

A VISIT TO THE FRONT

chipped and peppered. On the floors inside were heaps of wreckage, all the filthy *débris*, the soiled intimacies of deserted human habitations, sordid relics of sordid lives tragically interrupted, left behind by fleeing refugees before advancing armies in the autumn. The Germans had knocked rude holes in the party walls, so that one could pass directly from one house to another and be sheltered from the fire. And so we passed on through one silent house after another of that deserted village, through gardens overgrown with weeds, littered with rubbish, here and there the souvenirs of some former occupant, happy, maybe, in his quiet home—a portrait hanging crookedly on the wall, having escaped miraculously all those shells; a little lace curtain blowing out of a window in that sweet morning breeze. It was the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet, depressing in the extreme.

There was not a living being in sight, and then suddenly we came upon a soldier sitting in the kitchen of a house, at a common table. His head was bound up in a white surgical bandage, as big as a turban, and he wore an old faded, threadbare black frock-coat, that made him ridiculous. He had been wounded and was convalescing. He was breakfasting on a piece of black bread upon which with a pocket-knife he was spreading some kind of grease from a tin, and he had a tin cup of coffee. At our approach he sprang to his feet, came to attention, and stood there. Our officers spoke to him, with the condescending sugary kindness that wardens and gaolers display toward inmates of prisons when visiting and inspecting committees are about. Myriad flies were crawling over his tin of paste and his hunk of black bread. . . .