II

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I had no desire for laughter, and yet at times I felt a vague longing to laugh. It was when I thought of those men who write about the war in the newspapers, saying: “The breach has been made. Why do we hesitate to fling fifty divisions into it?” or, “It remains only to mass reserves close to the front. Quick! Four hundred thousand men into the breach.”

I should have liked to set those fellows to work to find, between Fouilloy and Maricourt, a space big enough for the cat that purrs on their piles of strategical papers. They would have had a bit of a job.

As I walked along I mused over my affairs; from time to time I would cast a glance over the country-side, and I assure you I saw some curious things.

Under the poplars that stretch down the length
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of the valley an immense army lay hidden, with its battalions, its animals, its wagons, all its artillery, its discolored tents, its evil-smelling leather, its filth. The horses were nibbling the bark of the great trees, which were dying, the victims of a premature autumn. A surging mass were trying to hide themselves, as if the face of heaven were one vast betrayal. A trio of puny elms served as shelter for a whole encampment; a dusty hedge hid under its shadow the fighting equipment of an entire army. But the vegetation was sparse and the shelter scanty, so that the army overflowed everywhere across the naked plain, scraping the roads to the quick, until they showed their bare skeletons, streaking the fields with tracks like those left by the passage of great herds of wild animals.

There were joint roads where the French and the English moved side by side. There you saw filing past the fine British artillery, quite new, not rusty, but shining, covered with light-colored cloth, its horses selected for their coloring and all well fed and well groomed like circus mounts. Some in-
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fantry was going by also, nothing but young men. The flutes and drums of various sorts made a savage music for them, like that of the Senegalese. And then some great two-storied cars went by, carrying with scarcely a tremor the wounded who with their fair hair and their surprised expressions still had the placid look of Cook's tourists.

Our villages were filled to bursting. Man had thrust himself in everywhere, like an epidemic, like an inundation. He had driven the beasts from their quarters and installed himself in the stables, in the cattle-sheds, in the burrows. The stores of shells, here and there, looked like potteries full of earthenware jugs.

The slimy water of the canal was loaded with barges, carrying provisions, guns, hospital supplies.

A vehement vibration replaced the usual silence, caused by the breathing of all these beings and the grinding sound of their machines. The whole landscape suggested some sort of sinister kermess, some festival of war, some gathering of rowdies and gipsy bands.
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The closer we came to Bray, the more congested the country seemed. The automobiles ruled over the highways tyrannically, pushing out into the fields the humble convoys drawn by horses. Some little trucks, built close to the ground, their backs loaded with thousands of cartridges, showed their independence by tooting ostentatiously; between the cases men were squatting, half asleep, mutely testifying that it is sweet to be seated on something that does your walking for you.

When I arrived above Chipilly I saw a strange sight. A vast plateau rolled away, covered with so many men, objects, and beasts that over great stretches the earth was no longer visible. Beyond the ruined tower that rises above Etinehem extended a landscape that was brown, reddish, like a heath ravaged by fire. Later I found that this color was due to the accumulation of horses, crowded one against another. Every day they led twenty-two thousand to drink at the muddy watering-place in the Somme. They turned the trails into mire and filled the air with a formidable odor of sweat and dung.
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Farther to the left there rose a veritable city of unbleached tents, with red crosses quartered on their tops. Beyond this the ground dropped abruptly and stretched away toward the battlefield, trembling under its black smoke against the horizon. Here and there rose, side by side, puffs of smoke from a hail of shells, all in a line like trees along a road. There were thirty balloons or more in a circle high overhead, like curious idlers watching a quarrel.

The adjutant pointed to the tents and said to me:

"That's Hill 80 over there! You'll see more wounded go through that place than there are hairs on your head, and more blood flow than there is water in the canal. All those who fall between Combles and Bouchavesnes are brought there."

I nodded, and we returned to our reflections. The daylight was fading out in the dim mists of the marshes. Some heavy pieces of English artillery were firing not far away from us, and their sound hurtled over the plain like a furious charger,
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dashing blindly onward. The horizon was peopled with so many guns that one heard a continuous rumble like that of an immense caldron boiling over a brazier.

The adjutant turned to me again:

"You have had three brothers killed by the enemy. In one sense, you are out of it all. You will not be badly off as a stretcher-bearer. It's unpleasant in a way, but it's a whole lot better than being in the line; is n't it?"

I did not answer. I was thinking of the desolate little valley, facing the ridge of Plémont, where I had passed the beginning of the summer. I had endured there hours of deadly tedium, watching through the shattered poplars the horror-stricken apple-trees along the chaotic road, the shell-holes filled with a sickeningly green, oozing water, the mute, reproachful face of the castle of Plessier, and that frightful hill which only a cosmic upheaval could have thrown up from the dismal depths of some dream. There, during long nights of guard duty, I had inhaled the fetid breath of fields thickly sown with corpses. In the
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solitude of utter despair I had experienced by turns the fear and the desire of death. And then, one day, they had come to me, saying, "You are to return to the rear; your third brother has just been killed." And many who looked at me seemed to be thinking, as the adjutant thought: "Your third brother is dead! In a sense you're in luck."

I was thinking of all this as I made my way toward my new destination. We were picking our way over that plateau, raised like an altar toward the sky, loaded as if for a sacrifice with millions of creatures.

There had been no rain for several days and we were living in the kingdom of dust. Dust is the toll exacted for fine weather; it permeates the hounds of war, mingle in their work, their food, their thoughts; it soils the lips, grits the teeth, and inflames the eyes. It spoils the honest joy of breathing. But when it disappears, the reign of mud begins, and the soul thrives better in dust than in mud.

In the distance great currents of dust like slug-
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gish rivers marked all the roads of the country, spreading themselves all over the landscape at the will of the winds. It sullied the sunlight, as the sky was affronted by great flocks of aviators, as the silence was affronted and sullied, as the earth and its raiment of verdure were sullied and defiled.

I had little enough inclination for joy, as it was, but all this made me fairly drunk with misery.

As my glances fell on my surroundings, I could find no place on which to rest them but the innocent eyes of the horses or those of a few miserable, frightened men who were working along the rough roads. Save for them, the whole world was nothing but a bristling camp.

Night was falling as we reached the city of tents. The adjutant led me toward a tortoise and found a place for me on the straw, which smelled like a pig-pen. I set my pack down, stretched myself out, and went to sleep.

Rising with the dawn, I steered my way through the fog and tried to get my bearings.
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There was a road, the road from Albert, worn full of hollows, jammed with traffic. Along it flowed the never-ending stream of the wounded. Beside this road rose up the city of tents, with its streets, its districts, its public squares. Behind the tents there was a cemetery. That was all.

I leaned against a post and I looked at the cemetery. It was already overflowing; it had a famished air. A lot of German prisoners were at work digging long trenches that gaped like open jaws. Two officers passed; one of them was stout and seemed, early as it was, to be on the point of an apoplectic fit. He was saying to the other, with frantic gestures:

"We have two hundred graves ready and nearly as many coffins. No, no! They can never say that this offensive was not prepared for!"

There were, in fact, a great many coffins waiting. They filled a tent where some men were hastily laying out the corpses. Out in the open a large gang of carpenters were cutting up pine boards. They were whistling and singing inno-
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cently, as men usually do when they are busy with their hands.

It was to this work that I was assigned that very day, the reason given being that in my youth I had had something to do with furniture designing.

Once more I learned that every man judges even the most imposing events only from the point of view that his profession and his habits afford him. There was a sergeant there whose opinion of the World War depended on the quality of the wood he had to work with. When the wood was poor, he would say: "This war's a hopeless mess!" But when the wood had no knots in it he would asseverate: "We'll get them."

An anxious busybody of a young man had undertaken the overwhelming task of directing the whole hospital. He would appear at all hours, his fingers clasping bundles of papers that passed ceaselessly from one hand to the other. I seldom had occasion to hear him speak, but almost every time I surprised the same words: "That does n't
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concern me. I have nothing to do with that! I have trouble enough already."

I realized that he had a great many things to think about. Nearly all day automobiles, weighted down with groaning cargoes, followed one another along the curved roadway, which was being hastily paved and which was like the ravenous mouth of this vast organism. At the top of the curve the cars would be emptied under a porch adorned with flags that somewhat resembled the decorated canopy set up at a church door on the day of a wedding.

On the very first evening I received orders to serve as a stretcher-bearer for the cars that arrived at night. There were about fifteen of us assembled under the porch for the same task.

Up till then I had merely seen my comrades who were wounded beside me in the trenches setting off on a long, mysterious journey of which we knew little. The wounded man was spirited away; he disappeared from the battle-field. I now learned to know all the stages of the dreary life which at that moment began for him.