



Letters to Helen(Annotated): Impressions of an Artist on the Western Front

Keith Henderson

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contents of their haversacks.

June 25.

[Sidenote: READY FOR THE PUSH]

We are in a funny state of waiting for something to happen. Rumours flying about all the time. We live on them--a bite off one, a slice off another, a merry-thought off another. And so we learn the news of the world. Papers when we get a chance of going into some town, and then only two days old, or else French, which are very scrappy. Often we get no news at all for three or four days, except what some passing ambulance will vouchsafe. And usually they don't really know much. So when there's an extra heavy strafing or an extra quiet lull we learn that the entire German staff has been captured, or Rheims evacuated, or Holland sunk, or something else equally strange. The M.G.'s were hammering away furiously last night, and the whole line was lovely with star shells hanging like arc lights in the air, and then dropping slowly to earth. They light up everything like immense moons.

June 28.

Starting from the farm where the horses are hidden at nine o'clock last night (twenty-one, as we call it out here), after a hot meal, we marched through Bedfordshire-like country, along ascending paths, to the bottom of a wooded hill where a motor lorry with picks and shovels met us. Thence along a narrow muddy path through a wood. The path circles round the hill. The east side of the hill faces the Boche front line. It was still quite light. The undergrowth thick and dank. Our fellows very merry. The Boches know this path, which is pitted with shell holes. They shell the place by day, oddly enough, but hardly ever by night.

It was raining gently. Turtle-doves continually crossed our way. I felt much intrigued. A very weird wood. The guns crashed lethargically, intermittently.

When we got round to the east side of the hill, the R.E.'s, who were acting as guides, comforters, and friends, showed us what we were to do: to dig a line of trench 6 feet deep, and as narrow as might be, for some cables that were to lead into a very important set of dug-outs for certain pink and gold people.

The dug-outs are deep in the side of the hill. It's what is called an advanced H.Q.--_i.e._, when the Push begins, the gilded ones will crawl in and rap out messages to the various commanders, and watch the battle. The R.E. officers showed us what was wanted, and each man put in his pick or shovel to mark the line. This is the procedure: each pick or shovel about 2 yards apart, and each man delves on that spot till he is 6 feet down. If it were not done like this, then (when it became too dark to see) the line would be lost. This only applies fully, of course, when you are in woods or other cover. Digging isn't really a cavalry job. But what of that?

[Sidenote: TRENCH DIGGING]

Well, now we've started. It's about ten o'clock, and getting very dim. Drizzle, drizzle, drizzle. Humphry and I creep up (neglectful of duty) to the top of the hill. A tiny tower there, smashed to pieces, but beautiful in the twilight. We creep about amongst shell craters. Presently a strange sweet odour. Flowers? Impossible. We stare into the dusk. An exquisite faint scent all around us. Surely, surely, thyme? Yes, sweet-williams, thyme. Evidently there has been a cottage here, but now only a mass of rubble and beams and glass to show where once it was. Sweet-williams, thyme, and later some Canterbury bells. Another drea

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