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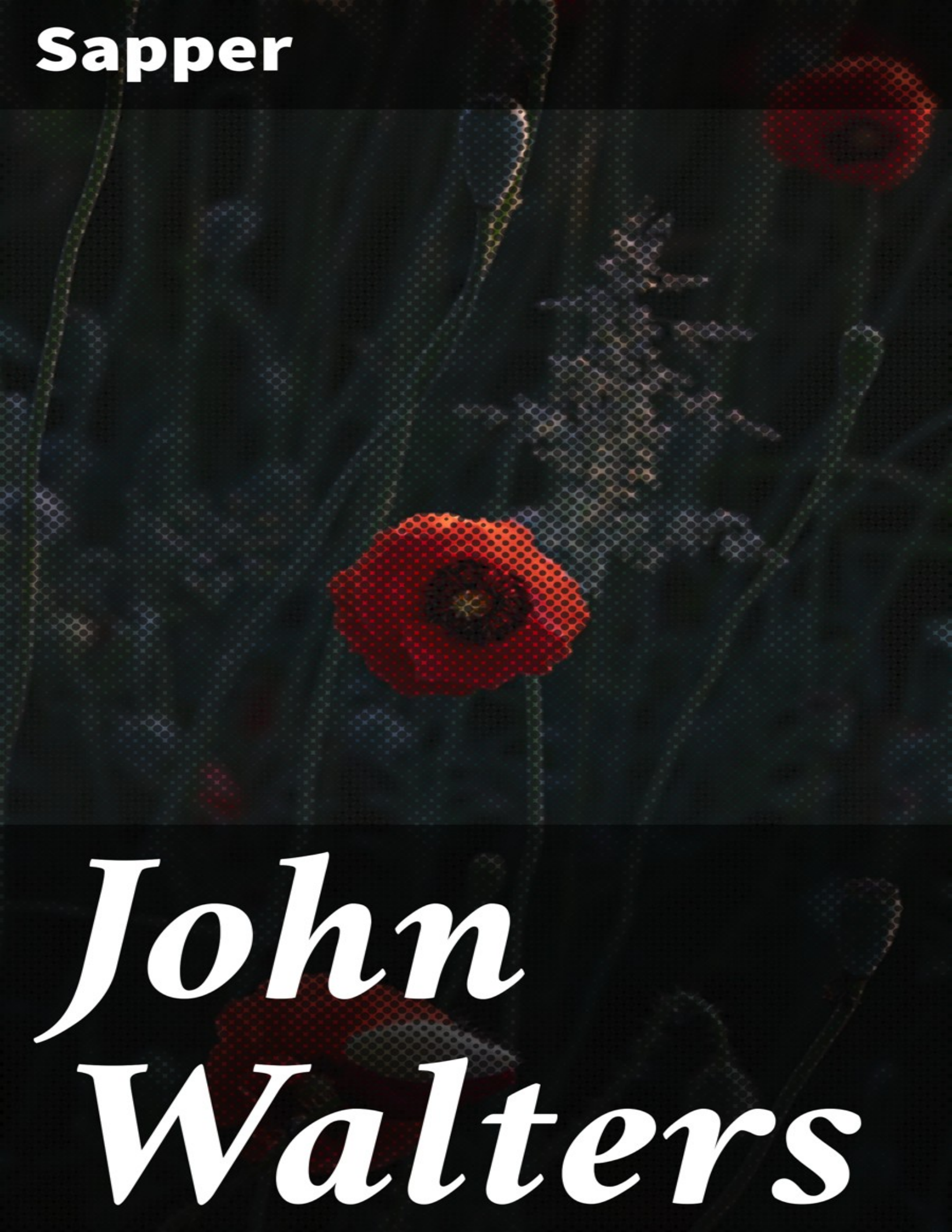

John Walters

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I. — THE AWAKENING OF JOHN WALTERS

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SHOULD you ever wander round the ranks of the North Sussex and inspect the faces of the men in that celebrated battalion, you will find that the majority are of the type bovine. They are a magnificent, if a stolid crowd, and their fighting record is second to none; but as might be expected in a regiment recruited largely from those who have been born and bred on the land, the prevalent expression of countenance is wooden. And in the rear rank of Number Three Platoon—at least that is where he used to exist beautifully—you will find the winner of the competition.

John Walters—the individual to whom I refer—was a great specimen of a man as far as his physical development was concerned; with regard to his brain the less said the better. Moreover, he looked it. He viewed life philosophically, if he viewed it at all; and the only thing which had ever been known to stir him into the slightest semblance of excitement was the unexpected addition of three more to his already numerous family circle. But the strain of endeavouring to work out the increase in separation allowance that this would give to the painstaking Mrs. John proved too much for

him, and with only the briefest of struggles, he relapsed once again into his normal torpor.

My story is of the awakening which came to our friend on a certain hot day in May. It was not permanent—he is now as comatose as ever—but while it lasted I am given to understand it was quite a useful performance. And this was the way of it, on that morning in early summer.

For our scenery we must go to the front-line trenches in a certain district where mine craters grew and multiplied, and saps crept out, turning and twisting between the thrown-up mounds of earth on each side of them. In some places they were only ten yards apart—the English and the German sapheads—in others they were a hundred. But over the whole area there brooded that delightful sense of doubt and uncertainty which goes so far in cheering up its happy occupants. Complete ignorance as to where the next mine is going off, coupled with absolute certainty that it will go up somewhere, and that as far as you can see it's about your turn for attention, is a state of affairs at which only the most blue-faced pessimist could cavil.

And quite in agreement with that opinion was our friend John Walters on the morning of the day in question. At least it appeared so. To the casual observer the worthy John was quite content with his position; and if the thought ever crossed his mind that mines frequently went up in unexpected places, or that the saphead he was adorning was only fifteen yards away from the nearest Hun one, it certainly was not reflected on his face.

Far from it. At the rise of the curtain he was lying sprawled on his back, and staring stolidly upwards.

He had been similarly occupied for the last hour, apathetically watching the stars pale gradually away, and the faint glow of dawn come stealing over the sky. Had he chosen to raise himself a little and look towards the east he could have seen the sun glistening like a gigantic orange ball, glinting through the thick white ground mist that covered everything; a sun that as yet had no heat in it. But John Walters did not choose to; he was quite comfortable, even if a little cold; and his mind was blank of any desire to be so energetic. Had anyone told him that this was the dawn of the most eventful day of his life, he would have contemplated the speaker without interest, spat with violence, and remarked in the fulness of time, "'Oo be you a-gettin' at?"

After a while he shifted his position and ceased to gaze at the deepening blue above his head. He felt in each pocket in turn until he found an unpleasant-looking clay pipe whose bowl he carefully inspected. Apparently satisfied with what he saw he produced from another pocket a piece of plug tobacco; and having performed the mystic rite with due care and solemnity and the aid of a blunt knife, he thoughtfully rubbed the tobacco between his hands and stuffed his pipe with a square and dirty forefinger. Shortly after, the blue spirals of smoke ascending in the still summer air proclaimed that John was having his matutinal pipe.

Occasionally, when he thought about it, his eyes rested on a little piece of looking-glass on a stick set into a sand-bag in front of him—a glass tilted at an angle of forty-five degrees, which reflected the ground behind his back. It was the periscope at the end of the sap, and John was the sentry

whose duty it was to look through it. The sap facing him ran back to the English front line. He could see the men asleep where it joined the trench twenty yards away—the others of the sap party; and every now and then he could see? men going backwards and forwards in the fire-trench. He settled himself more comfortably, and again the smoke curled upwards in the motionless air, while John ruminated on life.

Far be it from me to blame our friend for thus indulging in a little quiet introspection, aided and soothed by My Lady Nicotine. The occupation has much to commend it at suitable times and in suitable places. Unfortunately, the head of a sap on the flank of a continuous line of craters at five o'clock on a misty morning fulfils neither of these conditions. Further, there seems to be but little doubt that the review of his life was of such surprising dullness that the worthy John's head fell forward three or four times with the peculiar movement seen so often amongst those who are known as earnest church-goers. It occurs at intervals throughout the sermon, to be followed instantly by a self-conscious glance round to see if anyone noticed. Only there was no one at the moment to watch John, when his head first dropped slowly forward and his pipe fell unheeded to the ground—no one, that is, of whom our friend had any cognisance. But had his eyes been riveted on the periscope he would have seen a thing which would have galvanised even him into some semblance of activity.

Slowly, stealthily, a head was raised from behind a great hummock of chalky earth, a head surmounted by the round cloth cap of the German. Motionless the man stared fixedly at the little periscope—John's little periscope—then as if

worked by a string the head disappeared; and when our hero, waking with a start, looked at the periscope himself with the guilty feeling that he had actually dozed on his post, once again it merely reflected the desolate, torn-up ground. But the German had seen John—and John had not seen the German, which is a dangerous state of affairs for solitary people in No Man's Land, when the range is about five yards.

It was just as our friend grunted and leaned forward to retrieve his pipe that it happened. Suddenly the saphead seemed to swarm with men who leaped into it out of the silent mists; a bullet-headed man seized John by the collar and yanked him out; the rest of the party seized the Mills bombs lying at the saphead, threw them at the sleeping picket near the fire-trench, and followed John's captor. In four seconds it was all over; the bombs burst in quick succession right amongst the picket, and when an infuriated and excited officer came rushing up to find out what the devil was the matter, the only traces that remained were two dead men, a lance-corporal with a large hole in his leg, and—John Walters's unpleasant-looking clay pipe.

The next few minutes in our friend's life were crowded. Stumbling, half-running, and ever conscious of a large and ugly revolver pointed at his stomach, he was driven over the uneven ground for twenty yards or so, and then without warning he tripped up and fell into a trench which he found in front of him, followed almost immediately by four panting Huns, who mopped their brows and grunted in a strange tongue. John was still completely bemused—the whole thing

had been so sudden—and he sat for a while staring at the Germans.

"Gaw lumme!" he remarked at last, scratching his head in perplexity, "if you ain't the ruddy 'Uns. This 'ere's a fair box-up—that's wot it is."

Almost mechanically his right hand wandered to his jacket pocket in search of his pipe, only to receive a crashing blow on the elbow from a revolver butt.

"'Ere—wot are you a-playing at?" His tone was aggrieved. "Danged if I ain't left my pipe in that there sap."

"English swine." One of the Germans spoke slowly, choosing his words with care. "You will later killed be."

"Go hon." John regarded him unmoved—he was still thinking about his pipe. "And look 'ere, guv'nor, I ain't 'ad no breakfast."

The German shook his head—our friend's accent was beyond him. Then seeming to realise that he was failing to hate sufficiently, he brought the butt of his rifle down with great force on John's foot, and drove him along the sap with the point of his bayonet. The procession turned along the fire-trench—once again John tripped up; something hit him on the head, he felt himself falling down a timbered shaft, and then—no more.

Now, generally, when a man is taken prisoner he is removed with all possible speed to the rear, where he can be examined at leisure by men who know his language. At least, it is so in the case of German prisoners, and it is to be assumed it is so in the case of ours. Therefore our friend can

deem himself lucky—though he certainly did not think so at the time—that the usual procedure was not followed in his case. Had it been, this more or less veracious narrative would never have been written; and our worthy John would even now be languishing in Ruhleben or some equally choice health resort.

He was roused from a sort of semi-stupor by a heavy kick in the ribs; and for a moment his mind was a blank—more even than usual. He was painfully aware that his head was very sore, and his stomach was very empty; and after he had completely grasped those two unpleasant facts he became further and even more painfully aware that a stoutly-booted German was on the point of kicking him again. He scrambled groaning to his feet; memories of the saphead had returned. The German pointed to the dug-out shaft; and when John again began remarking on the little matter of breakfast the stoutly-booted foot struck another portion of his anatomy even more heavily. Our hero, perceiving that the subject was unpopular, and encountering for the first time in his life the doctrine of *force majeure*, reluctantly began to climb the shaft A bayonet prodded into the region of the last kick, and having let forth a howl, he climbed less reluctantly.

When he at last emerged blinking into the daylight of the trench, he looked, as is the way with those who are of the earth earthy, at the sun; and found to his surprise that it was late in the afternoon.

"Lumme, guv'nor!"—he turned to the man behind him—"I ain't 'ad nothin' to eat all day. Not since last night, I ain't, an'

then a perisher dropped me bread in the trench and trod on it."

His guard gazed at him impassively for a moment, and then kicked him quiet again—in the stomach this time—while two men sitting on the fire-step laughed gutturally.

"English swine!" One of them mockingly held out a piece of bread, and then snatched it away again, as John was about to take it.

"Swine, yer ruddy self," he snarled, his slow bucolic temper beginning to get frayed.

But a rifle-butt in the ribs and a bayonet half an inch in his back showed him the unwisdom of such a proceeding; and he stumbled sullenly along the trench. It was lightly held, but everyone whom he did see seemed to take a delight in finding some hitherto unbruised part of his body to hit. At last, half sobbing with exhaustion and pain, he was propelled forcibly into another dug-out, where behind a table lit by candles there sat a man studying a map. He felt a hand like a leg of mutton seize him by the collar, force him upright, and then hold him motionless. After a few moments the man by the table looked up.

"What is the number of the battalion you belong to?" He spoke in perfect English.

"The Sixth." John's spirits rose at hearing his own language. "An', look 'ere, guv'nor, I ain't 'ad no—"

"Silence, you dog." The officer cried out something in German, and again the rifle-butt jolted into his ribs with such force that he groaned. "What division do you belong to?"

"'Undred and fortieth." Our friend's tone was surly.

"Say 'sir,' when you speak to me. How long have you been in this part of the line?"

"I've been 'ere a month, guv'nor—I mean, sir."

"Not you, dolt." The officer stormed at him. "Your division, I mean."

"Strike me pink, guv'nor, I dunno—I dunno, reely."

The wretched John's small amount of brain was rapidly going. Again the officer said something in German, and again an agonising jab took him in the ribs. It was a mistake, that last jab, if only the officer had known it. Given food and comparative kindness, John, out of pure ignorance of the harm he would be doing, might have racked his brains and said a lot. But that last unnecessary blow made him sullen—and when a man of that type gets sullen the Sphinx is talkative in comparison. For half an hour the cross-examination continued; were the men's spirits good, did they think they were winning, what was the food like? And, ultimately, the officer told him in a furious voice that even for an Englishman he'd never met such a mutton-headed fool. With a last parting kick he was hurled into a corner and told to lie there.

Bruised in every limb, he crouched dazedly where he fell; with the whole of the slow, fierce anger of the countryman raging in his heart against the officer who still sat at the table. Occasionally men came in and saluted, but no word was spoken; and after a while John noticed that he seemed to be writing occasional sentences on pieces of paper. Sometimes an orderly came in and took one away; more often he crumpled them up and threw them on the floor. And then he suddenly noticed that the officer had a peculiar

thing fitted round his head, with two discs that came over his ears.

"Come here." The terse command roused John from his semi-dazed stupor; he realised that the officer was speaking to him. "Put these over your ears, and tell me if you recognise who is speaking."

He handed a similar pair of discs over the table, which the Englishman clumsily put on his head. At first he could hear nothing distinctly but only a confused medley of chirrups and squeaks. Then suddenly quite distinctly there came a clear, metallic voice: "Halloa! is that the Exchange? Give me Don Beer."

"Gawd!" said John, in amazement. "'Oo the 'ell is it?"

"That's what I want to find out," snapped the German. "Do you know the voice?"

"But it's in English." Our friend still gaped foolishly at this strange phenomenon.

"Do you know who it is, you dunderheaded idiot?" howled the officer, in a fury.

"Lumme; I dunno who it is. 'Ow should I?" John was aggrieved—righteously aggrieved. "Look out; the perisher's talking again."

"Is that you, Don Beer?" The thin voice came once again clearly to John. "Oh! is that you, Sally? Heard anything more about that man of yours they got this morning?" John noticed the officer was writing.

"Not a word, old dear. He was the world's most monumental idiot, so I wish 'em joy of him." Then once again the squeak chorus drowned everything else. But John had heard enough. Regardless of the somewhat unflattering

description of himself, unmindful of the officer's short laugh, he stared with amazement at the wall of the dug-out. For he had recognised that last voice.

"Who was that? D'you know?" The officer looked at John sharply.

"Well, I'm danged!" he muttered. "That last were old Sally—the old man."

"What old man, you fool?"

"Why, our colonel, guv'nor. There ain't more'n one old man."

"Oh!" The officer made a note. "So that was the colonel of your battalion, was it?"

"It wor, guv'nor—sir. An' if I might make so bold, sir, seeing as 'ow I 'aven't 'ad any food like since last night—"

"Silence, you worm." The officer got up, and struck him in the mouth. "We don't give food to Englishmen. Go back to your kennel. I may want you again."

He pointed to the corner, and resumed his seat, with the receivers of the listening apparatus over his ears once more. But John Walters was not interested—the entire performance left him cold. He wanted food, he wanted drink, and what German prisoners he'd seen had not wanted in vain. With a fierce smouldering rage in his heart, he lay hunched up, and his eyes never left the man at the table.

A far quicker-witted specimen than our friend might well have been excused for feeling a little dazed by the position in which he found himself. To be suddenly torn from the peaceful monotony of ordinary trench life; to be removed forcibly from his friends, deprived of his breakfast and of his pipe; to be stunned by a blow on the head and on

recovering consciousness to have the pleasure of hearing his colonel describe him as a most monumental idiot does not happen to everyone.

To the unfortunate John, still partially dazed and therefore slower on the uptake than ever, the situation was beyond solution. The only dominant thoughts which filled his mind were that he was hungry, and that he hated the man at the table. Every now and then he fell into a kind of stupor; only to come to again with a start, and see the same officer, with the same arrangement over his head, writing—writing. He was always writing, it seemed to John, and the constant stream of orderlies annoyed him.

God! how he hated that man. Lying in the corner, he watched him vindictively with his fists clenched and the veins standing out on his neck; then everything would go blurred again—his head would fall forward, and he would lie inert, like a log, practically unconscious. Men were moving; the officer was writing; he could still realise his surroundings dimly, but only with the realisation of light-headedness. At one time the dug-out seemed to be the taproom of the One Ton—a hostelry largely patronised by our friend in the days of peace; while the officer who wrote took unto himself the guise of the proud owner. At another he thought he was in the battalion orderly-room and that the man behind the table was his C.O. He tried to remember what his offence was, and why he was lying down, and why the escort was moving about instead of standing beside him. Then his brain cleared again and he remembered.

The exact act which cleared his senses was yet a further application of the boot by one of the dimly-moving figures.

With a grunt John sat up and found beside him a hunk of unappetising-looking brown bread and a mug of water.

"Eat that up." The officer was speaking. "Then I shall want you again—so be quick."

John needed no second order. The fact that the bread was mouldly troubled him not at all; a hungry man looks not a gift loaf in the interstices. With a rapidity which would hardly be commended in a brochure on etiquette, he fell upon that hunk of bread, and having demolished it he felt better. It was just as he was washing down the last crumb with the last drop of water that he saw the officer at the table spring to his feet, while the two orderlies beside him also straightened up and stood to attention. He looked round to find the reason of the commotion, and found another officer standing near him regarding him malevolently. Somewhat refreshed by his meal, the worthy John came to the conclusion that he disliked the new arrival's face almost as much as his original enemy's, and returned the look with all the interest he was capable of displaying. It was not a judicious thing to do, but our friend was not a past-master in the higher forms of tact. Once again the dug-out became animated. Hitherto untouched areas of his anatomy received attention from two scandalised orderlies, and the ruffled dignity of the new-comer—a bull-necked man of unprepossessing aspect—was soothed. It was only John Walters's fury that increased until it almost choked him; but then to the other occupants of the dug-out John Walters's fury was a thing of no account. And but for the next little turn in the wheel of fate, their indifference was quite justifiable. He was unarmed: they

were not. And no man, even though he possess the strength of ten, is much use when an ounce of lead goes in at his chest and out at his back.

Completely disregarding the sullen prisoner, who stood breathing a little heavily just in front of an armed orderly, the two officers started an animated conversation. John, it is perhaps unnecessary to state, understood not one word; his school curriculum had not included German. Even had they spoken in English it is doubtful if their remarks would have conveyed much to him; though they furnished the reason of his temporary retention in his present abode.

"Any success?" The new-comer pointed to the receiver-discs lying on the table.

"Yes." The other officer held out one of the sets. "Try them on, and see what you think."

"Have you identified any of the speakers?"

The bull-necked man was adjusting his instrument.

"Only the colonel of the North Sussex for certain. That unmitigated fool"—he glared at John, who scowled sullenly back—"is too much of a fool to tell one anything. He is the thing we got this morning asleep in a sap."

The other nodded, listening intently, and for a while silence reigned in the dug-out.

To John the whole affair was inexplicable; but then a new and complicated listening apparatus might have been expected to be a bit above his form. He heard a salvo of shells come screeching past the entrance shaft, and realised with a momentary interest that they sounded much the same when they were English shells as they did when they were German. Then something hit the ground just outside

with a thud, a something which he diagnosed correctly as a trench mortar bomb, and a second afterwards it exploded with a roar which deafened him, while a mass of dirt and lumps of chalk rained down the shaft.

The occupants of the dug-out betrayed no excitement; only John longed, with an incoherent longing, that another sixty-pounder would roll down the shaft next time before it exploded. He felt he would cheerfully die, if only those two accursed officers died at the same time.

Then came another salvo of shells and yet another; while in rapid succession the Stokes and Medium trench mortars came crumping down.

"A bit hactive to-night," thought John, listening with undisguised interest to the bursts outside. After all they were *his* bursts; he had every right to feel a fatherly pleasure in this strafing of the accursed Hun, even though his present position as one of them left much to be desired. A gentle smile of toleration spread over his face, the smile of the proud proprietor exhibiting his wares to an unworthy audience—and he glanced at the two officers. He noticed they were looking inquiringly at one another, as if debating in their minds whether it was an ordinary strafe or whether —

Suddenly the firing stopped, only to break out again as if by clockwork, a little farther away; and with that sudden change of target any doubts they had entertained as to the nature of the entertainment disappeared. They were being raided and they knew it; and any further doubts they may have still had on the matter were dispelled by a sudden

shouting in the trench above them, coupled with the sharp cracks of bursting bombs.

To John the situation was still a little obscure, His brain creaked round sufficiently to enable him to realise that something had occurred to break up the happy meeting and cause feverish activity on the part of his captors. Various strange instruments were being hurriedly stowed away in a corner of the dug-out to the accompaniment of much guttural language; but his brain was still trying to grasp what had happened when he saw a thing which quickened his movements. Completely forgotten in the general rush he stood by the table, while the others darted backwards and forwards past him, carrying the instruments; and then suddenly the quickener arrived. Rolling down the steps there came a little black egg-shaped ball, which John recognised quicker than he had ever recognised anything before. It was a Mills bomb, and the pin was out. He was no bombing expert, but the habits of a Mills are known to most people who live with the breed. Four seconds—and then a most unpleasing explosion, especially when in a confined space like a dug-out.

So John acted. With a dispassionate grunt, he seized one of the orderlies who was brushing past him at the moment, all unmindful of the danger; and having picked him off the ground as if he were a baby he deposited him on the bomb, just in time. Barely had the dazed Hun alighted gently on the bomb when the bomb went off. So did the Hun, and the fun began. John's playful action had—amongst other good effects—prevented the lights from being blown out; and so at the trifling cost of one orderly he was in what is known as