MY ·75

PAUL LINTIER

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Oct. 15th. 1921

MY '75

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REMINISCENCES OF A GUNNER OF A ·75$^{m}/_{m}$ BATTERY IN 1914

FROM THE FRENCH OF

PAUL LINTIER

WITH A PREFACE BY

FRANCES WILSON HUARD

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PREFACE

BY FRANCES WILSON HUARD

Author of "My Home in the Field of Honour"

ALL during the three weary years of this great war *real* pleasures have been few for those of us whom Fate has destined to be more or less closely associated with the daily tide of events.

As I look back at present I feel that one of my first treats was when I came upon Paul Lintier's newly published volume called "Ma Piece." I read it, reread it and recommended it to those of my American friends who, able to read French, clamoured for some real human document; the war as seen by an actual participant.

Aside from the clear, concise style, devoid of any pretentious literary flourishes, the incidents were what gripped me. They were the direct answer to those thousand and one questions that we, the civilians shut up in the army zone, tortured by fear and anguish, asked

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ourselves and asked each other a hundred times a day.

Soldiers and diplomats, critics and littérateurs, wives and sweethearts all over the fair land of France devoured and discussed the book. And little did I dream that it would one day be my privilege to write a preface introducing to my compatriots this *chef d'oeuvre* already recognised by the French Academy, the winner of the Prix Montyon. This I may truly say is the greatest pleasure yet fallen to my lot. Pleasure, alas! not unmixed with pain, for were it not a nobler task to extol the virtues of the living than sing the praises of those gone before?

It was not my fortune to have known Paul Lintier. He fell in the very flower of his manhood, unmindful of the sacrifice for country, ignoring his glorious contribution for the safety of future generations. But with his passing on the Field of Honour, something besides a son, a soldier, and a poet was lost to France—lost to us all. It is such spirits as his that make a country great, make the world worth while. It is for such reasons that we should treasure all the more carefully his only contributions to posterity.

His name, yesterday unknown, now justly stands graven on the records of all time. This humble artilleryman lost in the masses of the combatants, jotted down on his knees a work that shall stand as one of the most immutable witnesses of the conflict; a book that long after we have gone will remain; an incomparable document, a magnificent offering to those who later on shall study the souls and gestures of a generation of heroes by whom France was saved.

Some one has said, and wisely, that what most pleases us when perusing a book is to find the author corroborating our own thoughts,—giving voice to our unborn sentiments—providing us with material for comparison. If this be true, then there is no reason why "My .75" should not live on forever.

Further than a really great literary talent, this book reveals the profound and generous soul of the entire "Jeunesse Française" ready to sacrifice itself without counting, for the highest ideal that ever inflamed a people.

The admirable patience, the great good humour, the intelligent cleverness and heroic devotion together with the plain, simple courage, all the deep-rooted, undreamed of qualities of the French Race, are to be found within its covers, making it a monument to stoic virtue.

How we love them, all the "Camarades"—Hutin, Deprès, Bréjard, Lieutenant Hély d'Oissel—and the others—the four million others who on August second, nineteen hundred and fourteen, stood willing, ready, to perish for their ideal, glad to offer their lives with a smile.

The dedication to "Captain Bernard de Brissoult, whose glorious death facing the enemy, drew from eyes burned by powder and long vigils, the terrible tears of soldiers," is one of the most touching things I know, and I should like to feel that all those of my compatriots who close the book have shed a tear of admiration and regret for Paul Lintier, who died for France, March sixteenth, nineteen sixteen, in the twenty-third year of his age.

New York,
July, Nineteen hundred and seventeen.

MY ·75

I. MOBILISATION

WAR! Every one knows it, every one says so. It would be madness not to believe it. And yet, in spite of all, we hardly feel excited; we don't believe it! War, the Great European War—no, it can't be true!

But why shouldn't it be true?

Blood, money, and more and more blood! And then we have so often heard people say: "Now there'll be war," and nevertheless we remained at peace. And it will be so this time. Europe is not going to become a slaughter-house because an Austrian Archduke happens to have been murdered.

And yet, what are we hourly expecting as we sit here in nervous idleness in the barracks, unless it is the order for general mobilisation? Sergeants of all ages arrived yesterday at Le Mans, and every train to-day has brought others. There is nothing for them to do. Since réveillé a man dressed in coarse corduroy has stood at the window watching the artillerymen and horses coming and going in the square.

Every now and then he takes a brandy-flask from his pocket and has a pull at it.

I was lying on my bed. Hutin, the chief layer of the first gun, was spread-eagled on his, smoking, his knees in the air and his heels drawn up under him. Noticing that my pack was crooked, I got up, mechanically, and put it straight.

"Hutin!"

"Yes?"

"Come and have a drink!"

"All right!"

The barrack square was less noisy than usual. There were no drivers just returned from the polygon unharnessing their teams in front of the stables. No word of command was heard from officers directing firing practice underneath the plane-trees. In a corner one of the guards of the artillery park was oiling his guns. A cavalryman, both hands in his pockets and the reins slung over one arm, was leading his horse to the trough or the forge. Over by the wall of the remount stables, in the full glare of the sun, a few orderlies were grooming their horses in a listless fashion. A continuous stream of men on their way to and from the canteen—like a black line of insects crossing a white gravel path—marked out one of the diagonals of the square. In front of the canteen there was a scramble for drinks. It was hot.

Midday, and we are still waiting for news. Suppose all this should only turn out to be another false alarm!

White-clad gunners, with nothing to do as there is no firing practice, are strolling about the courtyard in search of news. In the Place de la Mission inquisitive onlookers press close up to the railings; it is difficult to say why. The majority of them are women. A few gunners pass in front of them with a smile and a swagger, already assuming the air of brave defenders.

Near the guard-house which serves as a visitors' room, but where no visitors are allowed to enter on account of the fleas which infest it at this time of year, wives, mothers, sisters, and friends have come to see their soldiers. All make a brave attempt to hide their feelings. But their expression betrays their anxiety, which has lined their foreheads and sharpened their features. There are dark rings around their eyes, and the eyes themselves are restless and sunken. They continually avert their gaze, lest the fears and forebodings which no one can banish should be read in their faces. When they go away, through the little door under the chestnut-trees, after having watched the soldiers disappear down the passage at the end of the barracks, their feelings suddenly find vent in a sob, at which they are themselves surprised. Rapidly, and almost shamefacedly, pressing a rolled-up handkerchief to their lips, they turn aside into the Rue Chanzy, as if all the men there did not understand their trouble. . . .

At four o'clock I went out with Sergeant Le Mée by special permission of the Captain. We went to my room in the Rue Mangeard to leave Le Mée's parade uniform there, together with a bag and some papers.

We were about to have dinner together. I had just uncorked a bottle of old claret, when Le Mée caught hold of my arm.

"Listen!"

Up from the street a loud murmur rose through the open window. At the same moment something magnetic, indefinable and yet definite, shot through both of us. We looked at each other, I with the bottle held to the brim of the glass.

"At last!"

Le Mée nodded assent, and we hurried to the window. In the street below, near the artillery barracks, surged a dense crowd. All faces reflected the same expression of stupor, anxiety, and bewilderment. In the eyes of all shone the same strange gleam. Women's voices were heard—voices that quavered and broke. . . .

"Well, Le Mée, here's to your health and let's hope that in a few months we shall have another drink together!"

"Here's luck to us both!"

Grasping our swords we ran back to the barracks. That night we once again slept in our beds.

Sunday, August 2

My kit was ready. I had rolled up some handkerchiefs in my cloak.

A sergeant came in:

"Now then, all of you go to the office!"

The sergeant began distributing the record books and identity discs.

On one side of mine was inscribed: "Paul Lintier," and, underneath, "E.V. (engagé volontaire) Cl. 1913"; on the other: "Mayenne 1179."

You could have heard a pin drop in the office, everything was so still. For one moment there rose up before me a vision of a battlefield—with dead men lying stretched out on the edge of a pit, and a non-commissioned officer hastily identifying them before burial. My emotion was short lived.

The "Great Event" had at last come to break the monotony of our barrack life, and no one thought of anything else. It was almost as if a sort of blindness prevented us from looking ahead and confined each man's attention to the preparations for departure. This indifference astonished me, and yet I myself shared it.

Was it decision, courage? To a certain extent, perhaps. . . . Did we really believe there was going to be war? I am not too sure of it. It was impossible to realise what war would be—to gauge the whole horror of it. And so we were not afraid.

From one of the barrack windows I saw the following scene:

A young man, promptly called up by the general mobilisation, had just come out of a house opposite. He was walking backwards, shading his eyes from the sun in order to see the face of some one dear to him who stood at one of the second-floor windows. A fair-haired woman, very young and extremely pale, watched him with longing eyes from behind the muslin curtains, doubtless afraid to let him see her distraught face and tear-stained cheeks. She was standing close behind the curtains, her hand on her breast, with the fingers spasmodically stretched out in an attitude eloquent of grief. As he was about to disappear from view in a bend of the road, she suddenly opened the window wide, and showed herself for an instant. The man could not see her. She took two unsteady steps backwards, and sank into an arm-chair, where she sat huddled up, her face in her hands, and her shoulders shaken with sobs. Then, in the semi-darkness of the room, I caught sight of a servant with a Breton cap carrying a baby to her.

At noon we left the barracks in order to take up the quarters which had been assigned to us a little way down the Avenue de Pontlieue.

The 10th and 12th Batteries of the 44th Regiment of Field Artillery were to assemble upon a war footing in the cider-brewery known as Toublanc.

We had nothing to do except shake down our straw bedding. A gas-engine was throbbing with an incessant double beat which got on one's nerves after a while. On the doors of the available buildings were crudely chalked the numbers of the regiments to which they were allotted.

The stables were installed in a shed open on one side, at one end of which were piles of casks on which we placed the harness. These stables would have been quite comfortable if they had not smelt so horribly owing to the dirty lavatories adjoining them.

The men's quarters had been arranged in a kitchen garden full of black currant-bushes and peach-trees, and consisted of an old, tumble-down outhouse, which seemed to have escaped complete destruction solely owing to the vines and virginia creepers growing over it, and whose clinging embrace of closely woven branches and tendrils held its crumbling walls together. The grapes were already quite large. The coming harvest looked most promising. I wondered where we should be when the time came for them to be gathered.

No one troubled to ascertain whether war had been declared. After all, the declaration only meant a few words already spoken, or about to be spoken, by diplomatists. The war was already a reality. We felt it. The only question which occupied our minds was when we were to start, and this nobody could answer.

The men were cheerful, unconcerned, and

much less nervous than yesterday. Personally, I did not feel weighed down under the intolerable burden of anxiety which I had expected to crush me at such a time. I wanted to ask all my comrades whether they really believed that in a few days we should be under fire. And if they had answered "Yes," I should have admired them, for, if I remained cool and collected before the yawning chasm opening out before us, it was merely because I had not yet realised its depths.

I kept repeating to myself: "It is war—ghastly, bloody war . . . and perhaps you will soon be dead." But nevertheless I did not feel the least emotion; I did not believe that I should be killed. It is true that, in the presence of a dead person one has loved, one does not at first believe that he is dead.

I have written these notes sitting on a packing-case, using the bottom of an upturned barrel as a table. A stable-guard, after eyeing me a moment or two, came and looked over my shoulder.

"Lord!" said he, "you've got it badly!"

Monday, August 3

We don't yet know whether war has been declared, but Metz is reported to be in flames and some say Metz has been taken. French aeroplanes and dirigibles are said to have blown up the powder magazines. There is also a rumour that Garros has destroyed a Zeppelin manned by twenty officers, and that on the frontier our airmen have been tossing up as to who shall first try to ram an enemy airship. The Germans are said to have crossed our frontier yesterday in three places. But yesterday we heard that our soldiers, in spite of their officers, had broken through on to German soil. The rumours going about are numberless, and the most likely and unlikely things are said in the same breath.

What are we to believe? Nothing, of course. That would be best.

But we thirst for news, and yet, when any is brought in, we shrug our shoulders incredulously. Nevertheless, when a success is reported we are so anxious to believe it that the majority of sceptics only require a sufficiently vigorous affirmation in order to accept it as true.

I intend to note down every day both fables and facts. But at present I am not in a position to distinguish between what is true and what is false.

I am only endeavouring, in these hurriedly scribbled pages, to give some idea of the different elements which go to form the state of mind of an individual soldier lost among a crowd of others. In this sense fact and fable are the same thing; but later on, if this notebook is not buried with me in some nameless grave out yonder, these notes may perhaps serve to form a history of legend. A history of legend—that is as much as I dare hope to achieve!

I have an hour or two free for writing, and am using a bench as a desk. Behind me the horses keep stamping intermittently on the cement floor of the shed. It would not be so bad if these lavatories did not smell so abominably.

We have been informed that we are to start on Friday. To Berlin! To Berlin!

Berlin! That's the objective. It was in everybody's mouth! But did we not mark time to the same refrain in 1870, almost at this same season? And what happened afterwards? The recollection made me shiver. Superstition!

Is England going to come into line with us against Germany? England is the great unknown quantity at the present moment. Nevertheless, she is hardly mentioned here.

To Berlin! To Berlin!
The cry echoes on all sides.

Although I had begun to convince myself of the reality of events, the excitement of departure and the irritation caused by knowing nothing definite had set my nerves jangling and prevented me from realising to the full the approaching horror.

We had harnessed our horses and formed the gun-teams.

A gun in a 75 mm. battery is composed of the gun itself and ammunition wagon, each with its limber, and each drawn by six horses harnessed in pairs. The detachment consists of six drivers, six gunners, a corporal, and a sergeant, who is the gun-commander. But my gun, the first of the 2nd battery, is also accompanied by the section-commander, the battery-leader, a trumpeter, and the Captain's orderly with his two horses. In all, eighteen men and nineteen horses. Of the eighteen men, seventeen belonged to the active service. For nearly a year now they have led the same life; each day they have executed the same manœuvres together. One detachment, therefore, is a real entity, and forms a little society by itself, with its habits, likes and dislikes.

Bréjard, the section-commander, really commands it himself, as he did before the general mobilisation. So nothing seems changed. Hubert, the new gun-commander, a reservist, has his thoughts centred on his young wife, whom, after only a few months of married life, he has had to leave at his farm, where the corn is still standing.

Bréjard, who must be about twenty-four, is tall and spare, with unfathomable grey eyes, an obstinate chin, and rather strong features. He enlisted when very young, and, by dint of hard and methodical work, passed into Fontainebleau high up in the list.

Corporal Jean Déprez affords a contrast to Bréjard. Dreamy and imaginative, bored by regimental life, and far from reconciled to the prospect of many months of war, Déprez, as far as the Service is concerned, is a weakling to whom any exercise of his authority, small though it is, goes against the grain. He has momentary flashes of wit, and, although as a rule very unenthusiastic and rather moody, he is nevertheless an amusing conversationalist at times, and is a staunch friend. The lack of work in the barracks has for some part thrown us together, and both were pleased to find ourselves side by side when the moment came to take the field.

With Corporal Déprez on one hand, and Gun-layer Hutin on the other, I had not the least feeling of loneliness in the tremendous excitement of mobilisation, and the hourly expectation of the breaking of the storm.

Hutin is a little fellow with a thick crop of black hair and a moustache. His regular features are lit up by a pair of attractive dark brown eyes of rather roguish expression. Energetic, quick-tempered, fairly ambitious, intolerant, quick to make up his mind, and extremely intelligent, capable of real friendship and even devotedness, I have grown fond of his rich and spontaneous temperament.

In the Avenue de Pontlieue the commandeered horses were standing in line. There were hundreds of them, heavy, pot-bellied, docile animals, with splendid manes and shaggy fetlocks. They were held by men in smocks, standing motionless on the curb, chafing at the delay and longing for their dinner. Nearby, along the wall of the artillery barracks, was collected a heterogeneous medley of carts and lorries, also requisitioned.

A motley crowd was thronging the avenue—women in light-coloured summer dresses and soldiers in uniform and canvas clothing presenting an incongruous appearance. Reservists were arriving in groups. Almost all looked quiet and undisturbed, and some even wore a cheerful air. One or two were obviously drunk, and others looked as though they might be. I only saw one who was crying. He was sitting on a heap of straw, engaged in fixing a brand-new yellow strap to his revolver-holster, and tears were falling on his clumsy fingers as he fumbled with the stiff leather. I put a hand on his shoulder, whereupon he half turned round and said, with a jerk of his head:

"Oh, my God! My wife died in child-bed last week. . . . There's the baby-girl—only eight days old—left all alone with nobody to look after her!"

"What have you done with her?"

"Well, the only thing I could . . . took her to the Foundlings' Home."

It is when the post comes in that the men look saddest.

We are confined to quarters, but the non-commissioned officers are allowed to take the men, two or three at a time, to the *abreuvoir* as the café opposite is called.

Tuesday, August 4

Yesterday evening at nine o'clock, by way of a purely theoretical roll-call, the Lieutenant opened the door of our den.

"Every one all right in there?"

"Yes, sir, thank you! Warm as pies!"

"Nothing you want?"

"Yes, sir, we'd like to start!"

"Oh! to start, would you?"

This morning Pelletier, the trumpeter, a Parisian who seems able to turn his hands to almost anything, began sharpening our swords. Standing in front of a bench in his shirt-sleeves, he worked an enormous file with a horrible screeching noise which sent cold shudders down one's spine and set one's teeth on edge. From time to time he paused in his work and, with furious thrusts and slashes, tried the points and edges by cutting up some old deal cases lying in a corner.

From the depths of our quarters, where we live in an atmosphere alive with the most ridiculous rumours, waiting for orders to entrain, the tumult of the general mobilisation in the streets and on the neighbouring Paris-Brest railway line sounds like incessantly reverberating thunder in an atmosphere charged with electricity.

One of my fellow-countrymen, Gaget, who is clerk to the Artillery Staff, told me that war has not yet been declared. He is in a position to know. His mother has written to him from Mayenne saying that my family believe me to be already at Verdun. I wonder if my letters are not being delivered. . . .

This afternoon Déprez went to the laundry to get his washing. In the shop a young woman, the wife of a corporal of artillery who joined the colours this morning, threw her arms round his neck and began to cry.

He came back much upset.

Some of the men have gone with their horses to bring back our war material from the station. The park is arranged on the wide footpath of the Avenue de Pontlieue, where the plane-trees shelter our 75 mm. guns and ammunition wagons. Women stop to look at them, and some shake their heads despondently.

It appears that we are to entrain to-morrow evening. We are beginning to get thoroughly bored here, and do not know how to fill in our time. I am going to get some sleep in our den at the farther end of the kitchen garden, where it is cool and shady. The sun, through the open door, only lights up a large rectangle of straw, covered with haversacks and gleaming weapons. The weather has been splendid to-day, fine and clear, and, now that twilight is near, the air is beginning to hum with those midges which fly round and round in circles and are supposed to herald fine weather.

I was able to get out for a moment. Some women, their eyes swollen with crying, looked at us with pity, and spoke to us—the first young men to go—in voices full of sympathy:

"When do you start?"

"To-morrow—perhaps the day after."

"Where are you going?"

"We're not sure—either Verdun or Maubeuge."

"Well, the best of luck."

"Thanks so much. . . . Good-bye!"

Good luck! . . . I hope so! . . . It is a sort of lasting farewell they bid us, out of the fullness of their hearts, before we start for the Great Unknown.

Wednesday, August 5

War has been declared since the 3rd, and fighting is in progress all along the frontier.

Serious losses have already been reported. Eleven thousand French and eighteen thousand Germans are said to have fallen in the opening engagements. Whether these figures mean killed or injured I do not know.

The news, true or false, damped our spirits for a few moments. But our extraordinary indifference soon gained the upper hand. Besides, has there ever been a more favourable occasion for revenge—for our *Revanche*—than this?

Thursday, August 6

The Germans have entered Belgium, in spite of the convention of neutrality. I don't think this will surprise anybody. But what does astonish us, and what must also astonish the enemy, is the fierce resistance the Belgians are making.

The Germans have just failed in a massed attack on Liége. If the Belgian Army alone has managed to worst them, what hopes dare we not entertain?

England is joining us. That is now certain. With the French, English, Russians, Belgians, and Serbians allied, we ought soon to see the last of this military Power which is supposed to be so formidable. The news, official this time, made us all the more impatient to leave Le Mans and the wearying quarters in which we live.

On the Paris-Brest railway trains full of infantry, cavalry, and equipment have been passing incessantly. Grinding and screeching they laboriously roll over the bridge which spans the Avenue de Pontlieue, and which is heroically guarded by obese Territorials, wearing dirty canvas suits, and armed with Gras rifles with fixed bayonets. A crowd of women with children in their arms or clinging to their skirts are waiting there beneath the noontide sun. They stand for hours at a time, watching the procession of military trucks decorated with Evergreen and illustrated with crude chalk drawings. Clusters of soldiers are to be seen on the foot-boards, and in the brake and guards' vans. In the avenue clouds of dust are raised by commandeered horses which, harnessed to forage wagons, are being tried there, and which, under the unaccustomed yoke, become refractory, lash out, and finally get entangled in the traces. The women separate hurriedly, dragging their children with them, in order to avoid a prancing horse or the oncoming wheel of a wagon. But nevertheless, obstinate, excited, and as if intoxicated with the noise, light, and continual movement, they stay there in spite of all discomfort. Whenever a train passes a broadside of shrill cries rises from their groups, which collect, separate, disperse, and are again encompassed by the dangers of the avenue.

In front of the Toublanc cider-brewery flowers and ribbons in bunches, sprays, and cascades carpet the pavement and smother the gun-carriages, ammunition wagons, and limbers. Women and girls arrive with armfuls of hydrangeas, iris, and roses. Their faces, lit up by the sun and by the excitement of the moment, appear and disappear among the flowers. As the sentinels are not allowed to let any one approach too close, they throw their bouquets from a distance. Artillerymen, who have nearly finished loading up their trucks, thank them by blowing kisses which put them to flight.

I saw one girl fastening a huge tricolour bunch on the bayonet of one of the sentinels —evidently her lover. The steel shone amid the blossoms.

Women timidly bar the way to the horsemen in order to decorate their bridles and saddle-bags with garlands. And overhead the splendid August sun beats down, shedding a golden light on the dust of the roadway and the green of the trees, and lighting up the faces of the women and the flowers.

Friday, August 7

For some time now I have observed the first gesture of a soldier who has just received a letter. He tears it open hurriedly, and, without pulling it out of the envelope, rapidly fingers it to see whether it contains a postal order. . . .

I was out to-night with Déprez, when a woman, powdered and painted, with podgy cheeks and a chest and stomach forming an undivided mass of shaking fat, accosted us:

"Forty-fourth?"

"Yes."

"Do you know Corporal X? Give him the best wishes from Alice. He'll know. . . . Alice is my name. . . . You won't forget? . . . Poor old Joe! . . ."

Then, as we prepared to go on our way:

"Won't you come in?" she said, with the usual glance of invitation.

"No, thanks," answered Déprez politely, "we haven't got time."

After we had gone a little farther, he added:

"That's a message which I'm shot if I'll deliver!"

Saturday, August 8

At last we have received orders to entrain. Our first taste of war has been a sort of flower-show. A crowd of women and grey-haired men were waiting for us under the trees on the other side of the avenue. Children, their tiny arms full of flowers, ran up to us; their mothers waved their hands and smiled. But how sad the smiles of these women were! Their swollen eyes told a tale of tears, and the lines lurking round their lips, despite their smiles, showed that another breakdown was not far off. The younger children—and quite tiny ones came toddling across the street—were obviously finding the day's proceedings finer than a circus. They laughed and clapped their hands with delight.

We passed the fag-end of the morning getting the limbers and wagons ready and furbishing up the harness. Twelve o'clock struck. As the hour of departure approached the tumult in the avenue calmed down, and the crowd waiting in the shade became gradually quiet.

There was almost complete silence when the Captain gave the order, in clear resonant tones:

"Forward!"

Like an echo there rose from the crowd a loud hurrah, through which I nevertheless distinctly heard two heartrending sobs.

Never was there a brighter August day. The limber-boxes and gun-wheels, the straps and hooks of the harness—even the muzzles of the guns themselves—were festooned with flowers and ribbons, the bright hues of which were blended together in a harmony of colour against the iron-grey background of the guns.

This morning the Captain, Bernard de Brisoult, said to us:

"Take the flowers they offer you, and decorate your guns with them. They are the precious offerings of those who are left behind. But be calm! For by being thus you will inspire greater confidence in them as they watch you go!"

The streets, through which we proceeded at a walking pace, were gay with flags and bunting. Truly the departure of these men, many of whom would never return, was admirably serene. The gunners, sitting motionless on the limber-boxes or walking beside the horses, smiled and laughed merrily as the women by the wayside waved them farewell. We felt moved, of course, but it was rather the emotion of the crowd in the street which affected us than any feeling born in our inner selves.

The loading onto the train was effected easily and expeditiously. As it was very hot, the gunners hoisting the material on to the trucks had discarded their vests, and, with red faces, their shoulders to the gun-wheels, they united their efforts whenever the gun-commanders gave the word "Together!" which was echoed down the whole length of the train. The drivers had great difficulty in getting their teams into the boxes. The old battery horses were used to the manœuvre, but the commandeered animals resisted obstinately. Girths were slung round them, two by two, and they were hauled by force on to the foot-bridges. Once in the vans they had to be turned round and backed into position so that four could stand on each side. This operation was accompanied by a deafening din of iron-shod hoofs on the wooden floors and partitions. The horses once safely installed and secured face to face in their places by picket-lines, the stable-pickets began to arrange the harness and forage in the space between the two lines.

Just as the train was starting I felt a sort of dizziness. Something in my chest seemed to snap, and I was almost choked by a sudden feeling of weakness and fear. Should I ever come back? Yes! I felt sure of it! And yet, I wonder why I felt so sure!

CONNERRÉ-BEILLÉ. I am sitting on a bundle of hay between my eight horses. At every moment, in spite of my whip, they bite at the forage and nearly pull away my seat. The door of the van is opened wide on the sunny country.

Sunday, August 9

The train rumbled on for fifteen to eighteen hours. A long journey like this is best passed as a stable-guard. I made myself comfortable on some shaken-up hay, and, cushioning my head in a well-padded saddle, eventually fell asleep.

The horses, almost all of which were suffering from strangles, slobbered and sneezed over me, and eventually woke me up. It was already light. A thick summer mist was floating over the fields at a man's height from the ground. The sun, breaking through it in places, lit up myriads of shimmering grass-blades, dripping with dew.

Sitting at the open doors of the vans, their legs dangling over the side, the gunners watched the country flit past. The empty trains passing us in the opposite direction frightened the horses, who neighed and whinnied. No one—not even our officers—knew whither we were bound, and the engine-driver himself said that he didn't know, but that he was to receive orders on the way.

The Territorials guarding the line greeted us as we passed by holding out their rifles at arm's length. We waved our whips in answer.

"Morning, old chap!"

"Good luck to you, boys!"

Rheims. First the canal, then a glimpse of the town, and then open country again, with fields of ripe corn yellow in the morning sun. There were only a few sheaves to be seen. The crops were standing almost everywhere, motionless in the heat, casting golden lights on the gently rolling hills and quiet beauty of the countryside. I felt as though I could not see enough of it. In a few days, perhaps, I should no longer be able to see the splendour of the sun-kissed corn and the gorgeous mantle it throws over the symmetrical slopes of the harvest-land like a drapery of old lace lightly shrouding a graceful Greek form.

The train rolled slowly on towards Verdun. In each village, from the gardens adjoining the railway-line, girls and children threw kisses to us. They threw flowers, too, and, whenever the train stopped, brought us drinks.

It was already dusk when, after passing the interminable sidings and platforms of Verdun, with its huge bakeries installed under green awnings, the train finally came to a standstill at Charny. We had been travelling for more than thirty hours. Before we had finished detraining it was quite dark.

II. APPROACH MARCHES

WE crossed the Meuse. The sun had gone down and the river, winding its way between its reedy banks and marshy islands in the afterglow of the crimson western sky, looked as though it was running with blood. To-morrow, or perhaps the day after, the appearance may have become reality. I do not know why these blood-red reflections in the water affected me so much as this last moment of the evening, but so it was.

Night fell—a clear night, in which I uneasily sought for searchlights among the stars. By the wayside, in one of the army cattle parks, countless herds lay sleeping. The country would have been absolutely still and silent had it not been for the muffled rumble of our column as we marched along. The last reflections of the daylight and the first beams of the moon, just rising in the east, were welded together in a weird, diffused light.

We were marching eastwards, and, as the road skirted the dark mass of a steep hill, the moon rose clear ahead over the gloomy pine-trees, which stood out like silhouettes on the horizon. Soon the battery entered a dark wood, where the drivers had difficulty in finding the way. Nobody spoke. Occasionally the moon peeped through the trees, and showed up a horseman. It almost seemed as if the yellow light threw off a palpable golden powder; the brasswork of the equipment and the tin mugs of the men shone as though they were gilded. One man passed, then another, and the shadows, clear cut on the road, seemed to form part of the silhouettes of the horsemen and magnify them. Of the rest of the column, lost in the night of the forest, nothing could be seen.

We had been told that the enemy was not far off, somewhere in the plain stretching beyond the hills. At every cross-roads we were afraid lest we should take the wrong turning and find ourselves in the German lines. Besides, this first march of the campaign, at night-time, had something uncanny about it which scared us a little in spite of ourselves.

The column came to a halt just outside a village. Troops were camping on both sides of the road, and lower down, in one of the fields, an artillery park had been formed. Despite the hour—nearly midnight—the heat was oppressive, and the stars were lightly veiled by a thin mist. The bivouac fires cast flickering shadows of soldiers in varying stages of undress, some of them naked to the waist.

A little farther on, in a meadow where the 10th Battery was already encamped for the night—men and horses lying in the damp grass—we parked our guns.

We had to lie on the bare ground, and between drivers and gunners a competition in cunning at once arose as to who was to have the horse-blankets. Most of the men stretched themselves out under the ammunition wagons and guns, where the dampness of the night was less penetrating. But I was still on stable duty, and had to keep watch on the horses, which were tied side by side to a picket-line stretched between two stakes. The animals not only kicked and bit each other, but their collars kept getting loose, and one or two, succeeding in throwing them off, ambled off into the fields. I spent the night in wild chases. One little black mare in particular led me a dance for several hours, and I only caught her at last by rustling some oats in the bottom of a nose-bag.

Whip in hand, and wet up to the knees with dew, I had surely fulfilled my task as stable-picket conscientiously.

Monday, August 10

At 3 a.m. the grey shadow of a dirigible passed overhead beneath the stars. Friend or enemy?

At daybreak the park began to stir. Men draped in their rugs emerged from between the gun-wheels and from underneath the limbers and stretched themselves, yawning. We set about digging hearths and fetching wood and water, and before long coffee was steaming in the camp kettles.

On the Verdun road infantry regiments—off to the firing-line no doubt—were already defiling, the long red-and-blue column rippling like the back of a huge caterpillar. The battalions were hid, for a moment, by the cottages and trees of the village. But farther ahead, on the corn-clad slopes of the hills, one could just distinguish, in spite of the distance, the movements of troops marching on the thin white ribbon of a road.

We waited for the order to harness.

The meadow in which we had camped for the night sloped down, on the one side, into marshy ground watered by a stream issuing from a mill and running through the rank grass, and was bounded on the other by a rampart of wheat-sheaves. To the east a high hill of symmetrical contour, covered with yellow barley and tawny wheat, gave one the impression of a golden mountain shining in the sun.

Behind the horses tied together in parallel lines the harness made black patches in the grass. Some of us had slept there under our rugs. Saddles, propped up on their pommels, served as pillows to the men, who, half undressed, with bare chests, slept soundly. I would willingly have slept, too, for I was tired out with running about all night, but I could not help thinking of my mother, and of the anxiety the news of the hecatombs of Alsace must have caused her. She had no idea of my whereabouts and would be certain to think that I should be in the thick of any fighting in progress.

On the road columns of artillery succeeded the regiments of the line. It was nine o'clock, but so far no sound of battle had yet reached us. A driver, shaking his rug, woke me, and I started up. In my turn I roused Déprez, who was sleeping near me. Was it the guns? No, not yet.

Official news came that the Alsace army, whose headquarters were at Mulhouse, had been defeated by the French in a great battle at Altkirch. The beginning of the Revenge! . . . But there was talk of fifty thousand dead. . . .

Held spellbound by a sort of magnetic fascination Déprez and I riveted our gaze on the lofty line of hills to the east which stood between us and Destiny. Yonder were others like ourselves, masses of men in the plains and in the woods, men who would kill us if we did not kill them.

Overcome by the heat, I allowed my thoughts to dwell on these and similar reflections, and in vain endeavoured to banish from my mind the horrible picture of the fifty thousand men lying dead on the fields of Alsace. Eventually I fell asleep.

They have just killed, by means of a revolver-shot behind the ear, a horse which had broken its leg. The carcass is going to be cut up, and the best portions distributed among the battery detachments.

There seems no likelihood of going into action to-day. The soup-kettles had been put on the fires. On the side of the hill, where the corn stood in sheaves, the men were building straw huts in which to pass the night.

As the sun sank, damp vapours began to rise from the stream and the marshy ground adjoining it. Side by side on our bed of straw Déprez and I, booted and spurred, our revolver holsters bruising our hips, fell asleep with our faces upturned to the stars, which seemed to shine more brightly than usual in the eastern sky.

Tuesday, August 11

Shortly after dawn we were ready to start. Some of the 130th Infantry had arrived at the next village, called Ville-devant-Chaumont, to take up their quarters there. Pending the order to advance I entered into conversation with a little red-haired foxy-faced sergeant:

"Ah," said he, "so you're from. . . . Well, I don't know whether many of the 130th will ever get back there. . . . There was a scrap yesterday. . . . Slaughter simply awful! . . . My battalion wasn't touched, but the two others! . . . There are some companies which don't count more than ten men, and haven't a single officer left. . . . It's their machine-guns which are so frightful. . . . But what the devil can you expect? Two battalions against a whole division!"

"But why didn't the third battalion join in?"

"Blessed if I know. . . . You never know the reason of these things."

And he added:

"Some of our chaps were splendid. . . . Lieutenant X, for example. . . . He jumped up, drew his sword, and opening his tunic he shouted to his men: 'Come on, lads!' . . . And he was killed on the spot. . . . The flag? . . . That was taken by the enemy, retaken by one of our captains, and then again captured. Finally, a simple private got hold of it, and managed to hide it under a bridge before he died. One of the sections of the 115th found it there. . . . And then the artillery came up at last. . . . Three batteries of the 31st. They soon made them clear off. . . . They abandoned two batteries, what's more!"

Orders came to unharness. What heat! Transparent vapours rose from the ground and made the horizon quiver. From time to time we heard the muffled sound of the guns but more often we mistook the noise of the carts on the road for firing. Fleecy white clouds forming above the crests of the hills gave one the impression of shells bursting. For a moment their appearance was most deceptive.

I saw one of the men of the 130th coming back from the firing-line in a wretched condition, without cap, pack, or arms. It seemed wonderful that he should have managed to drag himself so far. With staring, frightened eyes he looked nervously from one side to the other. The gunners surrounded him as he stood there, with bent shoulders and hanging head, but he only answered their questions by expressive gestures.

"Done for!" he murmured. "Done for!"

We couldn't hear anything else. His lips kept moving:

"Done for! . . . Done for!"

Down he flopped in the middle of us, and immediately fell asleep, his mouth wide open and his features contracted as if with pain. Two gunners carried him into a neighbouring barn.

I heard to-day that a priest of Ville-devant-Chaumont had been arrested on a charge of espionage and sent to Verdun.

We availed ourselves of our leisure in order to wash our linen and have a bath in the river. Then, stretched naked on the grass, we waited until the sun had dried our shirts, socks, and underlinen, which lay spread out around us.

Wednesday, August 12

The French are fond of heroic legends. I have now found out the truth about the affair in which two battalions were said to have been cut up, and there is not the least resemblance to the highly coloured yarn of the little fox-faced sergeant.

On August 10 the officers of the 130th had not the slightest suspicion that the enemy were so close. A few men were taken by surprise as they were going down to the river, unarmed and half undressed. Immediately afterwards the fight began, and the 130th defended themselves bravely against superior numbers, at first without any support from the artillery, which, having received no orders, remained in its quarters. At last three batteries of the 31st arrived and succeeded in repelling the German attack. We were the victors.

As for Lieutenant X, who, according to the sergeant, had been killed as he stood bare-chested encouraging his men to attack, it appears that, in reality, he fell into the river called the Loison. The chill of the water, together with the excitement of the first brush with the enemy, set up congestion, but he is now reported to be perfectly fit again.

That is fortunate, for he is a valuable officer.

Several of his men, charging too soon, also fell into the river, which flows right across the fields between very low banks. There they remained as if entrenched, with the water up to their waists, and fought as best they could. The flag of the 130th was never even taken out of its oil-skin case.

The whole day was spent in sleeping, cooking, and in bathing in the river. Some of the drivers with their teams were sent off to transport the wounded of the 130th to Verdun.

When night fell we stretched ourselves out on the grass under the clear sky and sang in chorus until we gradually fell asleep.

If only those we have left behind anxiously waiting for news could have heard us!

Thursday, August 13

To-day some of the 130th brought back a grey German military coat, a pair of boots, a Uhlan's helmet, and a sort of round infantryman's cap, looking like a small cheese. These spoils were hung up in a barn, and attracted a crowd of gunners. They belong to a sergeant-major who was proudly exhibiting them to the spectators, calling special attention to a small rent in the back of the coat.

"That's where the bullet went in that did for old Steinberg," said he. "His name's marked inside. . . . See?"

And he drew himself up, beaming.

Inaction and the oppressive heat were equally distressing. We would like to be in the fight and yet we apprehend it a trifle.

We slept in the shadow made by the horse blankets tied to long tent pickets.

Monday's skirmish will be called the combat of Mangiennes.

Friday, August 14

We had started off again at dawn, and now stood waiting for orders. The Captain had sent the battery forward down the lane leading to the main road to Verdun. The horses splashed about in the water running out from a drinking-trough hard by, and spattered us liberally with mud. After waiting till the sun was well up, we unbridled and gave the teams some oats.

Reserve regiments of the Army Corps began to file by—the 301st, 303rd, and 330th. The men were white with dust up to the knees. Stubbly beards of eight days' growth darkened their faces and gave them a haggard appearance. Their coats, opened in front and folded back under their shoulder-straps, showed glimpses of hairy chests, the veins in their necks standing out like whipcord under the weight of their packs. These reservists looked grave, resolute, and fierce.

They swung by with a noise like a torrent rushing over pebbles, the sight of our guns bringing a smile of pleasure to their faces. The foremost battalions climbed up the hill. There were so many men that nothing could be seen of the road, nor even of the red breeches. The moving human ribbon scintillated with reflections cast by kettles, shovels, and picks.

We had filled our water-bags, and some of the soldiers, as they streamed past, replenished their drinking tins from them. Then they strode on, their lips glued to the brims, restraining the swing of their step in order not to lose a drop of the precious liquid.

At last the battery moved on. But it was only to camp at Azannes, about a mile southeast of Ville-devant-Chaumont, where we were hardly any nearer to the enemy. On the road a continual cloud of dust was raised by guns and wagons, motors full of superior officers, and squadrons of cavalry escorting gold-braided Staffs. The horses were smothered in it, and our dark uniforms soon became grey, while our eyebrows and unshorn chins looked as if they had been powdered. Paris motor-omnibuses, transformed into commissariat wagons, put the final touch as they lumbered by, and left us as white as the road itself.

"Limber up!"

"What?"

"Limber up, quick now, carry on!"

The order was repeated by the Sergeants, and the Captain, who passed us spurring his horse, said simply:

"We are going into action."

Then, followed by the gun-commanders, trumpeters, and battery-leaders, he set off at a gallop.

We passed through Azannes, where we were to have camped. It is a wretched-looking village, full of manure-heaps, and composed of low-built cottages eloquent of the fact that here no one has thought it worth while to undertake building or repair work of any kind. It is not that the surrounding country is barren, but the perpetual threat of war and invasion has nipped all initiative in the bud. The poorer one is the less one has to lose.

After passing Azannes the column lapsed into silence. The road skirted the cemetery, in the walls of which the infantry, at every few yards, had knocked loopholes through which we caught glimpses of graves, chapels, and crosses. At the foot of the walls lay heaps of rubble and mortar. Farther on, near the edge of a wood, the field had been seared by a narrow trench, covered with lopped-off branches bearing withered leaves, and showing up against the fresh green grass like a yellow gash.

In front of the trench barbed wire had been stretched. The enemy, therefore, was presumably not far off.

Amid the monotonous rumble of the carriages we tried to collect our thoughts. The prospect of the first engagement brought with it an apprehension and dread which clamoured for recognition in each man's mind. There is no denying the fact.

The battery rolled on its way through a large wood. The road, almost blindingly white in the midday sun, formed a striking contrast to the arch-shaped avenues of sombre trees, whose green plumes towered above us at a giddy height.

By the side of the road stood a horse with drooping head and the viscous discharge due to strangles running from his nostrils; he did not even budge as the guns and wagons thundered on their way. It seemed almost a miracle that the bones of the poor beast's haunches had not broken through his skin. His flanks, heaving spasmodically, seemed to meet behind his ribs, as if they had been emptied of flesh and entrails. He was a pitiful sight. In the shade of a bridle-path yet another abandoned horse was still browsing.

Between two clumps of trees lay a pond bordered by reeds and rushes, its surface shimmering like a silver mirror—an effect which was heightened by the dark woodlands in the background. In the distance the magnificent line of lofty hills which had hidden the horizon from us at Ville-devant-Chaumont, and which we had now flanked, formed an azure setting to the picture. On one side of the road stood a farmhouse. In a small paddock near the flood-gates of the pond we saw a freshly dug grave in the shade of an elder-bush. A cross, roughly fashioned out of a couple of branches tied together, was planted in the newly turned soil, and a ruled leaf torn out of a pocket-book, stuck on to some splinter of the wood, bore a name roughly written in pencil.

On emerging from the forest our batteries, which up to then had been in column of route, rapidly deployed down the side of a long valley, half hidden by the oat-crops, through which infantry, whose presence could only be guessed, caused ripples to flow like those raised by a puff of wind on still water.

Where was the enemy? What were these positions worth, and from what point could they be observed? Was the infantry on ahead protecting us? In a fever of excitement we formed up in battery in a neighbouring meadow. The limbers retired to the rear and took cover in the woods. Bréjard at once ordered us to complete the usual protection afforded by the gun-shields and ammunition wagons by piling up large sods of turf which we hacked up with our picks. As far as the eye could reach stretched the motionless oats, like masses of molten metal under a sky of unbroken blue. As the gun-layers could not find as much as a tree or sheaf to serve as an aiming point we had to go out and plant a spade in front of the battery. I should not have suspected the strength of the artillery—more than sixty guns—waiting for the enemy in this field, had I not seen the batteries take up their positions, and had it not been for the observation-ladders upon which, perched like large black insects on the points of so many grass-blades, the gun-commanders were to be seen surveying the land to the north-east.

We were ready for action, and lying behind our guns awaited the word "Fire!" No sound of battle was audible.

A gunnery officer brought some order to the Captain, and the latter, waving his képi, signalled for the limbers to be brought up.

"Hallo! What's up now?"

"We're off," answered Bréjard, who had overheard the orders.

"Aren't the Germans coming then?"

"I don't know. That officer told the Captain that after this the fourth group would be attached to the seventh division."

"Well, and what then?"

"Well, the fourth group has got to go."

"Where?"

"Probably to camp at Azannes."

Rather disappointed at having done nothing we returned westwards by the same road, bathed in an aureole of crimson light cast by the setting sun.

The horse with the strangles was now lying down in the ditch. He was still breathing, and from time to time tossed his head in order to shake off the wasps which collected in yellow clusters round his eyes and nostrils.

We encamped at Azannes, and the horses, tethered under the plum-trees planted in fives, wearied by the march, the dust, and the heat, let me rest and dream away my four hours' duty.

The night was clear, illuminated by the Verdun searchlights which stretched golden fingers into the sky. A magnificent mid-August night, scintillating with constellations and alive with shooting stars which left long phosphorescent tails behind them.

The moon rose, and with difficulty broke through the dense foliage of the plum-trees. The camp remained dark except for occasional patches of light on the grass and on the backs of the horses as they stood sleeping. My fellow-sentry was lying at the foot of a pear-tree, wrapped in his greatcoat. In front of me the plain was lit up by the moon, and the meadows were veiled in a white mist. Both armies, with fires extinguished, were sleeping or watching each other.

Saturday, August 15

I was helping Hutin to clean the gun.

"Well, Hutin, war's a nice sort of show, isn't it?"

"Well, if it consists in fooling about like this till the 22nd September, when my class will be discharged, I'd rather be in the field than the barracks. We've never been so well fed in our lives! If only that lasts! . . ."

"Yes, provided it lasts! Only, there are Boches here."

"Who cares?"

"And then, we don't get many letters."

"No, that's true; we don't get enough," said Hutin with some bitterness, viciously shoving his sponge through the bore.

And he added:

"And as for the letters we write ourselves, we can't say where we are, nor what we are doing, nor even put a date. What is one to write?"

"Well, I simply say that it is fine and that I am still alive."

Always the same silence along the lines. That has lasted for days now. What can it mean? For us, pawns on the great chess-board, this waiting is agonising, and stretches our nerves to that painful tension which one feels sometimes when watching a leaden sky, waiting for the storm to break.

To-day I saw General Boëlle, whose motor stopped on the road quite close to our camp.

He is a man with refined features, of cheerful expression, still youthful-looking despite his white hair and grizzled moustache.

The classic popularity of war trophies has not diminished. Quite a crowd collected round a cyclist who had brought back from Mangiennes two German cowskin bags and a Mauser rifle.

It is astonishing how quickly instinct develops in war. Civilisation disappears almost at once, and the relations between man and man become primitively direct. One's first preoccupation is to make oneself respected. This necessity is not implicitly recognised by all, but every one acts as if he recognised it. Then again, the sense of authority becomes transformed. The authority conferred on the Captain by his rank diminishes, while that which he owes to his character increases in proportion. Authority has, in fact, but one measure: the confidence of the men in the capability of their officer. For this reason our Captain, Brisoult, in whom even the densest among us has recognised exceptional intelligence and decision under a great charm of manner and invariable courtesy, exercises, thanks to this confidence, a beneficial influence upon all. And yet his actual personality, as our chief, makes little impression upon one at first. Captain de Brisoult never commands. He gives his orders in an ordinary conversational tone; but, a man of inborn tact and refinement, he always remains the Captain, even while living with his men upon terms of intimacy. It is hard to say whether he is more loved than respected, or more respected than loved. And soldiers know something about men.

In the rough masculine relations between the artillerymen among themselves there nevertheless remains a place for real friendships, but they become rarer. The ties of simple barrack comradeship either disappear or harden into tacit treaties of real friendship. The mainspring of this is rather egoism than a need of affection. One is vividly conscious of the necessity of having close at hand a man upon whose assistance one can always rely, and to whom one knows one can turn in no matter what circumstances. In the relationships thus wordlessly established, a choice is a necessity; they are not engendered by affinities of character alone. One learns to appreciate in one's friend his value as a help and also his strength and courage.

Sunday, August 16

I have only just heard of an heroic episode which occurred during our expedition on Friday. It might be called "The Charge of the Baggage-train."

During our march through the woods towards the enemy we were followed at some distance by our supply wagons. When we turned, we passed them, and they resumed their position behind the batteries. The head of the column had almost reached Azannes when the rear was still in the thick of the woods. Suddenly a lively fusillade was opened from the depths of the trees on the right and left of the train, and at the same time the noise of galloping horses was heard from behind. The Petty Officer bringing up the rear behind the forage wagon, who was riding near the cow belonging to the Group, which was being led by one of the gun-numbers, convinced that the enemy's infantry was attacking the column from the flank while a brigade of cavalry was coming up from the rear, yelled out, "Run for your lives! The Uhlans are coming!" The gunners jumped from the carriages, loaded their muskets, and, suddenly, without any orders, the column broke into a gallop. The men followed as best they might. But the horses of the forage wagon, restive under the lash, reared, backed, and jibbed, kicking the cow, which, in her turn, pulled away from the man leading her, first to right and then to left, finally breaking loose and setting out at a gallop behind the wagons in a thick cloud of dust.

A few seconds afterwards the cavalry which had been heard approaching came up. It was the General of Artillery, who, with his Staff and escort of Chasseurs, had routed our baggage-train. As for the fusillade, it came from two companies of the 102nd of the line, who, concealed in the woods, had opened fire on a German aeroplane.

The weather is changing. Already yesterday evening the storm gathering on our left had made us prick up our ears as if we heard gunfire. At breakfast-time we were surprised by a heavy shower, and had to abandon the kettles on the fires and take shelter under the wagons and trees. To-day it has been raining slowly but steadily. If this weather goes on we shall have to look out for dysentery!

Sitting on blankets in a circle round the fire, which was patiently tended by the cook, we drank our coffee. My comrades asked me to read them a few pages from my notebook, and wished me a safe return in order that these reminiscences, which to a great extent are theirs also, might be published.

"Are you going to leave the names in?"

"Yes, unless you don't want me to."

"No, of course not. We'll show them to the old people and children later on, if we get back."

"If I am killed, one of you will take care of my notebook. I keep it here—see?—in the inside pocket of my shirt."

Hutin thought a little.

"Yes, only you know that it's forbidden to search dead men. You'd better make a note in your book to say you told us to take it."

He was quite right, so on the first page I wrote: "In case I am killed I beg my comrades to keep these pages until they can give them to my family."

"Now you've made your arrangements *mortis causa,*" said Le Bidois, who was reading over my shoulder. And he added:

"That doesn't increase the risk either."

Le Bidois is a thin, lanky fellow rather like the King of Spain, for which reason Déprez and I have nicknamed him Alfonso. Every day we fire off the old Montmartre catch at him:

Alfonso, Alfonso,
Veux-tu te t'nir comme il fô!

We also call him "the Spanish Grandee." He never gets annoyed.

"A jewel of a corporal!" as Moratin, his layer, always says.

Some of the 26th Artillery have brought back two ammunition wagons abandoned by the enemy at Mangiennes. Painted a dark colour they resembled the old 90 mm. material with which we used to practise when training at Le Mans. They were followed by two large carts, of the usual type used by the Meuse peasantry, long and narrow in build, full of packs, tins, képis marked 130, camp-kettles already blackened by bivouac fires, belts with brass buckle-plates, and caps with dark stains on them. On the top bristled a heap of bayonets and rifles, red with rust and blood. A large blue flannel sash, sopping wet, hung behind one of the carts, and trailed in the muddy road. These were the wardrobes of the unfortunate infantry killed at Mangiennes.

This spectacle, rendered the more harrowing by the rain, moved us more than all the stories we had heard about last Monday's fight.

As I was taking some horses down to drink I saw, near the gate of the loopholed cemetery at Azannes, some soldiers who had fallen asleep, stretched out anywhere, exhausted and half undressed. They might have been taken for dead men. That is how I think the fellows killed at Mangiennes must have looked. And those rags conjured up anew a vision of the trenches where they were lined up.

In the absolute silence which for eight days now has reigned all along the line we have almost forgotten the work of death for which we have come here.

At nightfall, after swallowing some hot soup, we returned to our billets, which are in a large barn where it is possible to get a good sleep in the straw. Soldiers of every rank and regiment were swarming in the village, and blue dolmans of the Chasseurs and the red breeches of the Infantry giving a welcome dash of colour to the sombre uniforms of the Artillery and Engineers as they all jostled together in the street. Some of them, carrying in each hand a pailful of water, shouted and swore at the others to let them pass.

It was still raining, and from the manure-heaps by the side of the road thick clouds of steam arose. The cavalrymen had made hoods of their horse-blankets, and many of the foot-soldiers were sheltering their heads and shoulders under sacks of coarse brown canvas which they had found in the barns or wagons. The whole of this muddy multitude was almost silent and solely bent upon getting back to their billets. Almost the only sound was the tramping of many feet in the mire. Four sappers, scaling a ladder to a loft from which hay was crowding out through a dark, wide-open window, looked like a bunch of black grapes hanging in mid-air.

Monday, August 17

It was still raining when we started. Carts full of debris continued to pass us, each more heavily laden and each more dreadful to see than the last.

I heard that a Chasseur, whom I noticed yesterday morning mounted on a little bay horse, had been surprised by a party of Uhlans. They bound him hand and foot and then, with a lance-thrust in the neck, bled him as one bleeds a pig. A peasant who had witnessed the scene from behind a hedge told me of this devilish crime. He was still white with horror.

Last night the horses lay in mud and dung. This morning their manes and tails were stiff with mire, and large plasters of manure covered their haunches and flanks, giving them the appearance of badly kept cows. As for us, besmeared with dirt up to the knees and with our boots a mass of mud, we looked more heavy than ever in our dark cloaks, which were wet through and hung in straight folds from our shoulders.

We again started off, this time to take up fresh quarters at Moirey. From Azannes to Moirey is little more than a mile, but the road was blocked with wagons, and at every instant we had to halt and draw to one side.

The Captain gave the word:

"Dismount!"

The men, tortured by diarrhœa, availed themselves of the opportunity and scattered into the fields.

At Moirey we encamped under some plum-trees planted in fives, where we were as badly off as we had been at Azannes. Under the feet of the horses the grass immediately became converted into mud.

The first thing to do was to cover over with earth the filth left there by troops who had preceded us. The question of sanitary arrangements is a serious one. It is true that a sort of little trenches called *feuillées* are dug on one side of the camp, but many men obstinately refuse to use them, and prefer to make use of any haphazard spot at the risk of being driven off by whip-lashes by others of more cleanly disposition. A regular guard has to be kept round the guns and horses. It is useless for the officers to threaten severe punishment to any man taken in the act outside the *feuillées*. Nothing stops them. The Captain keeps repeating:

"What a set of hogs!"

To-night the sound of the guns is quite close. Perhaps we shall go into action at last.

It was a difficult job to find any wood fit to burn. Such as there was was damp and when burning gave off a thick acrid smoke which the wind blew down upon us. We had to fetch the water for the soup from more than 300 yards away, and then keep a constant look-out to prevent the horses from getting at it. The bread just given out was mouldy, and we had to toast it in order to take away the musty taste.

When it is time to water the teams the only street of the village is thronged with horses either led or ridden bare-back. Six batteries are encamped round Moirey, and there is only one pond into which a thin stream of clear water, not more than two fingers thick, trickles from a fountain. Every twenty paces one has to stop and manœuvre in order to avoid kicks, and the men, annoyed by the delay, swear at each other without reason.

After four or five minutes one advances another twenty paces, and, when finally the pond is reached, the men and beasts sinking ankle-deep in mud, it is only to find that hundreds of horses have left so much drivel and slime on the water that our animals refuse to drink.

It is reported that there has been a great battle near Nancy and that we have won the day. Why don't we advance also?

Tuesday, August 18

Lucas, the cyclist of the battery, succeeded in finding two bottles of champagne, which he hid in a corner of the guard-house where Le Bidois, who was on sentry duty, kept an eye on them.

Lucas is a young draughtsman of talent. His character is faithfully reflected by his face—fresh, mobile, perhaps a little feminine. You meet him in the morning and he seizes you by the arm:

"Oh, my dear chap . . . such a pretty little woman . . . a perfect dream! . . ."

And the same evening he will say:

"Oh, my dear chap . . . such a fraud. . . . No, not a word! . . . What a fraud!"

It appears that at Damvillers, a neighbouring village, he has made the conquest of a little woman who sells tobacco. And he still manages to get hold of cigarettes, writing-paper, liqueurs, and even champagne, whereas no one else has been able to lay hands on any of these luxuries for some time past.

When night fell he gave us a sign, and Déprez and I followed him to the door of the guard-house in which loomed the lanky figure of Le Bidois, who was leaning on his sword. The guard-house is an old tumble-down hut only kept erect by the ivy growing round it. The door only boasts one hinge, and the worm-eaten steps leading to the loft are crumbling into dust. But still we found it a snug enough place in which to drink our champagne.

Wednesday, August 19

The first gun has a team which is the joy of the whole battery. This is owing to Astruc and his off-horse Jericho. Astruc, with bright brown eyes and a face like a carrion-crow, is not much taller than a walking-stick and has hardly any legs. Jericho is a vicious brute that kicks, bites, and refuses to be groomed. Astruc holds long conversations with him, and every morning greets him like one greets an old friend who is a little crabbed, but of whom one is really fond:

"Well, Jericho, old boy, what have you got to say? Have you been dreaming of German mares?"

Bréjard pointed out to Astruc that Jericho is a gelding.

"Oh!" retorted Astruc, "I expect he gets ideas in his head all the same."

But to-day Jericho was in a specially bad temper, and wouldn't let himself be bridled in order to be led down to the watering-place.

"What's up, old chap?" asked Astruc. "Oh, I see what you want! You haven't had your quid this morning, have you? . . . It's your quid you're after."

And he held out in the hollow of his hand a pinch of tobacco which the horse swallowed with avidity. When Astruc is astride his near-horse, Hermine, Jericho bites his boot, and the more Astruc whips him the harder he clenches his teeth.

"Well," says Astruc, "I bet that if I leave Jericho in a mêlée he'll eat as many Boches as he can get his teeth into. If only we'd a hundred more like him!"

And looking the horse full in the face he added:

"It's odd, you know! The brute's got a naughty twinkle in his eyes . . . just like one of those girls. . . ."

A corps of pontoon engineers passed by

our camp, their long, steel-plated boats loaded on carts, keel uppermost. Some foundered horses, tied behind the vehicles, followed with hanging head and limping step, a look of suffering in their bleared eyes—a pitiful sight. Far down the road, winding its way through the long valley and white under the morning sun, one could see the column toiling up a hill as if ascending to the blue sky. At that distance men and horses seemed no more than a swarm of black ants, but the steel bottoms of the boats still glinted in the sunshine. In front of us the long line still passed slowly by.

The men's health is excellent, but the horses stand this new life less successfully. Last Friday we had to leave one on the road, and yesterday an old battery horse named Défricheur died in his turn. We had to prepare a grave for him, and four men had been digging for more than an hour in the hard and rocky ground when the mayor of Moirey arrived on the scene. The grave had been dug too close to the houses, so they had to drag the heavy carcass farther on and begin digging again. Unfortunately the measurements of the new grave had been badly calculated, and Défricheur, a proper gendarme's horse, could not be crammed into it. The men were heartily tired of digging and so, with a few blows of their spades and picks, they broke his legs and folded them under his belly, so that at last he could be squeezed into the pit.

The hill which had limited our horizon at Villa-devant-Chaumont was still to be seen rising on the east in solitary splendour, its outlines traced as if by compasses. Beneath the azure sky it shone like a mass of burnished bronze.

Moirey lies in the lap of a valley and consists of a few dilapidated cottages roofed with broken tiles. No matter from which side one goes away from the village it is instantly hidden by an intervening spur of the hills, so that one can only see the top of the roofs and the short, rectangular steeple covered with slates.

As we were grooming our horses in a field through which a brook bubbled along amid the iris, a bevy of white-capped girls came down from the village.

The only means of getting over the river was a narrow bridge. This we barred by standing a couple of horses athwart it, and, by way of toll, demanded kisses. The girls, their rosy-cheeked faces smiling under the spreading butterfly-wings of their caps, at first hesitated. Then one of them took a run, jumped, and splashed into the water.

The others learnt wisdom from her example and decided to pay the toll.

"Come on now! Just one kiss, you know!" said Déprez. "That's not so dear in war-time!"

They paid conscientiously.

Friday, August 21

To-day there was a fog when we awoke. Almost immediately the Captain gave the word to harness, and five o'clock had not yet struck when we started. The road was cut up into ruts by the artillery which for three days had been passing over it, and we were so shaken on the limbers that we could scarcely breathe.

Luckily the column was advancing at a walking pace.

The fog had collected at the end of the valley. On the right enormous and regularly formed mounds rose like islands out of the sea of mist. I could not take my eyes off their symmetrical curves, as perfect as those of Cybele's breasts.

Farther on the road straggled across a plain, the ample undulations of which reminded one of the rise and fall of the ocean on days when there is a swell. In every direction it was studded with wheat sheaves, but there were few trees except an occasional group or line of poplars welded together by the fog in an indistinct mass of dark green foliage.

Not a sound of battle was to be heard.

On the way we fell in with some baggage-trains and ambulances, and learnt from their drivers that the enemy was still far away.

Nevertheless the country had already been prepared for battle. A farmhouse by the roadside had been fortified, the windows barricaded with mattresses and small trusses of straw, while a few loopholes had been knocked in the garden wall. The fields were furrowed with trenches as far as the edge of a wood, where some abatis had been set up. Earthworks had been thrown up along the sides of the road, and in front were heaped ladders, a couple of harrows, a plough, a roller, and several bundles of straw. Two carts had been placed athwart the road, but they had been pushed one to each side and lay thrown back with their long shafts pointing upwards.

We still rolled on across this desolate country. So similar were its aspects that it almost seemed as if we were not advancing at all.

At last the fog lifted, and, suddenly, before we were able to guess that the end of the dreary scenery was near, a magnificent view opened out before us as if by enchantment. We were on the crest of a hill between two valleys, on one side of which thick woods descended in leafy terraces to the hollow of a narrow dell in which, through a meadow of vivid emerald green, a little black river trickled on its way. The forests surrounding this meadow, as if placed there in order to embellish and enhance its beauty, looked like a magnificent ruff of low-toned olive tints. In front of us, just where the road turned off at an angle, a spur of woodland rose with the forbidding aspect of a fortress. On the right, forming a contrast to the quiet and peaceful little river, a broad valley, with symmetrical slopes lightened here and there by corn standing yellow in the sun, opened out wide and invitingly. The river flowing through it was hardly visible, but the roads, villages, and the railway line were quite distinct. On the one hand lay Vélosnes, and on the other Torgny, their white walls and red roofs showing up on the green background of the fields.

There was nothing in the scene to suggest that war was on foot, and gun-shots heard from a distance were no more startling than the noise of carriage wheels.

It was a fine morning, to which the mist, softening the outlines of the landscape, lent additional charm. The narrow S-shaped road we were following plunged into the valley. The horses made efforts to keep back the guns, and especially the ammunition wagons, which were pushing them down the slope. Their shoes slipping with the dislodged stones, they braced their backs and felt their way cautiously.

The river at this point constituted the frontier between France and Belgium. A custom-house official was leaning up against the parapet of the bridge.

One of the men called out to him:

"No fine linen or lace to-day, old man!"

And another:

"Suppose there's no duty on melinite, is there?"

The official grinned.

The first Belgian village, Torgny, afforded a contrast to the French hamlets through which we had been passing since dawn. Our villages are tumble-down, dirty, and redolent of manure and misery. Torgny, on the contrary, was clean and bright, the windows of the houses boasting not only curtains but even, sometimes, embroidered shades, while the shutters, doors, and window-joists were painted light green.

On all sides we were greeted with smiles by the placid and open-faced villagers. Through the windows of the cottages we could see red tiled floors, and in the semi-darkness of the interiors the glow of brasswork on stoves and lamps reflected by carefully polished furniture.

Our column halted in the village, the men carefully wedging the wheels of the vehicles to prevent them from backing down the slope. A woman and a fair, slightly built girl were sitting in front of their house, of which the lower half was a mass of wistaria. We asked them where the road led to, and a conversation began in which not only mother and daughter took part, but also the grandmother, a wizened little woman with a wrinkled face out of which peered a pair of bright brown eyes; she had come out to see what was happening. They talked with a drawling sing-song accent, which nevertheless was in no way disagreeable to our ears.

"Have the Germans come as far as this?"

"Yes, they've come, only they didn't do any harm. . . . They hadn't the time. Five or six of them came down from the woods up there—cavalrymen. But they went back almost at once. Some of the villagers saw them. There were also some French cavalry here, in blue and red uniforms."

"Chasseurs?"

"I suppose so. They are so nice and polite. . . . At first, as there weren't many of them, we almost quarrelled as to who should have them. When the Uhlans came out of the woods they saw the French and went in again."

"And the Belgian soldiers?"

"Not seen any of them," said the old lady. "But my granddaughter saw some at Arlon last year."

"Yes," chimed in the girl, "and they are better dressed than you."

We prepared to make ourselves comfortable in the chairs which had been brought out for us, and chatted while waiting for the order to advance.

"You ought to be very grateful to us," said the grandmother. "We stopped them, and they hadn't reckoned on that! They thought we were sheep and found we were lions—yes, lions! They even say so themselves!"

We willingly acquiesced.

In future we shall always be able to count upon the goodwill of the Belgians, for we owe them a debt of gratitude. There is no more solid basis for affection than that which underlies the feelings of a benefactor towards his protégé. Nothing is more soothing to the spirit than a sense of superiority and legitimate pride.

There can be no doubt but that the blood so bravely shed for us in Belgium will be productive of more friendship than twenty years of sustained efforts to maintain the French language and culture against the rising tide of Germanisation. And, forty years later, when we meet a Belgian, we may be sure that he will remind us, in his pleasing accent:

"Yes, but you know . . . without us in 1914 . . ."

It will be a pleasure to him to recall all that France owes to his glorious little country. More, he will be grateful to us for the debt we owe her.

"Oh, of course it has cost us a lot to defend our neutrality," said the old woman. "It is awful what the Germans have done in our country. They seem to have a special hatred for the women. There was one down there. . . . We knew her quite well. . . . And they first cut off her breasts . . . and then disembowelled her. . . . And they've done that to countless others! Oh! it's too awful! They must be worse than savages. You must tell your people about it, when you get back—about that, and about everything else we've had to suffer. But you won't do the same when you get into Germany, will you?"

She added:

"I am very old—over seventy—and I had never seen war in Belgium."

The poor old woman spoke almost without anger, but in a trembling voice and with infinite sadness.

We encamped at Torgny. As soon as the horses had been picketed and the oats distributed, Déprez and I hurried to the wistaria windows to ask if we could buy a little milk and some eggs. The old woman was most upset; it seemed that she had already given everything to the Chasseurs. But she sent us a little farther on to the house of one of her daughters who, she said, would milk the cow for us. She added:

"We've a good loft here, where you would be quite comfortable and warm in the straw. So come back to sleep in any case."

We knocked at the door she had pointed out to us a couple of houses farther on, and were received as though we had been expected.

"It's some artillerymen, mother," said a young woman, who was nursing a child in her arms. "They want some milk."

Her mother came out of the next room.

"I'll go and milk the cow," said she. "Good evening, messieurs; please sit down; you must be tired."

Lucas had somehow managed to find some eggs.

"Shall we make you an omelette with bacon?" asked the daughter. "It won't take long. But do sit down. I'm sure you've been standing about enough to-day!"

Almost immediately the fat began to sizzle in the pan.

At every moment infantrymen and Chasseurs knocked at the door, and the two women distributed the milk from their cow, refusing all payment. When there was no more left they were quite wretched at having to disappoint the men who continually arrived on various quests.

"We've given all we had. I'm so sorry!" they said. "We've only a small bowl left for the baby. You see, we've only one cow!"

A Chasseur brought back a kettle he had borrowed; another asked for the loan of a gridiron. Never has Frenchman been more warmly welcomed in France.

The fair-haired girl, with whom we had been talking shortly before, came back carrying an earthenware milk-jug in her hand.

"Have you any milk, auntie? There are some soldiers who want a little. They're ill, some of them."

"Oh, darling, I'm so sorry! There are only a few drops left for baby!"

"Oh, dear! . . ."

The girl saw us seated at table round the smoking omelette, and smiled at us as though we were old acquaintances. I told her that if I ever returned home I should perhaps write a book about what I had seen in the war.

"And will you please tell me your name, so that I can send you the book as a souvenir to you and your family. You have all been so good to us Frenchmen."

"My name is Aline—Aline Badureau."

"What a pretty name—Aline!"

She prepared to go.

"I hope that you will return home," she said to me, "so that you can send us your book. But I'm sure you'll forget. They say that Frenchmen forget very soon."

I protested vehemently.

III. THE ATTACK. THE RETREAT

Saturday, August 22

WE slept in the barn which the kindly old woman had placed at our disposal, and in which the hay was deep and warm. At three o'clock in the morning one of the stable pickets came to call us through the window. We harnessed our horses as best we could in the darkness.

An extremely diffused light was beginning to spread over the countryside, and the mist, rising from the meadows, dimmed the clearness of the dawn. We marched on through the powdery atmosphere. The fog was so thick that it was impossible to see the carriage immediately ahead, and from our places on the limber-boxes the lead driver and his horses looked like a sort of moving shadow.

Eventually we reached the little town of Virton. All the inhabitants were at their doors, and offered us coffee, milk, tobacco, and cigars. The men jumped off the limbers and hurriedly drank the steaming drinks poured out for them by the women, while the drivers, bending down from their horses, held out their drinking-tins.

"Have you seen the Germans?" we asked.

"Only one or two came to buy some socks and some sugar. I hope they won't all come here. Will they?"

"Aren't we here to prevent them?"

The women's open faces, framed in their dark brown hair, were perfectly calm. Fat little children, like cherubs sprung to life from some canvas of Rubens, ran by the side of the column as we moved on, and others, a little bigger, kept crying: "Hurrah for the French!"

Our batteries joined up behind a group of the 26th Artillery on the Ethe road—a fine straight highway, flanked by tall trees. In the fog the sheaves in the fields looked so much like infantry that for a moment one was deceived. A few ambulances were installed in one of the villages. A little farther on some mules, saddled with their cacolets, were waiting at the end of a sunken road.

We had hardly passed the last houses when suddenly rifle-fire broke out with a sound like that of dry wood burning. A machine-gun also began to crackle, staccato, like a cinema apparatus.

Fighting was going on quite close, both in front of us and also to the right, somewhere in the fog. I listened, at every moment expecting to hear the hum of a bullet.

"About turn!"

"Trot!"

What had happened? Where were the batteries which had preceded us? We turned off to the right. The firing ceased. The march in the fog, which kept getting thicker, became harassing after a while. At all events we were sure, now, that the enemy was not far off.

Finally, at about seven o'clock, we halted. Not a sound of the battle was to be heard. We unbridled our horses and gave them some oats. The men lay down by the side of the road and dozed.

Suddenly the fusillade broke out again, but this time on the left. I asked myself how our position could have altered so in relation to that of the enemy. A few minutes ago the fighting was on our right. Perhaps it was only a patrol which had gone astray. I gave up thinking about it. Doubtless the fog had confused my sense of direction.

This time the firing sounded more distant. A single detonation, like a signal, was heard. I thought at first that it was one of the drivers whipping up his team, but a minute later the crackling of rifles broke on our ears in gusts, as if carried by a high wind. And yet the air was quite still, and the fog floated, motionless, on all sides.

Suddenly the sun broke through and the mists disappeared as if by magic, like large gauze curtains rapidly lifted. In a few moments the whole stretch of countryside became visible. The cannonade began at once.

On the right were some meadows in which flocks were feeding, and, farther on, a line of wooded hills, in the lap of which nestled a tiny village.

On the left and towards the north the horizon was hidden by a semicircle of hills through which a river wound its tortuous course, draining the stubble-fields on either side. A large, bowl-shaped willow-tree made a solitary green blotch on the background.

A battery was evidently already installed there, four dark points indicating the position of the four guns. As we stood waiting on the straight road, the perspective of which was accentuated by the trees flanking it on each side, the twelve batteries of our regiment, followed by their first lines of wagons, formed an interminable and motionless black line.

The Captain gave the order:

"Prepare for action!"

The gun-numbers who had been lying beneath the trees jumped to their feet and took off the breech- and muzzle-covers which protect the guns from dust when on the road. This done, they got the sighting-gear ready, and saw that the training and elevating levers were in good working order.

We were surprised in our work by an explosion quite near at hand. Above the stubble-fields a small white cloud was floating upwards. It expanded, and then disappeared. And suddenly, near the bowl-shaped willow-tree, six shrapnel shells burst, one after another.

I felt an odd sensation, as if my circulation was growing slower. But I was not afraid. For the matter of that, no immediate danger threatened us. Only I had an intuition that a big battle was about to begin, and that I should have to make a great effort.

The gunners anxiously riveted their eyes on a point of the horizon where shells were now falling almost incessantly. Of course none of them would have confessed to their anxiety, but there was a significant lull in the conversation. I do not know what we were waiting for—whether the fall of a shell or the arrival of orders.

For my part I excused myself for feeling apprehensive. The baptism of fire is always an ordeal, and the motionless waiting on the road had worked on my nerves. The enemy need only have lifted his fire in order to hit us as we stood there, defenceless, in column formation.

Besides, such emotions are only skin-deep. Even if anxiety could plainly be read in every man's face we still kept smiling and inwardly resolved to do whatever might be necessary in order to make the coming battle a French victory.

The Colonel passed by, accompanied by Captain Manoury and a Staff of Lieutenants. He gave us a quiet but searching look, which seemed to gauge our mettle and encourage us at the same time. The small group of horsemen made off rapidly, ascending the slopes which were being bombarded by the enemy.

"Attention!"

We were going into action.

On the side of the horseshoe-shaped ring of hills sections of infantry were deploying and advancing by successive rushes. Of a sudden men rose up and ran across the fields, and again as suddenly, at an inaudible word of command, threw themselves down, disappearing from view like so many rabbits. They went on farther and farther, and at last we saw their outlines silhouetted against the skyline as they crossed the ridge of the hill.

It was about ten o'clock, and very hot. From the unknown country on the other side of the hills came the awe-inspiring roar of battle. The rifle-fire crackled continuously and the noise of the machine-guns sounded like waves beating against the rocks. The thunder of the heavy guns drowned, so to speak, the general din, and blended it into a single roar, similar to that of the ocean in a storm, when the waves gather and break with dull thuds amid the shriek of the wind as it lashes the waters.

The battle-line seemed to lie from east to west, the Germans holding the north and the French the south.

"Forward!"

First we had to cross a meadow traversed by a stream almost hidden in the high grass. The gunners took the off-horses by the bridle and urged them forward, while the drivers whipped up their teams into a trot. The ground gave under the wheels of the ammunition wagon as it suddenly proved too much for the horses and sank heavily up to the axle in the mud. It was eventually dislodged by some strong collar-work.

Where on earth were we going to? We

seemed to be bound for the bowl-shaped willow-tree, near the heights from which the German machine-guns, for more than two hours, had been riddling every square inch of ground. Why were we being sent there? Were there not plenty of excellent positions on the hills? We should inevitably be massacred! But still the column advanced at a walking pace towards the sloping field in which shells were falling at every moment.

Why? Why? Death had reigned supreme there ever since the fog lifted. We were riding into the Valley. . . .

I felt a choking sensation grip my throat. And yet I was still capable of reasoning. I understood quite clearly that the hour was come for me to sacrifice my life. All of us would go up, yes!—but few would come back down the hill!

This combination of animality and thought which constitutes my life would shortly cease to be. My bleeding body would lie stretched out on the field; I seemed to see it. A curtain seemed to fall on the perspectives of the future which a moment ago still seemed full of sunshine. It was the end. It had not been long in coming, for I am only twenty-one.

Not for an instant did I argue with myself or hesitate. My destiny had to be sacrificed for the fulfilment of higher destinies—for the life of my country, of everything I love, of all I regretted at that moment. If I was to die, well and good! I was willing. I should almost have thought that it was harder! . . .

We continued to advance at a walking pace, the drivers on foot at their horses' heads. Presently we reached the willow-tree. A volley. . . . From far off came a sound at first resembling the whirr of wings or the rustle of a silken skirt, but which rapidly developed into a droning hum like that of hundreds of hornets in flight. The shell was coming straight at us, and the sensation one then experiences is indescribable. The air twangs and vibrates, and the vibrations seem to be communicated to one's flesh and nerves—almost to the marrow of one's bones. The detachment crouched down by the wheels of the ammunition wagon and the drivers sheltered behind their horses. At every moment we expected an explosion. One, two, three seconds passed—an hour. The instinct of self-preservation strong within me, I bent my shoulders and waited, trembling like an animal flinching from death. A flash! It seemed to fall at my feet. Shrapnel bullets whistled by like an angry wind.

But the column still remained motionless in the potato-field, which was so riddled by gunfire that it was difficult to steer the vehicles between the shell craters.

Why were we waiting? How we wished that we could at least take up a position and reply to the enemy's fire! It seemed to me that if only we could hear the roar of our .75's the dread of those deathly moments would become less intense. But we seemed to be merely awaiting slaughter; the minutes dragged by and we still remained motionless.

Some shells, which for a moment I thought had actually grazed the limber, hurtled by and shook me from head to foot, making the armour behind which I was sheltering vibrate. Fortunately the ground was considerably inclined, and the projectiles burst farther back. I perspired with fear. . . . Yes, I was badly frightened. Nevertheless I knew that I should not run away, and that I should, if necessary, let myself be killed at my post. But the longing for action grew more and more insistent.

At last we started off again, progressing with difficulty across the furrowed field. The drivers could hardly manage their horses, which had been seized with panic and pulled in all directions.

Hutin gave me a nod:

"You are quite green, old chap!" he said.

"Well, if you could see your own face . . ." I answered.

A shell fell, throwing up a quantity of earth in front of the horses and wounding the centre driver of the ammunition wagon in the head. He toppled and fell.

"Forward!"

Near the crest of the hill we took up our position on the edge of an oat-field. The limbers went off to the rear to shelter somewhere in the direction of Latour, the steeple of which could be seen overtopping the trees in the valley on our left. Crouching behind the armoured doors of the ammunition wagons and behind the gun-shields, we awaited the order to open fire. But the Captain, kneeling down among the oats in front of the battery, his field-glasses to his eyes, could discover no target, for yonder, over the spreading woods of Ethe and Etalle, now occupied by the enemy, a thick mist was still floating. All round us, behind our guns, over our heads, and without respite, high-explosive and shrapnel shell of every calibre kept bursting and strewing the position with bullets and splinters. Death seemed inevitable. Behind the gun was a small pit in which I took refuge while we waited for orders. A big bay saddle-horse, with a gash in his chest from which a red stream flowed, stood motionless in the middle of the field.

What with the hissing and whistling of the shells, the thunder of the enemy's guns, and the roar from a neighbouring ·75 battery, it was impossible to distinguish the different noises in this shrieking inferno of fire, smoke, and flames. I perspired freely, my body vibrating rather than trembling. The blood seethed in my head and throbbed in my temples, while it seemed as if an iron girdle encircled my chest. Unconsciously, like one demented, I hummed an air we had been singing recently in the camp and which haunted me.

Trou là là, ça ne va guère;
Trou là là, ça ne va pas.

Was I going to die in this hole?

Something brushed past my back. At first I thought I was hit, but the shell splinter had only torn my breeches.

The battery became enveloped in black, nauseating smoke. Somebody was groaning, and I got up to see what had happened. Through the yellow fog I saw Sergeant Thierry stretched on the ground and the six numbers of the detachment crowding round him. The shell had burst under the chase of his gun, smashing the recoil-buffer, and effectually putting the piece out of action.

Kneeling side by side, Captain Bernard de Brisoult and Lieutenant Hély d'Oissel were scanning the horizon through their field-glasses. I admired them. The sight of these two officers, and of the Major who was quietly strolling up and down behind the battery, made me ashamed to tremble. I passed through a few seconds of confused but intense mental suffering. Then it seemed as though I was awakening from a sort of feverish delirium, full of horrible nightmares. I was no longer frightened. And, when I again took shelter, having nothing else to do as we were not firing, I found I had overcome my instincts, and no longer shook with fear.

A horrible smell filled the pit.

"Phew!" I ejaculated hoarsely, "what a stink!"

Peering down I perceived Astruc in the bottom of the hollow. In a voice which seemed to come from the bowels of the earth he replied:

"All right, old son! Don't you worry . . . it's only me. I'm sitting in a filthy mess here, but all the same I wouldn't give up this place for twenty francs!"

Over the crest of the hill came some infantry in retreat. The sound of the machine-guns approached and eventually became distinguishable from the roar of the artillery.

The enemy was advancing and we were giving way before them. Shells continued to fly over us, and entire companies of infantry fell back.

The officers consulted together.

"But what are we to do? . . . There are no orders . . . no orders," the Major kept repeating.

And still we waited. The Lieutenant had drawn his revolver and the gunners unslung their rifles. The German batteries, possibly afraid of hitting their own troops, ceased firing. At any moment now the enemy might set foot on the ridge.

"Limber up!"

The order was quickly carried out.

We had to carry Thierry, whose knee was broken, with us. He was suffering horribly and implored us not to touch him. In spite of his protests, however, three men lifted him on to the observation-ladder. He was very pale, and looked ready to faint.

"Oh!" he murmured. "You are hurting me! Can't you finish me?"

The rest of the wounded, five or six in

number, hoisted themselves without assistance on to the limbers and the battery swung down the Latour road at a quick trot.

We had lost the battle. I did not know why or how. I had seen nothing. The French right must have had to retire a considerable distance, for, ahead to the south-east, I saw shells bursting over the woods which that morning had been some way behind our lines. We were completely outflanked, and I was seized with qualms as to whether our means of retreat were still open. We crossed the railway, some fields, and a river in succession, and approached the chain of hills, wooded half-way up their slopes, which stretched parallel to the heights the army had occupied in the morning. These were doubtless to be our rallying positions. The drivers urged their horses onwards while the gunners, who had dismounted from the limbers in order to lighten the load, ran in scattered order by the side of the column. The narrow road we were following was badly cut up, the stones rolling from under the horses' hoofs at every step. Half-way up the steep incline we found the way barred by an infantry wagon which had come to a standstill. A decrepit white horse was struggling in the shafts. The driver swore and hauled at the wheels, but the animal could not start.

One of the corporals shouted out:

"Now then, get on, can't you?"

Get on! . . . As if he could! The driver, without leaving hold of the wheel which he was preventing from going backwards, turned a distracted face towards us, almost crying with baffled rage.

"Get on? How am I to get on?"

We lent him a hand and succeeded in pushing his wagon into the field so that we could pass.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, and the heat was stifling. The battle seemed to have come to an end, and the only gunshots audible came from far away on the left, near Virton and St. Mard.

The column stretched out in a long black line on the hill-side as we crawled upwards through the woods crowning the summit in order to find a road by which we might gain the plateau. The horizon gradually opened out before us. Suddenly, from the direction of Latour, a machine-gun began to crackle; I hurriedly lifted my hand to my ear like one who drives away a buzzing wasp.

"They're firing at us!" cried Hutin.

Bullets began to hum past. Machine-guns had opened fire on us from the top of the positions we had just vacated. One of the horses, wounded, fell to its knees and was promptly unharnessed. A gunner, shot through the thigh, nevertheless continued to march.

Close by, in a valley where we were sheltered from the fire, we found a spot where one corner of the field cut a wedge out of the forest. Here we parked our three batteries and waited for orders. I saw at once how critical our position was. There was no road leading to the plateau through the wood, and several vehicles of the 10th Battery, which had ventured to try a bridle-path, soon found it impossible either to advance or go back. One of the guns had sunk up to the axle in the muddy ground.

The only means of retreat, therefore, was to cross the bare fields on the right or left and once again run the gauntlet not only of the machine-guns, but also, perhaps, of the enemy's field artillery, which by now had had time to come up. The longer we waited the more problematical became our chances of escaping unscathed.

Besides, I could not help wondering how long the route across the plateau was likely to remain available. We were already outflanked, and in front of us the Germans were still advancing down the crescent-shaped hills. They had doubtless already occupied Latour.

The Major still waited for orders. He hardly spoke a word, but every now and then his jaws contracted spasmodically—a sign of nervousness we soldiers knew well. He was "cracking nuts," as the men say. He had dispatched a corporal to ask for instructions, but no one knew where the Staff was likely to be found at that hour. The army was in full retreat.

Eventually a dragoon galloped up and drew rein in front of our officers. We anxiously crowded round him. He brought information that the retreat of the army was being effected on the right by the Ruettes road. The enemy, he said, had already taken Latour, and was advancing towards Ville-Houdlémont.

The column immediately leaped into life. Lieutenant Hély d'Oissel, riding on alone ahead, showed us the way. Again the machine-guns broke out in the distance, but this time no bullets whistled past us. For a few moments we were stopped by a paling, which we broke down with our axes. The open space we had to cross was short—a meadow capping the rising ground between the trees. We eventually reached Ruettes by a narrow lane on both sides of which rose steep banks.

Near the church stood a General without any Staff, and accompanied solely by three Chasseurs.

The Tellancourt road was a veritable river.

In the breathless hurry and bustle of the retreat we had to make our way through the crowd by force. Such battalions as still possessed their Majors went on in front with the artillery column. And, tossed about from right to left like bits of cork in the swirl of a current, dragged this way and that in the eddies, sometimes pushed into the ditch, and sometimes carried off their feet by the torrent, the tattered remnants of troops surged down the road. Wounded, limping, many without rifle or pack, they made slow progress. Some made an effort to climb upon our carriages, and either hoisted themselves on to the ammunition wagons or let themselves be dragged along like automata.

While the retreat of the infantry divisions continued along the highway, we turned off down a steep road to the right and reached the plateau. The day was drawing to a close, and the shadow of the thick woods at Guéville, between us and the sun, was projected on to the side of the next hill. Here there was hardly anything but stragglers and the ditches were full of wounded, resting for a moment before continuing the painful ascent. Many of them looked as though they would never get up again. Some were lying half hidden in the grass.

There was already something skull-like about their faces; the eyes, wide open and bright with fever, stared fixedly from out their sunken sockets as though at something we could not see. Their matted hair was glued to their foreheads with sweat, which slowly trickled down the drawn, emaciated faces, leaving white zigzag furrows in the dirt of dust and smoke. Hardly one of the wounded was bandaged, and the blood had made dark stains on their coats and splashed their ragged uniforms. Not a complaint was to be heard. Two soldiers, without packs or rifles, were trying to help a little infantryman whose shoulder had been shattered by a shell, and who, deathly white and with closed eyes, wearily but obstinately shook his head, refusing to be moved. Others, wounded in the leg, still managed to hobble along with the aid of their rifles, which they used as crutches. They implored us to find place for them on the carriages.

We contrived to make room for them on the limbers. At every bump and jolt a big bugler, whose chest had been shot clean through by a bullet, gave a gasp of pain.

In the fields by the roadside lay torn and gaping packs, from which protruded vests, pants, caps, brushes, and other items of kit. The road itself was littered with boots, mess-tins, and camp-kettles crushed by the wheels and horses' hoofs, shirts, bayonets, cartridge belts with the brass cases shining in the dust, képis, and broken Lebel rifles. It was a sight to make one weep, and, despite myself, my thoughts went back to the retreat of August, 1870, after Wissembourg and Forbach. . . . And yet for a month past we had heard continually of French victories, and had almost begun to picture Alsace reconquered and the road into Germany laid open. Nevertheless, at the first attack, here was our army routed! With some astonishment I realised that I had taken part in a defeat.

We reached the edge of the Guéville woods, which were being defended by the 102nd Infantry. Arms and equipment still bestrew the road, which had also been cut up into ridges by the artillery and convoys. The wounded on our lurching and jolting wagons looked like men crucified.

I questioned the big bugler:

"Shall we stop? Perhaps this shakes you too much?"

"No! Anything rather than fall into their hands."

"Yes, but still . . ."

"No, no—that's all right."

And he bit his lips to avoid crying out. I was very tired, and my head felt at the same time heavy and yet light. My one desire was to sleep, no matter where.

Hardly were we out of the wood when the battery halted in a field full of wheat-sheaves near a village called La Malmaison. I threw myself down on some straw. If we stayed there we should certainly not even be able to sleep; the enemy was too close, and we should probably be attacked at night. And my one thought was to sleep, to get far enough away to sleep. I waited for the prophetic order "Unharness!" which would leave us in this field to fight again in an hour's time—perhaps at once. But other orders arrived, and off we rumbled once more, through La Malmaison, which we found congested with troops in disorder. Night fell. I had now reached the extreme limits of fatigue and began to be less conscious of what was going on around me. As if in a dream I saw the men huddled on the limber-boxes, their heads rolling on their shoulders, and the drivers lurching from side to side on their horses like drunken men. I still seem to hear a gunner of the 26th Artillery, who, sitting on the ammunition wagon, was telling how the three batteries which preceded us this morning on the road to Ethe were caught by the German machine-gun fire and taken in column formation, and how he himself had been able, thanks to the fog, to escape almost alone.

We went on through the night, our wagons creaking and rattling with a sound almost like a sort of cannonade. One of the whips was dragging. . . . For a moment I thought I heard a machine-gun. . . . What an obsession! . . . The column rolled on through the darkness, the monotonous rumble of the wheels unbroken by an order or word of any kind.

About midnight, after a very long march, we again reached Torgny, and encamped there. The roll was not even called. I threw myself face-downwards on some hay in a barn, and it seemed to me, as I fell asleep, that I was dying.

Sunday, August 23

This morning they let us sleep until past eight o'clock. After getting up we at once led our horses down to the big stone trough in the middle of the village. The church bells were ringing. So there were still Sundays! Somehow that seemed strange! I was still sleepy and my numbed limbs ached abominably, so that it was torture to get into the saddle. How I longed for a day's rest!

As I was returning to the camp, Déprez at my side, we met Mademoiselle Aline, in a light pink dress of flowery pattern, and very daintily shod. She was doubtless going to Mass. She recognised us and waved her hand, smiling.

At the camp we found them waiting for us.

"Hurry up now!"

"Bridle! . . . Hook in!"

"What? Are we going into action again?"

"Seems like it. . . . I don't know," answered Bréjard. "Now then!"

The two batteries now forming the Group, our own and the 12th (the 10th had been taken by the enemy in the Guéville woods), started off along the Virton road. It seemed that we were never to get a moment's respite.

But almost immediately we halted in double column on the grass by the side of the road. On the hill-side were strong forces of French artillery in position, the motionless batteries showing up like black squares on the green slope.

The roll was called. One or two were missing from my battery. Bâton, the centre driver of the gun-team, had been wounded in the head, and had been left behind in the hospital at Torgny. Hubert, our gun-commander, had disappeared, and so had Homo, another of the drivers. The last time that I had seen Homo he was wandering across a field swept by the German guns, a wild look in his eyes.

Lucas, the Captain's cyclist, was also missing, and this worried me especially. He is always so cheerful, open-hearted, and amusing, and is one of my best friends.

There was no news at all of our entire first line, conducted by Lieutenant Couturier. Standing in a circle round the Captain the detachments were reorganised. The battery had only three guns left, and it was necessary to send to the rear the one with the broken hydraulic buffer.

How tired I was! As soon as I stayed still I began to fall asleep.

Hutin opened a box of bully-beef for the two of us.

"Hungry, Lintier?"

"Not a bit. . . . And yet I've not eaten anything since the day before yesterday!"

"Same here. Do you think we shall have any more fighting to-day?"

"I suppose we shall. . . ."

Hutin thought a little.

"There's only one thing that astonishes me," said he, "and that is to be alive still."

"Yes, it is wonderful."

"It's odd that we don't hear the guns to-day."

"They don't seem to have taken advantage of their victory yesterday in order to advance."

"Well," said our gun-layer, "in my opinion we've fallen into an ambuscade. They were waiting for us there, and they had got all the ridges nicely registered. That's how they had us! But all that will change!"

"I hope so! Oh, Lord, how tired I am! And you?"

"So am I!"

We each ate without much relish four mouthfuls of bully-beef and shut the box again. Besides, the column was already beginning to move.

Striking across country we reached Lamorteau, a large village on the banks of the Chiers, where we encamped near the river and waited for orders.

The scene was soon brightened by smoke rising straight up in the still air of the morning, which was already hot. The men made their soup and the drivers went off to draw water for the horses, which were not unharnessed.

Suddenly, on the bridge spanning the Chiers, Lieutenant Couturier appeared at the head of his column, accompanied by Lucas. The latter ran up to me.

"At last!"

"At last!"

"You devil! You did give us a fright!"

We grasped each other's hands, and that was all. But I felt immensely relieved.

Hubert was also with them. Conversation became lively round the camp-kettles, in which the soup was already steaming. Afterwards, no orders having arrived, we slept, and at nightfall returned to Torgny to camp there once more.

The Major ordered the horses to be unharnessed and, supposing therefore that no danger threatened, I stretched myself and gave a yawn of satisfaction. Then we bivouacked. What work! The guns are placed about twenty yards apart. Between the wheels of two guns are stretched the picket lines, and, when the horses have been tethered to them, and the harness arranged on the limber draughtpoles, the park ought to form a regular square.

We took off our vests, for it was still hot. Déprez was distributing oats among the drivers who stood holding out the nosebags.

Somebody suddenly cried out:

"An aeroplane!"

"A boche!"

Right overhead, like a big black hawk with a forked tail, an aeroplane was circling round and round. There was an immediate rush for rifles. Lying on their backs in order to shoulder their guns, and half undressed, their open shirts showing hairy chests, the men opened a brisk fire on the German bird of prey, which was flying low. The startled horses neighed, reared, and pulled this way and that, many breaking loose and galloping off across the fields. The aeroplane seemed to be in difficulties.

"She's hit!"

"She's coming down!"

"No! She's only going off!"

The men still continued firing, although the machine had been out of range for some minutes.

At the horse-trough in the only street of the village there was always the same crowd of men taking their horses to be watered, some mounted bareback, others led; the same shouting and swearing to get room at the trough, greetings from those who recognised each other, oaths from others leading their animals who were hustled by the men on horseback—in short, all the life and movement of an artillery camp. A Chasseur, shouting profanely, forced his way through the throng. He was assailed with cries.

"Here, you aren't in a bigger hurry than any one else!"

"Yes, I am! Get back to camp quick! I've got orders!"

"What's the matter now?"

"All you chaps have got to clear off! No time for amusement, this, you know; the Germans are coming up. There'll be some more fun in a minute!"

He spurred forward, and we hurried back to our guns. Was it a surprise? We limbered up at full speed, and before we had even had time to button our shirts the first gun left the park.

"Forward! March. . . . Trot!"

We had thrown the nosebags, still half full of oats, on the ammunition wagons and gun-carriages, and once on the way it was necessary to lash them so that they should not be shaken off. Hastily throwing on their clothing, the men jumped on to the limbers as best they could, while the battery moved forward at a brisk pace on the uneven road.

We kept continually looking over our shoulders, towards the hills on the east dominated by Torgny, from which direction we expected to see the heads of the enemy's column emerge at any minute. I momentarily awaited the crackling of a machine-gun or the scream of a shell.

The road in the distance, as it wound through the valley, was black with horses and ammunition wagons advancing at a trot and raising thick clouds of dust. Batteries were also to be seen rolling across country. What was the meaning of this sudden retreat? The whole day long we had only heard the guns from far off, towards the north. We had now even ceased to hear them altogether. Had we been surprised, then, or nearly surprised? But one never knows what has really happened on such occasions!

We took up our position on the ridge between the Chiers and the Othain, where the whole country, its contours and colours continually changing in the bright sunshine, had seemed to smile at us upon our arrival. It seemed to me as though the memories awakened by the majesty and stillness of the scene were deeply rooted in the past. I felt as though I had aged ten years in one day—a strange and painful impression.

Our guns were pointing towards Torgny and the plateau above it. At any moment the order might come to bombard the unfortunate village. Possibly, even, a shell from my gun might blow to bits the very house which had given us shelter, and kill the woman whose hospitality had meant so much to us! That was an awful thought! Oh, this ghastly war!

But night fell, and as yet the Captain had seen no signs of movement on the plateau. Behind us the narrow valley of the Othain was slowly becoming shrouded in shadows. The limbers were stationed 200 yards from the battery. All fires were forbidden—even lanterns might not be lit, as our safety on the morrow might depend upon our remaining undiscovered. The night was clear, but a thin mist partially veiled the light of the stars, and there was no moon. Motionless, and clustered together in dark groups, the horses quietly munched their oats. A far-reaching reddish glow lit up the eastern horizon—doubtless La Malmaison on fire—and as the darkness deepened other lights appeared on the right and left of the main conflagration. On every side the villages were burning. Against the fiery sky the haunches of the horses, their heads and twitching ears, and the heavy masses of the guns and limbers stood out like silhouettes.

Standing side by side with our arms folded, Hutin and I watched the flaming countryside.

"Oh, the brutes, the savages!"

"So that's what they call war, is it?"

And we both lapsed into silence, struck dumb by the same feeling of futile horror, and filled with the same rage. I saw a yellow gleam pass across the dark eyes of my friend—a reflection of the holocaust.

"And to think we can't prevent it! . . . That we're the weaker! Oh, Lord!"

"That'll come in time."

"Yes, that'll come . . . and then they'll pay for it!"

We threw ourselves down on the straw heaped up behind the guns. A searchlight from Verdun swept the country at regular intervals, and the inky sky was lit up by the visual signalling. Huddled together we gradually fell asleep, a single sentry, wrapped in his cloak, standing motionless on guard.

Monday, August 24

It was still night when I was awakened and saw a dark shadow standing over me.

"Up you get!"

"What time is it?"

"Don't know," answered the sentry who had roused me. The villages were still burning. Feeling our way, and almost noiselessly, we harnessed our teams, and the limbers came up. A steep decline . . . the stones rolled. In the darkness the horses might stumble at any moment. The brakes acted badly, and we hung on to the vehicles, letting ourselves be dragged along in order to relieve the wheelers, which were almost being run over by the heavy ammunition wagon.

At early dawn we passed through a slumbering village. Stretched on the ground under the lee of the high wall surrounding the church five Chasseurs were sleeping. Twisted round one arm they held the reins of their horses, which, standing motionless beside them, were also asleep. A pale, cold light was breaking through the fog, which had collected at the bottom of the valley. It was very cold as we marched along in silence, the men snoring on the limber-boxes. We were going westwards—retiring, that is to say. Why? Were we not in a good position to wait for the enemy? Suddenly a silver sun shone through the mist, surrounded by a halo of light.

After a long halt in an alfalfa-field manured with stable refuse, the smell of which remained in our nostrils, we took up position on a hill near Flassigny. But hardly had we done so when fresh orders arrived, and we started off again, always towards the west. In the space between two hills we caught sight of a distant town—doubtless Montmédy.

About midday we halted in a valley near the river.

"Dismount! Unharness the off-horses. Stand easy!"

The sun was burning hot, and not a breath stirred in the heavy air. Our bottles only contained a little of the Othian water, brackish and tepid, but at any rate it served to wash in. The men went to sleep in the ditches, the horses standing motionless, exhausted by the heat.

The evening was already advanced when our Group received instructions to push on to Marville, presumably to camp there.

I recognised the place, for we had passed through Marville on our way to Torgny. At that time it was a pretty little town with flowery gardens and river-side villas surrounded by dahlias. Now, however, the place was deserted. Large carts belonging to the Meuse peasantry were waiting, ready to start, piled high with bedding, boxes, and baskets. In one of them I caught sight of a canary-cage side by side with a perambulator and a cradle. Women, surrounded by children, were sitting on the heterogeneous heap, crying bitterly, while the little ones hid their heads in their skirts. Some dogs, impatient to be off, were nosing uneasily round the wheels of the carts. We asked these poor people where they were going.

"We don't know! They say we've got to go. . . . And so we're going . . . and with babies like these!"

And they questioned us in their turn:

"Which way do you think we'd better go? We don't know!"

Nor did we. Nevertheless, we pointed out a direction.

"Go that way! Over there!"

"Over there" was towards the west. . . . Oh, what misery! . . .

We bivouacked on the outskirts of the town. Near-by flowed a river, on the opposite side of which two dead horses were lying in a stubble-field.

The Captain of the 10th Battery, which we had believed lost, arrived on horseback at the camp. He told the Major that in the Guéville woods he had managed to save his four guns, but had had to leave the ammunition wagons behind. His battery had taken up position somewhere on the hills surrounding Marville on the south-east, and he had come to get orders.

The rent made by a shell-splinter two days previously in the seat of my breeches was causing me great discomfort. Divided between the wish to patch it up and the fear lest the order might come to break up the camp before I had finished, I let the quiet hours of the evening pass without doing this very necessary work.

Tuesday, August 25

I was awakened by the sun, and stretched myself.

"A good night at last, eh, Hutin?"

Hutin, still asleep, made no answer. Déprez called out:

"Now then, oats!"

Nobody was in a hurry. Two men, a confused mass of dark blue cloth, quietly went on snoring amid the straw strewn under the chase of the gun. Suddenly I thought I heard a familiar sound, and instinctively turned to see whence it came.

"Down!" cried some one.

The men threw themselves down where they stood. In mid-air, above the camp, a shell burst. In the still atmosphere the compact cloud of smoke floated motionless among the thin grey mists.

"It's that aeroplane we saw yesterday we've got to thank for that," said Hutin, who had been fully awakened by the explosion.

"Yes, but it was too high."

"That's only a trial round to find the range. We shall get it hot in a few minutes, you'll see!"

"Now then, bridle! Hook in! Quick!"

The camp at once became full of movement, the gunners hurrying to their horses and limbers. In the twinkling of an eye the picket-lines were wound round the hooks behind the limbers, and the teams were ready to start. Again came the whistling of an approaching projectile. The men merely rounded their backs without interrupting their work. High-explosive shells now began to fall on Marville, and others, hurtling over our heads, swooped down on the neighbouring hills which the enemy doubtless believed manned by French artillery. The drivers, leaning over their horses' necks, whipped up the teams, and the column made off at a trot to take up positions on the hills to the west of the town, which dominated the Othain valley and the uplands on the other side of the river, whence the enemy was approaching. A veritable hail of lead, steel, and fire was raining upon Marville. One of the first shells struck the steeple. The town was not visible from our position, but large black columns of smoke were rising perpendicularly into the sky, and there was no doubt that the place was in flames. Amid the roar of the cannonade, which had now become an incessant thunder which rose, fell, echoed, and rolled without intermission, it was difficult to distinguish between shots coming from the enemy's guns and those fired from ours. After a time, however, we were able to recognise the short sharp barks of the .75's in action.

"Attention! Gun-layers, forward!"

The men hurried up to the Captain.

"That tree like a brush . . . in front. . . ."

"We see it, sir!"

"That's your aiming-point. Plate 0, dial 150."

The men ran to the guns and layed them, the breeches coming to rest as they closed on the shells. The gun-layers raised their hands.

"Ready!"

"First round," ordered the gun-commander. The detachment stood by outside the wheels of the gun, the firing number bending down to seize the lanyard.

"Fire!"

The gun reared like a frightened horse. I was shaken from head to foot, my skull throbbing and my ears tingling as though with the jangle of enormous bells which had been rung close to them. A long tongue of fire had darted out of the muzzle, and the wind caused by the round raised a cloud of dust round us. The ground quaked. I noticed an unpleasant taste in my mouth—musty at first, and acrid after a few seconds. That was the powder. I hardly knew whether I tasted it or whether I smelled it. We continued firing, rapidly, without stopping, the movements of the men co-ordinated, precise, and quick. There was no talking, gestures sufficing to control the manœuvre. The only words audible were the range orders given by the Captain and repeated by the Nos. 1.

"Two thousand five hundred!"

"Fire!"

"Two thousand five hundred and twenty-five!"

"Fire!"

After the first round the gun was firmly settled, and the gun-layer and the firing number now installed themselves on their seats behind the shield. On firing, the steel barrel of the .75 mm. gun recoils on the guides of the hydraulic buffer, and then quietly and gently returns to battery, ready for the next round. Behind the gun there was soon a heap of blackened cartridge-cases, still smoking.

"Cease firing!"

The gunners stretched themselves out on the grass, and some began to roll cigarettes.

Another aeroplane; the same black hawk silhouetted against the pale blue sky which at every moment was getting brighter.

The men swore and shook their fists. What tyranny! It was marking us down!

Suddenly the enemy's heavy artillery opened fire on the hills we were occupying as well as on a neighbouring wood. It was time to change position, since for us the most perilous moment is when the teams come up to join the guns. A battery is then extremely vulnerable.

Before the enemy could correct his range the Major gave an order and we moved off to take up a fresh position in a hollow on the plain. The wide fields around us were bristling with stubble, and on the left a few poplars, bordering a road, traced a green line on the bare countryside. In front of us and behind stretched empty trenches. Marville was still burning, the smoke blackening the whole of the eastern sky. The sun was now high in the heavens, and poured a dazzling light on the stubble-fields. We were suffering badly from hunger and thirst. The din of the battle seemed continually to grow louder.

At the foot of some distant hills, still blue in the mist on the south-eastern horizon, the Captain had perceived a column of artillery or a convoy and large masses of men on the march. Were they French troops, or was it the enemy? He was not sure. The mist and the distance made it impossible to recognise the uniforms.

"We can't fire if those are French troops," said he.

Standing on an ammunition wagon he scanned the threatening horizon through his field-glasses.

"If it's the enemy, they are outflanking us . . . outflanking us! They'll be in the woods in a moment. . . . We shan't be able to see them. . . . Go and ask the Major."

The Major was no better informed than the

Captain, the orders he had received saying nothing about these hills. He also was using his field-glasses, but could not distinguish the uniforms of the moving masses. In his turn he muttered:

"If it's the enemy they're surrounding us!"

A mounted scout was hastily dispatched. We remained in suspense, a prey to nervous excitement.

A single foot-soldier had stopped near the fourth gun. He had neither pack nor rifle. We questioned him:

"Wounded?"

"No."

"Where have you come from?"

The Captain signalled for the man to be taken to him. The soldier, who had thrown away his arms, did not hurry to obey.

"What are those troops down there?" asked the Captain. "French?"

"I don't know!"

"Well, where do you come from?"

The soldier waved his arm with a vague, comprehensive gesture which embraced half the horizon.

"From over there!"

The Captain shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, but where are the Germans? Do you

know whether they have turned Marville on the south?"

"No, sir. . . . You see, I was in a trench. . . . And the shells began to come along—great big black ones. . . . First they burst behind us, a hundred yards or more. . . . Then, of course, we didn't mind 'em. But soon some of them fell right on us . . . and then we ran!"

"But your officers?"

The man made a sign of ignorance. Nothing more could be got out of him. Just at that moment a shell came hissing through the air, and he at once made off at full speed, crouching as he ran. A few dislocated words came back to us over his shoulder:

"Ah! Bon Dieu de bon Dieu!"

The shell burst on the other side of the road, and the moment after three others exploded nearer still. The Captain had not ceased to follow through his glasses the doubtful troops which, by now, had nearly reached the woods. We waited anxiously, standing in a circle round him.

"I believe they're French," said he. "Here, Lintier, have a look. You've got good eyes."

Through the glasses I was able to distinguish the red of the breeches.

"Yes, they're French, sir. But where are they going to?"

The Captain made no reply, and I understood that once again our army was in retreat.

A shower of shells poured down on the field behind us.

The enemy's fire, too much to the left and too high at first, was getting nearer, and was now corrected as far as training went. Our lives depended on the whim of a Prussian Captain and a slight correction for elevation.

Just at that moment some sections of infantry suddenly appeared on the edge of the plateau and hurriedly fell back. A company of the 101st had come to man the trenches behind our guns.

The air began to vibrate again, and more shells fell, this time right on the top of us. A splinter brushed by my head and clanged on the armour of the ammunition wagon. Another shell plumped down in the trench full of infantry. One, two, three seconds passed; then came a groan and a cry. A man got up and fled, then another, and, finally, the whole company. Their heads held low, and with bent knees, they scurried off. Behind them a wounded man hastily unstrapped his pack, threw both it and his gun to one side, and limped rapidly away.

A road orderly arrived with an envelope for the Major. Orders to retire. We limbered up, and moved off at a walking pace. Under the bright sun the stubble-field, with its entrails of black earth laid bare by the gashes torn by the high-explosive shells, seemed to possess something of the horror of a corpse mutilated with gaping wounds. Near the points of explosion clods of earth had been blown to a distance, and, round the edge of the hole, the soil was raised in a circular embankment. We were still threatened by sudden death. Some one asked:

"Why don't we go quicker? . . . If we stay here they'll make jelly of us!"

But I fancy that all of us were conscious that fatalism—which is, I believe, the beginning of courage—had got a grip on us. The enemy was firing without seeing us, and his shells seemed like the blows of Fate descending from heaven. Why here rather than there? We did not know, and the enemy assuredly did not know either. In that case, what was the good of hurrying? Death might as easily overtake us a little farther on. Useless to hurry, then; absolutely useless. . . . In front, our officers, heel by heel, rode on, talking.

In the trench in which the shell had just burst a single soldier remained behind. He was stretched out face downwards on a heap of straw which he had gathered under him for greater comfort. Blood was oozing from a wound in his back, making large black stains on the cloth, and the straw underneath him was dyed crimson. Another splinter had hit him in the back of the neck; his képi had fallen off and his face was buried in the straw. All eyes were turned on him as we passed, but not a word was said. What can one say about a burst shell or a dead man?

Another defeat! Just as in 1870! . . . Just as in 1870! We were all obsessed by the same paralysing thought.

"They are devilish strong! Look at that!" said Déprez, pointing towards the plateau where, as far as the eye could reach, swarms of French infantry could be seen retreating. Latour, six hours' fighting; to-day, hardly more. Beaten again! Oh, God!

We felt a blind rage against those who had fallen back. We did not retreat last Saturday when we were in action by the willow-tree.

In the distance, towards Marville, columns of artillery were trailing over the bare fields. A blue and red squadron was raising clouds of dust. Waves of infantry, diminishing but still noticeable, dust-covered cavalry, and black lines of artillery could be seen as far as the horizon, moving under the scorching sun. The guns had ceased to roar and there was absolute silence. The earth, parched and hot, exhaled a vapour which seemed to follow the movements of the men. It was almost as if the entire plateau had begun to march.

At Remoiville we came upon a beautiful château of the Early Renaissance period, with severe lines of long terraces and lofty turrets over which floated a white flag with a red cross. In the village not a soul was to be seen. Doors and windows were all closed. A few hens were scratching about on a manure heap, and a pig, which two gunners were killing in a little sty black with refuse, raised piercing and discordant squeals. And yet, on the threshold of one of the last houses, a wretched ruin in the shadowy interior of which we caught a glimpse of a varnished wardrobe, two old women, bent with age, watched us as we passed with eyes which were hardly perceptible under their furrowed eyelids. Only their fingers moved. Their silent and fixed stare, as keen as a steel blade, followed us like a reproach. Oh, we know it well, the bitter remorse of a retreat! A deep sense of shame oppressed us as we filed through these villages which we were powerless to protect, which we were abandoning to the fury of the enemy. Things in them assumed an almost human expression; the fronts of the forsaken dwellings wore an air of dejected suffering. Fancy, no doubt! Just imagination —but poignant and vivid imagination, nevertheless, for to-morrow all these villages might be burning and we, from our camp on the hills, should see the crops and cottages flaming when the sun went down.

It seems that the Allies have beaten the Germans in the north and in Alsace. At any rate the Communal and Army Bulletins, which are given us sometimes, say so. Then how is it that we are saddled with this terrible reproach by things and people whom we cannot defend against an enemy too superior in numbers?

We waited some time at Remoiville, and then set off across the river, which boasted a single bridge. The crossing was carried out in good order. Then, by the only road, across the valleyed country where dark green forests alternated with fresh pasture-land, the retreat of the 4th Army Corps began.

The western horizon was limited by a long range of blue hills of magnificent outlines. It was doubtless upon these that the French intended to stop and entrench themselves.

On the right of the road the interminable procession of artillery and convoys continued: guns of all calibres, ammunition wagons, forage wagons, carts, supply and store vehicles, division and corps ambulances, and peasants' carts full of bleeding wounded, their heads sometimes enveloped in lint turbans red with gore. Keeping to the left the infantry marched abreast in good order down the road, which was already badly cut up. In front of us rolled a 120 mm. battery. One of the corporals had half a sheep hanging from his saddle.

The 10th Battery had lost all its guns, for when, about one o'clock, the infantry gave up all resistance, the gunners could not limber up, the enemy's fire having almost completely destroyed the teams. Captain Jamain had been hit in the thigh by a shell splinter. We caught sight of him as he lay stretched on a hay-cart among the wounded foot-soldiers.

The forest, very dense and very dark in spite of the blazing sun, deadened the tramp of the infantry on the march and the rumble of the wheels.

In the ditches some foundered horses were standing with drooping heads and half-closed eyes glassy with fatigue. Occasionally a wheel fouled them, but they did not budge an inch. They would only lie down to die.

As it turned out, however, the 4th Army Corps was not going to await the enemy on the hills which, in a series of ridges, commanded the plain and the forest. Some one told me that the whole of Ruffey's Army was falling back behind the Meuse. The general retreat continued along the highway, but our Group turned aside down a by-road which led first to a village swarming with troops, and then zigzagged up the wooded hill-side.

We began the ascent. The sky had suddenly clouded over and the air became sultry. A few drops of rain fell. The main road below, over which the tide of retreating troops ebbed ceaselessly on between the poplars bordering it on either side, looked like a canal filled with black water and moved by a slow current.

The column halted, and we carefully wedged the wheels. The men were tired, and hardly any words were spoken. The silence was only broken by the jingling of the curb-chains as the horses stretched their necks, and by the patter of the rain on the leaves.

We advanced another hundred yards or so, and at the next turn of the road stopped again. A peasant's cart, filled with bedding, upon which were sitting a woman—obviously pregnant—and an old lady, both sheltering under a large umbrella, tried to pass the column. But several of the ammunition wagons, of which the wheels had been badly secured, had slid backwards and barred the way. A girl was driving the heavy cart, which was being laboriously dragged up the hill by a mare in foal between the shafts, and a colt in front, the latter pulling in all directions. Both the girl and the animals stuck pluckily to their job.

"Now then, come up!"

The mare threw herself into the collar, and, with our aid, they eventually reached the head of the column, after which the way was clear. The girl stopped the cart for a moment and caressed the nose of the heavy animal, from whose haunches steam arose in clouds.

We exchanged a few words.

"Where are you going to?"

"We don't know. At any rate we must cross the Meuse. . . . We're late, too. All those who had to go went this morning, when we first heard the guns. But we didn't; we thought we would wait a little longer and see what happened. But after all we had to go, too. Best to go, isn't it?"

"Yes," we told them, "you'd better go."

"And the Germans are perfect savages, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"They'll burn our houses . . . we shan't find anything when we come back—nothing but ashes. Oh, it's awful! . . . Can't you kill them all?"

"If only we could! . . ."

"Now then, come up, old girl!"

The cart moved on.

"Good luck!" cried the girl over her shoulder.

"Thanks—good luck!"

Near the top of the hill was a large clearing in the woods, from which the forest appeared like a magnificent mantle thrown over the shoulders of the neighbouring crests, rounding their edges and softening their outlines. From this point we could see the whole of the Woevre plain we had just crossed as well as Remoiville and the plateau of Marville, where, standing sharply out against the bare fields, was the dark line of poplars near which we had been in action in the morning.

Here, in a field where the oats were only half cut, we prepared to wait for the enemy. Our mission was to cover the retreat of the 4th Army Corps, which still continued below on the main road over which an interminable procession of Paris motor-omnibuses was now passing. The sky had become overcast, and the heavy clouds banking up behind us, to the west, threatened to shorten the daylight.

Advancing round the edge of the wood, in order not to reveal our presence, the battery finally came to a halt on the outskirts of the sloping forest, behind some clumps of trees which afforded good cover. We unharnessed and placed the horses and limbers against the background of foliage of which, from a long distance, they would seem to form part. We hoped to have a quiet evening, especially as the next day would probably be a very strenuous one. The two batteries which at present formed the Group, that is to say only seven guns, would have to hold up the enemy a sufficient time to ensure the retreat of the Army Corps. But we hardly gave any heed to the morrow, being too tired to think or reason.

We had still to take the horses to the pond in the village at the foot of the hill, and started off down a steep and narrow path through the wood. The only street of the hamlet was still crowded with troops. Through the open window of the mayor's house I saw General Boëlle. He looked grave but not worried, and I searched in vain for a sign of uneasiness in his expression.

Infantrymen had piled arms on both sides of the road in front of the houses. A flag in its case was lying across two piles. At the door of the vicarage at least two hundred men were crowded together holding out their water-bottles. The curé, it appeared, was giving them all his wine. Some Chasseurs, their reins slung over their arms, stood waiting for orders, smoking, their backs to the wall of the church. I overheard some of their talk.

"So Mortier's dead, is he?"

"Yes. Got a bullet in the stomach."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing much. . . . He said, 'They've got me!' and he lay down clutching his stomach with both hands. He rolled from side to side and said: 'Ah-a-a-ah! They've got me!' His horse, Balthazar, was sniffing at him. He hadn't let go of the reins . . . still held 'em just like I'm holding these, over his arm. I heard him say, 'Poor old boy!' He was all doubled up, and groaned and panted 'ouf-ouf!' and then all of a sudden he stretched himself right out at full length. . . . One more Chasseur less! His face wasn't a pretty sight, and I shut his eyes for him. Then I broke off a branch from a tree and covered his face with it, as I should like some one to do to me if I went under. . . . Must cover up the dead somehow. . . . After that I came back with Balthazar."

When we had climbed back up the hill and regained our clearing many of the foot-soldiers had already left, while others were strapping on their packs and unpiling arms. We were informed that only one battalion was to stay there and support us. I wondered what awful attack the next day might hold in store.

A Captain of infantry accosted Astruc, who was astride Lieutenant Hély d'Oissel's big horse.

"Hallo there, gunner!"

"Sir?"

"Well I'm blessed if it isn't Tortue!"

"Tortue, sir? Who's Tortue?"

"Why, the horse I lost. Sure enough! There can't be any mistake. Dismount now, quick, and hand him over!"

Astruc protested:

"But, sir, this horse belongs to our Lieutenant! I must take him back to him. What would he say to me!"

"Well, I tell you to dismount. I suppose I know my own saddle, don't I? And

Tortue . . . why, she knows me. . . . There! You see there's no doubt about it. It's Tortue all right, my mare I lost at Ethe."

"But, sir, this is a horse, not a mare."

The officer examined the animal more closely.

"Oh! ah! Why yes, it's true! Now that's odd . . . most extraordinary! I could have sworn it was Tortue. . . ."

Night fell, the mist enveloping the trees round the clearing. Under the black clouds passed yet another aeroplane, blacker even than they. Could the pilot see us at that hour? If so we might expect a shower of shells at daybreak. The machine pitched and tossed in the sky above the clearing, for the wind had risen and was blowing in gusts from the west.

We had strewn some cut oats round the guns, as the night was chilly, and it looked like rain. The wind, freshening into a gale, wrapped our cloaks tightly round us and almost seemed to move the men themselves. No light of any kind was to be seen on the plain over which our guns were pointing, and which soon became shrouded in the impenetrable darkness ahead. In one corner the clearing cut into the forest, and here, where the thick brushwood rose like a black wall on either side, we were allowed to light a fire. The wind blew in gusts on the flames, which it first nearly extinguished and then rekindled, making the shadows of the men flicker fantastically on the ground.

I was tired out—artillery fire creates an irresistible desire to sleep—and I was also rather hungry. Not feeling possessed of sufficient courage to wait for the meat to be cooked and the coffee brewed, I devoured my ration of beef raw and stretched myself out in the oats behind the ammunition wagon, where I was sheltered from the wind.

Wednesday, August 26

Réveillé came at dawn, and we woke to find a thick fog enveloping the battery. We were soaking with dew, and our benumbed and swollen limbs moved jerkily and with difficulty. The uncertain half-light awoke in us a feeling of anxiety and dread which, still heavy with sleep as we were, it was hard to throw off.

Wrapped in our cloaks and standing motionless round the guns, we had leisure to examine our situation in this clearing in the middle of the forest. On the right, according to our officers, it was not known whether there were any French troops. On this side the woods stretched uninterruptedly from the ridges we were occupying as far as Remoiville. On the left the movements of the 4th Army Corps were to be carried out. It is said that normally an army corps takes ten hours to effect a retreat along a single road. And this retreat had already been in progress for more than fifteen hours.

Our position in the clearing was difficult in itself, and might become positively perilous if the fog did not lift. Nothing could be distinguished at a distance of fifty yards from the guns, and the enemy might advance in the plain, threaten the retreating army, and take us by surprise.

On all sides of us, therefore, were the woods and their shadows, the Unknown and Unexpected. In front of us the enemy hidden in the mist; behind, the Meuse; danger everywhere.

The thought of the Meuse was especially disturbing. When it should become necessary for us to retire in our turn, the Germans, whom there would be nothing to check on the right, might reach the river before us. Possibly we should not find a single bridge left standing. We might have to sacrifice ourselves for the defence of the army.

The hours dragged by. The mists seemed to be collecting on the flank of the hills facing the Meuse, whence they were wafted by the west wind in filmy, trailing clouds which gradually curled over the crests of the hills, floated towards us, enveloping our batteries for an instant, and then slowly sank down on the plain.

I have written these notes on my knee, my back resting against the brass bottoms of the shells in the ammunition wagon, which was opened out like a wardrobe. The men were standing about smoking, waiting for orders.

At last, about eight o'clock, the sun shone over the top of the hill and the fog, like a kind of impenetrable gauze, began to draw away in front of us. One by one the trees reappeared, only the tops of the loftiest remaining shrouded in the mist. Nothing stirred. The road, black yesterday with men and horses, now appeared absolutely white between the meadows damp with dew and vividly green under the first rays of the morning sun.

Lying flat on our chests in the grass in front of our guns, on a sort of natural terrace between the stones descending the slope, we scanned the plain. After a time everything seemed to move, and one had to make an effort to dispel the illusion.

The men are saying that we may have to stay here two days. Surely that cannot be possible? Somebody asserted that he had heard the instructions given to the Major by a General:

"You'll stay there," said he, "as long as the position is tenable. I rely on your instinct as an artilleryman."

Another man supported the first speaker.

"Yes, that's right. He said, 'Solente, I rely on your instinct as an artilleryman.' Why, I heard him myself."

We also heard that last Saturday's engagement would be known as the Battle of Ethe.

"No," said another. "It will be called the Battle of Virton."

"Ethe, Virton! . . . What the devil does it matter what it's called. Seeing that we've had to retreat! . . ."

"Oh, yes, but all the same," said the trumpeter, "we ought to know. Suppose you get back to your people and they ask you what engagements you've been in. You'll answer, 'I've been fighting in Belgium.' 'Yes,' they'll say, 'but Belgium is a big place—bigger than our commune! Were you at Liége, or Brussels, or Copenhagen?' You would look a silly fool!"

The other shrugged his shoulders.

With the help of a bayonet we opened a box of bully-beef for the four of us, and fell to. The only sound was that made by the hatchet of one of the men who was chopping down a small birch-tree which might conceivably interfere with the fire of his gun.

The silence was too intense, the immobility of the countryside too complete. The enemy was there. We neither heard him nor saw him, but that only rendered him the more sinister. The unwonted calm, when we had braced ourselves up for battle, was terrifying, and our nerves became overstrained.

I supposed that the retreat of the 4th Army Corps had by this time been accomplished. Time passed, and the French army was still falling back, while the enemy advanced cautiously, threading his way through the woods.

Suddenly, about two o'clock, a machine-gun began to crackle quite close by in the forest. A horseman galloped through the clearing and drew rein beside the Major. We at once limbered up.

Was our retreat cut off? The staccato rattle of the machine-gun was now accompanied by intermittent rifle-fire. We had to cross the clearing diagonally in order to reach a forest path. Quite calmly, and determined to save our guns, we got our rifles ready. But the column crossed the close-cropped field without our hearing a single bullet, and we gained the wood in safety. We had to hurry, for the road, even if still open, might be closed at any moment.

Leaning over the necks of the horses in order to avoid the low-hanging branches which threatened to drag them from their saddles, and gauging by eye the narrow passage between the trees, the drivers urged their teams forward with whip and spur.

The road was still open. . . . We arrived at Dun-sur-Meuse, where we had to cross the river. The Captain assembled the non-commissioned officers:

"The bridge is mined. Warn your drivers to take care of the sacks on each side of the bridge. They're full of melinite."

In order to let us through the sappers threw some planks across the pit they had opened up in the centre of the bridge.

The hindmost vehicles of the column had not advanced two hundred yards on the other side of the Meuse, when a loud explosion shook us on our seats. The bridge had just been blown up. Behind us a large white cloud of smoke curled up in thick volutes, masking half the town.

As we stood waiting for orders in a field, our guns in double column, some one called out:

"There's the postmaster!"

"At last!"

"Letters! letters! A man from each gun!"

For eight days we had been waiting for news, and each man drew a little aside in order to be alone as he read.

It seems certain that the battle of Saturday the 22nd will be known as the battle of Virton.

Thursday, August 27

It had poured all night, and rain was still falling when we rose. The thought of all the misery such weather must inevitably cause spoiled the satisfaction we experienced at feeling fit and fresh after ten hours' delicious sleep in a well-closed barn. Our horse-blankets thrown over our heads like hoods and flapping against our calves, we silently marched in scattered order along the churned-up road, our feet squelching in the mud, and finally regained the park under the lashing rain.

The horses, motionless, glistening with water but resigned, endeavoured unceasingly to turn their tails to the rain. The stable-pickets had succeeded in lighting fires but they had had to dig new hearths, for those of the day before were swamped and black pieces of charred wood were floating in them.

The men's cloaks were streaming and hung heavily in stiff folds from their shoulders. Some of them had turned up their capes in order to protect their heads. The gunners stood round about, holding their red hands to the fire.

"Beastly rain! Two days more like this and we shall all get dysentery!"

"I'd rather die of that than be killed by a shell," said Hutin.

"No use trying to make coffee," growled Pelletier. "The fire doesn't give out any heat. . . . It would take hours."

"It's the wood that won't burn. It only smokes."

"Blow on it, Millon!"

We turned our boot soles to the heat in order to dry them. The rain hissed and spat in the fire.

"All the same," said the trumpeter, "if we hadn't been betrayed things wouldn't have gone like this!"

I grew annoyed.

"Betrayed! I was waiting for some one to come out with that!"

"Well, I mean it; betrayed! I heard about it yesterday. . . . It was a General who delivered up the army plans. I know what I'm talking about!"

"Pooh! Camp gossip!"

"I heard the same thing," affirmed another.

"Simply camp gossip! From the moment we got scratched that was bound to come sooner or later. If you're beaten it's because you've been betrayed! The French can't be the weaker! Lord, no! It's impossible, of course! But you know there are five German army corps in front of us. That makes two to one. . . . No . . . well, all the same. Even with two to one we can't be beaten, can we? And, if we are, we at once begin to whine about betrayal! Wasn't it you who were always saying that Langle de Cary's army ought to come up and help us? Eh? Well, it's all simply because you don't feel strong enough to tackle the Boches by yourselves."

"All the same, traitors exist right enough," said the trumpeter with a sage nod of the head. "There always have been traitors, and there always will be, to sell France."

"Idiot!" said Hutin peremptorily.

Almost all my comrades thought as I did.

A few properly equipped reinforcements would have enabled us to get the upper hand. Even alone, here behind the Meuse, we could have managed to stop the enemy.

Besides, during the days of defeat we had just been passing through, what a moving picture of our country had been revealed to us! An army immediately victorious cannot plumb the depths of patriotism. One must have fought, have suffered, and have feared—even if only for a moment—to lose her, in order to understand what one's country really means. She is the whole joy of existence, the embodiment of all our pleasures visible and invisible, and the focus of all our hopes. She alone makes life worth living. All this united and personified in a single suffering being, begotten by the will of millions of individuals—that is France!

In defending her one defends oneself, seeing that she is the sole reason for being, for living. One would prefer to fall dead on the spot rather than see France lost, for that would be worse than death. Every soldier feels this truth, either vaguely, or distinctly and clearly, according to his powers of perception and affection.

And yet, in the camp, these things are never talked of. The reason is that words which, in peace-time, too often veiled by their gross grandiloquence these deeper and finer feelings, would be insupportable now. This passion, for it is a passion, lies deep down in the heart with other sacred and inmost emotions, to give outward expression to which would be almost to profane them.

"Come on, now! Harness! Hook in! We're off."

The rain had soured the men's tempers.

"Now then! Be careful with your horse, can't you? You might have killed us!"

"Untie your horses so that we can get the picket-lines, will you? . . . All right, damn you, I'll do it myself."

"There's a silly fool! Fine place to tether a colt to—the wheel of an ammunition wagon. He's ripping up the oat-bag. Pull him off, can't you?"

Cramone, threatening his team with his whip, repeated for the twentieth time:

"I'll teach you how to behave, you brutes!"

"There's another dish lost," shouted Millon. "Who's the idiot who didn't pick it up yesterday?"

"Can't you pull your infernal mules back a bit? . . . We can't limber up. . . . Never seen such a fool! . . ."

The men pushed and tugged at their horses, which, face to the wind, continued pulling this way and that in a vain attempt to prevent the rain stinging their ears. Bréjard lost his temper.

"Lord, what a set! Can't you keep your horses straight? . . . Look at that off-leader! . . . Can't you see he's got entangled? . . ."

"Thought we were going to have a rest to-day!"

"I suppose the Germans are resting, aren't they?"

The start was difficult. During the night the wheels of the vehicles had sunk deeper and deeper into the softening soil, and the horses' hoofs kept slipping on the slope.

Once on the road the battery broke into a trot, the mud splashing in sprays from under the feet of the horses. Some of the gunners, attacked by colic, stopped in the ditches, and then, still doing up their breeches, ran along by the side of the column in order to overtake their vehicles.

We were going to extend a strong artillery position on the heights of the Meuse valley. From the hills near Stenay the sound of the guns reached us in gusts, and, some distance off, above the woods, we could see the shrapnel shells bursting. The rain had stopped, and the sky, dark a moment previously, suddenly cleared and assumed a uniformly light grey tint.

In a meadow by the roadside some peasants, fleeing before the tide of invasion, had set up their nightly camp. A large green awning sheltered their cart and formed a tent at the same time. Two shafts projected from the front end, pointing skywards. An old man and two women—both pregnant—with half a dozen children clinging to their skirts, watched us go by.

The road rose stiffly upwards, and the column slackened its pace to a walk. I heard one of the women say to the old man, as she gave him a nudge with her elbow:

"Go on, father!"

The old man hesitated, but she insisted:

"You must!"

He seemed to make up his mind, and approached us, shifting from one leg to another. Then, with a red face, he muttered:

"No! Can't ask for that at my time of life!"

He was about to go, but we stopped him.

"Ask for what, old fellow?"

"For a bit of bread, if you've got any over. It's for the children!"

"Yes, of course we have! We never eat it all!"

As a matter of fact we seldom get enough bread. The loaves have to be sorted out, and, when the mouldy parts have been thrown away, the ration is usually more than halved. The old man walked by the side of the limber while the men searched in their bags.

"Here you are!"

Two loaves, almost fresh, were held out to him.

"With an onion and a good set of teeth they're eatable!"

"Thanks. . . . Thank you so much. . . . But I'm afraid you'll be short yourselves!"

"Oh, no! That's all right, old chap! Why, we get a wagonful of those every day!"

He made off, a loaf under each arm. I saw him hunch his shoulders and dry his eyes with the sleeve of his coat.

A shower of shrapnel shells suddenly burst in the distance, over the dark woods.

"Swine!" growled Millon between his teeth. He had given up his bread.

He shook his fist towards the enemy.

Once in position to sweep the uplands on the right bank of the Meuse, we dried ourselves in the sun.

In the afternoon a few horsemen, Uhlans presumably, appeared on the edge of a distant wood. A broadside of shells quickly made them seek cover again.

Friday, August 28

"Alarm!"

"What?"

"Come on, up you get!"

"What's the time?"

"Don't know. . . . It's still dark."

"All right, then, we'll get up. Hutin, come on, get up!"

I shook Hutin, who growled in answer:

"All right! Oh, Lord, I was so comfortable there!"

The noise of shuffling straw filled the barn.

"What's the time?" repeated somebody.

"Look out there! There's a rung missing in the ladder."

Noises of feet scraping against the ladder. An oath.

"Get the lantern!"

"Where is it?"

"Hanging behind the door."

The men groped about for their belongings.

"My képi!"

"Dashed if I can find the lantern! Come and help, can't you?"

"Sure it can't be two o'clock yet."

"Come along now, hurry up," cried a sergeant, opening the door. "Anybody else still asleep?"

No one replied. Outside, it was very cold, and the night was dark. Not a star was to be seen. Fires had been lit in the middle of the village, and coffee was on the boil. The church, a diminutive chapel magnified by the light from below, had almost the air of a cathedral, its spire lost in the inky blackness of the sky. Fantastic shadows danced on the walls, and the windows were momentarily lit up by red or green lights. A crowd of poor people fleeing from the enemy were sleeping in the nave, together with some soldiers who in vain had sought shelter elsewhere. Through the front entrance, which was wide open, the interior of the church looked mysterious, filled as it was with fugitive light and shadows, like those cast by a building on fire. Under the vivid reflections of the stained-glass windows on the marble floor I caught a glimpse of prostrate human figures. In the square, soldiers coming and going between their fires threw enormous shadows on the ground and on the walls of the houses.

Why this alarm? Has the enemy succeeded in crossing the frontier near Stenay? We set off behind the infantry, whose tramp, tramp sounded like the movement of a flock of sheep on the road. The night was alive with moving but unseen forms. The breathing of hundreds of men on the march was felt rather than heard; every now and then, as if from far off, came a half-lost word. All this invisible life in movement seemed to give off currents which traversed the night air like electricity.

In the distance we heard the sound of the guns. We were marching toward them.

Soon the first streaks of dawn lit up the wooded hills, which reared their severe yet splendid crests between us and the Meuse. We passed through Tailly—a village at the bottom of a ravine, consisting of a few cottages, a church, and a cemetery. The cold bleakness of dawn was soon succeeded by the infinite vibration of light over the countryside and on the forest. Through the depths of an immense breach, breaking the monotony of the hills which border the Meuse, a roadway leads towards the river.

When we arrived at Beauclair, in the valley of the Meuse, the engagement appeared to have finished.

In front of the church the infantry who had just been in action were resting amid their piled arms. The majority were pale—but some were very red. They had thrown themselves down on the bare ground in the sun, and not one of them moved a muscle. The stiffened features of the sleepers were eloquent of tragic weariness as they lay there with open coats and shirts, showing glimpses of naked chests. All were indescribably dirty, their legs plastered with mud up to the knees.

The battery halted outside the last houses of the village, and we at once set about making coffee. A hulking infantryman came up to ask for an onion. We questioned him:

"So they've not succeeded in crossing the Meuse yet?"

"Oh, yes, they have! . . . One brigade got over all right . . . but the artillery had mowed down the bridges behind them, and so we had a go at them with fixed bayonets. . . . Lord! you don't know what that's like, you chaps! . . . A charge! . . . It's awful! . . . Never known anything like it! If there *is* a Hell, I expect there's bayonet fighting always going on there! . . . No! I mean it! Off you go, shouting. . . . Then one or two fall, and after them lots of others. . . . And the more that fall the louder you've got to shout so that the others will come along. And then when at last you get to close quarters with 'em, why, you're just raving mad, and you thrust and thrust. . . . But the first time you feel your bayonet sink into a chap's stomach, you feel a bit queer. . . . It's all soft, you've only got to shove a bit! . . . But it's harder to withdraw clean! I was so damned gentle that I upset my fellow—a great big fat chap with a red beard. I couldn't pull my bayonet out . . . had to put my foot on his chest, and felt him squirm under my tread. Here, have a look at this! . . ."

He drew out his bayonet, which was red up to the cross-bar. As he went away he stooped down and plucked a handful of grass to clean it.

The hours passed. The enemy appeared unwilling to make another attempt to force the passage of the Meuse.

We heard that d'Amade had made a flank attack on the opposing German army, and had taken Marville.

D'Amade! Well done, d'Amade! But . . . was it true?

At Halles, a mile and a half from Beauclair, we encamped at the foot of some high hills. The guns, which for some time past had been silent, again began to thunder. The enemy was bombarding the heights above us.

As billets for the night we had been given a spacious barn. But when at dusk we went there to get some sleep we found our straw covered with foot-soldiers, rifles, and packs.

The artillerymen began swearing:

"Hallo, what the hell's all this? No more room left?"

There was a scrimmage to let us find places.

The barn had a loft above it to which a ladder gave access, and the floor of which was worm-eaten. We stuffed up the holes with hay.

"There we are! As usual, the artillery above, and the infantry below. That's all right. . . . But mind you don't take the ladder away!"

"Take care of your feet. . . . O-o-oh!"

"Why couldn't you say you were in the straw?"

"Now then, up you go!"

Five or six artillerymen were on the ladder at the same time. It bent beneath their weight. Below, a foot-soldier stood motionless, holding a candle in his hand.

"Look out! Don't want your spurs in my face, you know!"

"Growl away, old chap! Let's get up."

"The floor's giving way! . . . They'll fall through."

"Go on, climb up! It's less dangerous than the shells!"

"Damn it all, move up a bit, you fellows; otherwise there won't be room for all of us!"

"Don't go there! There's a hole. . . . You'll fall on the fellows down below!"

Downstairs the infantry were grumbling:

"Can't you keep quiet, up there, eh? We want to sleep! And the straw's all falling in our mouths!"

"If only it would stop yours!"

"Look out, you're on my stomach!"

"Sorry. Can't see an inch in here. . . . Can't you raise the lantern over there?"

Again came the sound of a shell bursting in the distance. I hesitated whether to take off my spurs and leggings, although I knew quite well that I should sleep better without them. But, if there was an alarm, should I be able to find them in the straw? Finally, I decided to keep them on, nor did I unstrap my revolver holster, which was chafing my side. I tightened my chin-strap so as not to lose my képi.

Saturday, August 29

Réveillé came at two o'clock, together with orders to start at once. The Germans, we heard, had crossed the Meuse. But our artillery had no doubt registered the course of the river. I could not understand why we had not heard the guns.

In the darkness of the early dawn the road showed up yellow between the blue-grey fields. On the way I recognised the yew-trees of a cemetery in which some dead were being buried the day before.

We stopped in column on the steep ascent towards Tailly, and waited for orders. The day broke behind the hills and gradually overspread the whole horizon.

One by one the regiments of the 7th Division climbed up from the ravine and passed us. The men looked haggard and tired. Their eyes were hollow, and the faces of the youngest, drawn and sallow with privations, were furrowed with lines. The corners of their mouths drooped. Bending forward under the weight of their packs, in the attitude of Christ bearing the Cross, the infantry toiled up the hill as though it were a Calvary. At every hundred yards or so they halted and rehoisted their burdens with a jerk of their shoulders. Some of them were holding out their rifles at arm's length, as though it were a balance which helped them to march. Others were complaining that they had had nothing to eat for two days. One of the 101st, a pale, lanky, thin-faced fellow, with feverishly bright eyes, halted close to us and stroked the chase of the gun.

"Lord," said he to Hutin, "you might as well put a shell through my chest! At least there'd be an end of it!"

"Aren't you ashamed to talk like that?"

The other made a vague gesture, shrugged his shoulders, and went off dragging one leg after him.

As soon as the infantry had gone by we were ordered to take up our position on the plain, near the edge of the wood behind which the regiments of the line were retreating.

I heard the Major repeat the order received to the Captain: "Prevent the enemy from setting foot on the plateau. There are no more French in front of you!"

"So we are still covering the retreat! A vile job!" said Millon, the firing number, a good little Parisian chap, with a face like a girl.

In our present position we ran as great a risk from the rifle and machine-gun fire as from the shells. Not far off on the edge of the plateau, near the brush-shaped poplar, was a dark little copse whence at any minute bullets might come buzzing about our ears. The Germans might get their machine-guns there without being seen, rather than risk coming out into the open. And what might we expect then? Oh, well! . . . After all, that is what we had come there for.

"If we hadn't been sold, things would have gone very differently," growled Tuvache, a Breton farmer, who was brave enough under fire, but who suffered from bad *morale*.

And, still obsessed by the idea of treason, he added:

"And the proof is that they've been able to cross the Meuse without hindrance."

Bréjard made him stop talking.

"Why, you're worse than the others, you are! We're fighting from the North Sea right down to Belfort, aren't we? Well, then, how can you judge by one wretched little corner? Perhaps we're letting them advance as far as this in order to surround 'em afterwards. . . . Some of you chaps always seem to know more than your Generals. . . . And besides, all this time the Russians are advancing. You let things be. . . . We shall have 'em some day, never fear! And then they'll pay for this!"

We awaited the appearance of the heads of the enemy's columns, which from one moment to another might emerge from the Tailly valley.

The plateau, shining with dew, had assumed that absolutely silent immobility one so often notices in the country in the early hours of a sunny morning.

Four black points suddenly appeared far down the road? Was it the enemy's advanced guard? No. We were soon able to recognise three stragglers and a cyclist. A troop in column of march followed them out of the valley. In this order they could not be Germans. The column, which proved to be a battalion of the 101st, passed by, and disappeared down the road leading to the wood. But, in the rise and fall of the valleyed country stretching on the north-west as far as the dark masses of distant forests, Lieutenant Hély d'Oissel had discovered through his field-glasses large masses of men marching westwards through sunken roads which almost hid them from our view. Were they the enemy, or were they the French troops which were occupying the heights of the Meuse near Stenay and which were now retiring?

We had already experienced the same terrible uncertainty at Marville. The Captain climbed up into an apple-tree in order to see better, and the Major also tried to recognise the mysterious troops. But neither could distinguish anything. A mist—the dampness of the night evaporating—was already rising from the ground and veiling the horizon. If those were German columns, they would threaten the flank of the retreating army. A scout was sent off at a gallop to reconnoitre. Time passed, and the columns disappeared. At last the scout came back; the troops were French. He had seen parties of Chasseurs flanking them.

Our feet wet with dew, we once again became motionless and awaited the enemy.

About midday we received orders to move to the edge of the plateau, and take up position behind a clump of trees, in order to command the Tailly valley and the hills on the south of Stenay. And, continually, successive regiments of infantry emerged from the forest and passed us, falling back.

"Dashed if I can fathom it!" said Hutin.

"Nor can I!"

It was very hot, and we were thirsty, but our water-bottles were empty.

We continued to wait until dusk, but the enemy did not appear.

Night had fallen when we were sent to encamp on the other side of the woods.

The moon was rising clear of the tree-tops, The regular clatter of hoofs and the monotonous roll of the vehicles blended together into a sort of weary cradle-song, and made us sleepy after a time. In order to suffer uncomplainingly all the hardships and miseries of war, we would have asked no more than one hour of affection, of sympathetic tenderness, in safety, at evening-time, after the long day spent in watching or fighting.

The road was level, and we were hardly shaken at all; no one spoke, and most of us slept or dozed.

No sound disturbed the stillness of the warm night save that of the column on the march. Gradually we lost ourselves in pleasing reveries and memories of the past, forgetting present dangers and distress. On we jogged through space and time. . . . Lyons at night-time . . . long rows of lamps lighting the wharves and reflected in the Rhône . . . above the river the amphitheatre of Croix-Rousse with its lights scintillating like golden points, and above them, again, the stars. . . . Where did the town end, or where did the sky begin? . . . And the Mayenne in the bright days of autumn and summer, its sombre waters sparkling like black diamonds. . . . The memories which rose up before me gradually blurred the scene of illusive reflections.

And perhaps I should die in a few hours' time. . . .

Almost as if I myself had been able to write those beautiful verses of Du Bellay, I felt the aching nostalgia of his words:

Quand reverrai-je, hélas! de mon petit village
Fumer la cheminée, et en quelle saison
Reverrai-je le clos de ma pauvre maison,
Qui m'est une province et beaucoup d'avantage?

I repeated the lines to myself several times.

Sunday, August 30

This morning we marched for hours through clouds of dust, the sun scorching the backs of our necks. The men were thirsty and continually spat out the clayey saliva which clogged their mouths. The battery halted in a valley on the outskirts of a village—Villers-devant-Dun, I think it was—where the sound of the guns seemed to come from the west and south as well as from the east and north. This was a surprise, and at first made us uneasy. Janvier, for the hundredth time, said:

"That's it! We are surrounded!"

He was haunted by this idea. However, it was not long before we discovered that the illusion was solely caused by an exceptionally clear echo. In reality the fighting was going on near Dun-sur-Meuse.

We crowded round the fountain, on the surrounding wall of which the last *Bulletin des Communes* was pasted. But first we each drank, in great gulps, at least a quart of fresh water. Afterwards we read the news. All was going well! Nevertheless, it was announced that Mulhouse had been retaken. Apparently, then, it had been lost. We exchanged impressions:

"Well, Hutin?"

"Not bad," he answered rather dubiously, "but they don't say anything about our little show of last week."

Bréjard, on the contrary, was filled with an optimism which nothing could damp:

"Virton, Marville—why, all that is a mere nothing on a front as long as this! We've had to give a little in some sectors, that's all. . . . But otherwise things are going quite all right!"

"All the same, it isn't nice to find ourselves in one of the sectors which have to give way," answered Hutin.

"All that will change. We're going to be reinforced. . . . They say that De Langle is only a day's march off."

"He'll have to hurry up if he wants to find any of the 4th Infantry left!"

That was true. The regiments of the line, especially those of the 8th Division, had suffered terribly. Some battalions had been diminished by two-thirds, and, since the Battle of Virton, many companies were not more than fifty or eighty strong, and had lost all their officers. How we wished that De Langle would arrive!

In the ever-thickening dust and overpowering heat we returned by the same road to the positions we had occupied the day before at Tailly. It seemed to us that we had uselessly wasted more than seven hours marching in a large circle.

Another German aeroplane appeared. This oppression was becoming unbearable! We felt like a flock of frightened sparrows beneath the shadow of the hawk. The Germans have improved and developed the aerial arm to an enormous extent, and, unfortunately, our .75's are unable to hit aeroplanes, the mobility of the gun on the carriage not being sufficient. It is necessary to dig a pit for the spade, and before this is finished the machine is always out of range.

The aviator who had just flown over us had thrown out a star in order to mark the situation of one of our batteries in position on the heights commanding the river. The guns at once moved off, and took up a fresh position elsewhere. Shortly afterwards shells began to fall on the hill they had been occupying—enormous shells, which made the earth quake for miles around and withered the grass with their dirty, pungent smoke.

"I expect those are the famous 22 cm. shells," said the Captain.

We had nothing to do. Towards Stenay the horizon was deserted and motionless. For several hours heavy shells continued to fall in threes, making black holes in the green meadows in which not a soul remained. We were obviously within range of the guns from which they were fired, and we had no guarantee that we should not be hit if the enemy lifted his fire a little.

I was struck by the marvellous faculty of adaptability which forms the basis of human nature. One becomes accustomed to danger just as one becomes accustomed to the most cruel privations, or to the uncertainty of the morrow.

Before the war I used to wonder how it was that old men nearing the extreme limits of existence could continue to live undisturbed in the imminent shadow of death. But now I understand. For us the risk of death has become an element of daily life with which one coolly reckons, which no longer astonishes, and terrifies less. Besides, a soldier's everyday life is a school for courage. Familiarity with the same dangers eventually leaves the human animal unmoved. One's nerves no longer quiver; the conscious and constant effort to keep control over oneself is successful in the end. Therein lies the secret of all military courage. Men are not born brave; they become brave. The instinct to conquer is more or less resistant—that is all. Moreover, one must live, on the field of battle just as elsewhere; it is necessary to become accustomed to this new existence, no matter how perilous or harsh it may be. And what renders it difficult—more, intolerable—is fear, the fear that throttles and paralyses. It has to be conquered, and, finally, one does conquer it.

Apart from the necessity of living as well as can possibly be managed, the greatest disciplinary factors in the life of a soldier under fire are a sense of duty and a respect for other people's opinion—in a word, honour. This is not a discovery; it is merely a personal opinion.

It must also be confessed that this training in courage is far more easy for us than for the foot-soldiers—the least fortunate of all the fighting forces. A gunner under fire is literally unable to run away. The whole battery would see him—his dishonour would be palpable, irretrievable. Now fear, in its more acute manifestations, seems to me necessarily to imply annihilation of will-power. A man incapable of controlling himself sufficiently to face danger bravely will, in the majority of cases, be equally incapable of facing the intolerable shame of public flight. Flight of this kind would necessitate an exercise of will—almost a kind of bravery. The infantryman is often isolated when under fire; when the shrapnel bullets are humming above him a man lying down at a distance of four yards from another is virtually alone. Concern for his own safety monopolises all his faculties and he may succumb to the temptation to stop and lie low, or to sneak off to one side and then take to flight. When he rejoins his company in the evening he may declare that he lost his squad or that he fought elsewhere. Perhaps he is not believed, and possibly he was aware beforehand that no one would believe him; but at least he will have escaped the intolerable ignominy of running away before the eyes of all.

To remain under fire is by no means easy, but to keep cool in the heat of a modern engagement is harder still. At first fear makes one perspire and tremble. It is irresistible. Death seems inevitable. The danger is unknown, and is magnified a thousandfold by the imagination. One makes no attempt to analyse it. The bursting of the shells and their acrid smoke together with the shrapnel are the main causes of the first feeling of terror. And yet neither the flashes of melinite, nor the noise of the explosions, nor the smoke are the real danger; but they accompany the danger, and at first one is attacked by all three at once. Soon, however, one learns to discriminate. The smoke is harmless, and the whistling of the shells indicates in what direction they are coming. One no longer crouches down unnecessarily, and only seeks shelter knowingly, when it is imperative to do so. Danger no longer masters but is mastered. That is the great difference.

In order to form an exact idea of the effects of a shell, I went with Hutin to examine a field full of Jerusalem artichokes in which a heavy projectile had just fallen. In the centre of the field we found a funnel-shaped hole about ten yards in diameter, so regular in shape that it could only have been made by a howitzer shell. This kind of projectile strikes the ground almost perpendicularly, and buries itself deep in the soft soil, throwing up enormous quantities of earth as it bursts. Many of the steel splinters are lost in the depths of the ground, and the murderous cone of dispersion is thereby proportionately reduced.

The truth of this can be easily confirmed. In the present case the farther we went from the hole the higher was the point at which the artichokes had been shorn off, and at a dozen paces or so from the edge of the crater the shrapnel had only reached the heads of the highest stems. It follows therefore that a man lying very near the point of impact would probably not have been hit. Next came a circular zone which was entirely unscathed, but a little farther on the falling bullets and splinters had mown off leaves and stems, and a man lying down here would have risked quite as much as if he had remained standing.

When thus coldly examined a shell loses much of its moral effect.

The actual organisation of the artillery also stimulates a gunner's courage. The foot-soldier, cavalryman, and sapper are units in themselves, whereas for us the only unit is the gun. The seven men serving it are the closely connected, interdependent organs of a living thing—the gun in action.

In consequence of the links existing between the seven men among themselves and between each of them and the gun, any faint-heartedness is rendered more obvious, its consequences much greater, and the shame it bears in its wake more crushing. Moreover, in this complete solidarity the effluvia which create psychological contagion are easily developed; one or two gunners who stick resolutely and calmly to their posts are often able to inspire the whole detachment with courage.

To-day was a day of undisturbed quiet. Over towards Tailly and Stenay nothing revealed the presence of the enemy.

When evening approached we were again sent off to encamp on the other side of the woods. There was a glorious summer sunset, and through the dark depths of the trees the road opened up a mysterious avenue at the end of which glowed a western sky more varied in hues than a rainbow.

All sound of battle had ceased. Gradually the sky darkened and night fell. As yesterday, the artillery rolled monotonously on through the shadowy woods.

One by one the stars were veiled by a rising mist, and the sky became opalescent with a nocturnal luminosity that flooded the stretches of the forest, which, from the crests of the hills, could be seen rising and falling as far as the eye could reach. But underneath the trees the darkness was intense, and the road would have seemed a trench dug deep in the earth itself but for an occasional infantry bivouac, the embers of which glowed faintly through the brushwood, and but for a damp scent of mint and other herbs which rose from the dark undergrowth mingled with a certain sensuous smell of animality. We were surrounded by a delicious freshness with which we filled our lungs and which made us shiver slightly.

Millon, who was sitting next to me on the limber-box, told me the story of his life. It was a sad and simple history. Only twenty, with his girl's face and roguish yet infantile eyes, he had nevertheless long been the breadwinner of a family, and now his mother—

"my old mother" as he said in a tone full of deep affection—had been left alone in Paris with another child, still very young, whose delicate constitution and highly strung nerves were the cause of continual alarm. He told me of past misfortunes still fresh in his memory, of the present anxiety of his people in Paris, and of material worries.

"Ah," he sighed, "if only my old mother could see me to-night, safe and sound on the limber!"

In the field where the battery halted we had almost to fight in order to get a few armfuls of straw. The gunners of a battery which had arrived before us had stretched themselves out haphazard on a fallen hayrick. They had twenty times more straw than they needed, but when we tried to pull a little from under them the awakening of the overwrought sleepers was terrifying. They shouted, cursed, and threatened. Finally they fell asleep again, growling and grunting under their breath like a pack of surly dogs.

Monday, August 31

The guns awoke us early, and we prepared to return to meet the enemy. About seven o'clock we found ourselves back in Tailly, where we learnt that the day before the enemy had been pushed back as far as the Meuse, and that Beauclair and Halles were now entirely in French hands.

Standing in column of route in the village we awaited orders. The German artillery began to bombard the neighbouring hills.

In the market-place was a hay-cart in which were lying three wounded Uhlans. A doctor, his hands behind his back, was walking up and down in front of the cart. Some women and children were standing round them in a group, silently contemplating the Germans. One or two of the gunners joined them out of curiosity. The Uhlans looked at them with sad and troubled blue eyes.

"They aren't such an ugly set as I should have thought," declared Tuvache.

"No?" said Millon. "I suppose you thought they had got a third eye in the middle of their foreheads, like the inhabitants of the moon!"

Tuvache shrugged his shoulders:

"No, only I had an idea they were uglier. They don't look as bad as all that!"

There was severe fighting this morning in the Beauclair Gap, through which the enemy tried to force a passage. The incessant din of the battle sounded from afar like the rising tide beating on a rocky shore.

"Forward! Trot!"

After having proceeded some three hundred yards down the Beauclair road we again halted. Soldiers were coming back from the lines, some of them wounded in the hands or arms, and others in the shoulders. All of them were bandaged. They stopped to ask us for water or cigarettes, and we exchanged a few words with them:

"Are we advancing?"

"No, but we are holding our ground. It is their machine-guns that are the trouble. They're just awful!"

"Are you in pain?"

"No!"

"What does it feel like, a bullet?"

"It burns a bit, but it doesn't hurt much."

Some others, wounded in the leg, began to pass by. These were evidently in great pain. They were perspiring with fatigue and heat, for the sun, now in the zenith, was beating straight down in the hollow through which the road wound. Many were helping themselves along by the aid of sticks cut from the hedges.

An officer's horse went by, led by a stretcher-bearer and bearing a foot-soldier whose thigh had been broken by a shell. The wounded man was clutching the animal's mane with both hands, his right leg hanging helpless. Just above the knee was a rent in his breeches through which the blood flowed freely, running down to his boot and dripping thence to the ground. His eyes were closed and his bloodshot eyelids, pale lips, and the red beard covering his long, bony jaws, made him look like one crucified.

"Can you manage to hold out?" asked the stretcher-bearer.

"Are we still far from the ambulance?"

"No, not far now. If you feel faint let me know and I'll put you down. Does it hurt much?"

"Yes, and it's bleeding. . . . Look at the blood on the road!"

"That's nothing. Hold on to the mane!"

An ambulance passed full of seriously wounded. Instead of being laid down they had been propped up against the sides of the carriage so that it should hold more. Under the green tilt I caught a glimpse of one man with a face the colour of white marble whose head was rolling on his shoulders, and of another who was streaming with blood. A huge and swarthy corporal was sharing the box with the driver. His gun between his knees and one hand on his hip, he was sitting bolt upright with a grave and determined air, his head enveloped in a turban of crimson lint. Blood was trickling into his right eye, which, in its red-rimmed orbit, looked strangely white, and from thence ran down his drooping moustache, matting the hairs of his beard, and finally dropping on to his broad chest in black splashes and streams.

One of the wounded who had been waiting for a long time, sitting by the roadside, caught hold of a carriage which dragged him on.

"Please stop and let me get up!"

"We've no more room, I'm afraid!"

"I can't walk."

"But as you see we're full up!"

"Can't I get on the step?"

"Yes, if you can manage it!"

But the vehicle still went on. A gunner helped the man on to the step.

At the end of a sunken road, in the shade of some tall poplars with dense foliage which the sun only penetrated in places, two Medical Corps officers had improvised a sort of operating-table on trestles. Some wounded laid out on the slope were waiting their turn to be bandaged. Among the stones a thin, dark-coloured stream of water was flowing, partially washing away the pools of blood and bits of red-stained cotton-wool and linen. The air was pervaded by a stale odour like that of a chemist's shop, mingled with the damp smell of running water.

A Captain was brought up in a stretcher, on both sides of which his arms hung limply down. A hospital orderly cut off the sleeves of his tunic, and he was then placed on the operating-table. He was an ugly sight as he lay there with his blood-stained bare arms and his sleeveless blue tunic encircling his body. While his wounds were being dressed he gave long-drawn sighs of pain.

"Right about wheel!"

We set off up a steep incline across the fields to take up position on the heights overlooking the Beauclair Gap and the road we had just left. The battery was backed by a spur of the hills which hid Tailly from view except for the spire of the steeple, surmounted by a weather-cock, which seemed to rise out of the earth behind us.

In this position we were visible to the enemy through the V-shaped gap between the hills commanding the Meuse. We could see the woods and fields beyond Beauclair occupied by the Germans, and which the French batteries ahead of us were covering with shrapnel shell from behind the sheltering ridges. In the fields in the distance the German infantry debouching from the woods looked like an army of black insects on a bright green lawn. We immediately opened fire, and under our shells the enemy hastily regained the woods, which we then began to bombard.

The action seemed to be going favourably for us this morning. Some French batteries had advanced by the Beauclair road and were now engaged in the gap. On the hills surrounding us in a semicircle other batteries which, like ours, had taken up positions on the counterslope, and others still farther off, near the hills directly above the Meuse, thundered incessantly, the position of the invisible guns being revealed by clouds of dust and flashes of fire showing up against the greenery. The firing of these batteries was so violent that little by little the air became cloudy. An acrid atmosphere of smoke and dust invaded the valley, in which the numberless echoes multiplied the roar of the guns as the sound-waves met and intermingled. We were surrounded by a loud and continual humming and buzzing which deafened us and almost paralysed our other senses.

"Cease firing!"

The detachments became motionless round the guns. It was already midday.

Suddenly the enemy began to bombard Tailly and the pine-woods commanding our position. Some limbers which since the early morning had been waiting on the outskirts of the woods moved off hurriedly. A section of infantry emerged from the smoke of a high-explosive shell.

"Take cover!" ordered Captain de Brisoult.

The fire of the French artillery gradually slackened. A volley of shrapnel shells burst over the valley where our teams were waiting for us, and a fuse sang loud and long through the air. Nobody seemed to be wounded. The limbers standing motionless in the sunshine made a black square on the grass.

The enemy appeared to have registered the position of a battery installed on the other side of the pine-woods, and, under a perfect hail of howitzer shells, the guns were brought back one by one through the woods.

Hutin, who had taken shelter behind the shield, suddenly stood up in order to see. He crossed his arms.

"Yes, that's it!" he growled.

"What is it? But take cover!"

I pulled them by the coat.

"That's it! Retreat! Oh, my God!"

I also stood up. Sure enough, sections of infantry were crossing the ridges and falling back.

"Take cover, you idiots!" yelled Bréjard.

A shell swooped down. The splinters whistled through the air and the displaced earth pattered round us on the dry field. I had stooped down instinctively, but Hutin had not moved, being too much occupied in observing the retreat of the infantry, which was becoming more general every moment.

"There you are," said he, "now it will be our turn. . . . I bet . . . we shall retire, too. . . . Here's an Ordnance Officer coming up. . . . Oh, if we're always going to retire like that we may as well take a train!"

As he had suspected, the officer brought orders for us to retreat. The teams trotted up the slope to join the guns. The moment was critical, and, as ill-luck would have it, the first gun, in position on the counterslope, began to roll downhill as soon as the spade, which had been solidly jammed in the ground by the recoil, had been pulled out. It took eight of us to drag the gun back, and at every instant we asked ourselves whether we should succeed in assembling the train. The drivers began to lose their nerve, and backed the horses at random, this way and that.

"Now then, all together. . . . Whoa, there, whoa! . . . Steady! . . . Whoa back!"

A final pull, and we had limbered up.

"Ready!"

The team started.

Beyond the village of Tailly the hill we had to ascend in order to reach the plateau was very steep, especially where the road skirted the stone wall of the cemetery.

Some foot-soldiers resting on both sides of the way had taken off their packs and piled arms. Sitting in the grass they watched us go by with that absent and stupefied look peculiar to men just returned from the firing-line. Suddenly a shrapnel shell, the whistling approach of which had been drowned by the rumble of the vehicles, burst above the cemetery. Some of the soldiers promptly dived into the ditch, and others fell on their knees close to the wall, shielding their heads with their packs. Two men, who had remained standing, stupidly hid their heads in the thick hedge. On the limbers we bent our shoulders and the drivers whipped up the horses.

At one point the road was visible to the enemy, but when we discovered this it was already too late to stop.

A volley of shells. . . . Over! We had escaped by a hair's breadth.

We formed up ready for action in the same position as the day before, overlooking the neighbouring ridges, where the tall poplars served as aiming-points. The third battery, which had been with us on the Saturday, had opened up some fine trenches here. But the limbers had hardly had time to range up on the edge of a copse when high-explosive shell began to fall round us.

How had the enemy been able to discover our new position? We were carefully covered, and were invisible to him on all sides, nor had we yet fired a single shot, so that our presence had not been betrayed by smoke or flashes. No aeroplane was in the sky. Then how had we been seen? . . .

We sheltered in the trenches.

"It isn't at us that they're firing," said Hutin.

"Then what are they firing at?"

"I think we've got to thank those fat old dragoons they saw passing on the road for this! They're aiming at the road."

But the dragoons got farther and farther away, and the enemy continued to fire in our direction. There was no doubt that he was aware that there was a battery in position here. Had we been betrayed by signal by a spy hiding somewhere behind us? I carefully scrutinised the surrounding country, but could see nothing.

Some shells fell a few yards off the guns, smothering the battery in smoke and dust, and shaking us at the bottom of our trenches. I heard the Major shout:

"Take cover on the right!"

While the Captain and Lieutenant remained at their observation-posts the gunners hurriedly moved out of the line of fire of the howitzers. But as we ran along the road across the fields in view of the enemy a Staff passed by. I was seized with sudden anger. The horsemen would get us killed! The party consisted of about twenty officers in whose centre rode a General, a little, thin man with grey hair. A gaily coloured troop of blue and red Chasseurs followed them. The scream of approaching shells at once made itself heard, and thrilled long in the air. The Chasseurs and officers saluted, but the little General made no movement. This time the enemy had fired too low.

"To your guns!"

The Captain thought he had discovered the battery bombarding us:

"Layers!" he called.

Feverishly, beneath the shells, we prepared for action.

"Echelon at fifteen. First gun, a hundred and fifty; second gun, a hundred and sixty-five. . . . Third . . ."

The fuse-setters repeated the corrector and the range.

"Sixteen. . . . Three thousand five hundred. . . ."

"In threes, traverse! By the right, each battery! . . ."

"First gun . . . fire! . . . Second . . ."

The rapid movements of serving the guns electrified us. In the deafening din made by the battery in full action orders had to be shouted. We no longer heard the enemy's guns; they were silenced by the roar of our own. We forgot the shrapnel, which nevertheless continued to fall.

Suddenly the howitzer fire slackened, and then ceased.

"They're getting hit!" said Hutin, bending over the sighting gear.

"Fire!" answered the No. 1.

"Ready!"

"Fire! . . . Fire! . . ."

On the plateau behind us companies were retiring in extended order.

Night fell. We also received orders to retire. It seemed as if the earth and the woods were absorbing such light as was left. The movements of the infantry in the distance were lost in the undulations of the ground. The men seemed to become incorporated with the fields, and dissolved, disappearing from view.

Near a dark shell-crater lay a red heap. A soldier was lying stretched on his back, one of his legs blown off by a shell, leaving a torn, bluish-red stump through which he had emptied his veins. The lucerne leaves and earth under him were glued together with blood. The man's head had been thrown back in his agony, and the Adam's apple jutted out amid the distended muscles of his neck. His glassy eyes were wide open, and his lips dead white. He still grasped his broken rifle, and his képi had rolled underneath his shoulder.

Tuesday, September 1

A long night march. It was past one o'clock in the morning when at last we halted, and we still had to make our soup, water the horses and give them their oats. This done, we fell into a deep sleep.

About four o'clock the sergeant on duty came and shook us one by one. He was greeted with growls.

"Alarm!"

"What misery! Can't we even sleep for an hour!"

It was veritable torture to keep our eyes open. Our limbs were stiff, our heads heavy, and our loins ached. The weather was foggy and cold.

We clambered on to the limbers and started off. Numbness at once seized our feet and then our knees, mounting rapidly. Our heads rolled from side to side, and we gradually lost consciousness. Some of the drivers were sleeping on their horses. They slipped more and more to one side and, just as they were about to fall, were awakened by instinct and sat straight up in the saddle again. But a moment after one could see them through the gloom, once more subsiding and gradually slipping, slipping . . .

Where were we going to? Perhaps the army had been obliged to fall back below Verdun, because the enemy, who had undoubtedly got a footing on the hills on the left bank of the Meuse, near Stenay, was threatening their left flank. But we knew nothing for certain, and were too tired to think, too tired even to fear! Each man's one desire was to sleep a whole day through.

At daybreak we halted near Landres in a sloping field full of plum-trees. Unless counter-orders arrived we were to stay there and rest for twenty-four hours.

We lit fires and started shaking the plum-trees.

Suddenly a cry broke out:

"The postmaster!"

It was answered by a hoarse—almost savage—shout, and the men literally mobbed the Petty Officer who was carrying a sackful of letters.

News at last! Some of the letters had been on the way for a fortnight; ours, it seemed, were not being delivered. What anxiety the people at home were in!

After we had read our correspondence Hutin called me:

"Are you coming to wash your linen?"

"Yes."

We hung up our tunics on the low-hanging branches of the plum-trees, and, our shirts under our arms and with bodies bare save for our braces, walked down to the river.

We spent a quiet morning eating, smoking, and writing. At midday the short, sharp reports of the .75's began to sound on the next range of hills. At one o'clock we received orders to advance and support a group of artillery engaged on the heights north of Landres.

Hardly had we taken up position when an aeroplane passed overhead. A German machine, evidently; so far we had seen no others. Almost immediately afterwards shells began to fall around us, but again, as if by a miracle, the battery remained unscathed in the middle of the bursting shrapnel and the smoke of melinite. But that would not always happen!

Ah! if only I escape the hecatomb, how I shall appreciate life! I never imagined that there could be an intense joy in breathing, in opening one's eyes to the light, in letting it penetrate one, in being hot, in being cold—even in suffering. I thought that only certain hours had any value, and heedlessly let the others slip past. If I see the end of this war, I shall know how to suck from each moment its full meed of pleasure, and feel each second of life as it passes by, like some deliciously cool water trickling between one's fingers. I almost fancy that I shall continually pause, interrupting a phrase or suspending a gesture, and tell myself again and again: "I live! I live!"

And to think that in a few moments, perhaps, I shall only be a shapeless mass of bleeding flesh at the bottom of a shell-hole!

There was nothing to do under the shrapnel-fire. The Captain surveyed the plain with exasperating calmness.

Presently the enemy increased his range, and the shells passed overhead and burst in the valley, on a road where we could see first lines of wagons making off at a gallop in thick clouds of dust.

Orders arrived. . . . We were to return to Landres.

A deep hole had been made in the road by a shell, and near-by lay the hashed remains of a horse—a limbless, decapitated body. The head, lying on the edge of the ditch, and apparently intact, seemed to be looking at this body with a surprised expression in its big, still unclouded eyes. A shred of flesh and chestnut skin had been blown to the top of a neighbouring slope. The shell crater, in which lay the intestines surrounded with purple blood rapidly blackening in the sun, exhaled a smell of decay and excrement

—a sickening odour which nearly made us ill.

It seemed that the senior Petty Officer who had been riding this horse had escaped without a scratch.

A regiment of Chasseurs was slowly descending the high hill overlooking Landres on the north-east.

The setting sun no longer lit up the depths of the valley where we had parked our guns, but, by contrast, illuminated the more magnificently the steep incline down which the red and blue squadrons were descending in good order, their drawn sabres glinting in the gorgeous orange-coloured light. The Chasseurs passed close by us, and then rode up the opposite side of the valley towards the sun, whose red disk still peeped over the hill-top. As they crossed the summit the horsemen were silhouetted for a moment against the horizon.

I was tired out, and in spite of my efforts began to fall asleep. I had the impression that in order to keep awake I should have to adopt the attitude of the sentries of old—one finger raised, commanding silence.

Wednesday, September 2

Last night the horses were not unharnessed, and we ourselves had hardly four hours' sleep on the bare ground, where it is so difficult to get proper rest.

It was still dark when we set off again, down a road flanked with dense woods. The night was dark and filled with weird, grey shadows cast by the first, almost imperceptible rays of the pallid dawn. I was drowsing on the shaking ammunition wagon, to which one becomes accustomed after a time, when I was awakened by the crackling of broken wood and the heavy thud of a fall. I looked about me, but saw nothing. Then, through the rumbling of the wheels, I fancied I heard a plaintive cry mingled with sobs. Yes. . . . I now distinctly heard the clear voice of a little girl, calling:

"Mother! Mother!"

On a heap of stones by the roadside I was now able to see the wheel of an overturned cart, a human form on the ground, and round it the shadows of kneeling children.

Some more sobs; then the little voice called again:

"Mother! Mother! . . . Oh, mother, do answer!"

The column continued on its way. A convulsive, heartrending wail, rising from a throat choked by anguish, seemed to echo in my breast:

"Mother!"

We should have liked to stop, to make inquiries, and help if we could. There were several children. Had their mother fainted? Perhaps. Was there a man with them? Suppose there was not! . . . I was sorely tempted to jump down from the ammunition wagon and run back, but I knew that I should not be able to rejoin the battery. A horseman dismounted, saying:

"I'll stop the medical officer when he comes up. . . . We'll catch you up at the trot!"

We were carried on by the slow-marching column. So great was the horror of that which had happened on the side of the road that I was kept awake despite my weariness, and saw the daylight slowly creeping in. I think I shall always hear that little voice crying "Mother!" and the sound of the children's sobs in the grey dawn.

On reaching the main road we had to halt and let the infantry of the 7th Division pass. The Army Corps was retiring. Some one said that we were going to embark.

To embark! Why? To go where? It appeared that we had been relieved on the Meuse by fresh troops, and that the 4th Corps was to be re-formed.

We were going to rest, then—to sleep! But we had heard that so often during the last eight days! Could we believe it? And yet it must be true, for this part of the country would surely not be left defenceless.

Down the road, wave upon wave, with the swishing noise of open sluices, battalion succeeded battalion. The soldiers seemed fairly cheerful; there were even some who sang.

The 101st Infantry swung by.

"Is the 102nd behind you?" asked Tuvache.

"Yes."

"I ask because my brother is in it."

The long column still filed by. At last, several minutes later, the brother arrived.

"Hi! Tuvache!"

One of the men turned round:

"Hallo! It's you!"

The two brothers simply shook hands, but their joy at meeting again could be read in their eyes.

"So you're all right?"

"Yes, and you?"

"As you see . . . . quite all right."

"I'm glad. . . ."

"Had any news from home?"

"Yes, yesterday. They're all well, and they told me to give you their love if I saw you, and to give you half the postal order they sent me."

The soldier searched in his pocket.

"The only thing is that I haven't been able to get hold of the postmaster to cash it. But, if you want it . . ."

"No, you keep it! I've got more money than I want."

"All right, then. Uncle and auntie both sent their love. . . . Hallo! I mustn't lose my company. . . . I believe we're going to rest a bit. . . ."

"They say so. In that case we shall see each other again soon. . . . So long!"

Their hands met. The infantryman made a step forward.

"I'll tell them I've seen you when I write."

"Yes, so will I!"

The man ran on, shouldering his way through the ranks. Occasionally we saw his hand raised above the heads, waving good-bye.

Following behind the regiments of the 7th Division we began a march of exasperating slowness. It was very hot, and the dust raised by the infantry smothered and stifled us. At intervals, by the roadside, dead horses were lying.

On reaching Châtel we turned to the left down a clear road and at last were able to trot. Across the fields and valleys, as far as the horizon, a long line of grey dust clouding the trees marked the Varennes road which the division was following.

It was noon, and it seemed to me that we must have journeyed ten or twelve miles since we started at dawn. But suddenly we heard the guns again—not very far away, towards the north-east.

Near the village of Apremont on the outskirts of the forest of Argonne, in which the head of our column had already penetrated, three shells burst.

Then the enemy was following us! Was there no one to stop him? Had we not been replaced? Did it mean defeat . . . invasion . . . France laid open?

Abreast of our column lines of carts were lumbering along the road. The whole population was flying from the enemy—old women, girls, mothers with babies at the breast, and swarms of children. These unhappy people were saving that which was most precious to them—their existence; the women and girls—their honour, a little money, often a household pet, such as a dog, a cat, or a bird in a cage. . . .

The poorest were on foot. A family of four were making their way through the woods led by an old man with careworn features. Over his shoulder he carried a stick, on the end of which was tied a large wicker basket covered with a white cloth. At his side dangled a game-bag crammed to its utmost capacity. He was followed up the narrow forest path by a young woman leading a fat red cow with one hand, while with the other she held a shaggy-haired dog in leash by means of a handkerchief fastened to its collar. A little girl was clinging to her skirts, and letting herself be dragged along. Behind them came an old woman, bent almost double by age and by the weight of a grape-gatherer's basket full of linen which she was carrying on her back. She hobbled along, leaning heavily on a stick.

Where were all these poor people going? Many had not the vaguest notion, and confessed as much. They were going straight ahead, into those parts of France which the Germans would not reach.

"What is the use of staying?" asked an

old man querulously. "They'll burn everything just the same, and I'd rather find myself ruined and roofless here, but free, than back yonder where I should be in the hands of the Germans. Besides, I've my daughter-in-law to think of—the wife of my son, who is a gunner like you. She's with child—seven months gone—and when she heard the guns begin yesterday the pains came on. At first I thought she was going to be confined; but it passed off. But I thought we had better leave at once. These beasts of Germans, who violate and disembowel women . . . who knows whether they would have respected her condition? . . . Last night we found a road-mender's hut to sleep in, but I don't know what we shall do to-night. . . . And I'm afraid she'll get ill. Just now she's sleeping in the cart. I must take care that she doesn't get ill! My son left her in my charge."

Pointing in the direction our column was following, I asked the old man:

"Where does this road lead to?"

"Where?" he replied, a wrathful look suddenly coming into his eyes. "Why, Châlons and Paris . . . the whole of France!"

And, shaking his head, he added bitterly:

"Oh, my God!"

"You see they're half again as many as we are."

He did not answer immediately, but, after a moment or two, he said:

"I saw '70. . . . It's just the same as in 70."

The battery rolled on till we had crossed the whole of Argonne. At Servon, a village on the fringe of the woods, where the infantry were making a long halt, we stopped for a few minutes. It was two o'clock.

We led the horses down to the drinking-place, near a mill on the bank of the green Aisne. The animals waded breast-high into the stream, where they stood puffing and snorting, splashing the men, who, with rolled-up trousers, were also paddling with enjoyment in the cool water.

Finally, near Ville-sur-Tourbe, we parked our guns. Presumably we were to embark the same evening at the station close by.

The forebodings which had seized me in the morning when I saw the enemy advancing behind us had in no way diminished. Were we going to embark and leave the road open to the invaders? Would they not surround the troops operating in Belgium and those advancing in Alsace? . . . But were the French still in Belgium and in Alsace? How we wished that we could know the truth, whatever it might be!

To-night the men were surly and despondent, and one and all were anxious to escape fatigue duty. Déprez found himself confronted on all sides by the same sulkiness and apathy.

"Tuvache, go and fetch water!"

"But I went yesterday! . . . It's more than half a mile! . . . Why can't some of the others have a turn? . . ."

"Well, Laillé, did you go yesterday?"

"No."

"Right then, off you go!"

"Oh, but . . ."

"I'm not asking for your opinion, you know. . . ."

"Some of 'em never go. . . ."

"I tell you once again to go and fetch water!"

"Well, at any rate, you won't order me to do anything else afterwards?"

"No."

Grasping a canvas water-bag in each hand Laillé slouched off, dragging his feet and shrugging his shoulders.

We were informed that we were not going to entrain at Ville-sur-Tourbe.

We had to swallow our soup boiling hot and eat the meat raw, after which we set off again in the crimson-tinted twilight. Refugees were camping in the fields on either side of the road, where they had prepared to pass the night stretched out on straw strewn beneath their carts, which would afford but poor protection from the morning chill and dew. Infants in long clothes were sleeping in cradles.

We were marching southwards. The moon had risen, and straight ahead shone a solitary, magnificent star. Presently we reached a dark and deserted town—Sainte-Menehould—where it was too dark to see the names of the streets. The road was in lamentable repair, and the horses stumbled and the guns jolted. Perspectives of abandoned streets were prolonged by the moon. . . . Finally we saw ahead the red lamp of a railway station, where, for a moment, I thought we should embark. But we did not even halt.

Under the wan and yellow moonlight, which magnified the distances, the country once again spread itself out in long valleys, where no troops were moving and where no sentinel could be seen.

Thursday, September 3

Towards midnight we halted, and almost immediately afterwards orders arrived. Our original instructions had been to move on at daybreak, but the orders just to hand were to the effect that we should remain here. So we were able to sleep until past nine o'clock.

A never-ending stream of refugees was now flowing down the dusty road.

We again heard a rumour that we had been replaced on the Meuse by the 6th Army Corps; and that we were going into Haute-Alsace under the command of General d'Amade. This name, which was very popular, elicited general enthusiasm.

"Now it will be different!"

I questioned a Chasseur, one of General Boëlle's orderlies, but either the man knew nothing, or he would not tell what he knew.

The carts of the refugees had to be lined up on one side of the road in order to make way for the infantry of the 2nd Army Corps arriving from Clermont-en-Argonne and Sainte-Menehould. These troops seemed to have suffered less severely than the regiments of the 4th Corps, but they had no more notion as to their destination than we. They also spoke of d'Amade, of successes in the north, and of naval victories. They appeared to be quite unaware that the Germans were advancing behind us. But were they really advancing? Was it not merely a fresh allotment of French troops? How we wished that it were!

Friday, September 4

It was still night when we broke up the camp. After a whole day solely spent in eating and sleeping, we should have felt much refreshed had we not been tortured with diarrhœa. The Medical Officer had no more bismuth or paregoric elixir left, and we had no choice but to chew blackthorn bark.

The horses were even more exhausted than the men. Many had been slightly injured in the engagements on Monday and Tuesday, and their wounds were suppurating. No one seemed to trouble about them, and that was not the worst, for some of them had to suffer the stupid remedies applied by the ignorant drivers. I saw one man urinate on his horse's pastern, which had been cut by a shell splinter. Nearly all the animals were lame as the result of kicks received at night-time, when the worn-out stable-pickets fall asleep. Seldom taken out of the traces and hardly ever unharnessed, the straps, cruppers, and especially the crupper-loops had made large sores on them which were covered all day long with flies. And, besides all this, the poor beasts, like the men, were weakened by incessant diarrhœa.

All the morning we marched on, through Givry-en-Argonne, Sommeilles, Nettancourt, and Brabant, the milestones being at first marked "Meuse" and then "Marne." The dust half veiled the austere, regular hills of the beautiful country and the magnificent reaches of the forest of Argonne sloping away to the east.

About noon we reached Revigny-aux-Vaux, a pretty little white-walled town surrounded by fields and pasture-lands, where we parked our guns on the bank of the Ornain, close to the station. As we were leading the horses down to the river a man dressed like an artisan, who was sitting by the side of the road, accosted me:

"Where are you gunners from?"

"From the Hauts-de-Meuse, over by Dun and Stenay. We've been replaced there by fresh troops."

"Replaced?"

"Yes—they say by the 6th Army Corps."

"Pooh, that's all rot! . . . You've just turned tail! . . . Yes . . . simply that! . . . Do you know where the Prussians are?" he added, getting up.

I felt chilled by a sudden fear. Misery was plainly written on the fellow's bony, emaciated face. When sitting he had not seemed nearly so tall or thin.

He stretched out a long arm, and with a shaking hand pointed to the north-west.

"They're just outside Châlons, the Prussians!"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You don't believe me? Well, I've come from Châlons—an aeroplane dropped a bomb on the station just as my train left. And the Prussians have got to other places as well, if you want to know. They are at Compiègne! Do you hear? . . . At Compiègne . . . it's certain. You've only got to ask . . . anybody here will tell you. They've got to Compiègne and they took La Fère as they passed."

I began to tremble, everything seemed to be turning round me, and for a moment I thought I should fall. Instinctively I pressed my knees into my horse's sides and returned slowly to the camp with a haggard face and an aching heart.

Hutin was there. I looked him straight in the eyes and said slowly:

"Hutin! The Germans are at Compiègne!"

"Where?"

"At Compiègne!"

He grew pale and shrugged his shoulders.

"No!"

"Yes, at Compiègne!"

"Compiègne! Compiègne! Why, that's less than sixty miles from Paris! Oh, my God!"

We looked at each other.

"Who let them get through?"

"Those in the north, I suppose."

"Then it's worse than in '70!"

"At Compiègne!" repeated Hutin distractedly.

Dreadful thoughts of downfall, of treason, of all the bitterness of defeat and of suffering endured to no purpose rose up like spectres in each man's mind.

"I told you so; we've been sold!" declared the trumpeter.

In spite of everything, I still could not believe in treachery.

"Sold! Why sold? By whom? . . . By whom?"

"How should I know? But they wouldn't

be at Compiègne if we hadn't been betrayed. Oh, it's the old story! . . . Just like '70. . . . Bazaine in '70!"

"We may have been overwhelmed. . . . There are so many of them! . . . Three times our numbers! . . . Besides, in 1870 the mistake made by the Châlons army was that they didn't wait for the Germans at Paris. That is well known. If MacMahon's army had not advanced, had not let itself be bottled up at Sedan, perhaps we shouldn't have been beaten. . . ."

I grasped at the idea of a strategic retreat, and tried to convince my comrades in order to convince myself. But they all remained downcast and sullen, and kept repeating:

"Just as in '70!"

What a refrain!

Bréjard, who had been listening as he smoked, was the only one who was still confident.

"The worst of it is," said he, "that we don't know anything for certain. But, if the other Army Corps are in the same condition as ours, all is by no means lost. They've probably been pushed back a bit in the north, like we have been in Belgium. But if they haven't been taken, that is the main thing, and as for this being the same as '70—why, there's absolutely no resemblance! In '70 we were alone, whereas now we've got the English and Russians with us."

"Oh, don't talk to me about the English and Russians!" said the trumpeter.

"Have you seen any of the English, sergeant?"

"No, but they're over here, all right."

"They are said to be," corrected Millon. "But it was also said that we were advancing in the north. A brilliant advance! . . ."

"And the Russians!" went on Pelletier. "Why the hell aren't they in Berlin by this time? They've nothing to stop them on their side. . . ."

Bréjard shrugged his shoulders:

"Well, but all the same they've got to do something more than purchase their railway tickets!"

"But a month ought to be enough . . . with their famous Cossacks," retorted the trumpeter.

And he continued:

"It's all tommy-rot! Shall I tell you what *I* think of it, sergeant? Well, these Russians and English, who have declared war on Germany . . . it's simply sham! . . . A put-up job! They've engineered the whole thing together in order to do us in . . . just like '70!"

"Just like '70!" repeated Blanchet, who, sitting cross-legged like a tailor, was mending a rent in his coat.

This crushing catastrophe, which had descended upon us like the blow of a sledge-hammer, made us begin to doubt everything and everybody.

Why, instead of beguiling us with imaginary victories, could they not simply have told us: "We have to deal with an enemy superior in numbers. We are obliged to retreat until we can complete our concentration and until the English reinforcements arrive?"

Were they afraid of frightening us by the word "retreat" when we were already experiencing its reality?

Why? Why had we been deceived, demoralised? . . .

Accompanied by Déprez and Lebidois I turned into the garden of a restaurant and ordered luncheon. Under the leafy arbour of virginia creepers and viburnum, pierced here and there with dancing rays of sunlight, blazed a medley of officers' uniforms—chemists, Medical Corps men, infantry officers of all denominations, Army Supply Corps officers and paymasters, the latter in green uniforms which gave them the appearance of foresters.

For fifteen days we had not eaten off proper plates nor drunk from glasses. The luncheon would have been an untold delight had we not all three been haunted by the spectre of catastrophe. . . .

When night fell we embarked. The long platform, littered with straw, was illuminated at lengthy intervals by oil-lamps. The horses, overcome by exhaustion, their heads drooping, allowed the drivers to lead them into their boxes without offering any resistance. The gunners finished loading up the guns on the trucks, and soon all became silent. The men installed themselves for the night, thirty in each van, some stretched out on the seats and others lying underneath, using their cloaks as pillows. Rifles and swords had been cast into a corner. And, just as the western sky had ceased to glow, leaving the dreary platform dark and desolate, the train slowly started.

Saturday, September 5

I had hardly any sleep last night. Every quarter of an hour the train stopped, and men attacked by dysentery trod on me as they hurriedly made for the doors in order to jump down on the tracks. This morning the same scramble continues. As soon as the train stops one has a vision of files of gunners making for the bushes, whence they hastily return when the whistle blows. Luckily the train gathers speed very slowly!

A melancholy day—spent in absently watching the country roll past, one's mind always hypnotised by the thought of defeat. . . .

Often the train does not go faster than a man walking.

IV. FROM THE MARNE TO THE AISNE

Sunday, September 6

WHEN we awoke, in a fine morning lightly veiled by silvery mists, the suburbs of Paris were already visible.

We passed the forest of Fontainebleau, where troops were camping amid the broom and bracken, and rolled on through the woods in which the white walls and red roofs of the villas made a gay splash on the green background. The gardens were a mass of blossoms; huge sunflowers turned their golden faces toward us.

We almost forgot the tragedy of the moment. Sunday! The bells were ringing. Besides, Paris was quite close now, and the magnetic power of the great city was already making itself felt. The Parisians amongst us could hardly keep still.

Suddenly, after this dreary journey, and although it would have been difficult to explain why or how, hope was rekindled in spite of some more bad news we had learnt on the way, namely, that the Germans had reached Creil without opposition.

It was not the strength of the entrenched camp of Paris, of its garrison, nor of its heavy artillery which restored our confidence; it was rather the instinctive faith of a child, who, having returned home, feels irresistible because there seems to be a sort of reassuring sympathy between himself and surrounding objects—even the elements. What again sent the blood coursing through our veins was the indescribable yet definite sensation caused by the presence of something immortal, of something loved and revered. It was like a breath of life, like the comforting support of an invincible Personality, an all-powerful Divinity.

And then, as Hutin kept repeating:

"There! That's Paris! that's Paris!"

"The English!"

A convoy of British troops was passing us. The men shouted and waved their képis.

At Villeneuve-Saint-Georges the station was thronged with Highlanders. Our train came to a standstill and was immediately surrounded by a crowd of kilted soldiers intent upon examining our guns. Lebidois acted as interpreter, and there was much hand-shaking and cheering.

Little Millon stopped a burly Highlander with tattooed wrists and knees and asked him whether he wore any drawers under his kilt. The other did not understand and laughed.

"That's so, isn't it?" said Millon. "If only you'd got a little more hair on your head and a little less on your paws—why, in that skirt they'd take you for a girl!"

We disembarked at Pantin. Except for inscriptions on the wooden panels or steel shutters of the shops, such as "Owner away at the front," or, in letters a foot high, "We are French," and save for the faded mobilisation placards, Pantin wore the usual aspect common to such places on summer Sundays.

On the pavement and in the roadway swarmed crowds of women in light-coloured dresses, carefully corseted, their figures curving with that grace which only Parisian women seem to possess. Soldiers of every rank and regiment strolled in and out the crush. A Territorial passed with a woman on one arm, while with the other he led a little boy by the hand.

Could it be possible that the enemy was at their gates?

At Rosny-sous-Bois we camped on a plateau overlooking the town on one side and the plain of Brie on the other—a depressing enough spot, devoid of all charm. Far off, towards the south-east, the sound of guns was audible.

In the streets, between the shrubbery of the gardens and the light-coloured fronts of the villas, the scarlet uniforms, white blouses, and variegated parasols chequered the crowd with bright dashes of colour.

The Zouaves had come down from the forts.

On the terraces of the cafés, where not a single place remained vacant, the white aprons of the waiters fluttered in and out among the multicoloured uniforms of the Chasseurs, Army Service Corps officers, Artillerymen, Tirailleurs, and Spahis. In front of the Post Office and round the doors of the bakeries and confectioners' shops the crowd collected in animated groups. Women ran to and fro greeting the soldiers, asking questions, searching for a husband, son, brother, or lover whom they were expecting to arrive.

Every one jostled together, hailed each other, drank, ate, smoked, and laughed. Families of placid tradespeople, mildly inquisitive, strutted in and out the crowd with short, conceited little steps.

The guns were still roaring, but in order to hear them one had to separate from the crowd and enter the quiet little streets between the gardens.

We heard that fighting was in progress on the Grand Morin.

Monday, September 7

It was broad daylight when I was awakened by Bréjard.

"Up you get," said he.

"What?"

"Here, listen to this."

He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket.

"Army Order of the Day.

"At the moment when we are about to engage upon a battle upon which will depend the safety of the country, it is necessary to remind every one that this is not the time to look back. No effort must be spared to attack and repulse the enemy. Troops which can advance no farther must at all costs hold the ground won and be killed rather than retire."

"Do you understand?"

Yes, we had all understood perfectly. We should never have been able to express so simply and yet so completely our inmost thoughts. "Troops should let themselves be killed rather than retire." That was it!

"And now, limber up," added Bréjard. "We're off there!"

Just as the battery was starting, two girls, the sister and fiancée of one of the gunners, hurried up. For a moment or two they ran, flushed and panting, by the side of the horses, both speaking rapidly and at the same time. When they were quite out of breath they held out their hands, one after the other, to the gunner, who leant down from the saddle and kissed their finger-tips.

We passed through the suburbs and then, by the Soissons road, approached the plain of Brie. We were going to the front, and I think that each man felt that we were now passing through the gravest and most critical moments of a whole century—perhaps of a whole history.

Evening fell. The battery had been on the march for more than ten hours without halting. Far away in the background Montmartre reared its black silhouette against the western sky.

The fields were lit up by the stars, which were exceptionally brilliant, but the road remained dark under the vault of tall trees planted in double rows on either side, between which floated a suffocating cloud of dust. A distant searchlight was sweeping the plain. The battery broke into a trot on the paved road, and the vehicles jolted and bumped so that it was veritable torture to sit on them. Sharp internal pains made us twist as we clutched on to the limber-boxes; our aching backs seemed no longer capable of sustaining our shoulders, and the breath came in gasps from our shaken chests. Our hearts thumped against our ribs, our heads swam—we perspired with pain. Should we never stop?

Hour after hour we followed the same dark road, but the column had again slowed down to a walk. The bright headlights of an approaching automobile suddenly threw the trees into vertiginous perspectives like the columns of some cathedral, and showed up the teams and drivers as they emerged from the gloom in a grotesque procession of fantastic shadows. The motor passed.

On we lumbered . . . on, on. . . . Should we never stop?

"Halt!"

At last! We parked the guns in a field and then led the horses off to be watered.

The only light in the dark little village was a lamp burning in a kitchen, in which we caught a glimpse of large copper saucepans.

There was no horse-trough and we had to push on to a marshy meadow through which ran a river. The banks were so steep that the horses could not drink from the current, and we gave them water out of the canvas bags.

On our return we found the road crowded with horses. Other batteries had just arrived.

An eddy in the stream had just pushed me up against the garden wall of a château when a motor, showing no lights, forced its way through the herd of horses, throwing against me a confused mass of men and animals whose weight crushed me against the stone. Another car followed, then another, hundreds of them, silently and interminably.

By the light of the moon, which had now risen, I was able to recognise the oil-cloth caps usually worn by taxi-drivers. Inside the cabs I caught a glimpse of soldiers sleeping, their heads thrown back.

"Wounded?" asked somebody.

"No," came the answer from a passing car. "It's the 7th Division from Paris. They're off to the front!"

Tuesday, September 8

"Attention!"

It was still pitch-dark. Cinders continued to smoulder on the hearths. The guns were still roaring, and the vivid jets of fire startled us like flashes of lightning. A little way off, to the east, a farm or hayrick was burning. The weather was sultry and a persistent smell of putrefying flesh permeated the air.

The battery started; we were off to the firing-line.

At daybreak we reached Dammartin, where, on the doors and closed shutters, notices and billeting directions were chalked up in German. On the front door of one house I saw two words scrawled in pointed, Gothic handwriting: *"Gute Leute"* (Good people). I wondered who it was that lived there. . . .

We continued on our way. The dull boom of the guns seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, and continued uninterruptedly.

By the side of the road a grave had been dug and marked by a white deal cross bearing a name painted in tar and capped by a Chasseur's shako with a brass chain. The dead man had evidently not been buried deep enough, and a sickening smell rose up from the freshly turned soil, which had cracked under the hot sun.

The road was still staked out with dead horses, swollen like wine-skins, their stiffened legs with shining shoes threatening the sky. From a gaping wound in the flank of a big chestnut mare worms were wriggling into the grass; others were swarming in her nostrils and mouth, and in a bullet-hole behind her ear.

"Trot!"

The battery became almost invisible in its own dust. We began to pass wounded, hundreds of wounded—infantry of the line, Alpine troops, and Colonial infantry white with dust, their wounds dressed with red bandages. They helped each other along.

The majority were marching in small groups. Many had stopped to rest. It was very hot, and I saw several of them round an apple-tree, shaking down the fruit in order to slake their thirst.

We had halted while the Major received orders from an Ordnance Officer. I questioned one of the Colonials, who was wounded in the head.

"Well, how are things going down there?"

"Phew! they're falling thick!"

I did not know whether he was referring to bullets, shell, or men, but from the expression of the drawn and haggard faces it was easy to see that the fighting had been severe.

"Been fighting long here?"

"Yes."

"How many days?"

"It had begun when we came."

"And when did you come?"

"The day before yesterday."

And he repeated:

"Yes, they're falling thick!"

We restarted, again at a trot.

The clear sky, of a pure limpid blue on the northern and eastern horizon, was fleeced with the white smoke of shrapnel shell; in the distance black clouds were rising from burning buildings and high-explosive projectiles.

We were still pursued by the smell of dead flesh, which harassed and obsessed us, making us peer about in all directions for hidden corpses.

Suddenly one of the horses of my ammunition wagon foundered and refused to go any farther, stopping the whole team. He had to be unharnessed and abandoned. The other carriages had passed us, and with our five remaining horses we galloped across country in order to rejoin the column. The furrows nearly shook us off our seats and we had to hold on to the box-rails with might and main, bracing our legs against the foot-rests in order not to fall off.

We overtook the battery in a village which had been visible from afar on the flat and bare countryside. The enemy had evidently quartered there. The doors had been broken in with blows from the butt-ends of rifles; almost all the windows had been smashed, and were now mere frames bristling with jagged splinters of glass. Dirty curtains flapped through them on the outside. Torn-down shutters lay strewn on the pavement among broken bottles, shattered tiles, and empty tins of preserves. Others, hanging by one hinge, beat against the fronts of the houses.

Through the wide-open doors we could see staved-in wardrobes which had been thrown down the staircases. Empty drawers, mantelpiece ornaments, photographs, pictures and prints littered the red-tiled floors. Mudstained sheets with the mark of hobnailed boots on them trailed to the middle of the street, giving to these unfortunate houses something of the horror of ripped-up corpses.

The pavements were a mass of furniture thrown out of the windows, perambulators, go-carts, and broken wine-casks. Wood crunched under the wheels of the wagon. A pair of pink corsets was lying in the gutter.

On one of the Michelin danger signals, at the other end of the village, I read the warning: *"Attention aux enfants—Sennevières,"* and on the other side a derisive and mournful *"Merci."* *

We halted where the road traced a straight white line through a plain planted with sugar-beets. The desolate nakedness of the fields was only broken by a shed, three hayricks, and, farther off, some little, square-shaped copses and a long line of poplars. To the east and north the battle growled, whistled and roared like a storm at sea. One would have thought that the infernal noise came from some deep, subterranean earthquake.

We had waited a few minutes when suddenly the countryside sprang to life. Battalions, debouching from Sennevières, deployed in skirmishing order, and other soldiers—hundreds and thousands whose presence one would never have suspected—rose up from the bosom of the earth and swarmed like ants over the fields, their breeches making red patches on the sombre green of the grass. Frightened hares fled from before the oncoming lines.

Small groups of wounded again began to go by. They could be seen far off, black specks on the straight white road dazzling in the sun.

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* Literally: "Village of Sennevières.—Take care of the children."—"Thank you."

Some Cuirassiers appeared to be billeted somewhere in the surroundings. One or two passed by on foot, without helmets or breastplates, their chests covered with buff-coloured felt pads fitted with wadded rings round the armholes. They were carrying large joints of fresh beef. In the shade of three poplars to the right of the road, just outside the village, some men were slaughtering cattle and cutting up the meat. Near-by lay a dead horse.

Presently came the order:

"Reconnoitre!"

The battery was going into action. Once more I was unable to escape the little shiver of fear which follows this word of command.

In the firing position the battery was only masked by a hedge of brambles and some tangled shrubs, so that from several points of the horizon we must have been visible to the enemy. The position was not a good one, but it was the best the surroundings offered.

The officers had taken up their posts near the first gun on a narrow path cutting across the plain. The battlefield opened out wide before us. But on the almost flat countryside which bore such an everyday aspect, and upon which we nevertheless knew the destiny of France was at stake, not a man, not a gun was to be seen. The thunder-ridden plain seemed to lie motionless under the shells.

We had covered our guns with sheaves; yellow under the yellow straw they might deceive at a distance. Besides, straw affords good protection against shrapnel bullets and shell splinters.

We at once fell asleep in the sun with the apathy of pawns who let themselves be moved, with that fatalism which is an inevitable result of the life fraught with hourly danger we had been living for a month.

I was awakened by a word of command. Behind us the sun was sinking.

"To your guns!"

Something dark, artillery possibly, was moving yonder at the foot of some wooded hills more than five thousand yards off. We opened fire. On the right, on the left, and even in front of us .75 batteries came into action one by one. When our own guns were silent for a few seconds we heard their volleys echoing in fours.

In the distance in front of us all had become still. The Captain gave the word to cease fire. But the smoke from the powder and the dust raised from the parched field by the concussion of the rounds had hardly cleared away when some heavy shells hurtled through the hedge masking us, leaving three gaping breaches in their wake and obliterating with their smoke the whole of the eastern horizon.

"They must have seen the fire of our guns," said Bréjard.

"And they've got theirs trained to a T," added Hutin. "Six-inchers, too!"

As ill-luck would have it, just at that moment a refilling wagon from the first line, conducted by a corporal riding a big white mare, came up at a trot.

While they were still some way off we shouted:

"Dismount!"

"Dismount! You'll get us killed!"

The drivers seemed not to hear.

"Dismount, you—! Walk! . . . Walk! . . ."

They had already unhooked the full ammunition-wagon, hooked the empty one to the limber, and were off at a gallop in spite of our cries.

Shells were not long in arriving, their whistling modulated by the wind. One second passed . . . two . . . three . . .

This fear of death—the death which falls slowly from the sky—was an interminable torture. Everything trembled. The shells burst, and the wind blew their smoke down upon us.

I heard a choking groan:

"Ah . . . Ah . . . Ah! . . ."

Our battery remained intact. The refilling wagon was still galloping away in the distance. One of the numbers of the adjoining battery had fallen forward in his death agony, and his forehead, pierced by a shell splinter, was bathing the bottoms of the cartridge-cases with blood.

Hutin, still sitting on the layer's seat, suddenly cried out:

"Why, I can see the swine firing! I can see them . . . long way off . . . down there, about ten thousand yards . . . I saw the flash. . . . It's coming . . . it's coming . . . look out! . . ."

Sure enough, we were shaken by fresh explosions. I shut my eyes instinctively and felt my face lashed by the cast-up earth, but I was not touched. The bottom of one of the cartridge-cases hummed loud and long, and once again the battery was smothered in smoke. I heard the clear voice of the Captain as he shouted to the senior Petty Officer:

"Daumain, get everybody under cover on the right! Major's orders. No use getting killed as long as we aren't firing."

We called each other, got clear of the smoke and hurried out of the line of fire of the Howitzers. But the enemy's shells pursued us over the field as we ran, crouching down, in scattered order.

A projectile, the flash of which blinded me for a moment, knocked down a sergeant of the 12th Battery, who was running by my side. The man picked himself up immediately. Just above his eyes a couple of splinters had drilled two horribly symmetrical red holes. He made off, bending his head so that the blood should not run into his eyes. I offered to help him, but he said:

"No, leave me. . . . Run! It's nothing, this . . . skull isn't smashed."

We took cover behind some large hayricks and waited for orders.

The roll was called:

"Eleventh?"

"Eleventh!"

"Hutin?"

"Here!"

"Not wounded?"

"No, and you?"

"No."

The four detachments were complete.

"And the Captain?"

"Still down there at the observation-post.

Look . . . you can see his elbow sticking out behind that tree. He's all right!"

Two more volleys of shell burst close to our guns, which still appeared to have escaped damage.

How long the night seemed in coming! How we cursed the sun which, its blood-red disk almost touching the horizon, seemed as though it would never sink down behind the beet field! It looked absolutely motionless, stationary.

Hutin swore and shook his fist at the crimson sphere.

The Captain signalled for us to come up.

Behind the hayricks the cry was repeated:

"To the guns!"

We thought we were going to fire, but found that other orders had arrived.

"Limbers!"

A mist, rising from the hollows of the plain, blotted out distant objects one by one. The far-off hills occupied by the Howitzer battery were lost in a purple haze, but quite possibly we could still be seen thence as we stood silhouetted against the clear western sky.

We limbered up and rolled off. The Howitzers kept silent.

The rifle-fire now began to grow fainter, and the guns were hushed in their turn. A deathlike stillness settled down on the plain, which, as the sun sank, became illuminated by burning buildings, the flare of which blazed ever more brightly as the night crept on.

The day of severe fighting which was just drawing to a close had decided nothing. Each of the adversaries slept in his own positions.

Wednesday, September 9

In a field near Sennevières, in position of readiness, we brewed our coffee. The weather was very hot. This morning the battle had been slow in opening, but now to the east and north-east the guns were roaring as incessantly as yesterday.

Suddenly, about midday, the firing-line on our left opened out and became slightly curved. We were occupying the extreme wing of the French army, and were at once seized with misgivings. Was the enemy outflanking us again?

We questioned the Captain, who was also intently observing the woods which yesterday had been out of the enemy's range, and which were now being heavily shelled.

"What does that mean, sir?"

"I don't know any more than you, I'm afraid. I only obey, you know. . . . I go where I am told to go. . . . That's all!"

But Déprez insisted:

"They're turning our left again!"

The Captain's finely chiselled face was puckered with anxiety.

"Well," said he, "they're certainly bombarding woods which they weren't bombarding yesterday. But that at any rate proves that they haven't reached them. On the contrary, perhaps they've been threatened on that side by an enveloping movement of our troops. . . . Who knows? . . . Besides, if they do outflank us we aren't alone here. . . . We'll face them!"

He gave us a searching look with his intelligent hazel eyes, and repeated:

"We'll face them, won't we?"

"Of course we will, sir!"

Coffee was ready. The Captain pulled his aluminium cup out of his pocket and dipped it into the black beverage smoking in the kettle. The gunners stood round him, their drinking-tins in their hands, waiting their turn, and when he had filled his cup helped themselves one after the other. Conversation ceased, and the men sipped their coffee.

After a while the cook said:

"There's some left over!"

"How much?" asked the Captain, anxious not to deprive any one.

"A good half-cup each."

The Captain helped himself and the men followed suit. Then, as there still remained a little coffee mixed with grounds the operation was repeated.

With that startling rapidity which we had observed each time we had had to retire on the Meuse, the country became alive with lines of infantry. Companies and battalions were emerging from the woods and from behind the hedges, and overspread the stubble-fields, massing in the hollows.

"Hallo! what does that mean?" asked Bréjard.

"Are those swine turning tail?" exclaimed Millon, crossing his arms.

The Captain anxiously observed the movements of the infantry.

"No," said he. "Those are reserve troops advancing towards the north in order to face the enemy if he outflanks us."

Orders came for us to go and take up position between Sennevières and Nanteuil-le-Haudoin.

There could be no doubt about it. The enemy was turning our lines.

We were seized with a fit of wild rage. Would they manage to pass us, and get to Paris? To Paris . . . to our homes . . . to kill, sack, rape? . . .

"Ah," growled Hutin, "what wouldn't I give to murder some of those savages!"

"Trot!" commanded the Captain.

Bending down over their horses' necks the drivers urged the teams forward with voice, knees, whip, and spur.

The same gust of wind seemed to carry with it men, horses, and guns—all this artillery let loose like a tide on the naked fields, over whose furrows it billowed and surged.

We took up position with our guns pointing north-east. Behind us the sun, already low in the western sky, lit up the railway-line and the road from Nanteuil to Paris, flanked with tall trees.

Sections of infantry began to fall back.

"You see?" repeated Millon. "They can't stick it, the beasts! Haven't they read the Army Order then?"

Suddenly, almost behind us, rifle-fire broke out. We had been outflanked.

On the main road to Paris, and between the road and the railway, dense masses of infantry were debouching from behind Nanteuil. We were encircled by a huge hostile horseshoe, and it now seemed as if the only means of retreat open to the 4th Army Corps was the narrow road running south-east between Sennevières and Silly.

An officer wearing an aviator's cap arrived in a motor-car and hurried up to the observation-post. Shortly afterwards the Major ordered us to turn the guns right round.

At any moment we might be caught between two fires, for, to the north-west of Nanteuil, on the hills commanding the road, there could be no doubt that the enemy's artillery was taking up position in order to support the infantry attack.

Our batteries opened fire.

The same wild frenzy immediately gained possession of men and guns. The latter became roaring monsters—raging dragons, which from their gaping mouths belched fire at the sun as it sank to rest in the soft summer twilight. Piles of smoking cartridge-cases mounted up behind the guns. In the stricken zone in front of us we could see men waver, turn tail, run, and fall in heaps. From the heights above Nanteuil, from which our guns could have been counted, came no answering roar of artillery.

For a long time the slaughter continued.

"Ah! *That* lot will never get to Paris!"

Night fell. The infantry regiments began to retire in order down the hollow of which we were occupying one of the slopes. Some mounted Chasseurs passed by at a trot, followed by a whole brigade of Cuirassiers. It was the retreat!

We were beaten! . . . beaten! . . .

The enemy was marching on Paris!

The sun was now but a red crescent on the horizon. The horsemen advancing towards Silly disappeared in their own dust. We still continued firing, lavishing shrapnel on the plain where men still moved here and there.

"Cease firing!"

The gunners either had not heard, or did not want to hear. . . . Three guns still barked. Shouting at the top of his voice the Major repeated the command.

Perspiring and brick-red with heat the gunners sponged themselves over and then, with folded arms, stood silently behind their guns, contemplating the fields of which not one square inch had been spared.

We were expecting orders to retire in our turn, but eventually received instructions to pass the night here. A battalion of infantry had been sent to support us, and the men deployed in skirmishing order and took up positions about two hundred yards from the park, which we had had to form on the spot.

We heard that in front of us not a single

French unit remained. We were at the mercy of a cavalry night attack.

Thursday, September 10

After yesterday's engagement we had expected a furious cannonade to begin at dawn. But not a sound was heard. The sun illuminated the plain and the slopes upon which we were waiting for the enemy in firing position. Not a single gun was fired, and we began to grow surprised and uneasy.

A Lieutenant-Colonel at the head of a passing column recognised the Major and hailed him.

"Hallo! Solente!"

"Hallo!"

"How are you?"

"I'm all right, thanks."

"What's your Group doing here?"

"Guarding the Nanteuil road."

"Then you don't know what's happened?"

"No, what?"

"The enemy retired during the night."

"No!"

"Yes, it's quite true! We've got orders to advance. . . . The Germans are retiring all along the line."

The two officers looked at each other and smiled.

"Then in that case . . ."

"It's victory!"

The news passed rapidly from gun to gun and nearly set the men dancing with joy. Victory, victory! And just when we were not expecting it!

Towards midday we also received orders to advance.

At Nanteuil a slight recrudescence of life was noticeable. A grocer was taking down the wooden shutters of his shop, and some of the windows were thrown open as we went by. As at Dammartin I read on several of the doors the notice: *"Gute Leute."*

The road we were following skirted the fields on which we repulsed the enemy yesterday. We halted, doubtless waiting for fresh orders.

The surrounding country was motionless, but, between the Paris road and the railway, grey-coated corpses lay among the sugar-beets as far as the eye could reach. On the fringe of some large maize-fields six Germans had fallen in a heap. The last to die had toppled backwards on to the others, his stiffened legs pointing skywards. His neck was doubled up under the weight of his body, and his chin touched his chest. His eyes were wide open and his mouth twisted in a horrible grimace of agony. With a single exception, nothing could be seen of the other corpses under him save the shoulders, necks, and feet. But one of them, who had not been killed outright and who lay half buried beneath the rest, must have died hard. Scalped by a shell splinter he had tried to rid himself of the ghastly burden crushing his back and legs, but his strength had failed him. Propped up on one elbow, his mouth wide open as though his last breath had been a shout, he had died stretching a huge knotted fist towards the hills we had just left, whence death had come to him.

His cheeks, already turning grey, had begun to fall in, and in the stiffening features from which all semblance of life was rapidly departing one already seemed to see the hollow-eyed, square-chinned, grinning mask of Death.

A little farther on three Army Service Corps men were standing round a Prussian lying on his back, his arms clasped as if in some awful embrace. As one of them lifted his head in order to take off his helmet a stream of black blood gushed from the dead man's mouth and covered the soldier's hands.

"Pig!" growled he, and wiped his gory hands on the skirts of the German's grey coat.

Near-by a Sub-Lieutenant of Engineers was counting the corpses for burial.

"So it's you gunners who have given me all this work! I've already counted seventeen hundred, and I haven't finished yet! There'll be more than two thousand."

As I returned, sick at heart, across the maize-fields I stumbled against something soft. Suspecting a corpse I hastily jumped to one side.

Again we advanced, towards the north.

The roadside was strewn with Mausers, bayonets as short as butchers' knives, cartridge-pouches, helmets, cowhide-packs, wallets, saddles, dead horses. . . .

On the evening of the Battle of Virton the Ruettes road had borne a similar appearance. Upon that occasion I had dejectedly said to myself: "This is a French defeat," and now I was equally astonished to realise that I had taken part in a victory, of which these remains were the proofs, a victory which had snatched Paris from the jaws of the Germans, saved France, and which conceivably might open a new era for us all. In sight of this Calvary of the German army we told ourselves that the enemy would evacuate France as quickly as he had entered it.

Across one of the broad, flat fields ran a yellow line of freshly turned earth, staked out with rifles planted butt-end upwards. Hundreds of men—thousands perhaps—had been buried there side by side, and the air was tainted with all the pestilential odours of decomposition which escaped through the cracks and fissures in the sun-baked soil. On approaching one of the scattered clumps of trees under which other corpses had been buried, the same sickening smell assailed our nostrils. Despite ourselves we kept sniffing the air with an uneasiness like that shown by dogs when they are said to scent death.

Farther down the road we came upon a party of sappers busily plying pick and shovel. At the bottom of a hole they had just finished digging lay a brown crupper marked "Uh. 3" (3rd Uhlans), and on the ploughed land at the edge of the ditch lay a dead horse covered with clayey earth. Worms were swarming in the putrid blood surrounding him.

One of the sappers, who was covering up the carrion with large spadefuls of earth, looked up.

"Phew! he smells bad, doesn't he?" he said. "Nasty job, this! I shan't apply for undertakers' work when I've finished soldiering! And horses smell worse than men. We shall end by getting the plague!"

"When I started to drag him," said another, "his hoof came off in my hand."

And he pointed with his foot to an iron-shod hoof lying on the ground like a stone.

Close by, in a newly harrowed field, undisturbed save for the hoof-prints of a couple of horses which had galloped across it, lay two lances, one of them broken, a light cavalry sword, a Uhlan's helmet, and a water-bottle.

The weather gradually became foggy. The fields, monotonous and drab under the grey sky, and littered at intervals with uniforms, arms, and corpses, imbued us with a sadness which bordered on fear. We had to keep repeating to ourselves "Victory, victory!" in order once again to feel the joy—which nevertheless was so deep—of knowing that the Country was saved.

Saturday, September 12

For two days it has rained incessantly, and we have advanced about twenty-two miles under the downpour. The enemy is still retiring, his retreat covered by a few Howitzers which appear to be short of ammunition. Each hour that passes confirms our victory, and we should be in excellent spirits were it not raining so heavily.

The Captain has sent me to pass a few days with the first line of wagons, partly on account of persistent diarrhœa, which was weakening me considerably, and partly owing to a rather serious cut in the wrist. Life in my new billet is far less strenuous; one's rations are better cooked, and one gets plenty of sleep.

While our batteries keep up a lively bombardment on the rear of the German columns in retreat, the first lines of wagons are installed in a wide ravine cut right across the plateau as if by giant swordstroke. It almost seems as if the rain converged in this hollow from all points of the compass. Shells fall also, but they bury themselves without bursting in the marsh near-by, raising geysers of mud.

To-day the Petty Officer of the 6th gun, to which I am temporarily attached, called the men round him:

*"Les poilus!"**

"Here we are!" answered a voluntarily re-enlisted man who was already grey about the temples. "Hairies without a dry hair on our bodies!"

"Listen to this!"

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* Poilu (literally "hairy"): a popular term for the French soldier, equivalent to the English "Tommy."

And in a hoarse voice the Officer began to read an order of the day:

"For five days without interruption or respite, the 6th Army has been engaged in combat with a foe strong in numbers, whose morale has hitherto been exalted by success. The struggle has been a hard one, and the loss of life due to gun-fire, and the exhaustion caused by want of sleep and sometimes food, have exceeded all that could have been imagined. The courage, fortitude, and endurance with which you have borne all these hardships cannot be adequately extolled in words.

"Comrades, the General-in-Chief has asked you, in the name of your Country, to do more than your duty; you have responded even more heroically than seemed possible. Thanks to you, victory has crowned our arms, and now that you know the satisfaction of success you will never let it escape you.

"For my part, if I have done anything worthy of merit, I have been rewarded by the greatest honour which in a long career has fallen to my lot—that of commanding men such as you.

"From my heart I thank you for what you have done, for to you I owe that which has been the aim of all my efforts and all my energy for

the last forty-four years—the Revenge for 1870.

"All honour and thanks to you and to all combatants of the 6th Army.

"Claye (Seine-et-Marne) 10*th September,* 1914.

"Signed: Joffre.

"Countersigned: Manoury."

"Hear, hear!" cried some one.

"I say, sergeant," shouted the old soldier who had spoken before, "as the General is pleased with us, can't you get them to ask him to turn off some of this water?"

We started off again. The country through which we had been marching since dawn, with halts of one and sometimes two hours during which the guns went into action, seemed, at the first glance, an endless and almost deserted plain. The beetroot- and corn-fields where the crops, often in sheaves, had now rotted, seemed to succeed each other without interruption from one side of the horizon to the other under the lowering, cheerless sky, from which the cold rain poured down relentlessly. But suddenly, in the middle of the flat and barren country, there opened a dale whose existence one would never have suspected, well wooded and so deep that even the church steeple of the village nestling in its lap was hidden from view.

Under the stinging rain the teams walked on with heads held low and twitching ears, their coats shining like oilskin. By this time many of our horses were only kept on their legs as if by a miracle. The foul weather had put the final touch to their ruin, and we had to abandon three of them, one after the other. They keep going until they reach the extreme limit of their strength, and then suddenly they stumble and stop dead; after that no power on earth will make them advance another inch. They have to be taken out of the traces, unharnessed, and abandoned where they stand. They remain in the same place until they die.

The men were apathetic and taciturn under their black cloaks. Water ran down our backs and made us shiver. Many of the drivers had turned their képis round so that the peaks protected their necks. Their faces, wincing under the sting of the lashing rain, were half hidden in their upturned collars. Our shirts clave to our shoulders and our trousers to our knees. The soaking garments absorbed the warmth of the body, and we experienced the horrible sensation of gradually becoming chilled to the marrow. It seemed as if life was slowly ebbing from our limbs and as if we were dying by inches.

We passed a group of miserable, saturated foot-soldiers, from the skirts of whose coats the rain ran in streams. Some of them had thrown sacks full of straw over their shoulders. One man was sheltering his head and back underneath a woman's skirt, and others under capes, neckerchiefs, and flowery-patterned bed-curtains.

The road was a river of liquid clay upon which neither the men's boots, horseshoes, nor the tyres of the wheels left a trace.

As night approached the grey vault of the sky seemed to sink still lower, drawing in the horizon over the fields, and almost to touch the earth itself. A dense fog first surrounded and then smothered us. We could not have told upon which side the sun was setting; the west was as opaque as the east. The yellow, diffused light gradually became weaker. Here and there by the wayside we could still distinguish the dark forms of dead horses. Night fell. The rain was trickling down my back as far as my loins. I was very cold and now felt more acutely than ever that indescribable sensation as if my life's blood was being slowly sucked from my veins. The battery lumbered on and on. . . .

It was perhaps ten o'clock when we finally halted on the outskirts of a village and ranged up our carriages by the side of the road. We had to wait there some time, sitting motionless on the limbers and becoming more frozen every minute. Our teeth chattered with cold. The delay was probably caused by a cross-roads, a block in the transport traffic, a passing convoy, or some other obstacle; in any case we could not move on. I began to wonder whether we should have to pass the whole night in the rain. . . .

Eventually we reached a field in which we bivouacked, stretching the lines between the carriages. The hurricane lamps formed large yellow points in the opaque darkness, piercing the night without lighting anything. There was no sound save the squelching of dragging footsteps as the exhausted men and horses moved about in the mud.

The sergeant-major summoned the corporals for the issue of rations. But the distribution between the guns had not been finished and the men immediately went away again, preferring to wait until the next day to get their rations. The sergeant-major shouted after them, declaring that if there should be an alarm they would risk going for a whole day without food. He was perfectly right, but no one listened to him.

The darkness was so intense that it was difficult to follow the road, and in order to keep together the men kept shouting:

"Eleventh! . . . This way. . . . Eleventh! . . ."

Convoys passed by, splashing us with mud. A wheel just grazed me. After a long march the only shelter we could find was some rickety old barns, open to the four winds of heaven, in which a thin sprinkling of straw hardly separated us from the beaten-down earth. Here the battery, silent, soaked to the skin and smelling like wet animals, sank shivering into a troubled sleep, continually interrupted by the cries of men dreaming.

Sunday, September 13

This morning the sun was shining. Clouds were still banked up to the west, but the blue, which cheered us up wonderfully, eventually spread over the whole sky. We continued our march forward.

The enemy's Howitzers were still bombarding the country round us, but spasmodically and at haphazard. The Germans were being hotly pursued; in the villages we learned that less than two hours previously stragglers were still passing through. It seems that yesterday the enemy's retreat almost became a rout. Disbanded infantrymen without arms, gunners, dismounted horsemen—all fled pell-mell, pursued by the fire of our .75's and harassed by our advanced guard.

At Vic-sur-Aisne, while waiting till the pontoon bridge should be clear, I entered a pretty little house, the doors and windows of which had been left wide open by the Germans on their departure. The wardrobes and chests of drawers had all been broken into and pillaged. Women's chemises and drawers together with other underlinen were trailing down the staircase. A meal was served on the dining-room table, but the overturned chairs bore witness to the precipitation with which the guests had fled. I was hungry and sat down without hesitation. The food was good although cold.

The leading carriages of the column had already begun to cross the bridge before I learned that the luncheon I had just eaten had been prepared for the Grand Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, but had been interrupted by the arrival of the French advanced guard.

We crossed the Aisne without difficulty. How came it that the enemy was allowing us to cross the river? The thought of a trap, such as that we laid for the Germans when they crossed the Meuse, made me a little uneasy.

Near Attichy our batteries went off to take up position, while the first lines of wagons halted on a winding road leading to the plateau through some extremely dense woods, all damp and odorous after the rains of yesterday. In a little quarry of white stone yawning on one side of the road in the full glare of the sun, I lay down with a few comrades in some tall ferns. I was nearly asleep when, suddenly, the noise of a bursting shell, which had just fallen close by, spread in vibrant waves through the trees, of which every leaf seemed to rustle.

At the entrance to the quarry appeared a gunner staggering from side to side, his face deathly pale. He grasped his right elbow with his left hand and let himself fall among the bracken.

"Oh!" he murmured, "I'm hit!"

"Where?"

With a slight movement of the head he indicated his elbow, which was cut open and bleeding. And, suddenly, from the road which at this point made two successive bends and then plunged beneath a dark vault of big beech-trees, came a confused sound of groans, cries, and stamping.

A driver hurried up without his képi, his face streaming with blood.

"Come quickly . . . it's fallen down there . . . it's fallen on the road! Everything's all messed up, the horses are on top. . . . Oh, my God! . . ."

"Are you wounded?"

"No . . . where?"

"Your cheek. . . ."

"Oh, that's nothing—it's a horse, my off-horse. . . . Come on!"

More shells whistled overhead. We started to run. Suddenly, at the bend of the road I stopped dead, breathless, paralysed by a ghastly sight.

Under the sun, which, breaking through the branches, marbled the white road, lay a shapeless mass of mangled men and horses. The entire teams of the forge and store wagon were welded together in a writhing heap of bleeding flesh. Men were struggling underneath. In the middle of the road lay two gunners, face downwards; others were dragging themselves about on their hands among the fallen saddle-horses. Wounded were moving in the ditches.

From this shambles rose long-drawn-out groans similar to the harrowing cries made by certain animals at night, a muffled and interminable "Aaah! . . . aaah!" rising and falling like some savage song. Blood was running in streams in the gutters on each side of the way. A nauseating stale stench, like that of a slaughter-house, a sort of warmth, an odour of steaming flesh and flowing blood, a smell of horses, entrails, and animal gasses gripped our throats and turned our stomachs.

One man, who lay buried beneath the team of the forge, had succeeded in passing his arm through a mass of tangled intestines, but the viscera had gripped his wrist in a tenacious grasp. He shook them furiously, scattering jets of blood in all directions. Round him the horses lay writhing in their death agony, breaking wind, dunging, staling, and scraping the ground with their stiffening limbs, their shoes grating stridently on the flints. In their death-throes they strained at the traces and one heard a noise of cracking chains. The vehicle to which they were harnessed advanced a few inches, and then rolled back.

Near-by lay a dead foot-soldier, his whole chest one gaping wound. In his wide-open blue eyes was a fixed expression of horror that went to my heart like a knife. An artilleryman, his stomach ripped open, had been pinned to the bank in an almost erect posture by a wounded horse which, bleeding at the nostrils, had fallen across his feet.

Whenever the groaning and wailing stopped for a second one heard the noise of the blood as it burbled and trickled stream by stream and drop by drop, and the gurgle of the intestines which lay in an entangled pink and white mass on the road.

I ran to help the man buried under the forge team. His face was red all over, and horribly convulsed, his hair and beard glued with blood, and his white eyeballs rolling like those of one asphyxiated. A horse in its agony was threatening to kill a gunner wounded in the loins who was dragging himself along on his hands, so I quickly killed the animal with a revolver shot. It was only then that I perceived, stretched out between two horses, my friend M——, very pale, with closed eyes. I ran up and put my arm round him in order to lift him up. . . . All my blood suddenly ceased to flow, my heart stopped beating. . . . My arm had sunk up to the elbow in an enormous wound in my friend's back. . . .

I stood up. For an instant the ghastly scene turned round and round. . . . I thought that I should faint with horror. I put my hand—dripping with blood—to my forehead.

. . . I daubed my face with gore. In order not to fall I had to lean up against the wheel of the forge.

A hospital orderly had succeeded in extricating a couple of untouched stretchers from the ambulance, which had also been shattered by the shell. On one side of the road the Medical Officer, still much upset, himself slightly wounded by the explosion, was occupied with some first-aid dressing. Three of us hoisted on to one of the stretchers a big, fair-haired gunner with a Gaulois moustache, whose foot, almost completely severed from the leg, dangled in the air, and who was yelling with pain. We remembered that there was a dressing-station at the foot of the hill on the fringe of the woods.

We started off, bending our knees in order to jolt the stretcher as little as possible, but we continually had to step over the scattered limbs of horses and pick our way between corpses so disfigured as to be unrecognisable.

A wounded man clasped my leg as we passed, lifting up a deathly face which the blood, running from his ear, had surrounded with a gory collar. His eyes implored us to stop, and in a low voice of profound supplication he murmured:

"For God's sake don't leave me here!"

But we could not carry two men at a time. I bent down a little:

"The others will be along in a minute or two with the other stretcher. They'll take you. Come, now, let go of my foot! . . ."

We left the scene of carnage and began to breathe again. . . .

The closely meshed cloth of the stretcher retained the blood of the wounded man, whose foot swam in a red pool. He was suffering horribly and twisted his arms together, groaning:

"Oh, my foot! . . . You're shaking me. . . . Oh, how you're shaking me!"

And then:

"For God's sake walk slowly!"

In spite of all our efforts we could not avoid the shaking which caused him so much pain, and he continued to murmur, his voice getting fainter and fainter:

"Walk, walk . . . slowly! . . ."

His lips silently repeated "walk" until a fresh jolt made him cry out.

In front of the field-hospital some medical officers had improvised an operating-table in a shady part of the road. The wounded were laid out in rows on the edge of the ditch. A fat doctor with four stripes on his arm ran hither and thither, shouting.

Carried on stretchers or limping on foot, either alone or with the aid of their comrades, the wounded arrived. One man's chin was no more than a bloody jelly; one of his eyes was shut and the other wide open.

The veterinary surgeon's horse, shot through by a shell splinter, had followed the wounded as far as the ambulance, but as soon as he stopped he sank to his knees by the side of the road. The eyes of the animal were full of a suffering almost human, and as he turned his head towards me I fired my revolver in his ear. With a dull, heavy thud like that of an axe as it sinks deep in a tree-trunk, the animal fell on his flank, and from the top of the slope skirting the road rolled over twice into the field below.

We had at once to return to the scene of slaughter, where we were badly needed. As soon as I left the fresh air and sunshine and re-entered the woods I felt almost paralysed by the thought of what I was going to see, and the shadows of the trees, growing darker as the daylight waned, helped to intensify my fear.

"Come on! . . ."

Two saddle-horses with bleeding wounds were walking away from the shambles by instinct. With faltering steps they slowly descended the road towards the sun. The dead horses had been unharnessed and dragged to one side of the way, but two artillerymen had been left lying in the middle of the road, and some one, either out of force of habit or out of pity for the dead, had broken two branches off one of the beeches and had covered their faces with leaves.

In the gutters the rivers of blood had become congealed. The hot, fetid smell, imprisoned under the vault of the trees, still floated in the air, more nauseating and terrifying than ever. The efforts the men had made in order to unharness the horses and clear the roadway had caused the intestines to split and break, and they now trailed about everywhere, covered with dust, separated by several yards from the gaping, empty bodies from which they had been torn.

Two prisoners, tall men whose height was increased by their long grey cloaks and pointed helmets, came down from the plateau. The foot-soldiers accompanying them, fearing that this spectacle of death might cause their enemies too keen a delight, had blindfolded them, and led them by the hand in and out the corpses. But the Germans had recognised the smell of blood. A line of uneasiness barred their foreheads and they continually sniffed the tainted air.

Monday, September 14

At Attichy we spent the night in some splendid, well-closed barns in which the hay lay deep, but our rest was disturbed by horrible nightmares. I dreamt that I was rolling among mutilated corpses in rivers of blood. When I awoke it was raining.

A countryman with a drooping white moustache brought us some beer and wine in buckets. He lived in an isolated house easily visible from our barn, in a copse on the side of the hill. During the German occupation he had left his house as being too solitary and had taken up his quarters in the village. When the enemy took their departure the day before yesterday he had returned to his house accompanied by a foot-soldier. He was going on ahead when through the broken-in front door he saw, in the hall, a helmeted German in the act of aiming at him. He jumped to one side, exposing the French soldier behind him, whereupon the German at once dropped his rifle and threw up his hands. The two Frenchmen seized him and, sitting him down on a chair in the kitchen, shot him through the head. There they left him, still sitting, his head on his breast and the blood dripping from his forehead between his knees on to the tiled floor, and went off to reconnoitre the surroundings of the house and the garden. They could discover nothing suspicious, but when they returned to the kitchen they found it empty. Nothing remained of the German save a pool of blood in front of the chair. But near the door and on the stairs were red stains and they heard groans coming from the garret.

We asked the peasant:

"Well, what did you do with your Boche?"

"Oh, he's still in my garret," he answered placidly.

"But you must get him out of that. He'll soon begin to smell!"

"Yes, I'm going to dig a hole for him to-night near the dung-heap."

And, as I ventured to say that instead of killing the man treacherously they might have taken him prisoner, seeing that he had surrendered:

"Why?" asked the peasant. "Wouldn't he have killed me if I'd been all alone? And yet I'm a civilian!"

"No!" he added, "we shall never kill enough of those swine!"

The wind had risen and the rain ceased.

Our Group advanced along the Compiègne road, which runs by the side of the river. But we had hardly gone a mile when the word was given to halt. We prepared to make our soup, but there was no water, and I searched in vain for a spring or well. Finally we decided to draw water from the Aisne. On the opposite bank a dead German was lying among the rushes, half his body submerged in the stream. Well, we would boil the water, that was all! One must eat!

As night fell a horseman arrived with orders. We set off at a trot.

Under the lee of a high wall some Spahis were resting, their burnous making red patches in the dusk. Near them their little horses stood motionless under their complicated harness. Against an apple-tree leaned an Arab with magnificently cut features, as regular as those of a statue. Under the purple, woollen hood his brown face bore an expression of that resigned melancholy, at once so pitiful and so noble, in which men of his race always languish when far from the desert. His large, apathetic black eyes, which seemed fixed upon something in the distance, had a mystic look in them. He appeared to feel cold. The gunners greeted him smiling:

"Hallo! old Sidi!"

But the Arab, without moving, only replied with a condescending blink of his eyes.

The batteries took up position, the first line of wagons halting behind a screen of acacias. The silence of the night was hardly broken by a confused murmur of the far-off battle when suddenly, as if at a given signal, more than forty French field-guns, almost in unison, fired a terrific volley across the plateau.

The vivid flashes from the muzzles cleft the twilight like red lightning. The air continued to vibrate. It was as though the atmosphere were filled with huge sound-waves dashing and splitting one against the other like the waves of the ocean in a storm. The earth quivered in response to the twanging air. Gradually the night became darker.

Our batteries were certainly firing at registered aiming-points. The enemy only replied now and again, and then at haphazard.

Suddenly a rumour began to circulate:

"The Germans are embarking! That station is being bombarded! . . ."

"Oh, well, I shouldn't prevent 'em taking their tickets," said an imperturbable-looking reservist. "I shouldn't interfere with 'em. Let them clear out and let us go back home.

I've a wife and two kiddies. It's no joke, war! . . ."

It was pitch-dark when the guns, one by one, gradually became silent. In a few moments there was complete stillness, a stillness almost surprising, almost disturbing after the deafening cannonade.

We rejoined the batteries. Noiselessly, one behind the other, the carriages plunged like phantoms into the darkness, the soft field, as it yielded under the wheels, giving a strange impression of cotton-wool. The nocturnal clarity, diffused and as if floating, did not enable us to see what kind of field it was which the long column was crossing without a jolt or jangle, with only an occasional creaking of badly oiled wheels.

The whole countryside smelt of death, and this was not due to imagination. Far off a burning building stood out like a fixed point of light. The massive trees of a neighbouring park filled us with nameless fears.

The wheel of the limber passed over something soft and elastic which yielded under the weight. I felt sure that it was a dead man, and looked behind me fearfully. But I could see nothing.

We halted on the outskirts of a village called Tracy-le-Mont, where the supply-train was waiting for us. Rations were issued, the men in their cloaks standing in a black circle round the provision wagon, which was lit by a solitary lantern. Hutin and Déprez were among them. Somebody was calling out the guns:

"Third! . . . Fourth! . . ."

"First!" cried Hutin.

"You've missed your turn. You'll have to come last now."

We talked while waiting. Hutin was very tired and hungry.

"There's some good grub going," said he. "We're going to get some fresh meat."

"Yes, but fires will be forbidden."

"I suppose you haven't seen the postmaster?" he asked suddenly.

"No, why?"

"Because in the first line you see him more often than we do."

"Well, I've begun to doubt whether there is such a person."

"It's true. . . . The brute never turns up! Confound it all! If only we got letters sometimes the time would pass quicker. The last I had was simply to say that they hadn't any news of me. It does seem hard!"

"First gun!"

"At last," said Hutin. "Good-bye, old

chap! I'm off to get my grub. Try to get back to us soon."

Tuesday, September 15

It was splendid weather when we awoke. During the night it had rained a little, but we had surrounded our guns with armfuls of hay gathered from some large ricks near-by. I slept under the ammunition wagon, which sheltered me as far as the knees, and I had covered my feet with a couple of sheaves. The ground was not very damp and I slept well in spite of the shower.

With the dawn the sky cleared. The air was soft and warm, and the tall trees in their infinite variety of green shades stood out in clear-cut silhouettes against the pale blue of the sky. The grass, although cut short, now that the summer was ending, had regained some of its lost freshness.

Here and there in the fields dark heaps arrested the eye. These were the bodies of fallen Germans. Once one has seen three or four one instinctively searches for them everywhere, and a forgotten wheat-sheaf in the disstance looks like a corpse.

We started, the wheels of the leading carriages tracing a well-marked track across the fields. On one side lay a dead German. The vehicles had brushed by him as they passed and would have crushed his feet had the drivers not seen him in time. His face was still waxen in colour, and the eye-sockets alone had begun to turn green. The solemn, regular features were not lacking in a certain virile beauty.

The man sitting next me on the wagon looked long at the dead man's face as if trying to catch his last expression.

"Poor devil!" said he, shrugging his shoulders.

A little moved myself, I echoed:

"Yes, poor devil!"

But the wheel-driver, who had left a wife and children behind him, and was wondering how they fared, turned in his saddle:

"Dirty pig!" he growled.

This morning the battle started early and with unusual violence on a front which appeared to stretch from east to west. As far as one could see the sky was fleecy with shell smoke.

"There! . . . And they said the Germans were going—were embarking! Do you see them over there? . . . Brutes!"

"Yes. They were disembarking!"

The men bitterly cursed their erstwhile credulity. Nevertheless I knew that this evening they would be ready to believe the news that the Russians had reached Berlin, provided that it was sufficiently vigorously affirmed.

We learned the truth from some passing foot-soldiers. The Germans had entrenched themselves strongly on the wooded hills and in the quarries. The pursuit was held up, and a new battle was about to begin.

I asked a sergeant:

"But those aren't the Germans we were on the heels of yesterday and the day before, are they?"

"No," he answered, "these must be troops which were behind them in Belgium."

The first line, installed in a narrow valley, replenished every half-hour the battery which, in position near a large farm, was emptying wagonful after wagonful of shells. The German artillery swept the plain, and some six-inch Howitzers, whose objective seemed to be the bend of a neighbouring road, aiming too high, threatened to catch us in enfilading fire at any moment. On the other hand, one of their 77 mm. batteries had opened fire on a wood commanding the other end of the valley. There could be no thought of trying to get out of this uncomfortable position by way of the plain. The enemy would see us and his

Howitzers would reach us with ease. The officer in charge of the train, Lieutenant Boutroux, was perplexed. Finally he decided to face the 77 mm. guns, and we began to work round the edge of the wood, shrapnel shell bursting over our heads. Soon the valley curved inwards. The danger zone was passed. Unscathed, and keeping well screened from the enemy, we took up a fresh position in another gully almost exactly similar to that we had just left.

We lacked water, and in order to find it had to follow a path leading across the field to some barns, from the roofs of which pipes ran down into a couple of water-tanks. A ladder was propped up against one of the latter, and I climbed up out of curiosity. The metal plating of the inside was covered with rust, and out of the turbid water, which was slowly sinking, emerged an old boot, a felt cap, and all sorts of shapeless objects of cloth or metal, coated with green slime. We had nevertheless to content ourselves with this water! . . .

The sound of the battle was indicative of no decision; it neither approached nor became fainter. The wounded who passed told us that since the morning the infantry had been continually launched against the strong entrenchments without being able to break through them. The gun-fire did not slacken until nightfall.

We rejoined the batteries, cutting across the plain now hidden from the enemy by the falling darkness. Somewhere a machine-gun was still crackling. A thin rain was floating in the air and we rapidly became wet through. We had to lie in the open among the sugar-beets, and the horses were not taken out of the vehicles.

It was almost impossible to sleep. The moment we lay still we began to shiver and our teeth chattered. I had a vague fear that the cold, which ran down my spine in long shudders, might kill me unawares if I went to sleep.

My feet resting on the wheel, I curled up on the top of the ammunition wagon, preferring the icy contact of the steel to the dampness of the ground. The rain began to fall more heavily.

Wednesday, September 16

Quite early this morning the dull, far-off thud of a Howitzer echoed and re-echoed, and immediately afterwards, as if fired by a train of powder, all the guns on the plateau began to roar.

Astruc came up:

"Lord!" said he, "I had a funny experience last night! Just think . . . the others had bagged all the places under the wagons, and, as I was looking about, I saw a great big chap, at least six feet long, covered over with a blanket in the middle of the field. 'Well,' said I to myself, 'if there's room for one there's room for two,' and I lifted up the blanket and snuggled in beside him. But as I went to sleep I pulled it little by little to my side. Suddenly the long 'un sits up, wide awake, and starts shaking me! . . . At first I said nothing—pretended to be asleep. I was so tired! But he went on shaking me, and then he shouted: 'What the blazes do you think you're doing?' Finally I grunted, 'All right! No need to make such a row. . . .' And then I rubbed my eyes, and got up. . . . Do you know who it was? . . . It was the Major! I'd pulled his blanket off him! I didn't lose my head. I told him that I felt awfully ill—fit to die—and that there wasn't any more room underneath the wagon. . . . Then he muttered something, I don't know what, and settled down again. I didn't hesitate an instant, but lay down beside him. Then he said: 'Well, for God's sake don't take all the blanket, at any rate!' "

The battery went off to take up position, and the first line of wagons returned to the gully where we sheltered yesterday.

My wrist was hurting me. In spite of the dressing the wound had been poisoned by the blood of the wounded and dead at Attichy.

The postmaster arrived with a sackful of letters.

"At home they seem to think the war will last until New Year," said somebody.

"But the Russians?"

"Oh! the Russians. . . ."

"Well, let's see . . . October, November, December. . . . That makes another three months and a half. . . . Why, we shall all be dead of exposure before then!"

Hardly five hundred yards away from our park some big farm buildings suddenly burst into flames, the walls surrounding the yard showing up on the bare fields like a massive square of luminous masonry. The smoke at first rose in heavy, dark spirals pierced here and there by yellow flashes and then shot straight up into the clear sky in a tall column.

We knew that there were sheep in the farm. The bombardment had ceased, and I decided to save one or two of the animals in order to supplement our ordinary rations. Two gunners of the 12th Battery, the carriages of which were lined up close to ours, had the same idea.

We set out for the farm as rapidly as possible. The field we had to cross had been ploughed up yesterday by the German Howitzers. The enemy doubtless thought that infantry lay concealed behind the buildings, and the whole day long his heavy guns had vainly mown down the sugar-beets.

"They've gone to work as though they wanted to plant trees in fives," remarked one of my companions. And he added:

"And they've done the job jolly well! I know something about it, for I'm a gardener."

On the edge of a shell crater two gendarmes lay stretched side by side among the scattered clods of earth. One of them, a big, red-haired man, had a great gaping wound in his chest, and his right arm, doubled up in a strange posture, looked as if it had two elbows. The body of the other, a grey-headed corporal, seemed untouched, but in one of his eye-sockets there was nothing but a clot of blood, and the eye itself was hanging on his temple at the end of a white tendon.

"Poor old chap!" said the gardener.

He leaned over the corpse with its ghastly, one-eyed face staring at the sky, and reverently covered it with the silver-badged cap which had fallen near the dead man's side.

Behind one of the blue-slated roofs, which was still intact, lively flames were now breaking out but were immediately stifled by the clouds of smoke. A magnificent cone-shaped fir-tree, of funereal aspect, mounted guard over the fire like a solitary sentry.

We approached the building. Near the wall of the yard were lying two gunners and a couple of horses. They had just been killed, and the blood on the ground was still red. I recognised one of the men as the orderly of one of our officers. The other had fallen face downwards, his arms crossed under him.

A shell had bored a great hole in the yard. Three ducks, despite the heat of the flames, were dabbling about in a little green pond near a square-shaped dunghill. Another, the head of which had been cut off by a shell splinter, was lying on its side at the edge of the water.

Against the background formed by the great dark curtain of smoke, which from where we were standing hid half the sky, the skeleton of a barn stood out like a fascinating framework of molten metal. Long flames darted out from the doorway and licked a plough and a harrow which had been abandoned there.

Above the hay-shoot a pulley-wheel for hoisting fodder, mounted in a recess in the front of the building, was red-hot. The roar of the guns was no longer audible, being drowned by the crackling of the fire and the sharp hiss of the sparks as they fell in the pond. One of the ducks, stung by a glowing splinter, was shaking her feathers.

"We're none too soon," said the gardener. "The mutton will be half cooked already."

The sheepfold was only separated from the shed, which was now alight, by a bake-house, and was already full of smoke, through which the woolly backs of the animals loomed like even denser clouds. The door was open, but the stupid beasts had not fled, and had crowded together against the end wall under the window communicating with the bakehouse, through which came the smoke which was gradually asphyxiating them. Huddling together they pushed forward as though trying to break down the wall with their foreheads.

"Come on," said the gardener. "You, Lintier, stand there . . . at the door. That's how we'll work it. We'll both of us rush in and each pull out one of them, and you put a bullet through them as they come out. Understand?"

"All right!"

I had a glimpse of the shadowy forms of the two men dodging about in the smoke. Then I heard the scraping of hard hoofs on the ground and one of the gunners reappeared grasping with both hands the tail of a fat sheep which he pulled out backwards. I killed the animal on the threshold, and immediately afterwards a second. The gardener went in again to fetch a third.

I replaced my revolver in the holster, and each of us hoisted a sheep on to our shoulders. They encircled our necks like heavy furs, which we kept in place by grasping the pointed feet bunched together in front two by two. From their heads, hanging down behind, blood dripped down our backs. We started off across the beet field.

Suddenly the gardener cried out:

"Listen!"

We stopped.

"Down!"

"We're seen!"

We heard the scream of heavy shell approaching, and at once threw ourselves flat on the ground behind the sheep, which formed a sort of rampart. Down came the shells, between us and the farm. We jumped up, and, in spite of our heavy burdens, ran till we were out of the line of fire. We passed the dead gendarmes and did not stop until we had reached a row of poplars which hid us from view. Three projectiles swooped down on the spot we had just left.

Winding our way through the copses and hollows of the plateau we regained the park in safety.

I resumed my seat on a bundle of wood near the fire, while a gunner, who was a butcher by trade, methodically cut up one of the sheep strung up by the foot to the store wagon.

As I led the horses down to drink at the tanks I took a short cut across the fields in the hope of finding some potatoes, beetroot, or perhaps some onions. We were specially in need of onions, for some of our food was most insipid and we knew of no other flavouring.

I found neither onions nor potatoes, but, on the other side of a knoll, I saw some foot-soldiers stretched out on the loose sheaves of wheat. Their red breeches were visible a long way off. Evidently some of those who had fallen in the engagements of the 12th.

In a hollow a little farther on I also came upon some German corpses. Thirteen Frenchmen and seventeen Germans had fallen there, almost side by side. And yet the Frenchmen seemed more numerous. Red patches on the yellow of the stubble-field, they caught the eye, whereas the Germans were hardly noticeable.

The arms and packs of the dead men had been taken away, and coats, tunics, and shirts had been unbuttoned so that the medals could be unpinned. Their necks, bared chests, and eyelids had already turned a greenish-grey. A little sergeant, who had fallen backwards on to some sheaves which now pillowed his head, still held his right arm starkly in the air. The stiffened fingers of his outstretched hand seemed clasped in a grip of agony. On his sleeve the gold bar shone in the sun.

As I passed on, some swallows, whose low flight announced rain, skimmed over the knoll, their pointed wings lightly touching the dead men.

Thursday, September 17

Our line of wagons still remains in the same hollow, nor has the battery changed position. Although during the last two days it has fired more than five hundred shells the enemy has not been able to discover its whereabouts.

Fighting continued, growing ever more violent in character, near Tracy-le-Mont, Tracy-le-Val, Carlepont in front of us, Compiègne on the west, and on the east, parallel to the Aisne, towards Soissons.

We neither advanced nor retired, and that was all we knew of the engagement. We have begun to fall into regular habits here; soup is served and the horses are watered at the same hour every day.

On my way to the water-tanks this morning I saw an odd-looking priest. Sitting astride his horse in the middle of the road he was talking to a surrounding group of gunners and foot-soldiers. He was booted and spurred, and a long waterproof cape, fastened under his chin, floated down over the crupper of his horse. A big wooden cross hung from his neck on to the varnished strap of his revolver-holster, and into his wide black belt he had stuck a German bayonet.

Standing in the stirrups he looked like some strange militant monk as he stroked the neck of his horse.

"Yes," said he, "he's a nice beast. He belonged to a Uhlan whom I found after the battle last week, near Nanteuil, where I was going to hear confessions. He had been abandoned, so I took him. It is much better than walking."

And he added:

"He saved my life yesterday. . . . I was going to the outposts where there had been some fighting and where I had heard that I was wanted. I was quite alone, and suddenly I met a patrol of Uhlans. They fired at me, but missed. I was angry at not being able to go where I wanted, and as I wheeled round I let them have a revolver shot. As a priest I ought not to have done that, ought I? But I couldn't help it. I saw one topple over. The others pursued me, but my horse went like the wind, and after a time they gave up the chase. So I turned round again and followed them. I found the man I had shot. He didn't understand a word of French. I was able to give him absolution before he died, but it was a close shave!"

Night was falling when we rejoined the battery. It was raining, and we wondered whether we should again have to sleep in the mud.

I found my comrades of the first gun—Hutin, Millon, and Déprez—covered with mire and black with powder, their faces gaunt with weariness.

"Hallo!"

"Ah, Lintier!" said Hutin. "We've had a bad time of it to-day! I really don't know how it is we are still here! . . . I don't know. . . . Ask Millon. . . ."

Millon nodded his head. He seemed at the end of his strength.

"Gratien is dead."

"Oh!"

"Killed as he was mounting his horse . . . a small splinter in the spine. He didn't move. . . . A shell came right through the shield of the third gun without bursting. . . . And another fell not two yards off our trench!"

"Ah! That one did burst. We were badly shaken. . . . My hair and beard were singed."

"No one wounded?"

"No one in the battery, except Gratien, who was killed. . . . Yes, though! Pelletier got his forehead grazed by a splinter. Come and have a look at the ammunition wagon—it's like a nutmeg-grater. It began to smoke at one time. Suppose it had blown up! . . . It was full . . . thirty-six high-explosive shells! . . ."

It was now quite dark, so we lit the hurricane lamps. Somebody called out:

"Eleventh, to your billets!"

"Right!"

"First gun . . . fifth gun . . ."

"Fifth!"

"To your billets, eleventh!"

We followed a man carrying a hurricane lamp, and found that we had to share our billets with some foot-soldiers from the south whose accent, so to speak, smelt of garlic.

The men of the firing battery let themselves fall in the straw like foundered horses, and, after having made sure of a warm place, I sallied out with a couple of comrades of the first line in order to find something to eat and drink.

The narrow, badly paved streets were alive with the shadowy forms of men jostling each other, the indistinct coming and going of horsemen and wagons, the noise of many feet plodding through the mud, and the confused sound of voices and respiration.

A little café, near which the pavement had been broken up by a shell in the afternoon, was crowded with foot-soldiers, Army Supply Corps men, and Zouaves.

The bottles, jugs, and glasses standing on the counter half hid the shadeless brass lamp with which the place was lit, and threw huge, uncouth shadows across the narrow, smoke-filled room on to the walls.

There was a babble of voices and laughter. Every one was drinking, and the proprietor still had some liqueurs and rum left. The tired-out soldiers soon became drunk with alcohol, tobacco, and tales of the war.

This diminutive café, where there was a

little light, a little warmth, and a whole world of oblivion, was a veritable haven in the immense weariness of the night, among the thousands of soldiers stretched out everywhere round us, in the open or in barns, sleeping as soundly as the dead men just laid low in the fields by the shrapnel bullets.

We succeeded in finding a bottle of champagne. Never had the sparkle of wine seemed to me so delicious.

Nobody was asleep when we returned to our billets. Despite the complaints of the gunners the southern infantrymen went on talking, swearing, and leaving the door open. . . .

"Aren't you chaps ever going to go to sleep?" thundered a gunner from the depths of the darkness.

"Hold your jaw!"

"Here! shut the door, can't you?"

Men continually trod on our feet and chests and let their rifles and packs fall on us. The air was full of grumbling and vituperation. It was nearly midnight, and Moratin lost his temper:

"Now are you ever going to shut up, you——! If you don't, I'll go and fetch the Major!"

A broadside of oaths rose from the straw.

The gunners replied. Dozing men, waking up, yelled:

"Shut your mouths! *Shut 'em,* do you hear?"

Friday, September 18

Day was just breaking as we moved slowly along the roads across the plain, our horses sinking up to the fetlocks in clayey mud.

We met large parties of wounded—Tirailleurs, Zouaves, and, above all, soldiers of the line. They overflowed the road on either side as they plodded on with heavy steps which dragged in the gutters and puddles.

The dawn was misty. It was half-past four, but we could not see the faces of the wounded until they were actually passing our carriage, when we had a vision of white bandages and of others crimson-red. But when the troops had gone by in the vague, uncertain light, we could only perceive a slowly rolling sea of heads and shoulders.

In the eyes of some of my comrades who yesterday were so close to death and who to-day were still stiff, tired, and dejected, I caught sight of looks of envy. They were aware of the orders which had arrived during the night, namely, that we were to return to our positions of yesterday.

They were not afraid, but the familiarity with danger, which had made them brave, had in no sense impaired their love of life—the life which they felt bubbling in their veins and which, in a few moments perhaps, might be spent, with all their red blood, on the field of sugar-beets. They were thinking of those who had died yesterday, of Corporal Gratien, of Captain Legoff—an officer adored by his men—of the six members of the 6th Battery who were reduced to a shapeless, bleeding pulp at the bottom of their trench.

It is at moments like these, at once melancholy and solemn, when the regular creaking and jolting of the wagons and the measured hoof-beats of the horses numb the senses and make one drowsy, that one's thoughts turn most bitterly to the future of bygone dreams, to all promised joys and pleasures, to all the happiness for which the past has paved the way and which might possibly have been realised without difficulty. . . .

Dawn—I do not know why—is always a sad hour. And on the mornings of battle this inherent sadness is rendered more poignant by the dread of the terrible and perhaps final experiences which the day just born may hold in store. Regrets and fears become linked in a vicious circle of thought from which there is no escape.

One's only desire is to live—to return alive in the evening—but to conquer first, to prevent the enemy from reaching our homes, above all to protect the weak and loved ones behind us, in France, whose lives are even more precious to us than our own. To conquer! And still live to-night!

* * * * *

The battery again took up position near the holocaust of the farm, which was still burning, and the wagons returned to their gully.

My wrist was giving me considerable pain, and the medical officer wanted to send me behind the lines on sick-leave, but I preferred to rest with the wagons a few days longer and then return to my gun.

The rain began to fall in torrents. On the edge of a lucerne-field one of our horses, which we had to abandon yesterday, was rolling in its death agony. The straw we had brought with us, hashed up by the wheels of the vehicles and by the hoofs of the horses, and mingled with the water and mud which had collected in the clayey hollow, formed a kind of noisome quicksand into which we sank ankle-deep.

The men did not open their lips except

to swear or complain. No more dead wood was to be found in the copses; all had been consumed yesterday and the day before. We could not light a fire. Some passing gunners told us that there were still some faggots in a farm near the water-tanks, and we at once hurried thither. On the plain the corpses were no longer lying among the loose sheaves. On one side of the Tracy road, which was now nothing more than a swamp, the earth had been dug up in the middle of the field of sugar-beets and two crosses roughly fashioned out of planks marked the grave.

The farm to which we had come in our quest for wood had been arranged as a first-aid post. The buildings surrounded a yard, in the centre of which, near the dung-heap, were ranged up several green-tilted carts marked with the red cross. In one corner a heap of cotton-wool and some blood-stained bandages and compresses were slowly burning.

In the stable and cow-sheds one could see, through the half-open doors, the recumbent forms of sick and wounded lined up on the straw underneath the empty troughs and mangers. Some hospital orderlies in canvas clothing were busy making soup. A medical officer stalked stiffly by in his white smock. Not a cry of pain was to be heard.

In the wood-shed some sick men—nine or ten pale and gaunt foot-soldiers—were lying on trusses of hay which they had not even untied. One man, whom we could not see owing to the darkness, was breathing with a noise like an engine.

The firing was less violent than yesterday. An aviation park had been formed a few hundred yards from our hollow, behind the farm-houses in which the Staff had taken up its quarters for the day. This proximity rendered our position increasingly unsafe. The enemy's Howitzers tried to reach the aeroplanes standing on the field, and though they seemed to be firing at haphazard, shells continually fell here and there on the outskirts of our park.

The day was drawing to a close without giving any indication as to the issue of the battle, which had already been in progress five days.

But towards evening a long convoy of Moroccan *Carabas* passed on the road near-by, marching southwards towards the Aisne. They were followed by some infantry. What could be the meaning of it? We could not help feeling uneasy.

The dusk deepened into darkness and the

long golden beams of the searchlights began to sweep the plain. Under the hard, unyielding light the smallest objects—a hayrick, a shed—cast huge inky shadows on the field.

Next, some artillery passed by, also heading towards the Aisne. We could not see the carriages, but recognised them by the familiar creaking and rattling. Occasionally they halted a moment or two, and then another sound became audible—a sound like a far-off torrent—caused by infantry on the march on some other road across the plain.

It started to rain again.

We rejoined our batteries at the water-tanks. A ceaseless tide of men brushed by our carriages, their shadowy figures rising and falling as they passed in the darkness.

"What regiment is that?" I asked. No one answered.

"What regiment is that?"

Apparently a regiment of dumb men. They continued to march by in the gloom without giving any reply.

"What regiment is that passing? Can't you speak French?"

"Hundred and third."

"Where are you going to?"

"We don't know."

"Where are you going to?" I repeated.

"We don't know," came the answer again.

On the fields of sugar-beets flanking the road we could see masses of motionless artillery. Was the Army Corps retiring? And yet we had not been outflanked this time. . . . I was suddenly seized with anxiety.

It began to rain harder. Under the moving ray of a searchlight I caught a glimpse of a long road black with men and horses.

My carriage had ranged up close to those of the first gun.

"Hutin!"

"Here! Yes? Hallo, it's you!"

"Yes. . . . Well, are we retiring?"

"No."

"What? The whole division is falling back! . . ."

"We're being replaced."

"Think so?"

"Yes. I've seen some gunners of the Corps which is replacing us."

"In that case we shall get some rest."

"No, I don't think so. I've heard that they mean to make a turning movement over by the forest of Compiègne and the forest of Laigle with the Moroccan Division."

Rain . . . darkness . . . smoking prohibited. The surrounding gloom was alive with distant footfalls, the muffled rumble of wheels, jingle of arms, and the heavy breathing of men and animals.

Behind the infantry regiments of the division we began a slow march interrupted by the halts of the foot-soldiers ahead and by other unknown impediments.

About midnight we crossed the Aisne. Rain was still falling. Two hurricane lamps marked the entrance of the pontoon bridge constructed by the Engineers. The planking gave under the weight of the column and one heard the water plashing against the metal bottoms of the boats.

The road was now clear, and the batteries on ahead broke into a trot. A horse which had become entangled in the traces stopped our wagons for a moment or two, and before we were able to catch up to the head of the column a cross-roads suddenly brought us once more to a halt. In the dense darkness there was nothing to indicate which road the leading vehicles had taken., We listened. . . . A distant rumble seemed to come from the right, and we wheeled in the direction of the sound. The drivers urged their horses forward. We strained our eyes in an attempt to pierce the gloom, always hoping to see the bulky form of an ammunition wagon or gun loom out of the darkness ahead. But we hoped in vain. The road became narrower, and at every moment we risked falling into the ditch. Finally we had to confess to ourselves that we had lost our way.

The Lieutenant gave the word to halt. We prepared to wait for daybreak before continuing our march. The downpour redoubled in violence, and it was impossible to find shelter. The gunners huddled together on the limber-boxes and became motionless, while the drivers stamped up and down in the mud at the heads of their teams.

Overcome by fatigue I had begun to get drowsy in spite of the cold and the wetness of my clothes, which stuck to my skin like icy poultices and seemed to suck all the warmth from my body. Suddenly I became aware of footsteps splashing in the gutters by the side of the road. Men were passing by the wagon. I thought that possibly somebody had discovered a barn and was leading them to it. I followed.

Sure enough, after a few minutes' walk we came to a house, the black bulk of which rose up suddenly before me, darker than the surrounding darkness.

My foot knocked against a ladder. Perhaps it led to a window? I clambered up and found myself in a loft of which the flooring was rotten and gave way under my tread. I clutched the low framework of the roof and advanced cautiously. Some one was already asleep there; I heard his breathing. Stretching myself carefully athwart the beams and pillowing my head on a bundle of wood, I prepared to go to sleep. It was almost hot in the loft.

Saturday, September 19

We started off again at dawn in a drizzling rain. The road, studded at intervals with the bodies of dead horses, wound through interminable woods of tall beeches from which the rain dripped heavily. Endless enfilades of swamped and deserted trenches stretched away on either side and were finally lost in the undergrowth. Tall, heavy trees had been felled and laid athwart the road, which had sunk beneath their weight. And when they had been dragged into the ditches in order to leave the way clear for the troops, their stout branches had scored deep scratches in the road, which had soon been converted into quagmires by the rain.

We passed through Pierrefonds, where, beneath the leaden sky, the magnificent outlines of the château rose up amid the verdure darkened by the rain, and then entered the forest of Compiègne, with its lofty beeches standing in colonnades, below which lay long lines of swamped trenches zigzagging between the trees, with here and there a primitive hut made of branches and ferns, and more and more dead horses.

The sun, breaking out between two clouds and piercing the leaves, threw emerald-green lights on the wet moss. Among the dark tones the bright trunks of the birches flashed intermittently.

Compiègne! The town, occupied by the enemy for a few days only, did not appear to have suffered very much. Gun-fire was audible from far off, to the north-east.

We crossed the Oise and rejoined our batteries at Venette, an outlying suburb.

In the large hall of a farm to which I had gone in search of provisions the farmer's wife, a matron of over fifty summers, was depicting the horrors of the German occupation to four gunners.

She broke off as I came in.

"Some milk and eggs? You want to buy them? No! I won't sell them, but I'll give you them. . . . Please wait a moment."

And she resumed her story.

"Well, as I was saying, it was just like that

. . . in front of their father. They trussed him up with his back to the wardrobe so that he couldn't help seeing everything. Five or six of them there were, and one officer. They violated both girls—only eighteen and twenty, and such nice, honest girls, too! . . . Yes—all six of them, one after the other! The poor things screamed all the time! . . . Oh, those aren't men! . . . They're just beasts! . . ."

And lowering her voice a little, but without embarrassment, she continued:

"More than one woman went through the same thing. I did . . . yes! . . . And yet I'm no young girl. . . . I've a son who is a soldier like you. . . . Oh, God, it's awful! . . . It happened one evening, at about this time . . . four of them had arrived here to sleep. How was I to defend myself? . . . The best thing was to say nothing. There have been women who have tried to defend themselves and who have been simply ripped up . . . that's all! My husband was out, getting in their things. I thought to myself, 'If he comes in, what will happen? . . . He'll kill some of them. . . .' "

"Yes, I would, too! I'd have killed them!" interrupted a voice from the darkness at the end of the room.

I had not seen the man as he sat smoking his pipe in a corner of the hearth.

His wife turned towards him.

"Poor old dear! You'd perhaps have killed one of them, but the others would have killed both of us. . . . Besides, as far as I'm concerned—well—I know I'm too old! . . . That's what my husband said—afterwards. . . . That won't lead to any consequences!"

Sunday, September 20

A long march in a stinging hail-storm, first towards the west and then northwards. We are evidently attempting a turning movement against the German right wing.

Monday, September 21

The day broke with the calm brightness of early autumn. We continued our enveloping movement.

Towards midday a heavy French battery in position near the road suddenly began to fire. Our officers went off at a gallop to reconnoitre. We thought we were going into action, but were finally told that we should not be wanted to-day and were sent off to camp in a park near Ribécourt. We ranged up the guns on a lawn flanked by a magnificent wood of beech-trees bordered by rhododendrons.

On one side of us lay an unruffled sheet of water, reddening under the brilliant sunset, and, on the other, among the clumps of trees beneath which lay flower-beds set off by blood-red sage, rose a fine modern château. Under the rich foliage a little rustic bridge spanning the river gave a curiously Venetian effect.

The evening was sultry, but nevertheless we made our bivouac fires under the chestnut-trees flanking the river. In the darkness of the night, which had now fallen, the pond looked like an enormous blot of ink. We were almost blinded by the yellow flare of our fires and could no longer distinguish the river banks, thus risking at every step a fall into the water.

Tuesday, September 22

We passed the night on some straw in the outbuildings.

My wrist is now healed, and I am going to return to my post with the first gun.

Under the morning sun the pond shone like a silver mirror, and the little Venetian bridge struck a bright note among the dark tones of the trees, while the water flowing underneath, over the slime and rotten leaves, was jet-black.

The château stood out starkly against the pale blue sky, and the yellow gravel of the walks and the vermilion sage afforded a bright contrast to the uniform green of the lawns.

The battery moved on. The crackling of rifle and machine-gun fire accompanied the roar of the artillery. The enemy was evidently making a stand against our enveloping movement, which it was doubtless the intention of the French commanders to accentuate. We resumed our march towards the north, heading for Roye. The success of the manœuvre depended on numbers, and I wondered whether we had sufficient men available.

In a field by the wayside some Senegalese Tirailleurs, fine-looking, ebony-coloured men dressed in navy blue uniforms, were making coffee with the simple gestures and admirable attitudes of people untrammelled by civilisation.

* * * * *

The officers had gone off to reconnoitre. We halted at the foot of a long slope in the middle of some large beet fields forming a kind of basin near the village of Fresnières, where heavy shells were falling.

The line of fire, forming an angle towards Compiègne, stretched from north to south. We could not be more than a mile or two, as the crow flies, from the plains we had been occupying during the past few days on the banks of the Aisne, near Tracy-le-Mont.

I do not know what echo or confusion of sound prevented us from locating the position of the battle exactly. Fighting was going on in the direction of Ribécourt and Lassigny, but the heavy battery which had been bombarding Fresnières was now silent. Behind the woods columns of black smoke were curling upwards. Fires or shells bursting? It was impossible to tell.

But our chief anxiety was the northern horizon, which was masked by a line of poplars, and from which occasional and unsustained rifle-fire revealed the presence of the enemy. The Germans might reply to our enveloping movement by trying to execute a similar manœuvre.

On the edge of the woods to the north-east large numbers of troops could be seen in movement. A long black column of artillery was winding its way across country. The hoof-beats of a far-off squadron, trotting, sounded like the reptation of some huge serpent. The whole countryside was alive. From where we stood one would have said that it was only the leaves of the beets moving in the wind, but in reality it was infantry deploying in skirmishing order.

We took up position in a field. The ground under my gun was extremely soft, and it seemed a foregone conclusion that the carriage would continue to recoil with the result that a perpetual error in laying would retard our rapidity of fire. The second gun was no better placed than ours, but the other section, in position on a stubble-field, was on much firmer ground. The battery would thus lose all cohesion, but there was no help for it. It was impossible to use the position assigned to us to better advantage.

In front of us, some 77 mm. guns were sweeping the fields, but these did not cause us much anxiety. In relation to the position which, judging from their fire, they were occupying somewhere to the north-east, we were well covered. But, beyond Lassigny, standing out amid the verdure, rose a line of lofty, wooded hills which commanded the whole of the plain and from the summit of which our battery was certainly visible. We could not take our eyes off their threatening crests. What lay hidden in their gloomy forests?

We were well within range of heavy artillery should the enemy install a battery at that point.

"Come on," said Bréjard, "we must make a hole and get to work quickly."

In feverish haste we dug a trench behind the ammunition wagon. Another group of .75's, occupying a position parallel to ours, opened fire on Lassigny.

The .77's now increased their range, and every round became more threatening.

"To your guns . . . by the right, each battery!" commanded the Captain.

"What range? We haven't heard the range," shouted Millon.

"Eleven hundred!"

"How much?"

"Eleven hundred!"

"Oh, they're not far off!"

"Sounds bad, that," growled Hutin.

The gun reared, and immediately recoiled more than two yards. We had to man it forward into position, but the spade and wheels had sunk so deep in the soil that try as we would the six of us could not move it. Our shoulders to the wheels, struggling and sweating, we began to get nervous and angry. Finally we had to call to the detachment of the second gun to come and help us.

Some infantry had taken up position in front of the battery. We signalled to them to move to the left.

"They'll get cut in two, the idiots!"

"To the left!"

"What fools!"

"To the left!"

The Lieutenant, his lungs exhausted, waved his long arms.

"Lord! Aren't they stupid, those fellows!"

We shouted in chorus:

"To the left . . . *to the left!*"

At last they moved off, and we could fire.

"Eight hundred!"

We thought we had not heard aright.

"Eight hundred!"

So the enemy was there, behind the crests, and was advancing. . . .

What was the French command waiting for? Why did they not throw forward the troops which, over towards Fresnières, were swarming on the beet fields?

Moratin, who was standing on the refilling wagon, cried out:

"Go on, let 'em have it full! That shell from the first gun mowed down a heap of them. There! you can see them, the brutes! . . . You can see them! . . ."

His words gave us strength to push the gun, the wheels of which kept turning backwards, forward into position again.

"Hutin!"

"What?"

"Did you hear?"

"Hear what?"

"There it is again."

"Bullets . . ."

"Yes."

"In threes, double traverse!"

The Captain had climbed into an apple-tree close to the fourth gun. The bullets, brushing over the crest, were too high to touch us, but they continually cut down leaves round the Captain. We begged him to come down. For the tenth time one of the gunners insisted:

"You mustn't stay there, sir!"

The Major interfered:

"Come down, De Brisoult!"

But the Captain, his glasses to his eyes, continued to scan the northern horizon and only answered quietly:

"But I can see very well, sir . . . very well. Nine hundred! . . ."

"Nine hundred!"

"Nine hundred!" repeated the gunners. Our infantry had doubtless retaken Lassigny. German shells were now bursting over the town, giving off clouds of yellow smoke.

"One thousand!"

We had at last found a more or less firm position for our gun, and our fire accelerated as the enemy fell back.

"Eleven hundred!"

"Twelve hundred! . . . Cease firing!"

The detachments piled up in front of the trenches the ejected cartridge-cases which strewed the field. Bullets still continued to hum over our heads, but the 77 mm. shells were now falling wide of the mark. We remained motionless at the bottom of our trenches. Every few minutes Hutin asked me:

"What time is it?"

When I told him he became impatient:

"Confound it!" said he, "we don't seem to be getting on!"

In the afternoon, on an order from the division, the Major commanded the limbers to be brought up.

The drivers arrived on horseback, at a trot.

"Dismount!" shouted the Captain.

They did not hear. Bullets, skimming over the crest, still whistled by. They would inevitably be killed.

"Now, then, altogether," said the senior Petty Officer . . . "One . . . two . . . three. . . . Dismount! . . ."

Twenty voices were raised in a single shout. This time they heard, and, without stopping the limbers, the drivers hurriedly tumbled off their horses.

We took up a fresh position still nearer the enemy between two lines of poplars in a meadow overgrown with tall grass. Almost immediately the 77 mm. guns, which since the morning had been searching for us without success, began to threaten our battery. The enemy could not have seen our movements, and no aeroplane was visible aloft. Had our position been signalled by a spy?

A foot-soldier passed, holding his abdomen with both hands and shifting from one foot to the other in the throes of intense suffering.

"Is there an ambulance over there?"

"Have you had a bullet in the stomach?"

"No, here . . . between the legs. It burns, it burns frightfully!"

"Listen," said Millon, "make for our limbers—over there on the left, behind the trees. They've nothing to do, and will perhaps be able to help you."

"Thanks! I'll go to them."

"But take care between the trees in the meadow. The shells are falling thick there!"

The unfortunate soldier moved off slowly, writhing with pain.

The Captain was standing at the foot of the first poplar of one of the two lines, intent upon making observations. Men ready to transmit orders by word of mouth lay at regular intervals on the exposed ground between the battery and the observation-post.

The 77 mm. shells were now bursting directly overhead. We took cover. Every few seconds the enemy's shrapnels sowed the position with bullets, the lead twanging on the steel armour of the ammunition wagon. Nobody moved, and no one was wounded.

Then I saw Hutin, who, sitting on the layer's seat, was sheltering behind the gun-shield, suddenly jump to his feet:

"Good God!" he ejaculated, "the Captain!"

"Hit?" we asked anxiously.

"It burst just over the tree he was leaning up against!"

In spite of the danger the whole detachment at once stood up like one man.

"Can you see him, Hutin?"

"No. . . ."

Lieutenant Homolle, the Major's little Aide-de-Camp, who quietly came up, unprotected, from the observation-post, shouted to us from a distance:

"Will you take cover, you idiots!"

"The Captain?"

"He's not hurt."

And, when he had reached us and taken shelter behind the ammunition wagon, he added:

"I've got two in the thigh. . . . That's nothing—they didn't go in . . . a couple of bruises, that's all. The shell's got to burst pretty close to do any damage. The most annoying thing about it is that the Captain can't see the Germans. We can't fire!"

The enemy's fire redoubled in violence, and shrapnel bullets riddled the poplars, making a noise like falling hail. Shorn-off leaves, carried by the wind, were scattered round the guns.

One of the liaison officers—one of the *hurleurs** as they are called—wounded in the side, hurriedly left the position. Astruc, wounded in the chest and vomiting blood, also left the field, leaning on the arm of a comrade.

We again became motionless under the shell-fire.

Since a moment or two I had felt an unaccustomed itching in my beard. Had I caught trench pest? Hutin lent me his looking-glass, but, while I was carefully combing myself, I felt a sudden burning sensation in my right hand, in which I was holding the glass and

* Shouters.

which I had stretched beyond the protective bulk of the ammunition wagon. At the same time something hit me in the chest. Feverishly, with my left hand, I fingered the cloth of my uniform and found a rent in it breast-high. I felt myself suddenly grow weak. I tore open my tunic and shirt . . . nothing . . . I could see nothing. My skin was unscratched.

My pocket-book, letters, and letter-case, which I carry in the pocket of my shirt, had stopped the bullet. The blood was spurting from my wounded hand. That was nothing. Instinctively I had pocketed the looking-glass. I do not know how it had remained between my fingers, for my thumb was now no more than a pendant piece of tattered flesh.

"You'll have to clear off," said Lieutenant Hély d'Oissel, who was crouching down next to me.

Hutin stood up:

"Lintier!" he cried, in a voice vibrating with horror which went straight to my heart.

"It's nothing, old chap . . . only my hand."

"I'll dress it for you!"

But shells were falling incessantly and I refused to let him get from under cover.

"Run off quick!" said the Lieutenant.

I ran off across the meadow, crouching

down as much as possible under the menace of the shrapnel bullets. Blood was dripping on to my leggings and thighs, and sticking the cloth of my breeches to my knees. From my hand the bullet had projected a red, star-shaped piece of flesh and tendons on to my chest.

Suddenly came the whistling of approaching shells.

At the foot of one of the poplars two horses had just been killed. I threw myself down between them in the long, blood-stained grass. The shells burst. With a dull sound a large splinter ripped up one of the inert bodies protecting me.

I immediately set off again, rapidly getting out of the 77 mm. Howitzer line of fire. My wounded hand was covered with earth and horse's blood. As I crossed a road or embankment, I suddenly found myself faced by the threatening muzzles of twenty French field-guns lined up on the field. There was nothing for it but to retrace my steps.

Behind the motionless artillery some Moroccan Tirailleurs were lying among the beets. I nearly trod on them before I discovered their presence.

A Captain stood up and beckoned to me:

"Come here, gunner, and I'll bandage you.

Got your first-aid dressing? . . . In the inside pocket of your tunic? . . . Hallo, it's all torn! Been wounded in the chest? No? . . . Well, you're lucky! . . ."

He examined my hand.

"H'm . . . nasty! . . . lot of earth and gun-grease got into it. . . . We must clean that off and disinfect the wound as soon as possible. . . . I'll take off the worst with some cotton-wool."

I was out of breath with running, and the blood was throbbing in my temples and buzzing in my ears. The instinct of self-preservation suddenly deserted me, and, as I stood motionless, I began to feel faint. My legs shook and gave way as though broken at the knees. The figure of the officer standing by me seemed to turn round and round.

"Hallo! Steady!" he cried.

He forced the neck of a flask between my lips and poured a draught of rum down my throat. I immediately felt strengthened from head to foot and laughed as I thanked him.

"That's all right!" said he as he finished dressing my hand.

The field-hospitals of the division were at Fresnières, and I started off in that direction. My hand felt as though it had turned to lead, and, as I walked across country holding myself stiffly erect with a view to resisting another fainting fit, buoyed up by the thought that I should soon be under cover, far from the shells and the battle, an unwonted lassitude, a yearning for sleep and silence, a weakening of will-power suddenly took possession of me and seemed to penetrate to the very marrow of my bones. It seemed to me that when I got to the hospital I should sleep for days on end.

To sleep—to sleep—and, above all, no longer hear the guns, no longer hear anything. To live without thinking, and in absolute silence; to live after so many times having narrowly escaped death. Suddenly I remembered what the Captain of Tirailleurs had said—that my wound was dirty, infected with earth and horse's blood. The fear of gangrene, of lock-jaw, and of all other forms of hospital putrefaction gripped me by the throat.

At Fresnières an enormous shell had just killed, in front of the door of the hospital, a medical officer, a nun, and four wounded men. The bodies were laid out side by side on the pavement, but the corpse of a Tirailleur, a great, dark-skinned giant whose arms, stretched out, spanned an extraordinary space, still lay in the cut-up roadway. The air was full of the distant whistling of shells. In the face of this menace which remained hanging over my head, now that I could no longer fight, I was seized with an instinctive and puerile feeling of revolt. I was no longer fair game.

In the yard outside the hospital, among the stretchers bearing wounded, blood-stained men, some hospital orderlies were laying the more severe cases on a large table covered with a flowery-patterned oil-cloth. Two medical officers were hurriedly dressing them.

One, a big, brown-haired man with gold-rimmed spectacles, beckoned to me. I went up to him.

"Well, what's wrong with you?"

"Shrapnel . . ."

"Let's have a look!"

He unwound the bandage, and, as soon as he took off the compress, the blood began to spurt like a fountain. He looked at the wound and made a grimace.

"H'm . . . it bleeds badly. . . ."

He called one of his subordinates, a bearded officer, who hurried up.

"Look . . . we'd better take the thumb right off, hadn't we?"

"I should think so! . . ." said the other.

"Right. We'll cut that off for you at once," said the officer with the gold-rimmed glasses.

I protested:

"Cut off my thumb!"

"Yes, unless you want to keep it on like that. Here, wait a moment. . . ."

A Colonial infantryman had just been brought in, the blood gushing from a large wound in his shoulder. The medical officer knelt down beside him and feverishly felt about with his fingers among the torn shreds of flesh, trying to pinch the artery.

"Cut off my thumb! . . ." echoed in my ears.

I quickly made up my mind. Seizing a compress and a strip of rolled lint from the table I managed with the aid of my left hand and teeth to bandage my wound in a rough-and-ready fashion, and without being observed by the officers, who were intent upon the severed artery, I slipped out of the hospital.

I knew that I should find the other divisional hospitals at Canny-sur-Matz, about a mile and a half from Fresnières.

I came upon a café still open in spite of the shells, and bought a flask of brandy. I placed my revolver holster on my left side, within reach of my sound hand, for night was coming on, and often, under cover of the darkness, patrols of German cavalry managed to slip between the network of French outposts and supports.

The Canny road made a wide detour, so I decided to strike across country. The steeple of the village church, standing out sharply against the crimson sky, would serve as a guide.

My hand continued to bleed. I kept up my strength with frequent pulls at my brandy-flask and felt confident that I should be able to reach the next hospital.

On a sloping field, near a square-shaped hayrick, some infantry lay stretched out, their red breeches making bright patches in the shadowy grass. A passing puff of wind bore with it a disquieting smell. The arm of one of the prostrate soldiers on the top of the knoll stretched straight up in the air, motionless against the clearness of the western skyline.

Dead men!

I was about to go on my way, when in the shadow of the hayrick I saw a human figure crouching over one of the bodies. The man had not seen me. . . . He turned the corpse over and began to search it. I at once cocked my revolver, and carefully, without trembling, aimed at the looter. I was about to pull the trigger when a sudden fear stopped me. I could see his movements quite clearly, but his face, turned sideways against the dark background of the hayrick, was not discernible. The thought that he might be a gendarme identifying the dead made me lower my weapon.

"What are you doing there?" I shouted.

The man jumped as though stung by a whiplash, and stood up, his features sharply defined against the clear sky. I saw that he was wearing a flat cap with a broad peak.

"Mind your own business and I'll mind mine!" he retorted. With that he made off, running in zigzags under the menace of my revolver, like an animal trying to cover its tracks.

I fired . . . he stopped a moment. Had I hit him? A streak of light flashed out from his shadow, and a bullet hummed past my ear. Off he went again but, just as he was about to disappear behind a bush, I fired a second time. I thought I saw him fall among the brambles.

I arrived at Canny, where a red lantern shining through the darkness marked the entrance to the hospital. Wounded were stretched out in the porch, and the yard was full of them. The medical officers were hard at work in a veranda adjoining the main building. Through the multicoloured glass windows a diffused light filtered slowly, vaguely illuminating the men stretched on the straw. Now and again, when the door of the veranda opened, a rectangle of crude light spread along the ground, showing up a line of stretchers and the suffering faces of the severely wounded who were waiting for first aid. Two orderlies carried off the first stretcher of the row. The door swung to behind them and the yard was again plunged in a flickering half-light.

I stood there, very tired, looking stupidly at the scene. My hand was still bleeding, but only drop by drop now.

I asked a passing orderly:

"Do you know when they'll be able to dress my wound?"

"To-night. Lie down in the straw."

I lay down where I was. Suddenly I heard a voice, at once infantile and yet grave, in my ear:

"You wounded?" it said, with a strange accent.

I turned and found a tall negro lying by my side. I could see nothing of him but two shining eyes.

"Yes, I'm wounded, Sidi. You, too?"

"Yes, me wounded."

He appeared to reflect for a moment:

"Blacks . . . wounded, wounded, wounded

. . . and then killed . . . killed . . . killed . . . Boches . . . oh! many, many Boches . . . William!"

"Ah! so you've heard of William?"

"William . . . bad chief . . . lot of women . . . many women! . . . ah! . . ."

He paused an instant and then continued:

"He many women . . . big, bad chief . . . like way back there . . . back there . . . killed the women . . . cut . . . cut. . . . Whish! . . . like that! . . ."

"Why?"

"Bad . . . ah! . . . he got big house . . . put women's heads on top . . . on roof. . . . Ah, bad. . . ."

He searched for words:

"Yes, put heads of women—many women—on roof of house . . . bad, very bad. . . ."

I was in too much pain to sleep, and had perforce to listen to his childish babble.

"So . . . down there . . . bad chief stick women's heads on roof . . . not good, no! . . . down there! . . ."

And then the Senegalese began to speak in his own language, a lisping, sweet-sounding tongue. Perhaps he was delirious.

I felt cold, but nevertheless, after a time, found my eyelids growing heavy. Covering my legs with straw as best I could I stretched myself out and went to sleep.

It was still night when I awoke, and a thin rain, or rather drizzle, was falling. I was colder than ever, and my wound pained me severely. The veranda was still lit up. I could see the shadowy form of the negro lying next to me, but could no longer hear his breathing. I stretched out my hand and felt his. It was icy cold. The straw under me seemed wet. I looked, and discovered that my feet were lying in a pool of blood.

I stood up. The severely wounded had now been dressed. A fire had been lit in the kitchen of the farmhouse, and a pale-faced Algerian was dozing in front of it. On the mantelpiece an alarum clock, standing between two brass candlesticks, marked two o'clock.

I had my wound dressed. It appeared that after all it would not be necessary to amputate my thumb. A Petty Officer took down my name, and on the cloth band which held my arm in a sling pinned a hospital ticket: "Severe shrapnel wound in left hand. To be invalided back, sitting."

Wednesday, September 23

I had to walk five miles along the main road, upon which the crowd of men wounded in the head, arms and shoulders gradually became less dense. Finally, I reached Ressons . . . the station, the train. . . . Then the interminable jolting of the cattle-truck half full of mouldy loaves of bread . . . fever, thirst. At last the hospital . . . bed . . . women's hands, the bandage stiff with black blood taken off . . . silence . . . ah, silence! . . .

* * * * *

On the 30th September the morning post brought me at the hospital a letter from my friend Hutin, which I copy here in all its simplicity:

"*September* 25, 1914

"MY DEAR LINTIER,—Do write as soon as you can and let us know how you are. I hope you'll soon be all right again, and all the other fellows in the detachment join with me in wishing you rapid and complete recovery.

"You probably do not know of the misfortune which befell the battery only a few minutes after you left. The Captain was killed—a shrapnel bullet just under the left eye. You remember how we all said: 'If anything happens to him he can count on all of us?' Well, when we saw him fall the whole lot of us ran out to help him. But it wasn't any use. It was all over. We carried the body back to the battery. Lieutenant Hély d'Oissel took over the command and we went on firing. He wept as he gave the ranges. When, about eight o'clock, we got orders to leave the position, and had propped Captain de Brisoult upon one of the limber seats of the first gun, half the battery had tears in their eyes. Two gunners sat one on each side of him. They had covered his face with a white handkerchief. At Fresnières we watched over him all the night. He was buried there.

"Since then we haven't done much. Besides, we've been a bit unsettled by this loss. I can't tell you where we are, but if I tell you that the battery has hardly changed place since you left, you will know more or less where our positions are.

"Always yours,
"GEORGES HUTIN."

I, too, wept as I read those lines.

THE END

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