Sassoon, Memoirs of an Infantry Officer

**A. Part Eight, chap V, pp. 434-5**

By ten o’clock I was above ground again, in charge of a fatigue party. We went half-way back to St. Martin, to an ammunition dump, whence we carried up boxes of trench mortar bombs. I carried a box myself, as the conditions were vile and it seemed the only method of convincing the men that it had to be done. We were out nearly seven hours; it rained all day and the trenches were a morass of glue-like mud. The unmitigated misery of that carrying party was a typical infantry experience of discomfort without actual danger. Even if the ground had been dry the boxes would have been too heavy for most of the men; but we were lucky in one way; the wet weather was causing the artillery to spend an inactive Sunday. It was a yellow corpse-like day, more like November than April, and the landscape was desolate and treeless. What we were doing was quite unexceptional; millions of soldiers endured the same sort of thing and got badly shelled into the bargain. Nevertheless I can believe that my party, staggering and floundering under its loads, would have made an impressive picture of “Despair”. The background, too, was appropriate. We were among the debris of the intense bombardment of ten days before, for we were passing along the Hindenburg Outpost Trench, with its belt of wire (fifty yards deep in places); here and there these rusty jungles had been flattened by tanks. The Outpost Trench was about 200 yards from the Main Trench, which was now our front line. It had been solidly made, ten feet deep, with timbered fire-steps, splayed sides, and timbered steps at intervals to front and rear and two machine-gun emplacements. Now it was wrecked as though by earthquake and eruption. Concrete strong-posts were smashed and tilted sideways; everywhere the chalky sol was pocked and pitted with huge shell-holes; and wherever we looked the mangled effigies of the dead were ou*r memento mori*. Shell-twisted and dismembered, the Germans maintained the violent attitudes in which they had died. The British had mostly been killed by bullets or bombs, so they looked more resigned. But I can remember a pair of hands (nationality unknown) which protruded from the soaked ashen soil like the roots of a tree turned upside down; one hand seemed to be pointing to the sky with an accusing gesture. Each time I passed that place the protest of those figures became more expressive of an appeal to God in defiance of those who made the War. Who made the War? I laughed hysterically as the thought passed through my mud-stained mind. But I only laughed mentally, for my box of Stokes gun ammunition left me no breath to spare for an angry guffaw. And the dead were the dead…

**B. Part Ten, chap VII, pp. 513-4**

It was obvious that the less I said to the Medical Board the better. All the necessary explanations of my mental condition were contributed by David, who had been detailed to give evidence on my behalf. He had a long interview with the doctors while I waited in an ante-room. Listening to their muffled mumblings, I felt several years younger than I’d done two days before. I was now an irresponsible person again, absolved from any obligation to intervene in world affairs. In fact the present performance seemed rather ludicrous, and when David emerged, solemn and concerned, to usher me in, I entered the “Bird Room” assuring myself that I should not ask Jean Jacques Rousseau if birds confabulated or no. The Medical Board consisted of a Colonel, a Major and a Captain. The Captain was a civilian in uniform, and a professional neurologist. The others were elderly Regular Army doctors, and I am inclined to think that their acquaintance with Army Forms exceeded their knowledge of neurology.

When David fidgeted about the ante-room I was replying respectfully to the stereotyped questions of the Colonel, who seemed slightly suspicious and much mystified by my attitude to the War. Was it on religious grounds that I objected to fighting, he inquired. “No, sir, not particularly,” I replied. “Fighting on religious grounds” sounded like some sort of joke about the Crusades. “Do you consider yourself qualified to decide when the War should stop?” was his next question. Realizing that he was only trying to make me talk rubbish, I evaded him by admitting that I hadn’t thought about my qualifications, which wasn’t true….Once I caught the neurologist’s eye, which signaled sympathetic understanding, I thought. Anyhow, the Colonel (having demonstrated his senior rank by asking me an adequate number of questions) willingly allowed the Captain to suggest that they couldn’t do better then send me to Slateford Hospital. So it was decide that I was suffering from shell-shock… Next morning I went to Edinburgh. David, who had been detailed to act as my escort, missed the train and arrived at Slateford War Hospital several hours later than I did. And with my arrival at Slateford War Hospital this volume can conveniently be concluded.