

In Open Country, 1914
and
A Winter at Souchez, 1915-1916

Jean Galtier-Boissière
Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1917

Translated by Charles T. Evans
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To my parents

Translator's Note:

Although the translation is technically completed, I am always willing to reconsider a specific translated passage if a reader has a suggestion.

This book by Jean Galtier-Boissière (1891-1966) included 17 of his own illustrations.

IN OPEN COUNTRY
August-September 1914

I
THE DEPARTURE

(3)¹

6 August

The great day has arrived. We are leaving right away for the frontier.²

For a week now, we've been living a dream. The most extraordinary events have succeeded one another so quickly that none of us, absorbed in our work and occupation, has had the leisure to reflect on what is happening. For ten days we've been providing guards in Paris and in the suburbs, at the national palaces, at the railroad stations, on the railways.

On August 1st I learned of the assassination of Jaurès³ by a newspaper thrown from a train in motion when I was on guard at the Pont de la Folie.⁴ All day, trains filled with civilians and men recalled from leave, all enthusiastic, succeed one another on their way towards the east; at 4 o'clock, a cyclist who was passing by on the road cried out to us that general mobilization had been decreed; and, on returning to the quarter, we have seen all along the way (4) the women of the suburb crying on their doorsteps.

Since mobilization the barracks are in a fever; some occupy themselves with the requisition of some cars and horses; others are escorts; others are receiving the reserves; we have to, in a few days, dress them, equip them, assign them. The canteen is always packed. In the evening, standing on the tables, some men declaim patriotic refrains that are met with enthusiastic shouts.

It was up to us, before the arrival of the territorials⁵, to police the streets of Paris, to disperse demonstrations, to guard against suspicious robbers who, under the cover of patriotism, pillage shops, to protect certain shop keepers from the outrage that their competitors have provoked by labeling them as spies, in a word, calm the effervescence

¹ (3) refers to the page number in the original printing.

² According to Jean Norton Cru, *Témoins: essai d'analyse et critique des souvenirs de combattants* (1929), Jean Galtier-Boissière served in the 31st infantry regiment, 20th brigade, 10th division, 5th corps, 3rd army. (That army was initially commanded by General Pierre Ruffey until 30 August 1914 and then by General Maurice Sarrail, 30 August 1914 – 22 July 1915). Later Galtier-Boissière was transferred to the 405th infantry regiment, 307th brigade, 130th division, 3rd infantry corps, 5th army, which was commanded by General Franchet d'Espèrey, 3 September 1914 - 31 March 1916. Galtier was serving his conscripted active duty military service when the war broke out. The regiment's barracks were located in the Paris suburbs at Melun (1st battalion) and fort de Romainville (2nd and 3rd battalions).

³ Jean Jaurès (1859-1914) was a French socialist known for his anti-military views. He was assassinated on 31 July 1914, just before the formal French declaration of war.

⁴ The bridge over the Ourcq canal. The Canal de l'Ourcq is a canal of almost seventy miles in the Île-de-France region around greater Paris.

⁵ The territorial soldiers were men between the ages of thirty-five and forty-one who had done their active duty (ages twenty to twenty-three) and their reserve duty (ages twenty-four to thirty-five for forty days a year) and were now obligated to still be available if needed for military service. They reported for nineteen days of training each year.

of the popular quarter of Belleville-Villette.⁶

All these jobs, all this work is executed with order and good humor and in the middle of hugs from upset parents. We have practiced mobilization so many times that the real one is carried out normally, like a simple exercise. For us, active soldiers⁷ who have not (5) been torn from family life like that of our reservists, the war appears like a planned exercise after all the test marches, maneuvers and the camp at Châlons. In the staircases, jokesters, aping the distraught screams of sergeants, shout loudly: "Everyone get out! To the war!"

At noon, the two battalions formed in a square in a corner of the quarter. Suddenly, the gates are opened and the crowd, which that morning has been waiting on the surrounding streets with large bouquets of flowers, rushes towards the soldiers and decorates them with flowers.

I find myself placed on the left side of my section and surrounded by exuberant civilians. A tall lady in black who undoubtedly did not have anyone to say goodbye to, says to her daughter, while pointing at me with her finger.

"Go embrace that man there!"

The small, young, blond girl comes up and gently gives me a fresh kiss on the cheek which I return a little moved.

"Fix bayonets! Present arms!"

The flag with its escort enters the center (6) of the square and is placed before the colonel on his prancing horse.

"The flag!" The colonel cries out in a terrible voice and turns towards the massed musicians in front of the reporting room.

The salute to the flag rings out, then the "Marseillaise," and, behind the barrier of soldiers at attention, immobile and silent, the impressed crowd stands.

Standing on his stirrups, sword in hand, the colonel harangues his regiment. I do not hear his words very well because he has his back turned towards me; but the end of his speech sounds clear and vibrant like the sound of a bugle:

⁶ Belleville and de la Villette were districts in the northeast of Paris.

⁷ French men were conscripted to serve three years of active military duty. Afterwards they served in the reserves and then territorials. As noted above, Galtier was serving his active duty when the war broke out.

“Take heart, my boys and long live France!”

An immense acclamation rose towards the sky.

“Long live France!”

Musicians in front, flowered, acclaimed, the 2nd battalion moves off, marching in impeccable order and passing through the gates. The 3rd battalion follows. We set off for Noisy-le-Sec⁸ at 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

Civilians and military men gather together in the heart of the quarter. There is an atmosphere of a prize distribution. All of Belleville is there. (7) Old mothers with white hair, who have cried a lot, dote on their dear little ones and ask them “to not expose themselves uselessly”; the fathers stiffen themselves against showing any emotion, talking of 70,⁹ sliding a last coin in the hand of his boy; the girls hang themselves, crying, around the neck of “their man” who they might never see again. Hiding their emotions, the soldiers joke, with the scornful air of young people who are free.

I did not want my parents to assist at the departure, fearing that it would be too emotional for them, and now, in the middle of all the hugs and all the goodbyes, I felt myself a little alone and kind of orphaned. I wander melancholically in the familiar corridors. I climb (running as usual) the staircases that I so often swept and washed, being blue -- “Stair detail, Galtier!” -- I made a pass through the canteen where the young canteen keeper (who unfortunately is no longer in the army) served his wine. I stroll in the courtyard, in front of the police post where formerly the “newbies” waxed, polished, pumped and “primped” to present themselves clumsily to the inspection of the dreadful sergeant with his square-cut chin: “Hats off...Go get your hair cut!” (8) While the “veterans”, cap askew, defiant in their epaulettes, theater ticket in pocket, passed jauntily by in salute.

The empty and dismal chambers, without bedding and colored packages, are suddenly invaded. Like school children on the last day of the school year proudly walk their parents through deserted classrooms, the soldiers want to give their loved ones the tour of their space where for two years they screamed while closing the door: “Ah! The new class...Good God! The new class!” Before the office, the adjutant says to his wife: “I will return perhaps with gold stripes.” “Return, that’s all that I ask,” responds the woman.¹⁰ In the embrasure of a window, Graillot, my old friend, a strong man with a mustache who is killed at La Villette, reassures his wife: “You know well Mrs. Graillot, that because of modern weapons, this will not last longer than five or six weeks.”

⁸ A railway station in the eastern suburbs of Paris on the railway line running east from Paris.

⁹ The reference is to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870.

¹⁰ Gold stripes (galon d’or) indicate that a soldier holds a command position.

Suddenly in the courtyard the bell sounds assembly. With an infernal din of studded shoes, the soldiers tumble down the stairs, gathering themselves. We put on backpacks, we grab our rifles.

(9)

This time, that's it! We are leaving! We are quitting our old barracks and Paris, perhaps forever. The exit from the quarter takes place very simply. There are no flowers in the caps, we think that it's going to be a simple departure and march, and the captain orders.

"Forward by fours!" With the same voice as if we are going on a simple maneuver to Aulnay-sous-Bois or the Ferme du Groslay.¹¹

With bugles and drums in front, the battalion exits the barracks door. The esplanade is filled with people. They cheer us.

"Bring us the head of William!"¹² Kill a lot of those dirty Prussians! And all of you return!" Shout the women while throwing flowers at us.

As we pass the gate, some old, white bearded men, standing on some stones, gravely take their hats off. On the Rue des Lilas, fresh young girls stop us while passing by to hug us. Older people, more practical, pass us liters of red wine.

"What will happen when we return victorious! What a triumph that will be!" says my neighbor.

Everyone privately promises himself that he'll be returning!

(10)

The Parisians of the company who are married march in the ranks with their rifles on shoulder and their wives on their arms. Some lead their children by the hand. Beautiful corsages alternate with blue caps. By habit, the sub-officers¹³ shout out: "one, two, one two!" The officers smile.

Greeted by the cheers, conscious of their strength, the soldiers feel neither the knapsack nor their equipment; with bulging torso, they walk bravely at a cadence; the shouts from the noisy crowd, the tricolor flags that float from all the windows; the colorful flowers that decorate the caps, great coats and rifle barrels, all gives a festive air to the departure.

¹¹ These are communes to the north and northeast of Paris.

¹² The reference is to Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany.

¹³ In France, a sub-officer is often approximately at the equivalent rank of sergeant or above as a non-commissioned officer.

No apprehension of the suffering that perhaps the campaign will bring tempers our joy! For long months, the commanders have formed, in view of upcoming battle, our spirit and our body. Up to this day, the energy that bubbles in us had not been dispensed except on sterile and often laughable simulations. Today, it is no longer the fake war, it's the real war that is beginning, and we are all satisfied, like a man who, after a hard apprenticeship and fastidious studies, is authorized to exercise the trade that he knows thoroughly. Finally! We will aim at something else (11) than cardboard silhouettes at fifty meters, fire real cartridges, and use our terrible bayonets for something other than to impale those grotesque mannequins! A singular drunkenness penetrates us where it mixes patriotic enthusiasm with the desire for physical exertion, the taste of adventure and the thirst for carnage.

Carefree of the next day, proud of the confidence of the civilians, looking forward to seeing the country and winning battles, ready for any sacrifice for France, without any slogans, we sing loudly the only song that suits this triumphal march.

Allons, enfants de la Patrie,
Le jour de gloire est arrivé!¹⁴

To women who, with tears in their eyes, send us farewells with their handkerchiefs, we cry happily.

“Do not cry, kids, we’re taking the fun train to Berlin, to go and return!”

¹⁴ These are the opening lines of “La Marseillaise.”

II APPROACH MARCHES

(15)

7 August

For thirteen hours, we roll on, stuffed in an animal wagon—32 men, 8 horses.¹⁵ We passed the night drinking, smoking, singing songs and playing interminable card games in the faint light of the oil lamp that smokes and stinks.

We talk about the war, we guess at the forces of the belligerents; each proposes his campaign plan; then we discuss the conditions of the peace; the most moderate are content with Alsace-Lorraine and fifteen billion; others demand the dismemberment of the German Empire and the hanging of the Kaiser. But what bothers my comrades, workers and peasants the most, it's the length of the campaign. The men of this [conscript] class are to be released 23 September—forty-six days to fight—and so they were worried how long the campaign would last—forty six days to fight—it's important (16) not to go into overtime.¹⁶ At least everyone is in agreement that with the aid of our friends, the Russians and the English, the war will not drag on and that the power of modern armaments makes a long campaign impossible.

I engage in a philosophic discussion with the reservist sergeant Ballot, who is an abbot as a civilian. We tease him to understand how he can reconcile the necessities of the war with the voice of his Christian conscience.

As I begin to fall asleep, my head on the shoulder of my neighbor who snores, day is breaking. We're off. I have a little hangover. The figures are gray; the flowers in our caps are faded.

8 August

We get off the "pleasure train to Berlin" at Sampigny.¹⁷ The battalion camps at Boncourt.¹⁸ It seems that our division must contribute to the investment of Metz.¹⁹ The captain charged me with the food supply of the company. I chose as helpers the

¹⁵ Forty-and-eights (Quarante et huit), 40/8 or 40&8, were French 4-wheel railroad boxcars designed to hold 40 men or eight horses.

¹⁶ "Supplementary time." In 1913, France introduced a "Three Year Law" of conscription at age 19 instead of previous age 20, and so the 1913 class was called up in 1913 instead of 1920. The men here do not want to be conscripted longer than they are supposed to be.

¹⁷ Sampigny is a commune in the Meuse department in northeastern France, about 125 miles east of Paris and a little south of Saint-Mihiel.

¹⁸ Boncourt is to the northeast of Saint-Mihiel, about 25 miles northeast of Sampigny.

¹⁹ Metz was about 30 miles to the east northeast of Saint-Mihiel. After the Franco-Prussian War and according to the Treaty of Frankfurt of 1871, the city was annexed into the German Empire, being part of the Imperial Territory of Alsace-Lorraine and serving as capital of the Bezirk Lothringen.

Grenier brothers, two astute Bellevillois,²⁰ small, but sturdy, who know the system D²¹ and would do miracles for a quarter of pinard.²²

(17)

The company begins the campaign with three officers: Captain S, a big devil, extraordinarily lean, dry like a cudgel—he had spent seven years in Morocco and the Sahara—cold, distant, hard on others like on himself, but very just; an officer full of authority, very service-minded who fully knew his job and loved it.

Lieutenant F* was an instructor at the l'École de Joinville at mobilization.²³ Big, muscular, well built, he has a long mustache and tuft of hair under the lower lip like officers of the Second Empire; his frank look, his clear and precise speech, his decided bearing, all please the soldiers.

The sub-lieutenant of reserves CH* is a nearsighted student with shaven appearance. He is very friendly and willingly lends a hand to his men. He is very popular. The soldiers say of him, "He's an Ace!"

For the two career officers, it is clear that war is the realization of their dearest hopes. They exult at the opportunity to add stripes, decorations, glory. They love the adventure, the struggle, the command. It is their job to be brave.

(18)

The sub-lieutenant CH*, who his two superiors regard a little like a civilian dabbling in the military, is less carried away. The war upset him, and he sorrowfully predicted its horrors; but I believe that he will act as courageous as the others, if not as skillfully.

9 August

Alert at midnight. A commotion in the barns. Assembly in the light of the moon. We depart. No talking or smoking. Are we going to fight?

At dawn, during a pause, the colonel has an official telegram that he received read to the companies. It's the announcement of a great French victory. Alsace is invaded. General Amade²⁴ triumphantly entered Mulhouse!²⁵ This news, applauded by all, gives us courage; I no longer feel the weight of the knapsack. We are happy, but we are

²⁰ A city quarter of Paris.

²¹ Essentially "le système D" means "to do something with nothing," or to seize an opportunity on the fly.

²² Cheap, local red wine.

²³ l'École normale militaire de gymnastique de Joinville opened in 1852.

²⁴ Albert Gérard Léo d'Amade (1856-1941), but this information was not correct. It was Augustin Yvon Edmond Dubail (1851-1934) commanded the First Army during World War I.

²⁵ Mulhouse is a city in eastern France, near the Swiss and German borders. It is the second largest city in Alsace after Strasbourg.

astonished because we had not expected such a victory.

“What’s happening to those Germans!” exult the soldiers.

The officers are beaming.

At dawn, we pass through Saint-Mihiel still sleeping. We are always marching to the north. At the exit from (19) the town, still deserted at this morning hour, we meet a supply convoy, a file of Parisian autobuses white with dust. The “Madeleine-Bastille” and “Clichy-Odéon” raise happy cheers.²⁶

“First class only! Pass the tickets!” Scream the jokesters.

As the day advances, the heat increases, a blazing sun makes us dizzy. Rolled-up sleeves, wide open coats revealing hairy chests, caps hanging back, faces red, sweating in big drops, the infantrymen, covered with dust, advance more and more painfully. In such heat the march, with full equipment, is a terrible suffering: the straps of the bag sear the shoulders; leaning forward, neck stretched out, one has the painful feeling of suffocation; the soles of the feet are on fire; each time you put your knapsack on your back, the sack seems to weigh a little heavier.

“Ah! A break! Thank God, a break!” Cry the reserves.

[censored]

In the villages that we pass through (20), the artillery men, the resting chasseurs have buckets of fresh water on either side of the dusty road. We scramble, we fight furiously for a quart of water.

“No stopping! Forward! Forward!” Shout the officers from atop their horses who dread abrupt stops in the march of the column.

Towards 10 o’clock, the heat becomes overwhelming. Men begin to fall, hit with sunstroke. Soon there are many along the route and in the ditches; some have rolled around on the ground, unconscious, their lips blue; others, after a short moment of unconsciousness, have put their knapsack and rifle on the embankment and sit on the edge of the wheat fields, patiently waiting for the regimental car (which has been filled for a long time already!). Still we go on.

²⁶ Both of these are bus routes in Paris with the bus routes indicated on the busses. For example, the omnibus that goes back and forth between the Place de la bastille and the Place de la Madeline bore the sign “Madeleine-Bastille.”

Finally, towards 2 o'clock, there is a long pause. According to the lieutenant, we have marched more than forty kilometers. The men throw their knapsack and rifle on the ground and fall down next to them, exhausted. The spryer run up to a hedge to stretch out in the shade. Under each shrub there are bunches of men snoring and sunburnt with open mouths.



EN MARCHÉ

(21)

The officers would like the men to make coffee, but no one has the courage to light a fire.

At 4 o'clock, the battalion adjutant assembles the quartermasters and the supply corporals and takes command of the encampment. We leave by a side road in full sun. Some fall along the road, overcome by the heat and fatigue. Finally, we see a clock in the distance: it's Ranzières.²⁷

The battalion is supposed to stay in this grubby hamlet. I put down my knapsack and rifle with joy and put my head under a fountain. What a delicious feeling!

The food has still not arrived; with the quartermaster Tapin, a red-headed reservist and a good lad, I sit down, in slippers and a cap, in a small, paved outdoor café, very refreshing.

The battalion only arrives at night, very much in disorder. The poilus exhausted, eyes blank, faces crimson, sweating, dusty, staggering like drunks, and as soon as they arrive they fell into the straw in the barns. Some sleep completely equipped. Only lieutenant F, whose authority over the section is extraordinary, succeeds in organizing his exhausted men and orders them to form (22) a stack, as required by orders. Two men, standing at attention behind the rifles, fall stiff, exhausted.

"Break ranks," says the lieutenant, very calmly.

The command requisitions all the carts of the village to bring back the laggards that line the road for fifteen kilometers.

I get the supply food and distribute it at 8 o'clock to the squads.

An hour later, hundreds of fires illuminate the street, strangely lighting up the village which buzzes happily as everyone prepares stew.

10 August

5 o'clock in the morning, lying in a meadow with Jacques Danziger, barefoot in the fresh grass. The reveille of the regiment in the village reminds us of the descriptions of Erckmann-Chatrian.²⁸ In granaries, in barns, men emerge from the straw. "Stand, there" shout the sergeants of the day from the top of ladders. The early-risers, naked to the

²⁷ Ranzières is a commune in the Meuse region about ten miles south-southeast of Verdun.

²⁸ Erckmann-Chatrian was the name used by French authors Émile Erckmann (1822–1899) and Alexandre Chatrian (1826–1890) who wrote military fiction and ghost stories in a rustic mode.

waist, wash at the fountain, squatting, cheeks swollen with air, like Aeolus, god of the winds.²⁹ The cooks revive the ashes (23) by blowing on them to prepare the morning coffee. A few youngsters are walking about in checkered shirts and red pants. Those who are suffering from blisters walk about with comic precautions; they say that they march on a pin cushion. A cook calls out at the door of a barn, "In sixty seconds, coffee's ready!"

Framed by large trees in a circle, the hamlet, with its large thatched roofs, with its orchards and hedges, is reminiscent of some watercolor model for young girls. The sky is a faded blue, with nary a cloud, the atmosphere of incomparable clarity. We do not hear any guns in the distance. We simply believe that we are on maneuvers.

This afternoon, there is a boot and shoe review by the battalion commander.

11 August

At the camp, we had a good laugh. A sergeant, in short sleeves, is surprised in the act of using a pole to knock down some prunes by the owner of the orchard. Furious, the peasant declares that he will go find a senior officer to report the offense. The NCO disappears, runs to the barn, puts on his coat and, reappears (24), and begins to yell at the trespassers, to the great satisfaction of the peasant!

As I hung out in the village, I overheard the commanding officer confide in our captain.

"We've only been told about Mulhouse, but I am really sure that Amade is already at Colmar!³⁰ Ah! The poor Boche!"³¹

"As long as he leaves some for us!" responds the captain while clenching his fists.

12 August

As we were preparing the soup, on the side of the road, the commander arrives on horseback and shouts us to overturn the pots; we leave immediately.

While the battalion is gathering, I hear a desperate meowing; a soldier knocks on his musette as if to silence a cat that might be locked up there. An old, disheveled peasant rushes up to the soldier, begging the captain to have his dear tomcat returned to him, a cat that the poilu without a doubt wants to transform into a stew. The officer laughing intervened. The soldier opened his musette: it contains only a loaf of bread!

²⁹ Aeolus was a son of Hippotes who is mentioned in the Odyssey and the Aeneid as the keeper of the winds.

³⁰ Colmar is a city in Alsace, about seven miles west of the Rhine River and 21 miles north of Mulhouse. The speaker is greatly mistaken on this rumor.

³¹ In this case Galtier uses the older "Alboche" form of the colloquial "Boche" for the Germans.

(25)

13 August

Worn out. A very exhausting march; endless hills. Region of Verdun; dark wooded valleys, grassy ridges where we can see invisible forts. Thousands of men building entrenchments, making barricades, blockading the roads, concealing in the wheat fields networks of barbed wire that will entangle enemy cavalry. Many territorials, shovel or hatchet in hand, old papas in uniform, seem touched by us; we cheer them. A worker with white hair approaches me and shakes my hand profusely. "Good luck!" he shouts to me. I do not recognize him at first with his uniform whites³²; I think that it's my hairdresser.

Camp in a dirty village, near Étain.³³ The peasants are in a bad humor; they do not like the soldiers who they have had to deal with during maneuvers. They get their revenge by selling an ordinary wine at 2 francs a liter.

[censored]

(26)

We fired our first shots at an enemy airplane; the entire regiment fires; the airplane did not crash.

15 August

Marching; the knapsack; the sweat. Some woods, some fields, some wheat fields with blueberries and poppies, fields of alfalfa and rye; some more woods. The road, a long, dusty ribbon. The undulation of caps, and, in front of my nose, the perpetual knapsack, the eternal mess kit of the man who precedes me and walks with his feet inside-out like a duck.

Arriving at the camp, as exhausted as my companions, I still need each day, while the others rest, to get the food, make equal piles of beans, sugar, coffee, rice for the squads, distribute the meat, serve the pinard. Lieutenant F* watches the distribution with extreme care. The sixteen squad leaders must be present, and there is always one nowhere to be found.

"With the lieutenant," declares Grenier, "it would be necessary to count the coffee beans by squad."

³² The unit mark on the cap was in white for territorial soldiers.

³³ Étain is a commune in the Meuse department on the Orne River about fifteen miles to the east-northeast of Verdun.

(27)

Ah! what a job as the quartermaster! I'm exhausted.

16 August

Arriving in the village where we are thinking of camping, I buy a superb goose for my squad. An order arrives: we are departing. I do not want to lose my acquisition, and I stash the living goose on my knapsack. The bitch, weighing nine pounds, did not let up, for six kilometers, whistling, flapping wings and pooping on my neck.

We feel that each day we are approaching the enemy. Patrols of uhlans³⁴ are reported in the surrounding woods. Yesterday, one of our mounted scouts was wounded in the hand; the war is over for him! The chasseurs showed us a lance and helmet from an uhlan. All the men tried on the helmet while grimacing in turn.

We camp on an isolated farm that the company has put in a state of defense. One section led by the sub-lieutenant is at a small guard post in a neighboring wood. I go in a small cart to the village to get supplies, with three men, rifles loaded. On my return I am hailed because I am bringing back some pinard and tobacco.

(28)

Last night, a sentry killed a cow he had mistaken for a uhlan and who had not complied with the required password check.

17 August

Depart the camp at 3 o'clock in the morning. (We went to sleep at midnight!) Assembly in the fog; we leave. I was sleeping while marching when a shout suddenly startled me.

"Stop there! Who goes there?" shouts the battalion adjutant who is marching in front.

In front of us, on the road, a shadowy group of cavalry. Could they be uhlans?

"French!" responds a cavalryman who advances to exchange a word; it's a patrol of dragoons.

We go around Étain. Today, we've changed camp three times. We are all completely exhausted.

18 August

To bring the reservists up to speed, we train when we are not marching. Today, the

³⁴ German cavalry typically armed with a lance.



UN CUISTOT

(29)

company trains in the countryside. The captain, behind a line of riflemen scattered in a field, shouts: "Fire at will, at four hundred meters, at the uhlans who are coming out of the woods!" An excited man, who believed that it was actually happening, fired a live cartridge and risked the wounding of some comrades. Eight days of prison for the soldier, four for his corporal. All the same it was comical.

We have still not received any news about our friends. It seemed that all letters stopped on 25 August; I think that my parents will be very upset about me. Think nothing of it. Up to now the war is hardly different than maneuvers.

The officers are more and more impatient; they say that they are deliberately leaving the division behind because they do not believe it sufficiently trained. The poilus explain that, since we are used to parade exercises, we are being reserved to parade in the conquered cities.

Yesterday they stopped a fiery territorial who had deserted his regiment in order to go fight in the front line!

(30)

19 August

No letters, no newspapers since our departure from Paris. We do not know anything about current operations. Are we still advancing in Alsace?

A general who passed us on the road shouted to the captain:

"We have to grease the feet of the men! We have some long marches ahead of us!"

Some long marches? We move forward!

20 August

The company is assembled in an enclosure, in the shadow of fruit trees. The lieutenant in a police cap, reads out loud the Bulletin des armées de la république.³⁵ The title of the journal evokes the volunteers of 1789, the flags from "La Liberté ou la Mort,"³⁶

³⁵ The Bulletin des armées de la république was issued daily by the Minister of War.

³⁶ "La Liberté ou la Mort, Freedom or Death (1795), is a painting by Jean-Baptiste Regnault (1754-1829) done during the French Revolution (1795) and representing the choice between freedom or death.

Valmy,³⁷ the victory of our troops over the Austrians.³⁸ The news of the war is excellent. In Alsace, French troops march from success to success. At Liege, the small Belgian army heroically holds up the invaders. The Germans on the march have already eaten their reserve rations. (31) “We will not have to go into combat with a rifle,” says a Belgian jokester, “but only with some pastries!” Revolution threatens in Berlin, and already the famous Cossacks are invading Eastern Prussia.

These victories inspire us! The lieutenant interrupts his reading because he is too emotional. “Finally,” he says joyously, “it’s revanche.”³⁹ Tears in our eyes, we taste the bitter enjoyment of living in heroic days, and, impatient to receive our baptism of fire, we all burn with the desire to prove ourselves.

21 August

Alert in the night. Quick departure. The rumor is that we are going to enter the front line soon. A cyclist confides in me that the colonel has just received maps of Luxembourg and northern Germany. We are marching on Aix-la-Chapelle.⁴⁰

Near Mangiennes⁴¹ a fight took place. Some equipment lays in the field. The peasants bury a dead horse. As we pause in front of a ransacked house, a general comes out grumbling: “Ah! The pigs! We will make them pay for this!”

(32)

Towards 4 o’clock in the afternoon, the column enters a small town nestled at the bottom of a deep valley; it’s Longuyon.⁴² The inhabitants greet us joyously because the Germans who had occupied the village have just evacuated under the pressure of French troops. We really did nothing in this liberation, and yet we are celebrated as saviors; we are the glorious victors even before having fought! The women jump for joy watching us parade by; a gatekeeper ransacks his garden to adorn the soldiers with flowers. We stack our rifles in front of the shop of an owner who immediately distributes free bread, sausages and beer.

“It’s life at the château Longuyon!” Exclaims the fat Fouchard.

We hoped to camp in the town but, an hour later, we put our knapsacks back on. The

³⁷ The Battle of Valmy, 20 September 1792, was the first major victory by the French army during the revolutionary when a Prussian army was defeated near the village of Valmy in Champagne-Ardenne.

³⁸ Also, during the French revolution, the French army battled Habsburg Empire forces in northern Italy.

³⁹ French for “revenge” (revenge for the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in 1870-71).

⁴⁰ Also known as Aachen, the medieval, imperial capital of Charlemagne.

⁴¹ Mangiennes is a commune in northeastern France about fifteen miles northeast of Verdun.

⁴² Longuyon is a commune in northeastern France about twenty-one miles north-northeast of Verdun.

countryside of Longuyon is empty; the march slows; the men are exhausted, but today no one wants to be left behind. Night falls as we arrive at Cons-la-Grandville,⁴³ a small town hidden beneath giant plane trees, in the valley of the Chiers.⁴⁴

It is almost twenty hours since we started; the regiment is at the end of its tether. (33) However, the men, exhausted, do not lose courage. All hope to camp in Cons.

Suddenly an officer who gallops by shouts: "The villages where you are supposed to camp are in the hands of the enemy! If you want to sleep on some straw tonight, we'll have to free them at bayonet point!" Trembling with joy, the captain, standing in his stirrups, repeats to us, "your beds are at the point of your bayonets."

The news passes from mouth to mouth. A quiver runs through the ranks. Finished with the marching and the training, it's the real war that's beginning. Instantly I no longer feel my fatigue. The men who just now are dragging themselves along, suddenly straighten up; the cripples whose feet are bloody resume their place in line; some poilus who were lying in the ditch, at the end of their strength, rejoin their section at a run. The immense enthusiasm of the departure returns. We feel that it will soon be worth all the bravos and kisses that have been lavished on our credit from Paris to the frontier.

We file through the village between the mounted chasseurs all dusty and a crowd of anxious peasants who say to us, "Try to be victorious." (34) An order passes through the ranks, "Get ready while marching." Rifles are readied, the bolts creak. The enemy can't be far away.

I see a supply corporal leave a house with two enormous white cheeses under each arm.

"You see how I've managed it!" He shouts to me. "There will be cheese for my company tomorrow!"

"But tomorrow, my friend, where will we be?"

Above on the hills a beautiful, tragic spectacle appears to us; the whole horizon is ablaze. A huge scarlet glow dances, flaming in the black sky like soot. They say that it is Longwy that burns.⁴⁵ We hear the heavy rumbling of the bombardment like the far away rolling of a drum. A dismounted horse, mane in the wind, passes by at a fast gallop, sewing disorder in the column. The dogs run wild in the fields, barking at death.

⁴³ Cons-la-Grandville is a commune in northeastern France about five miles to the northeast of Longuyon.

⁴⁴ The Chiers river is a tributary of the Meuse.

⁴⁵ Longwy is a commune in northeastern France that has historically been the industrial center of the region's iron mining.

In the dark night, in extreme confusion, the battalion, harassed, makes its entrance into Lexy,⁴⁶ and is greeted by the population. Hearing the bombardment and seeing the glow in the night of the villages along the Luxembourg frontier, the inhabitants anxiously awaited us, (35) not thinking that French troops could abandon them. And voila here we are! It's us, the gay, red pants who are come to defend this village, protect their wives and children from the savage invader!

When the good folk learn that we have been on the march for 24 hours, they bring us wine, some beer, some bread, some ham; they empty their huts; the wine barrels are tapped. In dark silhouettes on the threshold of the lighted dwellings, women continually cut sandwiches in large loaves of bread; pots of honey circulate. There are some leftovers for everyone. In turn I eat some jam, some sausage, some honey. By stuffing ourselves, we forget our fatigue, our march of fifty kilometers. We are all moved by the warm welcome of these poor people who want to celebrate tonight their defenders of tomorrow.

The hoarse voice of Martinet, a small, resourceful guy from Belleville, dominates the uproar. Full mouth, a liter in each hand, he reassures the crowd with an accent from the rue Ramponeau.⁴⁷ "Do not worry, old friends, we are here for some shooting! Ah! The poor Prussians, what are they going to get!"
(36)

I will never forget the extraordinary sight of the village square at midnight, fantastically illuminated by the glow of nearby fires, where, to the sound of cannon, a crowd of soldiers and peasants fraternized in a brouhaha of gaiety, quiet confidence and enthusiasm.

⁴⁶ Lexy is a commune in northeastern France about two miles northeast of Cons-la-Grandville.

⁴⁷ La rue Ramponeau is a street in the Belleville quarter of Paris.

III
THE GREAT ATTACK
The Fighting around Longwy and Longuyon

(40)
22 August

I slept soundly in an attic. At dawn, the captain hailed me, “the food has not arrived. Scavenge the countryside; it’s necessary to find something to feed the company!” Flanked by Grenier Jr. and de Calvas, a small Parisian, pale and frail like a young girl (who has replaced Grenier Sr. who became a cyclist, as supply officer). I ran to the bakery and retained an entire batch; then I visit the grocers and round up all their preserves. When the bread is ready I throw the hot boules with the preserves in a small cart and I rejoin the company. But as I begin to distribute, the head of the battalion runs up at the gallop and shouts to me.

“You imbecile! Give me a fucking break with your distributions! We don’t have the time to eat today!”

The battalion sets off, leaving Lexy (40) and goes to take up a position on the plain. I am with my small cart and, when the companies form up in lines of four by sections, facing south, the captain orders me to distribute the food. Aided by Grenier and Calvas, I throw the loaves and the cans on the fly.

As we arrive at the lieutenant’s section, I see on the horizon four white spots; it looks like tufts of cotton wool stitched in the blue sky.

“Aha,” says lieutenant F.” That’s their shrapnel!”

The men, crouched in the grass, turn, and looking at the horizon, joke as they follow the small cotton balls with their eyes. One after another, four small round clouds expand across the same line, in the sky, then disperse by the wind. At each new salvo, the smoke approaches us.

Huh! A gust bursts over the road where some hussars in light blue tunics patrol. A cavalryman falls from his stirrups, rolls under his mount, and does not move. The others, prick their stirrups, and with noses on the horses’ manes, gallop off. Suddenly, going back to the cause of what happened, (41) we recognize the imminent danger. In fact, this first victim, this hussar cut down in a second, disconcerts us. We knew that in each battle there were some dead, and yet we were so joyfully indifferent, that when a tragic and unforeseen accident saddens a party, we remain unfazed. I see the smile freeze on the lips of my comrades. The salvo is getting closer to about a hundred meters. Now we regard these dangerous small clouds with less curiosity and more apprehension.

“All at once, my friend,” Grenier says to me. “We’re going to catch one.”

Suddenly, strident whistles that end in furious sneers hurl us face down, frightened. The volley explodes over us. Some explosions, some pieces of shrapnel lash the air, a big piece comes buzzing, crashing next to my knee; impulsively, as if to parry a blow, I protect my face with my arms.

The lieutenant, in a clear voice, as if reciting theories about maneuvers declares.

"We are under artillery fire. Salvos. Take cover!"

(42)

The men, on their knees, huddled, knapsacks over their heads, arching their backs, glued to one another. New squeals, new explosions.

"Volley," announces the lieutenant, very pale.

The shrapnel rains down, ricocheting on the camp bowls, a pierced canteen pisses out its wine, a rocket stays for a long time in the air. My head under the knapsack I take a quick glance at my neighbors, panting, shaking with nervous tremors, mouths contracted in a hideous grin, all of them chattering, their faces racked by the terror that recalls the grotesque gargoyles of Notre Dame; in this bizarre posture of prostration, arms crossed on chests, lowered heads, they have the appearance of supplicants who offer their neck to the executioner.

"Dzin-baiing! Psiou..Brainggn!"

"Volley" repeats the lieutenant, imperturbable.

The sneer of shells is unbearable; it looks like they are laughing at our anguish before killing us. The expectation of death is unbearable. (43) How much longer is this torture going to last? Why don't we move? Are we going to rest here, immobile, to get chopped up without doing anything?

Dzin...Brâon!...Dziou...brâon!...Dchin...bingh!

After each volley, there was a great silence. We hear only hurried gasps.

"By section! Forward, move up!" Suddenly shouts the captain.

The lieutenant leaps forward, the section throws itself by his side. What a joy to run, to change place, to feel that we are trying to avoid a fatal destiny. The lieutenant throws himself to the ground; the section falls down, piling up behind him. A funny idea occurs to me: "No need to threaten with detention today to get the poilus to lie down quickly!"

Another rush forward, running, side by side. Shrapnel follows our pursuit. At each volley, catching my breath, I think. "This time, it's it, it's it for me!"

Over there, about fifty meters away, is a wall. The captain, who lengthens his stride, shouts "to the wall!" It's an unrestrained rush! I run behind the lieutenant. I run with all my strength. I arrive at the base of the wall (44) breathless. I run to climb it; the stones fall out; my foot slips; the knapsack pulls me down. With a terrible effort, I get up; I roll to the other side, into nettles. Pell-mell the men scale the obstacle, tumbling over one another; the little ones beg for help; soon below, the men, pale, panting, bulging eyes, huddle against the walls. Some, during the run had thrown away their knapsacks. Corporal Rivet, who had lost his cap, says to me between two hiccups.

"Oh well! My man, if I had thought that this was war!"

"I thought that I had a heart attack," says another.

"If all the days are going to be like this one, I'd prefer to be killed right away!"

The company reassembles in the shelter of a farm. All the men are very pale, some still tremble nervously. I admire our lieutenant. A moment ago he showed an admirable sang-froid, and he has kept the men under fire in good order by his calm and decisive attitude. Now, he tries to pull them together, telling them that the German shells are exploding too high, and that by maneuvering correctly under the bombardment (45) (as we have just done) our losses will be minimized and that we will quickly get used to more demoralizing effects than the murderous fire of the enemy artillery. He reassures one, chats with another, he knows how to touch the self-esteem of everyone.

"You all make a fine appearance," he exclaims. "You are not cardboard soldiers! You should be proud to have received your baptism of fire!"

No, we are not paper soldiers! But our first contact with war has been a rude surprise. In their insouciant carelessness, the majority of my comrades never thought about the horrors of war. They saw the battle only through patriotic pictures. Since our departure from Paris, the Bulletin des Armées entertained us with a blissful allusion to our father's war. We believed the stories of the Alboches who were going to be toast. Convinced of the crushing superiority of our artillery and our airplanes, we naively imagined the campaign as a military walk, a succession of rapid and brilliant victories. The early thunderbolt, revealing the appalling disproportion between (46) the engines of death and tiny soldiers, whose nervous system is not up to such assaults, has suddenly made us understand that the struggle that is beginning would be a terrible test for us.

“Say, lieutenant,” declares Grenier. “Summing up the general opinion, it looks like they are defending themselves, those bastards!”

Our battalion is undoubtedly in reserve because the captain installs us on the edge of a forest. We put down our knapsacks, we breathe a little. In front of us troops move in all directions. A regiment goes by singing towards Lexy which is burning. Some sections returning from combat retreat across the fields. Are we victorious? No one knows.

Suddenly a thunderclap explodes next to us; an enormous shower of black smoke seems to spring from the ground, throwing into the sky hundreds of clods of soil that fall like hail on our heads; it's a large melinite shell that has just exploded a few steps from us.⁴⁸

We install ourselves behind some hay stacks. Happily, the enemy extends his fire. However, at each detonation, some men hide their head in the straw.

“Ah! Ah! Ostriches!” exclaims the sergeant-major H* who (47) calmly sits cross-legged and rolls a cigarette.

A whistle; the company enters the woods. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief; we are better protected under the great trees than on the plain. We take up a position on the summit of a very steep and wooded hill, below us the foliage of a beautiful, leafy forest up to the Belgian plain, where some small villages, seen from so high, give the impression of figures on a map.

Some large explosions resound. The enemy is shelling the wood with some large caliber artillery pieces. We also perceive the rustling of big shells that seem to slip in fits and starts on invisible air railings and will burst three or four kilometers away, on the villages of the plain.

“Our position is very strong,” explains the adjutant. “The Germans will come out in front of us. From our perch, we will shoot them at will.”

The heat becomes overwhelming. We have all emptied our canteens since morning, and our thirst cruelly tortures us.

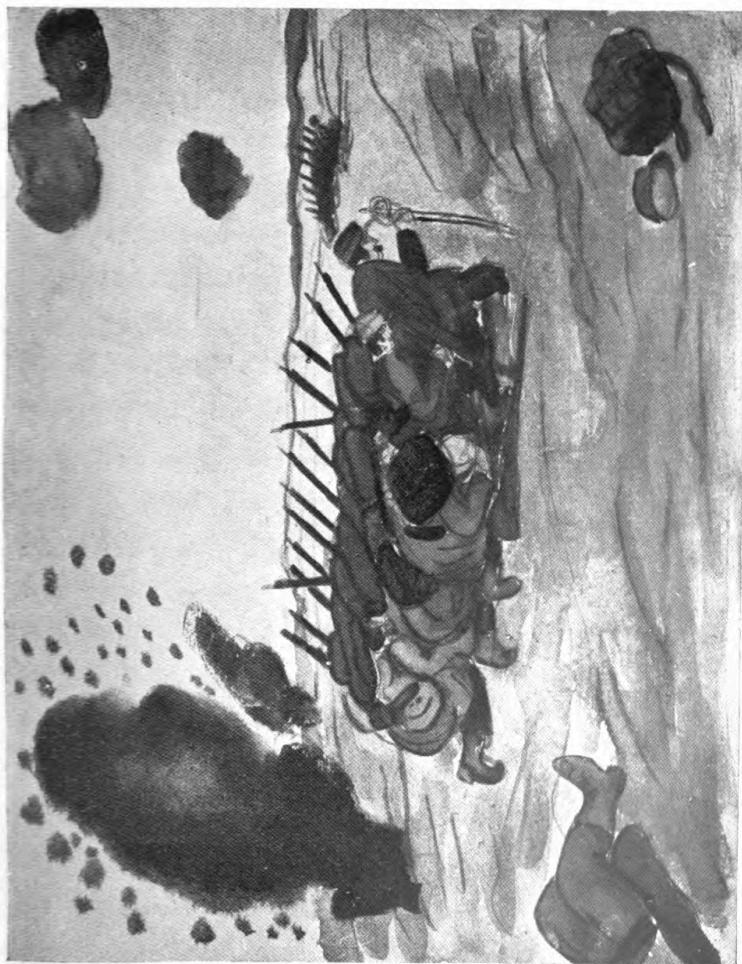
Towards 4 o'clock, the order to retreat arrives. Following the captain, we enter a wood that the enemy methodically sprinkles with large shells. (48) Explosions of an unheard-of violence rend the atmosphere and echo for a long time under the tall trees. Broken branches lash the ground with their shivering foliage; some trees are entirely shattered, cut in two as if by a gigantic hatchet; they collapse with a frightful cracking; mowed

⁴⁸ Melinite was a high explosive used in World War I.

down like blades of grass, the giants of the forest collapse in a crash of thunder, crushing in their fall all that lives in their shadows. Preserving themselves as best as they can, the soldiers, in scattered groups, run from trunk to trunk, following the sunken paths, bent over, tumbling in holes, stupefied by thunderclaps which pursue them from clearing to clearing. With big drops of sweat, and weakened by fatigue and the heat, we only stop our desperate run to eagerly mop up the muddy water.

Finally, we are out of that infernal forest! As soon as the company reassembles in a field, near the caisson of a demolished artillery piece, the sub-lieutenant says to me in a low voice.

“Have you noticed the power of their heavy artillery? If they acquire more accuracy with the precision of their fire, it will be terrible, and



LA CARAPACE

(49) alas, we are only able to respond with our small 75s!"

All of our regiments beat a retreat. At Tellancourt, a frontier village, I encounter Marcel Chassin, and he informs me that the 1st battalion has been annihilated this morning at Cutry.⁴⁹

We come across the first cart of wounded; they lie immobile, side by side, on a litter splattered with blood; they have waxen faces; no one cries. I ask of one of them who has his head bandaged and arm in a sling if he has seen the Prussians. He spit out a stream of red saliva and says:"

"Me? I didn't see anything."

23 August

I wake up at dawn in a small field; Calvas and Grenier are stretching. We eat some sardines on bread; the others look at us with envy; during the rush yesterday under the shells, many threw away their food to run faster, and today they have nothing to put in their mouths.

The company assembles and goes to take a position on the plain. In passing a field of alfalfa, the adjutant and a man rush together over a moldy loaf of bread (50), each claim to have seen it first; the adjutant, a brave man, finishes by cutting the bread in half. We deploy at a quick step and dig a trench for riflemen to be on their knee. Morale which was a little low after the anguished hours yesterday, has risen. "Today we are firmly waiting for them," declare the men. "They are not always going to be fighting with just shells and they will fall!" The first-class riflemen talk about distinguishing themselves.

Three German prisoners pass by, heads lowered. These are the first enemy that we have seen, some reconnaissance uhlans that a company of engineers just encircled in the woods. They have a gray uniform, dirty and torn, big boots and hair cut short. The captors have kept their helmets as trophies. The order to not insult the defeated is religiously observed. "They do not look so very terrible, these youngsters," declares the adjutant.

The captain rides up on his horse and specifies our role to us in the action that is being prepared.

"It is not necessary to engage the enemy. When the lines of German riflemen appear,

⁴⁹ Tellancourt is a commune in northeastern France on the border with Belgium, about four miles north-northeast of Longuyon. Cutry is about five miles east-southeast of Tellancourt, very close to Longwy.

each man will fire his gun, then will fall back towards woods on the right (51) to find the second line of trenches where there are a number of riflemen and the machine gun!"

"We're going to have a bad time," explains the adjutant, "when we fall back uncovered. But it's an absolutely necessary feint."

The German shells approach one hundred meters closer with each salvo. The company that extends our line to the left falls back; I have the impression that we've been forgotten. The shells approach.

Suddenly the adjutant shouts: "Up!" The entire line gets up. Two great shells whistle and explode, one in the middle of the men who are running, the other at the precise place that we have just left.

Finally, we see under the smoke. Hardly have we left the field of fire that the machine guns begin to clack. The fusillade rages. We rest in reserve in the woods, without the ability to follow the battle as we hide behind a thick curtain of shrubs.

In about a quarter of an hour the lieutenant tells us, "Follow me!" We pass next to a battery of 75s so well camouflaged that ten meters away you would not see it. It crackles without respite. We stop an instant to drink from a cistern; (52) then, still under the leadership of the lieutenant, we fall into a ravine. To climb the other side, it's a real ascent. On top, we find ourselves on a large road. Some wounded file by; some officers assemble the stragglers; the colonel, with grand gestures, shouts,

"Save my horses! Save my flag! I am going to re-assemble what remains of my regiment!"

How! We are already beaten? We retreat without us having fired a single shot? I don't understand anything!

"If that's the way we think of going to Berlin," smiles Hatter.

"Funny war," says another. "You never see the enemy!"

The lieutenant assembles the company in a column of fours on the road, and we set off on the march. Some lightly wounded men march in the ranks with the others. A poor devil who bandaged himself shouts, "who has a package of bandages to give to me?" I threw him some extra bandages that I had.

At the entry to Longuyon, some women in white, some aides press around the (53) stretcher bearers in front of a porch where the Red Cross flag flies. Some wounded quit

the ranks to go and get bandaged. So, this is Longuyon, the small flirty village where yesterday we had filed through as conquerors, feted, acclaimed, flowered by an enthusiastic population, Longuyon, where we now pass vanquished. The windows are closed, shops closed. Behind the curtains, some people watch us.

[censored]

“Go ahead there, hey you, packet!” answers, in the crowd, a soldier whose face is covered by a bloody bandage.

On the main street of the village, we see only a mixture of different caps. A crowd of soldiers with haggard eyes, covered with sweat and dust, uniforms torn, press together with insults and shouts. All the regiments are mixed up. The pavement is encumbered with large carts filled with wounded who groan at every jolt. A sergeant with a bandaged foot clings desperately to a car while the occupants shout at him. “There is no more room!” A wave of soldiers (54) mix with the civilians who flee, carrying trunks on their shoulders, wives distraught, trailing their children and who, to save themselves, have put on their best dresses and their Sunday flower hats. In the middle of this frightful mess, the artillery retreats at a full gallop in a cloud of dust; the artillery men, hitting their panting animals with the handle of their whips, shout “Make room! Space!” The crowd of infantryman half opens with a shout; the teams bounce over the pavers with a hellish din, provoking a terrible swirl in the human tide that crashes against the walls of the houses.

A scramble throws me into a corridor. I find myself nose to nose with a young blonde girl.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a bit of bread, mademoiselle?”

The young girl hands me a loaf. I thank her and I return into the crowd.

As we follow the highway, leaving the Longuyon choke point, violent detonations explode next to us. Soldiers and civilians jump pell-mell into holes. On the road there remains only a small baby carriage abandoned.

(55)

“What a bunch of idiots,” shouts lieutenant Ch*. “It’s our artillery that is firing!” We get a little sheepish and laugh at our mistake; a little further along we pass some French pieces that are firing over our heads to protect our retreat. We had taken the “departing” shells for some “arriving.”

The Germans search to locate our batteries, and some large shells with black smoke begin to fall on the plateau. I think with some angst of the horrible hash that a shell

would make falling in that compact crowd. Continuously interrupted by convoys, the column moves forward in fits and starts; the congestion produces violent jostling. The men are aggravated, impatient.

“So, go ahead! Go, God damn it!”

“He wants us all to screw up here!”

After a very painful march we arrive at night in a large meadow before the village of Saint-Laurent.⁵⁰ The companies assemble to bivouac. The food, that has not reached us for four days, is greeted with cheers. Soon, near the stacked rifles, silhouettes flutter around campfires that sparkle. The corporals give some orders. The squad cooks take on important airs. (56) Some men go for water, others for wood. The hustlers, charged with canteens, go to the village to search for some pinard “at whatever price.”

Reassured to the idea of eating hot food and drinking some wine, the men forget their fatigue. Around the hearths, the carefree poilus, lively faces, move, joke, laugh out loud.

The captain comes with Rivière, who was thought to have been killed.

“So! We eat today?” says Rivière. “Count me in.”

24 August

I wake up at dawn, chilled. It drizzles. In front of us the village of Saint-Laurent fades into blurred lines in the morning fog. It’s prohibited to light a fire, and so no coffee. Some artillery files along the road, going back towards Longuyon; the artillery men, enveloped in their great somber and muddy coats right up to their caps, sleep on their caissons.

The regiment assembles in place; the call to arms goes rapidly, then:

“Forward by fours, march!”

Stomach empty, we leave in the rain, in the gray morning, wading through the mud (57) covering the way. Where are we going? No one knows. The noise indicates that the army corps has retaken the offensive towards Longuyon.

In about an hour of march, we see on top of a hill some autos, an escort, a tricolor pennant. A bearded, very tall general is standing in the middle of his staff and giving instructions to the officers who are examining some maps. As we arrive at the spot of the group, our colonel approaches the general, and saluting at six paces, at impeccable attention, inquires:

⁵⁰Saint-Laurent-sur-Othain is a very small village about four miles to the southwest of Longuyon.

“General, I have not received any order.”

“Yes, yes!” says the general while caressing his black beard. “Well colonel, we are trying to use you. Please give me a liaison officer. “

The regiment takes up combat formation on some grassy hills. We advance along a marshy lowland, at first in line of sections by four, then in a line of squads single file, the men in line behind their corporal. We hear the bombardment, but the shells explode still far enough away from us, forming an arc of fire in the sky above some French batteries installed on the flank of a hill that fire without stopping. We climb, arm in hand, a rather steep slope; I notice that I (58) have lost one of my leggings but this is not the moment to return to the rear for it. On arriving at the crest, someone shouts:

“Towards the right, riflemen. Get down!”

We deploy in a line of rifles, and we lay flat on the crest, noses in the grass. We straighten our line by crawling. How far away from us is the enemy? Are there other troops marching in front of us? I don’t know. Some bullets whistle, angry, almost at the top of the ridge: bziou, bzing, pi-ou!

“Aha! Watch to not get one in the face,” Grenier, who has promised to be my comrade in battle, whispers to me.

At first, I do not dare to raise my nose; my horizon is a meter in front of me; I don’t see anything but blades of grass off to infinity; two molehills and an anthill. In a virgin forest in miniature, there are a multitude of insects, golden beetles, green flies, grasshoppers, locusts, ants who circulate, busy. I am curious of the comings and goings of this little world that does not know that there is war among men, and I dream that in the immense battle that engages me, I am also an infinitely tiny being.

(59)

My ideas, my sentiments, my will, how to weigh all this at the present moment? Perhaps a stray shell is going to all at once reduce me to dust, without being able to protect myself better than a gnat being accidentally crushed. Waiting each second for blind death, I bitterly sense how I am little, a humble peon, anonymous on the immense chessboard of the battle! My nose in the ground, some literary memories come back to me. I think of the charming *Micromégas*⁵¹ of Voltaire and I dream; the inhabitants of other planets—if they exist—must be following the adventures of the great melee where millions of men will be slaughtered, with the same smile, a bit disdainful, that I grant to the small red ants that bravely climb to the assault of the molehill.

⁵¹ *Micromégas* is a 1752 “science fiction” novella by Voltaire that is based on a visit to Earth of a being from a planet around the star Sirius and his companion from Saturn.

Little by little, I get used to the music of the bullets; I look around me. The small Grenier has dug a small ditch, with his pick, in which he has stashed his head with his knapsack above—the “personal shield” recommended by theory—and he waits the course of developments panting like a breathless dog. Each time that a bullet passes near to him, he arches his back and makes a grimace like Punchinello⁵² (60) that makes me laugh in spite of myself. Splattered in the high grass, immobile, the line of riflemen seems dead. Some men, tired, fall asleep. Only captain S..., in flaming red pants, is standing, very gallant, cap with his golden stripes lightly on his ears, smoking a cigarette.

“He has no fear, the captain,” declares Grenier, admiringly.

In front of us extends a grassy plateau, bordered on the horizon by a small, thick wood that is undoubtedly occupied by the enemy. To the left, a light bulge of rolling terrain is continually swept by German shells. A section that tries to cross the crest is chopped up by a big black shell. I see the soldiers fly to the left and right. When the black smoke dissipates, some men still run, but there are small piles of blue and red that no longer budge. I sense these frightful vicissitudes as an attentive spectator but almost without emotion. Perhaps because I myself might fall in a similar accident.

Suddenly, an order passes, repeated by the NCOs,

“Everyone up! Forward!”

The line of riflemen emerges from the tall grass, appears upright, shakes itself (61); for me, it’s a relief, a true relaxation to feel on the march, that we are going forward, instead of waiting foolishly for death in place.

“Stay in line! NCOs, watch the alignment! It’s of the utmost importance!” commands the captain with the same voice as if on maneuvers.

We advance in the grass, at a walking pace, arms at hand. The bullets sing in the air over our heads. Arriving at the edge of the small wood, the commander, who marches along with the first line of riflemen, shouts:

“Third battalion, at my command! Fix bayonets!”

Just at that moment, as if by a miracle, the sun shone through the clouds, resplendent, and bathed us with its rays. The officers drew their sabers; we adjusted our bayonets while marching. A shiver ran through the ranks. My heart beat as if breaking; but I was no longer anxious just now, because it was not necessary to sit waiting for the luck of a

⁵² Punchinello is a fat, short, humpbacked clown.

shell. I cannot wait. My comrades taste the same drunkenness as me. All of their eyes shine with a ferocious joy. We intensely feel that nothing can resist us. All must bend before us. Shivering with a untranslatable pleasure, I glance (62) behind. Bravo! Other lines of riflemen appear, ready to reinforce us for the final assault: it's a moving forest of bayonets, shining under the rays of the sun!

"Ah! Splendid!" says a man. "We are going there like a fork!"

For two days we fight without seeing the enemy. Those cowards struck us from a distance with their large shells. We have had some comrades killed and mutilated, and we have not had the occasion to defend ourselves, arms tied behind our backs! But today, God have mercy! It's man to man that we will have to measure ourselves! Hearts beat, hands clench nervously the wood of the rifle, bayonets high, ready to leap forward, we increase the pace, we will run by letting out frightful screams. And suddenly, just as we have bypassed the small wood, an order is given.

"Replace the bayonets!"

Put the bayonet back in its sheath, without skewering a single Prussian, what a deception! The élan is broken, the enthusiasm drenched coldly! Then, were we wrong? The enemy is not occupying the wood?

In front of us stands a bare hillside; (63) not a tree, not a wall, not a wave of ground; could the enemy be entrenched up there?

We climb the hill, in lines, riflemen a few steps behind one another. The bullets whistle by, shrapnel screams over our heads with a furious sneer; sprinkling the bullets that ping the air between us; some great shells explode with a thunderous sound, upending geysers of earth that fall back as hailstones on our heads. Troubled by this horrible din, deafened by the explosions, ears buzzing, I don't hear the orders that are shouted. I try not to lose sight of the adjutant, my section chief. Deaf, dumb and drunk of the dust and noise, incapable of thinking, I march automatically, as if in a dream. A sole idea, a sole will, occupies all the whole shrunken field of my consciousness. Forward! Forward! Forward!

I see men confusedly crumble to the right, to the left. The captain leaps into the smoke. A bugle, standing, sounds the charge with full lungs and then falls. The ranks thin. We still advance. No one looks back.

We move forward by leaps; at the signal from the adjutant, we stand, we move forward (64), one runs, straight-forward, weighed down by knapsack, cramped by the cartridges, the canteen, the musette that rattles on the side; then you throw yourself on the ground,

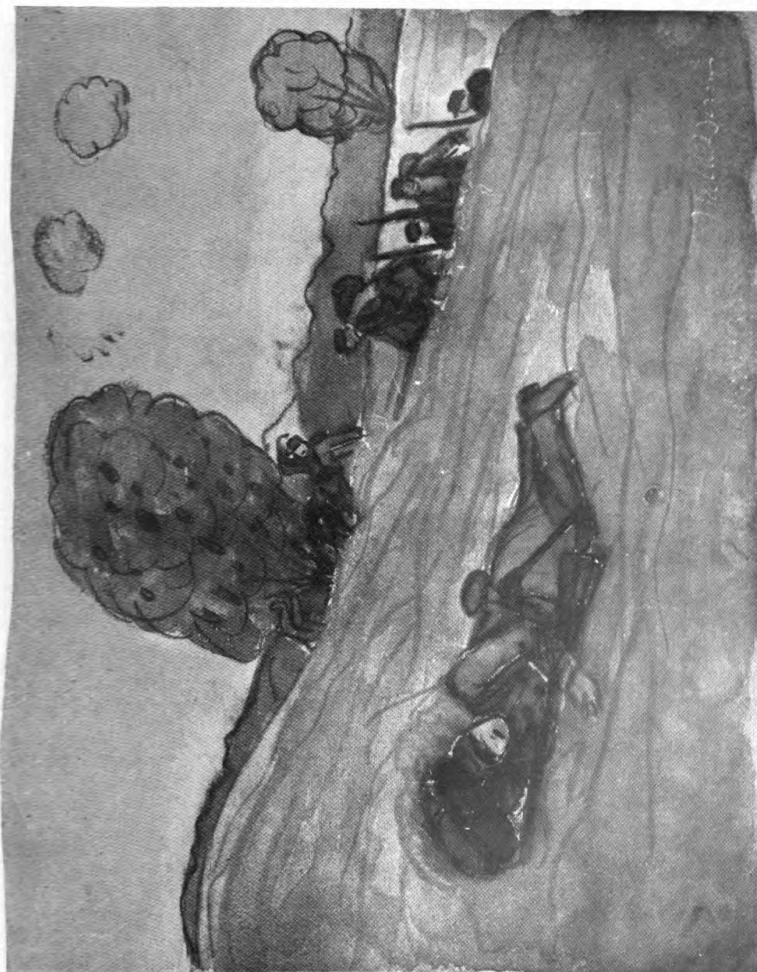
breathless. Some drink during the run, others are hit in the head getting up. No one pays attention to their neighbor, whatever! A single thing is important; to advance!

The bullets arrive in volleys, very low, churning up the ground a few steps in front of us.

"They are mowing us down with machine guns," says my neighbor who, an instant later, does not get up.

Another leap! We are about forty meters from the crest, and the enemy who machine guns us is still invisible. We have still not fired a shot! Although he does not make out the objective, the adjutant decides to order some volleys to keep the men in control. We are not more than a dozen that fire randomly; dead or wounded, the other men of the section are resting on the side of the hill.

It seems to me that it has been hours that I am extended in this furrow and that we no longer advance. I stay immobile, curled up, in a ball between two big clods of earth, knapsack over my head, my hands between the thighs to protect



EN TIRAILLEURS

(65) the stomach. I hear everything near the enemy coffee grinders: tac, tac, tac, tac, tac. It seems to me that if I budge, I am going to be immediately killed. The bullets flow by. A projectile ricochets against a rock, skipping between my neighbor and me. I hear the dull sound of the bullet piercing something. Not hearing any moaning, I say to the other:

“Hey, old man, is that you that it hit?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Where are you wounded?”

“I don’t know, in the thigh perhaps.” He responds to me without moving.

The rain of steel continues. The air is furrowed with squeaks, squeals, whistles, buzzing, hooting. It’s infernal music! For each bullet that hits, I think, “That one is for me, no, that one.” I dream of my parents, of all the other dear ones that I will never see again because I feel that I’m going to die in this damn furrow! Then I react, I curse, I try to be brave with myself. It seems to me that this critical position cannot endure; I say to myself that if I leave living from this bad spot and that one day, joking about my anxieties, when I recount this episode while taking a cup of tea with some women, they will not believe me!

(66)

Little by little I get accustomed to the terrible expectation of death. Each minute gained brings me no doubt closer to deliverance. I get up on my elbows, I risk a glance at my comrades. They are stretched out side by side, immobile, head under knapsack. Are they alive? The adjutant raises his head, looks over the field of fire with his lorgnette. To “show off”, I yell at him:

“Sir, it’s not worth the rue de Belleville!”⁵³

Again, I am stuck to the ground. I try to reason. For how long have we been here? Why hasn’t the second assault wave come to reinforce us? Stuck to the ground by a terrible cross fire of machine guns, we are not able to progress. We have lost two thirds of our effectives; are they going to let us in this terrible position, without aiding us, just to the minute where we will all be killed? Why haven’t we received any orders? And our artillery, what the f* is it doing?

Suddenly, I hear a shout: “Back! We are retreating!” I turn, afraid of having understood! Amazement! Exactly! The lines of men who were supposed to reinforce us for the final charge, are retreating at a run. There is a gap of three hundred meters (67) behind us!

⁵³ La rue de Belleville is a street in one of the suburbs of Paris.

The section is “in the air”, completely isolated. If the Prussians advance, we are going to be surrounded, massacred!

The adjutant makes a sign to us to crawl up to a small field of potatoes. On elbows, thighs, I advance, my head against the muddy boots of a comrade. I'm there! Around me the bullets whip the loose earth, beheading potato tops. We are twenty meters from a large road bordered by trees. The ditch by the road, that's salvation! But it's necessary to cross a space covered and beaten by the machine gun fire. Dirty luck! A man leaps up, takes a few steps, collapses without a cry, face to the ground, arms crossed. A second jumps out, clears half of the ground, balls up like a rabbit hit, and screams, hands on his stomach, “Oh! La la! Oh! La la la!” A third departs, stops abruptly, turns toward us, his face bloody, and falls down groaning with a small child's voice: “Mama! Ah! Mama!”

The adjutant pulls him in, then the men pass unhindered. I am the last; nothing to hope for if I fall! I run with all my might, I jump down into the ditch, I huddle there, saved! (68)

Breathless, I examine the situation. As far as I can see, the French line is retreating, and I repeat, stunned, with as much astonishment as powerless rage:

“But, we're going crazy! God damn, God damn! Crazy!”

[censored]

In the ditch, huddled in twos to avoid the fire of machine guns, the men, pell-mell, run panting. I follow, alas! I am one of the last! I will never get to the end without being wounded. To run faster (69) the men throw their knapsacks to the ground, their musettes; some terribly mutilated, wounded drag along on their stomachs like crushed slugs; the fleeing jostle them, jump over them. Martinet jumps along next to me, coat open. “Faster! Faster!” Yells the crazed pack! Behind us, it's death that pursues us: “Faster! Faster!” The bullets whistle, then large shells cover the ground with debris.

[censored]

“To me! To me, friends!” The wounded cry out with arms outstretched, begging. “Don't abandon me!” We hear nothing, we don't stop, we step over the corpses.

[censored]

“Faster! Faster!”

When we go forward, we cannot restrain the soldiers; who offer their head, their chest,

their stomach, all their flesh as a living target to machine guns, impatient to reach the enemy and throw them back in disorder; they run, in a frenetic élan, sure of victory! When one retreats, alas! When defeat is certain, we cannot hold them back either! When the order to retreat had been ordered, the sections that were the last in the assault have come out of the storm the least tested (70), yet in good order, under the command of their officers. But all the isolated men, all the survivors of the first wave, who just now were left on the crest of the hill just a few steps from the enemy, seeing the reinforcements retreat, have understood—with what anguish—that they are being abandoned! They realize that their officers have been killed! All at once, these enthusiastic soldiers, communicating in a sort of common will, existed only according to the assault wave that swept irresistibly towards the enemy; all of these individuals had voluntarily annihilated themselves in the mass; each had made for the common success the sacrifice of his life. At the first word of retreat, the weak units, decimated, without officers, broke up. The heroic men who, in climbing to the assault sure of victory, who had progressed forward under a terrifying fire, now when they run towards the rear, certain of defeat, are again become simple men, thrown into a terrible catastrophe. After having crazily exposed themselves, each has recovered and wants to save themselves at any price.

[censored]

Trying to escape from the conqueror, and not to be captured, to escape living from this (71) hell! The flow of infantrymen who roll pell-mell into this tragic ditch knows no more leaders, no more orders!

[censored]

No friends who slow them down! Each for himself! No pity! There are only animals stalked, trembling, panting, distraught, fleeing the terrible furnace, crumbling, get up, move again; it is the distraught flight, panic, the horrible save yourself!

Faster! Faster! Exploding with a terrible fracas on each side of the route, the great shells seem to pursue us. At each explosion we throw ourselves to the ground, one on top of the other, gasping; then we go again; there are some who don't get up.

At a bend in the road, I see a battery of artillery, dismounted behind a hill. Some officers, installed on the bank, scrutinize the horizon with binoculars and direct the fire with an extraordinary calmness.

Suddenly a volley of shells tumbles right in the middle of the battery. Some men are scattered; the caissons jump; shell fuses explode in all directions like some fireworks. Some men run through the smoke. We hear shouts, some orders.

“Bring around the limbers!” a supply officer (72) covered in blood from head to toe like a killer de la Vilette⁵⁴—his uniform is burgundy—jumps on a horse, shouting like he’s possessed, and flees, pulling another horse by the bridle. When he arrives on the main road, a shell mows down a pole that falls. The horses, lanced at full gallop, get entangled in the telegraph wires, crumble one over the other, crushing their rider.

Finally, we are out of the danger zone. Out of sight, the soldiers retreat, crossing fields, guns hanging on their straps. On the plain, down there, the columns in retreat resemble long red and blue caterpillars that advance undulating in the fields of golden wheat. Some artillery moves along a cliff road. Alongside the path a section of a regiment that did not take part in the attack is installed in a small set of trenches to cover the retreat.

Overwhelmed with fatigue and emotion, I sit down under a tree. The beating of my heart eases; my gasping slows. I breathe a deep sigh of relief; a physical pleasure hits me; overwhelmed to have (73) escaped the rain of the machine gun; like the survivor of some terrible cataclysm, I deliciously enjoy the feeling of myself living.

On the road a float of men with haggard eyes moves by, covered with sweat and dust, uniforms in shreds. Some soldiers have lost their cap, their knapsack, their equipment, saving only their rifle. Some wounded staggering, hopping, clinging to their comrades.

And I sadly dream about all the brave poilus, less lucky than us, who are fallen during the assault. After a success, the tears that one sheds for the dead should be less bitter; it is frightful to think that all the heroic sacrifices have not led to victory and that we have been forced to abandon our dead and wounded on the battlefield.

Just now, crouched a few paces from the enemy, we had waited impatiently for the wave of reinforcements to come, in an irresistible elan, to carry us to the line of our adversary; the crest was going to be captured, the enemy annihilated! And now the battle is lost. Just a moment ago it was the drunkenness of the charge, the certitude of victory; now it’s the retreat, perhaps a rout. It’s France invaded, (74) the homeland in danger! The suddenness of the reversal stupefies me. In this formidable shock, did the French army not provide a magnificent effort. *How could we be defeated?*

A call pulls me away from my reflections.

“Hey! Galtier, not dead, are you?”

It’s Girault, a small, shy, blond corporal who often replaced me on guard duty on Sundays in Paris. He tells me that it is time to get back on the road if we don’t want to

⁵⁴ Reference is to the slaughterhouses in the suburb of Paris

be taken prisoner. We descend down a grassy hill and come out in a deserted village. Suddenly our stomach cries out, famine. We knock on many doors; no response. Finally, an old, wrinkled and hunched peasant opens his house, gives us some bowls and brings a large pot of vegetable soup. Two corporals of the 76th and 46th who pass in the street, stop and come to draw with their canteen from the steaming pot. The old man questions us about the battles and asks us for advice, should he flee? The options are divided. Finally, he says,

“Never mind! I’m staying. I’ve never left my house.”

He guides us through his garden to the plain and indicates the path to us. We shake hands, (75) and all four of us leave. We talk, and everyone argues that it was his regiment that suffered the greatest shock and was the most tested.

Far away on the plain, we see disappear the queues and columns of French. There is no one else but the four of us on the road.

“Fortunately, we do not have to fear any uhlands!’ declares Girault.

Marching calmly on this sunny road, all four of us feel the joy of being alive, after having been close to death. Each lights his pipe; I give some tobacco to the corporals who are not from the regiment, and we continue our march, in silence, each one thinking of himself and his loved ones.

At a crossroads, the guys from the 76th and 46th leave us, and we wish each other good luck.

We enter a wood, and I see some men from the company, stretched out under a large oak tree. I am happy to find my “blues”, Guénet, my orderly, Parpex and Rousseau. Seeing me, their faces, covered with sweat and dust, light up. They exclaim, “Well, the corporal is not dead!”

(76)

“So, tell us, corporal Galtier, today, that counts as a battle?”

“The corporal, he no longer cares to go out at 5 o'clock in the evening!”

I take command of the small band and we rejoin a convoy of wounded. Some men of the company, stretched out on the straw, with bloody bandages, we say hello to. A poor bugger, strapped to the trunk of a car, is horrible to see: his lower jaw is nothing more than a bloody porridge, which is supported by a checkered handkerchief tied to the top of his head. The man does not seem to suffer; he is dazed. Seeing me, he stuttered my name, asking for water,

“Galtier, water, Galtier, water.”

I overcame my horror and helped him drink, and I told him few words of encouragement. But his face is so horribly mutilated that I don't know to whom I am talking.

A little further on we encounter a battery of 75s. The captain, a tall redhead, shouts to us,

“Hey! Infantry, who has a quart of water for me?”

I go forward and I empty the bottom of my canteen into his.

(77)

“Thanks corporal.”

We talk. He questions me, astonished that our spirit could have been broken so easily. I tell him of the terrible fire of machine guns and ask him why the artillery has not tried to destroy these formidable weapons.

“Don't you blame the artillery,” responds the captain. “We have destroyed two regiments of cavalry massed behind the village of Noers that actually would have sabered you!”

At the crossroads, an officer with an armband and binoculars, on horseback, informs the stragglers of the places for reassembly of their respective regiments.

“The *,” he says, “you will find your regiment at Merles. First road on the left, four kilometers.”

The presence of this staff officer, very calm, on this road, comforts us. When we left the torment, we had the impression that all was finished! I thought of Waterloo! And well, no! It is not the debacle that I dreaded. What comfort to see that despite the defeat the retreat is methodically organized and that there is some order in the disorder!

The night falls. Weary, (78) we rejoin the regiment near Merles where the staff of the army corps is located. Assembling in a field, around the flag, the * regiment counts barely half of its effectives. We happily find our comrades! Some we thought dead, others wounded. We shake hands with unrestrained joy; we congratulate and welcome each other to be safe and sound from this hot adventure.

Those who have not fought in war cannot comprehend with what emotion a soldier says: *my* regiment, *my* company, *my* squad. The regiment, all the men who wear the

same number on their badge, who have participated in the same actions, who have endured the same suffering, communicated the same enthusiasm; it's three thousand soldiers—or many less—grouped around the flag on which the glorious victories of the veterans are inscribed in letters of gold, around the colonel who says proudly: *my men*. The company, that's the large family of which the captain is the father, it's two hundred men who know their commander and who their commander knows. The squad, that's intimate, it's the small group in which each poilu participates: a soldier says: I managed it, *for the squad*; (79) in the barracks, it's the *men* of the same room who live for two years bedside by bedside, eating the same soup, writing to their old people under the same lamp; on the campaign, it's the small group around the fire at a bivouac, the dozen pour buggers who partake in the same pot of stew and who recognize the authority of the same corporal!

On the evening of a violent battle what good luck to be found around a good fire with the faces of friends! What joy to talk with old comrades, to exchange impressions, to recall while resting the anguishes that we endured! It is after suffering such frightful shocks that we feel how deeply we are attached to his fellow soldiers.

Each recounts his own adventure in the great melee, and the tales complement one another, coordinating; little by little we arrive at an idea together of the battle in which each has glimpsed only a small corner: certain companies managed to approach the enemy with bayonets; at certain points the Germans retreated in disorder; many men even reported some tawny-colored knapsacks (80) that the enemy infantry had abandoned in their precipitous flight. All the soldiers have the impression that with some reinforcements we would have taken the position at Noers and are enraged to have been stopped by the fire of some terrible machine guns and crushed then by the number of the enemy. I learn that in the course of a German counterattack the flag was almost captured. The colonel, revolver in hand, shouted "to the flag!" and assembled at once an honor guard that decided to be killed rather than let the enemy tear off the sacred emblem of the regiment!

Our losses, alas! Are very high. The lieutenant colonel, our battalion commander and *. Some officers are out of combat, killed or wounded. Certain companies are commanded this evening by some sergeants. In the company, of which a sub-officer has taken command, three officers are fallen. The sub-lieutenant CH*, seriously wounded in the chest, has confided his sword to corporal Lejoux, not wanting it to fall into the hands of the enemy; he did not know if he could carry it to an ambulance. Captain S has been decapitated.

[censored]

As for lieutenant F*, he received (81) a bullet full in the chest, while he was fearlessly

charging, sword unsheathed, ten meters in front of his section.

Certain companies, particularly those well tested, are reduced to about forty men, but we hope that a few stragglers will rejoin tomorrow. In our company, many men are absent at roll call. The sergeant-major receives information on the disappeared. Each names the comrade that he has seen fall. How many soldiers, corporals, sergeants, joyous and enthusiastic this morning at the assault, repose forever on the flank of the terrible hill at Noers!

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I go to inquire of some of my friends in other companies; Orange is reported missing; Danziger has been cut by a shell; Chassin has been successively wounded in the shoulder, ear and the thigh. We hear talk of the dead and the wounded. We are approaching with pained faces, always afraid to learn bad news; we talk in a low voice; the regiment is in mourning.

It is a dark night. I return to my section. My comrades are now silent, around a dying fire.

IV
THE RETREAT
Forced Marches - The Battering

(85)
25 August

The battalion assembles in a clearing. Captain P, on a horse, passes the companies in review and announces that he is taking command of the battalion.

He's an extraordinary figure, this captain P! Head of a condottiere⁵⁵; burning eyes, light colored colorful complexion, and under a raptor's nose a red mustache that seems to flare up. In Paris we knew him as lively, fantastic, remarkably intelligent; under fire he revealed a brilliant bravery. Yesterday, when his company reached fifty meters from the enemy and was stuck to the ground by an infernal fire, ceasing to progress, captain P seeing the rifle of a dead man, stood up and fired standing, in the face of machine guns, defying death, wounding the enemy in the fashion of the heroes of Homer: "Take that, pig! ... wham! ... Take that shit!" and he slaughtered the Boche as if on target practice. (86) How was he not touched? His invulnerability seemed extraordinary, and his men are convinced that he wore under his coat a shield of steel!

Standing on his stirrups, our new battalion chief harangues us.

"Yesterday, some mistakes have been made, there were some bad hesitations; especially, we were crushed by the numbers; but the regiment has done its duty well! The army of France is retreating, but will soon retake the offensive! Very soon, we will have the occasion to avenge our dead and take a dazzling revenge that I desire! Be sure, soldiers of the 3rd battalion, that you will always find in me a commander who will never have fear!"

These simple and energetic words hit us in our guts. We will follow this man everywhere, anywhere that he will lead us.

At first, we took up a position in swampy terrain, as support for a battery of Remailhos.⁵⁶ I open my knapsack which has greatly tired me, and I put on some clean underwear and throw away the dirty.

"Do you want to die with a white night shirt on?" banters a man.

After two hours of waiting in the grass, the order arrives to fall back. The company (87) marches in line with the regiment. As we enter into a wood, the sub-lieutenant is called to the colonel and meets with him for a few seconds. He returns to us at a gallop, a little pale, stops the company, and has it make a circle around him.

⁵⁵ The condottieri were the mercenary leaders of the military companies contracted by the Italian city-states in the late middle ages.

⁵⁶ An old model French artillery gun

“The company has the honor of being chosen today for a mission of sacrifice. We are going to protect the retreat of the division. The company will deploy in skirmishers at the edge of this wood, the men far apart from one another; when the Prussians appear, we will execute a heavy fire, to make it seem that the wood is heavily occupied. We will hold as long as we can. When I estimate that the regiment has had enough time to cross the Meuse, the men who remain can try to escape through the woods. They will find a bridge at Dun-sur-Meuse.⁵⁷ Here are the directions.”

This short speech does not put the men in a good mood. The soldier loves equality and always asks why it is him and not another who is chosen for this glorious mission from which one does not return.

The sub-lieutenant charges me to conduct a patrol in front of the woods to signal the arrival of the enemy.

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(88)

“You could not have chosen anyone other than a father” says one of the patrol men to me.

“Don’t worry!”

As for me, I do not despair of being able, if I am not wounded during combat, to reach the Meuse that I will cross swimming if the bridges are destroyed.

We are hidden in the grass for an hour, scrutinizing the horizon, when we learn that the regiment has retraced its steps. There is a counter order. The entire brigade will cover the retreat of the army. The physiognomy of the soldiers changed instantly; we are no longer to be sacrificed, everyone will be equally paid.

The day passes “marching.” We occupy some positions, abandon them, reoccupy them, beat a retreat, retrace our steps. Orders and counter orders succeed one another. The battalions, the regiments, mingle, outdo each other, mix on the paths, in the middle of very dense woods. Some enemy airplanes, who survey our lines and launch some flares oblige the men to constantly hide in the bushes.

(89)

“And our planes, where the fuck are they?” Ask our soldiers in a bad humor.

We are exhausted. Many, feet bloody, crawl with difficulty, some fall into a shell hole,

⁵⁷ A commune a little more than seventeen miles west-northwest of Verdun.

some who had saved their knapsack just until now throw it on the fly into the thickets. All the men are unhappy, unnerved by the hesitations of the command.

Towards 4 o'clock, while we are stationed near a railroad, an order comes: "Advance, crawling into the thickets, but without showing yourselves at the edge of the woods; the Prussians are six hundred meters away."

Then, as we are installed in the woods as skirmishers and the engineer sappers begin to use their hatchets to open breeches in the thickets to prepare large ways for our retreat, an authoritative voice shouts out,

"Everyone, leave the woods, without rifle and equipment."

What? Had I heard wrong? They are ordering us to quit our positions without weapons, while the Boche are six hundred meters away! What does this inconceivable order mean? My comrades look at each other, aghast.

"We should not go!" Says a man, "in case this is Prussian treachery?"
(90)

"Maybe we are surrounded and we are surrendering," says another one.

"It would not be worth the half of our friends who fell yesterday in the assault" declares corporal Broutat, "for us to go today, like a fart?"

"First, I don't want to retreat," I say in a low voice.

"Neither do I," says Broutat. "I'm keeping my rifle."

The two of us decide not to leave the woods and to keep our arms. If the capitulation of the regiment is confirmed, we will try to escape through the woods and reach the Meuse. As we work out the plans of evading, a revolver shot sounds at the edge of the woods.

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My heart beats furiously. A terrible anxiety overcomes me.

"Hey, there, why are you not leaving like the others?" A sergeant shouts at us, "Corporals are not exempt!"

And suddenly the mystery is cleared up. In our nervousness we interpret very simple orders in a very bizarre manner. (91) The enemy was further away than we thought. They made the men leave the woods to make a lot of noise to hide our firing; and as for

the revolver shot that got our attention, it is a horse that has just been brought down and that the soldiers are dismembering. Relieved, we laugh frankly at our mistake.

The lieutenant sent me on water detail with six “man buckets” to Merles, in front of the lines. The village is deserted. An old man, who is staying alone in his house, gave us some sour milk; we are crunching some green pears in the priest's garden. While the poilus gathered around the pump, on the square, a reconnaissance of mounted chasseurs, pretty, dapper, trotted into the village, carbines in hand. The officer in command seemed absolutely stupefied to find us there on the work detail.

“You have no soldiers in front of you!” He shouted. “The enemy could appear any minute, and you’re not going to stop them with your canvas buckets.”

In the meantime, a cyclist arrives to give us the order to immediately rejoin the regiment which is retreating. (92) We set off and an hour later catch up with the regiment first, then our company.

Night has fallen. We advance in silence along dirt roads and through woods. The march is painful; there are continually jolts; often we stop, and the exhausted men are able to stay standing only by leaning on their rifle padded by their knapsack; often it is necessary to run so that the column is not cut. My legs are so tired; my feet, plastered with bloody blisters, they make me suffer terribly. At each step I fight against the desire to sleep. At each pause I lay down in a ditch, without the courage to take off my knapsack, and my eyes close in spite of myself. A neighbor shakes me to depart. Many men, exhausted, sleep while marching and only wake up by bumping into a back or a hanging bowl. Certain ones, at the end of their tether, roll up in a ditch; their neighbors say to them. “Don’t rest there! You will be killed by the Prussians!” They hear nothing, already snoring.

Ah! To sleep! To Sleep! I march automatically, without thinking, like a sleep walker.

We arrive on a plain and on a large road straight road we rejoin another regiment. The ranks get mixed up. At each (93) village that we can see in the distance a luminous halo, we hope to halt. But the village is traversed without stopping, and the march continues into the night.

[censored]

No echo. We are too tired to think, to talk. A single desire obsesses us, to sleep.

We arrive in a large town: it’s Damvillers.⁵⁸ Are we going to camp here? Alas! The

⁵⁸ Damvillers is a commune about five miles north-northeast of Verdun.

village is already filled with troops. Some soldiers group themselves around large fires lighting up the sidewalk; piles of men are lying in the streets and snoring, annihilated. The hall, the barns, the attics are engorged with red pants. It is necessary to go further!

I cannot. I have the desire to let myself crawl in a creek like the others. But tomorrow it will be necessary to rejoin the ranks, and to quit my comrades breaks my heart. With a violent effort of will; I return to the stream of men that flows along slowly.

At midnight, a glow in the night: a small village, a silent street. While we sit down against the walls, worn out, (94) we wake the mayor; the camping assignments are rapidly distributed by company.

In the barn where we are going to finally be able to sleep I argue with sergeant Ballot about a place in a corner. Both of us are agitated, we fight; they separate us.

"You are going to have eight days in prison, you uncouth lout," the sergeant shouts at me, red with anger.

"Fuck you! Tomorrow I will be killed, or better you!"

I carry a bundle of straw. I throw it on the pavement, in the street, and I go to sleep under the stars, fully equipped, my rifle between my legs.

26 August

At 3 o'clock in the morning, the noise of soldiers who file by on the road wakes me. Ten minutes later, someone shouts "Everyone up!" I am still very bitter, it is necessary to march; the Prussians are arriving.

As we climb up a steep path overlooking the village, day breaks. We file through a forest by small paths, Indian style. half marching, half running. The Germans (95) send us a few shrapnel shells that don't hurt anyone.

After a long march, at the top of a hill, we see the Meuse. In embracing the admirable view of this thick and peaceful valley where the large river flows, gray in its harmonious banks, I feel myself penetrated by a sense of comfort. It seems to me, I don't know why, that I'm seeing the promised land!

We cross the river on a bridge that is mined. The regiment assembles on the other bank and make a long pause. Some soldiers who disappeared since the 24th and that we had thought dead, present themselves and are reintegrated into their sections. Dreading a reprimand, these stragglers tell, with fine details, of sensational exploits and the

extraordinary forced marches that they have executed to rejoin the regiment. One of them informs us that sub-lieutenant CH has been carried to an ambulance by one of his men, himself wounded in the arm.

We call the supply corporals. After the distributions, the sub-lieutenant orders me to stay in the rear to load two cases of conserves on the company's car. It is always with a little heartbreak that a soldier separates from his comrades-in-arms. Marching along (96) a big road is much more painful than moving forward, framed and trained in a flood of comrades.

The crates loaded on the top of the cart, the driver spurs on his horses and rejoins the convoy at a trot. I start off with a few stragglers.

We continually come across convoys of civilians. In large uncovered carts the peasants who flee before the invaders have piled the most precious of their possessions. At the top of a heterogenous pile of furniture, huge bales, cages of chickens, piles of clothes, are perched some women, very young children, the sick: there are also some old women in white bonnets, all wrinkled, who assuredly have never left their village and look at the countryside passing by with eyes open and thoughtful. The women do not send looks of disdain at us like the bourgeoisie of Longuyon; they feel, like us, crushed by a fatality against which it is useless to rebel. They pitied our fatigue, and we have pity for their misery. The men, stick in hand, march along the vehicles, pushing some animals in front of them. It's a lamentable procession of the "evacuated."

(97)

We cross Montfaucon,⁵⁹ a small village perched on a wooded peak that the gendarmes have evacuated and where I bought a large pot of currant jam.

At night, I arrive at Malancourt⁶⁰ on the dusty platform of a supply autobus. A brigade of infantry and artillery are camping in the village. It rains torrents. The road, plunged into darkness, is filled with cars, caissons, foragers, some "Madeleine-Bastille" busses.⁶¹ The drivers swear. Some bands of soldiers, who have not yet been able to get into the barns, wander down the street in the rain and knock on every closed door. Two or three cabarets with lighted windows are besieged by a noisy crowd.

I'm looking for my company, and I find the men of my section crowded one on top of the other in an attic full of dust and cobwebs. The roof has no windows; it stinks like a wet dog; as soon as you move, a fine dust rising from the hay sticks into your throat and makes you cough. I box myself in between two poilus; curled up, knees to chin, head crushing cobwebs. I feel (98) a delicious joy to be in the shelter from the storm, in the

⁵⁹ Montfaucon is a small commune about ten miles north-northwest of Verdun.

⁶⁰ Malancourt is a small commune about one mile south-southeast of Montfaucon.

⁶¹ Autobuses from Paris that served the Madeleine-Bastille bus route.

middle of my comrades.

27 August

Assembling at dawn. I enter a peasant house to grill a piece of meat on the embers, and I find Bonnal installed by the fireplace. While we are all shaggy and disgusting, Bonnal appears a model of coquetry, almost clean. Today he is freshly shaven. He explains to me complacently that the situation is excellent and that the army is executing a strategic retreat of which he expects the best results. His assurances comfort me; in fact, he has perhaps some insider knowledge because his uncle is a general.

We leave in the rain and pass through Montfaucon. The sub-lieutenant announces that we are going to have a long rest of which the regiment has a serious need. In the afternoon we arrive at Apremont where we are supposed to camp.⁶²

Apremont is a small, agreeable village, built on the flank of a wooded hill. After the terrible tests that we have endured, it is for us a real joy to reconnect with the life of the rear, to see some civilians. (99) Some women—dressed to the penultimate, Paris style—some cafes, some shops. One must have suffered from hunger and thirst to understand our intense satisfaction at the idea of drinking and eating for a few days at our fill.

Even before the rifles are stacked, the soldiers flowed into an assault on the inns. The shops are invaded by a boiling crowd and joyous tommies all equipped, dusty, ragged and who all want to be served at the same time. The traders are overwhelmed; some panic. In the cafes we make a chain from the cellar. Groceries and delicatessens are emptied, at a high price, understood! Even when they are satiated, the soldiers, long deprived of everything, buy, buy, for the pleasure of buying! Since I have the advantage of having long arms, I am able, with a few bruises, to buy white bread, two pounds of butter, wine, biscuits and slippers.

In the afternoon, the sub-lieutenant calls me: “Try to find some wine for the company. It’s still the best way to improve morale!”

That same evening, I buy a hundred liters of a terrible piquette⁶³ that the lieutenant declares (100) “Good enough” and the distribution of which eases my comrades.

After the distribution, Gotsener, a resourceful Parisian, takes me aside and says:

“I found a profitable item to check out tonight. Do you want to enjoy it?”

⁶² Apremont-la-Forêt is a very small commune about four miles west-northwest of Malancourt.

⁶³ Piquette is a French term which commonly refers to a very simple wine or wine substitute.

“A bed?”

“Better than that, my friend!”

I am intrigued. He leads me to the railroad line; on a siding a train seems abandoned; and in a sumptuous salon car I find three men, dirty as combs, on pearl gray benches, quietly sipping various aperitifs, smoking penny cigars.

28 August

Reinforcements of a thousand men arrived at the depot. The reservists are rapidly incorporated into the companies where they stand out as so many new faces. The captain of the reserves and the one who brought the detachment takes command of our battalion.

The wine that I distributed yesterday has made many men sick. The sub-lieutenant files a complaint; the rumor spreads that the producer [of the wine] (101) is a spy who tried to poison us.

According to the officers, we will rest here a week.

29 August

We leave Apremont with regret and go to camp at Charpentry.⁶⁴ The German planes bombard the French airfield, but it is us that receive the bombs.

I receive a letter from my mother who advises me “do not drink cold [water] and do not be reckless!” Poor parents!

30 August

We resume our move towards the north. A great march under a blazing sun. The men fall like flies. The majority of the reserve reinforcements, little used to marching, cry.

After having waited in vain for the enemy in combat formation, we go to camp at Saint-Juvin.⁶⁵ Night falls.

31 August, Trench Combat

⁶⁴ Charpentry is a commune about a mile to the southeast of Apremont.

⁶⁵ Saint-Juvin is a commune about five miles northwest of Apremont.

As we arrive in view of the village of Nouart,⁶⁶ very tired from a march in full (102) sun, our new battalion chef, captain C, whose horse prances, gives the exhausted men the assurance that we will not be engaged tonight.

“You will have time to rest this night!” He shouts to us. “The village of Nouart, which I believed to be in the hands of the enemy is occupied by the * regiment. As for us, we are actually in the general reserve for the army.”

An instant later, R, general of the division, arrives at a gallop. He stops his steaming steed brusquely before us and, standing on his stirrups, mustache bristling, eyes flaming, he harangues us with harsh gestures and hammering out the words:

“Soldiers! Today, it’s no longer a question of looking backwards. The army is retaking the offensive. Each must do his duty! All failure before the enemy will be punished [censored]”

“He didn’t say that we are the army general reserve,” one of my neighbors whispers to me.

The battalion takes up battle formation in a decline in the ground; then, after a long enough march through the woods, (103) we begin to see shells explode over a wooded ridge, ahead of us, the order is passed.

“Skirmishers!”

The general of the brigade jumps on the back of his horse, draws his sword and rides to the assault, in a line of skirmishers.

In single file, we enter a forest that is extremely thick. You have to make your way through the copses with sticks and kicks. The brambles staple us in passing; the thorns tear our hands; blinded by the branches that whip their faces, some men scream; creepers cling to us, from which one releases oneself with sudden shoulder thrusts; muffled by the bursting of the shells that smash the trees around us, we advance with extreme pain in thickets more and more inextricable. The scathing shots of French batteries that have taken a stand all around the woods stupefy us.

How long will we struggle through the thickets like a rabbit in a snare. Will we finally exit from these damn thickets? We have lost all orientation; no one has a compass. (104) We turn around ourselves like a hamster in his wheel.

Suddenly bullets whistle by, breaking some branches. The volley crackles to the right, to

⁶⁶ Nouart is about eight miles to the northeast of Saint-Juvin

the left, behind us! The bullets ping all the senses; the men throw themselves at the foot of some large trees. But on which side to hide? There are machine guns in enfilade and behind! Have we been encircled by the Prussians? Is it the French who are wrong? How to defend in these cross fires and should we fire at the risk of killing some comrades? The night falls little by little and the undergrowth fills with shade.

The men get discouraged. The men begin to panic.

"It's a trap that we have fallen into!"

"Not a one of us will return! We will all be bungled up in this damn forest!"

I would like to try again to exit from these thickets; I take the head of a column; I try to advance constantly in the same direction; we march for a long time; suddenly the woods clear! It's the edge; what a relief!

As we break out into a sort of clearing, the adjutant, followed by a few men, (105) goes down a grassy slope and runs towards us out of breath, all red, sword in hand. A staff officer who goes by at a little trot stops his horse and shouts at the adjutant:

"What the fuck's wrong with you there?"

"Captain, I climbed that crest there, and the Prussians fired at me!" cried the adjutant with an indignant air.

"Did you charge them?"

"No, no, only fired!"

"Good. Retreat immediately behind the woods. Here you are completely cut off from the rest of the troop and you risk being encircled. Go quick!"

The officer pricks his spurs and disappears.

"That's not good," says a man.

The adjutant regains his sang-froid, we file along a path at the edge of the woods. After six minutes on the path, we come out in a field where some soldiers are running in every direction under a violent bombardment. There are some sections that retreat in echelon; some other parts deploy in the cut of a railroad. Some straggling soldiers continuously exit from the woods. A few officers try to re-assemble their dispersed companies.

Out of breath by our race, we (106) walk across some ground torn up and that is sprinkled by large shells. An officer, squatting in a hole, shouts to us from afar.

“Get down in the name of God! Don’t expose yourselves! You are going to get us spotted!”

Suddenly, in the direction of the woods from which we are moving, echoes the sound of a charge: “There is a bit of drinking up there!” Then the furious clamor of a troop that is charging at bayonet sounds.

We want to rejoin the comrades who are launching the assault. But no one knows exactly where the line of fire is located. There are no orders; no one dares to take the initiative. Everyone gives his opinion aloud; some think that it is appropriate to fall back because night has completely fallen and we risk being surrounded and or to fall into some ambush. Others, of whom the entrancing sound of the charge has made their heart beat, want to march forward. But how to traverse, at 8 o’clock in the evening, this bushy wood where we were lost in the middle of the day.

The lieutenant of the * company assembles the scattered bands, forms a column of four and gives the signal for the retreat. The quartermaster and I are astonished that we do not try to rejoin the larger regiment that is (107) perhaps victorious. But the sub-lieutenant to whom we confided our doubts responds to us drily that he is under the command of the lieutenant of the * company. We do not say another word.

The column begins to march under the light of the moon. The lieutenant studies his compass.

Four stretcher bearers pass by next to us carrying a wounded man who screams terribly.

“What’s up with him?’ asks a voice.

“Two bullets in the genitals.”

“I like that it is him and not me!” replies the voice.

In the woods, the fusillade has stopped. The bombardment is over. We march in silence. I anxiously ask whether the lieutenant is well oriented and if all at once we are going to be made prisoners. Finally, we come out on a large road lined with poplars.

About a hundred meters away we come out at the side of the road on a convoy, and

suddenly a tall shadow stands up before us.

“Halt there! Where are you going? Who is in command?”

It’s an artillery officer, wrapped in his big-collared great coat. The lieutenant has disappeared. (108) It’s our sub-lieutenant who explains in a few words our situation.

“Ah! Ah! You are stragglers,” says the artillery officer. “Well, good! Rest here. You’ll protect my batteries during the night.”

Along the road some 75s are stopped. The artillerymen snore under the caissons, covered in their blankets.

We stretch out in a ditch, fully equipped, knapsack under the head and rifle at hand; a fine rain begins to fall; chilled we lay next to one another; I am too agitated to be able to fall asleep, and I am too cold also. As I begin to lose consciousness, a shout wakes me and startles me:

“Alert! Uhlans! Uhlans!”

We jump onto the road rifle at hand.

“France! France!” shouts a voice in the dark.

It’s a patrol of mounted chasseurs that is returning to our lines.

1 September, Fighting at Fossé⁶⁷

At dawn the sub-lieutenant re-assembles the company. The night passed shivering in the (109) ditch has hardly rested us. We begin to march at once and soon, at the edge of a wood, the panorama of the battle appears to us: a plain watered with big black smoke shells; some lines of skirmishers that seem minuscule; on the road the first wounded pass, whining, staggering, hopping.

“And as I see it,” declares Fouchard. “They are not waiting for us!”

The company deploys in lines of skirmishers, and the first wave advances through the field. There are already many waves in front of us. As we arrive at the first houses of a village—it’s Fossé—an officer comes to give some instruction to the sub-lieutenant: the company is artillery support.

⁶⁷ Fossé is a commune about a mile west of Nouart.

“That’s not a bad deal,” says the sub-lieutenant. We are supposed to protect a battery of 75s which is hidden in a fold of ground from an enemy surprise attack. We will not take part in the action that is engaged, but it is necessary for us not to move because there is no doubt that the enemy’s artillery will be looking for the battery.

A flag passes in front of our line, with its guard. The flag bearer, who is lost in the woods and has lost his regiment, asks (110) the sub-lieutenant permission to put the emblem under our protection.

Lying, nose in the grass, we wait. I light my pipe. The large shells—we call them “the tramways” pass purring over us and go on to explode with furor three hundred meters behind us, in a field where these are no soldiers.

Captain L--bizarre with his red beard that he has left grow shaggy since the departure from Paris--prances behind us, revolver in hand and shouts.

“Our mission is simple: *hold*. Everyone repeat: it is necessary to *hold*. We will hold till the end.”

Many times, he passes at a small trot behind our line, twisting his terrible eyes. They say that he is looking for something. Finally, he decides to talk.

“Is there among you a man, a true soldier, who has some *gnôle* for the captain?”⁶⁸

A man gets up out of the grass and laughing hands his canteen. The captain tastes it and has a long drink of the *eau-de-vie*, then two, then three, and throwing the empty canteen at its owner, he concludes.

(111)

“Thanks, comrade!”

Then standing on his stirrups, he shouts in a terrible voice.

“The first one who retreats, I will blow his brains out!”

A few shells explode about six meters in front of us, then in back. Splinters tear through the air. When I hear the hooting precursor, I always have the impression that I am personally targeted and that the projectile especially wants Jean Galtier-Boissière! During those moments of anxious waiting, each secretly makes some small calculations of the probability according to the points of the fall of the shell.

“I will be better on the right of my section, no, there, near to the lieutenant.”

⁶⁸ Eau-de-vie

But one has a fear of changing place in front of his comrades, and at the end of the day, one gets little by little used to the danger.

Braoom! A great black cloud has just exploded on my left, creating an enormous hole that still smokes. One dead, one wounded. The wounded man gets up, his head bloody, a finger cut off, and, throwing his equipment in the grass, sets off calmly for the rear, saying, with the accent of the rue de la Gaieté:⁶⁹

“I will be able to cure my diarrhea!”

(112)

“Two wounds!” A jokester shouts to him. “So, you do not want to leave it for others, spoiler, go!”

Captain L. continues to promenade on his horse under the rain of shells, haranguing the men and gesticulating. He’s a cavalry man out of place. On his rearing horse, frightened by the detonations, he has school exercises executed. Soldiers watch the horse kneel obediently, rear up at command - and they no longer think about shells.

Towards noon the captain gallops behind us shouting at the top of his voice.

“Brave soldiers, good news! An entire army corps is coming to our aid; it will fall in on our left; you are going to see the colonials at work! Sparks will fly! All of you repeat. Sparks will fly!”

The artillery captain who commands the battery of 75s in fact climbs a tree to observe the movements of the enemy. Astride a high branch, binoculars pointed at the horizon, he shouts firing orders to a liaison who is stationed at the base of the tree.

“By piece. A shot a minute...3,500...Fire!”

(113)

The shots fire, very spaced out.

“By battery...3,200...correct 18...Fire!”

“3,000...2,500...2,000 meters.”

The distances diminish at each shot. Crouching in the grass, we don’t see anything. But from the height of his perch, the captain was able to see the Germans who are advancing. Will they stop?

⁶⁹ A street in the Montparnasse section of Paris.

“1,200 meters...explosive shells...Large volley...Mow them down! Fire at will!”

Boomboom!...boom! Boomboom! Bang boom!

The ground trembles. The scathing shots, which follow one another like the hasty shots of a machine gun, break our eardrums.

“Ah! Ah! Bravo!” shouts the captain in his tree with a savage joy! “In the middle of a section! That makes their arms and heads fly!”

“1500 meters! Double!

“1,800 meters. They’re off the hook! 2,200!...2,500!....3,000!”

As the figures increase, the faces of the infantry light up. The enemy is retreating!

An artillery cyclist brings the cease fire order to the captain; he talks with the officer (114) who continues to watch the evolutions of the enemy and who shouts to him.

“You tell the commander that I am doing a great job...it is impossible to cease fire! They fall like bowling pins, my friend, like bowling pins!”

“But captain” insists the cyclist, nose in the air.

“3,200!” Mutters the captain. “With the permission of the commander! 3,500! Like bowling pins, I tell you, like bowling pins!”

At the end of afternoon, the battalion re-assembles in a meadow, behind Fossé. We take a break. The shells no longer fall. We hear the birds chirping in the woods. The enemy is retiring. We are the vanquishers.

The village is engorged with wounded and soldiers; I stand in a queue for an hour at a pump to refill my canteen with fresh water; I enter many houses where I find I find top hats and ridiculous umbrellas, but not the least bit of bread. I encounter a tiny public dancer who is a soldier in the *. He has received, he explained to me “the wind of a shell” in the belly and walks whining, bent in two.

At 10 o’clock in the evening, the sub-lieutenant (115) sends me to search for supplies six kilometers in the rear, with about twenty men who are reluctant. As we arrive in the darkness at the place that they indicated to us for the distribution, a staff officer tells us that the convoys have rejoined the regiments. We start in the opposite direction. The men of the work detail, irritated, are exasperated by this useless course and hold me

responsible. I let them complain; I am also at the end of my string and hunger twists my stomach. Marching alongside a convoy, I perceive some men who steal some loaves of bread from the trunk of a car. I come closer, but as I approach, just as I seize a loaf, a sub-officer runs up and seizes me by the collar, calls me a plunderer and forces me, with my fist raised, to put the bread back in the car. I would never have believed that I would one day be forced to be stealing bread nor that I would I would be stupid enough to get caught in the bag. I rejoin my comrades, pitiful enough.

At 2 hours in the morning, we find the company and the supply vehicles. I make the distribution, alone, the two Greniers have been wounded yesterday in the forest. An hour after we reassemble, we depart in silence. I have not slept.

(116)

How? We are still fighting in retreat? And yet today we were clearly victorious! Do we really want, as some believe, to bring them near Verdun?

2 September

We march all day. Not even a long pause to make the stew. Famished, in the fields, on the roadside, we dig carrots and potatoes that we eat raw, with stale bread.

Camp at Baulny,⁷⁰ near Apremont.

3 September, Battle of Apremont

At dawn, the regiment deploys on a plain, before Baulny; we feverishly dig a continuous line of trenches to be able to shoot from our knees. Then when we've accomplished that, an order arrives, with regret, that we are abandoning our organized position and going to establish one a kilometer in advance; on the edge of a woods, without trenches.

The German shells begin to explode in the fields in front of us, then the artillery elongates its fire and bombards Apremont (117) with large caliber shells that produce clouds of dust.

We remain all day sitting at the foot of some trees--the hustlers have naturally seized the largest trunks--and we wait, rifle between legs, for the enemy infantry which does not present itself. The firing breaks out from time to time behind the woods, then ceases. It seems that the other companies have repulsed some attacks. The enemy conscientiously sprinkles the trees with his shrapnel that makes much more noise than damage.

⁷⁰ Baulny is a small commune just south of Apremont.

At night, the order arrives to retreat. We traverse the woods and come out on a plain in view of Apremont. A cyclist makes us turn back; it is necessary to reoccupy the edge of the woods that we just abandoned. Nothing more unnerves and demoralizes a troop in campaign like hesitations.

[censored]

“Why do we leave and then come back, just to wear us out. Always these nutty movements!”

The enemy, who without a doubt perceived our movement of retreat, executed a barrage (118) of large shells between us and our former positions. The men hesitate to execute the order, openly complaining. However, advancing prudently from tree to tree, hiding behind piles of wood, one after the other, they regain the danger zone. I think of Napoleon’s grenadiers “who complained but who always followed him!”

Suddenly night has fallen. The corporals place sentries in front of the woods, in the wheat. Then we lay down in a ditch, huddled one against the other because the night is fresh; every hour, I am woken by the sentry whose next guard needs some coaxing; it’s necessary that I get up; I talk, I order; exhausted, the men avoid duty, the men slip into the woods to continue their sleep in peace; some show tenacious bad will, pretend to go to work, then go back to bed and fall asleep again. I am obliged to make them get up by kicking them.

At midnight the sentry shakes me. “There is something like red lanterns walking in the fields!” The next guard, a fat stupid and ugly reservist named Poulet, shakes like a leaf and tells me, frightened (119), “Firstly, I do not want to take the watch alone. You must put me with another man!”

I yell at him in a low voice:

“You’re a coward, you’re scared of the dark, like a kid!”

I must threaten him to obey, mumbling.

4 September

At dawn, nothing new.

During the morning the heavy German batteries bombard furiously a peaceable herd of cows that far from the enemy is taken, without a doubt, for an assembly of cavalry. Some are chopped up by the large shells; the other ruminants do not get deranged and

continue to graze under the shells.

The wheat seems to stir in an unusual way about fifty meters from the woods. We fire some salvos. The enemy does not respond.

At midday, the order arrives to evacuate our positions. A man groans,

“It’s not the Boche that make us retreat.”

(120)

We move away in a single column through a wood and come out on a plain and traverse Baulny. The village street is deserted, the houses open. At the first shell, all the peasants fled. Some chickens and pigs roam the streets. My men catch a colt; they load him with bags and musettes and declare that the squad will eat it on arrival at the cantonment. Hunger tortures us, because there have not been any supply distributions since the day before yesterday. The soldiers enter the abandoned houses hoping to find something to eat but the inhabitants have carried away the contents of their cupboards. Some men string some chickens in their knapsack, saying.

“So that the Prussians won’t have them!”

When I go into a farm, an adjutant comes out with a bottle of liquor under each arm, bumps me and shouts.

“Come on! Do you want to move forward! You are told that it is forbidden to stop in the houses!”

We leave Baulny. On the plain a troop of horses in full gallop, manes in the winds, a vision of an antique bas-relief.

We pass by a peloton of chasseurs who are resting in a field alongside the road. The horses perspire, the men (121) wipe their sweaty faces. They just moved to clear one of our companies that had lingered in the woods and that Uhlans were getting ready to charge.

After a long march under the burning sun, we arrive at Varennes.⁷¹

All the shops are closed; many houses have their shutters closed. On the door thresholds, the civilians discuss amongst themselves, hesitating to abandon their abodes; they anxiously question the soldiers who pass. In the main street, a regiment of artillery files by at a fast trot in an infernal noise; the drivers use their big whips to nip the steaming flanks of horses. The roads are filled with artillery fodder, engineer

⁷¹ Varennes is about three miles south of Apremont.

vehicles, regimental supply trains, large carts of evacuees, at the top of which are perched old peasants in Sunday dress, holding brats in their arms. At each turn of the street there are roadblocks. The drivers, red with anger, curse and threaten with their whips; cars crawl along, some horses fall down heavily, and then, whipped, get up, pawing, in the midst of a shower of sparks; crazed peasants run after calves, foals, goats (122) that take off down side streets; in the middle of the extraordinary mess the infantry weave between the wheels of vehicles, slipping along the houses. A man who has just had his foot crushed, looks up whining, sitting on a post to take off his boots. The civilians who are fleeing, carrying some clothes in a scarf, or a suitcase in hand, mix, aghast, in the flood of the army in retreat. Some elegant staff officers on horseback, escorted by helmeted gendarmes, multiply, shout orders, scream at the drivers. "Do not be cut off! Bumbling idiots!" At each corner of the street, there are some generals (I have never seen so many!) who give some instructions, surveying the flow of this unimaginable crush.

Before leaving the area, certain shopkeepers distribute their merchandise to the soldiers, so as not to leave anything for the enemy. From the window of a second-story window an old lady empties her drawers onto the street; linen, towels, white handkerchiefs float like swirling snowflakes. The infantrymen snatch up lace shirts and women's pants that they put in their belts laughing.

(123)

At the grilled window of a hospice, the charity sisters distribute cocoa; a wave of thirsty men sweeps towards the window, begging, holding their canteens at outstretched arms, bumping one another; this rush reminds me of an image of the fire "Bazar de la Charité."⁷²

As we leave the village, German shrapnel begins to explode in the blue sky, provoking a panic among the inhabitants.

The route to Clermont is filled with artillery convoys. The infantry advances on the sides of the road, in a cloud of dust, coughing and spitting. The majority of the men haven't eaten anything since the day before yesterday. All are suffering cruelly from thirst. We move painfully under a blazing sun, throats dry, white with dust, sweating in big drops.

A voice calls me:

"Aha, the great Galtier!"

It's the little Montmartre gigolo I met at Fossé, seriously bruised. Today this Parisian "what me worry" is sitting on the edge of the road. He distributes generously to a circle

⁷² An image of the 1897 fire at the annual Catholic charity bazaar in Paris in which 126 people lost their lives in the panic and fire.

of intimates the contents of an enormous pot of honey that he holds wedged between his legs.

(124)

“Hey, old man! Do you want a tartlet?”

What a bargain! And how useful it is to have some friends! The former, something of a dance hall legend, hands me a big slice of bread on which he spreads a heavy layer of golden honey; then he pays me further with a cup of white wine.

“Thanks, old friend! And one of these days!”

“The first to arrive will wait for the other,” banters the Parisian.

I rejoin the line of march while my comrades throw envious regards at my appetizing tartlet.

The march is slower and slower. Many of the men, exhausted, cling to the vehicles that pass. On each 75, behind each caisson, there is a cluster of infantrymen, exhausted and white with dust.

I stop in a village to drink a bowl of creamy milk and buy a loaf of black bread. When I return to the main road, it is no longer my regiment that marches by, it's another; an interminable column of soldiers, dirty, bearded, ragged, of which the figures are unknown to me. At the idea of being separated from my company, an anguish strains my heart; but I do not feel a sense of having the force to run to catch up to my comrades. All at once, I make it a point of honor to (125) pack it in. Now, I do not hesitate to drive the last kilometers of the walk. A big truck of the engineers goes by at a trot: that's my opportunity! I jump on the running board and hoist myself to the top of the truck where five dusty infantrymen have already been installed.

“So, say, hobos, you take my car for an omnibus?” Grumbles the driver who whips his horses.

I don't respond. He's not a bad guy, and he pitied our fatigue.

For a marcher, used to sweating, pack on back, painfully feeling the road with the nails of his shoes, travel by car is an extraordinary bargain. What a sensation to feel that one goes fast and without effort! Instead of having perpetual view of the feet of your comrade, I glance at a vast panorama: the road, in front, to the rear. I see unfurl the interminable ribbon of regiments marching. To the right, to the left, I see other roads where other columns advance slowly in waves like a monstrous centipede. I also see some artillery regiments that roll on in a heavy cloud of dust, some undetermined

convoys, some cavalry troops whose helmets shine in (126) the sun; all the floods continue in parallel and crawl slowly towards the same horizon, there, in the bluish distance, towards the Meuse. I imagine the innumerable enemy columns whose irresistible torrent invades the country we are abandoning.

The vehicle rejoins my regiment, then my company; I recognize from afar my sub-lieutenant on horse. My conscience orders me to get down; alas, I feel so exhausted, I am so comfortably installed, that I do not have the courage to retake my place in the ranks. Passing above my section I turn my head in a kind of bashfulness, so that my comrades do not see me. It's not because I fear mocking, but in the regiment the soldier who possessed a "bonanza" is always regarded by the others with a sympathetic admiration; but I am a little ashamed of myself.

We soon arrive in view of a small village built at the base of a cliff of steep rocks that is surmounted by a grove of black pines. At the first houses, I jump off the vehicle. It's Clermont-en-Argonne.⁷³

No infantry regiment has yet arrived, but the streets are filled with staff officers (127), officers of the treasury and post and convoy officers; there is also a crowd of supply men, drivers, helmeted gendarmes, conductors, all the kinds of soldiers that one rarely sees in the front lines, but who, clean and freshly shaven look with some disdain on the poor stragglers and the exhausted as we are.

At the corner of a street I encounter corporal Broutat who had made the route on an artillery caisson; he took me to the "Hôtel des Voyageurs" where he believed that we would be able to clean ourselves.

In the paved courtyard of a good, genuine hotel, some soldiers from all branches (and even gendarmes) made a queue before the door of the cellar; the patron, the boss, before departing, set a high price for his wines. We traverse a long dining hall with shining parquet floor, the table d'hôte with its flowers, shiny crockery and towels folded in a fan shape, the stemmed glasses give me the effect of a decoration. We deliberately enter a small room where the ices we receive are pleasurably received by our troglodytes of bandits.

Some staff officers constantly cross the room running, papers in hand, and without paying attention to us, (128) but a soldier at a white table with a white apron carrying a pile of plates seems bewildered and even scandalized to find two infantrymen, fully equipped and covered with dust, wallowing in the most peaceful world on plum velvet sofas, and he asks us in a severe tone, what the f* we are doing there.

⁷³ Clermont-en-Argonne is about ten miles south of Apremont and ten miles west of Verdun.

“Take care of your dishes, eh, stooge,” I respond dryly to make him understand the respect due to the soldier who fights with a gun, instead of the one who makes war with a mop!

This small exclamation restores order.

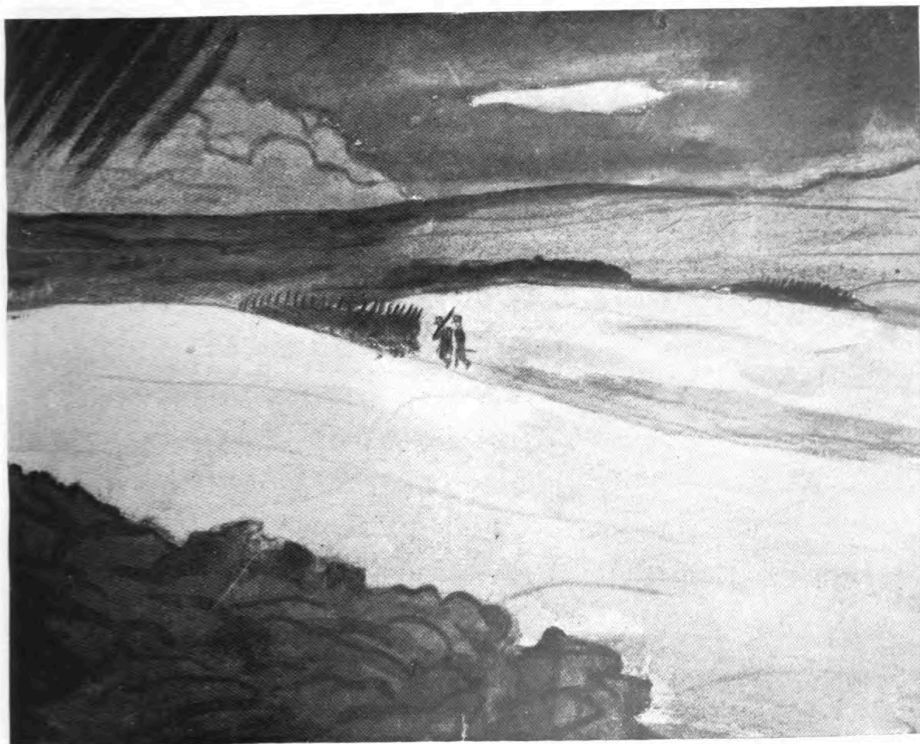
“Ah! Ah!” He says without getting angry. “You have a good laugh! I bet that these men are from Paris?”

We are talking, and in the conversation, I learn that this mess servant was in the civil service of friends of my family; the servant does a very respectful bow, then he waits on us and kindly tells us.

“These men of the corps army staff have just come to finish their lunch. Would you permit me to bring you some food?”

“If you wish! And how!” We shout enthusiastically.

We put the bag and rifle on an armchair, and



LA RETRAITE

(129) we are seated at the table of the leftovers of the general commanding the army corps. For people who have been accustomed for a month to "crusts" or bully beef on the go, what a joy to taste carefully prepared dishes, to savor creamy sauces, to use white plates and shiny cutlery.

"He is pretty handy, the general's cook!" Brouat declares, his mouth full.

"He's the chef of P...", replies dignifiedly the orderly who stays standing behind us and serves us.

For dessert we eat an excellent apricot compote; then the orderly brings us the coffee and brandy. After having smoked blissfully a pipe of tobacco, Broutat suggests that it is time to rejoin the regiment. Before parting, with rifle, I slid a coin into the hand of the servant who protested.

"No, thanks! Truly, it was good-hearted!" He says while pocketing the tip.

We head onto the road, red like roosters, stuffed, slightly weighed down by the sumptuous meal that changes our appearance, but very satisfied by the service at the "Hotel des Voyageurs."

Just at that moment the regiment arrives in the village. We rejoin the company that camps (130) in a small obscure and messy street. The men are exhausted, the majority sleep in the barns without having the courage to prepare stew. However, a few cooks, the dedicated of the squad, search in the piles for some dry wood, gather some large rocks and light some fires. They call me for the distribution of food. I find only two men willing to help me, and I am obliged to wrestle onto my shoulder an enormous quarter of fresh meat whose blood runs down my neck.

The mailman who I have not seen for several days brings some letters. The sergeant of the week, a lantern in hand, calls the names, mine often.

"Why does he receive so many letters, this Galtier," the sergeant says with admiration.

I even have a real packet. I read them in order, sitting along a wall, in the light of the kitchen foyer. What joy, in the calm of the torment, to re-establish contact, during some few brief instances, with those dear, left in the rear; and as one feels clearly the very small number of persons of whom he thinks and who think of you! The letters from my parents all finish with the comforting affirmation, behind which they hide their terrible anguish. (131) "The English debark without stopping some new reinforcements on the continent and the Russian roller advances irresistibly towards Berlin!"

Hardly am I stretched out on the straw, knapsack as a pillow under my head—it is midnight—than I hear a shout in the street.

“The supply corporal! At once, the supply corporal!”

I get up. I go out. It’s a cyclist who asks me to go the other part of the village to receive some conserves as reserve provisions for the regiment.

I need a dozen men for a work detail. All the boys are exhausted. No one wants to willingly go with me. I beg some, I order others. Now, the threat of punishment does not bring out anyone. The men that I wake are cursing at me or beg me in sobs to let them sleep, pity! All are at the end of their strength.

Finally, pushing them I am able to assemble six men, some young soldiers who still respect the authority of stripes. I depart with them in the deserted street by the light of the moon. We are dragging a big dumper found in a cul-de-sac
(132)

The resupply is done in a field at the exit from the village. The supply sergeant who holds a lantern in his hand and surveys the distributions shouts at me.

“It’s not too early! You could not hurry a little?”

The corporal adds.

“They are fucked that we did not get any sleep!”

I want to tell him that I too can fall asleep, and that I am perhaps more to be pitied than him, because while driving in a car, sitting on his bags of beans, I am struggling on the roads, with backpack. And he never heard a whistle, that bastard.

But why bother? I am too tired to argue. I shrug my shoulders and take, without saying a word, delivery of a few hundred cans and packets of sugar and coffee.

It is impossible to wake the company to distribute the rations. I make equal pyramids of cans along the wall in the alley, and I go back to the barn telling myself.

“Just soon it will be daylight, and the squad leaders will fend for themselves.”

(133)

I begin to go to sleep in the straw, between two snoring comrades, when I hear shouting outside.

“Alert! Everyone up!”

The men assemble in the street; all groaning, regretting their interrupted sleep. One looks for his cap; another has lost his bowl, another complains that someone has hidden his rifle.

We hear shouting in the night:

“Move! Move! Forward by fours!”

On the steps of the doors, the inhabitants, in nighttime dress, question us anxiously.

“Do you think that it will be better for us to leave?”

A young woman, in a camisole, approaches my arm.

“Sir, tell me, you are not going to abandon us? You are going to defend us?”

Alas, we still beat a retreat.

5 September

We arrived at Waly to sleep.⁷⁴ While strolling in the village, I perceive a group in front of a white poster. I approach and, above the heads, I read that (134) “the Government is moved to Bordeaux to give a new impetus to the national defense.”

“Ah! We’re screwed then,” says a soldier, stupefied.

We are all very concerned. We knew that our army was beating a retreat, but we ignored that all of the French line was has fallen back! The Prussians are thus at the doors of Paris! The capital was going to be besieged like in 1870! What a disaster! I am aghast.

“It’s impossible that they are going to let them enter Paris!” roared a soldier, clenching his fists.

And suddenly, I understand that man, like me, like all of my comrades, is determined to give all the effort, all the sacrifices, to save the country this shame: all of us clearly feel that one day soon, tomorrow perhaps, it will be necessary to win or die.

⁷⁴ Waly is about five miles south-southeast of Clermont-en-Argonne.

V
THE BATTLE OF THE MARNE

(137)

6 September

Reveille at night. Still awake, it is necessary to get equipped in the dark, retrieve the rifle and hat from the straw, and put on the knapsack. The regiment assembles in the middle of a confused brouhaha, leaves the village and advances in a fine rain on a major highway straight ahead.

As the day arises, a small, disheveled girl passes along the column crying and shouting, "Papa! Papa!" Ten minutes later, a panicked farmer runs after the small one, and asking us, out of breath, "have you seen a small girl? Yes, blonde! I've lost her. Ah, God! The Prussians are going to kill her!"

Will the poor man find his child?

The evening we camp at Louppy-le-Château.

(138)

7 September, Battle of Villers-aux-Vents⁷⁵

Reveille at dawn. Assembly in front of the barns. We depart in a fine rain. The most diverse rumors circulate in the ranks: according to some, the regiment is going to embark at the station in Revigny to be reformed on the walls of Paris; according to others, we are going to retake the offensive today.

Suddenly, in the distance we hear artillery, at the exit from a wood, before us, we see an enormous column of smoke, red at its base, which springs from a village and swirls upwards to the sky. A line of artillery convoys and engineers obliges us to move to each side of the road, into the heavy soil of the plowed fields. Soon the regiment arrives in disorder in the village that is burning; it's Laheyecourt.⁷⁶

On the main street, a regiment of dragoons is aligned along the houses, as if on parade. The colonel, superb, prancing in the middle of a dashing staff with lacquered boots and sparkling helmets. At the end of the street, some chasseurs on bicycle take up position.

In front of the church, we turn to the left. (139) At the exit of the village the road crosses a pond on a wooden footbridge. Trucks from the engineers, artillery caissons and infantry mix at the same time on this very narrow bridge. The corps ambulances come too at a small trot. The battalion of cyclists who are retreating at full speed wants to pass too. A road block ensues; the confusion is extreme. The boys warn the gunners,

⁷⁵ Louppy-le-Château is a little over ten miles south of Clermont-en-Argonne; Villers-aux-Vents is immediately to the west.

⁷⁶ Laheyecourt is about a mile north of Villers-aux-Vents.

the nurses on their seats are insulted by the chasseurs who carry their bicycles on their backs. In the melee, the dragoons survey the scene with slackened bridles, shouting, "Make room! Room!" At that tragic moment, when there is the inevitable jostling, a hay stack catches fire suddenly at the edge of the pond—is it the signal from some spy—and at once shrapnel fills the sky, above that terrible throng.

Some men place their rifle across their sack and jump into the pond; they move painfully through the reeds with water to their armpits. I'm caught in a swirl of the fray and dragged onto the deck. A jokester cries in the middle of the crowd, "It's like being in the Metro!" The wheels of the caissons press us against the sides. As the shells (140) crack over us, all the men shrug their heads.

"Will you get going forward!" shouts an officer.

[censored]

The bridge passed, we can breathe a sigh of relief, a quarter of an hour later, we arrive at Villers-aux-Vents. The inhabitants flee through the fields because shrapnel begins to burst over the rooftops.

A lamentable procession of wounded lands on the big village square; they are about a hundred, covered in blood, uniforms in tatters. Some drag themselves painfully, whining, leaning on broken rifles as crutches; others support themselves in pairs, or threes; a man with head bandaged carries on his shoulders an unfortunate whose leg hangs, broken. Another passes by with a bandage on his face which lets him look out with one enormous eye. A soldier with a bloody face is screaming at an ammunition car. Some messed up men cling desperately to the sides of a military train, begging the drivers to let them ride. In the arms of a comrade, an (141) officer whose eyes are covered by a bandage advances tottering and repeating continually, "I no longer see! I no longer see!"

When one is himself on the point of entering into the furnace, nothing leaves a greater impression than to come across the tragic procession of returning comrades horribly mutilated. The bravest say with a tearing heart, "Voila, perhaps that is how I will be soon."

The company is at first placed in reserve behind the village church whose clock tower serves as a target for enemy artillery. Spread out in an orchard, we crunch on some apples to pass the time. All the men are nervous. Before being engaged they resemble a man who while waiting at the dentist shudders in hearing the screams of the preceding client. Once in the torment, you no longer have time to think of anything.

The order arrives to move forward. This is the moment that invariably some slackers—not very numerous and always the same—choose to notice that their leggings are unstitched and stop, or go to the bathroom behind a hedge.

(142)

The company assembles in line of sections by fours and advances slowly on the plain, utilizing the undulating terrain. Shrapnel shells with green smoke form an arc of fire over our heads, but we fear less their strident shrills than the terrible thunder clap of large percussive shells with their black smoke. They say that the plain is under the spout of a monstrous watering can of fire; it explodes simultaneously in front, behind, to the right and to the left. When we hear their hooting, everyone bends their backs, and we always have the impression that the shell will drop in the middle of the section and we scatter.

As bullets begin to chirp in the air, the sub-lieutenant passes the order,

“Line up squads in single file, fifty-meter distance as the interval!”

I take the head of the squad. In this march under artillery fire, it is necessary to progress, with the fewest possible losses, by sneaking between the shells that explode on all sides. The company is divided into many columns as squads advance, each for his own account, through the fields and heathers. The responsibility for the squad—a dozen human lives—is (143) entirely taken by the corporal who guides the march. Certain corporals, fatalists, advance right with them. Some others, figuring that they are able to judiciously maneuver and guide their destiny, seek to weave skillfully between the drop points. The men who follow their corporals are also interested that he evades the dangerous trajectories of the engines of death, and all, anxious, excited, panting, watching for the hissing of the shrapnel, spotting the little volcanoes that continually spout out of the earth and belching their big black swirls towards the sky, overwhelming their guide with anxious advice.

“Galtier! Galtier! Press left!”

“No! Oblique to the right!”

“Now a leap forward. Old man: it’s time!”

“Ah! It’s unfortunate to be led by a guy who does not listen to advice. He’s going to make us screw up!”

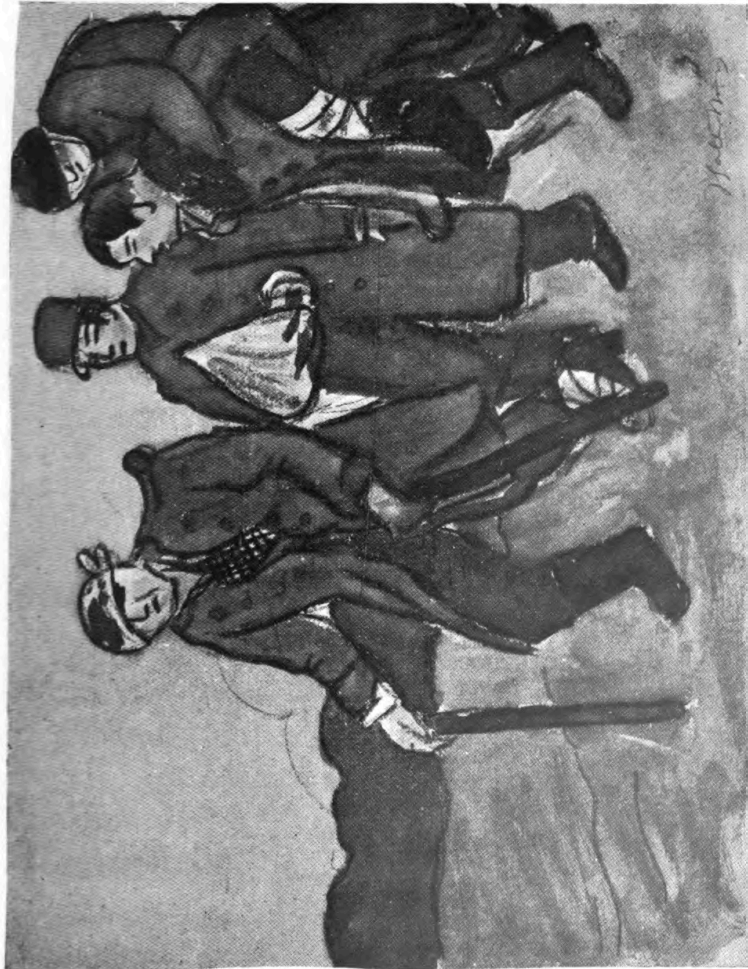
What is most surprising in these marches under artillery fire, it’s to perceive, in watching evolve in the rear the sections of reinforcement, that the shells fall very rarely on a group. They say that each section possesses a counter-magnet that pushes the projectiles. To kill a single man, it is necessary (144) for a storm of shells of all calibers,

but a single shell can also shred several men, and when unfortunately, a large pot bursts in the middle of a group, what a horrible hash.

We arrive safely at a small hill where we are at least sheltered from bullets. The sub-lieutenant makes some grand gestures; but I don't hear his orders. A violent explosion quite close has rendered me temporarily deaf. One of my men shouts the order in my ear,

"Everyone as skirmishers on the crest, crawl!"

The men crawl on their stomachs. The line advances like a row of toads. At the crest, the bullets whistle by. The men regret the absence of their sacks which serve as protective shields to the crouched rifleman. Some lost them in the first combats; the others, exhausted, tossed them aside during the painful marches of the retreat; those who, like me, have kept them have put them yesterday evening, when ordered, on the cart. Some men protect their heads with the butt of their rifle. I imitate them. Perhaps its not very helpful, but,



LES BLESSÉS

(145)

when one has a semblance of precaution, you feel reassured.

In taking a leap forward, I perceive a French corpse in the grass; it's a corporal. Two men rush up and argue over his knapsack.

We think that we are only in the second line and have before us a first wave of infantry, when suddenly, in a fold of the terrain where they were holed up, surge forth one, five, ten, fifteen Germans, who, with hunched backs, take off at will! The apparition is so brisk and so unexpected that we remain an instant frozen. Then all the men stand up and without an order, the firing unfolds along the entire line; we fire like at target practice. The wounded Germans jump like rabbits; not a one returns, and the band splits into a clump, like a flock of partridges.

"Forward, bayonets fixed on rifles!"

What joy, what pride to state that the enemy had not dared to fight hand to hand, but to flee without letting himself be approached.

The line advances at steps, bristling with shining bayonets. All the men shaking with joy.

We traverse a large road lined (146) with trees. The enemy is again lurking, invisible. However, before us, in a harvested field, we make out some gray piles. I move forward with some men, bayonet lowered to see if they are corpses. The first pile is a German officer, rolled into a ball, who rattles; he holds his stomach with two hands and his face is convulsed in a terrible grimace of a man who fights against death. The second pile jumps lively to his feet at our approach and seeing our menacing bayonets, runs toward us his arms raised. It's a big redhead, punchy, in a field gray uniform who is not wearing a pointed hat, but a grotesque round little red cap. He has received a bullet right in the face; a real red billiard ball. Shaking his big bloody knot, he stammers, hideous, spitting a tooth with every word.

"Pardon, good Frenchman! Pardon, comrade Frenchman! Pardon!"

He throws himself at the foot of Chapelier, a big man with the hands of a strangler, a bullfighter at La Villette, and begs him by gestures not to finish him off. Full of grand spirit, Chapelier, who we familiarly called "poker face", pitied him, washed the wounded man's face with some water (147) from his canteen and summarily bandaged him.

[censored]

"Thanks! Thanks much! Comrade Frenchman!" thanked the German who believed that

his last hour had come.

The wounded man furiously kisses the hands of his generous adversary, caresses his chin affectionately; he distributes as mementos his cheese-shaped cap, his tawny leather equipment, his gray coat, his bag, and then calls for the ambulance. We point to Villers-aux-Vents, and voila our large prisoner runs toward the village, leaping from right to left to avoid the German shells, and happily targeted by the French sharpshooters on the plain.

While some inventory the bag quietly, the others, standing, forgetting that the enemy is near, laugh heartily watching the Boche running away, a burst of bullets bangs the air; we throw ourselves to the ground. A man falls to his knees, face in a haystack. It looks like he is praying, his neighbor helps him, he is dead.

(148)

"Who is it?"

"Don't know. A reserve reinforcement."

Evidently, the German company that we have dislodged all at once has taken up position further on. Sergeant Paillard hesitates. He's a sub-officer, active, very conscientious and much admired by his men because he is very just and brave beyond proof; his authority is remarkable, but perhaps sometimes hypnotized a bit by the regulations. Paillard scrutinized the horizon with his glasses, and he does not make out the least trace of the enemy. In accord with the theory to avoid the wastage of ammunition, supported by the section chiefs to order any firing without seeing an objective; it had not been foreseen that even in the open country we very rarely see the enemy who benefits from all the accidents of the ground; and that we must nevertheless shoot, if not to exterminate him, then at least to scare him and prevent him from drawing away quietly.

The bullets whistle by continuously. When one of our riflemen rises up, he is hit; as nothing agitates our soldiers than to be decimated without responding, I beg Paillard to order some firing, he cedes.

"Before us, a small wood."

The corporals repeat.

(149)

"On the small woods."

"On the edge of the woods, some presumed infantry, at 250 meters!"

"250 meters."

“Fire about two cartridges. Commence fire!”

The firing snakes down the line.

All of a sudden, we see the company which extends past our line on the right, bend and fall back in disorder (*).⁷⁷

“Bunch of cowards!” shout the soldiers of my section, pointing their fingers at the fleeing. “Cowards! Bastards!”

A German explosive falls in the middle of the disorganized company.

“Bravo! That’s well done! They had only not to let go! They are punished for being chicken livers!”

“Ah! God damn!” Shouts Paillard “We will show these fools that we are not f... c... like them! In our company, we will hold until the end!”

“Yes! Yes!” shout the men enthusiastically. “To the end! Long live Paillard!”
(150)

At the same instant, our quartermaster, the excellent Tapin who has only friends in the company, rolls onto me, saying,

“Ah! My God, I am dead!”

“But no, friend,” I say to him, very touched. “You exaggerate. Where are you wounded?”

“I don’t know...I don’t know...but I feel that I am going to die,” he says brusquely, livid.

A bullet has traversed his thigh. Without a doubt it is an explosive bullet because the hole is enormous. The blood shoots out like a fountain. Some poilus approach crawling, and we summarily bandaged him.

“We can’t let the quartermaster here. We’re going to carry him to the ambulance,” proposes a man.

Four soldiers of good will lay him out on a sheet on which the unfortunate groans.

⁷⁷ Numbered footnote 1 in the text. We learned later that this company who had brilliantly charged the enemy and taken prisoners, had to fall back because it was hit by enfilade fire, while the men had exhausted their ammunition.

“Let me die there! I am suffering too much.”

These men risk their lives in carrying this wounded man while not under cover. The bullets whistle around the group. And next to me, a poilu who does not believe in pure heroism, declares cynically.

“They found a real great bonanza, those four there!”

We resume firing. A German officer, in agony, is located between the two lines and he (151) receives simultaneously some German and French bullets.

“That officer, he’s a real bullet catcher!” banters my neighbor.

Tapin’s accident has left a vivid impression on the men. Paillard searched for a way to re-elevate the morale of the troop.

“The loss of our good quartermaster Tapin should not beat us!” he shouts. “Just now, I too will be killed. I know it! The most senior corporal will take command of the section. And when there are no more corporals, a simple soldier, more resolute and more courageous than the others, will be your chief! You will hold on to the end!”

Listening to these masculine words, I feel pass through me a breeze of heroism! It’s the first time that I hear a commander—a simple sub-officer—harangue his men in the middle of a battle and try to communicate to them his fire! In war, words seldom rise to the height of circumstances; action kills the verb; the heroic words are ordinarily made after the action. As for me, each time that I would have tried to say something, a curious modesty touched me and prevented it from exiting. How many commanders (152) who desire to excite their men with a few words filled with enthusiasm, repress their oratorical impulse, fearing the languid verve of the stupid jokester who, even on the front line, never loses his rights! It may be a special shyness, a weird fear of ridicule, which prevents many soldiers from being heroes.

The firing resumes. The 77s eternally in the air; the 105s exploding on the ground a few meters from us. The wounded leave, on all fours, towards the rear; the others are good. Behind us the main road is swept by the big shells and the chestnut trees fall down with a crash.

The company that retreated suddenly has uncovered our right flank. From one minute to the next we risk being taken from behind. The two new officers of the company have just been wounded. The order arrives to fall back in stages, behind the road.

It’s the movement to retreat “in reverse.” When one section falls back, the other

continually fires to prevent, by its fire, the enemy to fire at their ease. The retreat is executed in rapid leaps and in very good order. The men who fall are carried by their (153) neighbors. We only want to leave the dead behind.

During a leap, an adjutant of the X, who comes across to us with his section, bars the road to us; red, boiling with rage, eyes wildly fixated, he brandishes his revolver.

[censored]

It is well worth it, I say to myself, to have been heroic at the moment like "Les Dernières Cartouches" or to be treated as cowards while we retreat in order.⁷⁸ My friends are furious.

"You do not have the right to insult us," shouts a simple soldier. "You are not part of the regiment."

"Sir," explains the sergeant, "we are executing an order. Find out from our company commander who is over there on the road!"

And as the fiery adjutant runs to have an explanation with our second lieutenant, a jokester cries to him, irreverently,

"Excess of zeal! Excess of zeal!"

We pass again the road through a barrage of heavy artillery. I leap crossing through the black smoke. I seem to be crossing a fire.

(154)

The entire line retreats in the direction of Villers-aux-Vents. The plain is covered with soldiers who, in groups, fight in retreat, gun slung, at an accelerated pace.

All of a sudden, the captain who commands the battalion appears to us, standing on a mound, shouting and gesturing in the middle of the smoke.

"Band of idiots!" he shouts. "What kind of fucking men are you that maneuver like that! A pile of Cossacks! Will you please retire in echelons, God damn it!"

While the shells explode on all sides with a deafening din, the large captain, red with anger, struggles, gesticulates, harangues; sweat on this forehead, he runs from one to another, assembles the disbanded men whose commanders have been killed during the fighting, energetically attacks the fugitives with loud rants and formidable insults,

⁷⁸ Referring to the famous painting by Alphonse de Neuville (1836-1885), from the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, depicting the last stand of some French soldiers down to their last bullets.

inquires of the NCOs, reestablishes order, consults successively the lieutenant, sergeant, corporal, organizes lines of riflemen, restores confidence to his world and shouting strides along the line of fire, without any concern for the danger.

But when this commander has just about reformed somehow a line of resistance, (155) our artillery (which undoubtedly changed position), seems to go quiet while the enemy bombardment redoubles in intensity. Dozens of shells speckle the blue sky with their green smoke and enormous geysers of earth and smoke continually burst from the ground with a roar of thunder; the throwing of fire is so numerous and so regular that we would believe we are in the presence of a natural phenomenon; it looks like a volcanic land erupting.

Many men are put out of action. The position becomes untenable. Despite the efforts of the captain who sweats blood and water, lavishes his person and puts his honor to hold until the end, the line weakens anew, falls back and we engulf ourselves pell-mell on the main street of Villers-aux-vents where the men of the * are in reserve, weapons at their ready.

In front of the ambulance at the town hall where a large Red Cross flag is flying, a crowd of wounded await evacuation. The good Tapin is lying on a stretcher, swarthy complexion; we make our goodbyes with emotion. Corporal Rivet, who we call double-meter on account of his tallness, (156) arrives hopping, supported by a comrade; he was shot in the heel and suffers atrociously. I say to comfort him,

“You are going to see your wife in Paris!”

I remember a good-looking, small worker, a very regular type, who, during the mobilization, came to him bringing treats at the gate, and recommended to him that he kill a lot of Prussians and then return quickly at La Villette.

On the sidewalk, a big lad, naked arms ending in an enormous white bandage--we cut the sleeve of his hood close to the shoulder--did not seem to be upset that he had scooped “the good wound.” He received smiling the congratulations and the wishes of his comrades in arms of which a few perhaps envied him. A friend gave him a commission for his wife.

“I am going to spend two months in the Midi,” declares the wounded man. “I always liked to travel.”

“The war is finished for you!” says a soldier.

The company assembles in an orchard, in the shade of apple trees, behind the village.

We are in reserve. The * has not yet given the order to defend the village. We breathe a little. Some stretch out on the grass; the others wracked by hunger. (157) I also ask for permission to return to the village to search for something to eat.

In the big sunny street, stray bullets are singing, slamming against the walls. Some granaries are burning. The Germans are bent on the steeple of the church that refuses to collapse. The majority of inhabitants fled during the fighting. However, an old peasant stationed in the middle of the road, hands in his pockets. Nose in the air, he looks dazedly at the shrapnel bursting over his house.

“Get in your cellar! Old father!”

“No, no, I am watching,” responds the old man, without getting upset.

“One more who will complain when he is killed!” replies a jokester.

I enter a cottage that is filled with soldiers; in the cupboards we find only some jugs of milk. I drink with pleasure the creamy contents of a large earthen bowl.

I’m coming out. At the door of a cellar, a man calls to me and gestures: “Come now! We have found a wonderful cellar; it would be a pity to let this to the Boche and there are not enough of us to drink everything!”

(158)

A large boy with shaved chin staggers down the street; it’s D* a comic café singer; popular in the barracks because he sings at the canteen, the rare evenings when he was not in prison. During the departure from Paris, he reconciled with captain P* who had so often put him in jail, and, during all the fighting, he followed him like a shadow. A liter in hand, he said to me, with tears in his voice,

“I am not fighting anymore! You know that the captain received five bullets in the tummy; it had to happen to him, he was still standing. Now, you see, everything makes me sweat!

The shells explode over the roofs, some tiles fall into the street; an attic collapses with a crash. I enter an abandoned house whose windows have been broken by the explosions. In the dining room, the table is set; the inhabitants have fled without eating. I put a nice leg of lamb in my musette and a jar of cherries in brandy that (as Martinet would say!) were getting "bored" on a shelf.

I see many soldiers go into a small pavilion surrounded by large trees and with a nice appearance. I follow them. Its (159) undoubtedly the country home of some local notable.

The men walk around from furniture to furniture admiring the nice stuff and delicate furniture. I sense that they are surprised by this luxury to which they are not used to and which is unexpectedly revealed to them as a result of a battle. They sit in the soft armchairs, stretch voluptuously on the beds with pink bedspreads.

“Still, it must be creepy to fart all the time in the silk,” says a skinny soldier with an owl-like profile.

A bearded man, perched on a thick cushion, picks up a knife with a curved blade that he puts in his belt saying with a fat laugh.

“Having this little pocket knife we can do some good work. Good God!”

In a corridor, two poilus amuse themselves like children to slip with their big studded claws on the shining mirror of the waxed floor.

In the bedroom, three undressed soldiers change clothes quietly, without worrying about detonations that make the furniture shake and unhook the paintings from the walls. Crouching in front of a dresser drawer (160) full of shirts, a small, good-looking corporal makes his choice, with the hesitation of a little woman at the "Galleries," on pay day.⁷⁹ Maybe he reads in my eyes a little surprise, because he says to me, as if to apologize,

“In an hour, the Boche will occupy this small village, burning and pillaging all the houses. I take what might be useful to me. As our captains says, it’s really so that the enemy doesn’t have it!”

“Surely the proprietor of the shack will prefer to know that his shirts are taken by the defenders of the country, rather than by the Boche! Remember the people of Varennes who threw everything out the windows!”⁸⁰

“We do not often have the opportunity to change clothes,” adds another who examines with amazement cream silk pajamas decorated with mauve crests.

I return to the orchard. The company just left for the rear. On the plain, I distinguish the parts of the regiment that fight in retreat towards Bar-le-Duc. Villers-aux-vents is held by only some machine guns and the rear guard of the * infantry.

A soldier, bare headed, passes alongside me marching in a bizarre fashion. I shout to him,

⁷⁹ A fashionable Paris store.

⁸⁰ Referring to the Prussian occupation of Varennes during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

(161)

"Hey, three legs! Are you wounded?"

The man turns:

"Yes, I suppose; but at the moment, I don't see anything."

"Where are you hurting?"

"In the arm."

With a stroke of a knife I cut the sleeve; nothing on the arm; I split the cape in the back, and I pull aside the checkered shirt. Under the shoulder blade there is a little round hole that does not bleed.

"It's not a big deal," I say to the man (who I was astonished to see marching with a bullet in the lung).

Parpex and Denisard pass by in the pasture. I call them. We bandage the wounded man who does not complain.

"Spit," says Denisard.

The wounded man spits.

"It's not serious" concludes Denisard. "You are not spitting blood."

"But where is it that I've been hit?" asks the man simply.

No stretcher bearers in sight. We support the wounded man whose legs wobbled. At the end of about two kilometers of somewhat painful marching, we find on the road a cart conducted by a peasant and where a lifeless officer is stretched out on the straw. (162) We hoist our wounded man into the vehicle.

"Thanks, thanks!"

"Good bye and good luck!"

Some units of the regiment retreat across fields along the road. I see my sub-lieutenant. He shouts at me from a distance.

"You haven't seen the company?"

“I am looking lieutenant.”

“Yes, good, I am also looking!”

Denisard, who has some historical knowledge, confides to me in a low voice,
“He is like Soubise, Napoleon’s marshal, who had lost his army!”⁸¹

Some shells explode on the road. It’s curious; some come from the north; the others from the southwest. We are caught between two firing directions. The Germans, have they taken Revigny from where they are taking us in enfilade! We risk being turned.

The column quickly traverses the village of Laimont,⁸² whose attics begin to burn, and enter the forest. Under the large trees we feel secure. The road is filled with troops and convoys of artillery. All the regiments who have fought side by side (163) retreat in the direction of Bar-le-duc.

Along the road, some batteries of 75s take position in the shadow of the large beech trees and commence to fire over our heads to protect the retreat. I see, for the first time, two large 155 pieces in action. We file in front of the battery just as a monster cracks with the noise of thunder and an enormous jet of fire. Dazzled, I close my eyes and instinctively huddle my head in my shoulders. The detonation is so violent that we have the impression of receiving a blow on the back of the neck; the ground shakes under our feet.

The regiment reassembles alongside the road. While the other regiments continue to retreat towards Bar-le-Duc, we pause in the grass. Night falls. It seems that an order has just arrived to hold in place. My company is sent to full alert a few hundred steps from the main road. We install ourselves in a vast field surrounded on all sides by a forest. We set out sentinels. We are laying straw bales on the ground and we sleep with pleasure.

(164)

8 September, Battle of the Bois de Laimont

“Everyone up!”

I rub my eyes; it’s night. The pale light of the moon is sifted by a thin curtain of clouds. Men emerge grumbling from straw bales and equip themselves.

⁸¹ Mistake here as this refers to an incident in the Franco-Prussian war, not the Napoleonic wars. Charles de Rohan, duc de Rohan-Rohan, prince de Soubise, comte de Saint-Pol, Pair de France, maréchal de France (1715-1787).

⁸² About a mile to the south of Villers-aux Vents.

A cyclist comes to warn the sub-lieutenant that the regiment has changed position and is approaching the enemy; we are going to rejoin it. While the sergeants assemble their sections, the adjutant calls me and sends me with four men on a patrol to cover the front of the company.

I penetrate the forest with my men, bayonet fixed. It's a wood of bushy firs and, like the men say, "It's blacker here than the rear of a Negro!" In Indian file, so that we don't get lost in the darkness, we advance from trunk to trunk, stumbling against snags, stepping over the scrub, fumbling with our hands like blind men.

After about a half an hour of painful marching, I wonder if, advancing indefinitely, we do not risk going beyond the first enemy lines.

(165)

I stop my men; we stretch out on the moss under the low branches of a big fir, and I send one of my men to search for the company and ask for precise orders.

While we await his return under our fir, I hear footsteps close by and branches breaking. Could that be a German patrol? Holding our breaths, we remain immobile. Some shadows pass by our tree without seeing us.

A man, who stumbles against a rock, laughs,

"Ah! M...!"

No doubt about it, it's a Frenchman!

"Hey! Hey!" I say softly.

The man leaps aside, pointing his bayonet.

"No jokes! eh! old brother! We are friends!"

I show myself. It's a French patrol which is hidden in the darkness. I shake the hand of the corporal, and we decide to wait for the day and organize a small outpost. We make up guard duty between our men, and I sit down again satisfied under my fir tree, rifle held in my hand.

At dawn, while we shake (166) the dew from our uniforms, the man that I had sent during the night to search for orders, returns. The company has not budged from its place; the sub-lieutenant, not having precise information on the new position of the regiments, feared to go astray in the woods during the night. As for my patrol, he had

completely forgotten it.

“If you had not stopped us,” remarks one of my patrol, “we would be prisoners at this time...or botched up.”

We rejoin. The company assembles on the main road to Bar-le-Duc and sets off in a column of fours in the direction of Laimont. The sub-lieutenant stops us for a moment near a large box on which floats a yellow pennant. Two hundred cartridges are distributed per man.

At a detour from the route we perceive in the distance the village of Laimont from which rises a whirlwind of black smoke. Big shells rain on the beautiful beech trees bordering the road, and you hear, after the explosion, the sinister breaking of broken branches that fall to the ground in a fracas. In the ditches alongside the road, soldiers fall back. Some wounded who seem frightened run after us. A sergeant (167) whose face is covered with a bloody bandage says to us sobbing,

“We have held Laimont too long. The French artillery believed that we had evacuated the village and has fired on it. It’s terrible, those 75s! What a bad deal to be wounded by your brothers!”

In effect, our artillery, which, hidden in the middle of the woods, is doubtless ill-informed, executed between Laimont and the edge of the forest a tremendous barrage which caught the delayed defenders of the village.

A staff officer who promenades by on his horse on the road swept by the shells informs our sub-lieutenant of the regiment’s position then leaves, crawling on the ground to warn the artillery.

As we advance in single file on a sunken road, so gutted by recent rain that one believes that we are in the dry bed of a torrent, I see some soldiers of the engineers who seem to be standing guard around a body.

We approach; it’s not a cadaver. It’s a civilian lying on his stomach, with his legs and hands tied. He is very pale and rolls furious eyes.

“It’s a spy who we’ve just nabbed and (168) who will be shot at once,” explains a sapper who smokes his pipe. “He will not touch the hundred sous that he has for selling his brothers.”

“Bastard! Shot? That’s not enough!” exclaims an infantry man approaching with the menacing air of a man ready to murder.

I think he's going to bash his skull with a heel kick, as one crushes an evil beast; but no, he stops, leans over the spy and looking into his eyes, smacks him brusquely in the face. The next imitates him, misses his slap, starts again,

“Here, carrion!”

And all the soldiers who file by, without stopping, turn their heads while passing in front of the traitor and spit their contempt at him. The condemned man, tied, powerless, makes superhuman efforts to break the bonds; his face convulsed, drooling with rage, he writhes on the grass like a worm that is crushed and tries in vain to hide in the ground his pale face, stained with filthy spittle.

We take a break in front of a large farm built in a clearing in the forest. I enter, followed by several comrades, into the house which seems abandoned. As I examine with admiration (169) the superb furniture that decorates the dining hall a door opens and an old lady appears—white hair, mittens and black silk robe—who asks what we desire. A little taken aback by this sudden appearance, I tell her that we are hungry.

“Poor soldiers! Dear defenders of the country!” says the old lady in opening a large armoire where there is lined up a row of honey pots and confitures; our hostess takes from a large hutch a large boule of brown bread, carefully makes us some toast, then brings a jug of sparkling cider that we drain to her health. Outside we hear the call, “To the barricades!” We leave while thanking with all of our heart the good old lady who did not want to abandon her property.

The company sets off on a march, and we soon arrive at the north edge of the forest where the battalion is installed. The men are sitting or crouched next to each other in a large grassy hole that forms the edge of the forest and serves presently as a trench. Arriving in the front line, we see the body of a sergeant-major stretched out at the base of a tree, the earthy figure, the eyes (170) wide open. It's D*, who yesterday celebrated his well-deserved nomination to the grade of adjutant and had not yet had the occasion to sew on his silver stripes.⁸³

The sub-lieutenant talks with the battalion head to find a place in the trench for his company. But it seems as if there are enough already in line. The company deploys as skirmishers hidden three meters to the rear of the hole. The position is quite grotesque because, in case of an attack, it is difficult for us to fire over the heads of our comrades and in addition we are not protected from bullets like the soldiers who are in the trench.

The enemy bombardment begins and increases in violence as the day progresses; we

⁸³ Stripes worn on the sleeve of the coat indicated rank.

are stretched out side by side, face down in the earth. The shells whistle over us and explode behind the trench with a loud mocking laugh. The salvos are a little too long and do more damage to the trees than to the soldiers. From time to time a large casing or fuse comes purring next to us. We regret once again the loss of our sacks.

At the end of the day, we made it.

“At the signal of three whistles, everyone will fall back into the woods.”

(171)

Soon afterwards three whistles sound. The sergeants shout, “Up!” We leap and we squirm running through the woods, rifle in hand. Suddenly, the captain who commands the battalion stands before us, asking the men with large gestures,

“There is a counter order! We are no longer retreating. All of you return to your trenches. We are going to hold here to the last man!”

As soon as we regain the edge of the forest we are met by a violent barrage of rifle fire. Many men fall. The enemy without a doubt seeing our movement of retreat has advanced; the Germans, hidden in the wheat, fire at all the men who try to regain the abandoned trench. A man who marches just in front of me collapses without a word. With a leap I jump into the trench.

Three hundred meters in front of us, in the fields, a line of German skirmishers surges forward. Infantry stand out clearly, in dark silhouettes, on the glowing sky in the sunset; they run very fast, fall down, get up, fall down. They say these targets (172) “appear and disappear” on which we practiced formerly at the firing range. I shoulder my rifle, finger on the trigger, and when the infantrymen stand up, I fire. At each leap forward the line appears less dense, it crumbles under our fire. Finally, it at last falls down a hundred meters from us, crouches, invisible, and seems nailed to the ground. The French shooting decreases

Suddenly a second assault wave appears that starts to reinforce the first wave.

“Fire at will!” shouts the adjutant T* next to me.

By leaps the enemy advances, winning ground, and progressively approaching our line. Enervated, muffled, we shoot, load, shoot, without stopping. Ah! The German line always advancing! To see better, we jump onto the parapet and fire from our knees. All of a sudden, a volley of bullets enfilades us; a part of the enemy has without a doubt infiltrated the woods on our right! Are we going to be caught between two fires? In front of us, the assault wave is no more than forty meters away! I fire with a frenetic rage. My heart beats to breaking, my ears are buzzing, my head is on fire (173) grayed by the

powder and the infernal racket of the firing, it seems to me that I am in a paroxysm of life and intense enjoyment.

The entire edge of the woods is only a long jet of fire in the night. Our rifle barrels are burning. The German ranks collapse, just like a row of dominoes falls with a flick. And suddenly the enemy line flexes, swirls, disbands!

Standing on the parapet, we drop the fleeing with our last cartridges, shouting with a ferocious joy,

“We got em! We got em!”

“Cease fire! Cease fire! Cease fire!”

The attack is repulsed. The enemy is fleeing in disorder. After the deafening noise of the shooting a profound silence succeeds, that is troubled only by the moans of the German wounded who drag themselves on the field.

I sit on the edge of the trench and put down my burning rifle. After minutes of extreme tension, it is an incomparable joy to feel alive! We calm down. We say some words without result. Fingers still trembling we roll a cigarette. To the joy of being alive is added the joy of being vanquisher!

(174)

“Well, just like that,” said a man, “I understand the war”

“Malin, go,” answers the adjutant, philosopher, “always better to be a hunter than a rabbit!”

While in the distance, in the plain, the German trumpets send back the gloomy bell of the retreat, our battalion is massing in the woods and starts to march backwards.

“No speaking or smoking”

We move on in the darkness, pressed one against the other. We hear only the muffled sound of our steps on the dead leaves and the clicks of bayonets that clink the empty canteens. The thick foliage of the forest forms above our heads a low vault which hides the sky. You have the impression of walking in a tunnel. The deep mysteries of the forest unnerve us. I feel oppressed; sinister forebodings obsess me. We walk in silence, without looking behind.

Abrupt stop. The officers discuss something in a low voice. The men gossip. What’s going on? Was the retreat of the Germans nothing but a feint? Our line would have

been overwhelmed on the flanks, so that we would be forced to withdraw? Will we be surrounded (175) in this wood? Can we escape, sneak in the darkness to the high road of Bar-le-Duc?

An order is passed, “take cover in the ditches.”

I think that we are taking a break while the officers do a route reconnaissance. We stretch out in the ditch, side by side. I fall asleep exhausted.

A man who walks on my stomach wakes me up with a start, and a cry of pain. All of my comrades are sleeping a confused, tangled mass at the base of some trees. I try to regain my interrupted sleep, I toss and turn, pricked by the cartridge belt from behind, by the scabbard of the bayonet that sticks in my back.

9 September

I am shaken; 3 o'clock in the morning. They distribute rations on the road; some conserves. We have the order to reoccupy the edge of the woods that we abandoned yesterday evening. Perhaps the Prussians have installed themselves there during the night! We advance cautiously from tree to tree; the trench is empty.

At dawn, the bombardment resumes. (176) But we are now used to the sneezing of the 77s, we're joking at them. Those shells sound meaner than they are

In the middle of the day a roll of thunder shakes the air. A large black plume has just risen from the thickets, thirty meters behind us. A second roar makes us arch our backs, the shell passes over our heads and will burst with a terrible crash ten meters ahead of the ditch.

“Good God!”

A terrible agony tenses us! The lieutenant dispatches a liaison officer to the battalion commander. The phone is off. A cyclist goes off at full speed warning the heavy battery to lengthen its shot.

And suddenly a new explosion throws us against each other, breathless, the shell has fallen on the parapet.

“Everyone into the woods!” shouts the sub-lieutenant who takes the initiative to fall back just until the artillery has corrected its fire.

We run towards the rear. At the moment that I reach the large trees, a shell whistles by,

explodes some meters away from me, and throws me into the air. The acrid smoke burns my throat. Explosions, clumps of ground thrown on all sides. (177) A small white dog who had been adopted by our sections for a few days, ran in front of me, barking with pain; his torn open stomach with his intestines trailing along on the ground. I receive a violent shock on the chest, on the left side. Like a flash, this thought is going through my mind,

"I am killed! I have a shell fragment in my heart!"

I do not run faster, surprised to be able to "think, being killed." Under the large trees I stop, out of breath. I unbutton my coat quickly, anxious to see my wound. No blood on the chest, nothing; the suspension strap cushioned the shock, and the fragment remained burning between the coat and the shirt. Joy!

The French shells continue to sweep the ground that we have just quit, while the enemy artillery methodically sprinkles the woods; fuses chuckle in the branches, heavy percussives dig holes, leaving enormous smoke funnels, breaking the roots of the trees that fall, crushing the fugitives. The whole company, gagged in the wood, falls back.

But as we come in view of a support trench, occupied by soldiers of the *, the latter stand up on the parapet (178) and signal us to stop and shout at us,

"Bunch of cowards! Fuck! Regain your trenches!"

In vain do we try and explain at a distance that we are only retreating for a moment and under orders: they swear at us.

[censored]

"You will not pass by!"

[censored]

I sit down at the foot of a tree, on the ground. I ask myself if I am not the prize of some nightmare. In the trench, we are prisoners under fire;

[censored]

in the woods, we are under a terrible artillery barrage of the German heavy artillery. And when we fall back, under orders, there are our brothers in arms who are aiming at us. In front, in back, everywhere the menace of death pursues us. How do get out of this hell? My head explodes.

The shells fall on the right, on the left. A branch, sawed off by a shell, impales a man near me and nails him to the ground.

In the course of ten minutes, I reflect that the French battery that has shot too short has to have been warned and I take part in regaining the edge (179) of the woods. On the path I encounter the battalion commander,

“Where are you coming from?” he shouts to me.

“Captain, I fled the camp like all my comrades because the artillery is firing too short. Now, I think that the firing has been corrected, and I am returning.”

“You are frank, at least! That’s good. You haven’t done anything but execute the very sensible order of your lieutenant. Now the damage is corrected. I hope that all of your comrades will return as fast as you!”

Little by little the trench is filling up. One after another the soldiers return and take their place of combat, after that hot spot.

Night comes. We place sentries in the field ten meters in front of the trench. I stretch out on the ground, between Chapelier and Ciret; we slide against each other because the night looks to be cold.

Towards midnight, I wake up. It rains torrents. The hollow where we rest is full of water. I get up and go to dry off under a large oak. Each tree shelters five or six soldiers, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched, a handkerchief tied around the neck. Alas! the gusts of rain slant in on us. (180) We are pierced. My greatcoat, all dirty, is saturated with water; the rain runs down my neck, along my back. My wet pants stick to my thighs; my boots are full of water. fouth! fouth! with each step. It’s raining, it’s raining always. What misery!

Where to find shelter? It rains even under the trees; it is a cold downpour. I shiver, my teeth chatter.

My God, will this night never end! I change trees; the shower continues.

Above, on the plain, we see the shadowy silhouettes of the sentries, stoic under the squalls of rain.

“You talk about a bath,” whispers a man whose nose is like a dropper. And, pointing to the flooded plain, he adds, sublime,

“What are they going to take, the Boche!”

10-13 September, life in the Bois de Laimont

The rain falls all night, in torrents, without stopping. The pale dawn was greeted by shouts of joy; this was a veritable deliverance. The downpour diminished. The adjutant undertook the distribution of the alcohol, which gives us a salutary boost. To get warm, we beat (181) our arms, in the manner of coachman, we dance the sabotière,⁸⁴ we hit each other with friendly punches. As the first rays of the sun timidly pierce the large back clouds, certain men take off their water-soaked coats and hang them in the trees. But some bullets whistle by. The rain had made us forget the presence of the enemy. Everyone stretches out in the mud.

As we don't speak of quitting the position, little by little we organize life on the edge of the woods. The demarcation trench was dug, and we enlarged the trench to be able to shoot standing, with a bench to sit. Because it rains continuously, the soldiers, ingeniously, had the idea to construct behind the trench, amidst the first trees of the forest, some huts that protected us from rain and bullets. After having so many times run in open country under a machine gun, this was for us a very agreeable sensation to taunt bullets and shrapnel behind sturdy shelters made of large, stacked logs. Only the machine-gunners, who found good tools at the wood farm, dug an underground shelter, which they were very proud of.

With the aid of Ciret, I build a wooden cabin backed by a big oak and (182) covered it with foliage and large clumps of earth. For sleeping, Giret went to look in a field for two straw bales. Without the rain, which despite all our efforts persisted in filtering through the interstices of our roof and dripping perpetually on our heads, our improvised installation would have been almost comfortable. But as I was very tall, I was obliged to let my legs outside.

During the day, everyone was going about freely at his occupations, some, untiring and never satisfied of their work, constantly improved their home, carrying some branches and brush, accumulating logs, carrying bales of hay. Others, resumed, during the lulls in the bombardment, the habits of the barracks and endeavored to clean their rusty rifle, or carefully stitch their ragged uniforms.

No time for eating. Each eats when he is hungry. The quartermaster continues to furnish each day some dry apricots, some rice and some fresh meat, but since it was forbidden to light a fire, we see sacks at the base of trees without distributing them. At two we opened a box of bully beef and nibbled this cold pinkish gelatin on a crouton.

⁸⁴ A kind of clog dance.

Unfortunately, the bread, that one can't eat (183) because of the humidity, was covered with blue Prussian fungus and almost inedible.

Many men no longer have any tobacco and suffer from that deprivation. It's a great distraction on a campaign to smoke! The officers themselves, deprived of their canteens, search in the back of their pockets for some crumbs of tobacco, mixed with dust, to role a decent cigarette. By good luck I had bought a good provision of blonde tobacco at the Belgian frontier and I am able to share happily. The tobacco, a rarest good, became exchange money and replaced silver which for men out in the woods does not have any use. For a small exchange, I offered a pipe full. One morning, in exchange for the cigarette paper (bought at Lexy and that I found in my coat pocket) I obtain a canteen of hot coffee—an extraordinary boon—for which I would have certainly in vain offered a louis! As for the matches, they were completely lacking. Two men who owned lighters had become considerable figures. We passed fire, from pipe to pipe, without ever letting it go out, as in the myth of the "carriers of the Olympic torch."

(184)

When you were tired of sleeping or smoking, the main distraction was to go on a work detail to get water at the chateau. The men with buckets went out in broad daylight, in a column of ones, marching behind the bunches of bushes, nose towards the ground, bent in two so as to not attract the attention of the enemy. When several bullets whistle through the legs of the men on the detail, the poilus, sitting on the threshold of their hut, shout,

"Do you want to get down! You are going to let them find us!"

At the "chateau" (it was a small hunting pavilion in the woods) we took some water at the kitchen tap. The luxurious chambers, traversed during a week by some soldiers who wiped their muddy shoes on the pricey carpets, offered a dismal appearance.

The food resupply took place at night. About twenty men left under the command of the quartermaster corporal, carrying some large camp bags and kettles hanging on saplings. The supply vehicles waited on a road in the middle of the forest. The distributions were done rapidly in silence behind the vehicles by the light of lanterns. The men of the work detail returned in the middle of the night through the woods, bent under the weight (185) of the large sacks filled with loafs of bread, cans, stumbling in the ruts, sometimes wandering off the dark paths. When they arrived, all sweating, at the edge of the woods, the supply man woke up the corporals who were sleeping in their huts and distributed as good as possible, without light, the squad distributions. The adjutant himself served the "Eau-de-vie" so that he would have no arguments. Then some men went into the depths of the woods to sweeten the coffee that they apportioned out warm at dawn.

The quartermaster once risked himself in the front line to bring us letters. What joy to receive dear writing! The forgotten have sad hearts. I learn one time more "that the English land in new reinforcements and that the Russian steamroller advances irresistibly on Berlin!" I scribbled on military postcards some words in answer that the quartermaster undertook to send.

One time the sub-lieutenant received the Bulletin des Armées.⁸⁵ The paper passed hierarchically from officer to adjutant, from adjutant to some sergeants to corporals and so when it arrived to me it was no longer (186) anything but a rag of muddy paper. Still, what pleasure I experience to read some printed lines! We have been deprived of papers since the departure from Paris! The Bulletin published some echoes of charming optimism. I read with joy the history of a Cossack who, taken prisoner, proposes a riding lesson to a Prussian general and hurried, at a great gallop, to the Russian lines. There was a series of stories of similar caliber on all of our allies, English, Serbs, Montenegrins, and Belgians, and also a feature article on "English Aid" by Victor Bérard.

Each evening, towards 5 o'clock, a violent bombardment. At the first shell, all the men disappear into their shelters. The Germans, strongly trounced a first time, do not risk to attack again. Sometimes a strong reconnaissance ventures onto the plain. We disperse it with some shots; we retain the two battalion machine guns to stop an attack in force.

One evening, a horseman who galloped on the plain, advances towards our trench. Some shots fired: the man emptied the stirrups; some volunteers go to search for him; it was a large Bavarian, an artillery officer; he had gone astray and thought he was going back to his battery, firing on our woods.

(187)

His wounds, of which one in the stomach, made him suffer much. When we bandaged him carefully, he took from an interior pocket a photograph of his wife and children; they did not leave the image of the eyes and, from time to time, approached his lips. Everyone was softened.

"There are good fathers of families, among them also," concluded Ciret.

We carried the wounded man towards the ambulance at the chateau where he died as soon as he arrived. The soldiers who killed him were blamed by their comrades, who thought they could have taken him prisoner without shooting at him.

The Boche horse grazed in the plain; a dismounted officer offered a louis to the man who went to fetch the beast. Bonnal had the honor of going there, hands in his pockets.

⁸⁵ Issued daily by the Ministère de la guerre.

During these days, the rain was our principal enemy. We are subjected to a continuous shower, a strong bath! We shiver in the humid shelters. My hands were peeling like those of a laundress. By constantly being wet and never eating hot food, we all suffered from dysentery. At each pause in the bombardment, the men leave their shelters and ran (188) into the woods to crouch. One next to the other, by fifteen, by twenty, the unfortunate try, with grotesque grimaces and unhappy groans. As soon as one shell whistles by all the "pères la colique"⁸⁶ get up and regain precipitously their cabanas and hold their pants in their two hands. They did not have the idea of installing some latrines, and the woods, rotten with filth, soon became a real infection. The slightest breath of wind brought to our shelters the stench of nausea.

The dysentery tortures me like all of my comrades; it's an actual illness; you feel completely "empty," weak, without strength and without will; the slightest physical effort or intellectual thought seems considerable; one has the painful impression of being only the shadow of one's self.

11 September

The sub-lieutenant sent a patrol of volunteers onto the plain to reconnoiter the enemy positions during the day. The Germans let them approach then machine gunned them at close range. Half of the men remained on the ground. Returning, Thureau had his legs cut off by a shell.

(189)

This was a brave boy, a little "earthy", as the Paris workers say, but playful and very helpful; at Paris he slept in my room and sang from morning to night. At night, four men would come, crawling, searching for his body on the plain. When the funeral cortege passed in front of the shelters, some did the military salute. His head hung, pale, the eyes rolled back, and his crushed legs were as those of a disjointed puppet.

"Poor old guy!" said his companions. "He will no longer sing."

His squad dug a deep hole at the base of a tree, a few meters behind the trench. He was put in the bottom. A man gave his handkerchief to cover the face. The company assembled in a circle around the gaping hole and the sub-lieutenant pronounced a funeral oration for the soldier:

"Adieu, brave soldier! You have courageously done your duty! You are dead for the motherland, it's a most beautiful death. We vow to avenge you and will never forget you. Adieu brave...brave (He had already forgotten the name of the soldier! We whisper: Thureau! Adieu, brave Thareau! (sic))"

⁸⁶; Father Colique was a squatting figure. A refill was placed in the hole provided for this purpose and after lighting, a coil of carbonaceous material and black appearance unfolded.

The men file away singly in front of (190) the grave. And many soldiers, who during the fighting had seen, without emotion, their best friends fall beside them, sobbed in looking at the miserable, muddy remains of that unknown comrade to whom pious honors were being paid, because that day we had been lucky enough. Each man, in passing, eyes down, grabs a clump of dirt and throws it into the gaping hole, while turning their head. Ballot, the reserve sergeant who had been a pastor as a civilian, mumbled the prayer for the dead.

Every morning, we say: it is going to be this evening that we are relieved. And every evening, we repeat: it's going to be tomorrow morning! The "rumors," the most diverse, circulate, one day, it's that three corps of the German army are being encircled at Maubeuge; two hours later they affirmed that Paris is itself invested!

12 September

The sub-lieutenant announced to us that the chasseurs have received the order to take, no matter what the cost, the village of Vassincourt on our right.⁸⁷ All day, 75s, 120s, 155s thunder furiously. The whizzing of great shells, the sharp whistling of some 75s over our heads (191), a sound vault. An artillery officer who directs the firing tells us,

"You will never perhaps have the occasion to assist at a similar artillery duel."

At the end of the afternoon, as the shots spaced out, a corporal climbed to the top of a tree and announced that he saw nothing moving in the German trench. A patrol, commanded by Sergeant Péraldi, reached the first line of the German position which he found filled with corpses. The enemy had fallen back and fortified a few hundred meters to the rear.

13 September at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, the sub-lieutenant, passing in front of the huts, says to the men,

"The German 1st army is in retreat, the 2nd German army is in retreat and the 3rd routed."

⁸⁷ A commune about 2.5 miles south of Villers-aux-Vents.

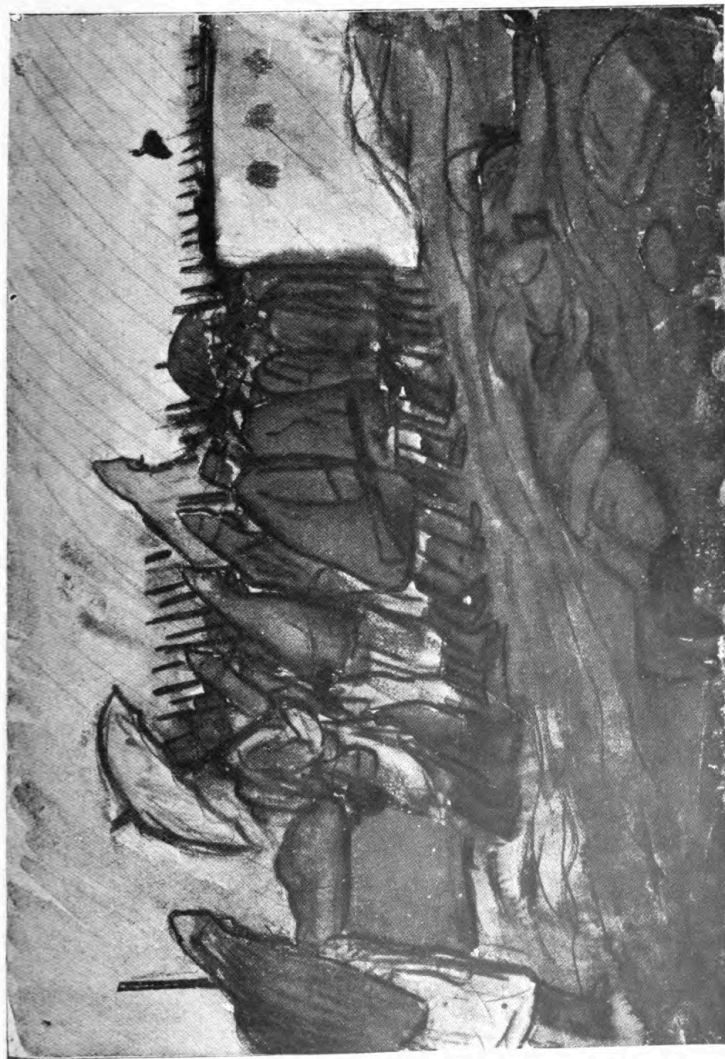
VI
AFTER THE VICTORY
The March Forward

(195)

13 September

When, madly enthusiastic, we left Paris singing, under a rain of flowers and kisses, we were all convinced that the hour of the inevitable revenge had come and that a succession of brilliant victories would lead us quickly to Berlin. In the first shocks at the frontier, where we were crushed under their numbers, what seemed astonishing to us even abnormal, was that we were not winners! But after these terrible reverses, despite the lost illusions, few men had the idea that France would relive the horror of 1870. Beaten, we were not beaten. The retreat was never a route, and each time that we face back, like a hunted boar turning against the dogs, we have the impression, at each new thrust, that the forces in the present are little by little in equilibrium. (196) In the course of the successive encounters, the troops got used to the horror of battle that, at their baptism of fire, they were dismayed; we were hardened, we learned to fight; the most discouraged, the most pessimistic, regained confidence, seeing that on certain points the French army clearly dominated the adversary. As for me, even in the darkest hours of the retreat, even when weakened by the greatest fatigue and tormented by the most terrible anguish, I always preserved in the depth of my heart not only hope but also the certitude of final victory. Today it exploded, the victory so much hoped for, we do not find anything supernatural; perhaps it was precisely possible because everyone, soldiers and officers, we still all have faith in it—yes, we are all waiting for it, we predict it, and we are all trying today to blame him for having a little desire.

All the same, in the regiment, we are a bit vexed; it is not “our” victory! After Noers, after Fossé, after Villers-aux-Vents, we were waiting for the reward of our efforts and the ransom of our sacrifices! Alas! Each time that we have charged, each time that we have advanced under a terrible



LA MARCHÉ EN AVANT

(197)

barrage, each time that we have seen, without failure, fall by hundreds our most valiant comrades, each time, our hopes for success have been disappointed. The retreat—often precipitous—has always been the result of our offensives! For a week, we are, au contraire, on the defensive, our mission was to hold at all costs, to guard to the last man the edge of this woods, eight kilometers in front of Bar-le-Duc. We have held—without much damage. After a violent attack on 8 September, where they were decimated, the Germans have not attempted to attack us again. So, it is after a few days of relative calm, where only the gun has spoken, that we are learning—irony of fate--the sudden change, the defeat of the enemy! It seems to us that the victory was made without us, and perhaps do we harbor him a little grudge!

And then we are currently too weathered for us to enjoy success and to rejoice! These last six days in the rain and bombardments, in the mud, next to corpses, with as food some “bully beef” and some moldy bread, these six nights, passed shivering with cold, have exhausted us. All the men are pale, feverish, at the end of their strength. (198) And it rains, it rains without stopping! Our coats, heavy with water cannot dry between the showers; we are uncomfortable, we freeze with the cold, hands in our pockets; it rains. You don’t dance with joy, under a shower!

At nightfall, the battalion evacuated the line of trenches that it had held for almost a week; we abandon without regret our picturesque, precious little village; we traverse the woods and we stack our rifles before a large farm.

Some German shells had destroyed the wall of the house where a good old woman had regaled us with some cider and confitures. But the battery of 77s which did this work was spotted and annihilated by the precise fire of our 75s. The last rays of the setting sun illuminate, on the side of a hill, the tragic mass of mutilated guns and shattered caissons, with which lie dead bodies of men and horses on the grass.

The fires illuminate the edge of a wood of pines. For us, who shiver after a week in the rain, what a joy to sit around a good fire that crackles! The cooks prepare the soup in quick time; they grill (199) some steaks on the points of bayonets. It’s the first time in eight days that we’ve eaten hot food. What a feast!

While seated around the fires, scarlet faces, we savor the hot soup and we allow ourselves to be blissfully invaded by the feeling of well-being; ring tones of French clarions burst in the distance.

“They’re calling assembly,” remarks a trooper.

In the distance, along the entire line, the bugles sound, respond, take up the refrain one

after the other.

"It's the sound that you hear at the end of maneuvers," observes a reservist.

"What if it was the end of the war?"

"That wouldn't be anything extraordinary if we are the winners!"

"Without a doubt they are sounding the armistice so that the chiefs can agree on a treaty!"

"Egad! Everything is explained," exclaims a soldier, suddenly inspired. "Today is the 13th of September! Madame de Thebes had predicted that the war would end on the 13th of September."⁸⁸

The noise expands, quickly from fire to fire, 13 September, the end of the war! (200) In each group, around the fire, they discuss passionately, they calculate the chances for peace; each supports a new argument to strengthen the common hope. Simple minds, confident in the clairvoyance of the soothsayers, rejoice frankly; those who do not believe in the predictions of the witches, consider that after their defeat the Germans will be compelled to offer us a very advantageous peace. We speak again of Alsace-Lorraine and billions of an indemnity; satisfied with the victory, anticipating with satisfaction the end of their trials, all the men are gay tonight.

"Ah, shit! Voila the rain again!"

A fine rain begins to fall. Satiated, I'm worried about bedding. Impossible to find refuge in the barns of the farm; the colonel is camped there with his staff and has prohibited access by the soldiers. I install myself under the low branches of a large pine.

Barely asleep, a sharp pain awakened me with a jump. A hairy body slips across my face. It's a big rat, hungry without doubt, that was starting on my ear.

The rain now falls in torrents. Saturated with water (201) the branches of the pine begin to let the downpour filter through. It's necessary to find another shelter. In the violent squalls of rain that ping my face, wading through the mud of the smashed road, I walk to the door of the big farm. A sentry, bayonet on the barrel, is leaning against the wall, all dripping with water, hands in the pockets, a kerchief knotted around the neck. I try to get in. But he has orders to let no one pass and knows only his instructions.

⁸⁸ Madame de Thèbes (1845–1916), aka Anne Victorine Savigny, was a French clairvoyant and palm reader who published her prophecies every Christmas.

I return to the rain, disappointed, and bypass the farm. A ray of light filters from under a large door. I push the door that slides on some hinges; I throw a glance at the interior, dimly lit from the light of a candle, stuck to the guard of a bayonet, four soldiers installed on the straw, despite the orders. I slipped into the barn, and without saying a word, I take off my top that pisses water, I hang it on a beam and sink into the straw.

Despite the fatigue I did not succeed in immediately sleeping. My shirt is soaked. I'm shivering with cold, not wearing a jacket. Soldiers constantly wandering in the rain come in search of shelter, push the door (202) and sneak into the barn, not without hesitation. Every time the door is ajar, a whiff of rain and cold air gulps into our shelter.

"Close the door! Damn!" shout the sleepers who have been awakened by the cold.

The barn fills up. It smells of hay and wet stuff. In contact with the straw, a gentle heat penetrates me little by little and I fall asleep. A poilu who tramples me wakes me up with a start. I was in Paris, in a delicious dream; I look at the intertwined beams of the barn, with bewilderment, then, getting back into reality, I scream at the clumsy guy,

"Can't you be careful where you walk? pâté face!"

14 September

The cry "to arms" awakens us at dawn. The barn is filled with soldiers who sought refuge there in the middle of the night. There is about the size of a battalion. They exit from the straw, stir their numb limbs, stretch. I put on my wet cap and my heavy equipment. Through the door's opening we can distinguish the bluish lines of the forest, faded in a fog of rain.

The regiment assembles and moves off. (203) The column advances slowly in the forest, in a fine rain, by rocky paths. A cyclist, covered in mud, passes next to us, painfully pushing his bicycle by hand.

"Hey! Old man, what news?"

"The Germans are in flight; we are chasing after them."

"Well, that's not so bad!"

We come out onto a clearing. At the edge of the road, the small village of Laimont appears where we have passed in retreat. Since we are advancing peaceably in columns of four on this route, which yesterday was hit by enemy artillery, it must be that the enemy has seriously retreated! We are going to retake possession of the villages,

the fields, the woods which the invader had seized with great struggle and abandoned without a fight! The sentiment that we are marching forward for the first time, gave us courage. The sickest gathered their forces; everyone is happy.

Why must our happiness be spoiled by constant bad weather! It rains without stopping. When we beat a retreat, during forced marches, a crushing heat weakened us; in the serene sky, a bright sun seemed to taunt our sufferings. (204) And now that we are victorious, the sky is gray, cloudy, glum. No clearing! Not a ray of sunshine! It looks like nature is losing interest in our victory.

We pause in Laimont. Half of the houses are burned. In a corner, on a pile of manure, the corpse of a small infantryman, killed during the retreat, evokes pity. Two enormous pigs wander in the street. In the houses that fire had spared, we see, through the windows, some tables set, cutlery placed. On the square a general gives some orders.

The * unit files past our stacked rifles. The “appearance” of these poilus, who like us have been in campaign for five weeks, sleeping under the stars, marching on the roads, and fighting, is extraordinary; faces of bandits, bushy beards, hair stuck by the rain, faces thin, feverish, a repulsive dirt. No uniformity in the outfits: to protect themselves from the rain, many wear on the head, like the forts of the Halle, large empty bags that hang from them in the back. Others have cut a round hole in oilcloths and have put their heads in them or wear rugs like chasubles. Shaggy troops draped in bed runners, in flower curtains.



LES BONHOMMES DE BOUE

(205)

Some wear over their coats the big gray cloak of Prussian infantrymen. All are burdened with enemy trophies: pointed hats, tan equipment, Mauser rifles. Many have traded their worn boots for Teuton boots. Some, whose uniforms were in tatters, were dressed in civilian clothes they found in abandoned houses. One soldier is wearing a brown McFarlane cape, another with yellow women's shoes, with leggings of a game keeper; another sports the extraordinary stovepipe of some village mayor. Many take shelter under big umbrellas of color!

The general regards smilingly the carnival-like cortege of this army drenched and victorious.

A whistle. They resume the march. We pass alongside abandoned German trenches. The depth of their communications trenches, the comfort of their underground shelters stupefies us. What a stirring of the earth, what colossal work done in a few days!

On each side of the road the ground is cratered with shell holes. Some fields filled with enormous explosions make you think of a giant skimmer; that's the work of our 155s.

At a crossing of roads, our heart (206) is torn at seeing three small mounds with crosses topped by a red cap. On the escutcheon, we read the number! They are our brothers!

All along the road, there are some small graves freshly covered. Often the cross is a broken rifle. On the cross, sometimes a pointed helmet, sometimes a red cap, whose number brings tears to our eyes. At the edge of the road, in a small garden full of colorful flowers, a grave more cared for than the others. On the cross, in addition to the helmet, the friends of the dead have put his tawny equipment and a long veil of crepe. A soldier comes off the column, to steal the helmet. I shout at him, disgusted,

"Ah, no my friend! You don't do that!"

The man returns to the ranks, a little shamefaced.

We arrive at Villers-aux-Vents that we had defended eight days ago. At the door of a house an official says to us,

"The crown prince lived here. Seems that the horse chasseurs were not able to take him prisoner! Ten minutes earlier, and that would have happened!"

Half of the houses of Villers are burned, collapsed. Between the four ruined walls some ruined furniture, the rubble (207) still smolder. It's a spectacle of desolation.

At the edge of the village, in a field, three Louis XIV chairs, sumptuous, seemed horrified to be found outside in the rain.

We take up an approach formation and march, in a line of half sections by two, twenty steps apart. Perhaps someone thinks that Laheycourt is occupied by some enemy rear guard?⁸⁹

At the top of a hill, as we are trudging through the oily soil of a freshly plowed field, we see in front of us a line of recumbent skirmishers. They have dark hoods. We are approaching, surprised. The skirmishers are motionless.

[censored]

(208)

Further on we go past some German corpses; there are some spread out, nose in the earth, arms crossed; others are rolled in a ball; still others are piled up one on top of the others, in clusters.

“For sure, we’re going to have cholera,” says a poilu.

We enter Laheycourt, rifles at the ready, slipping along the walls. Only a part of the village had been burned. The church’s clock tower leans like the Tower of Pisa.

Some peasants, some bourgeoisie, some women come out of the houses and run at our approach. After having lived for a week in the woods, the sight of straw hats, jackets, and women makes us happy. The civilians all talk at once. We learn that the Prussians have left the area yesterday evening, and that a patrol of uhlans had passed through this morning. Then the civilians went on about their misfortunes. The Prussians didn’t kill anyone, but all the houses have been pillaged. As a big bearded fellow begins (209) to narrate his exploits, we resume our journey.

On the doorsteps, the women are squatting, prostrate, crying and moaning miserably.

“Ah! Good God! My God! What a misfortune!! Misfortune!” Cries an old lady.

“Do not be afraid, old woman,” shout the soldiers. “The Prussians are gone and they will not come back more.”

“Alas!” moans another, disheveled. “They emptied my cabinets! They took all my beautiful shirts, bastards!”

⁸⁹ Laheycourt is a commune about a mile north of Villers-aux-Vents.

The lamentations of these people whose possessions had been sacked do not overly evoke sympathy by the soldiers who have known the most vivid physical and moral suffering. To a crier who shouts louder than the others in a piercing voice, a soldier shouts,

“Cry over your armoire! I will pay for a more beautiful one!”

A small girl comes out of a bakery, carrying an enormous loaf under her arm. I entered the store,

“You have some bread?”

“Yes sir. (To be called sir!) As soon as the Prussians were f ... the camp, I cooked a batch for the country.”

(210)

He passed me a large, hot loaf. The thought runs through my mind that this man is going to tell me, “You are the first French soldier I see again, I give you this bread of my good heart.” But the big baker just tells me,

“That’s fifty-four sous.”

I bite to my teeth in the golden crust, white bread! What a delight! I think I lost my taste! In the street, comrades surround me. I share. Passing a barn, I see, next to some big boots, a cake of honey. What a treat! I have never felt such a pleasure to eat.

We took position at the edge of the village. Some mounted chasseurs, rifles in hand, depart on a reconnaissance at a trot. The sub-lieutenant who commands then, a beardless blonde who has a girl's face, is polished, primped, varnished like a ball at the sub-prefecture.

Soon, we depart forward, column of fours. Next to us the 75s of an artillery convoy file continually past us.

We arrive at Sommeilles.⁹⁰ The village is completely in ruin. There is nothing left of each house but the four walls. The roofs have collapsed; crumbling walls, (211) broken beams and charred furniture obstruct the street. One is reminded of seeing the ruins of a city after an earthquake. A wall of the town hall stood with the inscription

Liberté — Égalité — Fraternité

Attached to a scorched and cracked wall, a yellow plaque, intact, announces in large

⁹⁰ A commune about a mile to the northwest of Laheycourt.

letters

THANKS
Gift of Michelin.

“No problem!” cheers Broutat in his red beard.

Passing by a plum tree, we shake it to bring down the fruit. The battalion commander hastens on horseback and cries out to us,

“Raiders! Looters!”

And as the men remain prohibited and some laugh, the officer shouts,

“Insane! You are thinking of eating plums while crossing the Père Lachaise of France!”⁹¹

This melodramatic comment hardly affects my comrades. I feel that Captain C ... is baffled, even disgusted by the indifference (212) of his men in front of this spectacle of desolation which attests to the systematic barbarism of our enemies. The privations, the anguish, the sufferings of forty days of the campaign have made us egoists at this point that we refuse to sympathize with the misfortune of these poor people who find their burned property, their belongings destroyed! In five weeks of torment, I believe that we have exhausted the resources of our capacity of emotion. Earlier the lamentations of the civilians whose German soldiers have emptied the cupboards seemed to us disproportionate, almost displaced, when we had just paraded, with tears in our eyes, before the rotten corpses of our brave fellows, who had died on the field of honor. Now these cold Pompeian ruins—a decor adequate to the horrors of the war—leaves us a little insensitive, whereas a month ago they would probably have upset us. In our mental state as combatants, fatally egotistical, the ladder of sufferings and pain have been altered, by dint of living in the anguished expectation of pain and death, we have learned to gauge the various joys and sorrows of man to their exact value. For us who have been exposed each day at being (213) shredded or annihilated, only human suffering seemed horrible; there is only one thing not reparable, death; a thing precious, indispensable, unique, life! When, in battle, one has seen their best friends die next to you; when one has heard the bloody wounded, who hold out their arms screaming this cry of distress, “have pity, don’t abandon me!”; when we have shuddered at seeing all the paroxysms of human suffering, we no longer have tears to cry before bruised stones!

We traverse a dense forest. The endless wreckage--cannons, trucks, convoys--of the German army in debacle has smashed the road. We sink to the calf in the sticky muddy

⁹¹ Reference is to the famous cemetery in Paris.

ruts.

All along the road, in the ditches, the cadavers of horses with distended stomachs, the mouth teeming with worms, turn their stiff limbs towards the sky. Some, glassy eye, are dying, and their backs tremble like jelly. Along the hedges, in copses, behind demarcation walls, dead corpses of fallen German soldiers can be seen, fallen in rearguard skirmishes.

[censored]

(214)

I stumble against a stone; I spread my face and hands in the liquid mud of the road. I rise up swearing; I wipe on the grass my hands full of mud and bloodied by the gravel of the road.

A truck horns sounds behind me; I jump to the side, it's a staff car with top down that advances, chugging along on the smashed road. I recognize the driver, it's Paul B. with whom I once had very pleasant game of tennis. B recognized me despite my dirtiness, and waved hello with his hand, passing at my height, shaved and strapped in a new tunic, he shouts, convincingly, without letting go of the steering wheel,

"It's hard, heh?"

At night we reach the small village of Charmontois.⁹² The two remaining men of my squad are exhausted and go to sleep

(215)

without preparing the soup. I am a little ashamed to go begging for a portion in another squad. I enter some farms, but the hussars who have passed before us have collected all that remained to buy after the flight of the Boche.

In a house I find a family at the table. It is hot in the country dining room; a fire of fagots sparkles in the hearth. I would offer any price to sit at this table.

"We have nothing to sell," the father of the family says to me. "The Prussians have taken everything."

At the same moment, a beautiful young blonde girl, with a buxom bodice, appears, carrying in both hands on a wooden tray a huge pan where there are about twenty eggs on the flat, yellow, golden, perfect, speckled with salt and pepper, swimming in boiling fat that spits.

⁹² Les Charmontois is a commune about two miles north of Laheyecourt.

The peasants start to eat, calmly, without turning their heads toward me; I go out in the dark night, with my empty stomach, rage in my heart. Ah! those eggs on the dish!

(216)

15 September

At dawn we resume the march forward. The rains fall continuously. We stick in the mud. The sky is gray; the fields are gray; the road is an endless glossy ribbon. Everywhere some bodies, some dead horses, ruins. At each step traces of the invasion, the occupation, the German debacle.

We pass besides a vast field that held a large German ammunition park. Thousands of shell casings and the same amount of unexploded shells were abandoned by the enemy in his hasty retreat.

“What did they leave us, the Boche!” say the poilus, admiringly. Some carry the wicker baskets in which the shells are stocked.

“That will make an umbrella stand,” they say (as if they were to bring them home the next day).

We pass through Triaucourt,⁹³ where bloody rear-guard fighting had taken place. The village has much suffered from bombardment. Some houses are wrecked, roofs fallen, walls collapsed. At the corner of a street, (217) a villa seems to have been cut in two; three floors with furnishings appear cut off. In the square, thousands of bags, helmets, equipment and broken guns attest to the importance of the German defeat.

At 4 o'clock in the afternoon, we arrive in the small village of Froidos, not far from Clermont-en-Argonne. We stack our rifles in front of the farms. Chapelier, the horse dealer, has arrived mounted on an uhlan's horse. He exchanges his prize to a tall farmer in exchange for a pair of rabbits. The scrounger Cirt goes off in search of some onions. I light a fire. The squad is going to be regaled with a good bunny! After dinner, as the village has little suffered from the invasion, the spacious barns offer us some soft beds of straw. Sure of eating and sleeping this evening, the troops declare themselves satisfied.

“It's the good life!”

A cyclist who passes carrying a folder, says to me,

“Hey! Galtier, you know the news? Seems like the Cossacks have besieged Berlin. The

⁹³ A small commune just to the east of Les Charmontois.

tsar has said this to the kaiser: 'I will give you two days to evacuate France. Failure to do that, and I'll fucking burn down Berlin!'"

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And the cyclist, well informed, concludes in a low voice, with a raised finger,

"Remember well what I am going to say to you. In fifteen days, the war will be finished!"

The sun pierces the dark clouds and bathes with its clear rays the peaceful street of the village in which a pack of chasseurs on horseback emerges. Women, little girls with blond hair, come out on doorsteps and clap their hands as the dapper riders pass.

"Where are you going?" shouts an infantryman.

"We'll take them back to the border!" a chasseur gleefully answers, carrying two uhlan helmets, hanging from his saddle.

For the first time, the good weather allows us to enjoy the victory; sitting on a stone bench, in the sun, under a cradle of flowering wisteria, I dream, smoking my pipe; for two days we march forward; we retake as conquerors the route that we traveled as defeated; the enemy hides; without fighting. We retake possession of the woods, the plains, the villages where the Prussians have assuredly been chased from forever! The extraordinary victory of which we do not yet know the name seems to inaugurate a new campaign, and our first reverses (219) do not appear to us more than a painful nightmare that is already erased from our memory.

In front of the hospital barns, the infantrymen preparing the soup look, smiling, at the unbroken parade of dashing horsemen galloping in pursuit of the routed enemy. We all want to forget our past miseries and, in the hope of future victories, our hearts are filled with an immense glee.

A WINTER IN SOUCHEZ⁹⁴
1915-1916

To my comrades, the men of the 5th

To contrast the struggle in the trenches with the war of movement, I have chosen in my memoirs a year at the front with an active regiment that fought successively in Champagne, on the Aisne, the Somme, Artois and in Lorraine, and then passed a winter in the sector of Souchez. After having described the sensations of an infantryman in 1914 thrown into the turbulence of the war of movement, I will try to recount the life of a squad of poilus in this bizarre war of stagnation, where the soldier stands guard in the trenches with the regularity of a bureaucrat. I will show the suffering and the anguishes that accompany this war of usury and industry, and also the simple joys of these men who, as soon as they came out of the furnace, still covered with mud, found their good humor and their unshakeable faith in the victory.

J. G.-B.

⁹⁴ Located in the Pas-de-Calais region of France, about 10 miles north of Arras, and to the northwest of Vimy.

I
FIRST STAY IN THE TRENCHES AT SOUCHEZ
THE BLOCKHOUSE OF GIVENCHY⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Givenchy-en-Gohelle is immediately to the east of Souchez.

(225)

Helmeted, booted, covered with skins of beasts, clad with red musettes, stuffed with cartridges, rifle and bandolier, stick in hand, the men walk silently towards the trenches at dusk. The column, where the tawny sheepskins and the blue pants fade as the day goes down, moves down the main street of Ablain-Saint-Nazaire.⁹⁶

Snuggled at the foot of the barren plateau of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, Ablain was one of the first villages reconquered by French soldiers in the offensive of 9 May. They fought with grenades and knives in the small streets where some barricades still stand; they got stuck in the houses, they were shot (226) on steps; they were slain in the cellars. The walls are gutted, the roofs scalped, the trees mown down; the little gardens are buried under heaps of rubble, where broken beams, window frames and twisted fences are entangled beneath the rubble. Some roofs, of which all the tiles have been pulverized, have preserved only their frame of open woodwork, balanced on rickety walls. When rockets illuminate the horizon, it looks like huge cobwebs woven into the golden sky.

At the door of a small house a small tricolor flag flies; it's the command post of a general. Further on, an old territorial, fixed bayonet, guards the entry to an infirmary. Light filters through the windows of some cellars to some territorials from the Midi who, each evening, carry some material to the trenches, living for months in the subterranean spaces of the ruined village.

At the exit of the village from which many soldiers file at the same time, the mutilated church stands toward the sky; its tower strangely white, worn, hammered, slashed by large shells, and whose profile recalls the map outline of Corsica.

No smoking or talking. On the horizon (227) the glowing flares shine, go out, illuminate again a small line of ground. In single file, we advance rapidly in silence on the road smashed, wading in whitish mud. Another file of poilus—a corvée of food—files along in reverse carrying on their backs some canteens and cooking pots that clash with each other. One hears the continuous rustle of the gray stream flowing along the road lined with willows and shapeless stumps. Left: the massive ridge of Lorette. Right: the dull plain, where thousands of corpses with pointed helmets are rotting.

Suddenly, behind an ominous bunch of trees with bullets beating the sky like an army of grotesque broomsticks, Souchez appears to us. The countryside is so hideous, so unnatural, that I asked myself if I am not dreaming; it's a vision of an infernal nightmare, the gloomy decor of some fantastic tale of Edgar Poe. These are not ruins; there are no longer houses, no walls, no streets, no more forms. Everything has been pulverized,

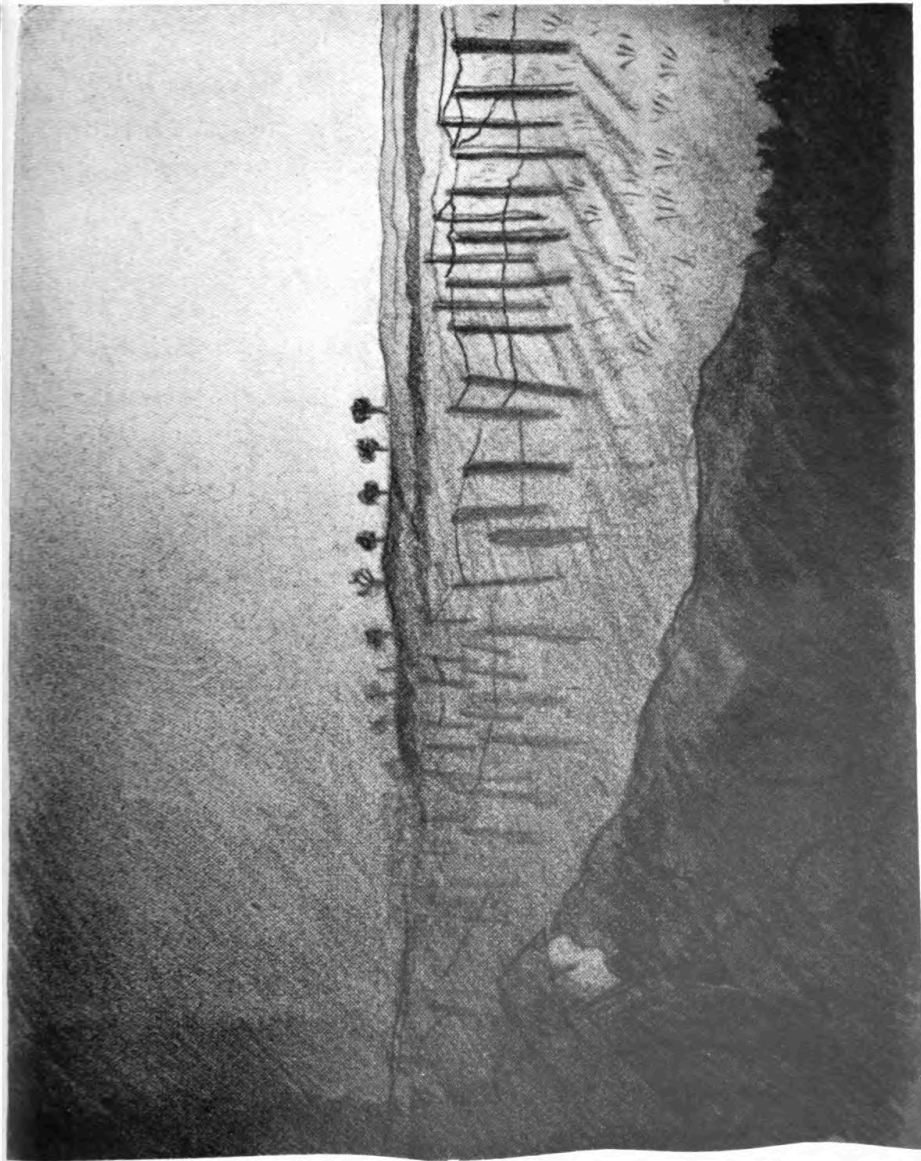
⁹⁶ Ablain-Saint-Nazaire is a commune in the Pas-de-Calais region of France, about five miles to the north-northwest of Arras.

leveled by the pestle. Souchez is nothing but a disgusting porridge of wood, stones, bones, crushed and kneaded in the mud. Like an ocean after a (228) storm, a few wrecks lie scattered on a carpet of glistening mud. The cellars must be full of German skeletons. This rubble stinks of death. When Souchez ceased to be the scene of daily guerrilla warfare, the water completed the work of fire. The little river, which some nights sank red, revolted and, out of its bed, tried to submerge the rubble. A few islets of ruins emerge alone from the mud; nevertheless, the enemy shells persevere in ruthlessly searching the entrails of the murdered burg!

At the exit from Souchez, a swamp. In single file the column follows a path of wooden duckboards, mounted on stilts, which wind between the pools. At the first step I stumbled against a mass; it was soft like a sandbag, a corpse whose head was plunged into the water.

Something unclear! An oath. A man has slipped and fallen into the water--it's Chaffot, naturally--a hand is extended, an effort, the poilu rises onto the bridge dripping. The march continues.

The glowing flares that sparkle on the horizon shimmer on our helmets. Through the gap between Lorette and the plateau of Vimy, the Boche can see us, by the light of their flares.



LA FUSÉE

(229)

Suddenly, a red and green rocket explodes and slowly blossoms into bright stars, like a bouquet of fireworks. Certainly, that's a signal! Would we be spotted? The march is accelerating. Anguish grips me a second. How to shelter oneself from shells on this bridge?

Chin...Chin!

The brutal sneer of a 105mm flies above our heads. We start running, head tucked in the shoulders, while the bursts pierce the water.

Dchinn...Brann...Dziou...brann, Dziou...braing!

It's towards the back now. We slow down, out of breath. No more duckboards, it's the mud, the gluey mud, viscous, whitish in which for four days we are going to live and maybe die. At the foot of a hill that stands before us in the night, we see the entrance of a communication trench. A sigh of relief. Between two walls of earth we mock the shells!

We are moving forward.

"The lieutenant asks if there are any wounded?"

The column moves through a narrow steep path; marching rapidly, the slope is steep; we (230) sweat in big drops; swollen musettes cling to the wattled walls; we feel stuck as in a vise: ceaselessly one must make violent efforts to disengage oneself; we climb, we always climb, we stumble, we get up. We shout,

"Pause! Slower up front!"

The second-line huts overlook this trench. At the entrance of the burrows, the men surround some braziers. We see, at the back of some deep layers, some poilus bunched together, joking warmly for us who climb to the front line, they are a bit like dodgers.

At the top of one side, at a crossing of communication trenches, a liaison points out,

"First section to the right."

Finally, we are in the front line. We file by one by one, rifle pointed down, in the trench where some poilus watch from their niches, draped in their tent canvas and looking like motionless specters. A guard says to another,

"It's the relief of the little fort."

No communication trench goes to the position that we are going to occupy and that has not yet been organized. It's necessary to cross open ground, "on the table," in front of the enemy trench. (231) The sergeant goes first. The men, one after the other, stand up on the parapet, advance painfully in the mud, bent over, head lowered, staff in one hand, the rifle in the other. To avoid getting lost in this mud pond, you follow the footprints of the previous. We sink in molasses to the knees, to the thighs. Each stride requires an exhausting effort. Staff and rifle serve as crutches in this shifting terrain. Whenever a flare whistles in the air, one bends in two, the buttocks in the icy glue.

We cross, on a board, an old trench filled with yellow water, and painfully reach the top of the hill. Some poilus are there, squatting in the mud, watching. The NCOs take the instructions in a low voice.

"You're the corporal? Good. The enemy is in front, forty meters. We are here like a lost sentinel. No liaison, neither on the right or left. No communication trench to the rear. No aid to wait for. Except for an attack, forbidden to fire, because any relief would become impossible. That's it. Now give me two men to relieve the listening post. The sentries are down there (232) between the lines, in a large shell hole. It's not a trench; they have water up to their nipples. Me, I only put my poilus there for an hour, so that they don't get sick. You, do as you want. Good bye and good luck!"

The relief is done. There is no trench, a small pile, a simple slope against which watchers crouch. Everyone chooses his place, in the mud.

The vigil commences in the dark night. The men hunch down each time that a rocket shines on their helmets and illuminates them for a few seconds. We see our field of fire; a plateau of mud, of monstrous shell holes filled with water, a few shredded trees, which we call "toothpicks. At forty meters, a whitish embankment indicates the enemy trench with other men like us watching silently.

I examine the situation; we are in a small advanced, and sacrificial, post. We do the figuring. No communication trench to retreat nor to evacuate the wounded. No grenades, and our rifles, veritable blocks of mud, are not usable. If the Boche attack in force, we will defend with bayonets and we will be killed on the spot.

(233)

These thoughts, logical though foolish, however make me happy! How to explain this tempestuous joy. Is it the falsely joyful mood of the gentleman to whom a big "misfortune" arrives and who says, resigned: "Like that! It is complete!" smiling with a blissful admiration at the fullness of his misfortune? Is it just the little vanity of the poilu dilettante who adds a curious page to his campaign memories? Is it not rather the bitter

enjoyment I have felt in certain critical positions, a kind of bizarre satisfaction at the thought of performing a particularly painful and dangerous task?

A terrible wind blows on the plateau and chills us despite the warm sheepskin. We have the impression that we will be washed away by the squall. Large shells pass by purring; wheezing torpedoes, which run out of steam, burst behind us, far enough away. Sometimes five or six white rockets shine simultaneously, at equal height, in the sky.

"It looks like an avenue with gas lights," remarks Cassaud.

Towards midnight, a shadow slides along the human forms, pressed into the mud. It's a liaison agent who is searching for me with (234) my squad for a work detail of material; we will be given something to organize the position a little. I brush off the mud. The men, tired, grumble but they follow me. The first squad stays to guard the position.

After half an hour of wading, we arrive at a depot of goods. The corporal quartermaster, the dreaded Lajoncquette, orders my poilus to take some large wooden duckboards, very heavy and about four meter in length. In vain I try to make him understand that it is impossible to climb to the small fort with these heavy encumbrances and that the men are likely to bog down to the shoulders in the mud, either to capsize with the boards in the ponds and to drown (this has already been seen, alas!). Lajoncquette is inflexible; it is the fate of the men or rather of the quartermaster.

Decided to seek the opinion of the second lieutenant, I let myself slip into the trench that leads to his hut, an old Boche shelter. After a fast tumble that reminds you of a toboggan ride, I burst, covered in mud, feet first, into a small room wallpapered with white paper with pink stripes, brilliantly lit, where two officers stretch out on planks, near a brazier, smoking some blonde cigarettes. (235) I had the effect of a chimney sweep tumbling into a salon. Very matter-of-factly, the sub-lieutenant listens to my reasons and advises me while smiling to carry some "spiders" and small "duckboards?"

As soon as I remounted to the surface of the plateau, I report to the terrible Lajoncquette. My men, satisfied that I had taken up their defense, loaded on their backs the spiders and duckboards, and the small column goes off in single file on the narrow path of boards that traverse the plateau. Each time that a rocket illuminates the sky, the corvée falls flat, seeming to return to the earth, and we discover a fantastic countryside. Millions of shells of all calibers have worked over the ground creating enormous shell holes some of which measure 10 meters in diameter; the plateau is a monstrous skimming ladler whose thousands of shapeless craters, filled with water, shine in the moonlight; it looks like a lunar landscape. I move forward at the head of the corvée on the narrow path of boards that serpent among the lakes, groping with a stick like a blind man so as to not go astray. Covered in mud, sweat, bent over from the weight of the

duckboards and spiders, the men move forward painfully (236) battling against the wind that blows in the storm and forces them to totter, stumbling against snags, losing balance, crumbling on knees, thrusting in the mud, swearing, getting up, reloading ...one false step, it's a fall into one of the monstrous shell holes, it is the wallowing up to the shoulders in the mud that snatches, attracts, hugs, its death if some dedicated comrades with the aid of ropes and poles, do not tear you out, after several hours of work, of this foul glue.

Suddenly a whistling, a flash. Three shells explode on our right. We fall to the ground, hands in the mud. I hear the painful gasps of my comrades. Unable to move to the right or left, impossible to leave the path of boards without risking getting stuck. Another mewing that ends with an angry sneer. The firing is moving on. We wait several minutes; then each again picks up his load and we move off in the mud.

Back at the fort, the vigil resumes, tedious. Then the day breaks, slowly, like with regret and reveals to us the surrounding landscape. It is always a curious sensation to see dawn on an unknown landscape, we arrived at night; in the darkness.



CORVÉE DE SOUPE

(237)

We chose a small place in the mud, each ignores everyone and does not know what is a few meters away from him. At the first rays of the sun, the landscape suddenly appears and always we are surprised not to find it as we had imagined in the night.

We are perched on a small hill, on the extraordinary hill of mud where we have traveled that night and on which we patrol like some flies in the dung of a cow. In front of us is the German line, in front of Givenchy. In back of us, we have before our eyes the rump of Lorette, and to the left the ruins of Souchez, its woods like a pin cushion, then on the horizon, in the middle of the ruins, the sugar cake of the Ablain church. To the right, on the flat plain of Lens, the red roofs intact and peaceful villages still occupied by the enemy—Angres and its ore pits, Liévin, Lens with its fumes—contrast singularly with the desolation of the village reconquered in fierce battle.⁹⁷ Actually, in the immense panorama where thousands of men are carpets, where some thousands of artillery pieces are dug in, camouflaged, ready to spit death at that first ring of the telephone, not a man visible, nothing stirring.

(238)

One night has sufficed to transform us, from the helmet to the boots, into disgusting blocks of yellowish mud. The rain commences to fall. We organize; day watchers, one per squad, are designated. It is recommended that you do not move once in place to signal our small post to the enemy who can observe us from the front, side and back! I distribute the alcohol.

“Alcohol kills, alcohol makes you a fool!” declares the virtuous Combrit. “You can give mine to my colleagues!”

The corporal that I have succeeded passed me a small niche that he had dug; huddled there with Lavartête and Chaffot. The other poilus of the squad, less “polished” than us, stretched out their tent cloths in the mud and roll up in them and soon are asleep in the rain.

We pass the day smoking our pipes, knees to chin, trying to sleep, watching the large shells explode in the distance and eat a mixture of bread and mud. The rain falls in torrents, we are wet. Chaffot, melancholic, sighs,

“We’ll get them. Feet frozen!”

At night, the darkness resumes. The hours roll by slowly. To stay awake (239) from 7 o’clock in the evening until 6 in the morning, without any distraction of any sort, smoking is prohibited, a continuous effort is necessary.

⁹⁷ All are communes in the vicinity of Souchez.

The second dawn is hailed as a deliverance. Sentry for the day: Dinard. We snack. I reinstall myself in my small niche between Lavartête and Chaffot.

Towards 2 o'clock, just as we open a can of bully beef, a violent detonation takes our breath away and makes our shelter tremble.

"It did not fall far from here, that one!" Says Chaffot regaining his breath. "Ah! The cows!"

Lavartête out of curiosity sticks his head out of the flaps that close the entry to our shelter,

"A large torpedo. Fifty meters."
Dziou...Braaoum! Dzzing...biiggnnee...

"Two 105s. About thirty meters, it's getting closer."

And, as the detonations explode, our comrade, whose body obstructs the entrance of the shelter, informs us,

"To the right, left, a torpedo, a 105 at fifteen meters. It's getting closer!"

"Lavartête, get your head back. You will be blown away unnecessarily!"
(240)
"Corporal, I realize that."

The enemy artillery searches the ground. Explosions of incredible violence shake the atmosphere, break the eardrum, throw us against each other, panting. Our little niche on the ground floor barely protects us from splinters; it breaks down little by little and, with each explosion, threatens to collapse on our heads and to bury us. We support our roof with our backs, like live caryatids.

From time to time, Chaffot pulls out his watch, an enormous onion shape, and declares,

"Ah! La! La! quickly 5, and it ends. They brush us with their stuff!"

"You can fuck the peace to people!" adds Lavartête, outraged by the lack of taste of Boche gunners.

"Being killed on the spot, it does not matter to me," remarks Chaffot. "What would disgust me, is to suffer, guts in the sun, in this foul mud. That should not be allowed in the twentieth century, these things! Ah! those Boche cows."

Every second can bring us a horrible death and, if not annihilation, at least atrocious suffering. However, none of us hope.



TENUE D'HIVER AUX TRANCHÉES

(241)

Each tries to joke, to show off in front of his neighbor. We have already come back from so many desperate situations since the beginning of the campaign! None want to risk being joked by the other two when we are all three quartering, in two days, in front of a good bottle!

Towards 5 o'clock, as the bombardment continues, Lavartête piteously announces that he has the colic. A modest man, he wants to leave the shelter to go to the bathroom. I forbid him. Obediently, Lavartête crouched, and against us, relieves himself on a newspaper, which he then throws into the direction of the enemy.

5:30. Three whistles very close together. Ah! It's for us. Tightly entwined, united in the same trembling, we wait, with clenched teeth, the ram's blow that will knock us out, reduce us to a pulp. If they kill us, the shells will not separate us now.

Flaouch! An immense shower of water rises to the sky, falls back, crackles like a shower on our tent. The salvo fell into a deep pool, two meters from us, and did not burst.

"Fortunate that these shells are duds! says Chaffot, relieved.

(242)

The bombardment ended. I go for news. Three wounded in the squad.

At nine o'clock in the evening, the relief arrives. We go back in the open in front of the German line, then after half an hour of painful march in some communication trenches where we waded up to our eyes in a kind of chocolate cream, we arrive in Chemin-Creux, in a sap of the second line.

The entrance is a black hole at knee height. I crawl on all fours behind Bordela, dragging my rifle and my club, crawling on my elbows. After about ten meters of crawling, I bang my nose against the musettes of the sergeant.

"Wait, guy, I'll light."

The light of a candle reveals a sort of excavated niche in the rock, where four could be well held. With the inclined corridor, up to a meter high, that we have just crawled on the belly, it is an accommodation for twenty-six men. We sit down. One by one, the men arrive on all fours. And we are already tight against each other, knees to the chin, when the last cry from above that they have no place and that "we do not care about them to let them hang in the rain.

(243)

The candles come out of the musettes; the poilus scrape the underside of their shoes

and fashion out of some mud balls, small candlesticks with which they fix the candles to the wooden pillars of the hut. Helmets are removed; we remove the sheepskin that serves as a cushion; we hang on the ceiling musettes, cans and equipment. We settle down.

As soon as the men feel in the shelter some explosions and the rain, there is a lessening of tension, a effervescent explosion of joy! They talk loudly, joking, joking with each other, we're laughing.

"Ah! The swine! what did they hurl at us today, stove pipes"!

"Like we were at Fradin's. Tomorrow morning I'm out."⁹⁸

"Oh hey! Friends! Pass a liter of hooch for the liaison!"

Pipes are lit and soon, in this deep sap, which, sitting, we touch the ceiling with our heads, the atmosphere becomes unbreathable. I say,

"Voila this is what the civilians call the rejuvenating air of the front!"

Also, sitting, corporal Doubois (Camille) goes to sleep, and here he is dreaming aloud,

"Where does it fall, this one? Where is it falling?"

(244)

And as his nightmare awakes him with a start, I greet him.

"Ah, no, my friend! Even when you sleep, you are talking business!"

At 2 o'clock in the morning, the men who left for resupply at Ablain return. We are already packed like herrings in a barrel. We must still fit somehow six poilus, thirty cans full of wine and coffee, grilled meatballs, huge bags of bread.

We distribute the letters. I have many. I first look at the envelopes and open them in order. After two days of isolation, we resume with joy contact with the rear. I also have a packet of newspapers that my good friend Paul Fuchs sends me regularly. My friends ask me.

"What new are they rattling about, those slobs? What is the latest brainwashing?"

And the joking goes on, punctuated by some great laughs.

⁹⁸ The restaurant hôtel Fradin was a kind of poor house.

“Famine in Berlin! German Shells Don’t Explode! How it’s going! Revolution in Constantinople! Romania Wavers! Greece, weapons at the ready!”

(245)

I wanted to read but my eyes close in spite of myself; many of my neighbors, entangled legs, are already snoring peacefully. I settle down for the night, but, as I try some, insidious maneuvers to progressively stretch out.

“Ah! Galtier, I beg you,” growls my neighbor. “Curl up your legs!”

As it is impossible for me to extend my bulky body, I have the idea to attach them to the ceiling with a belt.

It is three o’clock in the morning. We are finally able to rest!

[censored]

“Up, in there!” shouts a voice from the communication trench. “Up, boys! We are going to work in the front line until day!”

II
AT THE REST CAMP

(246)

“Coffee! In there!”

I wake up and sit myself on my bed. The barn is lit only by rays of light that filter through the disjoined tiles. Turet steps over the poilus sleeping in the straw, carrying the bucket by hand and smoking. I hold out my quart, and he fills it up to the brim with boiling coffee. It is one of the privileges of rank of being served first.

The barn is awakening. The men, their puffy faces framed by balaclavas, emerge from the straw, throw off their blankets, stretch out vociferously, and look for their quarts in the haversacks hung from their rifles. Turet serves the stragglers with circumspection.

“The Petit Parisien! Le Journal!”⁹⁹

(247)

Imposing gold hat drawn down over the eyes, little trumpet in hand, the newspaper vendor half-opens the door.

“What do you desire?”

“Victory!” shout the poilus in chorus.

Sufficiently rested - we just came down from the trenches last night - I went back to sleep. I wake up again, 10 o'clock! In slippers, police hat on my ruffled hair, I walk to the door, where I am greeted by the exclamations of the second squad.

“Ah! What is he pretending to be, our actor!”

The small farmyard, with its rabbit cages and its huge pile of manure where chicks are pecking about, is bathed by the pale rays of the winter sun. My lads go about the work of cleaning up. Charles conscientiously takes his bath in a large tub; sitting on a block, Chaffot hunts for lice in his checked shirt. The little Combrit, in shirt-sleeves, shaves in front of a piece of starry mirror. A man in white underpants whose lanyards hang in the manure, scratches with his knife the thick layer of yellow mud which covers his breeches; another, in boots, (248) brushes his muddy shoes with a wet straw broom; some lazy are still sleeping in the barn.

“It's time for soup; soup men, Combrit and Mailly!”

Docile, Combrit is looking for the camp kettles. Mailly coming out of the barn, covered with straw bits, grumbles loudly.

⁹⁹ Le Petit Parisien was a prominent French newspaper during the First World War published between 1876 and 1944. Le Journal was a Paris daily newspaper published from 1892 to 1944.

"Ah, ah, misery! It's always the same! It's not my turn, corporal; as proof that it was me that I was there last, before the trenches."

I don't say anything. I do not answer. By dint of constantly complaining, this Mailly, who is convinced that I blame him personally, has lost the right to be heard. He obeyed all the same, grunting.

"To the soup boys! There are some beans!"

One by one, the men, abandoning work, enter into the small canteen installed in the camp.

I command eleven soldiers. Their ages, their recruitments, their professions mix harmoniously in my squad which has two youths, five reservists, three territorials recently made active, among which are five Parisians, a Loir-et-Cher, Vendee and three men from the Midi; a man of letters, a wine merchant, two accountants, (249) an interpreter, three farmers and an acrobatic cyclist.

My friend Charles is one of the key figures of the squad. His age, his culture, his situation give him an indisputable authority. No one is close to him, and he is respectfully called "Monsieur Charles." He is brave, because in his opinion it is the only possible attitude for a man of the world in the face of danger. One day, at Roclincourt, as he was watching at the niche, a shell burst on the parapet, sending into the air the niche, sand bags and the watchman. Standing up unscathed, in the middle of the smoke, he says with his habitual phlegm, "I thought it was harder than that to receive a 105 in the chest!" A remarkable fencer, trained in all sports, Charles amazes us with his stamina. In the trenches, where he is a liaison, he "outdoes" friends fifteen years younger than him. Charles likes to have his ease, even in a dugout. "What annoys me most at the front," he often says, "is cold feet, lice, and an eight-day beard." His knapsack (which only he can wear!) is an extraordinary wardrobe on which he piles up huge rolls of blankets and four pairs of shoes (including one of snow boots)! Charles is one of those (250) who willingly give their country the sacrifice of their skin, but not that of their comfort.

Chaffot, who came with him from a territorial regiment, speaks of his forty years with some pride. A figure of an apostle with gray, dreamy eyes, a large yellow beard. He is a Parisian who made himself. He has traveled Europe as an interpreter; some well-chosen readings, the frequentation of very different individualities gave to this bohemian of very bourgeois ideas, a rather pleasant varnish. The war surprised him at the moment when, after an eventful existence, he was finally going to enjoy a little money, painfully hoarded; he does not hold too much of a grudge. He is a good man, very

obliging, a touch sensitive. Chaffot has a hobby that brings joy to the squad. He wants to persuade everyone that he has never been afraid; but he himself is so convinced that no one would have the courage to contradict him!

A southerner with a baby face, completely shaven, malicious eye behind eyeglass, a fluty voice, Combrit brings joy with his little person. It's his job to make others laugh. In civilian life, Combrit was an acrobatic cyclist, and he lugs at the bottom of his bag (251) wonderful programs and sensational posters. "The unique, the extraordinary, the hilarious Combrit." This good boy is proud to be an "artist." "I went on tour behind Mr. Mounet, of the Comedie-French,¹⁰⁰ he told me. "Good God, I assure you that I was more successful than him!" A charming comrade, gay, even under the gunfire, devoted, always ready to render service, with that naive bravery of one who ignores himself. His secret ambition would, I believe, be to rehabilitate by his exploits the troops of the South who are odiously calumniated. One day, as an officer, who came clumsily enough to joke about soldiers from the South, asked him, "What class are you from?" Combrit, a native of the Pyrénées-Orientales, replied, looking at his superior in the eyes, "I'm from the South!" When one makes him miserable in the company, Combrit declares quietly, "Well, I'm going to write to Gallieni about what's bothering me. He's a countryman of mine! He's not proud, you know. I used to play cards with him at the café, at Saint-Beat!"¹⁰¹

Dinard was a gangster in civil life. He has the equivocal silhouette of those youths who hang out at night in the recesses of doorways, flat cap on the eyes (252) and who, with an extinct butt glued to the lower lip, approach the wealthy bourgeois to ask them politely... for a light. We are surprised to see on his skull the cap, and not the traditional "flat cap" of the pimps. A curious head, moreover, almost classic, of Lovelace-type protuberances, a pale face with too red lips, black hair with blue reflections, cut off at the nape of the neck in an elegant "Tobacco pack", two big piercing eyes that glow like embers. When he's not drinking, he's not a bad boy; he is gentle, playful, cuddly, and always exquisitely polite. I do not blame him for anything; no more than a Negro will agree to put on some shoes or a girl with her hair done up would consent to wear a hat, Dinard could never resolve, despite my repeated observations, to encircle his bull neck with a regulation tie. How many reviews did I reprimand him for his tie! Dinard never wanted to part with the elegant scarf, a flattering gift from some queen of the night, and which undoubtedly reminds his nostalgic soul of the beautiful nights of yesteryear on the fortifications, in the singing rooms of some dance halls or in the happy dance halls. (253)

Turet, my aide, is a true, good man, a conscientious peasant and hard through trouble, become a poilu, patient, tenacious, disciplined until death. Since he has never been

¹⁰⁰ Paul Monet (1847-1922) was an acclaimed actor of the Comédie Française, a state theatre in Paris.

¹⁰¹ Joseph Gallieni (1849-1916), military governor of Paris and later Minister of War during World War I. He was born in Saint-Beat in the central Pyrenees.

noticed since he was at the front, neither by a punishment nor by a show of action, the lieutenant does not know his name and sometimes confuses him with other soldiers who have the same "appearance." The joys of Turet are simple: soup time is sacred to him. He follows attentively the actions of the corporal who distributes the stew to the squad and, when he has finished his bowl, patiently waits for the "seconds"; often he complains about the uniformity of the menus, but if the corporal "potato head" tries an innovation, he sulks and eats his dry bread rather than touching one of those strange dishes that he calls fish or macaroni. A quarter of a day's spinach brings the smile of the gourmet to his lips. He likes the thick wine of the quartermaster and the sweet wine of the bistro, which is savored with small gulps, on the evening preparing to leave, playing a card game. When he is sated, before "a deep sleep", Turet pulls from his pocket an old sock that is his tobacco pouch and, sprawled in the straw, the bag under the head as a pillow, smokes his pipe blissfully in the flickering light of a candle (254) despite the higher orders, on the hand guard of a bayonet.

He sometimes talks to me about his life before the war. It seems like an indistinct dream. I think he does not remember very well how a woman is made. However, he once went on leave, after sixteen days of trenches in a terrible area. In Paris, as he was going from one station to another, a lady said, "Oh! How dirty that one is! There are some who just have to do it on purpose!" In the countryside, he feasted. Since he was not telling anything, people said, "He must not have done much, he does not even have the *croix de guerre*!" He returned to the front without too much trouble, having not had time to get back into the old habits, and it was rather in the midst of people in the rear that he felt out of place. He quietly resumed his place in the squad. In the trenches, Turet takes the guard at the niche, spends the night at the listening post like the others, is part of the patrols when it is ordered. He grumbles when the adjutant puts him in a chore twice, but he goes all the same; he likes better to stir up the earth than to use weapons, because "earthworks, that he knows"; he knows how to park treacherous torpedoes and (255) if he is killed, it will not be his fault. He used to live in the land before he died and did his job conscientiously, as a good worker who honestly earns his pay.

Turet speaks little and does not read the newspapers; when one announces an attack, he does not clap his hands, but when, the alcohol is distributed, the squad is grouped around one of those little ladders that the poilus have baptized as the "scaffold", whistling, he climbs in his turn.

Some others complete the squad: Mailly, a little man with a little head and mustache, a bistro worker in civilian life, quite unfriendly, devious and shaking; Dullac and Lavartete, two well-coupled Southerners and very kind boys; Manteau, a taciturn reservist with bilious complexion; Thomas, an active army soldier, Vendéen with a bony face, stubborn, brave and cruel, who has made many attacks, but does not talk about them.

Finally, Cassaud, a salt and pepper territorial, ok, a petite bourgeois who regrets missing his little habits, thinks constantly of his wife and finds that it is not at his age that one becomes a hero.

(256)

The squad gathers in the little restaurant held by Mrs. Poiré, the farmer with whom we are confined. It has a country dining room, tiled, very open, whose furniture is a carefully polished chest of drawers, two massive tables with benches, a large chest clock that rings loudly, a monumental stove, and an old grandmother, motionless and dumb.

Three framed pictures are hanging on the wall, above the stove: a portrait of the Virgin in simple colors and two dirty lithographs which must date from the second Empire.

One, titled: "The Merry Wedding," shows the tender, timid bride, her eyes bowed down, in the arms of her eager spouse with curly wig, and followed by the fussing and muddled couples of the parents on the run. The second, titled "Le Grand Monde Parisien", shows the end of a supper where over-dressed knaves with straight collars, coat-tail, and some "ladies of the world" with generous charms, in crinolines, happily sipping the champagne and rolling under the tables, under the impassive eye of solemn lackeys with powdered wigs.¹⁰²

Mrs. Poiré gave a table for the squad; for the poilus, used to eating their food on a manure pile, it is a luxury very

¹⁰² Unable to identify these specific works.



LES PRISONNIERS

(257)

much appreciated. And the wise woman, who sells wine, finds her profit.

The stew smokes on the plates, the pinard fills the canteens. Everyone feels penetrated with well-being.

“God damn!” Exclaims Combrit, “we are better off here than at the fort!”

In the middle of the noisy poilus who tap on the tables, stuff themselves, laugh, yell commands, a girl circulates, placid and smiling. This is the daughter of the house, Palmyre Poiré. Palmyre is sixteen years old, with white teeth, golden blond hair, rosy cheeks like apples, and candid blue eyes, which look round like those of a chicken. She also has strong calves, a buxom bodice and a very consistent rump; she is a beautiful girl, plump, fresh and healthy, like a figure from of Rubens. The lieutenant, the two sergeants, the three corporals, and the twenty-six men of the section, court her; and when we are in the trenches, it must be the same in the section that replaces us; but no one has ever boasted of having been able to take only one kiss from the virtuous child! Always smiling, she listens to the cheers with a blissful indifference. When a poilu, excited by the plonk of mother Poiré, (258) risks passing a caress to the girl, Palmyre sends you a large donut in the face, like a tickled mare throws a shout and she screams at the top of her head,

“Ah! What an illness! They only cause trouble, these Parisian pigs!”

When the chaste Palmyre punches some overly enterprising adorer, the mother smiles and reveals her sole tooth; the figure of the grandmother is illuminated, and as the old woman, according to the general opinion, must have been very handsome under Louis Philippe, I think that she thinks with tenderness in the distant time when the boys told her about herself. As for the father, a silent merchant, he is always stirring about to see nothing; the important thing is that the cellar is empty.

As Palmyre serves us the coffee, the lieutenant, head of the section, appears in the door.

“Let’s go boys!” he shouts. “To work, there’s a review at 5.”

A farmer and a large rural proprietor, Lieutenant Botte, a solid, brick-red fellow, with a black goatee, is a good-natured man, a big eater and a heavy drinker. He is used to being the master and controls his poilus with the same gruff authority (259) as his boys on the farm. In the trenches he is not cold in the eyes; he is a tough brave man. The men like him because he is frank, not proud, tries to spare his section useless fatigue and gives confidence by his tone, perhaps a little affected.

Docile, the poilus leave the coffee house one after the other and go get their guns in the barn to clean them thoroughly. Lieutenant Botte, who had remained alone in the square, seated himself near the stove opposite the mute grandmother and began to pay court to Palmyre, who was washing the dishes.

After the review, as it is 5 o'clock, the squad returns to the little café for dinner. Tonight, there is a feast. First Corporal Galtier offers the pinard to the fine 2nd! Then the squad ordered a good pot of "fries" that Palmyre is pouring into the boiling fat. Turet roamed the fields all afternoon to collect some dandelion that Mrs. Poiré will accommodate us in salad. What a menu!

We are waiting. The guests are full of energy. Cassaud details some trivial anecdotes; Charles orates some words; the fiddling Combrit recalled that when he was director of a circus there was a beautiful evening played by all his troupe, and he had (260) to make the show, to appear successively as a clown, balancing actor, juggler, cyclist and tamer! Excited by the libations, the brave Chaffol lets his warlike enthusiasm overflow. With flaming cheekbones, rolling eyes, boastful, he exclaims,

"Ten Boche, twenty, thirty, hundred Boche, would not make me retreat!"

"What, you are drunk, perhaps?" insinuated perfidiously Mailly.

"First of all, I was never scared!" concludes our sympathetic bully amid laughter and bravos!

The poilus, satiated, light their pipes. Palmyre who advances in a bluish atmosphere, cannot keep up with the requests which come from all sides,

"Palmyre! A liter of white!"

"Palmyre! 10 coffees!"

"Palmyre! Two mugs of beer!"

To end pleasantly the evening, a small concert is organized. Dinard scratches a guitar. After being sufficiently entreated, Combrit declaims "At Saint-Sulpice! A poilu modulates in a softened voice "My Miette" and "If the stones could speak." But the most applauded is Corporal Lepied in his patriotic creation



UN BONHOMME

(261)

of "The March of the Porpoises," that the room resumes in chorus with the refrain.¹⁰³

Jealous perhaps of the applause given to an amateur, the inventive Combrit decides to give us the serenade from a burlesque skit. Suddenly, he rushes to the feet of Palmyre, kisses her hands with transport, declaims his passionate passion. The beauty laughs loudly! Then Combrit, helmet under his arm, ceremoniously comes to ask her daughter's hand to Mrs. Poiré dowager. She accepts him as a son-in-law. But Palmyre exclaims,

"Say! Mr. Acrobat, you will let your mustache grow. I do not want a husband who looks like a priest!"

So, it's delirium! We drink to the happiness of the betrothed of the war. Standing on a table, Chaffot improvises a clever and stunning sermon that punctuates in thunderous applause. We shout, we drink, we laugh, we sing, we tap the tables with the bottles; it's an infernal charivari.

The old men forget their past miseries, in wine, smoke and noise. We ate well, drank well, we are sure to sleep well now. Everyone enjoys deliciously the present minute. When we end up (262) between each other after cruel anxieties, what joy of life, what an overflow of healthy and turbulent gaiety!

"All the same, Captain," says Turet, with wet eyes. "There are days that it is the good life!"

And Combrit, fulfilled, declares,

"It's only the first three years that will be the hardest, right?"

¹⁰³ Popular French songs

III THE “BUTTE”

(263)

The battalion, going up for the fourth time to the trenches of Souchez-Givenchy, takes a long pause at Gouy-Servins, waiting for night to cross through Ablain, violently bombarded.

Charles and I, sitting on the edge of a sidewalk, detail the picturesque and colorful swarm of our comrades whose winter attire evokes the knaves of the Middle Ages, Eskimos and Bulgarian revolutionaries. The guys all wear the glittering Burgundian helmet, the warm skin of goat, covered in like a chasuble,¹⁰⁴ the "lice eggs" yellow, gray or reddish, with broad epaulettes, tawny equipment, with big stuffed musettes, box with mask and two canisters. Each poilu has a cane. It is the indispensable pole which one lends to the comrade stuck up to the neck in the mud (264) or a pothole; sometimes a large alpenstock, sometimes a drover's club, held on the wrist by a solid leather strap, sometimes a gnarled and rounded root, reminiscent of Madame Angot's conspirators.¹⁰⁵ To avoid the effects of the mud, many wear over the pants dark blue overalls, wide as Zouave pants, others have carved "climbers" khakis out of old tarpaulins, some have donned large oiled boots that go up to the thighs. What weird clothes! Here and there, the yellow and the blue sky, the basic colors of the winter costume, are relieved by the sharp note of a garnet red muffler or a royal blue balaclava. We are far from the young infantrymen with red pants of 1914.

As night falls, we cross Ablain, Souchez, and reach Chemin-Creux. A stop. A work detail of stiff passes by, descending from the first lines. Each stretcher, on which lies a corpse rolled in a tent, is carried by four men. The stretcher-bearers place their burdens beside the entrance of the communication trench on a mound of mud. There is a line of motionless heaps, lying in the clay, the "picture" of a horrible manhunt.

(265)

We climb the steep path and the lieutenant installs us halfway up in small niches dug at ground level and closed by tent cloths. Mine is five feet long and one meter wide and tall. We hold four, knees to the chin. Light is allowed. After smoking a pipe, we try to settle in for the night. We cannot think of stretching out. Our legs are entangled. We sleep in small amounts, awakened with a start from time to time by terrible cramps.

In the morning I extract myself from the shelter, extremely stiff. Lieutenant Eglantine who commands the company, is in the trench, his cap turned down on his ears, and followed by his faithful liaison agent, the "indispensable" Charles.

Lieutenant Eglantine is the "good" officer. An office assistant as a civilian, without hope

¹⁰⁴ A European liturgical vesture.

¹⁰⁵ Reference is to the comic opera La fille de Madame Angot by Charles Lecocq with words by Clairville, Paul Siraudin and Victor Koning (1872).

of advancement, the war was for him a good fortune. His gold stripes dazzle him a little, but he is so happy with his unexpected fate that he would like everyone to share his *joie de vivre*! Eglantine knows his trade thoroughly, takes care of the supplies very carefully, punishes little. Some men joke about his slight defect of pronunciation (266) without being able to make it ridiculous. Perhaps his men do not value him for his true worth; he is one of those good chiefs and all goodness can only be appreciated when it has been lost; in line, he is not one of those braggarts who walk on the parapet, a cigarette on their lips, "to give confidence to the men," and who are brutally killed. But when there is an attack, he is in the front row, like a *poilu*. He is a good man and, when necessary, a brave man.

The lieutenant looks with me at the landscape: the bleak plain, the sacked villages, Ablain, Carency, Souchez; Neuville-Saint-Vaast that we occupied last summer is hidden by a slight bulge of ground. Map in hand, the lieutenant locates in the landscape the famous ruins, celebrated so many times by the communiques: the castle of Carleul with its devastated park, the sugar factory, the cemetery of Souchez, the Red Cabaret.¹⁰⁶

I accompany the lieutenant to the commandant's cabin, then he sends me to the aid station at the quarry to give a letter to the major. In front of the aid station there is a small cemetery; humble mounds, surmounted by a small wooden cross and decorated with only (267) a bottle that contains the papers of the dead. A small isolated burial bears the inscription

Unknown Soldier
Died on the Field of Honor

As there are no flowers in this desolate landscape, a *poilu* had the touching thought to deposit on the grave a branch of a broken tree.

I'm coming back to my shelter. Sitting on the edge of the individual dugouts, the men are having a snack, drinking long swigs from their muddy canteens. I read a newspaper that Charles lent me; I revel in theatrical announcements when a terrible explosion staggers my shelter; we roll over each other. A lamentable scream of pain that comes from the trench hits me to the core. Still trembling from the explosion, I make a violent effort of will, I slip out of the hut.

In a cloud of black smoke that dissipates, a man staggers, his face bleeding. I do not recognize him. He collapses on me, splashing his blood on me.

I take a hard shot, I sit on the threshold of my dug out. It's Dullac. The shell (268) has just smashed the parapet and riddled it with splinters. His face is covered with a filthy

¹⁰⁶ All battlefield landmarks of the area.

mud of liquid mud and coagulated blood! With my handkerchief, I try to clean the forehead, the cheekbones. The horrible wounds appear to me. Instead of the nose, scalped by shrapnel, a black hole; the left eyebrow is opened as if by a slicer and both eyes closed cry tears of blood.

"I can't see! Ah! I can't see!" groans the unfortunate.

"But no, my old friend! It's just the dirt that you have in your eyes. Where is your packet of bandages?"

"In the inside pocket of my vest."

I begin to bandage him, controlling my disgust for these hideous gaping wounds. The quartermaster, then two stretcher-bearers come to help me. He is quickly covered with a large bandage; but when we go to lift him to take him away, the wounded man moans.

"My arm. My leg"

We tear the pants, we roll up the jacket. Horror! from the neck to the heel, the body of this unfortunate is only a bleeding wound. The foot hangs, half shredded! Stretcher-bearers who do not have enough bandages, carry him as he is to the aid station.



**LE RETOUR AU FRONT
DU PERMISSIONNAIRE**



AGENT DE LIAISON

(269)

The men in the squad are all pale and trembling. Dullac was a charming comrade, and the suddenness of his misfortune impresses us singularly. Dullac was smoking his pipe in the trench, he was a handsome boy, full of health, cheerfulness, courage. A random shell, and here he is disfigured, blinded, mutilated. Life will be for him only a long torture. How awful!

The stretcher bearers who return give us some more information.

"He was naked on the table. The poor man has more than twenty wounds, the nose, the eyes, the arm, the thigh, the foot, everything is hurt. You talk about a brave guy! The major was stupefied; during the whole dressing, not a complaint!"

"Now his entire body is bandaged. They say that he looks like a mummy!"

The next evening, we go to the front line. The commander recommends that we use the newly dug out communication trench; but the bombardment of the afternoon completely pulverized the plateau and the trench disappeared. We are forced to go by carefully weaving between the shell holes. We note a section at the butte where we occupy the upper lip (270) a mine crater. The trench has a parapet only on the side of the enemy; we do not lack sacks of earth or hand grenades.

At about ten o'clock, a man is to be sent to Ablain for wine and coffee; the poilus complain. Mailly has a foot ache, Cassaud fell up to his ears in a shell hole full of water and is regaining his senses, Chaffot invokes his forty years. Finally, Turet leaves loaded with the cans of the squad.

At 2 o'clock in the morning, my canteen finished, I settle in a bizarre shelter whose roof is made of railroad rails and broken rifles. I wrap myself in an abandoned blanket and start to read La vie parisienne.¹⁰⁷ In the light of a candle stuck in a small niche, I savor a very informative article on feminine underwear. Turet, returning from Ablain, enters my shelter, sweating in big drops and covered with liquid mud; he crawls up to me, carrying on his back twenty cans rattling, and says to me,

"Corp'ral! I no longer remember in which canteens I put the wine and in which I put the coffee and the brandy! I'm going to taste them; that's what I have to do, right?"

(271)

"The sly chap, to be aware of the contents of each can, takes them one after the other, swallows a gulp at the neck, thinks and says.

"Coffee, wine, wine, coffee."

¹⁰⁷ La vie parisienne was a French weekly magazine founded in Paris in 1863.

When I see him take a prolonged drag from a canteen, I ask him,

“And that one?”

Turet breathes again, reflects and concludes,

“That one has to be the brandy.”

At dawn, Combrit comes to settle next to me; he has laid in the mud and is nothing more than a statue of mud where a binoculars shines; he wipes his hands carefully against the rails of our ceiling, and as soon as he is stretched out, begins to snore.

I crawl to the entrance and take a look at the landscape. Illuminated by the rays of the rising sun, this tormented plateau, plowed up and worked over daily by heavy shells, resembles a furious sea; it is truly chaos, the image of the earth after the flood.

In the immediate vicinity of my shelter, hills of yellow mud on which are thrown old dishes, torn equipment, broken rifles, conceal dark holes where the poilus are hidden. Only two sentries are (272) resting in the trench, about 5 or six meters away.

Around noon, we follow with interest the adventures of a duel of mortars. Unlike shells that can be heard whistling without seeing them, torpedoes, slow and monstrous machines, are visible in the air. A French battery of crapouillots, installed in a dead zone, on the steep side of the cliff of Vimy, tries to locate a minenwerfer concealed in a house in Liévin.¹⁰⁸ Every three minutes a French mortar rushes into the sky in a frenzy; with its wings it looks like a big steering wheel. It passes over our heads and melts in the German lines at a high speed; at the precise moment when the French machine explodes, a German torpedo rises vertically, purring ironically. Sometimes the French torpedo and the German mortar cross in the sky, and one has the impression that they are going to hit each other in the air. Some men try to shoot at the "stovepipe" German shell (which, fully stuffed with explosives, has only a very thin casing). A 305mm mortar, hit by bullets, explodes in the sky like a balloon. But abruptly the 75s enter dance; warned by the mortar men, the batteries of the

¹⁰⁸ The crapouillot was a type of French mortar roughly equivalent to the German trench mortar, the minenwerfer.



LA MARMITE

(273)

plain perform an effective fire on the alleged location of the enemy minenwerfer that has been spotted. This one is silent, probably demolished.

But as the infantryman, like a circus clown, always takes the corrections deserved by others, we immediately suffer a terrible bombardment of "retaliation." Our corner seems particularly spotted. Everything is jumping around us. I am running away from my shelter that collapses under the shock of a 105. With Bordela and Combrit I move through the trench on all fours and rush to the big shelter of the 1st squad. In this shallow shelter, which has been badly built, more than thirty poilus have already taken refuge; when I present myself at the entrance, the voices shout, "It's full! Do not let anyone in!" We weave ourselves in, and, however, behind us, other men are still coming in, poilus from other sections, machine-gunners, liaison officers. Soon we are fifty, piled up in this recess, so tight that we cannot make a movement. I think with anguish of the frightful boil that a torpedo would make on the roof; the danger would be less great in the trench! Everyone is definitely (274) doing the same reasoning as me; but no one thinks of going out because here we have the advantage of not seeing the danger and also because in a group we support each other.

As explosions of unprecedented violence shake our shelter, some men, terrified, propose a common prayer. I think of "Nearer My God to Thee," sung on the Titanic.

But most poilus prefer to hide their anxieties by telling jokes. We laugh a little half-heartedly. Between two explosions, I obtain a great success by declaring,

"No way, I'd rather be with Palmyre!"

The bombardment lasts six hours and for six hours we remain huddled up in this shelter that rocks continually like a ship in storm.

The following evening, we are relieved in a torrential rainstorm. The Germans bombard Souchez, and we are obliged to pass by the Cabaret Rouge,¹⁰⁹ which lengthens the route by half. We go through endless communication trenches; we wade in water up to our knees, splashing each other between the two walls of mud, obliged (275) to run at each corner so that the column is not cut in half, while, in the back, the men shout out with tears in their voices, "Stop! Stop! Not so fast up front! We can't follow!"

We arrive exhausted at Gouy-Servins where some busses wait for us.¹¹⁰ Drivers, wrapped in their fur coats, sleep at the wheel. We pile into the cars; before the convoy

¹⁰⁹ The "Cabaret Rouge" was a "small, red-bricked, red-tiled café" on the road about a kilometer south of Souchez. Though destroyed by artillery in early 1915, the name lasted for the remainder of the war.

¹¹⁰ Gouy-Servins is a commune in northeastern France, about three miles west of Souchez.

starts, all the poilus are already snoring, head on the shoulder of the neighbor.

“Hey, boys! La Conte.¹¹¹ Everyone get out!”

The dark street, the barn, the candles that light up. My corner! We get out of our gear, we take off our shoes, we sit in a hubbub of gaiety. After the terrible anxieties, it is the delightful relaxation; we have "passed through" again, friends! It's the good life! In this existence of perpetual contrasts, after waiting anxiously for death or mutilation, what ineffable satisfaction to say that we will quietly eat, drink, sleep...live finally! Never, never, have I experienced such physical enjoyment, such blossoming, as on the return of those terrible trenches of Souchez, when, sprawled (276) in the straw, dripping with mud, exhausted with fatigue, I cried in a terrible voice, "Chaffot! You who have never been afraid and do not know tiredness, run for me to get coffee and vegetable soup!

¹¹¹ La Comté is about five miles northwest of Gouy-Servins.

IV
A BOMBARDMENT BEFORE THE ATTACK ON THE "TETON"

(277)

We sat down for lunch at the roaring stove at Madame Brunelle's, the wife of a miner from Bruay, who receives us very kindly at La Conté. Lion takes an inventory of a colossal package he had just received; Charles was playing with the blond girls of the mistress of house; Chassin teasing the canaries, and our excellent hostess was preparing to make a good omelet. We had bought oysters from a merchant who passed by on the road and a bottle of old wine to celebrate our return from the trenches.

Turet opens the door and a blast of wind enters.

"Hurry up you four! We are assembling! We are departing for Ablain!"¹¹²

"To Ablain? Is there an attack there?"

"No, but since the Boche have attacked yesterday at Neuville, we expect perhaps a strong attack at Souchez. (278) We are going to relieve the territorials at Ablain, do their work assignments, and if there is an attack, serve as reinforcements."

We abandon, with a sigh, the oysters, the omelet and our fine hostess who laments.

"Ah! What a misfortune! What a misfortune! Hope that all four of you return! Holy Mary! Cursed be the war!"

We reassure her gaily; we embrace the little ones and run to the assembly. We depart - twenty kilometers.

We reach Ablain-Saint-Nazaire at night. Many men are dragging their legs. We cross the village, and we settle in large huts that the territorials have quite comfortably arranged. We drop our equipment; we hang the musettes on the pillars; we stretch with joy on the straw. The voluptuous relaxation that succeeds every effort penetrates us. What a good sleep we are going to have!

"First section, outside!" shouts the sergeant. "We are going to carry some material to the front line now."

The men, exhausted, grumble, rebel; some ask to see the major, crying with tears in their voice that we want to make them die for the trouble.

(279)

"Hurry up! Hurry!" shouts the sergeant gruffly.

Groaning, the men put on their tent roll, helmet, go out one after the other. We gather in

¹¹² Ablain is about three miles east of Gouy-Servins.

the darkness. We quickly count the men by squad. *Nobody is missing.*

In Ablain, there is a crowd; rolling kitchens of online units are stopped among the houses and distributions are being made without light. Poilus crowd round the cars, brandishing cans, passing some of the camp kettles; some pile up cans in bags; others impale piles of bread on poles. The hustlers try to be served twice, beating the cook for a quart of boiling coffee. We challenge each other, we jostle each other. The quartermaster corporals usually go around busily. In a confused hubbub, the orders, the shouts intersect: "Do you have the letters of the *? To bread, the 5th! Do you have the lamb for the lieutenant? No? What are you going to take! Booze to the 10th! The 11th to the wine ration!" It's like the Halles, at 3 o'clock in the morning.¹¹³

On the road, convoys of artillery roll by noisily. A battery of 120mm long guns that will take up a position produces a traffic jam. (280) In the middle of the chaos, two troops of men file by opposite of each other, sneaking between the cannons, caissons and kitchens. One battalion goes up to the line, another goes down from the trenches. Covered with mud, club in his hand, the poilus that have just been relieved advance forward, cheerfully singing, happy to be, once more, coming out alive from the furnace.

Sudden flashes illuminate the crowd; thunderclaps make the ground tremble beneath our feet. These are the big artillery pieces hidden in the ruins that spit one after another their jet of flame. The dazzling light of the shots suddenly illuminates cracked walls, skeletons of roofs, silhouettes of men. In the street the parade continues. The men smile, happy to hear the din of our heavy artillery.

"That's what we are sending them as postcards!" banters a poilu.

After a long wait, we enter the depot, and the fellows parade in front of the storekeeper who, a heavy lantern in his hand, distributes the material.

"Ten poilus, some cases of grenades; ten, some hedgehogs; one, some oil for the colonel (281); pay attention, old brother! Five, some sacks of charcoal, two, some packets of fuses"

The last ten haul painfully on their shoulders, by two, the big logs six meters long which serve for the construction of shelters. Small Combrit hauls a log.

"Hey there! I still found "the idiot" he says simply.

Two kilometers between Ablain and the foot of the Vimy ridge. Although the men are very exhausted, no pause: the road is potted, and the passage in the ruins of Souchez

¹¹³ Les Halles was Paris's central fresh food market.

is always dangerous. The little wood. The dark stakes that line the sky make me think tonight of Velasquez's Spears.¹¹⁴ A gateway. A man stumbles, falls into the water, and he carried the coal! At the entrance of the Chemin-Creux, the work detail stops at the shelter. Men lay down their burden, mopping their sweaty brows.

An order arrives: you have to take the grenades and logs up to the plateau. Men retake their burdens in silence. Those who bear on the shoulder a box of grenades are not to be pitied too much. But for the poor buggers who have to climb the steep slope (282) and sliding, bending under the weight of enormous tree trunks, it is a true way of the cross. The trench has sharp corners. The poilus must raise the logs at arm's length to advance at every turn. Combrit walking in front of me, puffing like a locomotive, falls twice on his knees, exhausted! I offer to replace him. The tenacious Southerner refuses energetically.

"No, no, corporal! I am like Jesus Christ. I want to go all the way."

Suddenly a stop. It is a machine gun company coming down from the front lines. We step aside. They pass by us, without pity for our toes, failing to hide us with the machine guns they carry on their backs.

"Which company?" asks a machine gunner.

"Gas company!" replies Chaffot in a dark voice.

"Cute, get going! Move, there is some wind."

Combrit is taken to task because of its small size

"Hey, Paul Pons!"¹¹⁵

"Come and say it here, eh! big bootlicker!" Combrit responds, challenging the poilu as the flood carries him off.

(283)

Finally, the march resumes. The work detail reaches the plateau. The men carefully move over the ground with their burden on their shoulders. We come down the steep path. At the corner of a trench we meet Captain Quel, who with his helmet, his balaclava and his large square beard, jet black, looks like an Assyrian warrior! Passing by, I hear a few snatches of conversation,

¹¹⁴ The painting *La rendición de Breda* (1634-35) by Diego Velázquez (1599-1660)

¹¹⁵ Paul Pons (1864–1915), called "le Colosse," because of his size, was a French wrestler and world champion.

"My shelter has collapsed...Fifteen men buried...I received a beam on the head...Fortunately it was solid...yes, the head."

We return to Ablain at a slow trot. The shelters. We turn on the lights. We stretch out! whew!

After four days of work duty in Ablain and forty-eight hours spent in a shelter at Chemin-Creux, we go to the front line. This time, we occupy a particularly dangerous position, the "Teton." It is the summit of the salient which sinks like a wedge into the German lines. The enemy, who observe us from the top of the intact mine shafts, can bombard us on all sides and take us in enfilade to our trench which is perpendicular to the German line.

We reach the front line with great difficulty (284) in a torrential downpour, after being lost on the plateau, whose topography is changing daily, and being bombarded by shells.

The first twenty-four hours, no incidents. Poured rain. At some corners of the trench, you have water up to your belt.

On the second night, I manned the listening post twenty meters in front of our barbed wire, with Chaffot, Cassaud, Turet and Mailly. It is a bump in the ground against which one lies down, eyes fixed on the German line. Spread in the mud, wrapped in our tent cloth, we shiver with cold.

At midnight, at about forty meters I see very clearly the German relief. The Boche climb the parapet like us and go off in the mud, uncovered, towards Givenchy which shines bright in the night. This anger at not being able to fire; the orders are firm; as we cannot (any more than the Boche) dig communication trenches in this shifting ground continually worked over by the shells, the wisdom commands not to trigger firing.

I am badly rewarded for my rigorous observation of the order, because we return to the trench under a rain (285) of grenades and bullets. I crawl on my stomach through the mud; my four poilus following behind me, and the bullets whistle thick over our heads. Chaffot, who struggles to avoid getting tangled up in the iron wires, looks like a big, monstrous scarecrow. No injuries. We are going to sleep.

At dawn I wake up, cold with the frost. Hands in pockets, I go back to the trench to stretch my legs. Dorme, the barber of the company, hails me,

"Hey! Oh! great! Come and smoke a pipe in our living room!"

On all fours I enter, head first, into the rather spacious shelter where six men smoke, rolled in blankets. We talk cheerfully. Dorme sings a popular chorus. My pipe finished, I shake his hand and go out in the trench.

As I return to my shelter, a terrible explosion throws me to the ground, taking my breath away. I get up, I feel - nothing broken - I take a few steps staggering, ears buzzing.

Turet comes out in the trench and tells me by lighting his pipe,

"You know that Dorme is screwed?"

"Dorme! You think! I just left him."

"The last shell fell right on his hut." (286) "The six men are flattened, like pancakes."

"Ah..."

The bombing continues. The Boche send us big mortars. From minute to minute we see the monstrous machines rise vertically from the German line; having reached the high point, the torpedo rolls horizontally, waddling; and suddenly, like a drunken man, she loses her balance, tumbles and falls on her prey with a terrifying hoot. She sinks deeply into the ground, then explodes with a roar of thunder, digging a gigantic funnel and throwing hundreds of clods of dirt fifty meters into the air, smashed stones and planks that fall in hail on our helmets. No shelter, no undermining resists the formidable machine. Fearing to be buried alive and preferring to look death in the face, almost all the men are standing, quivering, in the trench, under the orders of Sergeant Bordela, an excellent and very cool non-commissioned officer. As soon as Lavartête, whose sight is piercing, shouts, "Attention!" All eyes are on the horizon. One says to each other, "Where is it? Where is it?" A finger points out the enemy. Everyone follows, shouting about (287) the path of the monster which advances in the sky while pitching. When it tilts in the air, the line of poilus moves away from the presumed drop point. The huge shower of smoke rises to the sky; the poilus, clogging their ears, kneel briskly in the mud, curled up.

Bordela divides the section into independent groups which, under the command of a non-commissioned officer, will attempt, by rapid movements, to avoid a fatal blow. I will direct the movements of a dozen men.

Sometimes I say, "It's not for us...Don't move!" And then, at the moment when the enormous "charcoal bucket" takes a nose dive above our heads, I shout, "To the right! To the right!" The line of poilus rushes in the direction indicated, while the blind monster, blowing and swirling, hits the ground and bursts with fury. Despite my atrocious anxiety,

the feeling that I act, that I make decisions for my safety and that of my men reassures me. But what a terrible responsibility! Sometimes when I shouted "right!" The torpedo deviates in a gust of wind, and I scream, panicked, "Left! To the left! To the left!" A second of inattention, an error of miscalculation, it's the destruction (288) of these dozen brave boys that who put their trust in me and obey me blindly!

Towards midday, the Boche place in fire some new mortars and execute a terrible cross fire. No sooner has a torpedo exploded to the right then another falls to the left and a third is coming right at us. How to move! The bombing becomes hellish. Streams of poilus of other sections, whose trenches are untenable, invade our trench, clutter us, prevent any rapid movement! The sergeant is overwhelmed. The torpedoes are now interspersed with 105s and 210s, hand grenades and rifle grenades. We are at the center of a real eruption. Mud geysers rise from all sides, the shelters collapse, the trench collapses, an avalanche of enormous amounts of earth engulf us, while the dreadful roar of explosions deafens and shakes us.

Under the shower of iron and fire, one feels the same helplessness as in the presence of a frightful cataclysm of nature! What can our grenades and small rifles do for this avalanche of earth and steel? What good is our courage?



LES HONNEURS AUX MORTS

(289)

Does a man defend himself against the earthquake that will engulf him? Are we shooting at a volcano that vomits its flaming lava?

Deafened by the heart-rending torpedoes and large shells, half-asphyxiated by their acrid, black smoke, stunned by the clods of earth, slapped by the splinters that lash from all sides, their eyes bulging, waiting desperately for the sky, the arrival of the terrible machines of death, calculating their point of fall at sight or sound, expecting from one second to the other to be ignobly shredded, pursued without truce in a moving ground by the screams of the monsters, shoved and jostling, spanning corpses and bloody wounded, the poilus, chattering, running, haggard, panting, aimlessly.

The nightmare only stopped at 5 o'clock. The bombardment ends. And suddenly a shout, from whom I do not know, rings out,

"To the gun slits, boys! To the gun slits!"

Then all the survivors of the horrible drama, all those men shattered by emotion that the horror has just held for hours in this greenhouse, all those trembling basket cases (290) united by a common will, jump out of their holes, run to their guns, to their grenades, to the machine guns to stop the enemy.

The torture of the pestle is finished, what a relief! The Boches are going out; we will fight, man against man; we will defend ourselves, we will kill! We will avenge on the enemy soldiers the frightful misdeeds of their terrifying machines. Ah! what a relaxation! what an intense joy!

"But get out! Come out, cowards!" scream the angry men, pointing at the enemy's trenches.

And suddenly, we hear shouting. "The Boches are coming out on the right!" A quick volley of 75s clears our parapet, fused at twenty meters in front of us, another, another, another!

Dzin! Dzin! Dzzin! Dzzingg! Dzin! Dzing! Dziouou!

The barrage is unleashed. While the stinging gusts of 75s sweep the ground in front of us, the big pieces of all calibers knock down the second lines where the reserves are undoubtedly massed. The whole German line seems to catch fire. Above our heads, the air is furrowed with rustling, whistling, purring that will end there in monstrous bursts of laughter!

(291)

The German attack is aborted. Joy blooms on the faces just now deformed by anxiety. We are proud of our artillery, but we have a little grudge for having cut off the attack so quickly.

"Ah! the artillery bastards!" says Turet, smiling. "They've done our work!"

At night, the relief was done safely, in the rain. During the crossing of Souchez, there are some shells. We want to say, "Hell with it! It's no longer our game!" In Ablain, in a barn, a tea room was installed by some medical aides. Under the paternal eye of the lieutenant, we parade in front of the counter, quart in hand, and enjoy a hot tea. The company gathers at the exit of the village; we do roll call in the night; and we leave.

The moonlight strangely illuminates the extraordinary procession of these men bizarrely harnessed who come out of hell. Exhausted, broken with fatigue and emotion, bent over, legs half folded, the poilus advance slowly; few have the strength to speak, many sleep while walking. Harassed myself, trembling with fatigue, I feel penetrated with a strange pride, the pride of being a good man among these men, of whom a general said, (292) "we should kneel in front of them," to be a block of mud among these blocks of mud! As I watched as a spectator this extraordinary cohort parade, I admire the inconceivable endurance of these poilus, humble little beings of flesh and bone, periodically thrown into an unimaginable hell, kept awake for days in the most terrifying nightmares. I remain stunned by the extraordinary strength of these men for whom the war is present as a succession of accidents, of disasters, of catastrophes, and which, scarcely out of the furnace, forgetting their martyrdom, regain their carelessness and good humor; before the heroic abnegation of these naive, obscure, ahistoric heroes, who have been supported for five hundred days, more than the hope of a vain reward, a prodigious self-esteem and the admirable pride of accomplishing unheard-of destinies.

A few poilus begin to sing an old marching song:¹¹⁶

Au jardin de mon père, les lauriers sont fleuris (bis)

La caille, la tourterelle y viennent faire leur nid.

Oui!

Another fifteen kilometers to finish up before laying down voluptuously on the straw, (293) to the camp! Just now, we are going to taste the boiling coffee and the fat soup with vegetables prepared by the devoted "braggards"! Come on, courage! Another effort! Tomorrow we will find the warm atmosphere and 1860 drawing in the restaurant of the "Belle Palmyre", nicknamed the "Main Leste" [Nimble Hand]. To us the golden fries, dandelion salads and the divine pinard! For a week, we will be able to "erase" and

¹¹⁶ "Après de ma blonde" is a military song of the seventeenth century:

In the gardens of my father

The laurel is in bloom. (twice)

The quail and the turtle dove come to make their nest their

"crush" with all our drinking! As the terrible anxieties of war make us appreciate the most innocuous joys of life; this perspective makes us feel good and gives courage to complete the next stage.

Removed from the furnace for a few days, happy to live again, melancholy dreaming of impossible happiness, the muddy men sing:¹¹⁷

Auprès de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon,
Auprès de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon dormir

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¹¹⁷ Ibid.