

BELGIUM

Beyond, there were heavy woods and the terrible devastation of war, ruins, and the wreckage left in the train of the battle with the retreating British in the autumn; back among the trees now and then some ruined old château, its windows staring vacantly, its white façade riddled by shell and ball, inexpressibly sad and desolate. There was not anywhere a single inhabited house, all had been deserted long since. At last we stopped in the edge of a wood, and there, with the sweet morning air blowing over us—already under the artillery fire that goes on continually and, as it were, for ever, between the Germans and the British across the trenches, we heard the screaming of the shells overhead. That shriek of shrapnel is a horrid sound; I had often read descriptions of it. There are many comparisons—"lost souls moaning in the wind," "the wail of damned spirits," etc., and it is indeed some one of the many noises of hell, no doubt; but nothing brings the sound more vividly to my mind than the instinctive gesture which the Captain with the head like Louis Philippe's, made to his brother-officer with the monocle, when, as a shell went over us, he placed his clenched fists together and then rent them apart as though giant hands were ripping asunder some heavy piece of cloth.

The Captain produced an engineer's drawing of the trenches which we were about to visit and, while we stood there in the edge of that cool wood, began to explain; we would enter the rear trenches here, pass on to the second line here, then enter the first line here. But I was not watching the well-drawn plan of the trenches—what can be more stupid than a plan of anything, especially when you are to see the thing itself?—but a wagon train