritable, and I snap at Carless.

“O, shut the damned thing up. We’ve had our evening.”

He looks at me like a shocked child.

“You are peevish to-night, daddy. You shouldn’t be. War, women and wine.”

“Rot,” say I, “bed’s worth all three of them after a night like this.”

I am going on leave. I think no words describe the feeling so well as Tommy’s saying, “My pack felt like a balloon.”

Is my head a little swollen? Perhaps. Captain Brent, M.C., with that mauve and white ribbon on his tunic, and within him a consciousness of mean impulses transcended, and some measure of manhood founded against fear. But there are also the sweet fears of this homeward adventure. Will my leave be stopped at the last moment? Will all leave be stopped? Will there be a fog in the Channel, or a scare because mines or a submarine have broken loose? One is as full of thrills and tremors as a boy home from school for the first time—

some sensitive kid who has endured his first term's bullying.

But my passage home is serene. I find Mary amid the crowd at Victoria. She looks at my face and she looks at my ribbon, and her eyes are very dear to me.

"O, Stephen!"

We exchange that rather conventional English kiss, and I pat her shoulder.

"How's Joan Phyllis?"

"Splendid."

"That's good. I'm glad we're not going to an hotel. Nothing like home."

I tuck my arm under hers, and forget I have been lousy and mud-caked and as frightened as some poor monkey.

"I've never seen you look so well, Mary."

She blushes.

"I'm glad, dear."

"Food's been a little difficult, hasn't it?"

"O, we manage. But I'm so terribly proud of that, Stephen."

"Which."

She reaches across and touches the ribbon with the fingers of her left hand.

But, if there is anything of the prig in me or the swollen-headed little hero, my small daughter's reaction to my reappearance should chasten it. We go upstairs and she is lifted out of her cot, and having stared at me with saucer-blue eyes, she breaks into angry howlings. What is this strange face that is being pushed up close to hers, this unsolicited, intimate, male jowl? She fights, and goes red and crinkled, and is full of wet rebellion, and I am both amused, and perhaps faintly piqued. This is yet another thing that this damned war does to us, makes us strangers to our children.

Mary has to soothe our small daughter.

"There, there."

And I add, "Did a nasty, strange man want to kiss you? Diddums then!"

Mary reproves me.

"Don't mock, dear."

I realize that part of my ten days' leave will be spent in making friends with my small daughter.

Most unexpected people congratulate me, but when I think of those two dead friends, poor Roger and Hallard, I am in no mood to swagger.

I meet Guthrie and he presents me with the usual gaff.

"Congratulations, Brent. 'Pon my soul, I didn't think you had it in you."

“Neither did I. You see, one can’t help these things sometimes. They arrive, like indigestion.”

He pushes his silly face nearer, and I smell his breath.

“Tell me, my dear fellow, how does it happen to doctors? I was under the impression that doctors aren’t exposed to danger.”

“No, it comes to them unasked for.”

“But you don’t get shelled.”

“O, no. We work in comfortable little places miles behind the line, and we change for dinner each night.”

He looks at me mistrustfully.

“Oh, I see. It is what one would call official recognition.”

“Yes, just that. I happened to treat our Divisional general for hæmorrhoids, and rather successfully so.”

Fatuous ass! But even old Randall does not appreciate the realities of the life out there. He seems to think that we function in palatial super dug-outs, supplied with hot water and electric light. When I tell him that we have to go floundering about like scavengers, collecting the war’s debris out of mud-holes, he looks shocked.

“But surely, Stephen, that is not fitting work for a medical man. Rather a waste of time and skill.”

When I point out to him that modern war is just an insane waste of valuable lives he seems to assume that I am stressing a platitude. He says, “One cannot make war without sacrifices.”

O, damn it, why don’t people understand!

One day gone. Two days gone. Three days. The irresponsible home-from-school feeling has passed. I am beginning to count the remaining days, to cling to them, to feel passionately and bitterly rebellious.

O God! I don’t want to go back.

Everything holds me here. I feel torn and frightened. I lie awake at night after Mary has fallen asleep, and think and tremble.

Why did I come home? The poignancy of these home associations rends one’s vitals. I cannot get Hallard’s death out of my head. Almost, it is a horrible obsession. That headless body! And he, too, would have been coming on leave, to spend ten wounded days looking at the faces of the creatures who were dear to him. It frightens me.

My investiture? Almost I am beginning to hate this damned ribbon. And

then I hear that there will be no official function during my spell of leave, or perhaps the occasion will be too crowded to include me. I am glad. I do not want to leave this place, even for a few hours, until I have to go back to the blood and sand.

The fifth day. Half my leave gone.

I have made friends with my small daughter. That is to say she does not burst into tears when I twiddle my fingers at her and make friendly noises. She stares at me and deigns to smile. We even become conversational. She says something that sounds like goo-goo, and I goo-goo back like a cuckoo clock. I try taking her on my knee and bouncing her up and down. She approves of the business and chuckles and bubbles down her bib.

I tell her solemnly that Miss Joan Phyllis Brent should have grown beyond such a habit.

The Ponsonbys ask us to dinner. We go, and find the Rector there, and old Sir Carnaby Cross. The two Ponsonby wenches are away helping to organize and officer the W.A.A.C.s.

When we men are left alone with our coffee and cigars old Ponsonby and Sir C. C. begin to talk the usual "club nonsense" about the war. They are so final; they appear to possess, or assume that they possess, intimate information upon all that is happening overseas. They discuss the Ypres show, and agree that the German casualties must have been catastrophic.

I am silent. These old men exasperate me. They are so much more bellicose and cocksure than the men in the trenches. I suppose my silence intrigues them, and perhaps out of politeness they ask me for my opinion.

I am feeling sardonic.

"An obscure medical officer is not supposed to have opinions."

Old Cross scowls at me.

"But, good God, man, you must get the feel of things. Even the German wounded must show signs of inanition."

That is a good word. I say that I have seen about six German wounded, and they did not exhibit any signs of starvation.

Old Ponsonby is kind and patronizing. "I don't suppose you doctors, Brent, are in such close contact with the firing line as the combatants. Back at your casualty stations the war has been cleaned up, and polished."

This assumption of superior wisdom annoys me. I am beginning to feel mischievous and suddenly I repeat to them Sergeant Fosdyke's tirade, but without the bloodies. I become aware of a shocked and hostile silence. Old Cross knocks the ash off his cigar and snubs me.

“That’s rank defeatism, Captain Brent. Under the Defence of the Realm Act, such language might land you in Queer Street. And it isn’t quite soldierly.”

I smile at him blandly.

“I was only quoting a plain, ignorant, soldier to you, sir.”

“Soldier! The fellow ought to have been shot.”

Old Ponsonby pushes his chair back. The atmosphere has become turgid and difficult.

“I think we might join the ladies.”

In the hall the rector takes me by the arm. He has the troubled, kindly face of a man whose Faith has been questioned.

“You don’t really think that, Brent.”

“What, sir?”

“That we are losing the war.”

I hesitate for a moment and then I say, “It seems to me to be a question whether we shall bleed to death before we win it.”

He smiles and pats me on the shoulder.

“O, you fellows over there only see fragments of the great picture. Yours must be a depressing job.”

“Well, I see plenty of fragments, sir.”

Six days gone.

Seven days gone.

I notice a change in my wife. We began my leave by being irresponsibly happy. There were wonderful days before us. Then our happiness became a bright cheerfulness, an avoidance of anything like silence.

But we have moments of silence now, and suddenly we seem to feel guilty, and look at each other or avoid looking at each other, and begin to chatter. I tell Mary all the funny things I can think of about the war, and assure her that we can laugh over there. One must laugh or go potty. But I understand that she is watching the days escape from us, just as I am. Her love for me is a strange and wonderful thing, and my love for her seems the one virtue that matters. I have no desire to rush up to town and play the Carless.

O God! I don’t want to go back.

But if I must go back, let it happen quickly now. These last few days are so bitter. Almost I wish that they were over. Why should all the profoundly sacred things in my life be torn up by the roots? I feel that Mary is suffering much as I am, and that it will be a relief to her when I am gone.

The garden is looking wintry.

I find strange solace in the presence of my small daughter. I like to play with her, and watch her crawling about the floor. She is so supremely innocent. We are on excellent terms now, and I can make funny faces at her, and she chuckles.

May there be no war in her world.

Mary insists that a certain noise Joan Phyllis had produced is undoubtedly "Daddy." I am a little sceptical, but let us cherish the illusion.

The last night. We lie awake for a long time, talking. Crude sex does not enter into a relationship that is built up of understanding and profound compassion. She strokes my head, and I feel like a child in the arms of its mother.

"Is it so very hard, Stephen?"

"If you care as I do, it is harder for you than for me."

"O, no, dear."

"I know what happens; you don't. I'm glad of that. The one consolation is that this war should make all future wars unbelievable."

"Do you think so, dear?"

"If I didn't I think I would suggest lethal gas for the whole of humanity."

The last morning. I have to catch a very early train in order to make contact at Victoria. I rise in the winter darkness and look out of the window. The world is very black and still. I go to the bathroom and shave, and while I am there I hear Mary go downstairs. She is getting our breakfast ready herself.

O, this brittle brightness, the poor little platitudes we utter! I feel I cannot bear much more of it. I want to be out of this dear house and alone with my silly self in the darkness.

We go up to the nursery. I pick Joan Phyllis out of her cot and kiss her, and make cheerful noises. She chuckles at me. I push her into Mary's arms, and kiss my wife.

“Good-bye, dear. Don't come down. Stay here.”

I leave her with the child, go down, put on my coat and cap, and sling my haversack over my shoulder. The street door is still locked and bolted. I open it carefully, and stand listening. There is not a sound.

I close the door gently upon the silent house, and walk quickly down the dark and empty street.

O, damn everything!

I have a feeling that I shall not see my wife and child again.

XIX

BAWDY talk in the train. I am too close to a party of youngsters who are swapping the stories of their sex adventures while on leave. It disgusts me, and yet I know that this feeling of repulsion is rather fatuous and unsympathetic. These poor young devils are mad for life in the midst of death. It is natural that they should crave for every sort of sensation, and smear their faces with strawberry jam.

Has not a single one of them learnt to care otherwise?

It may be so, and all this bawdy talk is just camouflage. The real romance may be so passionate and precious that it can terrify. Also, is it not possible that my disgust may be due to secret jealousy?

There seems to be no more unsympathetic creature than the average R.T.O. The one I strike is a superfine person, a casual, painted lily.

“The 81st. O, yes, somewhere near Amiens.”

He despatches me to Abbeville, where I discover that the Division is still in the Ypres sector. I spend a dreary night at Abbeville, with memories of my previous sojourn there. I write a long letter to Mary.

Poperinghe. I am lucky. I run up against one of our ambulances that has been evacuating to a C.C.S., and I get on board.

“Same old place, Gunter.”

The orderly grins at me.

“Same old hole, sir.”

“Everybody O.K.?”

“Champion, sir.”

The Menin Road. I see the familiar faces, and know myself among friends. They are glad to see me, and God knows I am glad to see them. Gibbs picks me up and holds me over the Canadian stove.

“The infant has gained ten pounds in a week, sir.”

“That comes of a diet of medals. Did you see ‘Georgie,’ dadda?”

I pinch Gibbs’s nose and he puts me down on the mess table opposite Fairfax.

“Will you carve, or shall I, sir?”

Fairfax tickles me.

“Get up, Steevie, get up, man. This isn’t a fitting position for my second in command.”

We have two new officers, Captain Potter and Lieutenant Toogood, and they are introduced to me. Potter is a tall, shy, awkward lad wearing pince-nez, in appearance quite colourless and tame, but appearances, as they concern the war, are exceedingly fallacious. It has been my experience that your fine, handsome, upstanding fellow, who may cause the women to exclaim, “What a splendid soldier!” is frequently a funk, and in a tight corner completely useless. Toogood I cannot quite place. He, too, is rather colourless and mute, mouse-coloured as to hair, and suggesting a compact and soapy piety. Perhaps it is the name that produces the impression of piety. But my chief concern at the moment is to discover what the immediate future promises us in the way of perils. It is with secret relief that I hear that the front has become static, and submerged in mud and hibernation. Conditions are fairly quiet. The Bakery—a transfigured Bakery—is our one A.D.S., and Harker is up there in charge.

Fairfax takes me along after tea to his dug-out. I sit on a box, and he on his bed, and he talks to me like a father.

“As second in command, Stephen, I want you to act as adjutant, and help me at headquarters. You remember my saying that I was going to consider you, when the chance came. I have four young unmarried officers now, and I think it is up to them to take on the dirtier jobs.”

“Isn’t that rank favouritism, sir?”

“Call it that if you like. I had a talk to Rankin on this very subject yesterday. He agrees with me.”

“How do you like Rankin?”

“Tremendously. He’s so fair. He has been through the whole of the bloody business himself, and he knows.”

“Not like the old ladies of both sexes at home, who, never having seen a shell-hole, know so much more about the conditions here than we do.”

Fairfax crinkles up his eyes at me.

“Has leave made you ironic, Steevie?”

“A little.”

“Same here. But to return to our subject, let some of these youngsters who are more or less fresh to it take the risks. There is nothing for you to feel sensitive about. I’m in your debt, Stephen.”

“O, rot.”

“O, yes, I am. You pulled us out of an ugly mess up there. The whole unit knows it, and no one is going to grudge you the privilege of being something of a veteran.”

I look at him with affection.

“You can always use me when you want to. I mean it is rather a personal matter between us.”

“Thanks, Stephen.”

“To tell you the truth, I funk'd coming back. But I am feeling different about it now.”

How little we know out here. The club-prophets at home may move us to irony, but they do appear to gather information, false or otherwise, that is not revealed to us. Perhaps it is as well that we men in the arena should not hear what the wise ancients are saying to each other on their senatorial seats. That is Fairfax's opinion, for while on leave he has had the political and domestic curtain raised for him by the hand of a certain great gentleman who is the squire of Fairfax's village.

“The things I have heard, Stephen, make me realize that it may be wiser to keep the fighting man in muddy innocence. Intrigue, and cowardice, and muddle. I have been told some incredible things. If Tommy were disillusioned he might march home and do a little killing on the home front.”

I suppose it is so. But after the war shall we allow the hard and greedy old men to fool us? I hope not. It should be a different world. Or will our follies and our commercial greeds repeat themselves?

We do not even hear of the Cambrai show until after the bells have been rung somewhat prematurely in London. The accounts we do receive are garbled, or Motor Transport gossip. Apparently we brought off a fine, imaginative coup, but since we had insufficient reserves, the adventure became a piece of bluff, and the Germans called it. But why stage so brilliant a show knowing that it could not be developed and exploited? The ultimate fizzle has depressed us more than inaction would have done.

I suppose we must regard it as an experiment. Yet, why help to educate your enemy, and provide him with interesting material for improved retaliation?

We obscure doctors do agree in our mess that the great, basic reality of the situation bewilders us. Germany has been fighting France, Russia and England, and on the map the flags are in her favour. She has put out Russia, and swamped Rumania, Serbia and Belgium. She has had to bolster up her allies. She has been able to send divisions to the Italian front, and shock us with Caporetto. She has been blockaded by our fleet. How does she manage to do it? She must indeed be a wonderful nation. Decry the Germans as we may I have a bitter suspicion that they have put us to shame.

And why are we short of men? We have just heard that our divisions are each to be reduced by three battalions, because reinforcements are insufficient. Why? Is it due to wangling and muddle and political opportunism at home, or have our strategists bled England white? None of us can understand why the allied nations with all their immense reserves of material power have been balked and beaten by this amazing people. We used to think in our innocence that our new armies would crash through to the Rhine and now we seem no nearer victory. Indeed we appear to be farther from it than ever. Russia is out, and next spring we shall have dozens of German divisions who have been set free massed against us on the western front.

No imagination, is that our tragedy? No subtlety, no powers of adaptation. Muddy thinking, and battles staged in impossible bogs. Our strategists seem obsessed with the symbol of the human battering-ram. Is it that they were born under the sign of Aries, and have the heads of rams?

It depresses me profoundly.

I do not understand.

Understanding? Is that the mysterious constituent that the whole world lacks? To understand and to know, and so to eliminate fear. I can remember reading Wells's "Days of the Comet," and the significance of the picture enthalls me. If our muddled, prejudiced, fear-ridden minds could only be clarified by some whiff of psychic oxygen. Peace to-morrow, peace and infinite laughter. Men getting out of the trenches, and meeting with laughter and mutual compassion.

"Good God, what fools we have been! Now, we understand."

Yet, in craving for this spirit of understanding one receives shocks that make one realize the limitations of the professional mind, and how grossly obstructive the professional mentality can be. Discipline can become the ruthless cult of little objective things. Man is regarded as an automaton—a mechanism to be paraded and polished, and not as a poor, suffering, bewildered, sick yet somehow splendid soul.

This little incident is so illuminating.

It is a filthy day with slush everywhere, and a north-east wind blowing. About a hundred sick have come down from the line, and are paraded outside, waiting for the ambulances. The orderly sergeant puts his head into the orderly-room. I am in charge, for Fairfax and Gibbs have gone to tea with one of the other ambulances.

"Officer, sir, asking for the C.O."

"Who is it, Simpson?"

“Brass hat, I should think, sir, but he is wearing a tin hat and a raincoat.”

I hurry out and am confronted by a tall, hawk-faced, elderly man with a grizzled moustache and angry eyes. A younger man is standing beside him. I salute, for I divine authority and its A.D.C.

“Are you the officer in charge here?”

“Yes, sir.”

He looks at my ribbon.

“What name?”

“Captain Brent, sir. Colonel Fairfax happens to be out.”

He turns and scrutinizes the sick parade. I admit that it is not a stimulating sight. These poor devils have been bogged for days in trenches and shell-holes in this bitter weather, and they are a forlorn, depressed, mud-coloured crowd.

“What’s this exhibition, Captain Brent?”

“The brigade’s sick, sir, just down from the line.”

He looks at me fiercely.

“Good God, man, haven’t these men any soldierly spirit? They look like a crowd of tramps.”

“They are sick, sir. Most of them have temperatures.”

He turns again and surveys that disconsolate crowd standing amid the slush in the north-east wind.

“Sick! They look it. I am sorry to say they look it.”

I suppose he expects me to call the poor parade to attention, but my sympathies are with the men and not with this fierce old gentleman who has never spent five minutes in a shell-hole. Doesn’t he understand that there are limits to human endurance, and that even great Cæsar became a whimpering child when fever shook him? But the ambulances roll up, and with careful politeness I ask authority if I may be permitted to get the men away. I do not want to keep them shivering in this bitter wind.

He answers me with sarcasm.

“By all means, doctor. It is not a parade that provides me with pleasure. No soldierly spirit.”

He gives me a curt nod, like a fierce bird pecking at something, and as he stalks off, I hear him say to his aide. “Did you ever see a worse set of scallawags, So-and-so? And that is what we have to finish the war with.” I long to go after him and say, “Scallawags! Who put these men to rot and freeze in a bog? You and the likes of you. And when they are sick and broken you pour scorn on them. By God, I should like to stuff the whole of G.H.Q. in shell-holes for a week.”

Yes, if I were to say that would the Red Beast in him understand? Of

course not. I should be court-martialled, and be stuck like a silly, impertinent fly on a piece of flypaper.

I describe the incident to Fairfax, and he reminds me that criticism can be easy, and that this is the first occasion in history when men with the brains of colonels have been made responsible for controlling millions of men. I agree. But the vastness and complexity of modern war may appear more vast and complex than it really is. It seems to me to be like big business, and it strikes me that the Army Service Corps is the most efficient branch of the service because it is largely officered by men who understand their business. So we, too, the medical branch, are considerably efficient. It may be that our directing minds are those of charming country gentlemen who know something about horses and guns and wine, but who would be quite incapable of administering Harrod's or the Army and Navy Stores.

We are stuck in the mud. But why? I can imagine an intelligent housemaid visiting the Ypres salient, and after viewing its vast filthiness, inquiring why the war was not removed to some nice, tidy place where it would be possible to use a carpet-sweeper. Surely our tanks might have been employed as a multitude of carpet-sweepers? We showed our hand when we had too few cards in it, and should have held it for a royal flush.

This life of ours is, after all, a very parochial affair. We are a little community embedded in the body of this vast male mass, and our world is a circumscribed one. We pay visits and receive them, but our contacts are casual and not intimate. We see a little of the infantry and a little of the gunners and the R.E.s, but their lives are just as circumscribed as ours. Our interests are somewhat primitive and narrow: letters from home, parcels, latrine rumours, the adventure of going into the line or leaving it, excitement over the amenities of new billets, our interminable games of Bridge. My impression is that we are growing a very stupid and intellectually mud-stuck crowd. Medical shop is taboo, and we rarely discuss our work, perhaps because we are mere collectors of sick and wounded, and are not permitted to retain an interesting case. We do not know what happens to our cases after we have passed them on. We are, indeed, one part of the sausage machine. We do not read any books that matter, nor do we discuss the economic, the domestic significance of the war. Harker is the only officer who retains any intellectual interest in life, but when in the mess he happens to speak of the Mediterranean race, Carless asks him gaily, "What's that, Harker? A kind of dago?"

I can only conclude that when men are massed in herds they become like herds, to be provoked only by the feminine mind. I can suppose that this professional inertia is more or less universal, and that a Corps mess is just as bovine as we seem to be. Let a man betray brains or a temperament and he is

suspect.

But we do meet problems in psychology. I have just experienced one. I was detailed for duty at D.H.Q. for ten days while Bliss was on leave. Rankin was up the line, when a strange officer arrived as a reinforcement, one of those bulbous little men with a pompous but worried manner. I interviewed him, and he began by telling me that he was forty-one, and that he had come from Salonica, and that at Salonica no medical officer over forty was sent up the line.

This intrigued me, as he looked supremely fit and well larded.

“My C.O. is forty-five, and there are two officers in one of our other ambulances who are over forty. What’s the idea?”

He shuffled his feet and became throaty.

“It wasn’t supposed to be fair. One doesn’t react to the conditions. Besides, I’m married.”

“Same here.”

“And I have a child.”

“So have I.”

“But you are a headquarters wallah.”

This annoyed me. I told him to wait, and when Colonel Rankin returned, I passed the careful gentleman on to him. Rankin has a rather quick temper, and possibly my man of forty attempted to argue with him, but Rankin emerged from his sanctum with his tawny eyes rather bright.

“Captain Brent.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Post this officer to the 25th Leicesters, to relieve Captain Snell, who will return to his Field Ambulance.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Where are the Leicesters?”

“Out, in hutments, sir, I think, in Canooga Camp.”

“Very well. The Ford can take this officer and his kit to the Leicesters. Give him a letter to the C.O.”

Three days later I have returned to our headquarters and am at work in the orderly-room on some new instructions that have been issued to us, when Sergeant Simpson comes in to tell me that a medical officer is reporting sick. He has asked for the C.O., but Fairfax has gone to call on a friend at No. 59 C.C.S.

“Send him in, Simpson.”

My man from Salonica paddles in. I can only describe his walk as a kind of paddling movement. He is unshaven, tremulous, pinched and yellow, smothered up in his greatcoat, and at the first glance I diagnose him as a case of 'flu. He flops down on a bench against the wall, and begins to shake and bobble like a large baby.

"Hallo, what's the trouble?"

He rolls his head at me.

"I, I—can't stand it. I can't stand it. My nerves, yes, absolutely gone."

"What's been the matter? Where have you come from?"

"The camp."

"Canooga Camp?"

"Yes."

"Then the Leicesters haven't gone into the line yet?"

"No; but we were bombed last night. Horrible. I—can't—stand it."

"Any casualties?"

"No."

I understand what fear is, and how it can reduce one to mere quaking flesh, but never have I seen so lamentable and shameless an exhibition of unregenerate funk. The orderly-room sergeant and two clerks are present with us, and I turn and make a sign to them, and they leave their tables and go out.

"Does your C.O. know you have come to report sick?"

"No."

"Good God, man, do you mean to say you have sneaked off and left your unit just because a few bombs burst near the camp?"

But he is quite shameless, and I am trying to estimate how much mean cunning there is behind his quakings. Is the man playing a part?

"I simply can't stand it. I'm too old. I'm a sensitive fellow."

Am I his judge or keeper? I, too, have felt capable of any meanness in the extremity of fear, and I try to reason with him.

"We all get cold feet at times, you know. One can be quite honest about it. But, look here, you can't be sent back with nerves from a place like Canooga Camp. It seems to me you haven't even tried to face up to things."

"I can't help it. I'm too old."

"You mean, you won't try."

And suddenly he flares out into futile, spluttering anger.

"Damn it, and what's it to do with you. I suppose because you're wearing that bit of ribbon——"

I go and sit down at my table.

"I was only trying to help you. I can't deal with your case. It's pretty

serious. You will have to wait and see my C.O.”

He looks at me. His chin quivers. He bursts into tears.

“You’re all so hard. You don’t understand. I can’t, can’t control myself. Look at my hand.”

He holds out his right hand, and I observe its tremblings.

“I’m like that all over. I’m not fit for any sort of responsibility. Can’t you see?”

“Yes, I can see. I’m afraid you will have to wait until the C.O. comes back. You had better come to the mess.”

“Can’t I sit here? I can’t face people, I can’t, really.”

Nor do I want to drag this wretched member of my profession about in public, or to exhibit him to the men. I feel somehow that his shame is mine, and that but for the grace of God and another man’s understanding I might have exhibited myself like this stuttering, slobbering coward. Meanwhile, the orderly-room is ceasing to function, and we happen to be particularly busy.

I get up and go to the door, which is nothing but an army blanket.

“Look here, man, pull yourself together. My staff has to come in and work, but you can stay here till my C.O. turns up.”

I call the orderly-room staff in, and stroll across to the mess to see if Fairfax has returned. His ambulance rolls up just as I reach the door.

“What’s the trouble, Steevie?”

It is a jest between us that my face is a kind of human clock-dial to him.

“I have something of a problem for you, sir.”

We go into the mess where the solemn Toogood is censoring letters with meticulous care, and I explain the problem of the Salonica gentleman to Fairfax. I see his blue eyes grow prominent. Apparently he is much less moved to mercy than I am, perhaps because he is responsible for other men’s lives, and a shirker is a traitor to his fellows.

“Do you mean to say the man has left his unit without a word, and slunk away here to us?”

“That seems to be the situation.”

“It’s pretty damnable. I may have to pass this on to Rankin. Fetch the fellow across, Stephen.”

I go and collect the poor wretch, and introduce him into the mess. Fairfax is standing with his back to the stove and as I look at him I think how I might have felt had I been in “Salonica’s” shoes, scrutinized and judged by those fierce blue eyes. The fellow is still maintaining his tremors; even his round head seems to shake like some bulbous blossom on a stalk. He does not attempt to salute Fairfax.

“Do you mind if I sit down. I’m so shaky.”

Fairfax observes him in silence, and had I to bear such a scrutiny I should have felt the shame of it eating into the skin of my soul.

“So I see. Sit down. So you want to be relieved of all danger?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I—I can’t stand it.”

Never have I heard a man lashed as Fairfax lashes this spineless creature. He is quite merciless, and I am aware of Toogood’s mild, prim face looking frightened.

“Listen: I have to send my officers into danger, and you come and snivel and ask to be relieved from bearing what all decent men have to bear. Don’t you realize thatfunking means leaving some other man to do your job? Why should an officer with guts have to endure things while you sneak off into safety?”

He just sits and stares round-eyed at Fairfax. I see his fat chin bobbling up and down.

“You haven’t any right to insult me. I can’t help being hypersensitive.”

“Insult you! Is it possible to insult a man who is without shame? Haven’t you any pride?”

“You’ll excuse me, but I am a particularly proud person. You see, you don’t understand a neurosis like mine.”

“Oh, I’m not capable of making a diagnosis? Brent, do you mind ordering an ambulance. I had better take this officer to divisional headquarters. I think his case demands further investigation.”

Fairfax is absent less than an hour. He returns, minus the patient, and his face has recovered its kindness. I have kept tea waiting for him.

“Well, that’s that, Stephen.”

“Any result, sir?”

“We have sent the wretched beast down. What is the use of keeping a thing like that? I suppose he will be posted to some Base Hospital, and will describe to the nurses his remarkable experiences in the line.”

He helps himself to jam.

“If I had had my way I would have pushed his fat head into the thick of things, but Rankin overruled me. I suppose he is right. It isn’t fair to the fighting men to fob them off with rubbish like that.”

He is silent a moment, and then he turns kindly to Toogood.

“I’m sorry, Toogood, but I have orders to attach you to the Leicesters. You will have to report to their C.O. to-night.”

Poor Toogood's face falls into shocked flaccidity for a second or two. How I know that feeling! But he is a good lad, in spite of or perhaps because of his piety. He smiles.

"Shall I go and get my kit packed, sir?"

Fairfax nods at him.

"I'll ask for you back when some reinforcement becomes available, something with self-respect. You will be all right, Toogood."

"I hope so, sir."

Christmas.

Let us speak of cheerful things, even of the sentimental saunterings one allows oneself in day-dreams.

The macabre is not always with us, and were we shut up in a charnel-house we should find it necessary to play a merry tattoo on some ancient skull with a pair of fibulæ for drumsticks.

We are out of the line, and in a hamlet in the Hazebrouck area. It is a land of flat and gentle fields and towering poplars, and it is sufficient pleasure to me to look at these unscarred fields and unmaimed trees. White mists hang about, and going from my billet to the mess I see the sun or the moon through silver vapour. The landscape is soft and blurred, like a pastel.

Bond has foraged finely for Christmas. The men have beer, turkey and plum-pudding. Saintley, our highbrow among the sergeants, has organized a concert party, and I discover that my man Finch is a consummate clown. We have a roaring dinner in the mess, and then transfer ourselves to the barn and sit among the men. Gibbs is called on for a song, and brings down the shingles with "Annie Laurie."

On Boxing Day we have sports. There is an officers' race, and I win it by a yard from camel-backed Potter, much to Finch's satisfaction. Apparently he had five francs on me, which, I suppose, was purblind prejudice. In the tug of war C Section beats both A and B. The Transport put up a ridiculous point-to-point on draught horses, and the race is won by a corporal dressed in clothes borrowed from an old grandam who lives at the farm. He buckets around the course shouting, "Chase me. I'm not too old at seventy for un poo d'amoor."

Parcels, letters, saunterings into Hazebrouck to have tea at a café where a pretty girl takes round the cakes. She is known as Mademoiselle Peut-être, for, if asked the amorous and playful question, she winks, cocks her chin, and replies "Peut-être." Carless is always wanting Hazebrouck leave.

I don't think I have ever laughed so much for a week. Life seems good and secure to me for the moment, and I love this sleeping, winter landscape. Moreover, rumour has it that our division is not to return to the infernal Salient, and that new horizons and hazards lie before us. I am glad. I do not

know why, but with the coming of the new year a breath of hope seems to play amid the frosted hedges. 1918. Will this year see the end? We can see no end, but somehow there is born in me an edge of hope, like the crescent of the new moon hanging above the poplars.

XX

Is it the Spring in the air, or the coming offensive, but I have become almost a Carless? Or is it that I feel that I must dress to my ribbon, and to the reflection in the mirror of Ye Perfect Knight? We are wearing blue flashes on our left sleeves, with 202 worked in gold on them, and we carry a blue circle with a white centre on the backs of our tunic collars. This is the Divisional sign and symbol. Also, Gibbs and I have visited an Officers' Clothing Depot, and I have presented myself with a new tunic, a rather doggy cap, and a pair of the new peach-coloured corduroy riding-breeches.

Fairfax teases me about these breeches.

I don't mind being teased by Fairfax.

I notice that when I take a morning parade, the unit appears interested in my new breeches. I become rather self-conscious with regard to them, and confess to Finch that they strike me as being a little too baggy and colourful.

"We'll revert to the old ones, Finch."

Finch does not approve of my modesty.

"They're champion, sir. You look nobby in them."

Apparently he approves of my gay feathers, and his candour amuses me.

"Mr. Carless oughtn't to have it all his own way, sir. Besides, you're It. When an officer is a 'ard nut, sir, he can afford to look knutty."

The Division is moving south and into the mysterious sea of rumour. We hear that we are taking over more of the line from the French, in spite of the fact that our fighting strength has been reduced. We travel by train. The Somme country once more, but it is not the bleached, battle-worn, shabby landscape of the war. We detrain at a little wayside station in Santerre, and march in frosty, clear weather to the village of Beaucourt. It is rolling country, with great black bristling woods climbing the hills into a blue sky. The valleys are deep and secret. Fruit trees line the roads. There is exhilaration, a spaciousness in this landscape, but a spaciousness that includes secret vistas that are as fascinating as old wood-cuts.

I find myself billeted in what is known as the Little Château. It is a rather dim, secret, silent house, and I climb to my room up a queer, spiral iron staircase painted green. My window looks across a lane at the high grey wall and the trees of the Great Château. The trees are beeches, and grown in the French fashion, shooting with grey splendour straight up into the sky. Brigade Headquarters are housed in the Great Château. It is very French and weather-

worn and charming, with a long low façade of many windows and a grey roof. It possesses a little park, and an avenue that is so cunningly planted that it seems to stretch into infinite distances. Our headquarters and mess are in a farm, and Fairfax has his billet there.

This place delights me. It is just on the edge of the front, but it has escaped the war. Also, it is completely French, and retains the life of the world before the deluge. One can hear cattle lowing, and the ploughed fields are set with winter wheat, nor has there been death and disorder in its woods. They are somehow virginal and sweet, and assure one that with the Spring there will be violets and primroses to be found. It is high, proud, peasant country, and it soothes me.

A funny, crumpled old couple are in charge of the Little Château, kindly people. I suppose in peace time this place is a kind of Dower House. I go and sit by the stove with the old people in the evening and practise my French. I provide the old man with tobacco, and share the contents of a parcel with madame.

Finch, too, has become domesticated. I find him on his hands and knees, scrubbing the tiled hall for the old lady, and whistling the latest song, "Roses in Picardy." I know that the music is flagrantly sentimental, but it haunts me.

This war is like one of those fussy and formidable hostesses who cannot suffer their guests to stay put, but must be for ever stirring them up, especially so if you have discovered a comfortable corner and a sympathetic companion. Our ambulance is to open a hospital at Villers Bretonneux for the Divisional sick, and Potter and I are to be in charge. Damn it, I was writing up quite a lot of my journal in this Louis Quatorze atmosphere and Villers Bretonneux is so like one of those provincial towns that have gone musty.

We are to feed at the A.D.M.S.'s mess, and the hospital is to be improvised in an empty warehouse. I am lucky in my billet, a single-storied cottage occupied by an old weaver and his wife, tucked away behind a little courtyard that is partly garden. My bed is a dream, and this war makes one a connoisseur of beds, if not of bedfellows.

I am becoming quite pally with Colonel Rankin. Our colours are complementary, and I find that he has a mind that has refused to submerge itself in army orders. We go for long walks together, and he confesses to me that he is profoundly anxious as to the future. It is estimated that the Germans have been able to transfer forty or fifty divisions from the Russian front, and

that a furious offensive is inevitable. Obviously it is their plan to smash the French or the British before the Americans can be counted upon seriously as to training or numbers.

But surely the offensive has always failed?

“Yes, Brent, but Fritz is a cunning old devil. He tried out a new offensive method in Russia, and if he tries it on us and in overwhelming strength, it may be a close thing.”

Again I say that I cannot understand how we and the French, who outnumber Germany in population, should find ourselves numerically inferior after Germany has been fighting the whole world for nearly four years. We must have wasted our substance and our opportunities.

“We have had to spread ourselves so much. Palestine and Mesopotamia, and Salonica. There is the Navy, and munitions.”

I argue that Germany must have been as hard put to it as we have been. She has had to bolster up allies, improvise, adapt, feed herself on her own tail, and yet in this fourth year of the war she can bring superior forces against us.

“I don’t understand it, sir. Why can’t we get the men?”

“I can give you one reason, Brent. Ever visited a Labour Camp out here?”

“No, sir.”

“I’ll take you with me some day when I have to do an official sorting of rubbish in the attempt to find a few possible A1’s.”

“Is it as bad as that, sir?”

“Incredibly bad. The last time I had to comb out such a camp I examined several hundred men and found just one solitary A man, and when I marked him up for the line he burst into tears.”

“You really think our national physique is part of the trouble?”

“Yes, that and wangling and official cowardice at home. I’ll swear I could get two million more men out of England if I were given a free hand.”

But I cannot convince myself that our comparative failure in this war can be explained so simply as this. There is nothing wrong with our courage, and in this war brains and character are of more importance than brawn. It continues to amaze me how civilized man has contrived to endure the prolonged and concentrated horror of trench life, for endure he does, though endurance has a limit. I have written so much of fear, being myself a fearful person, that I may have given a wrong impression in this journal of the character and courage of the average man. Mostly I have seen him as a wounded man, and his fortitude has made me feel humble.

I think Rankin’s red head rushes somewhat at conclusions. Let us be fair to England. I doubt whether any other country could have risen to the immense

effort she has made. As a Belgian schoolmaster said to me, it has been “un véritable tour de force.” It seems to me that our failure has not been in the production of power but in the application of it. Men capable of commanding battalions have been thrust into the charge of Army Corps. Our directing brains have failed, perhaps because a professional army is a clique, and a class cult, and does not attract brains of the first water. The professional mind is too stereotyped. That is their tragedy and ours.

After all, though we have blundered, and kept butting our bloody heads unintelligently against walls, we have managed to save Europe from military damnation. Without us France would have been torn to shreds, and the west as well as the east would have been under the German boot. We must hold on. There is nothing else for us to do but to hold on.

I wonder what the Americans will make of war? Will they bring to it a new intelligence, some new chemic plan that will dissolve trenches and barbed wire, and neutralize machine-gun fire? Or will they blunder and buy wisdom with blood just as we have done and are doing? Mere savage fury is not enough. The marshal’s baton should postulate a brain.

On my way from the mess to our hospital I pass a little single-storied, red-brick cottage in which a young Frenchwoman lives with her two children. She is a comely, buxom, dusky creature with great dark eyes and a mass of rather untidy hair. She dresses in black, and shuffles about in red slippers.

She attracts me. I know that she is sensual and a sloven, but even her slovenliness provokes me, the swell of her large hips and the ripeness of her bosom. I suppose the celibate in one cannot always be in the saddle.

I find myself saluting her as I pass, if she happens to be at her door. Always she seems to be at her door. She smiles, and that lighting up of her face inflames me. I want to be man to her woman.

For desire is so different from love. I know that my crave is physical, a starvation crave. But it makes me shy, and brusque and self-conscious. Sometimes I try to avoid seeing her.

I stop at her door and speak. I say that it is a beautiful day, and I ask after her children.

Her children! What a humbug does sex make of one!

She is arch with me. I see a gold ring on her finger. Her hands are work

worn, but I think of the big, white, sensuous body under the rusty black, and I tremble.

She is emptying a tub of soapy water into the gutter. Her red slippers are like two hot coals. She looks up into my face and laughs.

“I have been washing myself. The bath, monsieur!”

Is it an invitation? I am horribly restless during the day, and after dark I go out and down the empty street Her cottage has shutters, and they are closed. I stand outside her window, with my heart pounding. I see a little cranny of light. I am about to knock on her shutters when I realize that the cranny light may give one a slit of vision. I bend down and peer. I see a pair of brown legs and superimposed upon them the bulge of a black skirt, and those red slippers pendent. I am conscious of feeling chilled, shocked. A horrible curiosity possesses me. I move a little and manage to see more of the interior. My Frenchwoman is sitting on a soldier’s lap, and the soldier is my man Finch.

I am cured. A kind of withering self-scorn blows through me. What if I had knocked on those shutters and Finch had emerged to warn off a butter-in? I go back to my billet feeling emotionally frozen. I find my old weaver and his wife sitting by their stove, and I join them. He is a white-haired, blue-eyed, world-wise old person, a kind of peasant philosopher. Is it strange and a mere coincidence that our conversation should turn upon morals, or is he somehow wise and paternally moved to warn me?

He says: “Morality is convention, monsieur. Before the war this was a religious little town, but now there is not a girl or young woman in it who is not sick.”

Madame nods her head. She, too, is a realist.

“Yes, every one of them is sick with gonorrhoea or syphilis. What can one do? Our army began it.”

I am conscious of guilty self-disgust.

But Finch? Ought I to warn the man? Should I not feel the most consummate hypocrite? But, surely one’s humanity should be able to transcend one’s little shames and, in avoiding sepsis, help the other fellow? Am I jealous of my servant?

I do warn Finch, but I do not indicate the particular source of danger.

“O, by the way, Finch, be careful of these Frenchwomen. They are all venereal cases.”

Finch grins at me.

“Even the married ones, sir?”

“So I am told. I don’t want to lose you.”

Again he grins at me.

What a relief!

Potter and I have orders to close our temporary hospital, and to rejoin the unit. I am sorry to leave my two old people, and my comfortable bed, and the little garden under my window in which blue hepaticas are coming into flower.

Madame says to me, “The war is far away from us now, thank the good God. A year ago it was too near. We shall think of you often, monsieur.”

The Division is in the line near St. Quentin. Fairfax sends three ambulances for us and our equipment and we go forward along a straight, flat road lined with poplars. Presently the live trees cease, and we come to the old desolation. I see the name of a village painted on a board, but beyond a few heaps of bricks there is no village to be seen. We cross the Somme. It is pale blue under a March sky. We pass through Peronne. It is like a carcass that has been left to rot, a mere skeleton from which the flesh has fallen.

More ruins, grey rolling country, a landscape from which the plough has been banished, and which has become a wilderness. The road threads it like a tape. More ruined villages, slaughtered trees, collections of farm implements becoming scrap-iron. We are in country from which the Germans retreated in 1917, and upon which their malice spent itself in orderly devastation. Nothing was to be left for us in the way of head-cover.

We arrive at another village that is a heap of rubbish in a valley amid these grey chalk hills. I will call it Blaincourt. We turn up what was a street, and the ambulances stop outside a series of broken walls. It is the usual local brewery in a state of ruin, but in this case the Boche had taken the trouble to blow in the cellars. The ground-floor rooms and offices have been cleared of broken bricks, and roofed with corrugated iron. This is my new home.

Fairfax appears in a doorway. He has been out riding, and still carries his crop. The sun is shining; there is no sound of guns; some of our men are sitting sunning themselves under a wall. I am feeling strung up and nervous, for the change from secure and happy country—where shells are not—to the danger zone, always affects me in a particular way. From the moment I see the first shell-hole, I am conscious of a tension of the ear-drums and the stomach. It becomes listener’s land where death may be in the air. No longer does one feel secure.

I am glad of Fairfax, for this ruined countryside has depressed me. He is more my friend than my C.O. He shows me over our station. Apparently we

are to function as an additional gas-treatment centre, especially with regard to the treatment of mustard-gas cases, should the Germans attack on our front. There is one piece of good news. It is not our turn to act as the forward ambulance, and the 203 F.A. are to staff the collecting stations. I cannot help feeling relieved.

The men are quartered in odd holes and corners among the ruins, and the main part of the brewery is to be our gas-station. The mess is a small hut at the top of the high bank above the ruins. We also possess a large Nissen hut for walking wounded cases, and this building stands on open ground, and completely unprotected. I am to share a dug-out with Gibbs, and these dug-outs are queer little places, holes ten feet by six dug into the bank under the shelter of a hedge, and roofed with corrugated iron. They are fitted with wire beds.

Wonderful weather, windless, sunny and serene. By eleven o'clock in the morning it might be high summer. These chalky hills are bone dry, and the ground ripe for an offensive. I have not yet heard a shell. The landscape seems somnolent and peaceful, treacherously so. I do not like this ominous, sleek conspiratorial silence. Fairfax tells me that it is possible to ride up to the aid-posts and the battalion headquarters without being shot at. One might be on the South Downs in Sussex in the lambing season, with the sea between one and the war.

Apparently our Intelligence Service is convinced that the Germans will attack on this front. The system of defence is based on somewhat new lines, and consists of a series of strong posts and redoubts arranged in depth. There are supposed to be a succession of reserve lines that can be occupied in case of a partial retreat, but Fairfax tells me that these rearward systems are mere ink marks on the map. We have had neither the men nor the time to complete them.

I am struck by the emptiness of the landscape. I should have expected these valleys to be packed with troops, in view of the imminent Boche offensive.

Fairfax, Gibbs and I ride over to have tea with the officers of the 203 F.A. They are a cheery crowd, but their humour causes me furiously to think. Rumour has it that the Germans possess tanks capable of travelling at twelve miles an hour. How fast can a man run? They laugh and say that they are all in training for a sprint to the rear.

But this jesting is ominous. I discover the same atmosphere in the company mess of one of our battalions when I go to look up a friend. Always we have thought of going forward, even though our progress might be bull-headed and bloody, never of going back. Now, even the fighting men talk facetiously of a divisional cross-country race in the wrong direction.

I do not like the situation at all.

Let such a feeling permeate masses of men, even in jest, and a debacle may overtake us.

But is it jesting? Have we become infected by a profound mistrust of our leaders? And do our fighting men feel that they will be asked to do impossible things?

I set this fact down in all solemnity.

My feeling is that our army is flinching from the very rumour of the super-offensive that is being prepared against us, and that we are waiting upon disaster.

Were I to publish my premonition to the world here, I suppose I might be shot.

We are afraid, but with a different fear, the fear of men who are ready to run.

Our gas-treatment centre is prepared for the great day. We have been provided with a number of portable baths and stacks of pyjamas. Mustard-gas cases are to be stripped of their clothes, given alkaline baths, and re-dressed and evacuated in clean pyjamas. There is an element of grim humour in the prospect of our having scores of men neatly tied up in clean pyjamas, and being unable to evacuate them for lack of ambulances. It may be that the poor devils will be made prisoners in their sleeping suits.

We rehearse the proceedings, using some of our own men as mock-patients, and timing the process in relation to our equipment and staff. It is necessary that we should have some idea of how many cases we can deal with in a stated time. Speed may be essential if the German attack should succeed, and a deluge of troops in field-grey should come pouring down on us over these hills.

Note.—On March 21st our gas-treatment preparations proved superfluous. We had very few gas cases, but were swamped with wounded, many of them severe stretcher cases with which we had not been expected to deal.

Harker and Potter and B Section have left us for duty with the 203 F.A.

Fairfax and I go out riding. We are alone, and we strike back over the open country, and its emptiness troubles me. It seems difficult to believe that this silver-grey landscape and this serene and sunny sky can promise anything but peace, but we know that the storm may break on us any day. Moreover, Fairfax is out with a purpose, and he confides it to me when we pull up our horses on the crest of a hill.

“Rankin has given me a hint that it would be good policy to reconnoitre a line of retreat across open country. The Blaincourt cross-roads will probably be shelled to blazes. If we can cut across the open and strike the Peronne road farther west we may get away and without casualties.”

So, even some of our Divisional staff are not optimists, and they must know more than we can know.

“The ground seems pretty firm.”

“Yes, thank God for a dry March.”

“The old Boche may also have cause to praise God.”

We ride on, and strike no snags in the way of high banks or deep ditches. This country has grassed itself back to Nature, and is firm and solid, and capable of carrying wheeled traffic. Bearing right we come upon a track that leads to the railway which has been repaired. An engine is standing here, the driver, an elderly “tough” in khaki, leaning out of the cab and talking to a Tommy.

Says the driver of the engine, “Who’s downhearted? We’ve stopped the old blighter before, and we’ll stop him again.”

An admirable spirit, but I imagine that retreat will be easier for the man on the engine.

We find that the track joins the main road near the ruins of another village, and Fairfax is satisfied. In this dry weather we shall be able, if necessary, to cut out the Blaincourt cross-roads.

These crisp, cold March nights make one’s premonitions tingle. A blaze of stars, a strange tense silence, dark hills and dim valleys, and over yonder, what?

March 19. We have been warned to stand to. The fighting men have manned their battle stations. Silence. Nothing happens.

March 20. Weather serene and sunny. After dinner we play Bridge in our funny little garden-house of a mess. I become conscious of the fug, and feel sleepy. Gibbs and I go out, and stand under the stars. There is the suggestion of a faint ground mist rising, and the air is keen and fresh.

Gibbs yawns.

“What about turning in, Steevie? One may as well pile up some sleep. When the show starts we may not have a chance of shedding our breeches.”

We go down to our slit in the earth under the bank and hedge. We undress, get into our flea-bags, and Gibbs blows out the candle.

“How do you feel about it, Steevie?”

“What, the show?”

“Yes. I wish the damned thing would burst and get it over. It’s like going about with a nice little packet of pus in one’s soul.”

“Same here. Well, perhaps Jerry will serve us up a barrage for breakfast.”

I hear Gibbs yawn.

“Cunning old creature, Fritz. Well, nighty-night, old thing.”

I wake early in the morning. I am not suddenly awake, but gradually and drowsily so, and I lie and listen to the rumble and bump of guns. I feel that I have never heard anything quite like it before and its tremendousness and terror. Almost, one can feel the earth vibrating as though the thudding shells up yonder were so many gigantic metal feet stamping upon the soil. And suddenly I am acutely conscious and alert. This is the prelude to the great spring offensive. I sit up, reach for my wrist-watch which is hanging on a nail and hold it in the palm of my hand. The illuminated dial tells me that it is twenty minutes past five.

Gibbs is snoring. I draw my legs out of my flea-bag and squat on the edge of the bunk.

“Gibbie.”

“Hallo.”

He heaves himself up.

“What’s the wheeze? O, that! So we are for it, at last.”

We sit for a moment in silence listening to that devastating noise. There is nothing coming our way at present. Their guns are concentrating upon our strong points and artillery positions.

“Gosh, Steevie, it’s some barrage!”

He lights the candle and I see that his hand is quite steady. We begin to dress, and I open my kit-bag, which is under the bunk, and take out my new velour breeches and tunic. If I am to be a prisoner I will enter Germany clad in my best clothes.

I hear hurried footsteps. Someone shouts down to us.

“Captain Brent, sir.”

“Hallo.”

“We are to stand to.”

Gibbs glances at me as I pull on my breeches.

“What, peachies, Steevie?”

I explain that if I am to spend a holiday in Germany I may as well take my best clothes with me.

“What a wise old beggar you are, Steevie. It’s an idea. I’ll do likewise.”

I am the first out, and when I emerge I realize that there is something more than darkness in this black, March morning. The air is cold and raw and wet. Fog? It occurs to me to wonder what effect fog will have on the day’s happenings. Will it not be like a smoke screen, blinding the defence, and masking the attack? Surely, God loves the Hun.

I grope my way across to the mess. The door is open and a candle is burning on the table. I see Fairfax sitting there, and our mess-orderly bustling about and laying the table.

Fairfax gives me a square, quiet, steadfast look.

“We had better have breakfast, Stephen.”

I know what he means. Our next meal may be problematical.

Daylight. The earth is blanketed with white mist. So thick is it that one cannot see the big Nissen hut until one is close upon it. That infernal row is still in full blast up yonder, but here the world is windless and muffled, and swathed in white wool.

Everything is ready. I seem to see the interior of the hut like a picture in still life, its boarded floor and windows, the open door at the far end through which the wounded will enter, and Corporal Chance and his table beside the door to record the cases as they arrive. I am almost convinced that the official mind regards the recording of the wounded as more important than the dressing of them. Trestles are ready for any stretcher cases. Dressings are laid out on a big table. The nursing orderlies are standing about with the air of men who, while listening to that drumfire, are not to be persuaded to accept it too seriously. This timber shell seems to contain a whole world of human tensions, and I can feel my own particular strain in the pit of my stomach.

Carless and Gibbs are in charge of the gas-centre, and Fairfax and I attend to the walking wounded and the evacuation.

At first everything is normal, almost conventionally so, and completely according to plan. The wounded begin to dribble in, are recorded and dressed, and passed down to the road, where they are packed into lorries that have been supplied to us. Most of them are light cases, bullet wounds, or fragments of H.E. in arm or leg. An officer comes in with an abrasion on his finger. He

looks at me sheepishly.

“Perhaps I ought not to have come down with this, doc.?”

I take him across to Fairfax, who examines the abrasion, dresses it, and then leads him gently to the door, and points towards the line. The officer disappears.

I do not know what the time is, but the atmosphere has changed. Shells are falling in and about Blaincourt, big, terrifying shells. We hear some of them going overhead and the crash of the explosions. The Boche big guns are shelling the back areas and the roads.

We are getting stretcher cases, terrible cases, men from the transport lines, and even from a Labour battalion, as well as from the forward area. Gibbs comes up to help us. This wooden building seems full of anguish and horror and blood. I have a feeling that things are going badly. There is confusion and fear in the air.

Men are dying on our hands. We have a row of dead laid out under a hedge. The shells seem nearer, screaming and snoring overhead.

I am aware of one of my nursing orderlies flinching whenever a shell comes over.

I am feeling as he does. The strain of compelling oneself to concentrate upon doing things with one's hands under conditions such as these is cumulative. One's hands must not shake, nor one's face betray one, even though one is quaking inwardly.

I feel that if this shelling continues I must scream.

A hot and sweating sergeant belonging to an A.S.C. Company accosts me as I am turning away from a hopeless case.

“Excuse me, sir.”

“Are you a casualty?”

“No, sir.”

The strain is making me irritable.

“Well, get out of here. Can't you see we are busy?”

“I'm sorry, sir, but I hear you have had our S.-M. through, and that he's dead.”

I remember the case. The man died on the stretcher.

“Yes. He's outside somewhere.”

“You'll excuse me, sir, but he had the sergeants' mess-money on him. I've got to crash off with my crowd. If you could take charge of the money——”

I'm afraid I curse him.

“We’re dealing with wounded, not with mess funds, my lad. Get out.”
He gives me an angry, sullen look, and goes.

Fairfax comes up to me.

“Go and get some food, Stephen.”

“I’m all right, sir.”

He gives me a push.

“Go along. You’ll need it. There’s lunch in the mess.”

Outside the hut I realize that it is a perfect day and that the sun has eaten up the mist. Things seem quieter. I go to the mess and find Bond there eating bully-beef and pickles. He pours me out a whisky. I sit down and push food into a stomach that feels tight and unconsenting.

Fairfax appears at the door.

“Pour me out a drink, someone.”

Bond passes him out a whisky. He gulps it down and turns to go back towards the hut. He is about ten yards from the mess when I hear that sound in the air. Something makes me get up and rush to the door. I stand there, paralysed, fascinated. There is a deafening crash, a yellow glare, and a geyser of earth and smoke go up into the air. I see Fairfax blown sideways like a piece of brown rag. The hut is hidden for a moment. Clods of earth are falling on the tin roof of the mess. When the air clears I see the wooden hut sagging sideways as though some giant had given it a push. I hear screams.

I rush out to Fairfax. He is lying on the ground semi-conscious. His steel helmet has been blown off, and he is smothered in dirt, but I realize with immense relief that he has been blown over but not hit. Bond has followed me, and I leave him to look after Fairfax and dash on to the hut. I expect to find a shambles, but the screams I heard came from the poor, frightened wounded. The soft soil of the brewery garden had smothered the burst, and though the roof of the hut is riddled, and the blast of the explosion and the deluge of earth have almost pushed it over, no one has been hit. It is an amazing escape, but I realize that this wooden building has become impossible and may collapse. Also, it is too terribly exposed. I give orders for it to be evacuated, and for all the wounded to be carried down to what shelter we can find amid the broken walls. Gibbs is great, and so are Simpson and Block. I see Gibbie humping a man down on his back. Thank God for good men in a crisis such as this.

I go to Fairfax. He has been helped into his dug-out, and is lying on his bed. The shock has broken him up for the moment. He complains of a cracking

head.

“Get me some aspirin, Steevie, and don’t worry. I shall be all right in half an hour.”

I tell him that it is his business not to worry, and that we can carry on.

I am feeling better now, perhaps because the responsibility is mainly mine, and I feel like a father towards my friend. We have turned the orderly-room into a dressing-room. I am at work there when the S.-M. comes in with a worried face.

“We’ve got about two hundred walking wounded, sir, in the yard, and no lorries.”

“Hell, where are the lorries, and the ambulances?”

“The lorries don’t come back, sir. One ambulance has been ditched and another hit. We’ve only one ambulance in.”

This is bloody! I go out and find this crowd of khaki in the yard. They are like patient sheep. I know that the one ambulance must be kept for bad cases. Also, I know that there is disaster in the air, and that unless these lightly wounded men are got away they may all become prisoners.

“Form the men up, S.-M., in the road.”

They get into some sort of formation, and I give them the best advice I can.

“Look here, you lads, you’ll have to walk and keep on walking in the right direction. It will be better to stick it and walk than wait for Jerry. Off you go.”

Some of them grin at me, but they recognize the rightness of my candour, and the poor parade stodges off down the dusty road.

Fairfax sends for me. He is still lying down.

“I gave orders for all the wagons to be packed, Steevie, with all the spare equipment, and the transport to stand to. Will you see it has been done?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Officers’ kits had better be packed and loaded. How is the situation as to wounded?”

“We’ve got them away, sir. Things seem quieter.”

“Thank God.”

Blaincourt has become strangely and ominously quiet. What does it mean? That our fighting front has been submerged, and that the deluge is upon us? I look at my watch. It is half-past three. I go out and find that our Transport S.-M. has all the G.S. wagons and limbers and horse-ambulances ready under the shelter of a wall. I see Finch appear and heave my valise on to a wagon.

Again Fairfax sends for me. He is sitting up and shows me an order that a

cyclist messenger has brought from D.H.Q.

“Evacuate all wounded and retire at once, Tincourt-Peronne road. Report position—midnight. Acknowledge receipt of order.”

What a strange ride is this! Soon after four o'clock we have evacuated our last casualties, tumbled our remaining equipment into the wagons and pulled out across the open country, leaving Blaincourt to the dead. The empty landscape is serenely sunlit. I can see no troops anywhere, nor hear any sound of war. We seem to be alone under this March sky, and it is hard to believe that we are part of an army that is facing disaster. Fairfax is managing to sit in the saddle, and he is on ahead, riding with the transport. I bring up the rear behind our marching sections.

Once or twice I stop my horse, turn and look back. Rumour has been wild and active, and I wonder whether I shall see German cavalry or tanks appearing on the hills behind us. How does a R.A.M.C. unit surrender to an enemy? We may be shot to pieces by their tanks before they recognize us as a non-combatant unit. I am not conscious of fear now, but of an alert curiosity. This is a different kind of war, staged in the open country, vibrant and mobile.

Some of our men are straggling. They seem rather done up. One man in particular, Hanks, our prize wangler and misfit, is pretending to be vastly sorry for himself. He has unbuckled his equipment and unbuttoned his tunic, and is carrying his steel hat. I overtake him after one of my pauses, and he looks up at me almost as though he expected me to offer him my horse.

“What’s the trouble, Hanks?”

He glances at me sullenly, and I realize that he is the sort of man who will quickly become insolent and insubordinate when things go wrong. Also, he is capable of infecting other men.

“Done up, sir.”

“That’s rather a pity, isn’t it?”

He has a little, poky, sour face, a mean face.

“Must have had a touch of gas, sir.”

“Rot, man. Nobody else has. Get on with it.”

“It’s all very well for you, sir.”

I am tired and irritable, and I flare.

“Righto, sit down and wait for the Germans.”

He gives me an evil look, but I rather feel that I shall have no more trouble with the fellow.

As we wind along a valley and bear right towards the Peronne road I see that we are no longer the only caterpillar crawling over this vast grey-green leaf. I see silhouetted against the sky where the Peronne road follows the high

ground an endless stream of mounted men, horses and wagons. It is a strange and a disturbing sight, masses of transport in retreat.

I do not know the name of this village in which we have unhitched for the night. I presume Fairfax knows it, for he has sent off one of our dispatch riders to report our whereabouts to Rankin. The extraordinary thing about this ruined village is that we find a deserted house with something of a roof on it, and we crowd in. The men are in semi-ruined cottages. We find a table in the chief room, and our mess-orderly and cook unpack the mess-stores. Our valises are carried in. We are all dead tired, and Fairfax is still very shaky.

We fall upon bully-beef and bread and tinned fruit like savages. I suggest to Fairfax that he had better turn in and get some sleep, and that Gibbs, Carless and I will take turns at sitting up. Fairfax agrees, and orders me to post a sentry at the entrance to the village to warn us of any sudden change in the situation.

I take first watch.

Our motor-cyclist returns. He has been unable to find Divisional Headquarters. The big farm where they were situated has become a Brigade Headquarters. This is pleasant news! The whole front must be in a state of flux.

Gibbs relieves me after two hours. I had been walking up and down the village street, smoking interminable pipes. I go in, and taking off my field-boots, step into my valise, which has been unrolled on the floor. I want to sleep. I feel I want nothing but sleep. It is more urgent than any sex-crave.

But I am not to be allowed to fall asleep in peace. I hear a sudden crash and the scattering of tiles and bricks. The railway runs through the village, and close to our house, and I realize that the Boche is shelling the railway with one of his damned high-velocity guns. Another shell follows, and more debris flies. I lie sweating and shaking, waiting for the next shell to arrive, and wondering where it will land. This is too much after a day of such alarms and excursions. I hear Carless swearing in his corner. "O, damn the old brute." Fairfax, I am glad to say, sleeps through it all.

The shelling stops, and I try and recover the urge to sleep. I wonder what has happened to Harker and Potter, and I think of what our poor infantry have had to suffer, and must still be suffering. Poor devils, there is no relief for them, and no sleep, unless our reserves are coming up. And supposing we have no adequate reserves, and the front is badly broken? Disaster! I think of Sergeant Fosdyke's fierce denunciation of authority, and of our wasted lives. How glad we should be now of all the men who were sacrificed at

Passchendaele and on the Somme.

I have slept.

Bond has gone off with a wagon to try and find the A.S.C. and draw rations.

We do not know what to do, for we are marooned without orders in this village.

Fairfax has sent out a despatch rider to try and locate Divisional Headquarters, but the man comes back without having been able to find them.

The rumble of retreating transport has ceased. I go scouting along the deserted road. The landscape is distressingly empty. What the devil is happening? I fancy that I can hear machine-gun fire coming from the direction of Blaincourt.

I go back and tell Fairfax, and he decides to act on his own authority and to continue our retreat.

On the road. We meet Bond coming back with rations. The A.S.C. have not failed us. That is to be one of the marvels of this retreat, the enterprise and energy of the A.S.C. They send out mounted men each morning to get into touch with the various and scattered units of the Division. Such news as Bond has been able to collect is not cheering. Apparently, the Germans were able to overrun all our forward positions in the fog. We must have lost thousands of men, and hundreds of guns. And where are the troops who can restore the battle?

We see a Ford ambulance coming to meet us. In it is Colonel Rankin. He is looking tired and infinitely serious. We halt while he and Fairfax go aside to talk.

When Rankin has left us again in the Ford, I ride beside Fairfax. Our orders are to make for the Somme and cross it by one of the southern bridges. Peronne is chaos, and choked with transport. The outlook is very black. The remnants of the 81st are still fighting hard, and falling back. The 203 F.A. have managed to get away, but they have had an officer and a number of bearers taken prisoners.

And our reserves? Fairfax understands that we had but one division in reserve, and some cavalry behind us, and they are already engaged. I suppose the idea is to try and hold the line of the Somme river.

But what a debacle!

More foot-slogging. Our men are holding out very well. I get off my horse

and march, and Gibbs joins me.

We have left the Peronne road and turned south. The landscape continues to be distressingly empty; no fresh troops coming up. A few of our 'planes go over. I remember coming to a hollow road partly shaded by a few bare trees, and here a solitary tank is squatting grimly, with an officer standing beside it. There is just room for us to pass, but the significance of that solitary steel slug depresses us. It is there to try and block the road, and perhaps to serve as a rallying point for our tired infantry.

The Somme. The river is blue and faintly wind-whipped under the March sky, and the reed beds look pale and strange. The bridge we have been making for is intact, but charges have been laid, and some R.E.s are stationed here, waiting for the order to fire the charges. We cross over, and looking at the river I am conscious of relief, for it seems to put a barrier between us and hypothetical Boche cavalry and tanks.

Surely we shall be able to hold the line of the Somme?

Dusk. We find ourselves in a hutted camp that a few hours ago was a Corps Headquarters. It is deserted. The huts are black against the fading sky. We explore and find signs of confusion and of an abrupt and tumultuous flight. The place is ours save for a few straggling members of a Labour battalion, who appear to be scrounging for possible loot. We take possession, and flatter ourselves that we shall be secure for one peaceful night. There are wire beds galore for the men. We select a comfortable hut, feed, and doss down for the night.

We have forgotten that the Boche has bombing 'planes. I had just got to sleep when the machines came over, and I wake to the crash of bombs. I feel exasperated and lie still. The beastly things do not sound too near us, and I say to myself that I am damned if I will leave my flea-bag just to scout around. But a minute later I hear the S.-M.'s voice, and he calls my name.

"Captain Brent, sir."

"Hallo."

"A hut has been hit."

"Not one of ours?"

"No, one with some Labour Corps men in it."

No one else moves. Is it that they are so dead tired that they are leaving the job to me? I get up and lace on my boots and join the Sergeant-Major. He tells me that he was just turning in when he heard the explosion and men's screams.

Luckily there were only half a dozen fellows in the hut. Four of them were killed outright, and the other two wounded.

I find that indomitable soul Corporal Block already at work on the two wounded men. We dress them, and are then confronted with the problem of disposing of them. We have nowhere to send them, and nothing to send them in, for our motor-ambulances have never returned to us. Also, Rankin warned Fairfax that the Casualty Clearing Stations might have ceased to function and would be sharing in this vast rout. I decide that the only thing to do is to put the wounded in one of our horse-ambulances and carry them with us.

As I am making my way back to the hut where the others are in bed I am aware of the night becoming full of confused and urgent noise, voices, and the plodding of horses, and the creaking of wheels. A mass of transport is pouring past the camp, and with it groups of straggling men. It is like a sinister shadow-show of disaster and fear, and when I reach the hut I find Fairfax in the doorway, listening to the sounds of an army in retreat.

“I don’t like this, Stephen.”

He has a map in his hand, and he shines a torch on it.

“Can you see where we are? This road joins the Villers Carbonel cross-roads. I have had a brain-wave. Those cross-roads may be chaos. Unless we can get through there, we may be bogged.”

We stand and listen to the wheels on the road.

“It suddenly came into my mind when you went out. It was like you to go, Stephen.”

“Do you mean to move again, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Now? But the men are——”

“I know. But I shan’t be happy as long as we are on the wrong side of these cross-roads. You see, the country all round is impossible, old Somme country, old shell-holes and trenches.”

I have to confess that he is right. So we are not to sleep but to go on slogging, and join ourselves to that shadow-show of an army in retreat.

“Get hold of the S.-M., Stephen, and tell him to get the men up, and warn the transport.”

“Very good, sir.”

We are on the road again, and our tired men are less sullen than I expected them to be. Perhaps they understand that we are wise in our ruthlessness. Half

an hour later I am to bless Fairfax's inspiration. He and I walk on ahead, and before we come to those vital cross-roads, we are confronted with a problem that seems insoluble. Here is chaos. An artillery column has turned in the wrong direction and is blocking the wrong side of the road, and on the other side wagons and limbers are packed in one solid mass behind a lorry that has broken down. Fairfax and I push through to the cross-roads. Never have I seen such chaos. A solitary military policeman on traffic duty is rushing about like a madman, shouting and cursing, but the jam seems hopeless. It is like the Mansion House with all the traffic in London piled anyhow in chunks. The place is Bedlam. Thank God it is dark, and the Boche bombing 'planes are not over us.

But the man of destiny arrives in the shape of an A.S.C. major with a vast voice, and behind him a column of transport that is under control. He places himself in the middle of the mess, and backed by his N.C.O.s begins to sort out the tangle with a ruthlessness that is effective. The horses are unhitched from certain recalcitrant wagons, and the vehicles are man-handled and shoved off the road into the ditches. This example is suggestive. We go back down the side road to our own column of halted wagons, and find that more transport has piled up behind us.

The gunners are the people responsible for this block, for a lorry has broken down ahead of us, and the transport which is facing in the right direction cannot pull out and pass so long as the artillery wagons and limbers are where they are. Nobody seems to be in charge of this column. The men appear beyond caring, and are lying about in the ditches. I manage to get hold of a sulky sergeant.

"Where are your officers?"

He doesn't know and he doesn't care.

"Damn it, man, where are they? Gone on a binge to Amiens, I suppose."

My sarcasm does not bite him. He stands and glares at me with dull, sleep-sodden eyes. But the stupidity of the thing enrages me. I go back to Fairfax and tell him that the gunner officers have left their column derelict, and that unless we do something drastic about it we shall never get through. He comes up with me, and tries to rouse the artillery column out of its apathy, but the men are sullen and done up.

That is the climax. We go back and collect Gibbs and the two S.-M.s and thirty of our stoutest men. Fairfax and the Transport S.-M. themselves unhitch the artillery horses, and our men upset wagons and limbers into the ditches. It is a rough and a ruthless business, but logical. There is a good deal of foul language, but our unit has the authority and example of its officers, and the gunners are a mob without authority. Gibbs and I are helping in the jettisoning

of the wagons, and one fellow who may have had something to drink, gets hold of Gibbs by his belt.

“Blast yer ruddy eyes, who do you think you are? God almighty?”

Gibbs is not taking any sauce. He pushes the man off, smites him on the jaw, and the fellow disappears into the ditch.

We clear the road and go through. Thanks to that autocrat of a major the cross-roads are no longer a hopeless tangle, and our wagons and ambulances swing left into the main road. Our men are laughing. They have enjoyed the clash, and their tails are up. Fairfax remounts his horse. Gibbs and I light pipes and trudge along at the tail of the column. I ask him what has become of Carless.

“Asleep in one of the ambulances, my dear. His breeches seem a bit too superfine for this sort of thing.”

XXI

FAIRFAX'S wisdom is capped with compassion. His urge may be to conserve his unit in the midst of chaos, and to keep it ready for action should it be needed, but men must eat and sleep, and soon after daybreak we turn aside from the main road, and halt on some rough grassland near a place that was known as Nurlu. Fairfax retains his sense of humour. Carless is routed out of his horse-ambulance and appointed to be the officer whose eyes shall remain open while we sleep. The indefatigable Finch arrives with my valise and camp-bed, and he erects the bed in a quiet spot close to a stunted tree. I bless Finch, and tell him that he is the best batman on God's earth, and I take my boots off and get into bed. Finch lies down beside me in his greatcoat and with his pack under his head. We sleep.

I wake to find Fairfax standing over me.

"Sorry, Stephen; no more sleep for the wicked."

I sit up, feeling a fit man.

"What's the time, sir?"

"About eleven. I have been out on my horse and found Rankin and D.H.Q. He doesn't want us to stop here. We are to push on and come back into the main road well away from the Somme."

"Any news?"

"Nothing good. The whole 5th Army front has given way. Things are almost as bad north of the river."

I am lacing on my boots.

"No time for a shave, sir?"

"Not yet. There is just a chance that our people may manage to hold Jerry on the line of the Somme, but no one appears very hopeful."

Cheering news this! Are we to suffer a debacle after all these years of blood and sweat?

Never shall I forget the Peronne-Amiens road on that morning in March, nor Fairfax's face as we stand and watch this rout of an army.

"My God, Stephen!"

We have had to halt the Field Ambulance on the by-road behind us, for it is impossible for any formed body to insert itself into this disorganized mass of

men and animals. It is a terrifying sight, wagons, limbers, lorries, hobbling stragglers, Labour Corps men, Chinese coolies, pouring along in panic. There is no cohesion save the gregarious fear that sends sheep stampeding along a road. There seems to be no beginning and no end to the procession. I see a Chinaman with a monstrous bundle on his back and a staff in his right hand go pattering by, his face smeared with sweat, his chest heaving. There are corpse-faced men who hobble and sway, but the thing that makes the most profound impression upon me is the silent, dumb ferocity of these fugitives. I am witnessing a veritable *sauve qui peut*. Figures jostle each other and bob along like brown corks on a river that is in flood. No one seems to trouble about his neighbour. All these hundreds of faces strain in one direction. Lorries grind and grumble, clogged in this glutinous, moving mass of humanity. I see a staff-car engulfed in the flood, and in it a furious, red-faced officer with a monocle. He seems to be the one vocal creature in the crowd, and leaning forward, screams at the chauffeur, or at the hobbling men who have ceased to regard authority. "Drive through them, man; drive through the damned swine."

Again I hear Fairfax say, "My God, Stephen, this looks like the end of everything!"

I am conscious of a feeling of horrible helplessness in the presence of this ghastly rout. What does it mean? That there are no fighting men left who are capable of fighting or who are willing to fight? Are the Germans close on the heels of this stampeding multitude?

"What had we better do, sir?"

He answers that there is nothing to be done until the main road has emptied itself of this mob, and that he has no wish to expose our unit to the solvent of fear. And then, a yet more dramatic and terrifying thing happens. One of our aeroplanes appears flying fast and low above the road, and following it are three Boche 'planes, engines roaring, machine-guns crackling. Suddenly, with amazing swiftness the whole road spills its brown mess of panic into any hole or bit of shelter. Drivers jump from their wagons; lorries are left standing with their engines running. In a few seconds the long, straight road is empty of men, while those roaring 'planes with their black crosses and spitting machine-guns sweep on and past. The sight so fascinates me that I just stand and stare, and Fairfax is as paralysed as I am.

"My God, Stephen!"

The winged death has passed, and the brown crowd reappears like maggots out of the earth and resumes its fierce and sedulous flight. Drivers are back on their wagons; lorries roll on. The amazing thing is that no one appears to have been hit, and not a single horse that has been left exposed has suffered. Why did not those Boche 'planes drop bombs? The results might have been

catastrophic. Mercifully, perhaps, for this crowd the German airmen had dropped their bombs elsewhere—if they carried any.

I happen to turn and look at our men. I am aware of their white, shocked, silent faces, for this debacle is sufficient to shake the morale of any unit. Also, I see someone strolling across the rough ground from a collection of huts set back about fifty yards from the road. It is Colonel Rankin. His brown eyes have a kind of blaze in them, and his face seems to sneer. We salute him and he comes and stands with us to watch this sorry show.

“Well, your men seem a steady crowd, Fairfax. You can take the credit.”

“They are good lads, sir.”

“Nor must we take this horrid sight too seriously.”

“You think not, sir?”

“This is just the army’s rubbish. Our infantry are sticking it, or what is left of them.”

“That’s good news. This made one think that the end had come.”

Rankin’s sneer becomes a smile.

“Our damned old country isn’t done with yet.”

We are at our ease in a field beside the Amiens road, not far from the hutments that have become Divisional Headquarters. We have fed. Bond has drawn rations, and Gibbs and I sit on a little grass mound and watch the road. Fairfax is asleep on a stretcher at the bottom of what was once a trench. The road has become strangely empty and silent, a straight and dusty streak between the tumbled greenness of old battlefields. There is not a cloud in the sky. Gibbs and I smoke our pipes.

Now and again a few stragglers hobble by, or a belated lorry or G.S. wagon rumbles past. Both road and the green wilderness have a disturbing emptiness. We understand that the remnant of our die-hards are making a brave attempt to hold the river. We have a feeling that there is nothing between us and these sticky rearguards. Part of the 201 F.A. has been sent up to help the weary 203rd. We are being kept in reserve.

We watch the remnants of a Machine Gun Company march back down the road. That, too, is a sight I shall not forget. A big, swarthy, unshaven officer marches at their head. He has no steel helmet. He walks with a tired, hobbling swagger, and a little set smile on his face. Pride, pride that is dirty and weary, and unsubdued! Something makes me jump up and salute him.

He waves his hand at me, and passes on.

“Why are they going back?”

“Wait a moment.”

We see the little company leave the road and disappear into the crumple of shell-holes. I suppose that they are taking a position there, and we are in front of them! Or is it that they have fought their fill, and are being rested and saved for some future ordeal?

Two figures appear against the sky, infantrymen with their rifles sloped. They seem to be strolling casually in the wrong direction. I get up, walk across and intercept them. I find that they belong to one of our battalions.

“Where are you two lads going?”

The nearer of the two gives me an ugly look. They do not pause or salute me.

“Brigade Headquarters.”

“You are going the wrong way. Divisional Headquarters is just over there. You had better face about.”

The man nearest me slaps the breech of his rifle.

“You mind your bloody business. I’ve got a cartridge left in here.”

The man’s eyes are mad and dangerous, and I realize that he is like a fierce wild beast who is beyond control. They stride on, mount an old grassy parapet, leap down and disappear. It is not fear that makes me let them go, but a feeling of helplessness in the presence of a temper that has become savagely insubordinate.

Sunset. We dine like a picnic party with our plates on the ground between our knees. We have not much to say to each other. Divisional Headquarters has gone back, leaving an advanced Headquarters in those hutments. Bliss comes across and has a drink with us. He looks very tired. The last news is that we seem to be holding the line of the Somme.

I do not welcome the prospect of darkness. It is like being blindfolded and left to sit and listen in a dark room for the footsteps of some stealthy enemy. Bliss has told us that the Germans are practising a new method of penetration; they appear to have specially trained platoons who feel their way forward, groping for some weak place in our line, and when they find it they push through. It is like acid eating away metal, or the sea stealing stealthily in and undermining the land’s defences. Why had we not evolved methods of this description, instead of rushing bull-headed at concrete and barbed-wire? After all, the Boche’s scheme of infiltration is so simple, just common sense. Find the weak places and exploit them.

I go to sleep on a stretcher at the bottom of an old trench. It is a cold night, with a ground frost, and I wake very early feeling that my loins are frozen. Another beautiful day. The dawn comes up pale gold above the black crumple

of this old battlefield. To warm myself I walk along the road, and meet not a living soul. There is a great silence everywhere.

Where is brother Fritz? It would not have surprised me to see one of those coal-scuttle steel helmets rising out of a hole in the ground.

The Germans are across the Somme. We receive an urgent order to move, and we do move. I have never seen our transport men so spry and eager in harnessing up. It reminds me of a fire brigade competition. Our wagons go bundling out into the road, and I notice that the harness is half-off one horse. Fairfax rides out after them, using his voice. I hear him tell our A.S.C. fellows that they are not competing in a gymkhana.

We march, Gibbs and I at the rear. I notice that some of our men keep looking back at our faces, and at the empty road behind us. I suppose they are wondering, as we are, whether men in field grey will appear against that clear blue sky, or whether 'planes will come over to bomb or machine-gun us.

This long, straight road takes to itself untortured trees, great poplars whose grey branches meet overhead. This means that we have left the devastation behind us, and are back in country that for years has trembled on the edge of all this horror. Here are cultivated fields, and orchards, and suddenly I realize the added bitterness of this disaster. It will mean, for the poor French, another exodus.

Will they feel bitter towards us?

We have turned right, and marched into a village called Proyart. Fairfax has halted the unit in the yard of a tile-factory where our transport can be parked. The door of the house is open, and thinking that the owners have left we officers walk in. There is a little vestibule, and I see Fairfax pause, and raise his hand to his steel helmet.

“Pardon. We thought the house empty.”

An elderly Frenchman is sitting astride on a chair, smoking a cigarette and watching a young woman packing a basket. He gives us a look which is both sardonic and contemptuous. He shrugs his shoulders.

“Entrez, messieurs.”

This French girl fascinates me. She is very tall, very dark, with one of those white, clear skins, a beautiful creature, but it is not her mere physical beauty that makes me marvel. It is her young, dark-eyed dignity, the deliberate

and calm way in which she is packing that basket. All her movements have a smooth, unflurried grace. She does not look at us. We might be mere shadows on the wall, and her calm, tragic aloofness troubles me. Is her young stateliness so crowned with scorn? Are we, the scourgings of a defeated army, not deserving of one glance of compassion or of reproach?

The others must feel as I do, for her aloofness removes us like rude, gaping boys. We betake ourselves to the room on the other side of the passage, but I can hear the voices of the Frenchman and his daughter. He asks her if she is ready, and her reply is a quiet, monosyllabic yes.

He says, “Good, I will put the horse in. We will leave everything to our brave allies.”

That hurts me. I know that this business must be bitter to the French, and to me this young woman somehow is France symbolized. I stand at the window and watch the man lead an old grey horse and black buggy out of a tiled shed. He gathers up the reins and climbs into the seat. The young woman has put on a little black chapeau and a coat. I see her cross the yard, pass the basket up to her father, and climb up calmly as though she were going to market. The man turns the grey horse, and the funny old vehicle trundles out on to the road.

I find Gibbs beside me. He, too, has been watching this exodus.

“Damn it, Steevie, that makes one feel small. I think I’ll give up doctoring and take to a gun.”

I fill my pipe and light it.

“It must be pretty bitter for them.”

But our reflections are interrupted by Bond, who comes bucking into the room flourishing a bottle.

“Plenty of wine below in the cellar.”

Gibbs snubs him.

“Shut up. That’s looting, my lad.”

Bond giggles.

“Well, if we don’t drink it, the Boches will.”

I might quote Bond’s proverbial philosophy were I to be acting as counsel for the defence for others who are drinking unwisely and too well. Our Sergeant-Major is a serious-minded young man to whom this debacle has been a shocking disillusionment. We have just finished an impromptu tea when he comes to tell us that there is a disgraceful orgy going on in the village. Surprisingly, Proyart possesses a quite considerable wine merchant’s store, and the troops have discovered it.

“I happened to miss Bubb and Cufnell, sir”—Bubb and Cufnell are our two

bad eggs—“and I thought I had better look round. The men are getting drunk by scores.”

“Our men, S.-M.?”

“No, sir. There’s a battalion of infantry in the village—or what’s left of it—with only two officers, and they are, excuse me, sir, blotto.”

Fairfax is in the act of lighting a pipe, but he puts it away in his pocket. This is a serious business, for though we do not wish to act as spoil-sports, drunken troops will be easy meat for brother Boche. Fairfax, Gibbs and I go out to explore the situation. We find the centre of the village staging a bacchanalian scene. The men are completely out of hand. All the stragglers for miles around seem to have gathered like flies to beer and treacle. Men are lying by scores under the horses, noisily and genially intoxicated, or in the process of becoming so. A string of figures is emerging from the door of the wine-store, or entering it. I can quite understand the inspiration of this vast and insubordinate binge. Some of these fellows have had no sleep for days, and very little food, and their mood damns everything and makes the most of the moment.

Fairfax walks into the crowd and tries the effect of his voice on these celebrants. It is completely without effect. He confronts two men who have just emerged with their loot. He orders them to put their bottles down, and they grin at him insolently, and make off up the street. A drunken scallywag, with three days’ beard on his chin and his tunic unbuttoned, reels up to Fairfax. His mouth is all slobber, and his language not of the lily.

“You leave us alone, see. We’ve ’ad enough of the bloody war, and we’ve ’ad enough of bloody toffs in tunics.”

He has a half-empty bottle in his fist, and he flourishes it.

“No more bloody war. No more bloody officers. We’re going to get —— drunk, and you —— off, see.”

It is quite obvious to us that authority has ceased to be, and that there is every likelihood of our being roughly handled by these drunken fools. Fairfax’s blood is up, and we have to persuade him to make a strategic movement to the rear, while formulating other methods of attack. It is Gibbs who supplies the solution.

“Why not empty the cellars, and smash all the bottles?”

It is an inspiration. I race back and get hold of the S.-M. and tell him to parade C Company. I can rely on C Company. I explain the situation to them, and I make a laugh of it, but assure them that we shall be helping to win the war. I see by their faces that they are mine, and I tell them that they can salve a dozen bottles for the benefit of the unit.

I march through Proyart at the head of C Company. We pick up Fairfax

and Gibbs, and force our way into the building. Sundry casual looters are ejected, and the door held by six of our men. The building possesses a courtyard surrounded by a high wall, and stout gates that can be closed. We string the men out in a chain down the cellar steps, and they pass the bottles out to Fairfax and myself, while Gibbs and a few stalwarts see to it that the gates are not forced. Fairfax and I smash bottle after bottle, flinging them against the courtyard walls. I do not know what the bag is, but the yard is littered with broken glass and bloody with red wine. The walls are splashed and stained, and the yard suggests some horrid slaughter, but we empty that cellar and make sure that no more tired and disorganized troops shall become victims of the bottle.

Night. Fairfax has had his valise spread on the Frenchman's bed. Gibbs and I have decided to sleep on stretchers in the little *salon*, for somehow the French girl's bedroom scares us. I suppose we are sentimentalists, and regard her bed as sacred and inviolate. Silly asses! We miss Carless, and since it is Carless's duty to take first watch we shout for him. A sleepy voice answers from the French girl's room, and Gibbs and I look at each other.

"Damn the fellow!"

We are a little bored with Carless, for he has proved himself too much of a passenger during these strenuous days. Gibbs opens the door and flashes a torch into the room. We see Carless not on the bed, but well and truly in it, and wallowing in suggestions of sensuous femininity.

Gibbs tosses the bedclothes off, and lugs Carless out by the leg. He is in his pants and vest, and since, even in a place like Proyart, French women—or some of them—use exotic perfumes, Carless is scented like a tuberose.

He is indignant.

"What's the idea?"

"A little job of work, my lad. Didn't you hear Fairfax order you to take first watch?"

"Plenty of time. I thought I would have a few winks. My chap was going to wake me."

"We've done it for him," says Gibbs. "Poof! You stink like Paris leave. Getting into a girl's bed!"

"It's a damned good bed. Try it."

"Not bloody likely. What you have to do is to go out on the road and keep your eyes and ears skinned, or Jerry may catch you."

About midnight I relieve Carless. It is a very black night, and strangely still, and as I walk up and down in my greatcoat I see the eastern sky lit up in half a dozen places. Our dumps are burning, and by climbing on a bank beside the road I can see the fires like great braziers flaring on the horizon. Flowers of disaster! I know that we must deny these masses of food and equipment to our enemy, but the colossal waste seems part of our tragedy. Also, there is a quality of terror in those distant and silent conflagrations. They conjure up to me pictures of old, dead disasters, Rome in flames, an empire going up in smoke.

Corporal Block and two of C Company are patrolling Proyart and the road beyond it, for we are realizing that in this gigantic game of blind-man's-buff we must rely on our own wits and senses. Orders may not reach us, or no orders may be issued. Our world of authority is in a state of chaos and of flux.

I hear footsteps, and Corporal Block joins me. He is laconic and leanly facetious.

“Pity to burn all that, sir.”

“Why, Block?”

“Well, it might have been good business to leave old Jerry thousands of rum rations to get drunk on. Might have cramped his style a bit.”

“Yes, there might be something in that.”

And it occurs to me that a more subtle policy would have left all those wine bottles unbroken to fuddle Brother Boche.

I am shaving when a dispatch rider brings us orders. Fairfax calls to me, and I go in to him with half my face still lathered. He is sitting on the bed.

“We are to open a mobile A.D.S. at a place called Harbonnieres. Pass me my map, Stephen.”

“I don't quite like the word mobile, sir. And where are our ambulances?”

“Rankin says that three will report before 8 a.m. He hopes to get us a couple of lorries in addition. I am to detail one officer and a sub-section. Headquarters are to move to La Motte.”

I am feeling full of beans, and I ask to be detailed for the job. The strange thing about the war is that on some days one feels the complete hero, on others a mere windy worm. Are courage and a debonair and gaillard spirit dependent upon the nice functioning of one's glands and digestive organs?

Fairfax looks at me.

“Like Carless with you?”

“I'm not very keen, sir.”

“All right. You and Gibbs can relieve each other every forty-eight hours. I’ll keep Carless with me.”

It is a cross-country journey to Harbonnieres and I see its funny old church rising above the flat fields. At one point we pass a little crowd of infantry who appear to be constituting themselves a rallying point under an elderly Scotch major in trows and a Glengarry. Most of the men are lying on the grass beside the road. They have the starved faces and staring eyes of men who endure in spite of exhaustion, a tough, fierce lot. I notice that they belong to two or three different divisions, and are a composite crowd. One figure in particular attracts my attention. It is that of a young corporal in one of our 81st battalions, a tall, fair, good-looking boy, whose uniform and equipment are meticulously clean. He is walking up and down with a kind of fierce restlessness, head cocked, profile proud and tense. His uniform would lead one to believe that he had just returned from leave, but one glance at his face contradicts that conclusion. It is a bleached face, tinged with yellow, and somehow infinitely old in spite of its youth. His fierce young pride and his starved swagger move me strangely. May death be merciful to him and pass him by.

Harbonnieres is a sight for the gods. It contains two Divisional Headquarters, and red hats are like roses in June. All these staff officers look clean and debonair, if a little tired, and to see so much splendour rather encourages one. But the French are still in Harbonnieres, women at doorways, children enjoying the show. It would appear that these civilians are sceptical as to the imminence of the Boche, with all this red-hatted splendour pervading the place. On this sunny morning, without a gun to be heard, Harbonnieres is like a village enjoying the pomp and ceremony of peaceful war.

I see a young staff officer going from house to house, and appealing to the people in French.

“It is very necessary that you should leave. The Germans are coming.”

We traverse Harbonnieres and having explored its western purlieus, I choose a long, low, white farmhouse on the street, with a big courtyard, and farm buildings behind it. These buildings are built over extensive cellars. A very fat French woman is sitting knitting at a window. I salute her, and tell her that we need her place as a Dressing Station, and I warn her that in a very few hours the Germans may be in the village.

She does not believe me. She is unfriendly and obstinate, and seems to regard us as a nuisance. In fact she tries to deny us her house and buildings.

“I do not wish to have soldiers here. Monsieur must go elsewhere.”

Her needles continue to click, and though I admire her phlegm, our share in the war cannot be obstructed by a stout and truculent old lady in slippers and rusty black.

“I am sorry, madame, but it is necessary. I can assure you that it is time for you to leave.”

During our argument a small girl has been amusing herself by throwing a ball against a wall and catching it on the rebound. I smile at the child, and ask madame if she is her daughter, a compliment that should placate the old lady, but madame rises and comes forth, still clicking her needles, and ignoring my suavity. Seeing my men carrying stretchers and equipment into the yard, she becomes actively aggressive. She places herself in the middle of the gateway and orders us off her property. She says that she has suffered sufficiently from soldiers during the war, and that though she might tolerate her own lads in blue, she will not be invaded by the English.

I smile at her and tell the men to carry on.

“It cannot be helped, madame.”

“I will go and fetch Monsieur le Maire. I will have you turned out.”

But there are other interventions. I hear a whinnying sound in the air, and the first German shell pitches into Harbonnieres. It lands on a roof not fifty yards away, and broken tiles scurry and clatter in all directions. Madame drops her knitting and puts her hands to her ears. A moment later she has clutched her small grand-daughter and hustled her into the house. I hear her screaming to someone within. An old man bustles out, and proceeds to harness a horse in the shafts of a farm-cart. Madame and another woman appear with various belongings and make haste to bundle them into the cart. Another shell arrives. I get my men under cover, and detail two of them to help the French load the cart.

Madame talks incessantly in a high-pitched, screaming voice. She is fiercely candid in her remarks upon us as allies. She keeps repeating the words, “Le mauvais cinque armée, le mauvais cinque armée.”

I am glad when she has gone, perched with the child and her woman on the top of a multifarious load. I go out into the street and find it full of the flying French, carts, wheelbarrows, gigs. The faces that pass me are sullen and scared and hostile.

Our red hats are also leaving. Staff cars worm their way through the crowd of fugitives. Transport rumbles by. I am witnessing another bitter exodus, and it leaves a sour taste in my mouth. Meanwhile, the shelling is becoming unpleasant, with roofs crashing and tiles flying about, and I go and stand at the top of the steps leading to the cellars.

A big dog suddenly appears in the yard. For five minutes it runs round and round in strange terror, and then, as another shell crashes, it bolts out into the street.

We have had a few wounded, an old Frenchman among them. We dress them and send them by ambulance to La Motte.

An interlude. I go out to explore Harbonnieres. In one short hour it has become a dead village, utterly deserted, with the sunlight shining into its empty streets. I see no one save two weary orderlies carrying a box of papers into the Mairie. I ask them for news, and they tell me they belong to our Brigade Headquarters, and that Brigade Headquarters itself has become involved in the fighting. Cheerful news, this! How long are we to remain as a dressing-station in this place? Who knows? There is no one to tell me anything; no one to give me orders. I suppose that I must use my own judgment, and become a law unto myself.

Night. Another lull in the storm. But for occasional bouts of shelling this business is like two men groping for each other stealthily in the darkness. I do not like this stillness. There is terror and mystery in it, and it can be far more unnerving than actual noise. One feels helpless. One does not know what is happening. The crafty old Boche may be lapping round this place and surrounding us.

I am beginning to feel very jumpy, and I divine the same sort of feeling in the men. I catch some of them anxiously watching my face. We have nothing to do but wait. There are no wounded, and this waiting in the baffling silence of the night becomes almost unbearable. My stomach feels like a bit of twisted wire.

I take Finch and walk through the empty street to Brigade Headquarters. Two or three tired officers are sitting at a table with a candle burning. Their faces look haggard, and seamed with strain. I know the Brigade Major slightly, and I ask him if he can give me any information.

“Sorry, Brent, nothing. We don’t know where the old blighter is! Our line, such as it is, is in the air. He may be all round us for all we know.”

“I had better hang on, sir. I don’t want to lose my men.”

He looks at me kindly.

“Yes, I’d hang on a bit. I’ll tell you what, leave an orderly here, and if we receive bad news I’ll send him along with a warning.”

“Thanks very much, sir.”

I tell Finch to remain behind at the outer door. He is a stout lad but he looks at me pathetically, like a dog that is being deserted. This night in Harbonnieres has scared him badly.

“What do I do, sir?”

“Just keep awake here, Finch, and run like hell to us if you are given a message.”

Feeling rather guilty I leave him there. Strange how this silent and intangible terror affects the men more than mere noisy, sensational happenings. They become so like children, scared by the darkness and the silence in this village of ghosts. But I, too, am growing more and more jumpy. I have been smoking incessantly during the night, and yet the tobacco appears to have had no effect upon me. I make my way back, keeping in the middle of the street. I am within fifty yards of our particular house when a figure detaches itself suddenly from a dark wall.

I swerve aside like a shying horse.

“Who’s that?”

“Got a fag on you?”

It is only some wretched infantryman who has lost himself and his unit.

“Sorry. Afraid not. What do you belong to?”

“The Lancasters, sir.”

“Had any food?”

“No, sir, not since yesterday morning.”

“Come along with me. We may be able to raise you a fag, and some bully.”

We are all too tensely tired for sleep, and my conscious self is like the blade of a knife. I am longing for daylight, and for the black bandage of the night to be removed. The suspense becomes intolerable, and to break it I suggest that we start a sing-song, and I appoint Block, who has a voice, our choirmaster. He strikes up with “If you were the only girl in the world,” and the effect on the men is instantaneous. They were becoming like a lot of mouse-traps ready to spring off and jump at the slightest touch, and this singing gives them a chance to let off steam. We sing lustily, and feel the better for this cheerful noise.

I go out into the yard. The sky is growing grey above the roofs. The empty windows of the house become visible. Day is breaking and I am glad.

I go out into the street, and hear the sound of someone running. It is Finch, pounding along with his head down. He almost cannons into me, and apologizes breathlessly.

“Sorry, sir. Major Hanson’s compliments, and it’s time to go.”

I can hear the scattered rifle fire coming from the east of Harbonnieres, and the sound is like the crack of a whip. But one must not appear flurried or too

much in a hurry. I stroll back, and shout down the steps:

“Fall in. We will have a little walk before breakfast.”

Flat and open fields lie between Harbonnieres and the next village towards the west. Everything looks grey in the early morning light, and as we tramp along I look back like Lot’s wife, half expecting to see the grey figures of Germans moving across the fields. But the landscape is empty. One of our ’planes drones over, and near a little grove of poplars I see two field-guns preparing for action. I have other things to worry me at the moment. The two ambulances which I sent off last night with some wounded have not returned and I am wondering what the devil I shall do if the day’s fighting produces a crop of casualties. Moreover, no message has come through from Fairfax, and I am beginning to be worried about him.

The next village is a little place built round one big farm, and it is utterly deserted. We occupy the farm buildings, and breakfast. Finch, who has been exploring, comes in to tell me that there are half a dozen cows left chained in the cowhouse. The French have fled in such haste that they have forgotten or not bothered to unchain the beasts.

“Can anyone milk, Finch?”

“I can, sir.”

“Well, get busy, and then set the beasts free.”

But I am not happy amid these farm buildings, for one can see nothing of the happenings out yonder. I can hear our two field-guns firing. Moreover, it seems to me essential that I should try and find out what has happened to the rest of the Field Ambulance and what has become of our motor ambulances. I call Corporal Block and order him to post himself on the edge of the open fields, and to run in and report at once if he should spot German infantry advancing. Also, I tell Sergeant Simpson to send Bates—our prize runner—off to La Motte to try and find Fairfax and our Headquarters, and to report the non-return of our ambulances.

Distant rifle and machine-gun fire. Also, there is a scrap going on in the air up above. A few shells fall near the church. Block runs in to warn me that stretcher-bearers and walking wounded are coming down the road from Harbonnieres. I send some of our bearers out to help. Two wounded officers and half a dozen Tommies are carried in, bad cases, and as we deal with them I wonder how we are going to get them away.

One of the officers, a mere youngster with a badly smashed thigh, is

frightened, poor kid. He keeps saying to me, “You won’t leave me here, doc., will you?” I reassure him, but I am feeling most damnably worried about the situation.

Block has gone out again to watch the fields.

I hear something drive into the yard. A lorry. Thank God! The driver tells me that he has been sent from La Motte. We load our stretcher-cases into it, and send off the walking wounded. A Boche shell bursts in the farmhouse garden.

Block rushes in.

“Our guns have limbered up and gone, sir. Jerry’s coming across the fields.”

I have to make an instant decision. Ought I to stay and be captured with my men, or ought we to leg it? I am torn with doubts, but I decide to go, as we have evacuated all our wounded for the moment. We bundle up our equipment, load it on stretchers, and march out, putting the village between us and the enemy. We are about a hundred yards beyond the last cottage when a regular salvo of shells descends upon the wretched little place. The steeple of the church lurches to one side. The village appears smothered in smoke. A glow spreads over it. Some building is alight.

Block is walking beside me. He gives me a loving grin.

“You timed it just right, sir.”

I wonder? Ought we to have held on?

XXII

I SEE Bates running across the fields towards us. The man is so done that hardly can he get his words out.

“No headquarters at La Motte, sir.”

“The whole unit gone?”

“Yes, sir. Not a soul in the place.”

The lad is not only exhausted, but he has been badly scared, and I can understand sudden fear seizing him in that empty village. I halt the men, tell Bates to lie down, and squatting on the grass bank beside the road, I consult my map. There are other villages lying in the valley of the Luce, but I decide to hold straight on for Villers Bretonneux. I find myself thinking of my old weaver and his wife, and the lady of the red slippers. They, too, will be homeless.

We slog on. I can see a railway line on my left. The country is flat and hedgeless, and I cannot understand why the Germans are not using cavalry. They could mop us all up with complete ease. We approach another road running north and south, and I see forty or fifty figures in khaki lying down behind one ridiculous strand of barbed wire. An officer is walking up and down. He comes forward to meet me. He is elderly and clean, and nicely shaved, with a mild face decorated with pince-nez.

“Excuse me, are you a formed body or stragglers?”

I explain that we are part of a Field Ambulance and that we have had to evacuate the last village. He apologizes nicely, and explains in return that he has been posted here to stop stragglers and to consolidate a defensive line. I sum him up as an inoffensive creature attached to some back area formation whom the crisis has gathered up and thrust into the hurly-burly. Meanwhile, I become aware of the figures lying behind the strand of barbed wire becoming suddenly and stealthily active. They have seized the chance while his back is turned to get up and make off.

“Sorry, but I’m afraid your men are doing a bunk.”

I cannot help being amused by the astonishment on his mild face. He goes clucking in pursuit, uttering shrill protests.

“I say, you men, you mustn’t do that. Come back, please.”

But his fugitive flock pay not the slightest attention. They are off across country as fast as their tired legs will carry them, and we have to leave our

gentle acquaintance looking profoundly shocked and helpless. The realities of this grim retreat, and its humour, are beyond his comprehension.

Corporal Block guffaws.

“Nice gentleman, sir, but he ’asn’t got the gift of language. He ought to have asked ’em to come back and have their hair brushed, and their bibs put on.”

“It’s a bad business, Block.”

“I should say so, sir. Seems to me we shall soon be paddling in the sea at Boulong or Calay.”

The men are getting very done, sore feet and acute fatigue exhibit themselves in a certain mental soreness, bad language and angry petulance. They are in a critical mood, so far as they are capable of criticism, and if they are feeling bitter, so am I.

What a ghastly mess our Great Men have made of things! There is a kind of tired rage in me as I plod along. It isn’t that one doesn’t realize that this war has been out of all proportion to the past, and that these vast masses of regimented humanity had just blundered up against each other and got stuck. What one does resent is that we somewhat intelligent creatures, who have volunteered to help, should be at the mercy of people who seem to be utterly lacking in constructive imagination. Why should we be sacrificed because our professional masters are not only unoriginal, but mistrust and despise originality in others? I could forgive them their method of trial by error, but what I cannot forgive is their stubborn and cynical refusal to be educated by error. Neuve Chapelle taught them nothing, nor did Loos, nor the bloody Somme. After two years of slaughtermen’s strategy they could but repeat themselves and give us Passchendaele.

Yes, I am feeling bitter and my feet are sore, and I am so sharpened to the crisis that I feel I shall never sleep again.

Nearly four years of effort, and this ghastly anticlimax.

I can see Villers Bretonneux against the sky. I glance at my watch. It is nearly four o’clock. Good God, how has the day gone?

The men are very done, and I tell them to fall out for ten minutes, but I am too strung up to flop on the grass. I walk up and down.

I get the men up again.

“Sorry, you chaps. Stick it, and I’ll find you somewhere to sleep in Villers B.”

We crawl into the town. Like everything else it seems lost in chaos. Derelict transport is parked in the main street. I make the men lie down on the

footpath, with their backs to the houses, and I go exploring. Surely the Field Ambulance must be here? My temper is growing worse and worse.

I sight a familiar figure standing outside a gateway. It is Fairfax. He waves an arm and comes forward with a look of affection and relief.

“Thank God, Stephen. I thought you were Boche prisoners. What became of you?”

“I sent a runner to La Motte, sir, and you had gone.”

“I know; we had to clear out in a hurry. The Germans were coming down from the north; but I sent a sergeant in a Ford to hunt you up.”

“He never found us.”

Fairfax takes me by the arm.

“Sorry, Stephen. Come in and eat and sleep.”

“I’ll get the men, sir. I left them up the street. They’re pretty done.”

He gives my arm a squeeze, and the anger goes out of me. I walk back to where the men are lying on the pavement.

“Come on, you chaps, I’ve found the Ambulance.”

Block scrambles up with new cheerfulness.

“That’s the stuff to give ’em, sir.”

If I slept that night, which I did, it was due to the dope Fairfax gave me. I was out on my feet, and in a state of hysterical bitterness, ready to rage up and down and blaspheme against authority.

I can remember Fairfax’s shocked, but tolerant, face as I let fly.

“They have lost the war for us. We’re done. I suppose this means another ten years of blood and muddle.”

I slept on a stretcher in the corner of a barn, and woke to find a solitary Finch squatting beside me with a cup of tea and a plate of bacon.

“What about a little breakfast, sir, and then I’ll shave you.”

“I’m damned if you will, Finch. It is not as bad as all that. Had a sleep yourself?”

“Champion, sir.”

The barn is empty, and if my head is a bit muzzy, my stomach is in order. I wolf bacon and bread, and gulp hot tea. I see Finch sitting on an empty bucket, and stuffing himself with an air of unction.

“Where’s everybody, Finch?”

“Gone, sir.”

“Gone?”

“Yes, had orders to move and begin the old game all over again. Colonel

Fairfax told me to let you 'ave your sleep out, sir. He's left a Ford ambulance behind."

"Where are they?"

"Gone to a place called Hang-hard, sir. Cheerful sort of name."

"Any news?"

"Well, I listened round the corner to the C.O. and Colonel Rankin. Seems there's an eight-mile gap in the line with no ruddy troops to put in it."

"Cheerful news, Finch."

"Well, I dare say old Jerry is as done up as we are. It 'asn't been all jam for him. Besides, the Frenchies are coming up."

"Thank God for that! Any civies left here?"

"Not a soul, sir. I 'ad a scout round."

I can guess whom Finch went to try and find, the lady of the red slippers. But I am feeling my tail in curl after ten hours' sleep and this hot food. Finch manages to produce some warm water; I believe it comes from the Ford's radiator, and I shave. A clean chin increases my morale. I lace on my field-boots, put on my steel hat, and we embark in the Ford ambulance for Hangard.

It is a day of wind and of sunlight, not one of those charnel days when northern man feels that he must either go out and howl like a dervish or commit adultery, it does not matter much which, so long as the fierce ennui in him either rebukes sin or commits it. Great poplars are flashing against a blue sky. There is a strange, goblin beauty in these deserted French villages. They are like etchings in black and white, with blue-grey or red smudges for roofs. Hangard lies in a deep valley with its great wood visible on the sky line. The road runs in the trough of the valley, and poplars flicker overhead.

I don't know why, but my mood is set for adventure. Fairfax and Headquarters are established in a farmhouse. Gibbs is in the next village, Demuin, and I ask Fairfax if I may go and join Gibbs.

"What for, Steevie?"

"Oh, I just feel like it. It must be the spring in my blood."

I go alone, and at the Demuin cross-roads, where a hollow way comes rushing down the hill to meet the valley road, I fall in with Colonel Rankin. Great poplars are singing overhead, and brushing the white clouds with their branches. Rankin is looking worried, tired and worried, and my heart goes out to him.

"Brent, the very man I want."

"What can I do, sir?"

He is looking along the deep, sunlit valley between the hills.

“I can’t see any wounded coming down.”

Does he want wounded? After a week of anguishing responsibility has he become obsessed with visions of wounded left unsuccoured?

“I wish you would explore, Brent. I don’t like to send ambulances forward unnecessarily. Gibbs has to stay up there in the village. I am going back to lunch with Fairfax.”

“Right, sir. I will go on and scout round.”

He smiles at me gratefully.

“Don’t get lost.”

I take a country walk, leaving the road, and following the open fields on the northern slope of the valley. It is the most strange and peaceful of walks. I do not meet or see a living soul. The white road down below is empty, with a river running beside it. Where is the war? I am full of a boyish curiosity. Coming to a ridge that ribs the slope I see a solitary figure on a horse like an equestrian statue silhouetted against a green-grey hill. As I approach the figure I recognize our Brigadier, a lean, laconic person with a little red moustache.

I go and salute him.

“Good morning, sir.”

“What are you doing here, Brent?”

“Looking for wounded, sir. Can you tell me anything about the situation?”

He gives me an almost whimsical look.

“I can tell you nothing, Brent, for there happens to be nothing up there.”

“Nothing at all, sir?”

“Except our dear friend, the Boche, though just how near he is, I don’t know. One should put a certain restraint upon one’s curiosity.”

I understand him. He has ridden forward alone to assure himself of the absence of anything in khaki. There is no line, nothing before us but open country and the Germans, who may be over the hill, resting and eating, before pouring forward again in their advance upon Amiens.

“Then it is not much use my going any further, sir?”

He gives me a nod and a quizzical smile.

“No, I don’t think I should go any further, Brent. In fact, I’m turning back myself. One feels a little isolated up here.”

I walk back beside his horse to the bridge at the bottom of Demuin village. He rides on up the village street, and I, seeing two of our men standing in the doorway of a house, go in and find Gibbs. Carless is with him, and I hear Carless strumming on a piano that badly needs tuning.

Gibbs seems surprised to see me.

“What the devil are you doing here, Steevie? Thought you were still asleep.”

“I felt I wanted a walk.”

“Nice country ramble, what!”

“Yes, I went up the valley, and found the Brigadier all alone on a horse.”

“No troops? Damn that ruddy piano!”

“There doesn’t appear to be a single rifle between us and the Boche, at least, not on that side of the river.”

“Cheerful prospect! Then, what the devil are we doing here?”

“Ask the gods. But I’d put a reliable man out to scout up above there. Jerry could come down on the hill on us in three minutes.”

“I will.”

This deserted village fascinates me. It has a beauty of its own as it climbs the hill from the river, with high woods on the rolling slopes above. The poor French must have left it in a panic. Some doors are open, others shut. The shutters have not been closed. I hear pigs grunting, and see chickens scratching in a yard. I explore a house that is somewhat larger than the others. The remains of a meal have been left on the table in the little *salon*. Through open doors I see bedrooms in disorder. The lower drawer of a chest of drawers is open, and in it I see a clean, bright uniform in blue and gold and claret, half covered with tissue paper. The thing touches me. Perhaps some woman had wished to take that uniform with her. Or had she opened the drawer to look at it before going? There are family photos on the walls, one of them, that of a man, has a scarf of black crape draped round it, and I conclude that he was killed earlier in the war, and that the uniform in the drawer had been his. This clean, pleasant little house saddens me. I can share the bitter feelings of the woman who has had to abandon it and all her particular treasures and household goods, knowing that she will never see them again. How this waste must hurt the thrifty French! I go out, carefully closing the street door on the silent house, and as I close it other sounds break the stillness of the deserted village.

Shells. I hear one burst on the roof of a house higher up the street. But this is only a little fellow. The solid, savage stuff is crashing down there in the valley. Standing in the doorway I can see the hollow of the valley, and the winding road and those shell-bursts shambling along it. They advance in long, deliberate strides until they reach the cross-roads by the bridge and there they remain like giant feet pounding the earth and sending up columns of smoke and soil. I see the top of a poplar come down with a crash. The death anguish of this empty village has begun.

Presently, the storm passes. I can see the shell-burst going on towards

Hangard. And suddenly the empty street is full of men, a fierce, unshaven, sweating remnant who are retiring. They do not belong to our division. Here and there I see a tunic stained with blood. Two stretcher squads come along, with bloody bodies on the stretchers.

Work for us at last. I go down to the bridge with this little crowd, but hardly have we begun to deal with these cases when the house is hit, and for the moment all is dust, debris and confusion.

Gibbs is the man for such an occasion. It is madness to stay here in this doomed village so close to the cross-roads. Two of our men have been knocked out. We clear up the mess and bundle over the bridge and along the road to Hangard. Gibbs has one of our men on his back. The retreating infantry are lining the road, and I notice one boy with a bloody head getting his Lewis gun into position on a bank. I hear Gibbs shouting to me.

“We want an ambulance, Steevie.”

“I’ll go on and bring one back.”

The last incident I remember is seeing Carless standing under a tree, and carefully examining his beloved breeches. There is a considerable tear in the left section. Lucky for Carless that it was only his breeches.

We have had to evacuate Hangard. It was being shelled to blazes, and even the oddments of infantry avoided it, and chose to try and hold the marshy poplar groves in the valley and the hills above. We move back for a few hours to a place called Domart, but when the house across the way disappears in smoke we change our quarters. I shall always remember this particular little house for the neatness of its garden, and a pear tree that was coming into flower, and for the hundreds and hundreds of neat logs piled in an outhouse.

Night. Headquarters have gone back to Thienne. Gibbs and I are in a place called Bertaucourt. For the first time since the retreat we are minus rations, and our dinner consists of biscuits and chocolate. There is no food to be found in any of these deserted villages. They have been scrounged to the bone. Gibbs and I are very tired, and we decide to sleep, though it may be dangerous to sleep. Damn the Boche! We put our men into one house, and choose another for ourselves, a house built of chalk blocks, and standing at a corner. We have found a candle-end, and I have some matches. There are two bedrooms in this single-storied house. Both are in utter disorder, bedclothes thrown back, the contents of drawers and cupboards scattered over the floor. Gibbs takes the inner bedroom; I, the outer one. We pull the clothes up over the beds and lie

down as we are, with our boots on. My bed seems to smell of its French owner, but I am too tired to care.

I wake early. Some sound has disturbed me. I hear footsteps outside the house. The street door creaks, and suddenly I jump to the conclusion that the Germans are in the village. I lie quite still. The footsteps come into the house. I see two steel helmets and faces in the doorway. They are the blue helmets of the French. The *poilus* stare at me, and I at them. They disappear without a word.

I get up and wake Gibbs. We have no water to shave in, and nothing to eat. It is a sunny morning, and we go out into the street, and discuss the crisis. I decide to send Finch back to headquarters to see if they can supply us with rations. Gibbs is looking yellow. He says there was a disgusting smell in his bedroom, and that it has made him feel sick.

I hear the quick marching step of troops. A platoon of men in blue swings past the corner of the house in the roadway, and halts. The French! *chasseurs à pied*, clean, smart, stocky-looking men. A red-headed and fierce-looking sergeant is in charge. He sees Gibbs and myself, and says something to his men. I shall never forget the scorn on his hot, proud face, the insolence of his cocked head. To these Frenchmen we are nothing but a couple of dirty, unshaven, fugitive English. They are feeling bitter against us.

The sergeant snaps out an order, and the *chasseurs* march on up the street. As they pass I can see them looking at us with contempt and hostility. The thing hurts me. The swagger and the scorn of their pride! They seem so clean and efficient and confident, but why should they despise us? This debacle is not the fault of our fighting men.

I glance at Gibbs.

“Our allies are not loving us.”

“Fierce fellow that sergeant. Shock troops. To tell you the truth, Stephen, I am damned glad to see them. Something has got to stop the Boche, and we don’t seem able to do it.”

As to rations, Headquarters are in as bad a case as we are. Finch has managed to scrounge a chunk of stale bread, and he has routed out a solitary egg from some hen-house. He insists on Gibbs and I eating the egg, and we boil it hard and cut it in half with meticulous fairness.

My temper is getting short, but this starvation has clarified one’s consciousness.

Browning's tag haunts me, "Oh, to be in England now that April's there," and for the first time in my life I realize that Browning was a sentimentalist, and that though April may, on three days in the month, fool us with the sensuous softness of a young girl, on the other twenty-seven days she is a grim and painted hag with ice and mockery in her shrivelled bosom.

Headquarters have been shelled out of Thienne, one man, a sergeant, wounded, and two horses killed.

Fairfax has retreated to a place called Castel on the other side of the river. We have orders to join him there. This is a delightful little village, swarming up a steepish hill. It has been unshelled as yet, and Bond has managed to draw rations. We will eat and sleep. Good business!

Our cavalry are here. I see quite a number of stout Frenchmen walking coolly and conversationally in the wrong direction. They look at us sulkily. Is it that they feel that we have let them in for a dirty job, and that they are shrugging the shoulders and abandoning the war?

A French doctor in uniform comes to us to plead for dressings. We supply him, and provide him with a drink, and he becomes friendly. He is a dark, dramatic little man who speaks good English, and apparently he is the M.O. of the *chasseurs* I saw in Bertaucourt.

He says, "We fight him from tree to tree and house to house, and at night we go into the villages and kill him."

I hope they do. Those *chasseurs* should be fierce fellows with the bayonet, but I want to ask our French friend about those other Frenchmen whom I have seen strolling away from the battle, but the Entente might suffer if I did.

The illusion of a peaceful night is shattered. We are about to turn in when Fairfax receives a somewhat curt order from Rankin. Probably, Rankin is feeling as short-tempered as I am. He tells us that we are on the wrong side of the river, and in the French area, and orders us to recross the bridge, and open a station at Bertaucourt!

Fairfax is very worried. He has heard that the bridge is to be blown up, and I volunteer to go and reconnoitre. I find the bridge intact, though a young R.E. officer is sitting on the parapet, awaiting events.

It is dark now. We march down out of Castel, cross the bridge, and turn

north. I am to discover later that this little bridge has become famous in history. By it General Seely and his Canadian cavalry crossed next day to make that desperate and dramatic charge which held up the Boches and helped to save us all from disaster. Great men, those Canadians.

But this night march is a queer business. On our left we have the river, on our right the black and silent country. It is eerily and horribly quiet, which suggests that no troops of ours are left in front of us, and that the Boches may be close upon us in the darkness.

What shall we find in Bertaucourt?

Fairfax and I go on ahead. It is more than possible that the Germans are in the village. We may be shot down or taken prisoners. We reach the first houses and pause to listen. Complete silence. Fairfax has a torch with him. He flashes it on the houses. We see open, empty doors. The place is deserted. But how long will it remain so?

Carless is the only officer who sleeps that night. His capacity for sleep seems insatiable. We feel that it is too dangerous to sleep, and I spend most of the night walking up and down the empty village, listening for any suspicious sound. My last pair of socks are like clammy bits of board, and my tummy a tense drum.

There is some redness in the sky at dawn. The wind has changed, and one can smell rain coming.

But there is another and more savoury smell, that of bacon being fried, and my hunger exults. We breakfast in an empty house. Our transport is parked beside the road, and ready to move off at a minute's notice.

Two officers from the 203 F.A. join us.

A few wounded are coming in, French among them. Some sort of skeleton force seems to have been pushed forward in an attempt to hold the line. What is going to be the end of it all?

I feel lazy and irresponsible, and I take myself off to a field at the back of and above the village. I am interested in what is happening, and I am growing a wise and wary bird. The morning gives me my first picture of war as one imagines it in one's youth. I see a deep valley full of sunlight, and great poplars, and water, and above it a spacious sky all blue and white. Some French 75s have tucked themselves under a grass bank and are firing steadily. I see some of our cavalry riding two by two along the bottom of the valley with little pennons fluttering on their lances.

A burst of rifle fire comes from the east. The French gun-teams appear; their guns are to be pulled out. I hurry back to the village up a narrow path

between two gardens.

Fairfax has just received an order to retire.

We are in a strange little town called Boves, and on the march we have seen masses of French transport parked beside the road. Boves seems to be a sump into which has trickled all the oddments and ooze of a broken army. We find the two other ambulances here, and Potter, looking like a perambulatory skeleton. Harker has gone sick. We hear that Potter has done great work. He may have the exterior of a Verdant Green, but he is one of those mild idealists who can be serenely fearless in a crisis.

We have all crowded into a big house in the main street. It happens to be the local doctor's house. He appears to be a collector of old glass, and possesses a big cabinet full of it. We use some of his glass for our drinks at lunch.

I explore upstairs. The house has been left in perfect and pathetic order. I enter a bedroom in which the bed has been made as though for an occupant, and behind this room I discover a bathroom. I open the door of a cupboard and find that it is the domestic linen cupboard. On one shelf rows and rows of clean socks are laid out.

The very thing. Surely, I can be allowed to help myself to a pair of socks? I am in the act of extracting a pair when the door opens and a French interpreter in uniform blows in. He is a sallow, supercilious person, and he looks at me with angry hauteur.

“What are you doing in my billet?”

“Sorry. I thought the house was empty.”

“It is not empty. Do English officers loot?”

His insolent air piques me. It is obvious that he is regarding anything English with bitterness and scorn.

“Well, you had better lock your door.”

“Most certainly, under the circumstances, I shall lock my door.”

“Isn't it rather a pity to leave everything to the Boches?”

He glares at me.

“Get out, please. If our troops had been in the line it might not have been necessary to leave our homes to the Boche.”

I go out feeling hot about the ears. Assuredly, the French are not loving us.

Our ordeal is over, and it has begun to rain.

We are on a road leading towards Amiens, and I have been making every sort of effort to post a field-card to my wife, but everybody is trying to send

news home, and in the confusion the army postal service seems to have ceased.

Our march is only a short one, and poor Potter, who can scarcely hobble, has to ride in an ambulance. We arrive in a little village on a hill, and in the centre of it stands a biggish schoolhouse in the middle of a courtyard. All the houses are locked up and shuttered.

Fairfax chooses the schoolhouse for our unit. Its locked door seems to arouse a kind of northern rage in him. He sends his batman for an axe from one of the wagons, and we stand and watch our C.O. burst in the door.

Within we find a little paradise for tired troops, a little *salon*, a little kitchen, and three bedrooms above all with their beds neatly made, and exquisitely clean. I hope these good French will forgive us for storming their house, and wallowing in those dream-beds. For the moment the war seems far away.

Before dinner I go for a ramble. The rain has passed, and the sky is piled with great clouds, and the distances are very blue. I find a mobile anti-aircraft battery on a hill behind a wood, and I ask a corporal if I can slip a field-postcard in their post-bag. I scribble my wife's address in pencil, and leave those happy words undeleted:

“I am well.”

In the far blue distance I can see columns of smoke rising and the black smudges of shell-bursts.

So, we are still fighting.

But how will it end?

XXIII

GREY, green weather, a dim sky, the wind in the north-east. We are billeted in a village not far from Abbeville. In fact during the last two weeks we have been pushed from village to village, so that I can say that I have slept in ten different beds in a fortnight. We are part of the wreckage of a fighting force; no one needs us, and no one seems to know what to do with us, and being superfluous and an encumbrance we are kicked like stray dogs from door to door.

The 81st Division has ceased to exist as a division. We hear that it ended the retreat a few hundred rifles strong, and that most of these were men returned from leave or from courses or from hospital. The remnants have been incorporated with reinforcements into a composite brigade, and been sent to patch up the new front. We are cut off from everybody. We receive mysterious orders from mysterious sources to move here or to move there.

The reaction is upon us.

This bleak April mood is ours. We know nothing of what is happening, but are windy with rumours. We hear that the Division is to be scrapped, and this suggests that the three ambulances will become superfluous. Our happy family will be broken up, and all of us sent hither and thither like anonymous sheep.

This prospect depresses me.

Am I to begin the war all over again as a casual cypher, to be pushed in among strangers, to lose Fairfax and my friends, and the men who trust me? I have been something of a man in this community. I shall feel rather like a lost, frightened and rebellious child in some new slave-state.

We read Haig's message to the troops, and instead of inspiring us, it fills us with bitterness. But for years of bloody botching we should not have been brought to this pass. They may say what they like, and insist that it is an army's business to fight and to sustain losses, but it is the brainless fashion of fighting that has been our undoing.

A letter has come in warning Fairfax that the ambulance will be disbanded, and the personnel used as reinforcements.

This makes me sick and miserable. After ten days of hell is this to be our reward? I go out into a little wood behind this village, and wander about in it, and find a few primroses in flower. The sky is grey, and a north-east wind is blowing. Tragedy, tragedy! And yesterday I had such a happy letter from my

wife.

Yes, I suppose I am a selfish beast, but the war has taught me one thing. He who rushes impetuously to sacrifice himself will most certainly be sacrificed on the altar of official cynicism and indifference. Who will care if I am killed? Will it cause authority to suffer one single qualm? Why should it? And this, I think is the ultimate beastliness of war as waged by masses of humanity. We become no better than slaves, numbered and ticketed, to be sold to the next offensive. We cease to be individual men, or in any way master of our little fate. We are just meat for the machine.

We have been moved suddenly to the Lumbres area between St. Omer and the sea, and we suspect that this means that we are to hand over all our equipment at St. Omer, and be disbanded.

It is raining.

The purlieus of this village are swarming with Chinks. They are like yellow lice.

I am called down to a camp to attend one of these Mongols. He is a huge man, and in the full sweat of acute influenza, and lice are crawling over the warm wet soil of him. He stinks incredibly. The fug and the smell in the tent make me feel sick.

Another order to move, and in the reverse direction. We find ourselves returned to the area from which we have come. This must help amazingly towards winning the war!

But this is a pleasant village and the sun is shining, and a letter has arrived in the orderly room warning us that we shall not be disbanded yet, but used for other purposes. What purposes?

Rumour has it that the Americans are being rushed across in thousands. Well, thank God for that. They may help to extract us from this mess.

There is a pretty servant in my billet, and the apple blossom is in flower. Finch is making love to the wench.

I have just had a photo of my small daughter.

More good news. Two officers in all Field Ambulances are to be entitled to the rank and pay of Temporary Major. Gibbs and I are to be the recipients of

this favour. Moreover, Colonel Rankin appears out of the blue in a staff-car, and has lunch with us. The Divisional cadres are to be retained and used for the training of Americans. Two American Divisions are to disembark very shortly, and will be distributed in this part of Picardy.

Rankin hints that not only Gough, but several of our divisions are in disgrace. We were one of them, but not so seriously as two or three others, so we are to be relieved.

I suppose the country or the politicians are shouting for victims. Or are the French responsible? It is damned unfair. What more could Gough have done with the troops at his disposal? We were the victims of years of human wastage and bloody offensives.

Rankin tells us we can put up our crowns.

There must be a binge.

Sergeant Simpson and three other N.C.O.s waylay me outside their mess.

“We’d like to congratulate you, sir. Every man in the unit will be glad.”

Do I blush? It is one of the war’s happy moments.

We prepare a mighty binge. Bond has produced champagne, and I have warned Finch to be on duty in case I may need helping to my billet. There is a piano in the house in which we mess, and Carless is incessantly strumming and singing “Roses in Picardy.” The thing haunts me. I feel as though a blackbird were singing just outside the windows of my soul.

We have a vast binge, and in the middle of it we hear an improvised glee-party singing in the garden.

“Good luck to our two tough majors.

Good luck to our two ruddy majors.

May they swear and they curse

And not be the worse——”

I cannot remember how the last line went, or what they found to rhyme with majors. We have to appear at the window, and there are cheers. But the evening is full of surprises. The decorous Potter drapes himself with a rug, and crawls around the room asserting that he is a cow, and imploring someone to milk him. He loses his pince-nez, and Gibbs treads on them. Luckily Potter has a reserve pair. Carless borrows a skirt from the concierge’s wife, and gives us a skirt dance, accompanied by the gramophone.

I suppose I am drunk, but it is a lovely intoxication. I have a recollection of

Finch assisting me to my billet and up the stairs. I believe he puts me to bed with fatherly firmness.

He tells me next morning that I would persist in trying to go to bed with my feet on the pillow, and that I kept asking him for the nether portions of my pyjamas.

“Can’t go on parade like this, Finch.”

But I still seem to be something of a hero, and more so, to this very human animal.

We move once more, and crossing the Somme near St. Valery, find ourselves in sweet, unspoilt country full of beech woods and young wheat. Our goal is a little place called Le Mesnil.

I shall never forget my first glimpse of Le Mesnil. We cross a plateau, come to a wood where the road turns south in a sharp spiral, and I see below me a green valley which seems to be one flowery mass of apple blossom. The valley is splendid with tall trees, and the sunlight is shining through the young foliage upon the very green grass. There is an old red brick château like an island in a sea of flower. A stream runs through the village, and we look down upon the chimneys of the little white houses of this most sweet place.

I am conscious of a feeling of almost childish wonder. It seems almost unbelievable that we are to sojourn here for weeks, after the things we have suffered. The peace and the beauty of the place almost frighten me. What if the mercy of the gods should be ironical?

The French family who own the château are in residence. The men are to be billeted in the farm buildings of the château, and we officers are to be allowed a room to mess in, but only Monsieur le Colonel can be permitted to occupy a bedroom. This does not worry me, as I prefer to be able to retreat to some corner of my own. The mayor of Le Mesnil has left with the concierge a list of houses where officers can find billets. We choose them at random, and I select the name of Malaunay, perhaps because it has a pleasant sound. Victoire Malaunay, No. 6, rue de Bois l’Abbaye.

These beech trees are superb, and the apple blossom is ravishing. I walk up the street of Le Mesnil—with the little stream sharing the road with me—and I wonder what happens here in wet weather. There is a funny little church, and a Place surrounded with pollarded limes, some shops, and a small hotel—the Toison d’Or—also two or three estaminets and a schoolhouse. Some of Le Mesnil is red brick, but most of it white plaster, brown tiles and green shutters.

Finch plods along beside me with my valise on his back. He has sighted the estaminets.

“Posh place, this, sir.”

I suspect that he is on the look out for attractive things in petticoats.

The rue de Bois l’Abbaye turns south just beyond the Place. It seems to consist of farmhouses with big gates opening into yards. We come to No. 6. It, too, is a farmhouse, but smaller and different from the others, a little white place set back behind a patch of garden in which polyanthus, tulips and white narcissi are in flower. It has an air of being a little less logical and *pratique* than most French places. I open a gate in a green iron railing, and walk up the path to the door.

I knock. I expect to see a middle-aged Frenchwoman, perhaps moustached and bearded, and in black, but the person who opens the door to me is a girl, a curiously petite little person with a solemn face, and oat-coloured hair. She has a pretty pallor, and eyes that make one think of blue windflowers on a sunny day. I salute her, and she regards me with a gravity that is not wholly welcoming.

“Pardon, mademoiselle, but is this Madame Malaunay’s?”

She nods, and I explain that I am to be billeted in the house.

“Bien, monsieur.”

She lets me in, and goes to fetch her mother.

Madame is a grey-haired, jocund old lady, but her eyes are shrewd, and her mouth capable of making a bargain. We are very polite to each other. She conducts me through a kind of parlour-kitchen complete with stove and a picture of the Sacré Cœur. Another girl is sitting sewing at the window, a dark and rather fierce young woman who glances at me consideringly over her shoulder. La Petite has returned to another chair by the window, and I see her pale head bent to the sunlight like the head of a flower. Are these two girls sisters? Finch has carried in my valise and I tell him to wait, and I follow madame along a tiled passage and up some white wooden stairs. There is a big landing above, and she opens a door on the right, and smiles at me.

“Entrez, monsieur.”

It is a very plain little room, but it pleases me, for its window does not face towards the street, but looks out upon fruit trees and a garden. I thank madame and tell her that the room will suit me admirably, and that I hope to be no bother to her.

As we descend the stairs, I am aware of Finch’s voice airing its estaminet French, and its tones strike me as too gaudy and jocund. I find him sitting on

my valise, smoking a cigarette, and looking in a rather puzzled way at two young women whose aloofness suggests that they do not appreciate Finch's free-and-easy canteen courtesies. The idiot! I am rather sharp with Finch, and tell him to put his cigarette out and carry my valise upstairs. I follow him and show him the room.

"A word to the wise, Finch. This isn't an estaminet."

He grins at me.

"The m'amselles seem a bit sticky, sir."

I warn him that this house is different from anything we have inhabited hitherto.

I walk back to the château for tea, and find that we are to mess in a charming *salon* panelled in cream and gold. It looks out upon a forecourt and a gravelled drive, and stretches of grass planted with fruit trees, all shut in by a high, old stone wall. Iron gates end the vista. I know that this war has coarsened and hardened one, but here one seems to shed a shabby toughened skin, and to become sensitive to sweet, peaceful things. I say in my heart, "God bless America, and may this interlude last out the Spring."

After tea and half an hour in the orderly-room with Fairfax I wander back to my billet. It appears to be the custom in Le Mesnil for its people to bring their chairs out of doors and to sit in the evening sunlight chatting and sewing. It is a feminine population, sprinkled with a few old men. I meet the village *curé*, who looks a plump, pink humanist, and I salute him. I turn into the rue Bois l'Abbaye, and find that the Malaunay family follows the prevailing custom. Mother and daughters are sitting on hard chairs in the front garden. La Petite is wearing a black apron powdered with purple pansies. I smile and salute them as I go in. The elder daughter gives me a *farouche* look, and her black eyes are not friendly.

Finch has brought along my kit-bag. I unpack, arrange the family photos on a shelf, hang my spare tunic and trench coat in a corner cupboard that has a curtain, and transfer shirts, etc., to a chest of drawers. This little room has a homely feeling. I am the possessor of a small table, and I place it by the window, and arrange books and papers on it. I shall be able to write up my journal here.

Afterwards I go out to explore. These three women make me feel rather shy, and something of an interloper. I meet La Petite's eyes for a moment, but they seem to close up like windflowers. The road takes me to the Bois l'Abbaye, and before reaching it I pass a great crucifix set in a horseshoe of pollarded limes. Le Mesnil seems to be *religieuse*. The Bois l'Abbaye is a splendid wood of beeches, not grown like ours in England, but soaring straight and high, profoundly peaceful and mysterious. The great trees are just coming

into leaf, and the evening sunlight shining through them is sacramental.

On my way back I pass No. 6. Mother and daughters are still sitting in the garden, but I am shy and pretend not to see them. These Frenchwomen make me feel a barbarian.

At dinner Carless complains of his billet.

“Too ruddy austere. A dear old skeleton in crape. What’s yours like, daddy?”

I suddenly realize that Carless would be more than superfluous in my billet. He is the sort of Englishman who seems to think that every Frenchwoman is a cocotte. I confess that it is quiet and comfortable, but that the people do not appear very friendly.

“Any girls, daddy?”

I snub him with irony.

“Five, and all supremely austere.”

“Well, I’m going to look around. My dear old skeleton——”

I want to remind Carless that we are not in a dug-out or a cellar, but Fairfax does it for me.

“We are guests of a very charming family, Carless. Let’s rest our war language. It’s a little out of place here.”

Carless looks hurt and sulky, but so rarely does Fairfax use his authority in the mess, that when he does so, the effect is paternal and complete.

The Americans do not arrive for a week. Their Divisional Headquarters are to be established at Beauchamp, about a mile and a half away, and their battalions will be dispersed over a considerable area. Apparently, Le Mesnil is to remain ours, and it seems so pleasantly ours that I am glad.

Every time I leave my billet or return to it I have to pass through the parlour-kitchen, with its stove and its spotless tiled floor and supremely simple furniture. I feel that I ought to apologize to these Frenchwomen for invading the curiously intimate yet secret atmosphere of this room. Often, madame is there alone, cooking or sewing, for I understand that the girls, like so many other Frenchwomen, are working on the farm. I am less afraid of Madame Victoire than the girls, and one afternoon I stop to ask her whether Finch is making himself a nuisance. He comes in to clean my boots, and bring me my early tea, and he is supposed to make my bed, but after that he has no business

here.

Madame assures me that Finch is quite *bon garçon*. I hesitate, and she asks me to sit down.

I sit down. My French is adequately fluent, if not very academic, and Madame and I chat. She tells me that she is a widow, and that Jean, her son, is at the war, as also is Gabrielle's fiancé. Which is Gabrielle?

"Is that your elder daughter, madame?"

It is. Madame confesses that Gabrielle is temperamental, and that she worries excessively over the war and her Louis; no doubt that explains her moodiness, and her unfriendliness to an ally whose army is in disgrace. I say that the war has been a terrible ordeal for France, but now that the Americans are arriving the Boches will never come to Le Mesnil. I am conscious of wanting to discover the name of La Petite, and whether she, too, is fiancée.

"Has your son been wounded, madame?"

"Yes, at Verdun. And Gabrielle's Louis was wounded on the Chemin des Dames. He is in the artillery. And has monsieur been wounded?"

I have to say no, and I feel rather ashamed of it.

"That is a blessing. Monsieur is married, I believe?"

So, they have been looking at my photos! Yes, I have a wife and a small daughter in England.

Madame beams upon me. She appears to be regarding me with more confidence.

"It is very worrying for the women, monsieur. I am glad, in a way, that Pauline has no fiancé yet."

So that is her name. I am moved to be a little more personal.

"I hope your daughters do not resent my being here?"

This seems to amuse madame. But why? She tells me that they all are glad to have a senior officer, a commandant, in the house, and that I do not disturb them in the least. I am not quite sure whether my respectable innocuousness pleases me.

I happen to overhear a family conversation. I am in my room with the door open.

A voice says, "Monsieur le Commandant est très gentil."

Another voice adds, "Mais, très timide."

Timide! I feel a little hot over that word, and I pick up my dictionary and turn the word up. It may be translated as bashful or shy!

Do they expect me to be a kind of Carless? Carless, whose philosophy of

sex is so candid and elemental. He is always arguing that purity, so called, is utter humbug, a convention imposed upon the young by nasty old men who hate to think of all the world enjoying happy sinning. He says that when a man plays the noble fellow and talks about love transcending lust, he is just a funk.

The news is not encouraging. We appear to be having a sticky time up in the north after the rout of the Portuguese. The Boches are in Merville. That means that Le Hameau farm has been overrun and done to death. I am sorry.

Mademoiselle Pauline is a stately little person. It is extraordinary how much stateliness can be concentrated in a figure less than five feet high. What is more, even in her working-clothes, and wheeling a wheelbarrow up the street, she remains a creature of compact dignity. I go to open the yard gates for her, and offer to relieve her of the wheelbarrow.

I am repulsed. She thanks me, but assures me that the war has accustomed her to such work.

From my window I can see her hoeing in the garden. She wears leather gloves and a kind of sunbonnet. I gather that she milks the two cows. This little farm is carried on by these two girls, an old man and a hunchbacked boy.

This marvellous, radiant weather shows no signs of breaking. Lilacs are out, and a red thorn, and in the early morning I can hear the birds singing in the Bois l'Abbaye. The orchards are still a smother of blossom, and the beech trees like columns of green smoke.

These French girls work hard, but in the evening they appear like ladies of leisure in their black dresses and flowered aprons, with hair sleek and glossy. La Petite is rather fond of a little pair of heelless slippers in which she shuffles over the tiled floors. I happen to glance at these slippers one morning as I pass through, and I am aware of her somehow resenting my scrutiny. But why? They are such seductive yet innocent little slippers, but from that moment they disappear. Miss Pauline trips about in neat black boots.

A tragedy! I come back from the château after tea to write letters home, and find Madame and La Petite in the parlour-kitchen. There is a bowl of water on the table, and one of La Petite's hands is being held over it, and Madame is sponging a finger with a wad of wool. There is blood in the bowl. Gabrielle is being temperamental in a corner, huddled up on a chair, as though blood suggested death and horror.

What has happened? La Petite has cut her finger while attempting to sharpen a sickle. It is a nasty gash, and I become professional. I hold her wrist gently and examine the cut. I say that this is my affair, and that I will go and procure proper dressings and bind up her finger. She looks up at me with peculiar, intent seriousness, like a child.

“Is it necessary, monsieur?”

“Absolutely. Such things must not be neglected.”

I walk back to the château and get what I require—gauze, lint, wool and a bandage from our Sergeant Dispenser. When I return La Petite is sitting in a chair, still holding her hand over the basin. The bleeding has stopped, but she looks intensely pale. I ask her if she feels faint.

“No, monsieur.”

Gabrielle has disappeared, but madame comes in and watches me dress La Petite’s finger. I ask her if I am hurting her. Her eyes float up to mine.

“No, monsieur.”

Madame remarks that I am very skilful, and that I must have succoured many poor wounded. I say that it is my job, and that so far as I can see it is the only merciful business in this ghastly war. Madame nods her head, and asks me whether doctors have to dress the wounded under shell-fire. I say yes. As I am tying off the bandage round La Petite’s wrist, I am aware of her eyes fixed upon something. She is looking at the piece of ribbon on my tunic.

It is madame who asks the question.

“Monsieur has a decoration?”

“Yes.”

“Like our Croix de Guerre?”

“We call it the Military Cross.”

“Given for some brave act, monsieur?”

I smile at madame.

“Yes; because I was too frightened to run away.”

I am aware of La Petite’s eyes looking up at me. There is an enigmatic something in them, a kind of profound and intent questioning of my secret self and of some quality in our mutual self-consciousness. I stare into her eyes for a moment, and then give her hand a pat, and turn away.

Gabrielle is standing in the doorway, with a crooked finger on her lip, watching us with a kind of *farouche*, tragic curiosity. A little shiver seems to go through me. Why is that dark and passionate young woman looking at us so strangely?

Carless has discovered my billet.

Coming back to change into slacks for dinner, I discover Carless leaning over the green fence of No. 6. Damn the man! I suppose he has spied out the land, and has strolled up the rue de Bois l'Abbaye to play the part of fascinator. I could lay my cane across our Don Juan's backside. I can see the Malaunays in their garden, and as I come nearer I get the impression that Carless's budding amorousness has been subjected to a late frost. Madame Victoire and Gabrielle are knitting; La Petite has a newspaper on her knees. She is reading out some pieces of news to the others. The three faces appear to be maintaining a deliberate blindness towards this man leaning over the fence.

Carless taps the bars with his cane. He has a little, whimsical smirk on his face. I hear him say, "Que dit le journal, m'amselle?" I see Pauline look at him for a moment, close her lips firmly, and then go on reading.

Carless hears my footsteps, turns quickly, and assumes surprise.

"Hallo, daddy! I just blew along to see if you were in your billet."

I open the gate, and salute the Malaunays. Madame smiles at me. The two girls look at neither of us.

"Just going to change."

Carless follows me in. He is the sort of person whose sensibilities have to be stimulated with a curry-comb for any reaction to be produced. He saunters up into my room after me and sits down on my bed.

"Frosty bits, those two wenches. I'd like to cuddle the little fair one."

"Would you?"

"Prosaic old thing, you are, daddy. Haven't you noticed what a throat and a bosom she's got on her?"

Perhaps I am a little afraid of showing my face to Carless. I am sitting in a chair, bending down and unlacing my field-boots. Something blazes in me. I want to tell him that he is a vulgar, silly beast, but Carless might only laugh, and make the obvious retort.

I say, "I expect you know a good deal more about women than I do."

He slaps his leg with his cane.

"Well, I've had some experience. Say, daddy, is there another bedroom here? I'd like to move in. I bet you I'd cuddle that little fair bit in a week."

I have one boot off, and my impulse is to throw it in Carless's complacent, fornicating face. But I sit up straight in my chair and look at him.

"You are a rather filthy sort of beast, Carless. Can't you ever see any beauty in things? It seems to me you know only one sort of woman."

He is a little taken aback for a moment. His eyes are half shut. Then he slaps his leg, and lets out a laugh.

“You are funny, daddy. Feeling paternal, what?”

I bend down and take off my other boot, for I know that my face must be betraying my anger.

“I’d keep away from here if I were you, Carless, or you’ll get snubbed. These girls aren’t——”

Again I hear him laugh and slap his leg.

“You have had a week’s start of me, you old devil.”

I lay the second boot carefully aside. The urge to fling it in his face is almost too strong.

“Oh, all right. Try the Juan game, my lad. I’ll bet you a new pair of breeches, the sort you cultivate, that you’ll be put in your proper place.”

“Righto, daddy. You sentimental people never get up the stairs.”

My God, am I in love with this child? Yes, I know now that I am. But I am in love with her as one falls in love with beautiful things, the spring, the singing of birds, the apple blossom, trees in young leaf. It is all part of this exquisite spring, this sweet season after a winter of mud and of fear and of squalor. It is like drinking wine, and not expecting to be warmed by it.

I go and look at my wife’s photo, and I know that I love both these women, if a little differently. My love for Mary is part and parcel of my life, like the soil out of which all one’s good urges grow, and somehow this spring madness makes me feel more tender towards her. Would she understand? Perhaps? We men have been so starved of all life’s more beautiful and gentle satisfactions that this spring can be a sort of intoxication.

But I am not a Carless.

I say that to myself, and instantly I am challenged by Carless’s sexual realism. All this is mere sublimation, a romantic and sentimental prevarication, mere muslin in which one drapes an illusion and calls it sacred love. I seem to hear Carless’s laugh, and his voice saying, “What you really want is the girl’s body, and if you weren’t a humbug you would do your best to seduce her. Also, my dear, nine women out of ten ask to be seduced. All this virtue business is just a chemise, and modesty covers itself just to provoke the exposure. You romantic asses make women loathe you in secret. They get nothing but highfalutin from you, just when they are dying to be tumbled on the bed.”

Damn Carless! Yet, I know that the sensuous part of me desires Pauline, to possess her utterly and completely, to drink with her the cup of red wine to its dregs. Dregs! Yes, that is where the world’s Carlesses are cheated of that which transcends mere cellular satisfaction. Surely man is more conscious than

the beasts, and that his significance rests in the spiritualizing of his consciousness. Do all women desire to be regarded as mere ewes? I do not believe it. Surely, the essential and exquisite dreamer in woman should ask for the lover rather than the butcher in man? An exquisite memory can be more precious and lasting than the ghost of a greed that slinks off satisfied? If a woman has in her to understand that which a man feels for her, and that which he denies himself, she will know that a love that lacks restraint and compassion is mere gross selfishness.

But this Carless business must be thrown out into the street. I am not going to have him sniffing outside these railings. I go down, carry out a chair, and ask if I may join the family circle. Madame nods and smiles. La Petite does not look at me.

I ask her what the news is in the French paper she has been reading.

“Oh, about the war, monsieur, and the Americans.”

“Any good news?”

“Only that the Americans arrive.”

I pretend to be piqued, and she looks at me suddenly.

“Does not monsieur understand how we French feel?”

My eyes hold hers for a moment.

“Of course I do. Do you think I wish to see Le Mesnil in ruins?”

She gives me the paper to read, but I confess that some of the French is beyond me. She moves her chair nearer to mine, and pointing with a twig of a finger, translates for me. We are very close, and I love her.

I come back late in the dusk, and I find Carless in my chair. His cap lies on the grass and he is smoking a cigarette, and looking whimsical. The atmosphere strikes me as tense and chilly. La Petite has moved her chair a little way from the others. As I reach the gate Carless gets up and replaces his chair nearer to Pauline’s.

“Hallo, daddy. Heard from the wife to-day? And how is la petite enfant?”

So that is his idea of strategy? I am married, and nearly forty, and have a small daughter. I feel like taking him by the ear, and removing him.

He smirks at me.

“Come on; there’s room for everybody. Squattez vous.”

I am suddenly aware of Pauline getting up on her small feet, and walking deliberately towards the house. In the dusk her hair and her face seem of the same exquisite pallor, like pure wax.

Carless jerks round.

“I say, m’amselle, it’s too early to couchez.”

She pauses by the door, and makes the most unexpected of replies.

“I like to say my prayers, monsieur.”

I divine a sudden deflation in Carless. Prayers! He giggles, and turns to Gabrielle.

“I say, that’s marvellous. Do you say prayers, too, m’amselle?”

Gabrielle looks at him fiercely.

“Yes, sometimes, for my brother, and for someone else.”

Carless reaches for his cap, puts it on, stands up and gives a kind of waggle to his trousers.

“Well, I’d better be getting out my little prayer book, too. Nighty-night, daddy. Bon soir, madame.”

Mother and daughter reply with perfect politeness.

“Bon soir, monsieur.”

Carless swaggers out, and goes off down the street whistling “Roses in Picardy.” Damn him, why whistle that? I sit down in the chair that was Pauline’s.

Madame says that my friend is something of a flaneur. I say rather irritably that he is not my friend, nor is he the kind of friend I would wish them to have.

Gabrielle looks at me sharply in the dusk.

“If monsieur understands that, it is well.”

I become aware of a movement, a presence. Pauline has come back. I get up quickly and give her her chair.

XXIV

THE Americans.

I think we are not a little jealous of these men from across the Atlantic, for, perhaps we feel that the last dramatic act of the war will find them filling the stage. We are rather like the hero who has set out to rescue the princess from the dragon, and found that beast too potent and strong for us, and all the killing and the glory will go to this other knight. Yet, when one considers it, their coming into this war from the great distances of all those States is a wonderful and a singular adventure, and perhaps more splendid and unselfish than ours. We are more wise now as to the inevitableness of our intervention. It was not Belgium alone, but our secret fear of the wild beast that forced us into this fight. I cannot see that America had any such peril to persuade her. Whatever history may say about it, to me it is one of the most splendid and superlative things that has happened since the first Crusade.

One of their battalions is to march into Beauchamp, and our Brigadier, and a platoon, or rather the training cadre of one of our battalions, are to receive them. Fairfax and I decide to go and see the show, and we ride over and, leaving our horses with two grooms, take up a position near the church. The whole neighbourhood appears to have swarmed into this small town. The French have put on their Sunday clothes, and an excitement that is big with emotion.

Our English platoon is drawn up in the Place opposite the church. The Tricolor and the Stars and Stripes are flying from the church spire. Some U.S.A. staff officers have arrived upon the scene, and are talking to our General. They are big men, with hard, dry, dusty faces.

The battalion arrives. It has marched seven miles, but it comes in with a swing and a swagger, grey canvas gaiters well together, the tight, trim uniform making the men look slim yet big about the shoulders. They are a fierce, fine lot, and as I look at them I am conscious of a thrill that is a curious compound of jealousy, joy and sadness. These men indeed are the Flowers of the Forest—a forest that has not been cut over and mutilated like ours. I am astonished at the physique of these Americans. It is indeed a new world storming in to make good all the bloody sacrifices France has suffered.

One thing that strikes me and somehow makes me sad is the way these Yankees seem to tower over the men of our English cadre. They make them look small and insignificant, almost humiliatingly so. Our men's bayonets do

not seem to rise above the tops of the American steel hats.

But the French are cheering. This civilian crowd of peasants is moved by some elemental emotion. I see girls throwing flowers at their new heroes, and running along and holding to the men's arms. We English seem rather out of the picture, and yet one cannot accuse the French of fickleness. This battalion of strong, fresh young men from over the seas is to them a symbol, a sign of hope, a blessed pledge that their country will not again be ravished.

I feel Fairfax's hand on my arm.

"Seen enough, Stephen?"

I turn and look up into his face, and its sadness moves me.

"Yes, I think so."

We go and get on our horses and, unnoticed, ride away.

I find Pauline alone in the kitchen preparing a salad. It is the first time I have been alone with her, and I am so conscious of it that emotionally I am the complete coward. How absurd that one should be filled with fear by this small creature! There is a bunch of lilac in a vase on a little table by the window, and I go and put my nose to it.

I ask Pauline if she has been to Beauchamp to see the Americans march in.

"No, monsieur."

I say that they are a fine, fierce-looking lot, but I suppose my French is fantastic, for she does not seem to understand me.

"Comment, monsieur?"

I try to explain, and give it up, while watching her fingers busy with the lettuce and endive. Why does she always address me as "Monsieur?" It sounds so dreadfully formal, and yet, somehow, I cannot imagine her calling me Etienne. Moreover, she appears to be in a particularly still and stately little mood, and her eyes look at me like two round, blue enigmas.

I say that the lilac smells very sweet, and I ask if I may have a sprig for my room. She nods at me unsmilingly, and seems to become absorbed in this salad business. I break off a piece of lilac and stand holding it.

"May it bring us all good luck, Pauline."

She looks at me suddenly and strangely.

"Yes, monsieur, and le Général Foch."

"And the Americans. We poor English are rather out of the picture."

"Comment, monsieur?"

I pretend to laugh, and say that my French seems to be as unsuccessful as our strategy, but now that we have Foch and the Americans everything will be

different. And then, Gabrielle comes in, and glances at me queerly, and I feel suddenly foolish, and march off to my room with my piece of lilac. I put it in my tooth-glass, and stand the glass on the shelf between the pictures of Mary and Joan Phyllis.

Three American medical officers from their Bearer Companies have been attached to us for instruction. They are to spend a week with us, and then to be replaced by three more officers. Fairfax is to lecture to the Americans on the collecting, treating and evacuation of wounded in the forward area, and he asks me to help him by supplying some practical details.

Rankin has appointed me as liaison officer to the American headquarters at Beauchamp. At first I thought it would mean my having to leave No. 6 rue Bois l'Abbaye, but I am to have the use of a Ford ambulance for myself and the U.S.A. colonel.

I like these Americans, particularly Major Richmond, who corresponds to our D.A.D.M.S. He is a tall, grave, pale man, with a sudden smile, and a dry humour that delights me. Colonel Muller, who corresponds to Rankin, is a grey-headed, stoutish, rather grim person, prematurely aged. To begin with, I was a little baffled by a certain air of aloofness, almost of suspicion. These Americans seemed shy of me, and my position is a delicate one. I am not expected to give advice unless I am asked for it.

Richmond and I soon come to understand each other. He is a Southerner, and full of flexibility in spite of his rather austere manner. Nor is his voice quite that of a Yankee. He speaks French with some fluency. I ask him to dine with us in our mess at Le Mesnil château, and afterwards I take him to my billet and introduce him to the Malaunays. We sit in the garden and talk. No, I am not jealous of Richmond.

I stroll back with him by moonlight under the beech trees to Beauchamp. Our talk becomes intimate and easy. I confess to him that at first I was conscious of a vague feeling of unfriendliness between England and America.

He laughs gently.

“We are a little sensitive. Also, we come as raw troops.”

I tell him that we English have suffered from that sense of rawness.

“Did you expect to find us patronizing?”

“Perhaps.”

“God forbid. I think it comes down to this, that we have had to learn with blood and tears, and if we can save you some of the blood——”

He stands quite still for a moment, looking up at the moon.

“Can you, Brent? I wonder? I suppose war is rather like growing up. We're wild young guys, and we shall have to go through the bloody business for ourselves. That seems to be a law of nature.”

Yes, I like these Americans, their vitality, their keenness, their engaging candour. They make me think of a lot of big boys. As to breed, they are an amazingly composite crowd, and some of them have very little English, but the same spirit seems to permeate them. I am impressed by the passion for thoroughness in many of their officers, and I like their phrase "Fall down." Colonel Muller is always using it when inspecting some of his units. "I don't want you boys to fall down."

They keep my wits working. Muller insists on seeing everything that can be seen. They are to use English equipment, and so our F.A. equipment is of supreme interest to them. Muller is always stopping the car to get out and inspect something, a water-cart, or a G.S. wagon, or our latrines. He has me over a field-cooker. We are not issued with field-cookers, and I tell him so, and his grim face lights up.

"Guess that's the first time I've caught you with your pants down, Major Brent."

I laugh, and say that, at all events, I was honest about it.

He pats me on the shoulder.

"Yes, sir, you were."

But as to their phrase "Falling down," I give them one piece of candid advice. I tell them that we have learnt to transcend false modesty when shells are about, and that there is no shame, but horse sense, in falling down.

"We call it doing a belly-flop, sir."

That seems to tickle Muller to death. He caresses his somewhat mature abdomen.

"Well, sir, I have something to flop on!"

Yes, I like these Americans.

I have been dining with the American Staff at Beauchamp. It is a beautiful night, warm and still, with a full moon shining, and the mood moves me to walk back by way of the Bois l'Abbaye. The great trees are all black and silver, and still as death. Beyond the wood the narrow road runs between open fields, and when I come to the Crucifix and its lime trees my mood moves me to yet another whim. I turn aside, towards the great cross, and when I am within three yards of it I am startled by a shadow that seems suddenly to disentangle itself from the cross. It is a woman rising from her knees.

I am about to apologize for disturbing her when I see her face in the moonlight.

"Mademoiselle Pauline!"

She stands there quite still. I gather that she has been praying here, and I

feel like some tourist who has blundered into a chapel and found a woman at her devotions.

“I am sorry. I came this way to look at the wood.”

She does not move, and there is something in her stillness that troubles me.

“Shall I leave you here?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

I am about to leave her when she makes a sudden movement and says rather breathlessly:

“No, if you please, I will come with you.”

I don’t know why, but I get the impression that she is afraid of something. Not of me, surely?

We walk side by side, yet a little apart, down the moonlit road.

I say, “Forgive me. Can I put it into French? I feel that you have had bad news.”

“No, monsieur.”

“Is that the truth?”

“Yes.”

There is a short silence, and then she says, almost curtly, “Will you do me a favour, Monsieur Brent? I do not wish that officer, Carless, you call him, I think, to come again to our house.”

I look at her sharply.

“Has he been to your house?”

She nods.

“He is not gentil. He behaves to me——”

Damn Carless! Has the fool been trying the gaillard game on this child?

I try to tell her in blundering French that if Carless has been making a fool of himself, the thing is unforgivable. I will make sure that it shall not happen again, and I try to assure her that all English officers are not like Carless. But I feel there is some secret discord between us, and that she will not easily be appeased. We reach the village, and there are things I am burning to say that I cannot say, but just before we come to the gate, I manage to blurt out a few words.

“Please, tell me, this hasn’t spoilt our friendship?”

She gives me a sudden strange look.

“No, monsieur.”

“Thank you, Pauline.”

I open the gate and let her go in alone, for I have a feeling that she may wish to go in alone. I walk to the château, and find Gibbs, Potter and two Americans playing Bridge. I ask Gibbs if he has seen Carless, and Gibbs

smiles at me. "Gone hunting, I think." I am going to have it out with Carless before I go to bed. I walk to his billet and find him sitting with some French people, drinking red wine.

"Just a moment, Carless."

He looks at me, gets up, and saunters out after me into the street. I say very quietly, "Carless, if you come interfering again at my billet, I'll break your neck."

He laughs, but uncomfortably so.

"Why this thushness, daddy? I only asked the kid to promenade."

"You damned fool! You simply don't understand that some women——"

He stuffs his hands into his pockets, and waggles his body to and fro as though convulsed with mirth.

"Priceless old thing! Why, you're smitten with the kid yourself."

"Go to hell!"

But, somehow the anger has gone out of me. I know that he has spoken the truth, and that he knows it.

"All right, Carless. But can't you understand——?"

And suddenly he becomes quite gentle and serious.

"Yes, old man, I can. Sorry. I won't go messing about again. I'm a mischievous ass. All right. Nothing doing, nothing said."

My anger has gone. I say, "Thanks, old man. I may be a ruddy fool, but I am not going to make a fool of anybody. It's too big. Good night."

"Good night, old man."

There are very few completely bad men in the world. In fact, one wonders whether such a creature exists. I suppose extreme vanity and the sex urge go to the making of cads, and I have come across only one such complete cad, an officer who could display the M.C. and bar, and an arrogance that was catastrophic. We had a passage of arms upon some official matter, and the victory was mine, and later I caught him attempting to play a most blackguardly trick on me. I had dared to hurt his vanity.

Carless is very far from being a cad, but is just a breezy and good-natured extrovert, and he keeps his word to me. There is no malice between us.

I have a secret interview with madame, and I tell her that Monsieur Carless has conveyed through me his apologies to her daughter. Madame seems a little amused. She hints that her daughters know how to take care of themselves, and that I am a most paternal person.

I, paternal!

Also, La Petite seems to be avoiding me. She is smileless and aloof, and I wonder whether she can be classing me with Carless. Women are enigmatic

creatures. I pluck up my courage, and seize a chance to ask her if I have offended her in any way.

“You, monsieur, no.”

But she is so pale and formal, and distraught.

This month of May seems too exquisite to be real. Each day is sunny and serene, and the country is looking beautiful. Can there be such a thing as war? Here we do not hear even the distant grumbling of the guns. There has been a pause in the fury of the Boche attacks, and one dares to hope that the danger is past.

Colonel Muller, Richmond and I career all over the country in our Ford, inspecting sections of the Medical Corps, and doing a little sightseeing. St. Valery is a delightful little town, and it reminds me of Rye. We visit Eu and Le Tréport, and my American friends shop at Eu, a curious old place that suggests the 2nd Empire preserved in glass. These great wheatfields and the villages with their white houses and their beechwoods make me in love with peaceful things.

I am strangely and exquisitely happy, and exquisitely sad. Is there any sin in the love that has come to me? Does it clash with that other love? Yes, and no. For though I seem to live in a dream state here, my waking self goes over the sea to those at home with a more poignant tenderness. I know that this is a dream, and that my other world is reality.

Rumours are beginning to spread that the 81st will shortly be reconstituted, and the cadres brought up to strength with drafts from Salonica and England. I know that this exquisite interlude must end, but I am sad with a great sadness.

I should like La Petite to have known what she has meant to me, but my silly sensitiveness recoils upon itself. Does it hurt a woman to know that some man has loved her impossibly and very dearly? Can she be satisfied with the dream? I would rather lose my tongue than hurt this child. The love that matters is big with tenderness and compassion. It is the same love that I can give to Mary.

Am I a humbug? I think not. But this experience will make me more gentle in judging others.

June. I come in one day and find the Malaunay house vibrant with emotion. Gabrielle is sitting dry-eyed and tense in a corner. La Petite is standing behind her chair. Madame, busy mending something, has the face of an old woman weary with too much emotion.

Bad news? I am clumsy enough to ask, and Pauline's face becomes a pale flame. She frowns at me, and then glances reproachfully at her sister.

I turn into the passage feeling rebuffed. Surely, they might understand that I am their friend? I have reached the bottom of the stairs when I hear a flutter of footsteps, and turn to find Pauline behind me. She has a paper in her hand. She gives it to me.

"Read, monsieur."

Her face has a kind of sheen. Her eyes are looking at me differently. Is it that she knows that she has hurt me rather terribly?

I say, "Forgive me if I was *bête*. Is it bad news?"

"Yes."

She looks back down the passage, and again at me.

"Monsieur is never *bête*. It is because of Louis. My sister is afraid."

I take the paper up to my room and read. It contains news of the disaster on the Chemin des Dames. The communiqué may have been carefully edited, but one can read between the lines. The French have been hit as we were on March 21. Good God, will nothing stop these damned Germans?

I understand now. Gabrielle's gunner is in that sector.

These French have had too much to bear, nearly four years of suspense and anguish, and I can understand a country becoming a little hysterical. The glory of Verdun, the bitter failure of the Nivelle offensive, our debacle, and now this! I sit on my bed and think.

Yes, this exquisite interlude is but a dream. The war seems to loom over me again, like some huge, impending wave. One must face it. One must go on to the end. It is fate.

I get up and look at the portraits of my wife and child.

The war has come to this peaceful country. It arrives in the night, German bombing machines searching for the dumps in the Somme valley. They are trying to blow Abbeville and the railway *triage* to blazes. This conquest of the air has been nothing but a curse, and it seems to me that man, like an evil little boy, will continue to make of his new toys a murderous menace.

On these fine still nights one can hear the German 'planes, the double purr of the twin engines. Beauchamp has received two bombs, and an isolated farmhouse has been badly damaged in the valley. The whole family were killed. At night there is a feeling of tension in these French villages, and the people gather in the street and watch and listen, and speak carefully to each other as though the men in those murderous machines might hear them. They are very weary of the war, these French, but I can feel the hatred in their

hearts, their profound bitterness against the Boche, and their hatred has infected the Americans. I should be sorry to be the Germans when these fierce young men get in among them with the bayonet. They will not be polite in the matter of taking prisoners.

How strange that it should happen like this, and that a Boche bombing-plane should bring us together.

It is a perfect night, and a raid is in progress. I come down from my room, and find the Malaunays in the garden. I place myself beside Pauline. A bomb has fallen somewhere near Beauchamp. We are all looking heavenwards, and Gabrielle, suddenly excited, protests that she can see the 'plane. She is pointing. We can hear the double drone of the engines.

“Up there, over the beech tree.”

I do not realize how near I am to La Petite until our arms touch. She does not flinch away. My hand touches hers. Perhaps I make a movement of the fingers, and I feel her fingers in mine. Our hands close in quick, mutual consent.

Gabrielle is trying to point out to her mother what she insists is an aeroplane.

“There. Like a great black bird. I wish I had a gun, and could bring it falling, falling. I would like it to fall in flames.”

But I am conscious of nothing but the hand I hold, and the arm that presses gently against mine, and the little head so very near my shoulder.

My God, she loves me!

It is ecstasy and anguish.

Another bomb falls, and nearer to Le Mesnil. Gabrielle turns sharply, and our two hands slip apart.

“Do you not think it monstrous, monsieur, to drop bombs on women and children?”

I say that I know of no words fit to use about the devilries of modern war.

“And I believed in God, monsieur. I no longer believe.”

Madame takes Gabrielle by the arm.

“My child, it is not God, but the Devil.”

I cannot sleep to-night. I sit at my window a long time, thinking. Somewhere in this silent house she, too, may be awake. Is it as wonderful and hopeless to her as it is to me? And yet, somehow, I would not have it otherwise. My fate is not here. This is but a dream dreamed in the month of May, an exquisite phantasy from which I shall awake, in some trench or cellar.

But I am glad that it has happened like this. So exquisite a thing is not to be soiled by the flesh.

We look at each other differently now, mysteriously and yet with a kind of childlike candour. My eyes love her, and her eyes give me love in return. Do those others realize? Perhaps. Madame is as maternal as ever, and speaks to me almost as though I belonged. Is it that she trusts me? I hope so. Poor Gabrielle is, I think, blind to everything but her own inward stresses. She has had no news, and goes about like a woman whose soul is covered by a dark cloak.

The news has come. We are to leave our Americans at the end of June, and move to some other area to be reformed as a division. I feel both wounded and glad. This dream is becoming too real, and reality cannot be. I have a feeling that she would give all were I to ask for it, but that would be pulling the petals from a rose. I suppose that many men would think me a futile fool, yet in such folly the compassionate beauty of loving is manifest. I want a memory that will not hurt either her, or myself, or that other woman whom I love, and shall always love.

If Mary knew would she understand and forgive me?

This is just an exquisite dream compounded of moonlight and apple blossom and the sweet smell of the young year. There is no tarnish in it, no greed, no ugliness.

I shall love all good things better for having loved this child.

But I have to tell her, and then I realize that she knows. Of course the whole of Le Mesnil must know that we are to leave them shortly, for orderly-room gossip is not sacrosanct. Gabrielle has heard that her Louis is wounded and in hospital in Paris. She has packed a funny little trunk, put on her Sunday clothes, and rushed off to see him. Madame, Pauline and I are alone together.

Only once I have been alone with Pauline, on the night I walked back with her from the Crucifix. I want to be alone with her once before I go. I have a feeling that I shall be wise if I speak to her mother.

I seize my chance when La Petite is busy in the garden, and madame is cooking. I sit down on a chair by the window so that I can watch Pauline.

“Madame, I have a confession to make to you.”

She looks at me shrewdly but kindly across her table.

“Monsieur has been almost like a son to me.”

That touches me. I get up, go round the table, and kiss her jocund old face.

“Perhaps, you know.”

"I have eyes, monsieur."

"You will forgive me. Nothing that I can do shall hurt Pauline. It has been like a dream to me. But tell me, is a woman very unhappy when the dream ends?"

Madame looks at me steadfastly.

"I think it depends, monsieur, on the man. I am not one of those who quarrel with a good memory. My daughter is young."

I ask my question.

"May I be alone with her once, madame, before I go? You can trust me."

She says gently, "Yes, monsieur, I trust you."

I want to leave Pauline something as a remembrance. Fairfax is going shopping in Abbeville, and we drive in together. This serene weather still holds, and the beauty of this peaceful country makes me sad. I tell Fairfax that I have a secret commission on my soul.

"All right, Steevie."

I wonder if he knows.

I find a jeweller's shop not far from the cathedral. It is a very provincial shop, and I stand searching the window. I cannot give La Petite anything so conventional or obvious as a ring, but I see a little antique cross, amethysts in an old silver setting, and I go in and buy it. It is the kind of thing she can hide in her bosom if she cares to.

My last night. We are all packed up, and ready to take the road early tomorrow.

Gabrielle has come back, but it is a more gentle and compassionate Gabrielle. I go to my billet after tea. The three Malaunays are in the kitchen. Madame and Gabrielle make some excuse and leave me alone with Pauline.

She is sitting with her back to the window, and I stand beside her.

"May I ask you something?"

She nods at me.

"Will you go with me to the Crucifix to-night? It is my last night, and sacred."

She looks at me steadfastly.

"Yes, I will go."

I take the little cross out of my pocket, and hold it out to her.

"It is the only thing I can leave you, and a memory."

She holds the cross in the palm of her hand, and to it I add a little gold chain I have bought. She fastens the chain to the ring of the cross, slips the

chain over her head, and lets the cross slip down under her dress.

“I will wear it, always.”

I bend down and kiss her hair.

It is very dark. We walk up the road holding hands. We come to the cross and stand there. Pauline kneels down and I kneel down beside her. She is very silent and still. Her right hand moves, and I realize that she is making the sign of the cross on her bosom. I, too, make the sign of the cross.

We rise and walk on to the Bois l'Abbaye. We stand under one of the great black trees. I am trembling, and so is she. I cannot help it, but my arms go round her, and she clings to me.

“O, my dearest.”

We kiss, and suddenly she puts her hands gently against me, and I understand. Neither of us can bear much more. I kiss her again on the forehead, take her hand, and we walk back down the road.

I say, “I shall never forget. If I have given you any pain, my dearest, forgive me.”

She lets her head rest against my shoulder for a moment.

“No, such pain is good. I shall always be very proud.”

XXV

I AM riding alone behind our column through this sweet, clean country, and something sings in me with a blackbird's note. Exultation and anguish. The beech trees of Le Mesnil are a dim, green cloud behind us.

I shall never see the place again, nor the farmhouse, nor my little room with its window overlooking the garden, nor the face of Pauline.

I kissed Madame and Gabrielle, but La Petite and I only touched hands. Her eyes asked me to be merciful; and I, too, was asking for mercy. My last memory of her will be a glimpse of her standing by the window, large-eyed and pale, and yet with a kind of sheen on her face.

How strange that I should be glad to go! But I am in harness again, and the war is over yonder, and my dream is past. Nothing can take it from me, nor can it tarnish or wound the reality of those other things and creatures who are dear to me. I am thinking much of Mary as I ride, of the loyalty and tenderness she has always given to me. If I have been anything of a hypocrite, God forgive me. The thing just happened, without my asking for it, or seeking it. And after all, like many men, I might have gone to a brothel, instead of dreaming this unsoiled dream.

Yes, the war. I feel somehow braced for it now. I have some understanding of how the French have suffered, and that this business is still a crusade. We must fight and endure, for the sake of peace. Even the Germans must desire it as we do, all save the rabid and inexorable old men. We must put Germany down, and then perhaps stretch out a hand and say, "We have all been mad. Let us try to make a new world that shall be without hate and fear, and bombs and gas."

I am feeling most terribly alone.

We are in a squalid little village for the night, and my billet is over a butcher's shop.

Is Pauline feeling as I am feeling? O, hell, why must these things happen?

I don't know why, but the good Finch is being very kind to me, and in the mess the others treat me gently as though I had been ill and am still rather shaky. I make myself talk and laugh, but I suppose I must be looking a rather miserable creature. That is the worst of this community life. Nothing is hidden. One cannot crawl away like a sick beast and hide.

We are back in the St. Omer area, and we have ceased to be the skeleton or shadow of a fighting force.

I am feeling better.

I have had a letter from Mary, one of those wise and gentle letters that seem to melt the hot metal in one. May God be merciful to all understanding women. My old self seems to have come back to me, and I realize that I am more than a small boy whimpering at my mother's knee, and that even there, in Sussex, the roots of my life are planted deep and surely. Peace, and a comrade who can give one peace. This experience seems to have made me realize more profoundly how inevitable and necessary that other love is to me. It is not that I feel guilty. It is as though the essential, human loyalties in me have been renewed.

I wonder if anyone will ever read this journal, and condemn me as the complete egoist and prig?

We have received a reinforcement of some twenty men to replace those lost as prisoners and killed during the March show. The new draft are a rather loutish lot, but the most unprepossessing member of the party is a large, truculent, Hebraic-looking person who tells me aggressively when I interview him that he is here under protest, though his principles have at last condescended to allow him to succour the wounded.

This is funny. I am glancing through his pay-book, and I address him by name.

"Do you think that any of us want to be here, Campbell?" And why the Scotch name?

He looks at me with a kind of heated sulkiness.

"There is another war coming after this one."

"O, what kind of war will that be?"

"The Class War."

"And your principles will allow you to take part in that?"

"It won't be a capitalists' war, Major."

Familiar fellow! But I don't like these new men. They have the sulky and dumb-saucy faces of unregenerate louts. I have an argument with Gibbs on the subject of the lout mind. Gibbs is a pragmatist, with a strong sense of social responsibility, and he believes that it is the duty of a country's intelligentsia, muscular and otherwise, to go out into the highways and byeways and educate

the proletariat. Gibbs, I believe, helps to run a boys' club at home, and I should say that he makes a splendid cub-master.

But I confess that I cannot bring myself either to tolerate or to treat the loud mind. Spotty arrogance and loud voices repel me. I may be wrong, but I am made that way.

Gibbs says, "Look at it this way, Stephen. If we more mature people haven't the guts to govern, we shall find ourselves submerged by the loud mind."

I wonder?

I have no leanings toward the equality theory. One thing the war has taught me is the essential inequality of man. He differs so enormously in character and potentialities that the cabbage-patch idea is ludicrous. One is confronted by this unlikeness among officers as well as men, and here the opportunity dogma does not hold. We officers have had much the same start in life, and yet we produce Fairfaxes, Hallards, Carlesses, and Mr. Salonica. There are certain men upon whom it is fatal and foolish to rely, and nothing will ever make them reliable. There are men whose endocrine glands seem to have been born lazy.

Is the social remedy a universal dosing of the unfit and the unreliable with extracts of glandular tissue?

I think there is something more profoundly mysterious at the back of life than this. Or is it that one's little ego resents being regarded as a box of chemicals?

The S.-M. comes round to my billet one evening. He has a confidential matter to report. Will I come with him? Of course, but why me?

He says, "Well, you've got such a hold on the men, sir."

I thank him, and feel flattered.

In the summer dusk we make our way to the barn where the men are housed. I hear a voice declaiming. It seems to be blubbing its words like plums out of a paper bag. It is my friend Moses Campbell addressing the men. We stand and listen in the darkness. I don't quite like this eavesdropping, and I glance at the S.-M. and prepare to move off. After all, men should be allowed free speech.

But as we walk away sounds of storm and altercation become audible. The audience is responding, and I hear one particular voice becoming bellicose. My name is mentioned, and the orator says something caustic about officers and decorations. The other voice retorts, "'Ere, you bloody well come outside. Got any conscientious objection to that? Come on, the boys. Take Ike's coat off for him."

I nod at the S.-M. and we disappear.

Finch has the face of a large Tomcat, excessively pleased with itself, though one that looks a little war-worn. He brings me my early tea, and I hear him whistling as he cleans my boots.

It is my morning to take the parade.

Campbell has a black eye, and a very swollen mouth.

I cannot help pausing and asking him with an air of sympathy, "Campbell, what have you been doing?" He glares at my chin. There is not a sound from the men. The parade is perfect as to steadiness, every face wooden and expressionless. I pass on.

Later in the day, when Finch is laying out my slacks for dinner I ask him a question.

"Was it you who biffed Campbell, Finch?"

"It was, sir."

"Thank you. Good for discipline."

Finch guffaws.

"I've got a name for him, and it's stuck."

"What's that, Finch?"

"The latrine-bucket, sir. But 'e won't spill himself again on me."

Grey skies and rain. There is a soothing quality in this rain, as though it is preparing for us weather fit for the war. May, and fruit blossom and the singing of birds are not for this murder business. They anguish one, and are too tantalizing, and so is the pale face of a girl.

We are moving up towards Ypres. Rumour has it that Rupprecht of Bavaria is preparing yet another offensive that shall drive us towards the sea. This country seems strange, for places that were somewhat peaceful have now become shabby and sad and tainted with that terror which spreads over the fields like gas. Even the familiar outline of the Mont des Cats has changed, and jagged and spidery roofs tell of destruction.

We are to go into the line not far from Kemmel, and an American division is to lie behind us in reserve. It would appear that we are to act as shepherds to the Americans, and that when they have been a little hardened they will take over the line from us. As it is we are a somewhat raw crowd, and the new drafts are very young.

Fairfax tells me that we are to be the forward ambulance. That is both a compliment and a challenge, but have these three months of sweet sanity and peace slackened my nerves? I feel afraid—more afraid somehow than I have

ever felt before.

The night before we go into the line we are billeted in huts in one of those dreary fields that have been worn bald as to grass. Gibbs, Potter, Carless and myself are together in a hut. It is a warm, muggy, July night, and I cannot get to sleep. My wretched stomach is tense and wide awake.

About one o'clock a Boche long-range gun starts shelling this area. The stuff is not very near us, but I lie and shiver and sweat. It is abominable and humiliating, this fear, but I am learning that fear does not grow less as the war goes on. It is the slow, gradual, accumulating pressure of fear's fingers on the throat of man's soul that breaks him down. But this will not do. I have set myself to finish this war somehow as a man, and the things I have to bear are as nothing compared with what the ordinary infantry sub. has to suffer.

Those damned shells are coming nearer. I get up, slip a trench coat over my pyjamas and my feet into slippers, and go out. I have no tin-hat or gas-mask. The moon is shining, and even this wretched field has a beauty. I walk round among the huts, and come suddenly upon a group of sergeants very much undressed. The S.-M. is with them.

They look at me as though I were a ghost.

"Do you think we ought to get the men up, sir?"

I stand and listen for a moment, expecting another of those crashes and a geyser of earth and smoke.

"I rather think he has finished for the night, S.-M."

He has. There are no more shells. One of the sergeants offers me a cigarette. Please God that they do not suspect that it was sheer funk that sent me parading in my slippers. As a matter of fact I believe they have credited me with an act of courage. So are mock heroes made.

I will endure. I will not be broken.

We have our Headquarters in a deserted and semi-ruined farmhouse, part of which is habitable. It is a strange place, with a fallacious air of peace, for the fields around us are full of standing wheat with red poppies threaded through them. The wheat is just beginning to turn colour. One wing of the house has caved in, but the main part of it is more or less intact, as is the barn. We use the kitchen as an orderly-room, and the parlour as a mess. Trenches have been dug in which the men can shelter in case of night-bombing or severe shelling. The garden is full of espaliers trained on an old high wall.

Gibbs and Potter are up at the A.D.S., which is in the sandbagged cellars of

another farmhouse, farther forward. The country is very flat and can be observed from Kemmel, and it is not safe to visit the A.D.S. in full daylight, for one can be sniped. One goes up at dawn or dusk and, if possible, the wounded are kept and sent down when the light is dim.

It is a strange walk in the early morning. One takes a path through a wheat field, passes through a gap in a hedge, and follows a narrow lane, passing another little farm in which guns are camouflaged in the orchard. One leaves the lane again for another wheatfield, with Kemmel hill looming up as a sinister lump in the distance. One strikes the lane again where it is partially screened by a row of poplars. There are a few shell-holes, not many. The farm which shelters our A.D.S. lies in the middle of a paddock, and one reaches it by a ditch under a hedge, the ditch having been deepened into a shallow communication trench.

The news is good, and unexpectedly so.

Foch has made a trenchant flank attack on the Germans, and they are retreating from the salient into which their last offensive had thrust them.

“Oh, boy!” as the Americans say.

We have nearly thirty thousand of these vigorous young men behind us. By walking half a mile I can watch a whole battalion doing physical drill to music. It reminds me rather of a huge dancing class, but the physique of these Americans is comforting and impressive. They can be somewhat embarrassing neighbours at night, for when the Boche bombers come over, whole battalions will turn out and blaze away into the sky. It is an invitation to be bombed.

I have been to Poperinghe. It is a ghost of a town, but one can still dine and buy good wine at some shanties on the Abele road. How commerce does cling to the loincloth of death!

Fairfax sends for me. I find him in the orderly-room looking pink and jolly. He flaunts a yellow paper at me, a leave warrant. It must be a birthday present from Rankin!

“Not for you, Steevie, I’m afraid. I’m going down to Calais to-night.”

Leave! Good God, how home pulls one! But the fact that Fairfax is being allowed to go on leave is profoundly significant.

“I’m glad, sir.”

“You’ll be in command, Stephen. And directly I return, you will go.”

This means that in a fortnight or so I shall be in England. O blessed country! I may have dreamed a dream in Le Mesnil, but the bitter sweetness of

it is becoming a memory, and all my urge is towards home.

I smile down at Fairfax's happy face.

"This means that things are easier."

He returns my smile.

"Yes; Rankin hinted to me that the Boche attack up here is off. He has enough to do down south."

Thank God for that!

I am taking my responsibilities with great seriousness. I make myself walk up to the A.D.S. with Finch each morning, but I am in a most disgustingly windy state these days. If a shell lands a quarter of a mile away my tummy seems to bounce like a toy balloon. Perhaps it is the prospect of leave, and the dread of being knocked out before one has looked again at a dear and a particular face.

I have written to Mary warning her, and I have suggested that we spend three or four days in town. I want to celebrate and be gay.

Finch and I have a rather nasty time one morning in the lane just before reaching the communication trench. Whizz-bangs. We have to do a belly-flop, and then run like hell for the hedge and ditch. I arrive at the A.D.S. rather dirty and breathless, and in a muck-sweat.

Gibbs and Potter are really great souls. They dust me down in their cellar and give me a drink, and more than a drink.

Gibbs says, "Look here, old man, don't be silly. There's no earthly need for you to come stodging up here each morning. Potter and I are all right, aren't we Potts?"

Potter looks at me in his mild, serene way.

"Quite. Almost a reflection on us, Stephen!"

I say that I have got to take this morning walk, just because I am so damned windy about it.

Gibbs says, "Bosh. You've got the leave feeling, and too much conscience. Either Potts or I will take a morning stroll and come down and report, if you feel we are such a pair of kids."

I laugh and agree, but not as to their childishness. Their generosity touches me. It is good to have men who can help you through a windy patch. In the words of the rank and file, "I am sweating on leave," and my yearning to be home makes me jumpy.

The D.D.M.S. Corps pays us a visit, a charming old gentleman who stays to tea with us, and then shocks me by telling me that the Division will shortly be relieved, and taken out of the line for intensive training, and that the Americans will replace us. One of our ambulances, probably ours, will remain behind for three weeks to act as wet-nurse to the Yankees.

Will this make any difference to my leave? I put the question to him tentatively, and say that it is more than nine months since I have had leave. He says, of course, that it is a matter for my A.D.M.S. to decide, and that if Fairfax can spare me, there should be no objection.

Fairfax is back. He has called at Divisional Headquarters on his way, and he produces from his pocket something in an official envelope. It is a leave warrant.

“You can buzz off to-morrow, Steevie.”

I feel like kissing him.

“Did you stop and see Rankin on purpose?”

“Perhaps.”

“No wonder we are a happy crowd.”

The sun is shining. I have to spend the night at Calais, and I send Mary a wire. “Meet leave train Victoria to-morrow. Propose three nights at Piccadilly Hotel.” This Calais hotel is an austere and shabby place, but it might be the anteroom to Mahomet’s Paradise so far as I am concerned. I allow myself half a bottle of Beaune. I am thinking more of Mary than of the child at Le Mesnil. Mary is a reality.

England in August, the first week of August. It is the same England, but how different I am from the man of 1914. I suppose I am coarser and rougher and more charged with colourful and moving language, but though war may be a brutal business I feel that it has tempered me. Kent is a lovely county, and the afternoon sunlight is like amber wine. I am a little drunk with excitement and desire.

Mary. I see her waving to me. She looks a little flushed, and prettier than I ever remember. Her skin has a softness, bloom, and her frock and hat are to me flowerlike things. I kiss her, and she says with a flirt of the head, “How do you

do, Major Brent. Do Field Officers kiss their wives in public?"

I say, "I don't believe you are my wife. Some strange and wicked woman!"

There is a quality of strangeness in her that provokes me. It is all so fresh and virginal and new, as though we are to explore all the intimacies of marriage without the rawness of the conventional honeymoon.

The Piccadilly cannot take us in, but we are accepted by a pleasant hotel in Kensington which Mary has heard of, "The Vanborough." We have a little bathroom of our own where I can dress and shave, and that, I think, is another refinement that the war has introduced into the relations between the sexes. I do understand that double-bedded Victorianism is dead, and that marriage in its stuffy two-in-a-trough idea is a thing of the past. Woman, newly emancipated, will demand a more fastidious aloofness in these domestic intimacies. The war seems to have created in some of us a new shyness and a more delicate appreciation of the subtleties of other selves.

Our windows look out on to plane trees and grass, and as I sit astride a chair while my wife unpacks some of her things, I become conscious of her as an exquisitely individual creature, not to be taken for granted in the social sense, but more of a dear Aspasia to be matched in wit and esprit.

She says to me, "You really are a most disgraceful father, Stephen."

"I?"

"You haven't asked about our daughter."

"Surely, but I have."

"No, not properly."

"Well, you know, perhaps it is because you don't look like a mother, or I'm not seeing you quite like that."

"It sounds almost indecent. But go and wait for me, dear. I want to powder my nose."

"Splendid. Shall I try and get theatre tickets, or would you like to go out and dance?"

"I shall be quite happy here for to-night. One shouldn't rush at things too much."

"Yes, I think I understand."

I get up, and she sits down in front of her mirror. I have my hand on the handle of the door when she calls me back.

"Stephen!"

"Yes, dearest?"

"Do you know I feel that I have been an awful prig sometimes. Has it struck you in that way?"

"I can't say that it has."

“So many women seem to become so bossy now that they are running shows. Marriage is a show. I’ll try not to be bossy.”

I go back and kiss her.

Mary and I have never been better friends. We appear to understand each other more humanly, and to have shed the little hypocrisies that can clutter up marriage like social bric-à-brac. The war has broken so much bric-à-brac that I feel that we shall be able to move about more freely in the house of marriage, as well as in the highways of the world. Joan Phyllis’s England will be a very different England, but whether she will be happier in it, God knows! All the new freedom that is boiling up may lift the lid off all the conventions. Or, rather, I suppose we shall change our conventions, for our climate does not encourage nudism, and our habits, mental and otherwise, are the clothes our climate imposes on us.

This leave has not the bitter-sweet tang of the previous one. Is it that one has begun to see a little sparkle of light at the far end of the tunnel? I feel more hopeful that I may not have to leave my bones with poor Hallard’s somewhere in Flanders.

Chu Chin Chow! Has any piece of pretty musical fooling become more part of the War than this Chinese fantasia? But I shall never forget this particular matinée. During an interval the officer man on my left goes out and returns with a paper. There are big black headlines on the front page, and I glance across to read them.

“Great British Victory in France. We advance eight miles. Ten thousand prisoners, three hundred guns. The German line broken.”

I cannot believe it. I speak to the man with the paper.

“Is that official?”

He is as excited as I am.

“Absolutely.”

“Where is it?”

“In front of Villers Bret. We seem to have made a surprise attack and smashed clean through. Australians and Canadians, and some of us. A mass of tanks.”

“It seems too good to be true.”

“Like to read it?”

He passes me the paper, and turns to the woman beside him.

I hear him say, “That takes some of the worry off one’s shoulders.”

I feel that we must celebrate this victory. We do, but not in the champagne spirit. We go and sit in Kensington Gardens and watch the children playing. Please God, we shall all of us be able to play again, perhaps next year.

My small daughter is a rather adorable creature. She must have been well coached by Mary, for she does not greet me as a stranger. I'm "Daddy," a mysterious yet viridical person who has the right to jump up into her world like a nice jack-in-the-box. I have brought her a doll from town, and we take each other and the puppet round the garden, and I am aware of Mary watching us from the french window.

The Australians are in Proyart. Amazing! We hear that our light tanks surprised and shot up a Divisional Headquarters in a village east of Harbonnieres.

Proyart, Harbonnieres! I sit and smoke my pipe and think of that terrifying but fascinating week, with its superb sunlight and vast sky. Proyart. I remember that serene and very lovely French girl packing her basket and getting into her gig. I laugh when I think of how Fairfax and I smashed the bottles of wine in that courtyard. And what happened to that poor devil of a dog in Harbonnieres who ran round and round as the shells scattered the tiles?

Hangard, Bertaucourt, Boves! Those dim villages about Abbeville, and then Le Mesnil, and that vivid spring. Pauline Malaunay! Her face will never be dim to me, but the memory causes me no pain. Joan Phyllis comes toddling into the room, and my small daughter is reality, and I am happy here in my home.

Poor old Randall has aged a lot, and is looking very tired. He says that life and some of the people at home have become very difficult. He has been overworked, and is inclined to be irritable and gloomy.

He says that he will be very glad to have me back. And how much longer is the war going to last?

I say, that with the Americans in full blast, we should be able to smash Germany in 1919.

Randall lights his pipe.

"Nearly another year. And, the afterwards? I hope to heaven we shan't go like Russia."

“Our army isn’t at all Russian.”

“It isn’t the army, Stephen, but these labour people at home. One hears many ugly rumours.”

I say, “Oh, I think you are all rather tired and jumpy.”

As usual I run into that ass Rob Guthrie. He has married a second wife, a young woman of twenty-five, and he is feeling canine and youthful. His face and his moustache and his clothes are more flamboyant than ever. How can a young woman accept intimacies from a smelly old dog like Guthrie? The thing disgusts me.

He slaps me on the shoulder.

“Well, we’re winning the war now, Brent.”

We, indeed! And then he goes on to say that we are making those damned Yanks look foolish, and that they may just as well get back into their ships and go home.

I say, that but for the Americans, the Germans would have been in Paris, and he snorts at me.

“Always a defeatist, Brent. Why do you always crab your own country?”

I tell him that we people who have been at the front are less boastful and bellicose than the old men. This seems to annoy him considerably. He is a perfect Pooh Bah of a creature.

“Well, tell me one thing that the Yanks have done.”

I retort by saying that America has behaved with great magnanimity, and that if he had seen those thousands of big young men as I have seen them, he would not talk such guff. I suppose the war has made me intolerant of snobbery and humbug, and we part with mutual hostility.

My last day. I am conscious of a feeling of serenity and of hope. Mary and I take Joan Phyllis out in the car and picnic near High Toy. The Downs are like silver smoke. Joan Phyllis crawls about amid the heather, and we watch our small daughter and are content with the silence and the shadows of the tall trees. It seems to me that summer is playing on a harp that has strings of gold, and that the world will soon be listening to nature sounds instead of to the roar of aeroplanes and the thudding of guns.

Mary says to me, “Stephen, I have a feeling that it will soon be over.”

Dear God, I hope it will.

She puts out a hand to me.

“Do be careful. Don’t take risks—unless you need, I mean.”

I hold her hand.

“I will crawl about under my tin-hat like a tortoise. No hero—this, my dear.”

XXVI

FLANDERS again, with Kemmel hill like the swell of a grey bubble on the horizon.

It is an American world to which I return, and only after two days' vagabondage do I find the Ambulance under canvas in a field which has for a hedge a quadrilateral of huge, white poplars. The whole countryside is crawling with U.S.A. in khaki. They are New Yorkers, and the timbre of their voices is a little more aggressive than that of my friends at Beauchamp. I find Fairfax and the whole unit feeling a little fed up and lost in this strange world, as though the war had ceased to be theirs, and Uncle Sam was straddling the horizon like a trousered colossus.

Fairfax has been made responsible for planning a scheme of evacuation in case of a Boche attack. No one believes now that Prince Rupprecht will be able to attack, unless the German High Command might think it policy to try and smash an American division for the sake of depressing the U.S.A. morale. Fairfax has been experiencing diplomatic difficulties, for some of these New Yorkers appear to be an over-confident crowd. They are going to finish the war for us, "Yes-sir," and they are going to do it quickly.

"They rather resent our being here, Stephen."

I say that it is quite natural that they should want their own show.

"Yes, my dear man, but I am getting rather old to be lectured. I have had it rubbed into me that we English have become such trench fogies that we have lost our aggressiveness. No imagination, Stephen, no offensive fancy."

"We seem to be offending pretty well down south. What's the idea?"

"Oh, the American idea is a sort of wild stampede. To go through and over the Boche without stopping. Masses of men and bombs and bayonets, and all that."

"Our old idea, when we were young."

"Yes, much the same. It would seem that no one can learn about machine-guns without being butchered."

I have witnessed a rather amusing incident, but at the same time it made me get up on my hind legs and bark.

There is a little, fat American major who is supposed to be in charge of the U.S.A. Bearer Companies, but he has been spending his time in rending down

huts and re-erecting them elsewhere. Fairfax and I are sitting outside the mess-tent after tea in the shade of the poplars, for it is hot weather, when Major Bullard appears on the horizon. He is in his shirt sleeves, with the stub of a cigar stuck in the corner of a rather truculent mouth, and a soft hat on the back of his head. He is slightly bandy-legged, a stocky, bustling little botch of a man. Even his hair is aggressive.

I hear Fairfax say, "Here comes the wind in the willows, Stephen."

I happen to know that Major Bullard has shown a sudden interest in the scheme of evacuation. He blew into the orderly-room tent this morning and announced to us that he proposed to go over the ground in person. And what about a cicerone? Fairfax had suggested that he should take one of his own officers, as most of them had been taken over the ground and were familiar with the collecting posts and routes of evacuation.

I may remark that the orderly-room tent is within ten yards of the mess-tent, and that our staff can hear all that Major Bullard chooses to say to my colonel.

He pulls up in front of us, and with his legs well apart and his tummy stuck out, he removes the cigar stump from between his lips, spits, and addresses Fairfax:

"Wal, sir, I've been over the ground and I guess your scheme's all wrong."

There are degrees and varying shades of candour, and if there is one man to whom I would wish courtesy to be shown it is to Fairfax. I look at him quickly. He is smiling, as though gently amused.

"Is that so, Major Bullard?"

The American is chewing his cigar. He waggles his tummy at us, and I am moved to sudden ironical politeness. I get up, and offer him my chair. He takes it without a word, spreads his legs, and protrudes his tummy. I notice his coarse blunt fingers and the fatness of his calves.

"You've got it all wrong, sir, yep."

Fairfax gives me a whimsical look.

"Would you mind fetching a map, Brent?"

I go to the orderly tent for a map. I have been over the ground myself and made myself completely familiar with all the details of the scheme. I come back and spread the map across Fairfax's knees.

"I would like to hear your criticisms, Major Bullard."

The American spits. He says that maps don't interest him, and that, as a pragmatist, he prefers to use his own eyes.

"Your transportation will fall down. And your collecting posts are all wrong. Looks almost as though you were shy of shell fire. Your posts ought to

be nearer the line.”

Fairfax’s voice is silky and tired.

“What do you suggest?”

Major Bullard makes a stabbing gesture with the stump of his cigar.

“I want twenty Ford trucks up by that place, Yeoman’s Farm.”

“Twenty Ford ambulances?”

“Yep. I tell you that if one American wounded soldier is left lying out, the American people will want to know why.”

But I can’t stand any more of this. I take the map from Fairfax’s knees, spread it on the grass, and kneel down.

“Where do you expect to get your Ford ambulances from? Do you think they breed like lice?”

“We’ve got to get ’em, Lootenant.”

“Good. Suppose we indent for twenty Ford ambulances. Suppose we receive them. Now you say you want them up at Yeoman’s Farm?”

“Sure.”

“Just look at the map a moment. Do you see that point there?”

He squats unwillingly and looks.

“Yep.”

“Those are cross-roads. The only road from Yeoman’s Farm joins them. Things have been pretty quiet here, Major Bullard. Do you know what happens to cross-roads when a stunt is on?”

He glares at me.

“What?”

“They are shelled to blazes. All your nice little Fords would be about five hundred yards from the reserve line. Not one of them would get back over those cross-roads.”

“You’re telling me!”

“I am. You wait until you have seen a little shelling, and then you may realize that the results one gets are only a proportion of what one plans for. You’d have all your Ford ambulances boxed in and useless in the first half hour. And most of them would be knocked out.”

His face has gone purple.

“I’d have boys on those trucks who’d drive through hell.”

I say quietly, “Please don’t be silly. Probably those cross-roads would just be a botch of shell-holes. Your brave boys couldn’t very well carry their ambulances over the craters, could they?”

He gets up, straddles, and glares at me.

“See here, colonel, this lootenant of yours may be some buck, but I’m not

standing for insults.”

Fairfax is smiling.

“There isn’t any lieutenant present, sir. Major Brent holds the same rank that you do.”

Bullard glances at my sleeve.

“Ain’t that a pip?”

“No, it’s a crown, Major Bullard. You are confusing a crown with a star.”

I quote the case of Major Bullard, because it is exceptional, and a good example of professional arrogance, for Bullard happens to be a regular soldier. He is the only American with whom we quarrel, for whatever some of their officers may think of our strategy, they are courteous and restrained in expressing their opinions. But it is evident that they are a little sceptical as to the aggressive spirit of the English army, and though they respect us as trench fighters they appear to suspect that we are not sufficiently fierce and ruthless in attack. I gather that it is impossible to make them believe that even after a heavy bombardment a mass of infantry cannot smash bull-headed through the enemy’s defensive system. They appear to think that they can do it, and I suppose their confidence is the faith of strong and eager youth in the very splendour of its undisillusioned strength.

Unless the German *morale* cracks badly, this New York division may discover in its baptism of blood that we English are not senile.

Orders have come to us to rejoin the 81st. We are to hand over our motor ambulances to the Americans, but not our drivers. We entrain at a siding not far from Poperinghe, and detrain at Doullens. The 81st Division is concentrated in the area east of Doullens. We are in a shabby village that has suffered in patches from the war, but like the curate’s egg is good in bits. Our M.T. sergeant and his drivers go off to Abbeville to collect new ambulances. Le Mesnil is not fifteen miles from Abbeville, but the realist in me resists the temptation to ask for two days’ French leave. I have wakened from that dream, and one does not dream the same dream twice.

I have seen two of our reconstituted battalions route-marching through this country. The men are very young, but they look good boys, and they march with their tails up, and with a jocund swagger. I am pleased, and I am proud. I do not want the Americans to have all the garlands and the glory.

Things are going well. Is it that we have at last learnt to handle and co-ordinate all the complex forces that must be merged into the concerto of the

offensive? It is like a vast orchestra, with the tramp of feet for an underchant. I am beginning to feel myself to be more part of this English host, and to dream other dreams of England. It is we who are dealing the Germans these hammer blows. Rightly do they call us stubborn swine. Four months ago we were fighting for our lives. The transformation is amazing.

We have moved to the Old Somme country, and the Boches are back in the Hindenburg Line. This horrible wilderness is like a country of ghosts. It may not smell of the dead, but the stigmata of death and horror are everywhere. We are camped close to Delville Wood, and I explore that ghastly place. Strange how Nature heals things, and is beginning to cover with green scrub the filthy and cruel insanities of man. The very earth has been disembowelled, and the wreckage that still lies about is sinister and horrible.

While wandering about among the brushwood I come across the mouth of an old deep dug-out. It is covered by a rusty sheet of corrugated iron, and someone has chalked on a board "Keep Out."

What horror or devilry still lurks below, rotting corpses or some treacherous mechanism left as a booby-trap by the Boche?

This setting of traps by the Germans is, I think, one of the most beastly things one will remember against them. There is a little, malignant spitefulness about it that is despicable.

The Hindenburg Line. I cannot believe that we contemplate attacking it. Perhaps this Somme country has depressed me, and I feel that the Germans can say to us, "Thus far, and no farther." That immensely strong position lies like fate across the horizon of our hopes. If we attack, it will be the supreme test, and I have a horrible fear that we shall be bloodily repulsed, and that another illusion may be shed. Nothing that has happened yet is of supreme significance. Probably, the Germans are repeating the manœuvre of March, 1917.

Gibbs is back from leave. He says that the prevailing opinion at home seems to be that we dare not attack the Hindenburg Line, and that if Haig attempts it and fails, there will be a savage outcry, and he will be broken.

Rumour has it that the politicians are funkng.

I feel rather a little, mean fellow when I think of the crisis Haig has to face. What right have I to judge or to criticize? Surely, no man was ever faced with

a more damnable and bitter dilemma than Haig. If he dares the throw and wins, will not his choice be recorded as one of the most courageous acts in history?

How easy it is to be a critic when one risks nothing, not even the seat of one's trousers!

We are moving up. There is a feeling of excitement vibrant in the air.

One sees tanks on the skyline, crawling along like huge slugs.

I have not seen a German 'plane for days, or any sign of a scrap in the air. We seem to be the masters of the sky.

I understand that the great gamble is to be dared. Rankin comes to tea with us, and his eyes are burning. Americans and Australians are ahead of us. If they smash through, our Division is to follow up and exploit the rupture.

The Americans are the same crowd whom we worked with near Kemmel. How will they fare? At last, Major Bullard will be confronted with reality in the shape of shell fire.

Please God, may my courage endure through this supreme crisis.

We hear that the 201 F.A. are to be the forward ambulance, but that we are to reinforce them with two officers and bearers.

Mean beast that I am, I wonder whether the choice will fall on the others. Fairfax and his remaining officers are to staff the main dressing-station.

This skulking selfishness disgusts me. I go to Fairfax and ask him if I may be one of the officers detailed for duty with the 201 F.A.

He says, "No, Stephen."

"Why not, sir?"

"Seconds in command are precious. I am sending Carless and Potter."

Beast that I am, I am conscious of mean relief.

I suppose history is an epitome of man's strange passion to be other than he is. And why this urge? As a savage he will daub himself with paint and wear stolen feathers. Sex display? But take the case of a man marooned upon an island. To whom would he display himself? To the birds and the beasts? Would he invent some ritual to impress upon these other creatures the marvellous and godlike otherness of his manhood? But from externals man passes to internals. He must strut before his secret self, dress his soul in

illusions, talk with God in his garden. Must man fool himself or die, or become, because of the curse of self-consciousness, even lower than the beasts? I suppose these illusions have become as necessary to us as our clothes, and we dare not shed them and look upon the nakedness of our little, lusty, greedy, fearful selves.

But why this passion to transcend the flesh? Is there some esoteric significance in the urge? Is man driven by it to postulate yet another illusion, God? We build temples to house a mystery that we do not and cannot understand.

St. George for England!

The British Army has broken the Hindenburg Line. Colonel Rankin comes to us with the news. It seems to have been a sticky business, and we were threatened with a bloody repulse, but an English Territorial Division, the 46th, performed a signal feat of arms. They had to attack across the canal, and their infantry, fitted out with life-saving jackets from the leave boats, swam the canal and broke the Boche line. It seems to be a case of the desperate and forlorn hope succeeding, and giving us victory in the very face of defeat.

Hats off to the 46th Division!

We are lying about waiting in a grassy wilderness seamed with old trenches. Just south of us the grotesque and distorted ruins of a sugar factory break the skyline. The weather is golden and serene, and the strange, sinister distances ahead of us look suspiciously peaceful.

We hear wild rumours. Something has not gone according to plan.

Fairfax, who has been to Brigade Headquarters, comes back with the news.

The American Division, who attacked ahead of us, exploited their theory of the mass stampede. They went forward with the impetuosity of young men in a hurry, but omitted to mop up the Boche who had gone to earth in the great tunnel near Bonny. An extraordinary situation arose. The Americans were trapped between the Boche front and reserve lines, and the Australians, who followed, were badly shot up, but managed to dig the Yankees out.

We hear that they have been decimated.

I wonder where Major Bullard is, and whether he has learnt to appreciate the crude realities of shell and machine-gun fire?

We are on the move. Those fierce fighters, the Australians, have pushed on, and here, too, the Hindenburg Line is ours. I hear that only one—and minor—defensive line exists, and if we can force it we shall have the Germans

in open country.

Ye gods, what great days!

I have seen some of the American dead, hundreds and hundreds of them laid out in rows in a little valley, big, fine men. I shall never forget one particular body, that of a huge fellow. He lies with his chest thrust out, and his head drawn back, and his whole face is black and swollen.

We are in a ruined village for the night. It is a most eerie place, and terror and death still seem to hang in its hollow spaces. Our home is a German dressing-station built of wood like a chalet, beautifully neat and efficient. They must have left it in a hurry, for drugs and oddments of dressing are lying about, and there is blood on the floor. The place smells insufferably stuffy, and I push open a window glazed with greased paper at the back of the main room, and discover below it a little pile of amputated legs and arms!

Good God! I cannot stomach the place, and I get a stretcher and sleep out in a derelict garden.

Potter and Carless have gone up with two bearer sections to reinforce the 201 F.A. Potter is an extraordinary person. He marched off with a kind of sheen on his face like a man going to be married.

The 81st Division attacked at dawn behind tanks and a creeping barrage. It is the first time many of these youngsters have fought, and they have fought with such effect that we have lost the division. They seem to have gone through the Boche line like buckshot through paper. In the course of the day they have advanced nearly eight miles, and we hear that one of our brigades, which is pretty fresh, is to attack again to-night. Casualties have been extraordinarily light. The 201 F.A. have been able to deal with them, and we have orders not to open out, but to move up and establish ourselves in a village named Droumont. We look up the place on the map, and realize that Droumont must be beyond the old battle zone.

We move about sunset. There is a curious stillness everywhere. Just when night has fallen we pass through the dark ruins of a village that smells most horribly. The Boche bombed the Australian transport here a few nights ago, and the village is full of dead horses. Poor beasts! Man has indeed involved them in his messy tragedy.

I gather that the country is very flat here, and that we are marching

between fields. The darkness grows less intense, and there is a pallor in the eastern sky that suggests the moon or burning villages. As for shell fire, it does not exist, so far as we are concerned, and our own guns are slamming away rather disjointedly in the distance. We have been marching for two hours, and I am with Fairfax at the head of our column when we see the dim shapes of houses immediately ahead of us. This must be Droumont.

I am aware of white walls and solid, unbroken roofs, and I hear Fairfax exclaim:

“Look there, Stephen!”

He is pointing at a window. It is open, and a white, filmy substance is waving gently to and fro. Curtains. How strange to see curtains! There must be French civilians in Droumont.

We come to a little open Place, and in one corner of it a window is illuminated. We halt the men and go across to the house with the lighted window. The door is open and we walk in, and see a couple of Frenchwomen and a very old man sitting round the stove. They stare at us with strange, impassive, pallid faces. Freedom and security have come to them, but they look like people who have been drugged by long misery, and who have not the heart to smile.

I say, “Bon soir, mesdames et monsieur.”

They reply almost sullenly, “Bon soir, messieurs.”

We spread ourselves in this semi-deserted village, but again I choose a stretcher in place of a bed. There is something sinister about the beds. Germans have slept in them. Finch comes in with a cup of tea and much conversation. The men have quickly discovered that house with the two girls, and have broken the ice more effectually than we could have done.

“We stood ’em supper, sir, and you should have seen their eyes bulge. Old monsieur has smoked his first pipe for umpteen years.”

“Starved, Finch?”

“Absolutely, sir. War bread and turnips. We gave ’em jam.”

“Did they say anything about the Germans?”

“A lot, sir. They said that Jerry isn’t a bad sort, but that his officers are beasts. Jerry’s very tired. Tail right down. Sick in the tummy, most of ’em. They told the girls that we had too much stuff for them, ’planes and tanks and guns. Jerry’s done, sir.”

“Fed up with not being fed, Finch?”

“I guess that’s about it, sir.”

Yes, Bulgaria and Turkey out, and Austria wobbling. It is an amazing transformation, and if the German army is suffering from war gastritis, and enteritis, the end must be near. No army can fight with its stomach out of order. Perhaps that is the explanation of the way Germany is crumbling.

I wake very early, and an impelling curiosity pushes me out to look at this liberated village by daylight. I see white sheets hung out of windows and one trailing from the church steeple. It is a gold and grey autumn morning, serene and still. I wander out of the village and along a hedgeless lane with grass fields on either side. Three huge black shapes squatting over there in shallow pits make me stand and stare. They are three German howitzers, big fellows with caterpillar wheels, their snouts still pointing skywards. There is an orchard on my right, and I turn aside, and following the hedge, sight another gun with its muzzle cocked at an acute angle. This gun is also a big fellow, and it is plain to me that the Boche gunners were trying to save the gun, but the orchard ditch must have been too deep for them, and the wheels stuck in the ditch.

But there are other objects here besides this gun, and other explanations of its surrender. I see several grey-blue figures lying at intervals along the green bank beside the ditch. Dead Germans. I realize that these are the first dead Germans I have seen, and I go to look at them. The first man is not a pleasant sight, his belly has been ripped open by a piece of H.E. I pass on to the next body and stand at gaze.

It is the body of a dark, good-looking boy. He could not have been much more than nineteen. His uniform is clean and new, and he lies on his back with his arms spread, his head on the soft grass, his eyes closed. He might be sleeping. I can see no wound on him, and no blood on his tunic, but when I look more closely I discover a little triangular blood-mark at the base of his neck. A fragment of shell or a shrapnel bullet must have struck downwards into his chest, and killed him.

I am not conscious of gloating over these poor dead. Indeed, this German boy moves me to compassion. We say that it is glorious to die for one's country, but how little of life was his. He was a comely lad, and one can credit him with a pride in his uniform and his looks. No doubt someone will weep, but what satisfaction is that to him, for life is passionate and sweet, and the cold earth so final.

As I stand there close to this French orchard I can remember saying to Gibbs, after having to dress a man who had been terribly wounded, that I should like to see hundreds of Germans lying dead and to be able to walk amid the bodies and exult, but now as I look at this clean young corpse, bitterness and hate seem to pass from me. I am conscious of nothing but the horror and

pity of this war. We have all been mad, brutally and blatantly mad, and this gentle autumn day seems to open its eyes upon a world that is waking from some evil dream.

It may be good to die for one's country, but surely it is better to live for it in the peaceful creating of beautiful things? Will this war be the end of war, as we who have suffered in it hope and pray? Are the illusions of gore and of glory and of flag-waving shattered? Or will brass-bands play for some other generation, and fool crowds shout and women throw flowers? Must man, like some mischievous urchin, try out some new devil's toy, his latest stink-machine or death ray? I should feel profoundly and cynically sad did I believe that this horror could repeat itself and our young men rush like poor sheep to the slaughter. We have borne so much for the peace we pray for that I think that I would rather see all humanity lying dead like this German boy, than it should blunder blindly into a war even more terrible than this has been.

XXVII

WE have moved forward into a larger village called Retz. Our Division is being given a three days' rest, and other troops have pushed towards Le Quesnoy and Le Cateau. Retz is only three or four miles behind the firing line, and all day transport and troops are pouring along its straight and narrow street, yet not a shell has fallen into the village for three days. This last phase of the war is almost unreal.

Retz has suffered little destruction. The only building in ruins is the church, which the Germans blew up before they retreated. The village is full of the poor French—women, children, and old men—many of them refugees from places that were in the fighting zone. A virulent type of influenza is spreading, and these poor people become easy victims to it. They look bleached and yellow and starved. They have no doctor, no drugs, no milk or eggs, and only the shabby clothes and poor blankets that have served for the last four years. The Germans commandeered all their cattle, and did not leave so much as a hen in the place.

We have established ourselves in a brick building set back off the main street. It was a girls' seminary before the war, and the Germans had used it as a hospital, and they have left it in a state of filth. The room on the ground floor which Fairfax and I have appropriated has manure and rubbish piled six feet high against one wall. I have never seen so many flies, not even at Gallipoli. They are in the sleepy, autumnal stage, and they collect on the walls in black sheets. Our cookhouse is out-of-doors, and on the wall behind it I can say without exaggeration that the brickwork is covered completely with flies. They swarm so furiously and filthily in our mess that I lose my temper with the foul things, rout out an old garden syringe, mix a bucket of cresol and drench the walls and the ceiling and the black insects with disinfectant. It kills or extrudes them, but the room smells for days like a lavatory.

We open out as a divisional hospital here, and are soon full of sick, but our own men are not our only patients. Our A.S.C. are being compelled to feed the French civilians, and we have to doctor them. In a few days I find myself with quite a small country practice, and at six o'clock each evening I hold a civilian sick parade. Our medical comforts are a godsend in this crisis, for one cannot feed on bully beef and biscuits people who are acutely ill.

Never have I seen anything so shabby and sad and weary as this French village. The poor people bless us for freeing them, but they seem beyond

smiles. The peeling, eczematous doors hide many tragedies. When a window pane was broken during the war, the hole had to be stuffed with rags or covered with paper. The village has had practically no soap for months, and the infernal flies buzz everywhere.

Tragedies, yes. There is one cottage where I am attending a girl in the last stages of consumption. Before she dies she may see the man she was to marry. I go there one morning and find a French *poilu* squatting on a chair outside the door of the next cottage. He has a pale, dead, apathetic face. I ask my French friends about him, and they tell me that he is the first French soldier to come on leave to this liberated village. For months he had had no news of his home, and he arrived to find his young wife and mother dead, and his small girl aged four so frightened at a stranger that she became screaming and hysterical when this poor, bearded creature tried to kiss her.

I have another patient at a farm outside the village, and in the field in which it stands the Germans appear to have collected all the farm implements from the whole neighbourhood, and smashed them. Ploughs, harrows, seed drills and reapers are parked in rusting ruin. All the trees have been felled. A petty, spiteful business this! The farmhouse holds no fewer than three families in addition to its owners, and every room is packed with humanity and flies. My patient, an old lady and her daughter, refugees from Quéant, occupy one room on the ground floor. The old lady is suffering from broncho-pneumonia, and is gallantly refusing to die.

The daughter is a silent woman, with a swarthy, tragic face. I do not think I have ever seen more tragic eyes in any human face. Their home, of course, at Quéant, is a rubbish heap, and all their menfolk appear to be dead.

I remember, after my first visit, the daughter producing a poor shabby little purse, and offering to pay me. Nothing has touched me more during the whole war.

When I made her understand that we were giving our services, and gladly so, tears came into her eyes.

“Monsieur is very kind.”

Good God, are we as sworn healers mere commercialists?

I have two other patients in this farmhouse, a child with tuberculous glands, and a youth with what I take to be pernicious anæmia, but my pet patient is the old lady from Quéant. It seems to me that the daughter with the tragic eyes regards her mother as the one thing life has left her, for she is middle-aged, and plain, homeless, and alone in the world save for this old woman. Moreover, there is a gaillard spirit in madame that challenges me. She has a happy old face, in spite of all her troubles, perhaps because the future is shorter for her, and not so hopeless and shabby as it must appear to the

daughter.

I draw meat essence and milk, and even a bottle of champagne for madame from Bond's medical comforts stores. The flies are one of the principal pests. The daughter sits beside her mother's bed and spends her time keeping the foul things off the old lady's face.

I say, "I wish we could get rid of these flies."

Madame crinkles up her face at me.

"God made both the flies and the Germans, monsieur."

Such courage and so jocund a spirit shall survive, but I wish these French would not seal up their windows against all fresh air. The house smells of crowded, unwashed humanity, and but for madame's brave face, it would nauseate me.

Victory! My Lady of Quéant is going to get well. Her chest is clearing up, and her pulse is stronger. Good business.

When I tell the daughter that I think her mother is out of danger, her poor, haggard face seems to crumple up with emotion. She makes a quick movement, grabs my hand and kisses it.

The 81st has attacked again and gone forward. They are nearing Le Cateau. Everywhere the news is good, and we are beginning to hope that we shall not have to endure another winter in the trenches.

What an amazing transformation in six months!

We hear that the Americans have been having a bloody time in the Argonne. Their transport arrangements broke down, and for a while there was chaos.

It is we English and Colonials who are dealing Germany the last hammer blows. I am proud. This country of ours has endured, and I, too, can call myself English.

Potter has come back to us, beat to the world, with his feet in rags, and his pince-nez minus one lens, but absurdly happy. We put him to bed. Finch is a great collector of gossip, and he tells me what the men have to say about

Potter. He has done very brave things in his quiet, mild way, wandering serenely in and out of the Boche barrage, and getting wounded men back.

Am I jealous of Potter? Yes and no. I tell Fairfax what Finch has told me, and Potter is to be put up for a decoration.

Gibbs has gone up to take Potter's place.

Two new and very raw medical officers have joined us. We find them useless, for they are so utterly and mutely green.

Our men have taken Le Cateau. News comes back to us that the Germans are deluging the captured town with gas-shells. Its cellars are full of French, many of whom have been gassed, and there is a call for help and rescue work.

My wretched cowardice seems unquenchable. It is trying to suborn me during these last days, and to persuade me to play for personal safety. Damn my foul little self! Somehow in this war I have made a conquest of my fear, or contrived to hide it, and I will not let it shame me at this last hour. Other men have endured far more horrible things than I have had to suffer, and given far more than I have given.

I tell Fairfax that I want to go to Le Cateau, and help rescue these French. The face of France is for me the face of Pauline Malaunay. Fairfax gives his consent, and I take an ambulance, and Corporal Block, Finch, and two other men. Le Cateau lies in a hollow, and when we reach the edge of the plateau, and the ambulance swings round a curve of the downward hill, we get a glimpse of the town and see shells bursting in it.

Block says to me, "Jerry's using up his left-overs, sir. Spiteful old beggar."

I smile at Block, and reflect upon the friendships I have made with these plain men. I have had nothing but goodwill and kindness from them, and in the years to come I shall treasure the memory of it.

There is a peeling, excoriated shabbiness about this town that gives it the look of a body that is diseased. Unpainted shutters hang awry, windows are broken, walls desquamating. The road is full of slime. The sinister, sweet smell of gas is here, and before we reach the centre of the town we are stopped by a sentry in a gas mask. We put on our masks. The sentry points us to a particular street in which gas-shells have fallen, and we find Gibbs and Carless at work here. I recognize Gibbs by his bulk and ginger hair, Carless by his breeches.

They are rescuing the French from the cellars in which they had taken refuge. It would have been much better for the poor people if they had climbed to the attics instead of crowding into the cellars. Two or three big shells crash on the houses while we are at work. I have Pauline Malaunay's face before me, and I am not afraid. We carry some of the milder cases to the upper rooms. My

own ambulance and two others are waiting in the street, and we load them up with women and children and old men. There is a fat, red-faced *curé* who has been working like a hero. He is badly gassed, and in spite of it he wants to stay with his people, and we have to persuade him by force into the last ambulance.

I go back with the convoy. There is a C.G.S. in another village close to Retz which is dealing with gas cases. I sit beside the driver of the leading ambulance. We are clear of that poisoned town, and my mask is off, and I am breathing the sweet, fresh air. Open country, trees, fields. Thank God this bloody business is nearing its end. I look at a distant church spire with a white sheet still trailing from it, and the thing is like a symbol of peace and of sanity. How man has blasphemed against his own soul! Almost it would seem that the chemist has been the evil spirit of this brutal war. He may plead that his cleverness has been debased by the cunning and the desperate necessity of his masters, but in the future I would shut up our chemists in cages until the goodwill and the kindness of plain men have made such clever devilry impossible.

When I return to Retz and our seminary I find Fairfax alone in the mess. Of our two new M.O.s one has gone sick with 'flu, and the other is acting as accoucheur to a Frenchwoman who cannot swear, poor dear, that Jove has visited her, and who will have to excuse herself to some returning husband for a baby that is Boche. Fairfax is writing home. I rid myself of steel hat and box-respirator, and pick up a paper that is lying on the table.

“Satisfied, Stephen?”

Fairfax is looking at me intently, and with the air of the kind and gentle physician. Does he understand what willed me to go? And suddenly I am moved to tell him that my secret self was trying to persuade me to remain *embusqué* during these last days, and that he has been too kind to me.

“Have I, Stephen? I think not.”

I put the paper down, and rest my arms on the table. I feel somehow that I want to confess myself to the man who has been so magnanimously my friend. I tell him that all through this war I have been afraid, and that of all the emotions fear can be most humiliating and shameless.

I am aware of him smiling at me.

“Well, you have camouflaged it pretty well, Stephen. I have not been conscious of any lapse.”

“Thanks to you.”

“Oh, nonsense.”

“It's the truth.”

He scribbles a few more words on his letter pad, and then looks up at me suddenly.

“That’s a good enough decoration for any C.O. But I do not think there will be much more fear, Stephen. That’s what I am telling my wife in this letter.”

Rumour is busy, but it is more than rumour. Rankin comes to visit us and he warns us that we shall have to pack up and move on in a day or two. It is an open secret among those in high places that Germany has asked for an armistice, and that the end is near. The rank and file are not supposed to know of this, though why such solemn secrecy should be maintained, passes my comprehension. Is it that our masters think that we shall go to earth like rabbits and refuse to dare a last gamble with death now that the great reprieve is about to rise like a new sun in the east?

I go to see my old lady at the farm. She is sitting up in bed swathed in a shabby old pink shawl. I tell her that the war is passing, and that peace is coming to the world, and that Germany will be made to pay for all the destruction she has wrought.

She beams upon me, and says that she will shortly be going home to Quéant. I meet the daughter’s tragic eyes. There can be no home for them at Quéant for many a long day, and our silence is a compassionate conspiracy against blurting the obvious. But madame is not to be discouraged by silence. She says, “When they put up our new house, Madeline, I will have white tiles round the stove in the kitchen.”

Sanguine and valiant old soul. May she live to see her white tiles.

There is a little wood beyond the farm at the end of a grass field. Misty sunlight is shining upon it, and I am moved to stroll to this wood and explore. A narrow ride traverses it from north to south, and is crossed by a second ride in the wood’s centre. Most of the trees have been felled and used by the Germans, but a few are standing, and the undergrowth has bushed up. The foliage is a soft, limpid gold; not a leaf is moving on the trees, for the autumn day is windless. A few leaves are falling like yellow scales straight from the branches. Some twirl as they fall. The silence is utter and complete.

A profound feeling of peace descends upon me. I am happy. In spite of my fear I have endured. I am man and master of my manhood. I am going home.

We move to Le Cateau. No shells are falling in the town now, and the French share its streets with our troops. They seem to take pleasure in the possession of their own streets, and to delight in parading up and down them. On Sunday the town dresses itself in such finery as it can command and the girls coquette with our men.

Carless is quite happy. He has found a mademoiselle who is eager for *un peu d'amour*.

It is raining, but no one minds. Grey skies do not matter. Our sodden troops are cheerfully clearing the German rearguards out of the Forest of Mormal. Even the Boche prisoners appear to be sullenly satisfied with the strange autumnal passing of the war.

The 81st Division is to attack again and perhaps for the last time. We are to be the forward ambulance, but Gibbs wrote that the show will be hardly more dangerous than a paper-chase.

I wonder!

I light a candle in my billet and sit down at a rickety table and write to Mary.

I feel that I can say to her, "Beloved, it is nearly over. In a little while I may be coming home."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur. Mixed hyphenation has been left as per the original printing.

[The end of *No Hero—This* by Warwick Deeping]