Sassoon, Memoirs of an Infantry Officer

Part V, chap. IV, pp. 376-7

About a week afterwards I received two letters from Dottrell, written on consecutive days, but delivered only by the same post. The first one began: “The old Batt. is having a rough time. We were up in the front a week ago, and lost 200 men in three days. The aid-post, a bit of a dug-out hastily made, was blown in. At the time it contained 5 wounded men , 5 stretcher-bearers, and the doctor. All were killed except the Doc. who was buried in the debris. He was so badly shaken when dug out that he had to be sent down, and will probably be in England by now. It is a hell of a place up there. The Batt. is attacking to-day. I hope they have better luck. The outlook is not rosy. Very glad to hear you are sitting up and taking nourishment. A lot of our best men have been knocked out recently. We shall want another Battn. All the boys send their love and best wishes in which your humble heartily joins.”

The second letter, which I chanced to open and read first, was the worst of the two.

“Dear Kangaroo…Just a line to let you know what rotten bad luck we had yesterday. We attacked Ginchy with a very weak Battn. (about 300) and captured the place but were forced out of half of it – due to the usual thing. Poor Edmunds was killed leading his Coy. Also Perrin. Durley was badly wounded, in neck and chest, I think. It is terrible to think of these two splendid chaps being cut off, but I hope Durley pulls through. Asbestos Bill died of wounds. Ferby, who was O.C. Bombers, very badly hit and not expected to live. Several others you don’t know also got killed. Only two officers got back without being hit. C.S.M. Miles and Danby both killed. The Battn. is *not now* over strength for rations! The rest of the Brigade suffered in proportion. Will write later. Very busy.”

Part 4, chap. IV, p. 351

Amiens was eleven miles away and the horses none too sound; but Dottrell had arranged for us to motor the last seven of the miles – the former Quartermaster of our battalion (who had been Quartermaster at Fourth Army Headquarters ever since the Fourth Army had existed) – having promised to lend us his car. So there was nothing wrong with the world as the five of us jogged along, and I allowed myself a momentary illusion that we were riding clean away from the War. Looking across a spacious and untroubled landscape chequered with ripening corn and blood-red clover, I wondered how that calm and beneficent light could be spreading as far as the battle zone. But a Staff car overtook us, and it whirled importantly past in a cloud of dust I caught sight of a handcuffed German prisoner – soon to provide material for an optimistic paragraph in Corps Intelligence Summary, and to add his story to the omniscience of the powers who now issued operation orders with the asserting that we were “pursuing a beaten enemy”. Soon we were at Querrieux, a big village cozily over-populated by the Fourth Army Staff. As we passed the General’s white chateau Dottrell speculated ironically on the average income of his personal staff, adding that they must suffer terribly from insomnia with so many guns firing fifteen miles away. Leaving our horses to make the most of a Fourth Army feed, we went indoors to pay our respects to the opulent Quartermaster, who had retired from battalion duties after the First Battle of Ypres. He assured us that he could easily spare his car for a few hours since he had the use of two; whereupon Dottrell said he’d been wondering how he managed to get on with only one car.

Part 4, chap. III, pp. 341-2

The Germans had evidently been digging when we attacked, and had left their packs and other equipment ranged along the reverse edge of the trench. I stared about me; the smoke-drifted twilight was alive with intense movement, and there was a wild strangeness in the scene which somehow excited me. Our men seemed a bit out of hand and I couldn’t see any of the responsible N.C.O.s; some of the troops were firing excitedly at the Wood ; others were rummaging in the German packs. Ferby said that we were being sniped from the trees on both sides. Mametz Wood was a menacing wall of gloom, and now an outburst of rapid thudding explosions began from that direction. There was a sap from the Quadrangle to the Wood, and along this the Germans were bombing. In all this confusion I formed the obvious notion that we ought to be deepening the trench. Daylight would be on us at once, and we were along a slope exposed to enfilade fire from the Wood. I told Fernby to make the men dig for all they were worth, and went to the right with Kendle. The Germans had left a lot of shovels, but we were making no use of them. Two tough-looking privates were disputing the ownership of a pair of field-glasses, so I pulled out my pistol and urged them, with ferocious objurations, to chuck all that fooling and dig. I seemed to be getting pretty handy with my pistol, I thought for the conditions in the Quadrangle Trench were giving me a sort of angry impetus. In some places it was only a foot deep, and already men were lying wounded and killed by sniping. There were high-booted German bodies, too, and in the blear beginning of daylight they seemed as much the victims of the catastrophe as the men who had attacked them. As I stepped over one of the Germans an impulse made me lift him up from the miserable ditch. Propped against a bank, his blond face was undisfigured, except by the mud which I wiped from his eyes and mouth with my coat sleeve. He’d evidently been killed while digging, for his tunic was knotted loosely about his shoulders. He didn’t look to be more than eighteen. Hoisting him a little higher, I thought what a gentle face he had, an remembered that this was the first time I’d ever touched one of our enemies with my hands. Perhaps I had some dim sense of the futility which had put an end to this good-looking youth. Anyhow I hand’nt expected the Battle of the Somme to be quite like this…Kendle, who had been trying to do something for a badly wounded man, now rejoined me, and we continued, mostly on all fours, along the dwindling trench. We passed no one until we came to a bombing post – three serious-minded men who said that no one had been further than that yet. Being in an exploring frame of mind, I took a bag of bombs and crawled another sixty or seventy yards with Kendle close behind me. The trench became a shallow groove and ended where the ground overlooked a little valley along which there was a light railway line. We stared across at the Wood. From the other side of the valley came an occasional rifle shot, and a helmet bobbed up for a moment. Kendle remarked that from that point anyone could see into the whole of our trench on the slope behind us. I said we must have a strong-post here and told him to go back for the bombers and a Lewis gun. I felt adventurous and it seemed as if Kendle ad I were having great fun together. Kendle thought so too. The helmet bobbed up again. “I’ll just have a shot at him”, he said, wriggling away from the crumbling bank which gave us cover. At this moment Fernby appeared with two men and a Lewis gun. Kendle was half kneeling against some broken ground; I remember seeing him push his tin hat back from his forehead and then raise himself to take aim. After firing once he looked at us with a lively smile; a second later he fell sideways. A blotchy mark showed where the bullet had hit him just above the eyes.