

I once used to think that the worst hell in war was the flame of shells; and then for long I thought it was the suffocation of the caverns which eternally confine us. But it is neither of these. Hell is water.

The wind is rising, and its icy breath goes through our flesh. On the wrecked and dissolving plain, flecked with bodies between its worm-shaped chasms of water, among the islands of motionless men stuck together like reptiles, in this flattening and sinking chaos there are some slight indications of movement. We see slowly stirring groups and fragments of groups, composed of beings who bow under the weight of their coats and aprons of mud, who trail themselves along, disperse, and crawl about in the depths of the sky's tarnished light. The dawn is so foul that one would say the day was already done.

These survivors are migrating across the desolated steppe, pursued by an unspeakable evil which exhausts and bewilders them. They are lamentable objects; and some, when they are fully seen, are dramatically ludicrous, for the overwhelming mud from which they still take flight has half unclotted them.

As they pass by their glances go widely around. They look at us, and discovering men in us they cry through the wind, "It's worse down yonder than it is here. The chaps are falling into the holes, and you can't pull them out. All them that trod on the edge of a shell-hole last night, they're dead. Down there where we're coming from you can see a head in the ground, working its arms, embedded. There's a hurdle-path that's given way in places and the hurdles have sunk into holes, and it's a man-trap. Where there's no more hurdles there's two yards deep of water. Your rifle? You couldn't pull it out again when you'd stuck it in. Look at those men, there. They've cut off all the bottom half of their great-coats—hard lines on the pockets—to help 'em get clear, and also because they hadn't strength to drag a weight like that. Dumas' coat, we were able to pull it off him, and it weighed a good eighty pounds; we could just lift it, two of us, with both our hands. Look—him with the bare legs; it's taken everything off him, his trousers, his drawers, his boots, all dragged off by the mud. One's never seen that, never."

Scattered and straggling, the herd takes flight in a fever of fear, their feet pulling huge stumps of mud out of the ground. We watch the human flotsam fade away, and the lumps of them diminish, immured in enormous clothes.

We get up, and at once the icy wind makes us tremble like trees. Slowly we veer towards the mass formed by two men curiously joined, leaning shoulder to shoulder, and each with an arm round the neck of the other. Is it the hand-to-hand fight of two soldiers who have overpowered each other in death and still hold their own, who can never again lose their grip? No; they are two men who recline upon each other so as to sleep. As they might not spread themselves on the falling earth that was ready to spread itself on them, they have supported each other, clasping each other's shoulder; and thus plunged in the ground up to their knees, they have gone to sleep.

We respect their stillness, and withdraw from the twin statue of human woe.

Soon we must halt ourselves. We have expected too much of our strength and can go no farther. It is not yet ended. We collapse once more in a chummed corner, with a noise as if one shot a load of dung.

From time to time we open our eyes. Some men are steering for us, reeling. They lean over us and speak in low and weary tones. One of them says, "*Sie sind tot. Wir bleiben hier.*" (They're dead. We'll stay here.) The other says, "*Ja,*" like a sigh.

But they see us move, and at once they sink in front of us. The man with the toneless voice says to us in French, "We surrender," and they do not move. Then they give way entirely, as if this was the relief, the end of their torture; and one of them whose face is

patterned in mud like a savage tattooed, smiles slightly.

"Stay there," says Paradis, without moving the head that he leans backward upon a hillock; "presently you shall go with us if you want."

"Yes," says the German, "I've had enough." We make no reply, and he says, "And the others too?"

"Yes," says Paradis, "let them stop too, if they like." There are four of them outstretched on the ground. The death-rattle has got one of them. It is like a sobbing song that rises from him. The others then half straighten themselves, kneeling round him, and roll great eyes in their muck-mottled faces. We get up and watch the scene. But the rattle dies out, and the blackened throat which alone in all the big body pulsed like a little bird, is still.

"*Er ist tot!*" (He's dead) says one of the men, beginning to cry. The others settle themselves again to sleep. The weeper goes to sleep as he weeps.

Other soldiers have come, stumbling, gripped in sudden halts like tipsy men, or gliding along like worms, to take sanctuary here; and we sleep all jumbled together in the common grave.

Waking, Paradis and I look at each other, and remember. We return to life and daylight as in a nightmare. In front of us the calamitous plain is resurrected, where hummocks vaguely appear from their immersion, the steel-like plain that is rusty in places and shines with lines and pools of water, while bodies are strewn here and there in the vastness like foul rubbish, prone bodies that breathe or rot.

Paradis says to me, "That's war."

"Yes, that's it," he repeats in a far-away voice, "that's war. It's not anything else."

He means—and I am with him in his meaning—"More than attacks that are like ceremonial reviews, more than visible battles unfurled like banners, more even than the hand-to-hand encounters of shouting strife, War is frightful and unnatural weariness, water up to the belly, mud and dung and infamous filth. It is befouled faces and tattered flesh, it is the corpses that are no longer like corpses even, floating on the ravenous earth. It is that, that endless monotony of misery, broken, by poignant tragedies; it is that, and not the bayonet glittering like silver, nor the bugle's trumpet cock-crow in the sun!"

Paradis was so full of this thought that he ruminated a memory, and growled, "D'you remember the woman in the town where we went about a bit not so very long ago? She talked some drivel about attacks, and said, 'How beautiful they must be to see!'"

A chasseur who was full length on his belly, flattened out like a cloak, raised his bead up as if an ox were to say, "What a fine sight it must be, all those droves of cattle driven forward to the slaughter-house!" He spat out mud from his besmeared mouth, and his unburied face was like a beast's.

"Let them say, 'It must be,'" he spluttered in a strange jerky voice, grating and ragged; "that's all right. But beautiful! Oh, hell!"

Writhing under the idea, he added passionately, "It's when they say things like that that they hit us hardest of all!" He spat again, but exhausted by his effort he fell back in his bath of mud, and laid his head in his spittle.
