

## THE STORM OF STEEL (EXCERPT) By Ernst Jünger.

Translated from the original text "In Stahlgewittern" by Basil Creighton

### GUILLEMENT

On the 23rd August we were transported in lorries to Le Mesnil. Our spirits were excellent, though we knew we were going to be put in where the battle of the Somme was at its worst. Chaff and laughter went from lorry to lorry. We marched from Le Mesnil at dusk to Sailly-Saillisel, and here the battalion dumped packs in a large meadow and paraded in battle order.

Artillery fire of a hitherto unimagined intensity rolled and thundered on our front. Thousands of twitching flashes turned the western horizon into a sear of flowers. All the while the wounded came trailing back with white dejected faces, huddled into the ditches by the gun and ammunition columns that rattled past.

A man in a steel helmet reported to me as guide to conduct my platoon to the renowned Combles, where for the time we were to be in reserve. Sitting with him at the side of the road, I asked him, naturally enough, what it was like in the line. In reply I heard a monotonous tale of crouching all day in shell-holes with no one on either flank and no trenches communicating with the rear, of unceasing attacks, of dead bodies littering the ground, of maddening thirst, of wounded and dying, and of a lot besides. The face half-framed by the steel rim of the helmet was unmoved; the voice accompanied by the sound of battle droned on, and the impression they made on me was one of unearthly solemnity. One could see that the man had been through horror to the limit of despair and there had learnt to despise it. Nothing was left but supreme and superhuman indifference.

'Where you fall, there you lie. No one can help you. No one knows whether he will come back alive. They attack every day, but they can't get through. Everybody knows it is life and death.'

One can fight with such fellows. We marched on along a broad paved road that showed up in the moonlight as a white band on the dark fields. In front of us the artillery fire rose to a higher and higher pitch. *Lasciate ogni speranza!* (1)

Soon we had the first shells on one side of the road and the other. Talk died down and at last ceased. Everyone listened--with that peculiar intentness that concentrates all thought and sensation in the ear--for the long-drawn howl of the approaching shell. Our nerves had a particularly severe test passing Frégicourt, a little hamlet near Combles cemetery, under continuous fire.



View of Combles.

As far as we could see in the darkness, Combles was utterly shot to bits. The damage seemed to be recent, judging from the amount of timber among the ruins and the contents of the houses slung over the road. We climbed over numerous heaps of debris -- rather hurriedly owing to a few shrapnel shells -- and reached our quarters. They were in a large shot-riddled house. Here I established myself with three sections. The other two occupied the cellar of a ruin opposite. At 4 a.m. we were aroused from our rest on the fragments of bed we had collected, in order to receive helmets. It was also the occasion of discovering a sack of coffee-beans in a corner of the cellar; whereupon there followed a great brewing of coffee.

After breakfast I went out to have a look round. Heavy artillery had turned a peaceful little billeting town into a scene of desolation in the course of a day or two. Whole houses had been flattened by single direct hits or blown up so that the interiors of the rooms hung over the chaos like the scenes on a stage. A sickly scent of dead bodies rose from many of the ruins, for many civilians had been caught in the bombardment and

buried beneath the wreckage of their homes. A little girl lay dead in a pool of blood on the threshold of one of the doorways.



View of square at Comblès. See [larger image](#).

The square in front of the ruins of the church had been particularly hard hit. Here was the entrance to the catacombs, a very ancient underground passage with recesses here and there in which were crowded the staffs of all the units engaged. It was said that the civilians had opened up the entrance with pickaxes when the bombardment began. It had been walled up and kept secret from the Germans during the whole of their occupation. The streets were reduced to narrow paths winding circuitously round and over heaps of timber and masonry. Quantities of fruit and vegetables were going to waste in the churned-up gardens. A plentiful supply of 'iron rations'<sup>(2)</sup> provided us with a dinner that we cooked in the kitchen and concluded, needless to say, with strong coffee. I then settled myself in an armchair upstairs. From letters scattered about I saw that the house belonged to a brewer, Lesage. Cupboard and chests of drawers were thrown open; there was an overturned washstand, a sewing-machine, and a perambulator. The pictures and the looking-glasses on the walls were all broken. Drawers had been pulled out and emptied, and a yard deep all over the floor were underclothes, corsets, books, papers, bedroom tables, broken glass, bottles, notebooks, chair legs, coats, cloaks, lamps, curtains, window-frames, doors torn from their hinges, lace, photographs, oil-paintings, albums, broken boxes, hats, flower-pots, and torn wall-paper, all tangled up together in wild confusion.

The view through the broken windows showed the square utterly deserted, and ploughed up by the shells, which had strewn it with the branches of the limes. The artillery fire that ranged round the place without ceasing deepened the gloom of this appalling picture. Now and then the gigantic crash of a 38-centimetre shell dominated the tumult; whereupon a hail of splinters swept through Comblès, clattering through the branches of the trees, or striking on the walls of the few houses that were still left standing, and bringing down the slates from the roofs.

In the course of the afternoon the firing increased to such a degree that single explosions were no longer audible. There was nothing but one terrific tornado of noise. From 7 onwards the square and the houses round were shelled at intervals of half a minute with 15-centimetre shells. There were many duds among them, which all the same made the houses rock. We sat all this while in our cellar, round a table, on armchairs covered in silk, with our heads propped on our hands, and counted the seconds between the explosions. Our jests became less frequent, till at last the fool-hardest of us fell silent, and at 8 o'clock two direct hits brought down the next house.

From 9 to 10 the shelling was frantic. The earth rocked and the sky boiled like a gigantic cauldron.

Hundreds of heavy batteries were concentrated on and round Comblès. Innumerable shells came howling and hurtling over us. Thick smoke, ominously lit up by Verey lights<sup>(3)</sup>, veiled everything. Head and ears ached violently, and we could only make ourselves understood by shouting a word at a time. The power of logical thought and the force of gravity seemed alike to be suspended. One had the sense of something as unescapable and as unconditionally fated as a catastrophe of nature. A[n] N.C.O. of No. 3 platoon went mad.

At 10 this carnival of hell gradually calmed down and passed into a steady drum-fire. It was still certainly impossible to distinguish one shell from another.

At 11 orders came to parade in the square. There we joined the other two platoons preparatory to marching into the line. There was a fourth platoon under Lieutenant Sievers detailed to carry rations forward. They surrounded us while we were hastily got together on this risky spot, and loaded us with things to eat, of which in those days there were still plentiful supplies. Sievers pressed a pan full of butter on me, and shaking my hand at parting wished me luck.

Then we moved off in single file. Every man had the strictest orders to follow closely on the man in front. We had scarcely got out of the place before the guide found he had missed the way. We were compelled to turn back under heavy shrapnel fire. Next we were following, mostly at the double, a white band laid down over the open ground to give the direction. It was shot into small bits. Often we had to come to a halt at the worst moment, when our guide lost his way. To lie down was forbidden, in case we lost touch.



"How a German trench between Guinchy and Guillemont looked after our [British] infantry had taken it." In spite of this, Nos. 1 and 3 platoons suddenly vanished. On again! We got to a sunken road, much shelled, where the sections stowed themselves. 'Lie down' was the order. A nauseous and oppressive scent warned us that this road had claimed many a victim. After a run that threatened death at every step we reached a second sunken road in which battle headquarters were concealed. Then we went the wrong way and had to turn back, nerve-racked and crowding on each other. Five metres, at the utmost, from Vogel and myself a medium-heavy shell struck the rear bank of the road with a dull crash and shot a volley of great clods on us, while its deadly fragments flew in a shower over our backs. At last the guide found the way again. He had come upon a surprising landmark--a group of dead bodies. On and on! Some of the men collapsed as they ran, for we were compelled to force the last ounce from their exhausted bodies. Wounded men called to us on left and right from the shell-holes and were disregarded. On and on, with our eyes fixed on the man in front, along a knee-deep trench formed of linked-up shell-holes of enormous size, where the dead were almost touching. Our feet found little purchase against their soft and yielding bodies. Even the wounded who fell by the way shared the same fate and were trodden beneath the boots of those who still hurried on.

And always this sickly smell. Even my orderly, little Schmidt, my companion in many a dangerous patrol, began to reel. I snatched the rifle from his hand, though even at such a moment his politeness made him resist me.

At last we reached the front line. It was held by men cowering close in the shell-holes, and their dead voices trembled with joy when they heard that we were the relief. A Bavarian sergeant-major briefly handed over the sector and the Verey-light pistol.

My platoon front formed the right wing of the position held by the regiment. It consisted of a shallow sunken road which had been pounded by shells. It was a few hundred metres left of Guillemont and a rather shorter distance right of Bois-de-Trônes. We were parted from the troops on our right, the 76th Regiment of Infantry, by a space about 500 metres wide. This space was shelled so violently that no troops could maintain themselves there.

The Bavarian sergeant-major had vanished of a sudden and I stood alone, the Verey-light pistol in my hand, in the midst of an uncanny sea of shell-holes over which lay a white mist whose swathes gave it an even more oppressive and mysterious appearance. A persistent, unpleasant smell came from behind. I was left in no doubt that it came from a gigantic corpse far gone in decay.

As I had no idea how far off the enemy were, I warned my men to be ready for the worst. We all remained on guard. I spent the night with my batman(4) and two orderlies in a hole perhaps one yard square and one yard deep.

When day dawned we were astonished to see, by degrees, what a sight surrounded us.

The sunken road now appeared as nothing but a series of enormous shell-holes filled with pieces of uniform, weapons, and dead bodies. The ground all round, as far as the eye could see, was ploughed by shells. You could search in vain for one wretched blade of grass. This churned-up battlefield was ghastly. Among the

living lay the dead. As we dug ourselves in we found them in layers stacked one upon the top of another. One company after another had been shoved into the drum-fire and steadily annihilated. The corpses were covered with the masses of soil turned up by the shells, and the next company advanced in the place of the fallen.

The sunken road and the ground behind was full of German dead; the ground in front of English. Arms, legs, and heads stuck out stark above the lips of the craters. In front of our miserable defenses there were torn-off limbs and corpses over many of which cloaks and ground-sheets had been thrown to hide the fixed stare of their distorted features. In spite of the heat no one thought for a moment of covering them with soil.



"The centre or High Street of Guillemont after it was taken [by the British]."

The village of Guillemont was distinguished from the landscape around it only because the shell-holes there were of a whiter color by reason of the houses which had been ground to powder. Guillemont railway station lay in front of us. It was smashed to bits like a child's plaything. Delville Wood, reduced to matchwood, was farther behind. Day had scarcely dawned when an English flying-man descended on us in a steep spin and circled round incessantly like a bird of prey, while we made for our holes and cowered there. Nevertheless, the observer's sharp eyes must have spied us out, for a siren sounded its deep, long-drawn notes above us at short intervals. After a little while it appeared that a battery had received the signal. One heavy shell after another came at us on a flat

trajectory with incredible fury. We crouched in our refuges and could do nothing. Now and then we lit a cigar and threw it away again. Every moment we expected a rush of earth to bury us. The sleeve of Schmidt's coat was torn by a big splinter.

At the third shot the occupant of the next hole to mine was buried by a terrific explosion. We dug him out instantly, but the weight of earth had killed him. His face had fallen in and looked like a death's-head. It was the volunteer Simon. Tribulation had made him wise. Whenever in the course of the day, when airmen were about, any one stirred from his cover, Simon was heard scolding and his warning fist appeared from behind the ground-sheet that curtained his earth.

At three in the afternoon the men came in from the left flank and said they could stick it no longer as their shelters were shot to bits. It cost me all my callousness to get them back to their posts.

Just before ten at night the left flank of the regimental front was heavily shelled, and after twenty minutes we came in for it too. In a brief space we were completely covered in dust and smoke, and yet most of the hits were just in front or just behind. While this hurricane was raging I went along my platoon front. The men were standing, rifle in hand, as though carved in stone, their eyes fixed on the ground in front of them. Now and then by the light of a rocket I saw the gleam of helmet after helmet, bayonet after bayonet, and I was filled with pride at commanding this handful of men that might very likely be pounded into the earth but could not be conquered. It is in such moments that the human spirit triumphs over the mightiest demonstrations of material force. The fragile body, steeled by the will, stands up to the most terrific punishment.

Sergeant-major H., the unfortunate rat-catcher of Monchy, who was with the platoon on our left, intended to fire a white Verey light. By mistake he fired a red one, and this signal was taken up on all sides. At once our barrage came down to a tune which delighted us. One shell after another went howling over our heads and crashed in sparks and splinters over the ground in front of us. A mixture of dust, suffocating gases, and vaporous exhalations of corpses flung high in the air was blown back on us from the shell-holes. After this orgy of destruction, the fire returned to its customary level and stayed there all the night and the next day. One man in a moment of agitation had released the whole mighty machinery of war.

H. remained what he was, an unlucky fellow. That same night he shot a Verey light into the leg of his boot while loading the pistol, and had to be carried back severely burnt. Next day it rained hard, and we were not sorry. With the laying of the dust the parched feeling was relieved and the great clusters of blue-bottles which the sun had brought out were driven away. I sat nearly all day in front of my earth on the ground, smoking, and eating, too, with appetite, in spite of my surroundings.

The next morning, Fusilier Knicke of my platoon got a bullet from somewhere through the chest. It hit the spine too and paralysed his legs. When I went to see him he was lying in one of the shelter-holes quite resigned. In the evening when he was being carried back he had a leg broken on one of the many occasions when his bearers had to take cover from the shell-fire. He died at the dressing-station.



At mid-day a man of my platoon got me to have a shot at a single Englishman in Guillemont railway station. When I looked I saw hundreds of English hurrying forward along a shallow communication trench. They were not particularly upset by the rifle-fire we could bring to bear on them. This sight showed the unequal terms on which we fought, for if we had ventured on anything like it our men we would have been shot to pieces in a few minutes.

While on our side not a captive balloon was to be seen, on the English side there were thirty at once over one spot, observing every movement with argus eyes and at once directing a hail of iron upon it. In the evening a big shell-splinter came hurtling for my stomach, but fortunately it was pretty well spent and fell to the ground after striking the buckle of my belt.

Two members of an English ration-party who had lost their way appeared at dusk on No. 1 platoon front. Both were shot down at point-blank range. One of them fell half into the sunken road, while his legs remained on the top of the ditch. None of the men would take prisoners, for how could we get them through the barrage? It was bad enough on our own without prisoners to see to.

Towards one in the morning I was roused from a confused sleep by Schmidt. I jumped nervously and seized my rifle. It was our relief. We handed over what there was to hand over, and departed with all speed from this corner of hell.

We had scarcely reached the shallow communication trench when the first group of shrapnel burst among us. The man in front of me reeled from a wound in the wrist from which the blood spurted. He wanted to fall out and lie down. I caught him by the arm and got him to his feet in spite of his dazed condition, and did not let him go till I handed him over in the dressing-station near battle headquarters.

It was hot work in both of the sunken roads, and we got quite out of breath. The tightest corner of all was when we found ourselves in a hollow where shrapnel and light shells were coming over all the time . . . Brrruch! Brrruch! the rain of iron crashed round us, scattering a shower of sparks in the darkness. Whoee! Another volley! We stopped, breathless, for I knew a fraction of a second in advance, from the sharpening intensity of sound, that the descending curve of the shell would end just where I stood. Immediately after there was a heavy crash at my very feet and the soft earth was flung high. This one of all others was a dud.

A better opportunity could not be wished for making the influence of an officer tell. Everywhere relieved and reliefs were hurrying through the shells and the darkness, some of them utterly lost and dazed with excitement and exhaustion. Everywhere voices rang out, in command, or in monotonous supplication from the shell-holes where the wounded were left to their fate.

As we rushed by, I gave information to those who had lost their way, pulled men out of shell-holes, threatened to shoot any who wanted to fall out, kept shouting my name to keep my men together, and at last, as though by a miracle, I got my platoon back to Combles.

From Combles we still had to march beyond Saily and the Government farm to the forest of Hennois, where we were to bivouac; and now our exhausted condition made itself felt in earnest. We shuffled bitterly along the road with hanging heads. Motor cars and ammunition columns crowded us to the ditch. In a kind of nervous distemper I was convinced that the transport rattling by pushed us to one side so roughly only out of spite, and more than once I surprised myself with my finger on the trigger of my revolver.

When our march was done we still had tents to pitch before we could throw ourselves down on the hard ground. During our time under canvas in this forest bivouac there were heavy downfalls of rain. The straw in the tents began to rot, and several of the men went sick. We five company officers were little put out by the dampness. Every evening we sat on our kit-bags under canvas, behind a battery of bottles.

We went back to Combles after three days, where I occupied, with my platoon, four smallish cellars. The first morning it was comparatively quiet, so I took a little walk through the devastated gardens and plundered an espalier of some delicious peaches. On my wanderings I got into a house surrounded by tall hedges, where a lover of beautiful old things must have lived. On the walls of the rooms there was a collection of painted plates, such as they love in northern France, holywater basins, copperplate engravings, and Nativities carved in wood. There were stores of old china, and lovely old leather bindings were scattered about the floor, a fine old *Don Quixote* among them. It was a pity to leave all these treasures to destruction.

When I got back I found that the men had marauded the garden on their own account, and had now made a stew of bully and vegetables, in which there were potatoes, beans, carrots, artichokes, and many kinds of green vegetables. While we were eating, a shell hit the house, and three fell close by. But we paid little attention, for the surfeit of such sensations had blunted us. The house must have seen some casualties already, for a newly-carved cross stood on a heap of debris in the middle room, with a list of names carved in the wood. At noon on the next day I went to the house of the collector of china, and got a volumn of the illustrated *Petit Journal*. It is to be found in nearly every French household, and it abounds in villainous bad taste. I then established myself in a room that still held together, lit a small fire of broken furniture, and began to read. I often had to shake my head, for I had stumbled on the numbers printed while the Fashoda affair(5) was on. At about seven I turned the last page and went into a little room where the men were cooking at a little fireplace.

I had scarcely joined them when there was a loud report [explosion] in front of the door of the house, and at the same moment I felt a violent blow on my left calf. Shouting out that I was hit, I jumped down the cellar steps with my pipe still in my mouth.

A light was lit in a moment and the matter looked into. There was a ragged hole in my putties, from which blood ran on to the ground. On the other side there was the round swelling of a shrapnel bullet under the skin. The men bound me up and took me under fire to the catacombs, where our surgeon-major-general took me in hand. Lieutenant Wetje, who happened to be passing by, held my head while the bullet was cut out with knife and scissors. The surgeon congratulated me, for the bullet has passed between the skin and the fibula without any injury to the bone. 'Habent sua fata libelli et balli(6),' remarked the old corps student with a grunt, as he handed me over to an orderly to be dressed.

To my great joy many of my men came to say goodbye to me while I lay on a stretcher in a recess of the catacombs waiting for dusk. My honored colonel, von Oppen, too, paid me a visit.



"A scene in one of the German trenches in front of Guillemont, showing the havoc wrought by the British Bombardment."

When evening came I was carried to the outskirts of the town and put on a Red Cross wagon. The driver, without paying any heed to the cries of the occupants, went at full speed over the paved road, for it was being shelled, and neither shell-holes nor other obstructions could stop him. Finally we were taken on by motor to the village of Fins, and laid in the church, which was already crowded with wounded. A

nurse told me that over 30,000 wounded had passed through Fins in the last few days. In the face of such figures I could not think much of the wound in my leg. From there I got to St. Quentin, whose windows shook in the incessant thunder of battle, and thence again in a hospital train to Gera, where I received the best possible attention in the garrison hospital.

I heard the subsequent fate of my company from friends in the other battalions who were wounded after I was. It was put back into the line on the day after I got my wound, and suffered severe losses marching up and also during ten hours' drum-fire. It was then attacked from all sides owing to the large gaps in the line. Little Schmidt, Fähnrich, Wohlgemut, Lieutenants Vogel Sievers--in fact, nearly the whole company--had died fighting to the last. A few survivors only, Lieutenant Wetje among them, were taken prisoners. Not one man got back to Combles to tell the tale of this heroic fight that was fought to the finish with such bitterness. Even the English army command made honorable mention of the handful of men who held out to the last near Guillemont. I was no doubt glad of the chance shot that withdrew me as if by a miracle from certain death on the very eve of the engagement. At the same time, strange as it may sound, I would willingly have shared the fate of my comrades and stood with them shoulder to shoulder while the iron dice of war rolled over us. Instead of this, I kept the unquenchable fame of these men as my reminder, in the worst moments of the sanguinary conflicts that were yet in store, that I must show myself always worthy to have been their comrade . . .

It was the days at Guillemont that first made me aware of the overwhelming effects of the war of material. We had to adapt ourselves to an entirely new phase of war. The communications between the troops and the staff, between the artillery and the liaison officers, were utterly crippled by the terrific fire. Despatch-carriers failed to get through the hail of metal, and telephone wires were no sooner laid than they were shot into pieces. Even light-signalling was put out of action by the clouds of smoke and dust that hung over the field of battle. There was a zone of a kilometre behind the front line where explosives held absolute sway.

Even the regimental staff only knew exactly where we had been and how the line ran when we came back after three days and told them. Under such circumstances accuracy of artillery fire was out of the question. We were also entirely in the dark about the English line, though often, without our knowing it, it was only a few metres from us. Sometimes a Tommy, feeling his way from one shell-hole to another like an ant along a track in the sand, landed in one that we occupied, and *vice versa*, for our front line consisted merely of isolated and unconnected bits that were easily mistaken.

Once seen, the landscape is an unforgettable one. In this neighborhood of villages, meadows, woods, and fields there was literally not a bush or a tiniest blade of grass to be seen. Every hand's-breadth of ground had been churned up again and again; trees had been uprooted, smashed, and ground to touch-wood, the houses blown to bits and turned to dust; hills had been levelled and the arable land made a desert.

And yet the strangest thing of all was not the horror of the landscape in itself, but the fact that these scenes, such as the world had never known before, were fashioned by men who intended them to be a decisive end to the war. Thus all the frightfulness that the mind of man could devise was brought into the field; and there, where lately there had been the idyllic picture of rural peace, there was as faithful a picture of the soul of scientific war. In earlier wars, certainly, towns and villages had been burned, but what was that compared with this sea of craters dug out by machines? For even in this fantastic desert there was the sameness of the machine-made article. A shell-hole strewn with bully-bins, broken weapons, fragments of uniform, and dud shells, with one or two dead bodies on its edge . . . this was the never-changing scene that surrounded each one of all these hundreds of thousands of men. And it seemed that man, on this landscape he had himself created, became different, more mysterious and hardy and callous than in any previous battle. The spirit and the tempo of the fighting altered, and after the battle of the Somme the war had its own peculiar impress that

distinguished it from all other wars. After this battle the German soldier wore the steel helmet, and in his features there were chiselled the lines of an energy stretched to the utmost pitch, lines that future generations will perhaps find as fascinating and imposing as those of many heads of classical or Renaissance times.

For I cannot too often repeat, a battle was no longer an episode that spent itself in blood and fire; it was a condition of things that dug itself in remorselessly week after week and even month after month. What was a man's life in this wilderness whose vapor was laden with the stench of thousands upon thousands of decaying bodies? Death lay in ambush for each one in every shell-hole, merciless, and making one merciless in turn. Chivalry here took a final farewell. It had to yield to the heightened intensity of war, just as all fine and personal feeling has to yield when machinery gets the upper hand. The Europe of today appeared here for the first time on the field of battle.

The terrible losses, out of all proportion to the breadth of front attacked, were principally due to the old Prussian obstinacy with which the tactics of the line were pursued to their logical conclusion.

One battalion after another was crowded up into a front line already over-manned, and in a few hours pounded to bits.

It was a long while before the folly of contesting worthless strips of ground was recognized. It was finally given up and the principle of a mobile defense adopted. The last development of this was the elastic distribution of the defense in zones.

Thus it was that there were never again such bitterly-contested engagements as those that for weeks together were fought out round shell-shot woods or undecipherable ruins. The names of the tiniest Picardy hamlets are memorials of heroic battles to which the history of the world can find no parallel. There it was that the dust first drank the blood of our trained and disciplined youth. Those fine qualities which had raised the German race to greatness leapt up once more in dazzling flame and then slowly went out in a sea of mud and blood.

(1) *Lasciate ogni speranza!* : Abandon all hope. Message on the gate of hell as described by Dante in the **Divine Comedy**.

(2) Iron Rations : A minimal food provision carried by the soldier and generally consumed when more nourishing supplies could not be brought up the line. Typically, they consisted of things like sweet tea, canned bully beef, and a handful of biscuits.

(3) Verey lights : Flares used both for signaling and lighting during the night. They came in several colors (e.g. white and red).

(4) Batman : Man-servant.

(5) Fashoda affair : British-French confrontation over the Sudan in 1898.

(6) *Habent sua fata libelli et balli* : [Even] Books and balls have their own destiny. A play on a quote from Roman writer, Terentianus Maurus, *De Literis*.