

## TWIXT SERRE AND HEBUTERNE

IT was on a day in early March of this year, with a cloudless blue sky overhead, that I stepped carefully off the muddy track on to the little strip of 'sown field'—with the blades of wheat, brilliantly green, just showing above ground—which separated me from Luke Copse Cemetery. This tiny spot, 'for ever England,' lies just over the old German lines that for so long lay, an impassable barrier, between Hébuterne and Serre.

I had come up that morning by car from Amiens. We had bowled along the great road to Albert in smooth security. The driver—who had done this kind of work often before—began by being vastly communicative. I must see the old G.H.Q. at Querieu Château; but it had meant little to me during the war years, and meant less than ever to me now. Then there was the bold notice painted in English on a barn wall, *Dangerous Corner*; that, too, I must note. Reminiscences of 1870 began to brim over his practised lips; a cemetery on the left, a monument on the right. But I was dull to respond; memories were marshalling themselves anew, stirring out of their long slumbers, awakening at contact with the familiar slopes of Picardy: that road there, on the left, it recalls a march—its destination long since forgotten, not even now to be recalled—but, somehow, clear as crystal, is the memory of that moving column, and myself a tiny part of it.

We are soon at Albert. I should see the new Basilica, should I? Well, I had not come for that—so new, so solid—my quest lay apart from such things, but I would spare a moment. The citizens have done

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their work well : it is a fine church, and the Virgin of Albert, glittering gold in the sunlight, upright and secure, views from her lofty pinnacle the familiar landscape. I vainly try to fix my billet—impossible, all is so new : and I have a silly song in my mind young Fullerton of the Gloucesters kept on singing as we walked together over muddy wastes, centuries ago it seems, right up from Albert to Martinpuich. His cheery young life, that morning, had almost run its course.

We are at Aveluy, passing through it : but—imperatively—the car must deviate : how can I pass like this, and hush in hurried movement that sudden clamour of memory? ‘ Yes,’ I say, ‘ down that road to the right,’ and we proceed to trundle down the hill—what roads!—cross the bridge over a very tidy Ancre, with all its old liberty gone, and up to the corner, Crucifix Corner, one of the many. The Crucifix is there, and the quarry beside it where that reeking A.D.S. was ; and busy, too, night and day, day and night, busy as those thundering guns. How silent it all is now, how deserted! Not a figure moving anywhere over those hills : my old dug-out—one of a line—a mere depression : I can fix the spot easily, and then the flooded Ancre lapped its edge. But the memories, so loud a moment ago, are shrinking back : it is so similar yet so unlike. Back again towards the village, with a glimpse up the ‘ closed road ’ straight over the crest, to Bouzincourt, before we turn sharp right out of Aveluy towards Martinsart Wood. I note—willingly this time—the great memorial monument at Thiepval, on my right. How quickly we move, where of old we seemed to crawl. We are out of the wood, and this is ‘ Ocean Villas.’ Then up to the Sucrerie, past ‘ Euston Dump,’ and into Serre.

Serre! Long before it became, in November 1916, the last place where my brother was seen alive, its

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name had a sinister sound on our ears. It was just those gaunt tree-tops, I think, straggling on to the horizon, and visible from so many points round Hébuterne, and as far back as the Château de la Haie, that made the name a sort of tangible embodiment of distant danger; though it had been harmless enough in the winter of '15, '16. Our road entered the village from the south-west. Very soon we turned off it to the left along what was merely a lane. Midway, in the shallow valley between Serre and Hébuterne, I had to get out and walk a couple of hundred yards or so along a track to my left till it brought me up to Luke Copse Cemetery on the right. I crossed the tiny strip of field, and entered through the Lych Gate.

The Cemetery is quite small, some twenty-five or thirty feet long by ten feet wide. It stands just within a big wheat field. It is surrounded by a solid, low, stone wall with a white trimmed-stone coping. Gate, walls, grave-stones, the big memorial cross above, the turf beneath one's feet, all are in perfect order; a fine example of the work of the Imperial Graves Commission. So small it is, so few the graves, I had no difficulty in finding the one I sought. I paused there, kneeling. The absolute silence of the morning was only broken by a lark singing somewhere aloft out of the blue sky: but for the bird, all was in utter stillness, mantled in sunlight and peace. I must look at the company in which he lies. Not many, I fancy, have done so before, not many will do so again; it is so aloof and so small. They are all Suffolks, save a few whose title runs *Unknown British Soldier*, and, likely enough, these are Suffolks too. They were such as the one solitary Lieutenant would have chosen to rest with, as he had chosen to work with; the highest in rank was a Lance-Sergeant.

I move back, noting, as I go, the shell holes, the broken iron stakes, the dud shells, still, to my aston-

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ishment, lying about after all these years. The car trundles me up the lane to Hébuterne, and we have difficulty in negotiating a farm waggon moving out from the village. Here we are in the main street. The lie of the place is all as it was, but how few of the buildings have survived, how altered its whole aspect. I am a stranger where once I was at home. No matter: Hébuterne is linked indissolubly in my mind with the 6th Gloucesters. Names and faces peep out for a moment from the mists of memory and fade again. We are running out towards Foncquevillers along a road which once marked our 'subsidiary' trench line. There is Gommecourt Wood on my right. It is reborn, a wood again; in a month it will all be green. Only one or two gaunt giants lift their dead heads over the young surrounding growth. Soon they, too, must vanish, but to-day they still survive to remind me of the old wood. I thought I should have relished every moment at Foncquevillers, but the shy memories of '15, '16 will not rise to greet the trimness of this rebuilt village. 'This is not the Foncquevillers we knew,' they urge. 'Where is the roofless church, with the untouched crucifix hanging on the scarred walls; the cellars, filled with smoke from pipe and brazier, but dry; the shelters under the ground sheet, airy but always damp; above all, where are the men, the Warwicks of the 143rd Brigade?' It is all a vanished past; it is here no longer; what, for me, *made* these villages is gone, the fascination that urged me forward is losing its grip; I grow disillusioned.

We make for Colincamps by the Saily road, which used to be under observation from Gommecourt and unsafe: it is safe enough now. Saily was always sordid looking; it still is, but I am glad the old stone church remains, standing solidly above the Square. At Colincamps, too, the little church of St. Thomas still survives; but I looked for a Warwick grave by the

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south wall, and it had gone. I felt I must come to the surface again after this plunge into the past. I had done what I came to do. Back, then, through Mailly-Maillet and Contay over roads which here and there wave back a memory to me as I pass. I am coming up again like a diver, and making for the shore. Here is Amiens, with the Cathedral freed from its defacing sand-bags, and with all the dim beauty of its glass restored. It is March again, 1932; but years seems to have passed since I left the city this morning.

DOMINIC DEVAS, O.F.M.

## *THE HOUSE OF CHIRON*

**W**HERE is the place in the mountains hidden,  
A strange house builded in sun and rain,  
Where the Centaur solaced his ancient hunger  
For the flowers that grew in the fields forbidden  
And winds that blew when the world was younger?

Where the wild beasts crowd to the pool unbidden  
By the thyme-sweet slopes and the windy spaces  
The shepherds seek for his house in vain.  
They have heard his hoofs in the upland places,  
But no man knows where his house is hidden.

A house of echoes, a house of shadows—  
But who shall follow the hoofs of Chiron?  
Where the torrent turns in the mountain meadows  
The silver sapling, a light-leaf dancer,  
Watches his tracks lest he come again.  
But the shepherds seek for that house in vain  
While the loud stream calls and the high hills answer.

ELIZABETH BELLOC.