VINTAGE **MANNING**

THE MIDDLE PARTS OF FORTUNE

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‘They can say what they bloody well like, but we’re a fuckin’ fine mob.’

Deep in the mud and stench of the Somme, Bourne is trying his best to stay alive. There he finds the intense fraternity of war and fear unlike anything he has ever known.

Frederic Manning’s novel was first published anonymously in 1929. The honesty with which he wrote about the horror, the boredom, and the futility of war inspired Ernest Hemingway to read the novel every year, ‘to remember how things really were so that I will never lie to myself nor to anyone else about them’.

About the Author

Frederic Manning was born in Sydney in 1882. As a teenager he went with his tutor to England, where he eventually settled for most of his adult life. Manning began his career as a writer and poet in Britain with a narrative poem, *The Vigil of Brunhild* (1907), *Poems* (1910) and *Scenes and Portraits* (1909), a collection of short historical fiction. His work won him considerable attention and acclaim. He was also the principal reviewer for the *Spectator* and forged a wide circle of literary friends and acquaintances. When the First World War broke out Manning failed to pass officer training but enlisted anyway and was sent to France in 1916, where he fought in the Battle of the Somme and was promoted to the rank of second lieutenant. His most famous work, *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, was published anonymously in 1929 due to the book's shocking content. An expurgated version was published the following year with the title *Her Privates We* and under the pseudonym 'Private 19022'. The book was highly praised by his contemporaries. Manning died in Hampstead in 1935.

ALSO BY FREDERIC MANNING

The Vigil of Brunhild
Poems
Scenes and Portraits

To Peter Davies
who made me write it

The Middle Parts of Fortune

Frederic Manning

On fortune’s cap we are not the very button . . . Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favours? . . . ’Faith, her privates we.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Author’s Prefatory Note

While the following pages are a record of experience on the Somme and Ancre fronts, with an interval behind the lines, during the latter half of the year 1916; and the events described in it actually happened; the characters are fictitious. It is true that in recording the conversations of the men I seemed at times to hear the voices of ghosts. Their judgments were necessarily partial and prejudiced; but prejudices and partialities provide most of the driving power of life. It is better to allow them to cancel each other, than attempt to strike an average between them. Averages are too colourless, indeed too abstract in every way, to represent concrete experience. I have drawn no portraits; and my concern has been mainly with the anonymous ranks, whose opinion, often mere surmise and ill-informed, but real and true for them, I have tried to represent faithfully.

War is waged by men; not by beasts, or by gods. It is a peculiarly human activity. To call it a crime against mankind is to miss at least half its significance; it is also the punishment of a crime. That raises a moral question, the kind of problem with which the present age is disinclined to deal. Perhaps some future attempt to provide a solution for it may prove to be even more astonishing than the last.

[1929]

1

‘By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once; we owe God a death . . . and let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next.’

SHAKESPEARE

THE DARKNESS WAS increasing rapidly, as the whole sky had clouded, and threatened thunder. There was still some desultory shelling. When the relief had taken over from them, they set off to return to their original line as best they could. Bourne, who was beaten to the wide, gradually dropped behind, and in trying to keep the others in sight missed his footing and fell into a shell-hole. By the time he had picked himself up again the rest of the party had vanished; and, uncertain of his direction, he stumbled on alone. He neither hurried nor slackened his pace; he was light-headed, almost exalted, and driven only by the desire to find an end. Somewhere, eventually, he would sleep. He almost fell into the wrecked trench, and after a moment’s hesitation turned left, caring little where it led him. The world seemed extraordinarily empty of men, though he knew the ground was alive with them. He was breathing with difficulty, his mouth and throat seemed to be cracking with dryness, and his water-bottle was empty. Coming to a dug-out, he groped his way down, feeling for the steps with his feet; a piece of Wilson canvas, hung across the passage but twisted aside, rasped his cheek; and a few steps lower his face was enveloped suddenly in the musty folds of a blanket. The dug-out was empty. For the moment he collapsed there, indifferent to everything. Then with shaking hands he felt for his cigarettes, and putting one between his lips struck a match. The light revealed a candle-end stuck

by its own grease to the oval lid of a tobacco-tin, and he lit it; it was scarcely thicker than a shilling, but it would last his time. He would finish his cigarette, and then move on to find his company.

There was a kind of bank or seat excavated in the wall of the dug-out, and he noticed first the tattered remains of a blanket lying on it, and then, gleaming faintly in its folds a small metal disk reflecting the light. It was the cap on the cork of a water-bottle. Sprawling sideways he reached it, the feel of the bottle told him it was full, and uncorking it he put it to his lips and took a great gulp before discovering that he was swallowing neat whiskey. The fiery spirit almost choked him for the moment, in his surprise he even spat some of it out; then recovering, he drank again, discreetly but sufficiently, and was meditating a more prolonged appreciation when he heard men groping their way down the steps. He recorked the bottle, hid it quickly under the blanket, and removed himself to what might seem an innocent distance from temptation.

Three Scotsmen came in; they were almost as spent and broken as he was, that he knew by their uneven voices; but they put up a show of indifference, and were able to tell him that some of his mob were on the left, in a dug-out about fifty yards away. They, too, had lost their way, and asked him questions in their turn; but he could not help them, and they developed among themselves an incoherent debate, on the question of what was the best thing for them to do in the circumstances. Their dialect only allowed him to follow their arguments imperfectly, but under the talk it was easy enough to see the irresolution of weary men seeking in their difficulties some reasonable pretext for doing nothing. It touched his own conscience, and throwing away the butt of his cigarette he decided to go. The candle was flickering feebly on the verge of extinction, and presently the dug-out would be in darkness again. Prudence stifled in him an impulse to tell them of the whiskey; perhaps they would find

it for themselves; it was a matter which might be left for providence or chance to decide. He was moving towards the stairs, when a voice, muffled by the blanket, came from outside.

‘Who are down there?’

There was no mistaking the note of authority and Bourne answered promptly. There was a pause, and then the blanket was waved aside, and an officer entered. He was Mr Clinton, with whom Bourne had fired his course at Tregelly.

‘Hullo, Bourne,’ he began, and then seeing the other men he turned and questioned them in his soft kindly voice. His face had the greenish pallor of crude beeswax, his eyes were red and tired, his hands were as nervous as theirs, and his voice had the same note of over-excitement, but he listened to them without a sign of impatience.

‘Well, I don’t want to hurry you men off,’ he said at last, ‘but your battalion will be moving out before we do. The best thing you can do is to cut along to it. They’re only about a hundred yards further down the trench. You don’t want to straggle back to camp by yourselves; it doesn’t look well either. So you had better get moving right away. What you really want is twelve hours solid sleep, and I am only telling you the shortest road to it.’

They accepted his view of the matter quietly, they were willing enough; but, like all tired men in similar conditions, they were glad to have their action determined for them; so they thanked him and wished him good-night, if not cheerfully, at least with the air of being reasonable men, who appreciated his kindliness. Bourne made as though to follow them out, but Mr Clinton stopped him.

‘Wait a minute, Bourne, and we shall go together,’ he said as the last Scotsman groped his way up the steeply pitched stairs. ‘It is indecent to follow a kilted Highlander too closely out of a dug-out. Besides I left something here.’

He looked about him, went straight to the blanket, and took up the water-bottle. It must have seemed lighter than

he expected, for he shook it a little suspiciously before uncorking it. He took a long steady drink and paused.

‘I left this bottle full of whiskey,’ he said, ‘but those bloody Jocks must have smelt it. You know, Bourne, I don’t go over with a skinful, as some of them do; but, by God, when I come back I want it. Here, take a pull yourself; you look as though you could do with one.’

Bourne took the bottle without any hesitation; his case was much the same. One had lived instantaneously during that timeless interval, for in the shock and violence of the attack, the perilous instant, on which he stood perched so precariously, was all that the half-stunned consciousness of man could grasp; and, if he lost his grip on it, he fell back among the grotesque terrors and nightmare creatures of his own mind. Afterwards, when the strain had been finally released, in the physical exhaustion which followed, there was a collapse, in which one’s emotional nature was no longer under control.

‘We’re in the next dug-out, those who are left of us,’ Mr Clinton continued. ‘I am glad you came through all right, Bourne. You were in the last show, weren’t you? It seems to me the old Hun has brought up a lot more stuff, and doesn’t mean to shift, if he can help it. Anyway we should get a spell out of the line now. I don’t believe there are more than a hundred of us left.’

A quickening in his speech showed that the whiskey was beginning to play on frayed nerves: it had steadied Bourne for the time being. The flame of the candle gave one leap and went out. Mr Clinton switched on his torch, and shoved the water-bottle into the pocket of his raincoat.

‘Come on,’ he said, making for the steps, ‘you and I are two of the lucky ones, Bourne; we’ve come through without a scratch; and if our luck holds we’ll keep moving out of one bloody misery into another, until we break, see, until we break.’

Bourne felt a kind of suffocation in his throat: there was nothing weak or complaining in Mr Clinton's voice, it was full of angry soreness. He switched off the light as he came to the Wilson canvas.

'Don't talk so bloody wet,' Bourne said to him through the darkness. 'You'll never break.'

The officer gave no sign of having heard the sympathetic but indecorous rebuke. They moved along the battered trench silently. The sky flickered with the flash of guns, and an occasional star-shell flooded their path with light. As one fell slowly, Bourne saw a dead man in field grey propped up in a corner of a traverse; probably he had surrendered, wounded, and reached the trench only to die there. He looked indifferently at this piece of wreckage. The grey face was senseless and empty. As they turned the corner they were challenged by a sentry over the dug-out.

'Good night, Bourne,' said Mr Clinton quietly.

'Good night, sir,' said Bourne, saluting; and he exchanged a few words with the sentry.

'Wish to Christ they'd get a move on,' said the sentry, as Bourne turned to go down.

The dug-out was full of men, and all the drawn, pitiless faces turned to see who it was as he entered, and after that flicker of interest relapsed into apathy and stupor again. The air was thick with smoke and the reek of guttering candles. He saw Shem lift a hand to attract his attention, and he managed to squeeze in beside him. They didn't speak after each had asked the other if he were all right; some kind of oppression weighed on them all, they sat like men condemned to death.

'Wonder if they'll keep us up in support?' whispered Shem.

Probably that was the question they were all asking, as they sat there in their bitter resignation, with brooding enigmatic faces, hopeless, but undefeated; even the faces of boys seeming curiously old; and then it changed suddenly: there were quick hurried movements, belts were

buckled, rifles taken up, and stooping, they crawled up into the air. Shem and Bourne were among the first out. They moved off at once. Shells travelled overhead; they heard one or two bump fairly close, but they saw nothing except the sides of the trench, whitish with chalk in places, and the steel helmet and lifting swaying shoulders of the man in front, or the frantic uplifted arms of shattered trees, and the sky with the clouds broken in places, through which opened the inaccessible peace of the stars. They seemed to hurry, as though the sense of escape filled them. The walls of the communication trench became gradually lower, the track sloping upward to the surface of the ground, and at last they emerged, the officer standing aside, to watch what was left of his men file out, and form up in two ranks before him. There was little light, but under the brims of the helmets one could see living eyes moving restlessly in blank faces. His face, too, was a blank from weariness, but he stood erect, an ash-stick under his arm, as the dun-coloured shadows shuffled into some sort of order. The words of command that came from him were no more than whispers, his voice was cracked and not quite under control, though there was still some harshness in it. Then they moved off in fours, away from the crest of the ridge, towards the place they called Happy Valley.

They had not far to go. As they were approaching the tents a crump dropped by the mule-lines, and that set them swaying a little, but not much. Captain Malet called them to attention a little later; and from the tents, camp-details, cooks, snobs, and a few unfit men, gathered in groups to watch them, with a sympathy genuine enough, but tactfully aloof; for there is a gulf between men just returned from action, and those who have not been in the show as unbridgeable as that between the sober and the drunk. Captain Malet halted his men by the orderly-room tent. There was even a pretence to dress ranks. Then he looked

at them, and they at him for a few seconds which seemed long. They were only shadows in the darkness.

‘Dismiss!’

His voice was still pitched low, but they turned almost with the precision of troops on the square, each rifle was struck smartly, the officer saluting; and then the will which bound them together dissolved, the enervated muscles relaxed, and they lurched off to their tents as silent and as dispirited as beaten men. One of the tailors took his pipe out of his mouth and spat on the ground.

‘They can say what they bloody well like,’ he said appreciatively, ‘but we’re a fuckin’ fine mob.’

Once during the night Bourne started up in an access of inexplicable horror, and after a moment of bewildered recollection, turned over and tried to sleep again. He remembered nothing of the nightmare which had roused him, if it were a nightmare, but gradually his awakened sense felt a vague restlessness troubling equally the other men. He noticed it first in Shem, whose body, almost touching his own, gave a quick, convulsive jump, and continued twitching for a moment, while he muttered unintelligibly, and worked his lips as though he were trying to moisten them. The obscure disquiet passed fitfully from one to another, lips parted with the sound of a bubble bursting, teeth met grinding as the jaws worked, there were little whimperings which quickened into sobs, passed into long shuddering moans, or culminated in angry, half-articulate obscenities, and then relapsed, with fretful, uneasy movements and heavy breathing, into a more profound sleep. Even though Bourne tried to persuade himself that these convulsive agonies were merely reflex actions, part of an unconscious physical process, through which the disordered nerves sought to readjust themselves, or to perform belatedly some instinctive movement which an over-riding will had thwarted at its original inception, his

own conscious mind now filled itself with the passions, of which the mutterings and twitchings heard in the darkness were only the unconscious mimicry. The senses certainly have, in some measure, an independent activity of their own, and remain vigilant even in the mind’s eclipse. The darkness seemed to him to be filled with the shudderings of tormented flesh, as though something diabolically evil probed curiously to find a quick sensitive nerve and wring from it a reluctant cry of pain. At last, unable to ignore the sense of misery which filled him, he sat up and lit the inevitable cigarette. The formless terrors haunting their sleep took shape for him. His mind reached back into the past day, groping among obscure and broken memories, for it seemed to him now that for the greater part of the time he had been stunned and blinded, and that what he had seen, he had seen in sudden, vivid flashes, instantaneously: he felt again the tension of waiting, that became impatience, and then the immense effort to move, and the momentary relief which came with movement, the sense of unreality and dread which descended on one, and some restoration of balance as one saw other men moving forward in a way that seemed commonplace, mechanical, as though at some moment of ordinary routine; the restraint, and the haste that fought against it with every voice in one’s being crying out to hurry. Hurry? One cannot hurry, alone, into nowhere, into nothing. Every impulse created immediately its own violent contradiction. The confusion and tumult in his own mind was inseparable from the senseless fury about him, each reinforcing the other. He saw great chunks of the German line blown up, as the artillery blasted a way for them; clouds of dust and smoke screened their advance, but the Hun searched for them scrupulously; the air was alive with the rush and flutter of wings; it was ripped by screaming shells, hissing like tons of molten metal plunging suddenly into water, there was the blast and concussion of their explosion, men smashed, obliterated in

sudden eruptions of earth, rent and strewn in bloody fragments, shells that were like hell-cats humped and spitting, little sounds, unpleasantly close, like the plucking of tense strings, and something tangling his feet, tearing at his trousers and puttees as he stumbled over it, and then a face suddenly, an inconceivably distorted face, which raved and sobbed at him as he fell with it into a shell-hole. He saw with astonishment the bare arse of a Scotsman who had gone into action wearing only a kilt-apron; and then they righted themselves and looked at each other, bewildered and humiliated. There followed a moment of perfect lucidity, while they took a breather; and he found himself, though unwounded, wondering with an insane prudence where the nearest dressing-station was. Other men came up; two more Gordons joined them, and then Mr Halliday, who flung himself on top of them and, keeping his head well down, called them a lot of bloody skulkers. He had a slight wound in the forearm. They made a rush forward again, the dust and smoke clearing a little, and they heard the elastic twang of Mills bombs as they reached an empty trench, very narrow where shelling had not wrecked or levelled it. Mr Halliday was hit again, in the knee, before they reached the trench, and Bourne felt something pluck the front of his tunic at the same time. They pulled Mr Halliday into the trench, and left him with one of the Gordons who had also been hit. Men were converging there, and he went forward with some of his own company again. From the moment he had thrown himself into the shell-hole with the Scotsman something had changed in him; the conflict and tumult of his mind had gone, his mind itself seemed to have gone, to have contracted and hardened within him; fear remained, an implacable and restless fear, but that, too, seemed to have been beaten and forged into a point of exquisite sensibility and to have become indistinguishable from hate. Only the instincts of the beast survived in him, every sense was alert and in that tension was some poignancy. He

neither knew where he was, nor whither he was going, he could have no plan because he could foresee nothing, everything happening was inevitable and unexpected, he was an act in a whole chain of acts; and, though his movements had to conform to those of others, spontaneously, as part of some infinitely flexible plan, which he could not comprehend very clearly even in regard to its immediate object, he could rely on no one but himself. They worked round a point still held by machine-guns, through a rather intricate system of trenches linking up shell-craters. The trenches were little more than bolt-holes, through which the machine-gunners, after they had held up the advancing infantry as long as possible, might hope to escape to some other appointed position further back, and resume their work, thus gaining time for the troops behind to recover from the effect of the bombardment, and emerge from their hiding-places. They were singularly brave men, these Prussian machine-gunners, but the extreme of heroism, alike in foe or friend, is indistinguishable from despair. Bourne found himself playing again a game of his childhood, though not now among rocks from which reverberated heat quivered in wavy films, but in made fissures too chalky and unweathered for adequate concealment. One has not, perhaps, at thirty years the same zest in the game as one had at thirteen, but the sense of danger brought into play a latent experience which had become a kind of instinct with him, and he moved in those tortuous ways with the furtive cunning of a stoat or weasel. Stooping low at an angle in the trench he saw the next comparatively straight length empty, and when the man behind was close to him, ran forward still stooping. The advancing line, hung up at one point, inevitably tended to surround it, and it was suddenly abandoned by the few men holding it. Bourne, running, checked as a running Hun rounded the further angle precipitately, saw him stop, shrink back into a defensive posture, and fired without lifting the butt of his rifle quite

level with his right breast. The man fell shot in the face, and someone screamed at Bourne to go on; the body choked the narrow angle, and when he put his foot on it squirmed or moved, making him check again, fortunately, as a bomb exploded a couple of yards round the corner. He turned, dismayed, on the man behind him, but behind the bomber he saw the grim bulk of Captain Malet, and his strangely exultant face; and Bourne, incapable of articulate speech, could only wave a hand to indicate the way he divined the Huns to have gone. Captain Malet swung himself above ground, and the men, following, overflowed the narrow channel of the trench; but the two waves, which had swept round the machine-gun post, were now on the point of meeting; men bunched together, and there were some casualties among them before they went to ground again. Captain Malet gave him a word in passing, and Bourne, looking at him with dull uncomprehending eyes, lagged a little to let others intervene between them. He had found himself immediately afterwards next to Company-Sergeant-Major Glasspool, who nodded to him swiftly and appreciatively; and then Bourne understood. He was doing the right thing. In that last rush he had gone on and got into the lead, somehow, for a brief moment; but he realized himself that he had only gone on because he had been unable to stand still. The sense of being one in a crowd did not give him the same confidence as at the start, the present stage seemed to call for a little more personal freedom. Presently, just because they were together, they would rush something in a hurry instead of stalking it. Two men of another regiment, who had presumably got lost, broke back momentarily demoralized, and Sergeant-Major Glasspool confronted them.

‘Where the bloody hell do you reckon you’re going?’

He rapped out the question with the staccato of a machine-gun; facing their hysterical disorder, he was the living embodiment of a threat.

‘We were ordered back,’ one said, shamefaced and fearful.

‘Yes. You take your fuckin’ orders from Fritz,’ Glasspool, white-lipped and with heaving chest, shot sneeringly at them. They came to heel quietly enough, but all the rage and hatred in their hearts found an object in him, now. He forgot them as soon as he found them in hand.

‘You’re all right, chum,’ whispered Bourne, to the one who had spoken. ‘Get among your own mob again as soon as there’s a chance.’

The man only looked at him stonily. In the next rush forward something struck Bourne’s helmet, knocking it back over the nape of his neck so that the chin-strap tore his ears. For the moment he thought he had been knocked out, he had bitten his tongue, too, and his mouth was salt with blood. The blow had left a deep dent in the helmet, just fracturing the steel. He was still dazed and shaken when they reached some building-ruins, which he seemed to remember. They were near the railway-station.

He wished he could sleep, he was heavy with it; but his restless memory made sleep seem something to be resisted as too like death. He closed his eyes and had a vision of men advancing under a rain of shells. They had seemed so toy-like, so trivial and ineffective when opposed to that overwhelming wrath, and yet they had moved forward mechanically as though they were hypnotized or fascinated by some superior will. That had been one of Bourne’s most vivid impressions in action, a man close to him moving forward with the jerky motion a clockwork toy has when it is running down; and it had been vivid to him because of the relief with which he had turned to it and away from the confusion and tumult of his own mind. It had seemed impossible to relate that petty, commonplace, unheroic figure, in ill-fitting khaki and a helmet like the barber’s basin with which Don Quixote made shift on his adventures, to the

moral and spiritual conflict, almost superhuman in its agony, within him. Power is measured by the amount of resistance which it overcomes, and, in the last resort, the moral power of men was greater than any purely material force, which could be brought to bear on it. It took the chance of death, as one of the chances it was bound to take; though, paradoxically enough, the function of our moral nature consists solely in the assertion of one's own individual will against anything which may be opposed to it, and death, therefore, would imply its extinction in the particular and individual case. The true inwardness of tragedy lies in the fact that its failure is only apparent, and as in the case of the martyr also, the moral conscience of man has made its own deliberate choice, and asserted the freedom of its being. The sense of wasted effort is only true for meaner and more material natures. It took the more horrible chance of mutilation. But as far as Bourne himself, and probably also, since the moral impulse is not necessarily an intellectual act, as far as the majority of his comrades were concerned, its strength and its weakness were inseparably entangled in each other. Whether a man be killed by a rifle-bullet through the brain, or blown into fragments by a high-explosive shell, may seem a matter of indifference to the conscientious objector, or to any other equally well-placed observer, who in point of fact is probably right; but to the poor fool who is a candidate for posthumous honours, and necessarily takes a more directly interested view, it is a question of importance. He is, perhaps, the victim of an illusion, like all who, in the words of Paul, are fools for Christ's sake; but he has seen one man shot cleanly in his tracks and left face downwards, dead, and he has seen another torn into bloody tatters as by some invisible beast, and these experiences had nothing illusory about them: they were actual facts. Death, of course, like chastity, admits of no degree; a man is dead or not dead, and a man is just as dead by one means as by another; but it is

infinitely more horrible and revolting to see a man shattered and eviscerated, than to see him shot. And one sees such things; and one suffers vicariously, with the inalienable sympathy of man for man. One forgets quickly. The mind is averted as well as the eyes. It reassures itself after that first despairing cry: ‘It is I!’

‘No, it is not I. I shall not be like that.’

And one moves on, leaving the mauled and bloody thing behind: gambling, in fact, on that implicit assurance each one of us has of his own immortality. One forgets, but he will remember again later, if only in his sleep.

After all, the dead are quiet. Nothing in the world is more still than a dead man. One sees men living, living, as it were, desperately, and then suddenly emptied of life. A man dies and stiffens into something like a wooden dummy, at which one glances for a second with a furtive curiosity. Suddenly he remembered the dead in Trones Wood, the unburied dead with whom one lived, he might say, cheek by jowl, Briton and Hun impartially confounded, festering, fly-blown corruption, the pasture of rats, blackening in the heat, swollen with distended bellies, or shrivelling away within their mouldering rags; and even when night covered them, one vented in the wind the stench of death. Out of one bloody misery into another, until we break. One must not break. He took in his breath suddenly in a shaken sob, and the mind relinquished its hopeless business. The warm smelly darkness of the tent seemed almost luxurious ease. He drowsed heavily; dreaming of womanly softness, sweetness; but their faces slipped away from him like the reflections in water when the wind shakes it, and his soul sank deeply and more deeply into the healing of oblivion.

2

‘But I had not so much of man in me.
And all my mother came into mine eyes
And gave me up to tears.’

SHAKESPEARE

IT WAS LATE when they woke, but they were reluctant to move. Their tent gave them the only privacy they knew, and they wanted to lie hidden until they had recovered their nerve. Among themselves they were unselfish, even gentle; instinctively helping each other, for, having shared the same experience, there was a tacit understanding between them. They knew each other, and their rival egoisms had already established among them a balance and discipline of their own. They kept their feelings very much to themselves. No one troubled them, and they might have lain there for hours, preoccupied with their own formless and intangible reveries, or merely brooding vacantly; but whatever remote and inaccessible world the mind may elect to inhabit, the body has its own inexorable routine. It drove them out in the end to the open, unscreened trench which served as a latrine. This was furnished with a pole, closer to one side than to the other, and resting at either end on piled-up sods, and on this insecure perch they sat, and while they sat there they hunted and killed the lice on their bodies. There was something insolent even in the way they tightened their belts, hawked, and spat in the dust. They had been through it, and having been through it, they had lapsed a little lower than savages, into the mere brute. Life for them held nothing new in the matter of humiliation. Men of the new drafts wondered foolishly at their haggard and filthy appearance. Even the details kept a little aloof from them,

as from men with whom it might be dangerous to meddle, and perhaps there was something in their sad, pitiless faces to evoke in others a kind of primitive awe. They for their part went silently about the camp, carrying themselves, in their stained and tattered uniforms, with scornful indifference. They may have glanced casually at the newcomers, still trim and neat from the bull-ring at Rouen, who were to fill the place of the dead now lying out in all weathers on the downland between Delville Wood, Trones, and Guillemont; but if one of the new men spoke to them he was met with unrecognising eyes and curt monosyllables.

Outside the tents two or three men would come together and ask after their friends.

‘Where’s Dixon?’

‘Gone west. Blown to fuckin’ bits as soon as we got out of the trench, poor bugger. Young Williams was ’it same time, ’ad most of an arm blown off, but ’e got back into the trench. Same shell, I think. Anyway, it were the first thing I see.’

They spoke with anxious, low voices, still unsteady and inclined to break; but control was gradually returning; and all that pity carried with it a sense of relief that the speaker, somehow, but quite incredibly, had himself managed to survive.

When breakfast came they seemed at first to have no appetite, but once they had started, they ate like famishing wolves, mopping up the last smear of bacon fat and charred fragments from the bottom of the pan with their bread. When they returned to camp on the previous night, there had been tea waiting for them, a rum issue left very largely to the indiscretion of the storekeeper, and sandwiches of cold boiled bacon. Bourne had drunk all he could get; but on biting into a sandwich it had seemed to chew up into so much dry putty in his mouth, and he had stuffed the rest of his ration away in his haversack. The other men had been much the same, none of them had had any stomach for food

then, though the sandwiches were freshly cut with liberal mustard on them; now, though they had turned dry and hard, and the bread had soured, they were disinterred from dirty haversacks and eaten ravenously. Gradually their apathy cleared and lifted, as first their bodily functions, and then their habits of life asserted themselves. One after another they started shaving. Bourne and Shem had an arrangement by which they fetched and carried for each other alternately, and it was Bourne's job today. There was a shortage of water, and rather stringent regulations concerning its use. Bourne had long ago come to the conclusion that there was too much bloody discipline in the British Army, and he managed to procure, on loan, a large tin, which had been converted into a bucket by the addition of a wire handle. He got this more than half full of water, as well as a mess-tin full of hot water from one of the cooks, and going and coming he worked round behind the officers' tents, so as to avoid other companies' lines, and sergeants or sergeant-majors, who, zealous in the matter of discipline, might have hypothecated both the bucket and water for their own personal use. Then, out of sight behind their own tent, he and Shem washed and shaved. They had not had a bath for five weeks, but curiously enough, their skins, under their shirts, were like satin, supple and lustrous; the sweat washed out the dirt, and was absorbed with it into their clothing which had a sour, stale, and rather saline smell. They were not very lousy.

They had achieved more of the semblance than the reality of cleanliness, and were drying themselves when Corporal Tozer, who knew their value, came round to the back of the tent and looked at the water, already grey and curdled with dirt and soap.

'You two are the champion bloody scroungers in the battalion,' he said; and it was impossible to know whether he were more moved by admiration or by disgust. Shem, whose eyes were like the fish-pools of Heshbon, turned on

him an expression of mingled innocence and apprehension; but Bourne only looked on indifferently as the corporal, making a cup of his hand, skimmed off the curdled scum before dashing the dirty water over his own head and neck. Bourne had no modesty in the demands he made on his friends, and he had got the water from Abbot, the company cook, by asking for it casually, while discussing the possibility of procuring, illegally, a grilled steak for his dinner, preferably with fried onions, which for the time being proved unobtainable.

'Tell me when you've finished with the bucket, will you, Corporal?' he said quietly, as he turned to go back to the tent with Shem. Before putting on his tunic, after taking it outside to brush rather perfunctorily, he looked at the pockets which the machine-gun bullet had torn. The pull of his belt had caused them to project a little, and the bullet had entered one pocket and passed out through the other, after denting the metal case of his shaving-stick, which he had forgotten to put into his pack, but had pocketed at the last moment. His haversack had been hit too, probably by a spent fragment of a shell; but the most impressive damage was the dent, with a ragged fissure in it, in his tin-hat. His pulse quickened slightly as he considered it, for it had been a pretty near thing for him. Then he heard Pritchard talking to little Martlow on the other side of the tent.

'. . . both 'is legs 'ad bin blown off, pore bugger; an' 'e were dyin' so quick you could see it. But 'e tried to stand up on 'is feet. "'elp me up," 'e sez, "'elp me up." – "You lie still, chum," I sez to 'im, "you'll be all right presently." An' 'e jes gives me one look, like 'e were puzzled, an' 'e died.'

Bourne felt all his muscles tighten. Tears were running down Pritchard's inflexible face, like rain-drops down a window-pane; but there was not a quaver in his voice, only that high unnatural note which a boy's has when it is breaking; and then for the first time Bourne noticed that Swale, Pritchard's bed-chum, was not there; he had not

missed him before. He could only stare at Pritchard, while his own sight blurred in sympathy.

‘Well, anyway,’ said Martlow, desperately comforting; ‘’e couldn’t ’ave felt much, could ’e, if ’e said that?’

‘I don’t know what ’e felt,’ said Pritchard, with slowly filling bitterness, ‘I know what I felt.’

‘Bourne, you can take that bloody bucket back to where you pinched it from,’ said Corporal Tozer, as he came into the tent, wiping the soap out of his ears with a wet and dirty towel, and Bourne slipped out as inconspicuously as a cat. Still rubbing his neck and ears Corporal Tozer caught sight of Pritchard’s face, and noticed the constraint of the others. Then he remembered Swale.

‘Get those blankets folded and put the tent to rights,’ he said quietly. ‘You’d better open it up all round and let some air in; it stinks a bit in here.’

He picked up his tunic, put it on, and buttoned it slowly.

‘Swale was a townie of yours, wasn’t he, Pritchard?’ he said suddenly. ‘A bloody plucky chap, an’ only a kid, too. I’m damned sorry about him.’

‘That’s all right, Corporal,’ answered Pritchard evenly. ‘Bein’ sorry ain’t goin’ to do us ’ns no manner o’ good. We’ve all the sorrow we can bear of our own, wi’out troublin’ ourselves wi’ that o’ other folk. We ’elp each other all we can, an’ when we can’t ’elp the other man no more, we must jes ’elp ourselves. But I tell thee, Corporal, if I thought life was never goin’ to be no different, I’d as lief be bloody well dead myself.’

He folded up his blanket neatly, as though he were folding up something he had finished with and would never use again. Then he looked up.

‘I took ’is pay-book an’ some letters out o’ ’is tunic pocket, but I left ’is identity-disc for them as finds ’im. If our chaps hang on to what we got, there’ll be some buryin’ parties out. There’s ’is pack, next mine. I suppose I’d better ’and them letters in at th’ orderly-room. There were a couple o’ smutty

French photographs, which I tore up. ’e were a decent enough lad, but boys are curious about such things; don’t mean no ’arm, but think ’em funny. ’Tis all in human nature. An’ I’ll write a letter to ’is mother. Swales is decent folk, farmin’ a bit o’ land, an’ I’m only a labourin’ man, but they always treated me fair when I worked for ’em.’

‘I suppose Captain Malet will write to her,’ said Corporal Tozer.

‘Cap’n ’ll write, surely,’ said Pritchard. ‘’e’s a gentleman is Cap’n Malet an’ not one to neglect any little duties. We all knew Cap’n Malet before the war started, an’ before ’e were a cap’n. But I’ll write Mrs Swale a letter myself. Cap’n Malet, ’e mus’ write ’undreds o’ them letters, all the same way; ’cause there ain’t no difference really, ’cept tha know’st the mother, same as I do.’

‘Have you a wife and children of your own?’ Corporal Tozer inquired, breaking away a little.

‘’ad a little girl. She died when she were four, th’ year before th’ war. The wife can look after ’erself,’ he added vindictively. ‘I’m not worryin’ about ’er. Th’ bugger were never any bloody good to me.’

He lapsed into a resentful silence, and the corporal was satisfied that his emotion had been diverted into other channels. The other men grinned a little as they shook the dried grass-stems and dust off the ground-sheets. When they had finished tidying the tent, they sat about smoking, without their tunics, for the day was hot and airless. The corporal stood outside, with his eye on the officers’ tents watching for the appearance of Captain Malet. Then by chance he saw Bourne talking to Evans, who had been the Colonel’s servant, and had been taken over in that capacity by the officer commanding them temporarily, who was a major from another regiment. Evans, who never in private referred to his new master otherwise than as ‘that Scotch bastard’, though he had nothing Scots about him but a kilt, was now idly swinging the bucket, into which Bourne, Shem

and the corporal himself had washed more than the dust of battle.

‘’e ’as some bloody ’ide, pinchin’ the commandin’ officer’s bucket,’ was the corporal’s only comment, turning his gaze towards the officers’ tents again. Presently Bourne stood beside him.

‘We’re on the move, Corporal,’ he announced.

‘Who says we’re on the move? Evans?’ he added the name as an after-thought so that Bourne might guess he knew where the bucket came from, and not underrate either his powers of observation and inference, or his more valuable quality of discretion.

‘Evans!’ exclaimed Bourne indifferently; ‘oh, no! I was only giving him back his bucket. Evans never hears anything except the dirty stories the Doctor tells the Major in the mess. Abbot told me. He said the cookers were to be ready to move off to Sand-pits at two o’clock. We’re on the move all right.’

‘Them bloody cooks know what we’re doing before the orderly-room does,’ said Corporal Tozer drily. ‘Well, if it’s good-bye to the fuckin’ Somme, I won’t ’arf ’ave a time puttin’ the wind up some o’ these bloody conscripts. Seen ’em yet? Buggered-up by a joy-ride in the train from Rouen to Méricourt, so they kept ’em fuckin’ about the camp, while they sent us over the bloody top; you an’ I, old son; in it up to the fuckin’ neck, we was! When they’ve ’ad me at ’em for a fortnight, they’ll be anxious to meet Fritz, they will. They’ll be just about ready to kiss ’im.’

Suddenly he shed his easy confidence, as Captain Malet emerged from one of the tents, on the other side of the extemporized road, looking up at the sky, as though he were chiefly concerned in estimating the weather prospects for the day. Then, rapidly surveying his company-lines, he saw Sergeant Robinson and Corporal Tozer; and waved them to him with a lift of his stick. Bourne turned, and going into the tent sat down beside Shem. When he told them what he had