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Headnote by A. Scott Berg

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In the North

EDITH WHARTON

With the same unerring eye she had once cast upon privileged members of society in New York ballrooms, Wharton shifted her gaze to the battlefields of the Western Front. In June 1915 she visited the ruins of Ypres, the Flemish city that had already braved two major battles. In the fall of 1914, French, British, and Indian troops had paid a heavy price in defending the town against a series of German offensives that threatened the French Channel ports at Dunkirk and Calais. In the spring of 1915, French, British, and Canadian troops stopped a German attack that began with the release of chlorine gas. Wharton's report from Flanders appeared in *Scribner's Magazine* in November 1915 and in *Fighting France, from Dunkerque to Belfort*, published the same month.

June 19th, 1915.

ON THE WAY from Doullens to Montreuil-sur-Mer, on a shining summer afternoon. A road between dusty hedges, choked, literally strangled, by a torrent of westward-streaming troops of all arms. Every few minutes there would come a break in the flow, and our motor would wriggle through, gain a few yards and be stopped again by a widening of the torrent that jammed us into the ditch and splashed a dazzle of dust into our eyes. The dust was stifling—but through it, what a sight!

Standing up in the car and looking back, we watched the river of war wind toward us. Cavalry, artillery, lancers, infantry, sappers and miners, trench-diggers, road-makers, stretcher-bearers, they swept on as smoothly as if in holiday order. Through the dust, the sun picked out the flash of lances and the gloss of chargers' flanks, flushed rows and rows of determined faces, found the least touch of gold on faded uniforms, silvered the melancholy grey of mitrailleuses and munition waggons. Close as the men were, they seemed allegorically splendid: as if, under the arch of the sunset, we had been watching the whole French army ride straight into glory . . .

Finally we left the last detachment behind, and had the

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country to ourselves. The ravage of war has not touched the fields of Artois. The thatched farmhouses dozed in gardens crowded with roses and hollyhocks, and the hedges above the duck-ponds were weighed down with layers of elder-blossom. Wheat-fields skirted with woodland went billowing away under the breezy light that seemed to carry a breath of the Atlantic on its beams. The road ran up and down as if our motor were a ship on a deep-sea swell; and such a sense of space and light was in the distances, such a veil of beauty over the whole world, that the vision of that army on the move grew more and more fabulous and epic.

The sun had set and the sea-twilight was rolling in when we dipped down from the height of Montreuil to the valley below, where the towers of an ancient abbey-church rise above terraced orchards. The gates at the end of the drive were thrown open, and suddenly the motor was in a monastery court full of box and roses. Everything was sweet and secluded in this mediæval place; and from the shadow of cloisters and arched passages beves of nuns fluttered out, nuns all black or all white, gliding, peering and standing at gaze. It was as if we had plunged back into a century to which motors were unknown and our car had been some monster cast up from a Barbary shipwreck; and the startled attitudes of these holy women did the more credit to their sense of the picturesque since the Abbey of Neuville is now a great Belgian hospital, and such monsters frequently intrude on its seclusion . . .

Sunset, and summer dusk, and the moon. Under the monastery windows a sharply drawn walled garden with stone pavilions at the angles, and below it tiers of orchard-terraces fading into a great moon-confused plain that might be either fields or sea . . .

June 20th.

Today our way ran north-east, through a landscape so English that there was no incongruity in the sprinkling of khaki along the road. Even the villages are English: the same plum-red brick of tidy self-respecting houses behind gardens bursting with flowers, everything neat, demure and freshly painted, the landscape hedgerowed and willowed and fed with innumerable water-courses, the people's faces square and pink and honest,

and the signs over the shops in a language astride between English and German. Only the architecture of the towns is French, of a Frenchness northern and reserved and robust, but unmistakably in the great continental tradition.

War still seemed so far off that one had time for these digressions as the motor flew over the undulating miles. But presently we came on an aviation camp spreading its sheds over a big green plateau. Here the khaki throng was thicker and the familiar military stir enlivened the landscape. A few miles farther, and we were seemingly in a big English town oddly grouped about a nucleus of French churches. This was St. Omer, grey, spacious, coldly clean in its Sunday emptiness. At the street crossings English sentries stood mechanically directing the absent traffic with gestures familiar to Piccadilly; and the signs of the British Red Cross and St. John's Ambulance hung on club-like façades that might almost have claimed a home in Pall Mall.

The Englishness of things was increased, as we passed out through the suburbs, by the look of the crowd on the canal bridges and along the dusty roads. Every nation has its own way of loitering, and there is nothing so unlike the French way as the English. Even if all these tall youths had not been in khaki, and the girls with them so wholesomely pink and countrified, one would instantly have recognized the passive northern way of letting a holiday soak in instead of squeezing out its juices with feverish fingers.

When we turned westward from St. Omer, across the same pastures and water-courses, we were faced by two isolated hills standing up out of the plain; and on the top of one rose the walls and towers of a compact mediæval town. As we took the windings that led up to it a sense of Italy began to penetrate the persistent impression of being somewhere near the English Channel. It might have been a queer dream-blend of Winchelsea and San Gimignano that we were climbing to; but when we entered the gates of Cassel we were in a town so intensely itself that all analogies dropped out of mind.

It was not surprising to learn from the guide-book that Cassel has the most extensive view of any town in Europe: one felt at once that it differed in all sorts of marked and self-assertive ways from every other town, and would be almost

sure to have the best things going in every line. And the line of an illimitable horizon is exactly the best to set off its own obvious limits.

We found our hotel in the most charming of little market squares, with a Renaissance town-hall on one side, and on the other a miniature Spanish palace with a front of rosy brick and twisted grey carvings. The square was crowded with English army motors and beautiful prancing chargers; and the restaurant of the inn (which has the luck to face the pink and grey palace) swarmed with khaki tea-drinkers turning indifferent shoulders to the widest view in Europe. It is one of the most detestable things about war that everything connected with it, except the death and ruin that result, is such a heightening of life, so visually stimulating and absorbing. "It was gay and terrible," is the phrase forever recurring in "War and Peace"; and the gaiety of war was everywhere in Cassel, transforming the lifeless little town into a romantic stage-setting full of the flash of arms and the virile animation of young faces.

From the park on top of the hill we looked down on another picture. All about us was the great plain, its rim merged in northern sea-mist; and through the mist, in the glitter of the afternoon sun, far-off towns and shadowy towers lay steeped, as it seemed, in summer peace. For a moment, while we looked, the vision of war shrivelled up like a painted veil; then we caught the names pronounced by a group of young English soldiers leaning over the parapet at our side. "That's Dunkerque"—one of them pointed it out with his pipe—"and there's Poperinghe, just under us; that's Furnes beyond, and Ypres and Dixmude, and Nieuport . . ." And at the mention of those names the scene grew dark again, and we felt the passing of the Angel to whom was given the Key of the Bottomless Pit.

That night we went up once more to the rock of Cassel. The moon was full, and as civilians are not allowed out alone after dark a staff-officer had offered to show us the view from the roof of the disused Casino on top of the rock. It was the queerest of sensations to push open a glazed door and find ourselves in a spectral painted room with soldiers dozing in the moonlight on polished floors, their kits stacked on the gaming tables. We passed through a white vestibule among more soldiers lounging in the half-light, and up a long staircase to the

roof where a watcher challenged us and then let us approach the parapet. Below lay the unlit mass of the town. To the northwest a single sharp hill, the "Mont des Cats," stood against the sky; the rest of the horizon was unbroken, and floating in misty moonlight. The outline of the ruined towns had vanished and peace seemed to have won back the world. But far off to the northwest a red flash started suddenly out of the mist; then another and another flickered up at different points of the long curve. "Luminous bombs thrown up along the lines," our guide explained; and just then, far off, a white light opened like a tropical flower, spread to full bloom and drew itself back into the night. "A flare," we were told; and another white flower bloomed out farther down. Below us, the grey roofs of Cassel slept their provincial sleep, the moonlight picking out every leaf in the hushed gardens; while, far off, those infernal flowers opened and shut along the curve of death. It was one of the moments when the beauty of war seems more intolerable than all its horror.

June 21st.

On the road from Cassel to Poperinghe. Heat, dust, crowds, confusion, all the sordid shabby rear-view of war. The road running across the plain between white-powdered hedges was ploughed up by numberless motor vans, supply-waggon and Red Cross ambulances. Labouring through between them came detachments of British artillery, clattering gun-carriages, stalwart young figures on glossy horses, long Phidian lines of youths so ingenuously fair that one wondered how they could have looked on the Medusa face of war and lived. Men and beasts, in spite of the stifling dust, were as fresh and sleek as if they had come from a bath; and everywhere along the wayside were improvised camps, with tents made of waggon-covers, where the ceaseless indomitable work of cleaning was being carried out in all its searching details. Shirts were drying on elder-bushes, kettles boiling over gipsy fires, men shaving, blacking their boots, cleaning their guns, rubbing down their horses, greasing their saddles, polishing their stirrups and bits: on all sides a general cheery struggle against the prevailing dust, discomfort and disorder. Here and there a young soldier leaned against a garden paling to talk to a girl among the

hollyhocks, or an older soldier initiated a group of children into some mystery of military housekeeping; and everywhere were the same signs of inarticulate understanding with the owners of the fields and gardens.

From the thronged high-road we passed into the emptiness of Poperinghe, and out again on the way to Ypres. Beyond the flats and wind-mills to our left were the invisible German lines, and the staff-officer who was with us leaned forward to caution our chauffeur: "No tooting between here and Ypres." There was still a good deal of movement on the road, though it was less crowded with troops than near Poperinghe; but as we passed through the last village and approached the long low line of houses ahead, the silence and emptiness widened about us. That long low line was Ypres; every monument that marked it, that gave it an individual outline, is gone. It is a town without a profile.

The motor slipped through a suburb of low brick houses and was stopped under cover of some tallish buildings. Another military motor waited there, the chauffeur relic-hunting in the gutted houses.

We got out and walked toward the centre of the Cloth Market. We had seen evacuated towns—Verdun, Badonviller, Raon-l'Étape—but we had seen no emptiness like this. Not a human being was in the streets. Endless lines of empty houses looked down on us from vacant windows. Our footsteps echoed like the tramp of a crowd, our lowered voices seemed to shout. In one street we came on three English soldiers who were carrying a piano out of a house and lifting it onto a hand-cart. They stopped in amazement to stare at us, and we stared back. It seemed an age since we had seen a living being! One of the soldiers scrambled into the cart and tapped out a tune on the cracked key-board, and we all laughed with relief at the foolish noise . . . Then we passed on and were alone again.

We had seen other ruined towns, but none like this. The towns of Lorraine were blown up, burnt down, deliberately erased from the earth. At worst they are like stone-yards, at best like Pompeii. But Ypres has been bombarded to death, and the outer walls of its houses are still standing, so that it presents the distant semblance of a living city, while near by it is seen to be a corpse disembowelled and embalmed. Every

window-pane is smashed, nearly every building unroofed, and some house-fronts are cut clean off, with the different stories exposed, as if for the stage-setting of a farce. And in these exposed interiors the poor little household gods shiver and blink like owls surprised in a hollow tree. A hundred signs of intimate and humble tastes, of humdrum pursuits, of family association, cling desperately to the unmasked walls. Whiskered photographs fade on morning glory wall-papers, little plaster saints pine under glass bells, antimacassars droop from plush sofas, yellowing diplomas display their seals on office walls. It was all so still and familiar that it seemed as if the people for whom these things had a meaning might at any moment come back and take up their daily business. And then—crash! the guns began, slamming out volley after volley all along the English lines, and the poor frail web of things that had made up the lives of a vanished city-full hung dangling before us in that blast of death.

We had just reached the square before the Cathedral when the cannonade began, and its roar seemed to build a roof of iron over the glorious ruins of Ypres. The singular distinction of Ypres is that it is destroyed but not abased. The walls of the Cathedral, the long bulk of the Cloth Market, still lift themselves above the market-place with a majesty that seems to reject compassion. The sight of those scarred façades, so proud in death, recalled a phrase used soon after the fall of Liège by Belgium's Foreign Minister—" *La Belgique ne regrette rien*;"—which ought some day to serve as the motto of the renovated city.

We were turning to go when we heard a whirr overhead, followed by a stinging volley of mitrailleuse. High up in the blue, over the centre of the dead city, flew a German aeroplane; and all about it hundreds of white shrapnel tufts burst out in the summer sky like the miraculous snow-fall of Italian legend. Up and up they flew, on the trail of the Taube, and on flew the Taube, faster still, till quarry and pack were lost in mist, and the barking of the mitrailleuse died out. So we left Ypres to the death-silence in which we had found her.

The afternoon carried us back to Poperinghe, where I was bound on a quest for lace-cushions of the special kind required by our Flemish refugees. The model is unobtainable in France,

and I had been told—with few and vague indications—that I might find the cushions in a certain convent of the city. But in which?

Poperinghe, though little injured, is almost empty. In its tidy desolation it looks like a town on which a wicked enchanter has laid a spell. We roamed from quarter to quarter, hunting for some one to show us the way to the convent I was looking for, till at last a passer-by led us to a door which seemed the right one. At our knock the bars were drawn and a cloistered face looked out. No, there were no cushions there; and the nun had never heard of the order we named. But there were the Penitents, the Benedictines—we might try. Our guide agreed to show us the way and we went on. From one or two windows, wondering heads looked out and vanished; but the streets were lifeless. At last we came to a convent where there were no nuns left, but where, the caretaker told us, there were cushions—a great many. He led us through pale blue passages, up cold stairs, through rooms that smelt of linen and lavender. We passed a chapel with plaster saints in white niches above paper flowers. Everything was cold and bare and blank: like a mind from which memory has gone. We came to a big classroom with lines of empty benches facing a blue-mantled Virgin; and here, on the floor, lay rows and rows of lace-cushions. On each a bit of lace had been begun—and there they had been dropped when nuns and pupils fled. They had not been left in disorder: the rows had been laid out evenly, a handkerchief thrown over each cushion. And that orderly arrest of life seemed sadder than a scene of desperate disarray. It symbolized the senseless paralysis of a whole nation's activities. Here were a houseful of women and children, yesterday engaged in a useful task and now aimlessly astray over the earth. And in hundreds of such houses, in dozens, in hundreds of open towns, the hand of time had been stopped, the heart of life had ceased to beat, all the currents of hope and happiness and industry been choked—not that some great military end might be gained, or the length of the war curtailed, but that, wherever the shadow of Germany falls, all things should wither at the root.

The same sight met us everywhere that sad afternoon. Over Furnes and Bergues, and all the little intermediate villages, the evil shadow lay. Germany had willed that these places should

die, and wherever her bombs could not reach her malediction had carried. Only Biblical lamentation can convey a vision of this life-drained land. "Your country is desolate; your cities are burned with fire; your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers."

Presently we came to Dunkerque, lying peacefully between its harbour and canals. The bombardment of the previous month had emptied it, and though no signs of damage were visible, the same spellbound air lay over everything. As we sat alone at tea in the big hall of the hotel on the Place Jean Bart, and looked out on the silent square and its lifeless shops and cafés, some one suggested that the hotel would be a convenient centre for the excursions we had planned, and we decided to return there the next evening. Then we motored back to Cassel.

June 22nd.

My first waking thought was: "How time flies! It must be the Fourteenth of July!" I knew it could not be the Fourth of that specially commemorative month, because I was just awake enough to be aware that I was not in America; and the only other event to justify such a terrific clatter was the French national anniversary. I sat up and listened at the patriotic popping of guns till a completer sense of reality stole over me, and I realized that I was in the inn of the Wild Man at Cassel, and that it was not the fourteenth of July but the twenty-second of June.

Then, what—? Why, a Taube, of course! And all the guns in the place were cracking at it! By the time this mental process was complete, I had scrambled up and got downstairs and across the court, had unbolted the heavy doors and rushed out into the square. It was about four in the morning, the heavenliest moment of a summer dawn, and in spite of the tumult Cassel still apparently slept. Only a few soldiers stood in the square, looking up at a drift of white cloud behind which—they averred—a Taube had just slipped out of sight. Cassel was evidently used to Taubes, and I had the sense of having overdone my excitement and not being exactly in tune; so after staring a moment at the white cloud I slunk back into the court, barred the door and mounted to my room. At a window

on the stairs I paused to look out over the sloping roofs of the town, the gardens, the plain; and suddenly there was another crash and a drift of white smoke blew up from the fruit-trees just under the window. It was a last shot at the fugitive, from a gun hidden in one of those quiet provincial gardens between the houses; and its secret presence there was more startling than all the clatter of mitrailleuses from the rock.

Silence and sleep came down again on Cassel; but an hour or two later the hush was broken by a roar like the last trump. This time it was no question of mitrailleuses. The Wild Man rocked on its base, and every pane in my windows beat a tattoo. What was that incredible, unimagined sound? Why it could be nothing, of course, but the voice of the big siege-gun of Dixmude! Five times, while I was dressing, the thunder shook my windows, and the air was filled with a noise that may be compared—if the human imagination can stand the strain—to the simultaneous closing of all the shop-shutters in the world. The odd part was that—apart from the first start of surprise—as far as the Wild Man and its inhabitants were concerned no visible effects resulted, and dressing, packing and coffee-drinking went on comfortably in the strange parentheses between the roars.

We set off early for a neighbouring Head-Quarters, and it was not till we turned out of the gates of Cassel that we came on signs of the bombardment: the smashing of a gas-house and the converting of a cabbage-field into a crater which, for some time to come, will spare seismological photographers the trouble of climbing Vesuvius. There was consolation in the discrepancy between the noise and the damage.

At Head-Quarters we learned more of the morning's incidents. Dunkerque, it appeared, had first been visited by the Taube which afterward came to take the range of Cassel; and the big gun had then turned all its fury on the French sea-port. The bombardment was still going on; and we were asked, and in fact bidden, to give up our plan of going to Dunkerque for the night.

After luncheon we turned north, toward the dunes. The villages we traversed were all evacuated, some quite lifeless, others occupied by troops. Presently we came to a group of military motors drawn up by the roadside, and a field black

with wheeling troops. "Admiral Ro'narch!" our companion from Head-Quarters exclaimed; and we understood that we had had the good luck to come on the hero of Dixmude in the act of reviewing the marine fusiliers and territorials whose magnificent defense gave that much-besieged town another lease of glory.

We stopped the motor and climbed to a ridge above the field. A high wind was blowing, bringing with it the booming of the guns along the front. A sun half-veiled in sand-dust shone on pale meadows, sandy flats, grey wind-mills. The scene was deserted, except for the handful of troops deploying before the officers on the edge of the field. Admiral Ro'narch, white-gloved and in full-dress uniform, stood a little in advance, a young naval officer at his side. He had just been distributing decorations to his fusiliers and territorials, and they were marching past him, flags flying and bugles playing. Every one of those men had a record of heroism, and every face in those ranks had looked on horrors unnameable. They had lost Dixmude—for a while—but they had gained great glory, and the inspiration of their epic resistance had come from the quiet officer who stood there, straight and grave, in his white gloves and gala uniform.

One must have been in the North to know something of the tie that exists, in this region of bitter and continuous fighting, between officers and soldiers. The feeling of the chiefs is almost one of veneration for their men; that of the soldiers, a kind of half-humorous tenderness for the officers who have faced such odds with them. This mutual regard reveals itself in a hundred undefinable ways; but its fullest expression is in the tone with which the commanding officers speak the two words oftenest on their lips: "My men."

The little review over, we went on to Admiral Ro'narch's quarters in the dunes, and thence, after a brief visit, to another brigade Head-Quarters. We were in a region of sandy hillocks feathered by tamarisk, and interspersed with poplar groves slanting like wheat in the wind. Between these meagre thickets the roofs of gimcrack bungalows shewed above the dunes; and before one of these we stopped, and were led into a pitch-pine sitting-room full of maps and aeroplane photographs. One of

the officers of the brigade telephoned to ask if the way was clear to Nieuport; and the answer was that we might go on.

Our road ran through the "Bois Triangulaire," a bit of woodland exposed to constant shelling. Half the poor spindling trees were down, and patches of blackened undergrowth and ragged hollows marked the path of the shells. If the trees of a cannonaded wood are of strong inland growth their fallen trunks have the majesty of a ruined temple; but there was something humanly pitiful in the frail trunks of the Bois Triangulaire, lying there like slaughtered immature troops.

A few miles more brought us to Nieuport, most lamentable of the victim towns. It is not empty as Ypres is empty: troops are quartered in the cellars, and at the approach of our motor knots of cheerful zouaves came swarming out of the ground like ants. But Ypres is majestic in death, poor Nieuport gruesomely comic. About its noble nucleus of mediæval architecture a modern town had grown up; and nothing stranger can be pictured than the contrast between the streets of flimsy houses, twisted like curl-papers, and the spectral ruins of the Gothic Cathedral and the Cloth Market. It is like passing from a smashed toy to the august survival of a cataclysm.

Modern Nieuport seems to have died in a colic. No less homely image expresses the contractions and contortions of the disembowelled houses reaching out the appeal of their desperate chimney-pots and agonized girders. There is one view along the exterior of the town like nothing else on the war-front. On the left, a line of convulsed and palsied houses leads like a string of cowering crutch-propped beggars to the mighty ruin of the Templars' Tower; on the right the flats reach away to the almost imperceptible humps of masonry that were St. George, Ramscappelle, Pervyse. And over it all the incessant crash of the guns stretches a sounding-board of steel.

In front of the cathedral a German shell has dug a crater thirty feet across, overhung by splintered tree-trunks, burnt shrubs, vague mounds of rubbish; and a few steps beyond lies the peacefulest spot in Nieuport, the grave-yard where the zouaves have buried their comrades. The dead are laid in rows under the flank of the cathedral, and on their carefully set grave-stones have been placed groups of pious images collected from the ruined houses. Some of the most privileged are

guarded by colonies of plaster saints and Virgins so numerous that they cover the whole slab; and over the handsomest Virgins and the most gaily coloured saints the soldiers have placed the glass bells that probably once protected the clocks and wedding-wreaths in the same houses.

From sad Nieuport we motored on to a little seaside colony where gaiety prevails. Here the big hotels and the gimcrack villas along the beach are filled with troops just back from the trenches: it is one of the "rest cures" of the front. When we drove up, the regiment "au repos" was assembled in the wide sandy space between the principal hotels, and in the centre of the jolly crowd the band was playing. The Colonel and his officers stood listening to the music, and presently the soldiers broke into the wild "chanson des zouaves" of the —th zouaves. It was the strangest of sights to watch that throng of dusky merry faces, under their red fezes, against the background of sunless northern sea. When the music was over some one with a kodak suggested "a group": we struck a collective attitude on one of the hotel terraces, and just as the camera was being aimed at us the Colonel turned and drew into the foreground a little grinning pock-marked soldier. "He's just been decorated—he's got to be in the group." A general exclamation of assent from the other officers, and a protest from the hero: "Me? Why, my ugly mug will smash the plate!" But it didn't—

Reluctantly we turned from this interval in the day's melancholy round, and took the road to La Panne. Dust, dunes, deserted villages: my memory keeps no more definite vision of the run. But at sunset we came on a big seaside colony, stretching out above the longest beach I ever saw: along the sea-front, an esplanade bordered by the usual foolish villas, and behind it a single street filled with hotels and shops. All the life of the desert region we had traversed seemed to have taken refuge at La Panne. The long street was swarming with throngs of dark-uniformed Belgian soldiers, every shop seemed to be doing a thriving trade, and the hotels looked as full as bee-hives.

June 23rd. LA PANNE.

The particular hive that has taken us in is at the extreme end of

the esplanade, where asphalt and iron railings lapse unaffectedly into sand and sea-grass. When I looked out of my window early this morning I saw only the endless stretch of brown sand against the grey roll of the Northern Ocean, and, on a crest of the dunes, the figure of a solitary sentinel. But presently there was a sound of martial music, and long lines of troops came marching along the esplanade and down to the beach. The sands stretched away to east and west, a great "field of Mars" on which an army could have manoeuvred; and presently the morning exercises of cavalry and infantry began. Against the brown beach the regiments in their dark uniforms were as black as silhouettes; and when the cavalry galloped by in single file they looked like the black frieze of warriors encircling the dun-coloured flanks of an Etruscan vase. For hours these long-drawn-out movements of troops went on, to the wail of bugles, and under the eye of the lonely sentinel on the sand-crest; then the soldiers poured back into the town, and La Panne was once more a busy common-place "bain-de-mer." The common-placeness, however, was only on the surface; for as one walked along the esplanade one discovered that the town had become a citadel, and that all the little doll's-house villas with their silly gables and sillier names—"Seaweed," "the Sea-gull," "Mon Repos," and the rest—were really a continuous line of barracks swarming with cheerful Belgian soldiers. In the main street there were hundreds of soldiers, pottering along in couples, chatting in groups, romping and wrestling like a crowd of school-boys, or bargaining in the shops for shell-work souvenirs and sets of post-cards; and between the dark-green and crimson uniforms was a frequent sprinkling of khaki, with the occasional pale blue of a French officer's tunic.

Before luncheon we motored over to Dunkerque. The road runs along the canal, between grass-flats and prosperous villages. No signs of war were noticeable except on the road, which was crowded with motor vans, ambulances, and troops. Presently the walls and gates of Dunkerque rose before us, as calm and undisturbed as when we entered the town the day before yesterday. But within the gates we were in a desert. The bombardment had ceased the previous evening, but a death-hush lay on the town. Every house was shattered and the streets were empty. We drove to the Place Jean Bart, where

two days ago we sat at tea in the hall of the hotel. Now there was not a whole pane of glass in the windows of the square, the doors of the hotel were closed, and every now and then some one came out carrying a basketful of plaster from fallen ceilings. The whole surface of the square was covered with a mosaic of glass from the hundreds of broken windows, and at the foot of David's statue of Jean Bart, just where our motor had stood while we had tea, the siege-gun of Dixmude had scooped out a hollow as big as the crater at Nieuport.

Though not a house on the square was touched, the scene was one of unmitigated desolation. It was the first time we had seen the raw wounds of a bombardment, and the freshness of the havoc seemed to accentuate its cruelty. We wandered down the street behind the hotel to the graceful Gothic church of St. Eloi, of which one aisle had been shattered; then, turning another corner, we came on a poor house that had had its whole front torn away. The squalid sight of caved-in floors, smashed wardrobes, dangling bedsteads, heaped-up blankets, topsy-turvy chairs and stoves and wash-stands was somehow far more painful than the sight of the wounded church. St. Eloi was draped in the indestructible dignity of martyrdom, but the poor little house reminded one of some shy humdrum person suddenly exposed in the glare of a great misfortune.

A few people stood in silent clusters looking up at the ruins, or strayed aimlessly about the streets. Not a loud word was heard. The air seemed heavy with the suspended breath of a great city's activities: the mournful hush of Dunkerque was more oppressive than the death-silence of Ypres. But when we came back to the Place Jean Bart the unbreakable human spirit had begun to reassert itself. A handful of children were playing in the bottom of the crater, collecting "specimens" of glass and splintered brick; and about its rim the market-people, quietly and as a matter of course, were setting up their stalls. In a few minutes the signs of German havoc would be hidden behind stacks of crockery and household utensils, and some of the pale women we had left in mournful contemplation of the ruins would be bargaining as astutely as ever for a saucepan or a butter-tub. Not once but a thousand times has the attitude of the average French civilian on the front reminded me of the gallant cry of Calanthea in *The Broken Heart*: "Let me

die smiling!" I should have liked to stop and spend all I had in the market of Dunkerque . . .

All the afternoon we wandered about La Panne. The exercises of the troops had begun again, and the deploying of those endless black lines along the beach was a sight of the strangest beauty. The sun was veiled, and heavy surges rolled in under a northerly gale. Toward evening the sea turned to cold tints of jade and pearl and tarnished silver. Far down the beach a mysterious fleet of fishing boats was drawn up on the sand, with black sails bellying in the wind; and the black riders galloping by might have landed from them, and been riding into the sunset, out of some wild northern legend. Presently a knot of buglers took up their stand on the edge of the sea, facing inward, their feet in the surf, and began to play; and their call was like the call of Roland's horn, when he blew it down the pass against the paynim. And on the sand-crest below my window the lonely sentinel still watched . . .

June 24th.

It is like coming down from the mountains to leave the front. I never had the feeling more strongly than when we passed out of Belgium this afternoon. I had it most strongly as we drove by a cluster of villas standing apart in a lonely region of grass and sand. In one of them, for nearly a year, two hearts at the highest pitch of human constancy have held up a light to the world. It is impossible to pass that house without a sense of awe. Because of the light that comes from it dead faiths have come to life, weak convictions have grown strong, fiery impulses have turned to long endurance, and long endurance has kept the fire of impulse. In the harbour of New York there is a pompous statue of a goddess with a torch, designated as "Liberty enlightening the World." It seems as though the title on her pedestal might well, for the time, be transferred to the lintel of that quiet villa in the dunes.

On leaving St. Omer we took a short cut southward across rolling country. It was a happy accident that caused us to leave the main road, for presently, over the crest of a hill, we saw surging toward us a mighty movement of British and Indian troops. It was a radiant afternoon and a great bath of silver

sunlight lay on the wheat-fields, the clumps of woodland and the hilly blue horizon. In that slanting radiance the cavalry rode toward us, regiment after regiment of slim turbaned Indians, with delicate proud faces like the faces of Princes in Persian miniatures. Then came a long train of artillery; splendid horses, clattering gun-carriages, clear-faced English youths galloping by all aglow in the sunset. The stream of them seemed never ending. Now and then it was checked by a train of ambulances and supply-waggon, or caught and congested in the crooked streets of a village where the children and girls had come out with bunches of flowers, and bakers were selling hot loaves to the sutlers; then we extricated ourselves from the crowd, and climbing another hill came on another cavalcade surging toward us through the silver wheat-fields. For over an hour the procession poured by, so like and yet so unlike the French division we had met on the move as we went north a few days ago; so that we seemed to have passed to the front, and away from it, through a great gateway in the long wall of armies that are guarding the civilized world from the North Sea to the Vosges.