

Chapter One

PRESENTATION OF THE WITNESS

WILL these pages ever be published?—I cannot tell. But whatever the eventual answer to that question may be, it seems probable that, for a long time to come, those outside the circle of my immediate intimates will be able to read them only 'under the rose'. Nevertheless, I have quite made up my mind to proceed with the writing of them, though the effort involved will be harsh and exacting. How much easier it would be to plead weariness and discouragement as an excuse for doing nothing! But if the kind of documentation that I plan is to have any value, it must be put into shape at once while the subject is still fresh and living in my memory. Nor can I really persuade myself that the effort will be wholly useless. A day will come, of that I am convinced, after no matter how long a delay, when this old and sacred soil of France, from which, in the past, so many harvests have been lifted—harvests of free thought and of judgement unrestrained—will once more burgeon into ripeness. In that happier future many secret records will be made public. Gradually the mists of ignorance and malice, which now begin to gather about the most terrible collapse in all the long story of our national life, will thin. It may be that then, those on whom the duty falls of seeing through them to the truth beyond will be helped in their task by glancing at the pages (should they come their way) in which an eyewitness has set down the events of the year 1940, just as he experienced them.

It is no part of my intention to produce a book of reminiscences. The account of what happened to one soldier among many is of no especial interest now when we are concerned with matters of greater moment than the details of personal adventure,

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however picturesque, however amusing, these may have been. But it is always well to have a full description of the witness in the box, and I feel that before narrating the things I saw I should give some account of the man who saw them.

For something like thirty-four years I have been wholly occupied with the writing and the teaching of history. In the course of my professional career I have had to examine a great many documents belonging to a great many periods of the past, and, as best I might, sift what is true in them from what is false. I have had, too, to keep a watchful eye on the world around me, holding it to be the historian's prime duty—in the words of my master, Pirenne—'to show a keen interest in life'. The special study which, in the course of my researches, I have made of the life of the country-side has convinced me that we can truly understand the past only if we read it by the light of the present. For a sound historian of rural economy a keen eye for the shapes of fields is no less necessary than an aptitude for deciphering the crabbed records of an earlier day. I have done my best to bring to the tragic events in which I played a modest part the same habits of criticism, of observation, and, I trust, of integrity, which were bred in me by the exigencies of my work as an historian.

My chosen calling is generally considered to be peculiarly lacking in adventure. But Destiny decided that I, with most of my generation, should, on two separate occasions, separated from one another by a stretch of twenty-one years, be jerked violently from the ways of peace. Whatever other results this breach of the normal routine of teaching may have had, it certainly made it possible for me to enjoy an unusually wide experience of the many different aspects of a nation in arms. I have served in two wars. I began the first, in August 1914, as an infantry sergeant: in other words, as an ordinary 'foot-slogger', only just above the level of a private. In the course of the next four years I became successively a Platoon Commander, an Intelligence Officer, an A.D.C. at Regimental Headquarters, and

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finished up as a Captain on a Corps Staff. My second experience as a soldier was, for the most part, gained at the very opposite end of the hierarchic scale. My duties confined me to the immediate entourage of an army commander, and involved me in constant liaison with G.H.Q. The fall of the cards has brought me plenty of variety, and has introduced me to a cross-section not only of the Army but of humanity in general.

By birth I am a Jew, though not by religion, for I have never professed any creed, whether Hebrew or Christian. I feel neither pride nor shame in my origins. I am, I hope, a sufficiently good historian to know that racial qualities are a myth, and that the whole notion of Race is an absurdity which becomes particularly flagrant when attempts are made to apply it, as in this particular case of the Jews, to a group of co-religionists originally brought together from every corner of the Mediterranean, Turco-Khazar, and Slav worlds. I am at pains never to stress my heredity save when I find myself in the presence of an anti-Semite. But it may be that certain persons will challenge the evidence which I propose to put on record, and attempt to discredit it on the grounds that I am an 'alien'. I need say no more in rebuttal of such a charge than that my great-grandfather was a serving soldier in 1793; that my father was one of the defenders of Strasbourg in 1870; that both my uncles chose to leave their native Alsace after its annexation by the Second Reich; that I was brought up in the traditions of patriotism which found no more fervent champions than the Jews of the Alsatian exodus, and that France, from which many would like to expel me to-day (and may, for all I know, succeed in doing so), will remain, whatever happens, the one country with which my deepest emotions are inextricably bound up. I was born in France. I have drunk of the waters of her culture. I have made her past my own. I breathe freely only in her climate, and I have done my best, with others, to defend her interests.

One day when I stood chatting with a young officer in a

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doorway at Malo-les-Bains, during a bombing raid, he said to me: 'This war has taught me a lot, and one of its greatest lessons has been that there are a great many professional soldiers who will never be fighters, and a whole heap of civilians who have fighting in their blood. That', he went on, 'is a truth I should never have suspected before the 10th of May. You, for instance, are a born fighter.' The judgement may appear to be rather oversimple, but I believe it to contain a good deal of truth, both as a generalization, and (to be perfectly sincere) when applied to my own particular case. An army doctor whom I knew when I was on the staff as an intelligence officer loved to twit me in a kindly way about being an 'old professor' who had 'more of the soldier in him than all the rest of the bunch put together'—which meant merely, I imagine, that I had a weakness for orderliness in the handling of military matters. I emerged from the first war with four decorations, and I do not think I flatter myself unduly when I say that but for the sudden irruption of the Germans into Rennes, which put a sudden stop to all recommendations from the First Army, I could hardly have avoided going home after this one, too, with another ribbon on my tunic.¹ In 1915, after convalescing in hospital, I returned to the front before I need have done, as a volunteer. In 1939 I allowed my name to be kept on the active list in spite of the fact that my age and my six children gave me a perfect right to put my uniform away in mothballs. I mention these things not from any motive of vain-glory. I have known far too many brave and humble men who did their duty without fuss or bother (far better than I could ever claim to have done mine), to be guilty of the sin of boasting. I put them on record here simply and solely as a form of self-protection against criticism. At times I may be rather crudely outspoken, and the reader may be tempted to accuse me of prejudice. To him I would say that I have always been an enemy to soft-soap, that I served of my own free will as a soldier, and that

¹ The award was actually made in Corps Orders dated July 1942.

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in the opinion of seniors and comrades alike I did a reasonably good job.

That is a bald statement of what I was expected to do, and, consequently, of what I was in a position to see, in the course of the last war.

In the period between the two wars I more than once refused, as I have already said, to take advantage of a regulation which would have enabled me to escape from further military service. But though from 1919 onwards I figured as a Reserve Officer eligible for staff duties, I made no attempt to attend any of the so-called 'refresher' courses. This, generally speaking, I admit was wrong. The only excuse I can plead is that the years in question happened to coincide with the period of my life during which, for good or for ill, I was producing the bulk of my serious historical work, and that therefore I had very little leisure. I derive, however, a certain amount of consolation for my failure from my active experiences during the campaign. I feel quite sure that the kind of training given at the Staff College which I was thus spared would have done nothing to fit me for my duties. But since, at that time, the military authorities attached particular importance to graduating with distinction from that establishment, I was made to suffer for having played truant. I received, in fact, a double punishment. In 1918 I had attained the rank of captain, and it was as a captain, therefore, that I was called up first in 1938, and again in August 1939, in spite of being recommended for promotion by senior officers who had had occasion to see something of my work. A captain I remained until I was demobilized on 11 July 1940. That was the first consequence of my slackness. It left me without any feeling of resentment or even of sorrow. The second related to the nature of the duties I was called upon to perform.

I had originally been attached, on paper, to Intelligence at Corps level. It seemed a reasonable form of employment for a professional historian. I was, however, almost immediately

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degraded to a similar position with a division. Soon afterwards I was withdrawn altogether from duty with an active formation, and relegated to the rather inglorious job of area administration, being attached to a headquarters controlling a group of sub-divisional areas. Since, however, this particular group was based on Strasbourg, which was generally expected to be one of the first targets for German bombing, I felt some qualms about agitating for a transfer. A natural laziness combined with this feeling to prevent me from taking any steps to find more interesting employment. One of my friends had tried, even before the war, to get me attached to G.H.Q. Intelligence, but there had not been sufficient time for his representations to produce results. Consequently, after two short periods of preliminary training, I was appointed to the Strasbourg Group of sub-divisional areas, first in September 1938 at the time of the Munich crisis, again, for a few hours only, when in March 1939 I was hastily summoned from Cambridge, and finally on 24 August in that same year of destiny.

By and large I have never really regretted this appointment. The duties devolving upon a sub-divisional Group Headquarters are, in themselves, flat and dismal enough, but they do, in the early stages of hostilities, afford one a good vantage-point from which to observe the general scene. That, at least, was my experience during the first two or three weeks.

We had to supervise a good deal of the actual mobilization. What happened in similar commands situated farther back? I imagine that, after the first excitement was over, they managed to keep pretty busy with paper-work and details. My own, which soon moved from Strasbourg to Molsheim in the foothills of the Vosges, was very much in the thick of things. When, at long last and extraordinarily slowly, the Sixth Army got its own organization going, our rôle, which had already been progressively whittled down, was reduced almost to zero. There followed an interminable succession of days when, seemingly, nothing

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ever got done. Our little party consisted of five persons: a general of brigade, a lieutenant-colonel, two captains, and a lieutenant. We used to spend the time sitting in the schoolroom which formed our office (I can still see the scene vividly in memory), longing for a runner to arrive unexpectedly with some official form which would provide us with an excuse for filling up still further forms. The most contented of the lot was the younger of the two captains, whose duty it was to issue passes! An historian is not often bored. He always has the resources of memory, observation, and writing to keep him busy. But the feeling that one is serving no useful purpose in a nation at war is intolerable.

Our general was a reservist, a thoroughly good fellow who was eventually sent home to pursue his studies. These, for the most part, took the form of fly-fishing. What remained of his staff was merged with the sub-divisional area group based on Saverne. I spent only two days in that agreeable though definitely overcrowded little town. I had managed to make contact with a high-ranking officer at G.H.Q. Wire-pulling with the object of landing a better job is not an activity in which one naturally takes much pride, but it was scarcely my fault that only thus could I find any useful outlet for my enthusiasm. Thanks to my influential friend, I was transferred early in October to H.Q., First Army, and reported, without losing a moment, at Bohain in Picardy.

G.H.Q. had made it quite clear what my function was to be. I was to act as liaison officer with the British, and, as such, was attached to the Intelligence Branch. But I had been there only a short time when two other officers turned up with precisely similar instructions. The Chief of Staff, embarrassed by a superfluity of riches, decided that each main formation of the Army should have its own organ of contact with the Expeditionary Force. He therefore divided us up among the various administrative branches—omitting only 'A', which, being concerned with

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matters of personnel and discipline, has no need of links with the outside world. I found myself attached to 'Q'—that is to say, to the office in charge of transport, labour-supply, and rations, though my job was very much what it had previously been, a combination of Intelligence and Diplomacy. I shall explain later on how, most unfortunately, and certainly against my will, it lost, in fact, any significance it may once have had.

I began to wonder whether I was fated to drop back into that lazy existence of which I had once already been a victim. I was feeling thoroughly lost and dispirited when it happened that the officer in charge of petrol-supplies was moved elsewhere and I inherited his duties.

Almost overnight I had become the mighty Fuel King of the most heavily motorized army on the whole of the French front. My first reaction was one of sheer panic. I realized only too well that, in the event of active operations, I should have to shoulder the most appalling responsibilities. I did not know the first thing about the subject. 'Pray God', I wrote to my wife, 'that Hitler decides to go slow for a week or two!' There are, however, few administrative posts that the ordinary intelligent man cannot tackle reasonably well, provided he gives his mind to the job. I did my very best to learn everything I could about what would be expected of me, and was blessed at the outset by a piece of real good luck. I found at the Army lorry park the wisest and most un-self-regarding counsellor that any man in my position could have wished for. This is the first time I have had occasion to mention the name of Captain Lachamp: it will certainly not be the last. The bitter aftertaste left in my mouth by the memory of this bungled and tragic war makes me the more inclined to cherish the few bright spots which it could show. It is always a delight to meet a man who really is a man. There can be no greater reward than to work with such a colleague in perfect harmony, and to feel the day-to-day sharing of one's problems blossoming into a genuine and solid friendship.

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Truth to tell, my new functions, once I had learned my way about, demanded little in the way of hard work. The period of apprenticeship once over, I slipped back, like everybody else, into the unexciting existence of the military bureaucrat. Not that I was ever left to kick my heels, but I was certainly never hag-ridden by my work, and the amount of stimulus that I received from the daily routine was small. Fortunately, I was able, for some weeks, to combine with it an additional task which I undertook quite voluntarily. It came to my notice that the information at our disposition about petrol dumps situated on Belgian territory was absurdly insufficient. This lack of accurate knowledge was particularly serious in view of the well-known fact that, once the Germans had violated the frontier, we should be called upon to move into Belgium. Certain personal contacts made it possible for me to add considerably to the headquarters file on this subject. A good deal of rather ticklish negotiating had to be done, and here my experience of the ways and mentality of staff officers served me in good stead. In particular I learned the very special way in which the bureaucrat who has a reasonable dose of good manners can interpret the phrase 'meddling in what doesn't concern one'. By and large, the inquiry which I set on foot, valuable though it may have turned out to be, did not really fall within my competence. My conduct in the matter was what is sometimes called (with a discreet smile) 'dynamic'.

This occupation, however, lasted only a short while, and once the goal at which I aimed had been reached, I was reduced to a daily grind which consisted in counting petrol-tins and rationing every drop of fuel issued. It was natural, therefore, though perhaps foolish, that I should once again sink into a mood of despondency and feel that what intellectual powers and gifts of initiative I might have were not being employed to the best advantage. The tedium of those long winter and spring months of 1939-40 wore down the resistance of a great many intelligent men. I was, I suppose, like many others, the victim of a peculiarly

subtle form of poisoning. Be that as it may, I quite seriously thought of asking, once the summer was over, for permission to resume my labours at the Sorbonne. But before I could take any step in the matter, the storm of 10 May burst over our heads.

How unexpected it was can best be shown by mentioning something quite trivial that happened to me personally. I had gone to Paris on the 9th, with the object of proceeding to Meaux early the next morning, in order to get from G.H.Q. Transport a supply of the petrol-coupons by means of which I kept a check on the fuel consumption of my various units. I arrived at Meaux in complete ignorance of what had happened the previous night. The gentlemen at G.H.Q. showed no little surprise at the sudden apparition of an officer who had made a special journey, for so very unwarlike a purpose, from one of the armies on the Belgian frontier! After a few moments spent in talking at cross-purposes, I realized why it was that I had been so coldly received. I had just time to make the station, cross Paris, fight my way on to an incredibly overcrowded train, and so get back to my battle-post.

I have promised myself not to describe in detail the three weeks that followed. I shall have occasion, later, to set down the lessons of what then occurred. A few scenes, chosen from among the crowd that presses on my memory, will suffice to mark the progress of a series of days and nights crammed with the incidents of that tragic campaign of the Nord.

Let me begin by making mention of the girls' school at Valenciennes which we planned to occupy temporarily before moving on to an Advanced H.Q. in Belgium which had been chosen on the assumption that we should be engaged in open warfare, though, in fact, it was never used. It was our first experience at close range of the ruin caused by the German preliminary bombing attack.

On two occasions I was able to slip away on trips into Belgium. They suited that nomadic instinct in me of which my superiors

did not always approve. On the 11th I got no farther than Mons, but on the 12th I pushed forward in the direction of Nivelles, Fleurus, and Charleroi. All along the road we saw miners enjoying the temporary leisure of the Easter holiday. They were standing at the doors of their houses to give a welcome to the French motorized columns. The gently rolling country-side round Ligny and Quatre-Bras, where once Ney's army had fought, decked in the green of early spring, presented a charming scene. But already the sides of the thoroughfare were chock-a-block with long lines of civilians making their way back from the districts round Liège. They trudged along, pushing the now almost traditional children's prams piled high with every variety of ill-assorted baggage. A sprinkling of disbanded Belgian soldiers from the villages through which they had passed was symptomatic of a more alarming state of affairs. Anxiety began to press hard on the heels of an earlier optimism. Word went round that the passages of the Meuse had been forced. An effort had been made to get supplies up to the divisions which had been hastily rushed into action, almost immediately to lose all cohesion and vanish, so it seemed, into thin air. Ultimately, our Army withdrew towards the south-west and, on the 18th, H.Q. was moved back to Douai.

For rather less than two days we occupied yet another school in the suburbs of that town. Having already enjoyed the hospitality of a girls' school at Bohain, we felt that educational establishments were to be our fate. All around us bombs were showering down on the station, the main roads, and the aerodromes. Almost every day news came in that yet another 'back-area' fuel dump had fallen into German hands. The fine containers which we had constructed at Saint-Quentin and Cambrai, and were holding jealously in reserve in order to ensure a continuous flow of petrol to the front, the 'dispersed' depots of which we had been so proud, where the tins were cleverly camouflaged under the trees of public parks or in the

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lean-tos of abandoned brickfields, could no longer be relied upon to supply the needs of our formations. After the shortest of delays we had to pack up once again and resume our trek. It had been at first arranged that I should be left behind with two assistants at Advanced H.Q., Douai. But that plan, like so many others, had to be revised a few hours later. Picking my way across the blackened country-side, through a maze of slag-heaps, most of which had collapsed grotesquely under the effect of bombing, and had already lost their pristine clarity of outline, I reached the fourth—and last—school, at Lens, which we were destined to occupy (19 May).

This time it was a nursery school. The furniture had been designed to fit the requirements of very young children, with the result that we were faced with a choice between two kinds of physical distress. Either we could remain standing indefinitely—an exhausting process—or we could squat on seats that were far too narrow for our mature figures, and at the imminent risk of skinning our knees against the undersides of the desks. Not that one was always in a position to choose. One might be forced into a sitting posture by the necessity of scribbling an urgent message, but then, how in the world was one to get up again? To extricate oneself from the seat of tribulation demanded strenuous and prolonged effort. This curious form of ordeal, the ugliness of the landscape, the filthy coal-dust that filtered incessantly through every crack and cranny—everything about the gloomy spot seemed to make a fitting background to our growing mood of depression. As a Battle H.Q., this educational set-up at Lens was sheer hell, a fitting preliminary to defeat. Shall I ever, I wonder, forget that evening of 20 May? Just as it was getting dusk, with the flames of Arras lighting the distant horizon, my immediate superior came into the room. In a very low voice, and pointing on a school wall-map to the mouth of the Somme, he said: 'The Boches are *there!*'—then, turning away, he murmured, 'Don't talk about it more than you can

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help.' I had been trying to get G.H.Q. on the telephone, and it was only after I had made the attempt several times and failed, that I realized to the full the sense of complete abandonment that comes to a soldier when he hears the word—'surrounded'.

A little later (22 May) we migrated northwards, and fetched up at Estaires-sur-Lys. But this, being a traffic-centre, was not a very healthy spot. German pilots did not often make a dead set at buildings occupied by H.Q. staffs, but it was too much to expect that we should not occasionally be hit. On the very first afternoon of our being there, a bomb fell near enough to shake the walls and chimney of the inn where we had established our office. The burst was sufficiently close to cover our clothes, papers, and faces with an indescribably filthy contribution of soot. The warning was not ignored. I had just turned in, and was enjoying the luxury of sheets for the first time for many days (for the last, too, it turned out, during the campaign) when a movement-order dragged me from my bed in the middle of the night. As a matter of fact we did not get off until well after dawn. The authorities always showed a curious inability to organize that most necessary of all things—rest. In the course of the following morning, after making a long detour which, as usual, involved a severe dislocation of my fuel supplies, I reached the Château of Attiches, south of Lille, whither I had been preceded by the rest of the staff (23 May).

The château stood in a fine stretch of park-land. It was a graceless building adorned on the outside with a repellent arrangement of 'artistic' tiles, and filled with the kind of luxurious, gloomy, and vaguely medieval furniture which the rich middle-class families of the later nineteenth century regarded as the necessary background to a bogus territorial grandeur. In one corner of the dining-room, where we worked, the owner, with what we could not but consider rather premature consideration, had erected a pile of mortuary wreaths. It was here, on the afternoon of the 23rd, that our 'Q' branch finally split into two

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sections. One of these was to form our rear organization, and at once proceeded to the coast, there to arrange a system of sea-borne communications. The other—to which I was attached—stayed where it was with the army commander. As things turned out, the former, though at a much greater distance from the front, was to come in for the worst of the bombing—an irony of fate which nobody at the time had, I suspect, foreseen. In the innocence of our hearts, we of the forward elements fully expected to be the chosen target for air-attack (bombs did, indeed, fall continuously all round us) and were quite prepared to find ourselves exposed to the imminent danger of capture. Since, too, rear H.Q. contained, in addition to several men whose courage was beyond question, a fair sprinkling of those who were not averse to putting a few miles between themselves and the battle-front, we of the front line had a feeling that we formed a rather special body of the elect, imbued with the spirit of comradeship and mutual assistance. So strong was this prejudice that one of my companions, a plain lieutenant of reserve who, in civil life, was President of a Chamber of Commerce in the Nord Department, having been told to report for duty to the coast, obstinately refused to budge. The second-in-command of our section, who, in a way not calculated to improve morale, had ignored the generally accepted military tradition in these matters, and moved back with his immediate superior, took in very ill part an attitude so clearly at variance with his own. White with anger, he haled the disobedient underling before the highest disciplinary authority available, only to find, to his great surprise, that this courageous refusal to obey orders was by no means frowned upon.

Another scene is associated in my memory with that dining-room at Attiches. It had to do with one of the most degrading spectacles of human weakness that it has ever been my lot to witness. As the morning wore on we became aware of the figure of a man slumped in a chair close to the door. Dull-eyed and gloomy, he sat there chewing innumerable cigarettes. He wore

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no badges of rank on his sleeve, and the personnel of the office pushed past him with no more consideration than they would have accorded to the lowest orderly. He was, in fact, a general of division who had been deprived of his command a few hours previously—for drunkenness, it was said, though with what justice I do not know. He was waiting to have a final interview with the army commander. This he obtained, after considerable delay, about noon. It lasted only a few minutes, and that was the last we saw of our depressing visitor.

On the 26th we moved into what was to be our last headquarters, a gay little villa, furnished with refinement, situated at Steenwerck, to the north-west of Lille. The house next door was occupied by General Prioux. He had just taken over command of the Army from General Blanchard. The latter had been transferred to the Army Group, thereby escaping the immediate consequences of the disaster. Enemy pressure was becoming more and more accentuated, and we were faced by the imminent necessity of burning our important reserve fuel dumps at Lille. I spent the whole of the 27th and the night following in an attempt to get a decision on this point. No less than four separate orders were issued, and no less than four times were they countermanded. The last of them was within an ace of never being carried out. I dispatched a messenger on a motor-bike after dark, but he never arrived. What happened to him I do not know. My conscience, however, was clear. I had to see that the order reached its destination. Had I taken it myself I should have been guilty of dereliction of duty. Still, it was only natural that I should feel some slight pang at the thought that, quite possibly, I had sent a brave man to his death. A number of similar incidents remained in my memory from the last war. For a while they had had a way of haunting me when I could not sleep, though eventually I became callous. Fortunately, on this occasion I was able to get a second message through, and the dump went up just in time. But only just in time, for the Army

had already begun a withdrawal behind the line of the Lys, preparatory to a general movement seawards. Not the whole of the Army, however, was involved. On the evening of the 28th, General Prioux made it known to us that he despaired of being able to disengage two, and possibly more, of his divisions. Consequently, he had decided to remain in person at Steenwerck, there to await the coming of the enemy. It was his intention to keep with him only one or two officers. The rest of us, he said, had better make for the coast under cover of darkness, and get on board what ships we could find. A little later I went to see him in order to get a confirmation of the order that I was to empty, render useless, and abandon my mobile tanks. This meant depriving the Army of its last few remaining gallons of petrol, and I felt that I could not take it upon myself to make so grave a decision, though it was a logical result of the situation as it was at that time developing. Our great-hearted leader was sadly pacing the hall of the house in which he had his quarters. His had been a melancholy fate if ever there was one. Secoded from the Cavalry Corps which, so I am told, he had commanded with distinction, he was sent at the eleventh hour to take over an army already in a state of disintegration, and had to accept a captivity which he had ill deserved in place of the man who was really responsible for the defeat.

That duty done, I returned to our villa. In the course of the day I had already, acting on instructions, burned all our records, including the note-book in which I had kept a day-to-day diary of my own adventures. I would give a great deal to have that green-bound volume by me now. I also committed all my personal correspondence to the mess stove—for we had been forbidden to load ourselves with unnecessary baggage—and made what room I could in my haversack for a few especially precious or useful objects. As it was, I forgot about three-quarters of them, though I was at least able to change my working tunic for something in a rather better state of repair. In this I

was more fortunate than the general commanding the Army artillery. This fine soldier who, from a perhaps excessive scruple of honour, had decided to remain with General Prioux, was separated from all his belongings, which had been sent, rather prematurely, to Dunkirk. He had only the clothes he stood up in, and there was a hole in the elbow of his tunic. This misfortune made him voluble. He could face the prospect of captivity calmly enough—but not of captivity in rags!

We left that night: a long, slow column of cars moving across the Belgian country-side, for the French roads were already cut. By first light we had covered barely ten kilometres. How had we managed to evade the enemy's motorized scouts? To this day I do not really know. The fact remains that, sometimes on foot, sometimes on wheels, I reached Hondschoote round about noon. But I still had to make the coast. Together with Captain Lachamp, whom I found there on my arrival, I set about discovering the main fuel column which had started ahead of us with instructions to rendezvous at Bray-les-Dunes. We drove along the roads to Furnes, but were brought up short, first by blown bridges, and then, on the main thoroughfare, by an incredible jam of lorries which were halted head to tail and three deep. In rear of this obstruction was a tank officer loudly announcing that he was on special duty and must be got through. For over an hour we worked hard to open even the narrowest of lanes. A general of division, whom we met by accident, wanted to know what I was doing there. Duly informed, he turned to with a will, and did, I must confess, a fine job. Our efforts were at last crowned with success. But it was too late for us to continue our journey. Even had we done so, what guarantee was there that we should not run into some other obstacle farther on? There was nothing for it but to beat a crestfallen retreat to Hondschoote.

We set out again at nightfall, this time on foot, and taking a more direct route. A pedestrian could scramble through where

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a lorry would have been forced to a standstill. It was a hideous experience—or, at least, the last ten kilometres of the journey were. We had to make our way through an extraordinary confusion of motor traffic in a darkness that every minute was becoming more dense. The column was at Bray, right enough, and I was offered the hospitality of an empty house. Even a drink was forthcoming. Unfortunately—as the surgeons at the Zuydschoote hospital near by had only too good reason to know—the whole of the coastal district, bounded on the inland side by marshes and polders into which the salt had infiltrated, was almost completely without water, owing to the canals having been cut. We had nothing but champagne with which to quench our thirst. How gladly would I have exchanged mine for a chance of gulping my fill on the bank of some cool, clear river!

The Army, as such, having ceased to exist, I had no staff duties to perform. But I still had a 'cure of souls'. True, I no longer commanded a fuel depot, nor yet a detachment of mobile tanks. But I had worked for too long with these fine fellows to feel that I was justified in concentrating attention on my own affairs until I had done something to assure their future—which, in this instance—meant their embarkation. For no one was concerned to look farther ahead than that. The one thought in everybody's mind was to get clear of this damned stretch of coast before the enemy should smash through our last defences; to escape captivity by the sole road open to us—the sea. A sort of escape-hysteria had got hold of this mob of men. They were to all intents and purposes unarmed, and, from where they stood, packed together on the beaches, they could watch the English ahead of them already putting out to sea. I spent most of the 30th in trying to get my men's names on to the official evacuation lists. I went first to Bray-les-Dunes, which was chock-a-block with a disorderly crowd of soldiers searching for their units, and of lorries. Any man who happened to come along turned himself

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into a driver, only, very often, to abandon his chance vehicle after a few hundred yards. Once more I appointed myself Traffic-Control Officer, and tried, without much success, to get some kind of efficiency into the unfortunate Military Police who were clustered in ridiculous groups at every cross-roads. A little later I might have been seen at the 'Perroquet' café on the Belgian frontier, which, for a few hours, served as a temporary headquarters for the Zone Commander. From there I went to Malo-les-Bains, where I found most of the 'Q' branch personnel. I spent that night bivouacking on the dunes. Our period of rest was punctuated by German shells. Fortunately, the enemy gunners, nothing if not methodical, concentrated on a point just to the left of the Malo-Terminus Hotel. The first salvoes claimed a number of victims. Thereafter the place was scrupulously avoided. If anyone had to pass near it, he did so at the run. Had the shooting been less accurate, what a scene of massacre there would have been in that sandy dormitory of ours among the sea-grasses!

Early next day I was assured that my men would be got on board. How could I have known that a bomb would sink their ship? Still, most of them, though not all, alas, were fished out of the water. I was free at last to think about myself. Our former second-in-command, who was still in charge, showed no very great eagerness to get his subordinates away before he himself was safe. He did, however, give me permission to make what arrangements I could. The phrase sounded ominous. Did it mean that I was to pull a fast one on some other unfortunate? Luckily, early that afternoon, the commander of the Cavalry Corps was kind enough to furnish me and two of my friends with an official movement-order. Nothing now remained but to find the ship to which we had been detailed.

As the result of a bungled message, the three of us were forced to go right through Dunkirk on two separate occasions, first from east to west, and then again in the reverse direction. I have

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a very vivid memory of the ruined town with its shells of buildings half-visible through drifting smoke, and its clutter, not of bodies but of human debris, in the streets. I can still hear the incredible din which, like the orchestral finale of an opera, provided an accompaniment to the last few minutes which we spent on the coast of Flanders—the crashing of bombs, the bursting of shells, the rat-tat-tat of machine-guns, the noise of anti-aircraft batteries, and, as a kind of figured bass, the persistent rattle of our own little naval pom-pom. But it is not the dangers and horrors of that day which have stuck most firmly in my memory. What comes back with especial clearness is our slow movement away from the jetty. A marvellous summer night shed its magic on the waters. The sky was pure gold, the sea a mirror, and the black, rank smoke, pouring from the burning refinery, made so lovely a pattern above the low shore-line that one was cheated into forgetting its tragic origin. Even the name painted on the stern of our vessel (*Royal Daffodil*) was like something out of an Indian fairy-tale. All things, as we slipped away, seemed to be in a conspiracy to accentuate the overwhelming and purely selfish feelings of relief which filled my mind as I thought of the prisoner's fate which I had so narrowly escaped.

We landed at Dover. Then came a whole day spent in travelling by train across southern England. That journey has left in my mind the memory of a sort of drugged exhaustion broken by chaotic sensations and images which, like the episodes of a dream, rose to the surface of my consciousness only to sink again almost immediately: the pleasure of devouring ham and cheese sandwiches handed through the windows by girls in multi-coloured dresses, and clergymen who looked as solemn as though they were administering the Sacrament; the faint, sweet smell of cigarettes showered on us with the same generous profusion; the acid taste of lemonade and the flat taste of tea with too much milk in it: the cosy green of lawns; a landscape made up of parks, cathedral spires, hedges, and Devonshire cliffs; groups

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of cheering children at level-crossings. But what struck us more than anything else was the warmth of our reception. 'How genuinely kind they are!' said my companions. Towards evening we re-embarked at Plymouth, and dropped anchor at dawn off Cherbourg. We had to wait a long time in the harbour. 'You see,' said the ship's officers (French this time), 'the dock officials don't get to their offices until nine.' We were back, alas, in the rear zones of a France at war. No more cheering crowds, no more sandwiches or cigarettes. We were given, on landing, a formal, dry, rather suspicious welcome. The rest camp was an inhospitable and squalid place brightened by the presence of a few ladies belonging to the Red Cross. Later still, after having been shaken to pieces in averagely uncomfortable railway carriages, we arrived in the middle of the night at Caen, where nobody seemed to be expecting us, but where, fortunately, we found a number of good hotels—and even bathrooms!

I shall have occasion at a later stage in this narrative of miseries to describe the efforts made to construct a serviceable fighting-force from the debris of an army, and to consider why the success achieved was so small. After remaining for some time in Normandy, we found ourselves finally stranded at Rennes. The First Army no longer existed. But Headquarters Staff, or what remained of it, was put at the disposition of the general commanding the 'Group' which had just been scraped together with the object, it was said, of defending Brittany. On 17 June Rennes was bombed from the air. We were stationed well outside the target zone, and if the sound of splintering glass caused by a direct hit, at some distance, on a dump of cheddite, made me wonder uneasily whether I might not be rather 'out' in my calculation of distances, these fears were quickly dissipated. 'How pleasant it is', says the Roman poet, 'to listen to a storm from the safe shelter of the shore.' The quotation is trite, the confession not altogether admirable. But what soldier, hearing the sounds of a danger from which he knows himself to be

immune, is not conscious, deep in his heart, of a sense of purely animal relief?

On the morning of the 18th a rumour got about that the enemy was advancing. Our office was situated on one of the boulevards of the upper town. From the opposite side of the main street a road led downhill to the more populous district in which my batman was billeted. About eleven o'clock I went to tell him to get my things packed immediately. I was climbing the hill on my way back when, at the far end of the street, I saw a German column debouching on the boulevard. It was moving between me and my office. Not a shot was fired. A number of French soldiers, including a few officers, just stood and watched. I learned later that whenever the Germans came across a soldier still in possession of his arms, they merely made him smash his rifle and empty his ammunition pouches. I had long decided that I would take any step to avoid capture. Had I believed that I might, even now, be of the slightest use, I could, I hope, have screwed myself to the necessary pitch of courage to remain at my post. But now that all show of resistance had melted away, there was obviously no point in carrying on with my duties. Or, perhaps, I should put it this way: that it was more and more clearly borne in on me that the only manner in which I could continue to serve my country and my family was by escaping before the trap should finally be sprung.

It was obvious that if I tried to get away westwards—even assuming that any of the roads still remained open—I should merely get rounded up, sooner or later, in the cul-de-sac of the peninsula. If I went south there was a good chance that I should never get across the Loire. That, at least, was how I argued at the moment. I have since discovered that, contrary to my expectations, the Germans did not occupy Nantes until next day. But even had I tried that route, should I ever have succeeded in reaching the place? I also played with the idea of getting to Brest, where I might find some means of slipping across to

England. But should I have felt justified in abandoning my children and going into exile for an indefinite period? What, in fact, I did, after standing for a few moments deep in thought on the pavement of that hilly street, was to choose what seemed to me then the simplest, and, in the long run, the safest method of getting away. I went back to the house where I was billeted. There I took off my tunic. My rough serge trousers had nothing particularly military about them. From my landlord, who, with his son, showed, on this occasion, a high degree of courage, I got, without difficulty, the loan of a civilian jacket and tie. Then, after first making contact with an old friend who was a professor at Rennes, I booked a room in one of the hotels. Arguing that the best way to escape being noticed was to retain one's identity, I put my real name and occupation on the form handed to me by the manager. My grey hairs were sufficient guarantee that no one would suspect the presence of an army officer beneath the outward semblance of so obviously academic a figure—unless, of course, it occurred to the German authorities to check the hotel registers with the parade strength of the military formations known to be in the neighbourhood. Such a course seems never to have entered their heads. No doubt our masters were already beginning to feel a bit blasé on the subject of prisoners.

In this way I spent about a fortnight at Rennes. I was constantly running up against German officers in the streets, in restaurants, and even in my hotel. My mind was torn between the agony of seeing the cities of my native land given over to the invader, a sense of surprise at finding myself on peaceful terms with men whom, a few days earlier, I should never have dreamed of encountering save at the revolver's point, and the malicious pleasure of pulling a fast one on these gentlemen without their having the slightest suspicion that I was doing anything of the sort. Not that this satisfaction was wholly unmixed. I have always felt a certain discomfort in living under false pretences, and though, in this case, I feel sure that my conduct would

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have passed muster with the strictest of casuists, I could not help feeling amazement at the determination with which I continued to play my part. As soon as the railways were running again, I went to Angers, where I had a number of friends, and thence, by road, to Guéret and my family. Of the delights of this home-coming I shall say nothing. To speak of them would set my heart beating too fast. It is better to draw over them a curtain of silence.

The reader will have gathered from what I have said, how limited was the nature of my experience—experience, I mean, of *this* war, since the former one comes into the picture only in so far as it provides a general background. I lived and worked at a fairly high staff level. True, I did not always know everything that was going on. Very often, as I shall hope to show, I was left without information essential to the proper performance of my duties. But, as a result of my daily routine, I was in a position to draw my own conclusions about both men and methods. On the other hand, I had no first-hand experience of fighting, and my contacts with the front-line troops were few and far between. In my references to them I have been compelled to rely on the evidence of others, which I was conveniently placed to collect and sift. I feel justified, therefore, in putting certain of my reflections on record, though nothing can really ever take the place of seeing things with one's own eyes—provided one is blest with good sight. By relying on second-hand evidence one is bound to lose something of the truth and much of the human atmosphere. But no man exists who can claim to have witnessed everything at first-hand, or to have had all the knowledge available. The most we can ask is that each shall say frankly what he has to say. From a comparison of particular sincerities, truth will eventually emerge.