MAY SINCLAIR

A JOURNAL OF IMPRESSIONS IN BELGIUM

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INTRODUCTION

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THIS is a "Journal of Impressions," and it is nothing more. It will not satisfy people who want accurate and substantial information about Belgium, or about the War, or about Field Ambulances and Hospital Work, and do not want to see any of these things "across a temperament." For the Solid Facts and the Great Events they must go to such books as Mr. E. A. Powell's "Fighting in Flanders," or Mr. Frank Fox's "The Agony of Belgium," or Dr. H. S. Souttar's "A Surgeon in Belgium," or "A Woman's Experiences in the Great War," by Louise Mack.

For many of these impressions I can claim only a psychological accuracy; some were insubstantial to the last degree, and very few were actually set down there and then, on the spot, as I have set them down here. This is only a Journal in so far as it is a record of days, as faithful as I could make it in every detail, and as direct as circumstances allowed. But circumstances seldom *did* allow, and I was always behindhand with my Journal—a week behind with the first day of the seventeen, four months behind with the last.

This was inevitable. For in the last week of the Siege of Antwerp, when the wounded were being brought into Ghent by hundreds, and when the fighting came closer and closer to the city, and at the end, when the Germans were driving you from Ghent to Bruges, and from Bruges to Ostend and from Ostend to Dunkirk, you could not sit down to write your impressions, even if you were cold-blooded enough to want

to. It was as much as you could do to scribble the merest note of what happened in your Day-Book.

But when you had made fast each day with its note, your impressions were safe, far safer than if you had tried to record them in their flux as they came. However far behind I might be with my Journal, it was *kept*. It is not written "up," or round and about the original notes in my Day-Book, it is simply written *out*. Each day of the seventeen had its own quality and was soaked in its own atmosphere; each had its own unique and incorruptible memory, and the slight lapse of time, so far from dulling or blurring that memory, crystallized it and made it sharp and clean. And in writing *out* I have been careful never to go behind or beyond the day, never to add anything, but to leave each moment as it was. I have set down the day's imperfect or absurd impression, in all its imperfection or absurdity, and the day's crude emotion in all its crudity, rather than taint its reality with the discreet reflections that came after.

I make no apology for my many errors—where they were discoverable I have corrected them in a footnote; to this day I do not know how wildly wrong I may have been about kilometres and the points of the compass, and the positions of batteries and the movements of armies; but there were other things of which I was dead sure; and this record has at least the value of a "human document."

There is one question that I may be asked: "Why, when you had the luck to go out with a Field Ambulance Corps distinguished by its gallantry—why in heaven's name have you not told the story of its heroism?"

Well—I have not told it for several excellent reasons. When I set out to keep a Journal I pledged myself to set down only what I had seen or felt, and to avoid as far as possible the second-hand; and it was my misfortune that I saw very little of the field-work of the Corps. Besides, the Corps itself was then in its infancy, and it is its infancy—its irrepressible, half-irresponsible, whole engaging infancy—that I have touched here. After those seventeen days at Ghent it grew up in all conscience. It was at Furnes and Dixmude and La Panne, after I had left it, that its most memorable deeds were done.[A]

And this story of the Corps is not mine to tell. Part of it has been told already by Dr. Souttar, and part by Mr. Philip Gibbs, and others. The rest is yet to come.

M. S.

July 15th, 1915.

[A] See Postscript.

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[*September 25th, 1914.*]

AFTER the painful births and deaths of I don't know how many committees, after six weeks' struggling with

something we imagined to be Red Tape, which proved to be the combined egoism of several persons all desperately anxious to "get to the Front," and desperately afraid of somebody else getting there too, and getting there first, we are actually off. Impossible to describe the mysterious processes by which we managed it. I think the War Office kicked us out twice, and the Admiralty once, though what we were doing with the Admiralty I don't to this day understand. The British Red Cross kicked us steadily all the time, on general principles; the American snubbed us rather badly; what the French said to us I don't remember, and I can't think that we carried persistency so far as to apply to the Russian and the Japanese. Many of our scheme perished in their own vagueness. Others, vivid and adventurous, were checked by the first encounter with the crass reality. At one time, I remember, we were to have sent out a detachment of stalwart Amazons in khaki breeches who were to dash out on to the battle-field, reconnoitre, and pick up the wounded and carry them away slung over their saddles. The only difficulty was to get the horses. But the author of the scheme—who had bought her breeches—had allowed for that. The horses were to be caught on the battle-field; as the wounded and dead dropped from their saddles the Amazons were to leap into them and ride off. On this system "remounts" were also to be supplied. Whenever a horse was shot dead under its rider, an Amazon was to dash up with another whose rider had been shot dead. It was all perfectly simple and only needed a little "organization." For four weeks the lure of the battle-field kept our volunteers dancing round the War Office and the Red Cross Societies,

and for four weeks their progress to the Front was frustrated by Lord Kitchener. Some dropped off disheartened, but others came on, and a regenerated committee dealt with them. Finally the thing crystallized into a Motor Ambulance Corps. An awful sanity came over the committee, chastened by its sufferings, and the volunteers, under pressure, definitely renounced the battle-field. Then somebody said, "Let's help the Belgian refugees." From that moment our course was clear. Everybody was perfectly willing that we should help the refugees, provided we relinquished all claim on the wounded. The Belgian Legation was enchanted. It gave passports to a small private commission of inquiry under our Commandant to go out to Belgium and send in a report. At Ostend the commission of inquiry whittled itself down to the one energetic person who had taken it out. And before we knew where we were our Ambulance Corps was accepted by the Belgian Red Cross.

Only we had not got the ambulances.

And though we had got some money, we had not got enough. This was really our good luck, for it saved us from buying the wrong kind of motor ambulance car. But at first the blow staggered us. Then, by some abrupt, incalculable turn of destiny, the British Red Cross, which had kicked us so persistently, came to our help and gave us all the ambulances we wanted.

And we are off.

There are thirteen of us: The Commandant, and Dr. Haynes and Dr. Bird under him; and Mrs. Torrence, a trained nurse and midwife, who can drive a motor car through anything, and take it to bits and put it together again; Janet

McNeil, also an expert motorist, and Ursula Dearmer and Mrs. Lambert, Red Cross emergency nurses; Mr. Grierson, Mr. Foster and Mr. Riley, stretcher-bearers, and two chauffeurs and me. I don't know where I come in. But they've called me the Secretary and Reporter, which sounds very fine, and I am to keep the accounts (Heaven help them!) and write the Commandant's reports, and toss off articles for the daily papers, to make a little money for the Corps. We've got some already, raised by the Commandant's Report and Appeal that we published in the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Chronicle*. I shall never forget how I sprinted down Fleet Street to get it in in time, four days before we started.

And we have landed at Ostend.

I'll confess now that I dreaded Ostend more than anything. We had been told that there were horrors upon horrors in Ostend. Children were being born in the streets, and the state of the bathing-machines where the refugees lived was unspeakable. I imagined the streets of Ostend crowded with refugee women bearing children, and the Digue covered with the horrific bathing-machines. On the other hand, Ostend was said to be the safest spot in Europe. No Germans there. No Zeppelins. No bombs.

And we found the bathing-machines planted out several miles from the town, almost invisible specks on a vanishing shore-line. The refugees we met walking about the streets of Ostend were in fairly good case and bore themselves bravely. But the town had been bombarded the night before and our hotel had been the object of very special attentions. We chose it (the "Terminus") because it lay close to the

landing-stage and saved us the trouble of going into the town to look for quarters. It was under the same roof as the railway station, where we proposed to leave our ambulance cars and heavy luggage. And we had no difficulty whatever in getting rooms for the whole thirteen of us. There was no sort of competition for rooms in that hotel. I said to myself, "If Ostend ever is bombarded, this railway station will be the first to suffer. And the hotel and the railway station are one." And when I was shown into a bedroom with glass windows all along its inner wall and a fine glass front looking out on to the platforms under the immense glass roof of the station, I said, "If this hotel is ever bombarded, what fun it will be for the person who sleeps in this bed between these glass windows."

We were all rather tired and hungry as we met for dinner at seven o'clock. And when we were told that all lights would be put out in the town at eight-thirty we only thought that a municipality which was receiving all the refugees in Belgium must practise *some* economy, and that, anyway, an hour and a half was enough for anybody to dine in; and we hoped that the Commandant, who had gone to call on the English chaplain at the Grand Hôtel Littoral, would find his way back again to the peaceful and commodious shelter of the "Terminus."

He did find his way back, at seven-thirty, just in time to give us a chance of clearing out, if we chose to take it. The English chaplain, it seemed, was surprised and dismayed at our idea of a suitable hotel, and he implored us to fly, instantly, before a bomb burst in among us (this was the first we had heard of the bombardment of the night before).

The Commandant put it to us as we sat there: Whether would we leave that dining-room at once and pack our baggage all over again, and bundle out, and go hunting for rooms all through Ostend with the lights out, and perhaps fall into the harbour; or stay where we were and risk the off-chance of a bomb? And we were all very tired and hungry, and we had only got to the soup, and we had seen (and smelt) the harbour, so we said we'd stay where we were and risk it.

And we stayed. A Taube hovered over us and never dropped its bomb.

[*Saturday, 26th.*]

WHEN we compared notes the next morning we found that we had all gone soundly to sleep, too tired to take the Taube seriously, all except our two chauffeurs, who were downright annoyed because no bomb had entered their bedroom. Then we all went out and looked at the little hole in the roof of the fish market, and the big hole in the hotel garden, and thought of bombs as curious natural phenomena that never had and never would have any intimate connection with *us*.

And for five weeks, ever since I knew that I must certainly go out with this expedition, I had been living in black funk; in shameful and appalling terror. Every night before I went to sleep I saw an interminable spectacle of horrors: trunks without heads, heads without trunks, limbs tangled in intestines, corpses by every roadside, murders, mutilations, my friends shot dead before my eyes. Nothing I shall ever see will be more ghastly than the things I have seen. And yet, before a possibly-to-be-bombarded Ostend this strange visualizing process ceases, and I see nothing

and feel nothing. Absolutely nothing; until suddenly the Commandant announces that he is going into the town, by himself, to *buy a hat*, and I get my first experience of real terror.

For the hats that the Commandant buys when he is by himself—there are no words for them.

This morning the Corps begins to realize its need of discipline. First of all, our chauffeurs have disappeared and can nowhere be found. The motor ambulances languish in inactivity on Cockerill's Wharf. We find one chauffeur and set him to keep guard over a tin of petrol. We *know* the ambulances can't start till heaven knows when, and so, first Mrs. Lambert, our emergency nurse, then, I regret to say, our Secretary and Reporter make off and sneak into the Cathedral. We are only ten minutes, but still we are away, and Mrs. Torrence, our trained nurse, is ready for us when we come back. We are accused bitterly of sight-seeing. (We had betrayed the inherent levity of our nature the day before, on the boat, when we looked at the sunset.) Then the Secretary and Reporter, utterly intractable, wanders forth ostensibly to look for the Commandant, who has disappeared, but really to get a sight of the motor ambulances on Cockerill's Wharf. And Mrs. Torrence is ready again for the Secretary, convicted now of sight-seeing. And I have seen no Commandant, and no motor ambulances and no wharf. (Unbearable thought, that I may never, absolutely never, see Cockerill's Wharf!) It is really awful this time, because the President of the Belgian Red Cross is waiting to get the thirteen of us to the Town Hall to have our passports *visés*. And the Commandant is rounding up his Corps, and

Ursula Dearmer is heaven knows where, and Mrs. Lambert only somewhere in the middle distance, and Mrs. Torrence's beautiful eyes are blazing at the slip-sloppiness of it all. Things were very different at the —— Hospital, where she was trained.

Only the President remains imperturbable.

For, after all this fuming and fretting, the President isn't quite ready himself, or perhaps the Town Hall isn't ready, and we all stroll about the streets of Ostend for half an hour. And the Commandant goes off by himself, to buy that hat.

It is a terrible half-hour. But after all, he comes back without it, judging it better to bear the ills he has.

Very leisurely, and with an immense consumption of time, we stroll and get photographed for our passports. Then on to the Town Hall, and then to the Military Depôt for our *Laissez-passer*, and then to the Hôtel Terminus for lunch. And at one-thirty we are off.

Whatever happens, whatever we see and suffer, nothing can take from us that run from Ostend to Ghent.

We go along a straight, flat highway of grey stones, through flat, green fields and between thin lines of trees—tall and slender and delicate trees. There are no hedges. Only here and there a row of poplars or pollard willows is flung out as a screen against the open sky. This country is formed for the very expression of peace. The straight flat roads, the straight flat fields and straight tall trees stand still in an immense quiet and serenity. We pass low Flemish houses with white walls and red roofs. Their green doors and shutters are tall and slender like the trees, the colours vivid as if the paint had been laid on yesterday. It is all

unspeakably beautiful and it comes to me with the natural, inevitable shock and ecstasy of beauty. I am going straight into the horror of war. For all I know it may be anywhere, here, behind this sentry; or there, beyond that line of willows. I don't know. I don't care. I cannot realize it. All that I can see or feel at the moment is this beauty. I look and look, so that I may remember it.

Is it possible that I am enjoying myself?

I dare not tell Mrs. Torrence. I dare not tell any of the others. They seem to me inspired with an austere sense of duty, a terrible integrity. They know what they are here for. To me it is incredible that I should be here.

I am in Car 1., sitting beside Tom, the chauffeur; Mrs. Torrence is on the other side of me. Tom disapproves of these Flemish roads. He cannot see that they are beautiful. They will play the devil with his tyres.

I am reminded unpleasantly that our Daimler is not a touring car but a motor ambulance and that these roads will jolt the wounded most abominably.

There are straggling troops on the road now. At the nearest village all the inhabitants turn out to cheer us. They cry out "*Les Anglais!*" and laugh for joy. Perhaps they think that if the British Red Cross has come the British Army can't be far behind. But when they hear that we are Belgian Red Cross they are gladder than ever. They press round us. It is wonderful to them that we should have come all the way from England "*pour les Belges!*" Somehow the beauty of the landscape dies before these crowding, pressing faces.

We pass through Bruges without seeing it. I have no recollection whatever of having seen the Belfry. We see

nothing but the Canal (where we halt to take in petrol) and more villages, more faces. And more troops.

Half-way between Bruges and Ghent an embankment thrown up on each side of the road tells of possible patrols and casual shooting. It is the first visible intimation that the enemy may be anywhere.

A curious excitement comes to you. I suppose it is excitement, though it doesn't feel like it. You have been drunk, very slightly drunk with the speed of the car. But now you are sober. Your heart beats quietly, steadily, but with a little creeping, mounting thrill in the beat. The sensation is distinctly pleasurable. You say to yourself, "It is coming. Now—or the next minute—perhaps at the end of the road." You have one moment of regret. "After all, it would be a pity if it came too soon, before we'd even begun our job." But the thrill, mounting steadily, overtakes the regret. It is only a little thrill, so far (for you don't really believe that there is any danger), but you can imagine the thing growing, growing steadily, till it becomes ecstasy. Not that you imagine anything at the moment. At the moment you are no longer an observing, reflecting being; you have ceased to be aware of yourself; you exist only in that quiet, steady thrill that is so unlike any excitement that you have ever known. Presently you get used to it. "What a fool I should have been if I hadn't come. I wouldn't have missed this run for the world."

I forget myself so far as to say this to Mrs. Torrence. My voice doesn't sound at all like the stern voice of duty. It is the voice of somebody enjoying herself. I am behaving

exactly as I behaved this morning at Ostend; and cannot possibly hope for any sympathy from Mrs. Torrence.

But Mrs. Torrence has unbent a little. She has in fact been unbending gradually ever since we left Ostend. There is a softer light in her beautiful eyes. For she is not only a trained nurse but an expert motorist; and a Daimler is a Daimler even when it's an ambulance car. From time to time remarks of a severely technical nature are exchanged between her and Tom. Still, up till now, nothing has passed to indicate any flagging in the relentless spirit of the —— Hospital.

The next minute I hear that the desire of Mrs. Torrence's heart is to get into the greatest possible danger—and to get out of it.

The greatest possible danger is to fall into the hands of the Uhlans. I feel that I should be very glad indeed to get out of it, but that I'm not by any means so keen on getting in. I say so. I confess frankly that I'm afraid of Uhlans, particularly when they're drunk.

But Mrs. Torrence is not afraid of anything. There is no German living, drunk or sober, who could break her spirit. Nothing dims for her that shining vision of the greatest possible danger. She does not know what fear is.

I conceive an adoration for Mrs. Torrence, and a corresponding distaste for myself. For I do know what fear is. And in spite of the little steadily-mounting thrill, I remember distinctly those five weeks of frightful anticipation when I knew that I must go out to the War; the going to bed, night after night, drugged with horror, black horror that creeps like poison through your nerves; the

falling asleep and forgetting it; the waking, morning after morning, with an energetic and lucid brain that throws out a dozen war pictures to the minute like a ghastly cinema show, till horror becomes terror; the hunger for breakfast; the queer, almost uncanny revival of courage that follows its satisfaction; the driving will that strengthens as the day goes on and slackens its hold at evening. I remember one evening very near the end; the Sunday evening when the Commandant dropped in, after he had come back from Belgium. We were stirring soup over the gas stove in the scullery—you couldn't imagine a more peaceful scene—when he said, "They are bringing up the heavy siege guns from Namur, and there is going to be a terrific bombardment of Antwerp, and I think it will be very interesting for you to see it." I remember replying with passionate sincerity that I would rather die than see it; that if I could nurse the wounded I would face any bombardment you please to name; but to go and look on and make copy out of the sufferings I cannot help—I couldn't and I wouldn't, and that was flat. And I wasn't a journalist any more than I was a trained nurse.

I can still see the form of the Commandant rising up on the other side of the scullery stove, and in his pained, uncomprehending gaze and in the words he utters I imagine a challenge. It is as if he said, "Of course, if you're *afraid*"—(haven't I told him that I *am* afraid?).

The gage is thrown down on the scullery floor. I pick it up. And that is why I am here on this singular adventure.

Thus, for the next three kilometres, I meditate on my cowardice. It is all over as if it had never been, but how can I

tell that it won't come back again? I can only hope that when the Uhlans appear I shall behave decently. And this place that we have come to is Ecloo. We are not very far from Ghent.

A church spire, a few roofs rising above trees. Then many roofs all together. Then the beautiful grey-white foreign city.

As we run through the streets we are followed by cyclists; cyclists issue from every side-street and pour into our road; cyclists rise up out of the ground to follow us. We don't realize all at once that it is the ambulance they are following. Bowing low like racers over their handle-bars, they shoot past us; they slacken pace and keep alongside, they shoot ahead; the cyclists are most fearfully excited. It dawns on us that they are escorting us; that they are racing each other; that they are bringing the news of our arrival to the town. They behave as if we were the vanguard of the British Army.

We pass the old Military Hospital—*Hôpital Militaire* No. I.—and presently arrive at the Flandria Palace Hotel, which is *Hôpital Militaire* No. II. The cyclists wheel off, scatter and disappear. The crowd in the Place gathers round the porch of the hotel to look at the English Ambulance.

We enter. We are received by various officials and presented to Madame F., the head of the Red Cross nursing staff. There is some confusion, and Mrs. Torrence finds herself introduced as the Secretary of the English Committee. Successfully concealed behind the broadest back in the Corps, which belongs to Mr. Grierson, I have time to realize how funny we all are. Everybody in the hospital is in uniform, of course. The nurses of the Belgian

Red Cross wear white linen overalls with the brassard on one sleeve, and the Red Cross on the breasts of their overalls, and over their foreheads on the front of their white linen veils. The men wear military or semi-military uniforms. We had never agreed as to our uniform, and some of us had had no time to get it, if we had agreed. Assembled in the vestibule, we look more like a party of refugees, or the cast of a Barrie play, than a field ambulance corps. Mr. Grierson, the Chaplain, alone wears complete khaki, in which he is indistinguishable from any Tommy. The Commandant, obeying some mysterious inspiration, has left his khaki suit behind. He wears a Norfolk jacket and one of his hats. Mr. Foster in plain clothes, with a satchel slung over his shoulders, has the air of an inquiring tourist. Mrs. Torrence and Janet McNeil in short khaki tunics, khaki putties, and round Jaeger caps, and very thick coats over all, strapped in with leather belts, look as if they were about to sail on an Arctic expedition; I was told to wear dark blue serge, and I wear it accordingly; Ursula Dearmer and Mrs. Lambert are in normal clothes. But the amiable officials and the angelic Belgian ladies behave as if there was nothing in the least odd about our appearance. They remember only that we are English and that it is now six o'clock and that we have had no tea. They conceive this to be the most deplorable fate that can overtake the English, and they hurry us into the great kitchen to a round table, loaded with cake and bread-and-butter and enormous bowls of tea. The angelic beings in white veils wait on us. We are hungry and we think (a pardonable error) that this meal is hospital supper; after which some work will surely be found for us to do.

We are shown to our quarters on the third floor. We expect two bare dormitories with rows of hard beds, which we are prepared to make ourselves, besides sweeping the dormitories, and we find a fine suite of rooms—a mess-room, bedrooms, dressing-rooms, bathrooms—and hospital orderlies for our *valets de chambre*.

We unpack, sit round the mess-room and wait for orders. Perhaps we may all be sent down into the kitchen to wash up. Personally, I hope we shall be, for washing up is a thing I can do both quickly and well. It is now seven o'clock.

At half-past we are sent down into the kitchen, not to wash up, but, if you will believe it, to dine. And more hospital orderlies wait on us at dinner.

The desire of our hearts is to do *something*, if it is only to black the boots of the angelic beings. But no, there is nothing for us to do. To-morrow, perhaps, the doctors and stretcher-bearers will be busy. We hear that only five wounded have been brought into the hospital to-day. They have no ambulance cars, and ours will be badly needed—to-morrow. But to-night, no.

We go out into the town, to the Hôtel de la Poste, and sit outside the café and drink black coffee in despair. We find our chauffeurs doing the same thing. Then we go back to our sumptuous hotel and so, dejectedly, to bed. Aeroplanes hover above us all night.

[*Sunday, 27th.*]

We hang about waiting for orders. They may come at any moment. Meanwhile this place grows incredible and fantastic. Now it is an hotel and now it is a military hospital; its two aspects shift and merge into each other with a

dream-like effect. It is a huge building of extravagant design, wearing its turrets, its balconies, its very roofs, like so much decoration. The gilded legend, "Flandria Palace Hotel," glitters across the immense white façade. But the Red Cross flag flies from the front and from the corners of the turrets and from the balconies of the long flank facing south. You arrive under a fan-like porch that covers the smooth slope of the approach. You enter your hotel through mahogany revolving doors. A colossal Flora stands by the lift at the foot of the big staircase. Unaware that this is no festival of flowers, the poor stupid thing leans forward, smiling, and holds out her garland to the wounded as they are carried past. Nobody takes any notice of her. The great hall of the hotel has been stripped bare. All draperies and ornaments have disappeared. The proprietor has disappeared, or goes about disguised as a Red Cross officer. The grey mosaic of floors and stairs is cleared of rugs and carpeting; the reading-room is now a secretarial bureau; the billiard-room is an operating theatre; the great dining-hall and the reception-rooms and the bedrooms are wards. The army of waiters and valets and chambermaids has gone, and everywhere there are surgeons, ambulance men, hospital orderlies and the Belgian nurses with their white overalls and red crosses. And in every corridor and on every staircase and in every room there is a mixed odour, bitter and sweet and penetrating, of antiseptics and of ether. When the ambulance cars come up from the railway stations and the battle-fields, the last inappropriate detail, the mahogany revolving doors, will disappear, so that the wounded may be carried through on their stretchers.

I confess to a slight, persistent fear of *seeing* these wounded whom I cannot help. It is not very active, it has left off visualizing the horror of bloody bandages and mangled bodies. But it's there; it waits for me in every corridor and at the turn of every stair, and it makes me loathe myself.

We have news this morning of a battle at Alost, a town about fifteen kilometres south-east of Ghent. The Belgians are moving forty thousand men from Antwerp towards Ghent, and heavy fighting is expected near the town. If we are not in the thick of it, we are on the edge of the thick.

They have just told us an awful thing. Two wounded men were left lying out on the battle-field all night after yesterday's fighting. The military ambulances did not fetch them. Our ambulance was not sent out. There are all sorts of formalities to be observed before it can go. We haven't got our military passes yet. And our English Red Cross brassards are no use. We must have Belgian ones stamped with the Government stamp. And these things take time.

Meanwhile we, who have still the appearance of a disorganized Cook's tourist party, are beginning to realize each other, the first step to realizing ourselves. We have come from heaven knows where to live together here heaven knows for how long. The Commandant and I are friends; Mrs. Torrence and Janet McNeil are friends; Dr. Haynes and Dr. Bird are evidently friends; our chauffeurs, Bert and Tom, are bound to fraternize professionally; we and they are all right; but these pairs were only known to each other a week or two ago, and some of the thirteen never met at all till yesterday. An unknown fourteenth is coming to-day. We are five women and nine men. You might wonder

how, for all social purposes, we are to sort ourselves? But the idea, sternly emphasized by Mrs. Torrence, is that we have no social purposes. We are neither more nor less than a strictly official and absolutely impersonal body, held together, not by the ordinary affinities of men and women, but by a common devotion and a common aim. Differences, if any should exist, will be sunk in the interest of the community. Probabilities that rule all human intercourse, as we have hitherto known it, will be temporarily suspended in our case. But we shall gain more than we lose. Insignificant as individuals, as a corps we share the honour and prestige of the Military Authority under which we work. We have visions of a relentless discipline commanding and controlling us. A cold glory hovers over the Commandant as the vehicle of this transcendent power.

When the Power has its way with us it will take no count of friendships or affinities. It will set precedence at naught. It will say to itself, "Here are two field ambulance cars and fourteen people. Five out of these fourteen are women, and what the devil are they doing in a field ambulance?" And it will appoint two surgeons, who will also serve as stretcher-bearers, to each car; it will set our trained nurse, Mrs. Torrence, in command of the untrained nurses in one of the wards of the Military Hospital No. II.; the Hospital itself will find suitable feminine tasks for Ursula Dearmer and Mrs. Lambert; while Janet McNeil and the Secretary will be told off to work among the refugees. And until more stretcher-bearers are wanted the rest of us will be nowhere. If nothing can be found for our women in the Hospital they will be sent home.

It seems inconceivable that the Power, if it is anything like Lord Kitchener, can decide otherwise.

Odd how the War changes us. I, who abhor and resist authority, who hardly know how I am to bring myself to obey my friend the Commandant, am enamoured of this Power and utterly submissive. I realize with something like a thrill that we are in a military hospital under military orders; and that my irrelevant former self, with all that it has desired or done, must henceforth cease (perhaps irrevocably) to exist. I contemplate its extinction with equanimity. I remember that one of my brothers was a Captain in the Gunners, that another of them fought as a volunteer in the first Boer War; that my uncle, Captain Hind, of the Bengal Fusiliers, fought in the Mutiny and in the Crimean War, and his son at Chitral, and that I have one nephew in Kitchener's Army and one in the West Lancashire Hussars; and that three generations of solid sugar-planters and ship-owners cannot separate me from my forefathers, who seem to have been fighting all the time. (At the moment I have forgotten my five weeks' blue funk.)

Mrs. Torrence's desire for discipline is not more sincere than mine. Meanwhile the hand that is to lick us into shape hovers over us and does not fall. We wait expectantly in the mess-room which is to contain us.

It was once the sitting-room of a fine suite. A diminutive vestibule divides it from the corridor. You enter through double doors with muffed glass panes in a wooden partition opposite the wide French windows opening on the balcony. A pale blond light from the south fills the room. Its walls are bare except for a map of Belgium, faced by a print from one