From *Civilization: 1914-1917*, by Georges Duhamel, 1918

On the Somme (*extracts*)

…The adjutant turned to me again: "You have had three brothers killed by the enemy. In one sense, you are out of it all. You will not be badly off as a stretcher-bearer. It's unpleasant in a way, but it's a whole lot better than being in the line; isn't it?"

I did not answer. I was thinking of the desolate little valley, facing the ridge of Plemont, where I had passed the beginning of the summer. I had endured there hours of deadly tedium, watching through the shattered poplars the horror-stricken apple-trees along the chaotic road, the shell-holes filled with a sickeningly green, oozing water.. There, during long nights of guard duty, I had inhaled the fetid breath of fields thickly sown with corpses. In the solitude of utter despair I had experienced by turns the fear and the desire of death. And then, one day, they had come to me, saying, "You are to return to the rear; your third brother has just been killed." And many who looked at me seemed to be thinking, as the adjutant thought: "Your third brother is dead! In a sense you are in luck."

I was thinking of all this as I made my way toward my new destination. We were picking our way over that plateau, raised like an altar toward the sky, loaded as if for a sacrifice with millions of creatures.

…Up till then I had merely seen my comrades who were wounded beside me in the trenches setting off on a long, mysterious journey of which we knew little. The wounded man was spirited away; he disappeared from the battle-field. I now learned to know all the stages of the dreary life which at that moment began for him.

….The wounded were all lying down; they were the seriously injured. Ranged side by side on the uneven ground, they formed a mosaic of suffering humanity, colored with the tints of war, dirt, and blood; smelling with the odors of war, sweat, and putrefaction; clamorous with the cries, the lamentations, the death-rattle that are the very voice and music of war.

This spectacle froze me with horror. I had known what it is to rise up for the slaughter, to go over the top, to be in at the death. I had to learn another horror, that of the "tableau," the swarm of prostrate victims, the sight of this vast hall with its mass of human larvae writhing on the floor.

I had finished my stretcher-bearing and I busied myself among the wounded with all the awkwardness of one who means well but has been too deeply moved. Some of them were vomiting, in the most frightful suffering, their foreheads streaming with sweat. The greater part were motionless and self-possessed, as if mindful of the inward progress of their ailment. One of them especially quite unnerved me. He was a little fair-haired sergeant with a delicate mustache. He was weeping in his hand with a despair that was like shame. I asked him if he was in pain. He could scarcely reply. Then gently lifting his covering, I saw that a machine-gun had cruelly wounded him. And I felt a profound compassion for his youth and his tears.

There was also a young boy who screamed out at regular intervals a curious lamentation, a lamentation of his own province of which I could only grasp these syllables: "Ah! mon . . . dieu . . . .ah! mon . . . dieu. . ."

A doctor who was passing said to him: "Come, have a little patience! Don't scream like that!"

The lad stopped a moment to reply: "You'd have to be without a voice not to scream."

And he immediately began again to cry: "Ah! mon . . . dieu. . ." keeping time as if this rhythm and these words were a necessary part of his agony.

Next to him was a rough fellow with heavy, powerful features, with that shape of the skull and that peculiar growth of hair that mark the men of Auvergne. He looked at the young boy who was groaning by his side and, turning to me, summed things up with a shrug of his shoulders: "Awful, isn't it?--to be smashed up like that boy, there!"

"How about you?" I said to him. "What have you got?"
"Oh! I?--It looks as if I hadn't any feet left. But I've got plenty of health. My carcass is whole."

And it was true: I saw that he had had both feet blown off …

All those who were on the Somme during 1916 will retain forever the memory of the flies. The disorder of the battle-field, its richness in carrion, the abnormal accumulation of men, animals, spoiled food—all these causes brought about that year a formidable hatching of flies. They seemed to have assembled from all points of the globe to be present at an exceptional and solemn occasion.

At Hill 80 I saw wounds swarming with larvae, a sight one had almost forgotten since the Battle of the Marne. I saw the flies hurl themselves upon the blood and pus of the wounds and gorge themselves with such drunken frenzy that you could seize them with your fingers or with a pair of pincers before they would consent to fly away and leave their feast. They spread all sorts of infections and gangrene. The army suffered cruelly from them, and it is really astonishing that the victory did not remain definitely with them.

There was nothing more desolate, more barren, than the plateau where the city of tents stood. Every morning heavy tractors climbed the hill of Etinehem and brought water to the camp. They filled a few scattered casks with a sweetish water, and for a whole day it was necessary to quench the thirst of the men and to wash away all the stains and soils of illness from this supply alone.

Not a bush, as far as the clumps of trees on the horizon! Not a tuft of fresh grass! Nothing but a boundless immensity of dust or slime, according to whether the face of the sky was serene or stormy. In order to bring some color into this desolation, some one had had the idea of doing a little gardening between the tents, and the wounded who were being taken down from the ambulances noticed with astonishment, amid the dreary bustle of military matters, the pale smile of a geranium or the little Gothic cathedrals of the juniper-trees, which had been pulled up from the rocky edges of the valley and replanted there, hastily, in the usual designs of French gardens.

I cannot recall without a strange emotion the tent under which a dozen soldiers, attacked with gas-gangrene, lay dying. All about this desperate place there ran a meager flower-bed, where a diligent man was trying placidly to make the salvias unfold their red bells.

But neither the dashing of the rain, the crashing of the thunder, nor any other furious assault of nature was able to distract these men from their task of war. On Hill 80 they continued to dress wounds and operate upon the wounded just as on the neighboring hills the artillery continued to tear up the disputed ground. Often it seemed as if man were determined to speak louder than heaven, and a sort of competition would take place between the guns and the thunder.

… Little Lalau, who died the same day, at least slipped off drowned in the unconsciousness of delirium.

He was a country lad; he had been wounded in the spinal marrow by a small fragment of shell. He developed a sort of meningitis and at once ceased to belong to the rational world. The pupils of his eyes swung from right to left with a dizzy rapidity; he moved his chin ceaselessly, like an animal chewing its cud. One day I found him devouring the rosary that the chaplain had placed about his neck. A nurse held his mouth open while we drew out a great number of fragments of wood and wire. The unfortunate fellow laughed softly, repeating: “It’s hard, it’s hard to chew!” and the lines in his face were shaken by a multitude of painful twitchings.

Delirium disconcerts, offends our souls as the supreme disorder: that is to say, of the power of judgment. But it expresses, perhaps, a kindness of nature, since it relieves the wounded man from the necessity of controlling his wretchedness. Life and death have these somber compensations. Once, for example, I saw a soldier who had been shot in so many places that the surgeons had decided his case was beyond the help of science. Among other injuries, his right wrist was transfixed by a long splinter of steel. The sight was so harrowing that they tried to pull the fragment out. A doctor had grasped it in his hand and was shaking it gently back and forth.

“Does it hurt you?” he asked, from time to time.

And the patient replied: “No; but I’m thirsty!”

“How is it possible,” I asked the doctor, “how is it possible that what you are doing to him doesn’t cause him pain?”

“It’s because he’s in a state of shock,” the doctor replied…

….I was indebted for many things to my new occupation of stretcher-bearer. I was indebted to it for the opportunity to know men better than I had known them until then; I have known you, Rebic, Louba, Ratier, Freyssinet, Calmel, Touche, and all you others …. When I passed between the beds where your fate was being fought out, when I looked you one by one in the face, it seemed to me that you were all good, patient, energetic men, and that you all deserved to be loved.

Didn’t you deserve it, Rebic, you gray-haired sergeant with a loving family awaiting you at home? One day they had just dressed the great wound you bore in your side, and we were crowding about you to put on your clean linen and remake your bed. You began to shed tears, good, simple man, and when we asked you the reason why, you gave this sublime answer: “I am weeping to see all the trouble I am causing you.”

From Louba we could not expect words: the bursting of a shell had blown away his face. Nothing remained of it but an immense, barbarous wound, one crooked, displaced eye, and the forehead, the humble forehead of a peasant. One day, however, while we were saying some friendly words to him, Louba wished to show us his pleasure, and he gave us a smile. They will always remember it, those who saw the soul of Louba smile without a face.

Freyssinet, a boy of twenty, often gave way to delirium; in his moments of lucidity he would realize this and ask pardon of those whom it might have disturbed. The hour came when he knew at last the majestic repose of death. That day a much bedecked personage was going about through the tents with an imposing escort. He stopped at the foot of each bed and pronounced, in a pompous voice, a few words intended to show what an honor his mere address was for the wounded man. He stopped before Freyssinet’s bed and began his discourse. As he was a man of importance and method, he said his whole say without noticing the many signals that were being made in his direction. When he had finished, however, he asked his attendants: “You wished to point something out to me?”

“Yes,” they replied, “it was . . . that wounded man is dead.”

But Freyssinet was so modest, so timid, that the whole attitude of his corpse expressed respect and confusion.

… Each day brought visitors to Hill 80. They arrived from Amiens in sumptuous automobiles; they chatted as they crossed the great canvas room, which looked like an agricultural exhibition; they addressed a few words to the wounded, according to the nature of their own personal business, their opinions, their station in life. They jotted down memoranda in their note-books and at times consented to sup at the officers’ table. There were foreigners among them—philanthropists, politicians, ladies of the stage, millionaires, novelists, and pamphleteers. Those who were seeking strong sensations were sometimes admitted into the conical tents or into one of the operating-rooms.

They would go away pleased with their visit when the weather was fine, and comfortably sure of having seen very unusual things, heroic warriors, a model institution.