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OFERTA

BRITISH ARTISTS AT THE FRONT



I.

C. R. W. NEVINSON

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With Introductions by

CAMPBELL DODGSON

and

C. E. MONTAGUE

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THE ARTIST

CHRISTOPHER RICHARD WYNNE NEVINSON was born on August 13th, 1889. He entered the S. John's Wood School of Art in 1907, and subsequently profited at the Slade School by the strict training in draughtsmanship, which is the good Slade tradition, but probably even more by the stimulus of mutual criticism and interchange of thought within the group of gifted students who were his contemporaries in 1909-10. His career as an independent artist opened with the second decade of this century. In the portrait of himself, painted in 1911, he adopted for the moment the manner of a *quattrocento* Florentine. This excellent likeness of seven years ago is welcome here, for the features are those of the painter of to-day, but as a specimen of his painting it is far from typical. That Mr. Nevinson, the avowed foe of mediævalist and pseudo-primitive revivals, should ever have posed as a Botticelli must surprise those who have known him first in the character that entitles him to a leading place in the present series, as a painter of the great war.

The face is that of an earnest man, who will confront the realities of life, think out its problems for himself, and follow no leader without being

sure of the rightness of the cause for which he battles. He has gone through much since his early Slade and New English Art Club days, and the influence of that phase of modern French art, which derives from Cézanne and Van Gogh, has helped to shape opinions formed originally on Impressionism. It can be no reproach that in the impressionable years between twenty and twenty-five his creed underwent profound modifications. The first Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries, a memorable afternoon at Clovis Sagot's picture shop in the Rue Laffitte, above all a year or more of study at Paris in 1912-13, and the personal acquaintance of M. Picasso and other leaders in the new movement, converted Mr. Nevinson to the Expressionist theory with its doctrine of significant form, in opposition to the popular school with the imitative representation of nature as its chief aim. For a time, on his return from Paris, Mr. Nevinson, who was already experimenting with the geometrical formula of Cubism, came strongly under the influence of the Italian Futurists, led by Marinetti and Severini, who startled London by their first exhibition in 1912, and carried on an active propaganda during the two years before the war among English artistic groups of "rebel" tendency. Futurism was an explosive force. More than one of these groups was shattered by it; but the story of their disintegration and the speedy formation of new societies out of the fragments of the old is of more interest to the artists themselves and the small initiated circle that follows their movements attentively than to the general reader. It is sufficient to say that Mr. Nevinson has remained the most faithful and consistent of the English adherents of Futurism. He adopted for a time some of the more extravagant practices of the school. He has made audacious experiments with kaleidoscopic patterns of dazzling colour, which have an exhilarating effect upon some people and goad others to fury and gnashing of teeth. Gay colour has delighted unsophisticated man in every age of the world, and there is surely no need for pharisaical indignation and violent abuse of artists whose work they dislike on the part of those who are too old or solemn to feel a frank and childlike enjoyment of these brilliant creations. There are many who do, and the gratification of their harmless pleasure is no crime. Mr. Nevinson has not confined himself to paint, nor to the customary two dimensions, in producing his novel effects. It is not his habit to plaster the surface of his pictures with pieces of wallpaper, tram-tickets, and tinfoil, but he has made interesting attempts at combining colour and form, and complicating his planes, by modelling curved shapes in plaster, and letting their graduated projections and their cast shadows help to form the total impression of interesting and attractive pattern.

But Mr. Nevinson has always been too sane to let himself be carried away to extremes like enthusiastic doctrinaires, who end by becoming

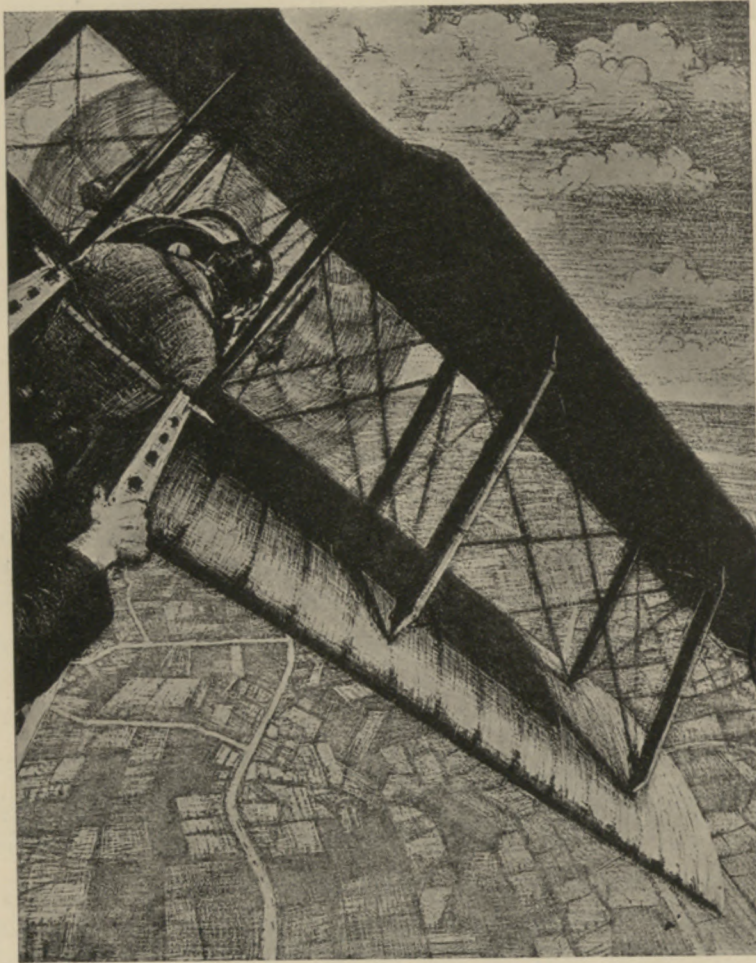
unintelligible, except to themselves and a small initiated clique. He has not forsworn the practice of Cubism and Futurism, but he has adapted these methods successfully to the treatment of subjects which interest the average man. "Illustration" is anathematized by some of these extremists. Mr. Nevinson has the good sense to see that purely abstract art is a thing which few can understand. The public will never be persuaded that an apparently arbitrary arrangement of shapes and colours, forming just a curious and lop-sided pattern of variegated triangles, arcs and parallelograms, is a picture at all. With the next stage, the puzzle picture, in which the spectator has to cudgel his brains and tire his eyes to recognize an alleged subject, aided perhaps by an explanatory catalogue, it is not much better pleased. But Mr. Nevinson has adapted the methods, which by now have become second nature with him, to a subject of enthralling interest to all of us, the tremendous subject of war. In his essay entitled "Modern War," to which I acknowledge my indebtedness for much of what I have already written, Mr. P. G. Konody has explained, in language which cannot be bettered, Mr. Nevinson's attitude towards war and the suitability of his methods to the painting of modern warfare, in which mechanism plays such an enormous part. Were there ever objects more appropriate for geometrical composition, for statement in terms of angles, curves and cubes, than guns and gun-carriages, lorries, planks and sleepers, aeroplanes, search-lights, the parallel rifles of a line of troops on the march? The very steel helmets of the men in the trenches are so many ready-made arcs. And what subject more tempting than the action of a bomb-thrower to a painter imbued with the Futurist principle that painting should be not merely static, representing movement interrupted at one particular moment, like the lover's unaccomplished kiss on the Grecian Urn of Keats's ode, but dynamic, representing movement still in progress, with its achievement foreshadowed by a succession of progressive, anticipatory curves? But Mr. Nevinson does not confine himself to showing us the implements and apparatus of warfare as the munition works turn them out or transport conveys them to the zone of war. He gives us dramatic and moving pictures of war itself, "the real thing." He is convinced that the proper subject for a modern painter is the life of the time in which he lives, and the one thing of supreme importance in the lifetime of Mr. Nevinson, as of all of us, since 1914, has been the war. Before 1914 he could paint with entire appropriateness chimneys and cranes, the gaunt high walls of factories in grimy industrial towns, barges and wharves and docks. These were among the hard and essential facts of early twentieth century life, the environment, which for good or evil, was shaping the lives of millions of twentieth century men and women. But war came, and he had to do more than this to keep abreast

of the times. He played his part, first, by going to Flanders in the autumn of 1914, as a motor mechanic and ambulance driver, moving along the French, British, and Belgian lines, between the coast and Ypres. Later, he became attached to the French Army, and then worked as a hospital orderly at Dunkirk and in London, till in January, 1916, he was invalided out of the army owing to rheumatic fever. In his enforced leisure he turned all this varied experience to account by painting the remarkable collection of pictures which were exhibited at the Leicester Galleries in the autumn of 1916, and reproduced in the monograph to which Mr. Konody's admirable essay serves for introduction. There was a general agreement among soldiers and civilians, art-critics, and plain men who professed to know nothing about art, that these pictures showed what modern war was like with unexampled earnestness and truth. These were the pictures to make men come forward and do their duty for their country. They were full of life, manliness and force; eloquent, interesting, and intelligible to all who were not made blind by prejudice.

The great impression made by this first group of paintings of the war led to the choice of Mr. Nevinson, among the few artists hitherto allowed by War Office regulations to go to the Front expressly to paint or draw. He went out at the end of July, 1917, and worked chiefly in the region of the Third Army, the region made famous last November by Sir Julian Byng's advance towards Cambrai. He added to his previous experience of war by repeatedly taking part in flights by aeroplane. He came back, not indeed with a full sketch book, for that is not his method, but with his memory richly stored. His experiences are never presented in a crude form, but pass through the mill of an active brain and a vivid imagination. They are new creations, the result of deep feeling and hard thought, and they owe to this selective, refining process the interest and force which are wanting in much of the old-fashioned painting of war, with its journalistic or theatrical superficiality.

The accompanying reproductions of Mr. Nevinson's pictures, which were painted between September and November, 1917, tell their own tale about his powers as a colourist. I may add that it is his habit, since 1916, to repeat some of his compositions in the form of dry-points, which should engage the serious attention of collectors, for he is the pioneer of a new movement in English graphic art. In lithography also, which he first attempted in 1912, he produced in December, 1916, some remarkable prints, one of which, "Dawn at Southwark," must rank among the best of recent lithographs. Some of these war pictures are to be repeated shortly, either on copper or on stone.

CAMPBELL DODGSON.



WAR AEROPLANES

MR. NEVINSON has a passion, as everyone should, for the aeroplane. He seems to see it most often from its own height in the air, or some other. To infantrymen on the ground an aeroplane seems to come out as a star does; a moment ago it was not there, and now it is clear, alone or flying with others in some formation elastic and yet systematic, like that of wild geese on their travels. Sometimes two solitaries will be seen to converge from opposite points of the compass, the one pursued by a little constellation of white puffs of smoke, the other by a less white bevy of puffs. Then everybody off duty stares up for the conflict. You will have often seen two house-flies meet in the air. There is a sudden increase in their speed, and they whirl about each other indistinguishably

for some moments and then break off. An aeroplane duel may be somewhat like that, but not quite. The separate path of each plane, unlike that of each fly, can always be traced. But there is the same concentration of mutual manœuvring within a small space; you get the same impression, right or wrong, of suddenly increased speed; and often there is the same abrupt break away.

The man in the trench sees the two incensed dragon-flies speeding round circuit after circuit of one small circle, each seeming to chase the tail of the other. Suddenly one of the two checks and falls. Sometimes it rolls down sideways, turning over and over as children roll themselves down slopes of grass. Sometimes it tumbles head-first—not quite head-long, but along a corkscrew line, fluttering down slowly like a dropped scrap of paper, with more of its wings showing at one moment and less at another. Sometimes it just falls headlong, like Lucifer, straight all the way to the earth. It may change on the way into a column of very black smoke and turbid flame. However it falls, if it does not take fire, its loss is not certain until it has crashed on the earth. Half-way or three-quarter-way down it may pause, flatten out on its wings, and make off at the lower level, or pull out a little and climb up again to renew the encounter.

The infantryman seldom knows what has happened—whether the pilot was hit, or the engine, or whether a checked fall was a ruse. The man or men in the plane can so seldom be seen that you do not, it must be confessed, feel all the exultant and poignant sympathy that you feel with comrades fighting near you on the earth. The plane and the will that controls it make up, together, something less human—a purposeful comet, or a demigod's car. Its domination of its element seems so serene that you scarcely even imagine it leaving the ground with effort—with a mechanic lugging round a propeller blade and calling "Contact, sir" to the pilot, and then the grass and grit blown furiously back behind the machine as the brown propeller changes into a circle of quivering haze, and then the steady ascent of the great spiral staircase of air. But sometimes the airman's impersonality suddenly ends. You may meet unexpectedly two flushed, bareheaded boys, clothed in leather, coming away from a rather tumbled assemblage of wood and metal in a field and asking urgently for the nearest telephone. During the battle of Arras the pilot of a two-seated machine was shot through the right leg far over the enemy's lines. The thigh-bone was broken and he bled badly. But he brought his plane down safely, well in the rear of our line. He had been taken out when I saw him and lay on the grass, with a greenish-grey face, alternately puffing a cigarette and groaning, but with a look of beatitude, having succeeded in life.

The airman delights our infantry most when he comes down to fight the enemy in their trench. It is rather like a swallow's hunt for flies low over a stream—first the wavy large curves high above our lines, as if the bird were undulating idly, in caprice, and then the swift dart downward and the skimming rush along the trench, with the machine-gun tapping, and the rise to sheer away for another foray and another and another. Mr. Nevinson's drawings evoke such recollections and others—of an enemy plane, immensely high above a village behind our lines on a clear night, traversing the white under-side of a moonlit cloud like a fly crawling on a white-washed ceiling, and then the swish of the falling bomb, the little splutter of flame from the ground under the trees, the shriek of a wounded civilian and the slow crash of boughs collapsing, and then the re-established stillness. And of a flying officer's mess ; the dissimilar regimental badges and details of dress ; the dissimilar, sharply individualised men ; the remarkable number of pet animals ; the evening papers miraculously fresh from London ; the great twilight field outside, to which belated members of the mess are returning or not returning ; the frequency of splendid decorations won in youth—there are boys who will go home after the war with the D.S.O. or M.C., or both, to be freshmen at Oxford or Cambridge, and live in meet fear of proctors. A Flying mess is unlike most other messes ; more casual, more mercurial, with something in it perhaps of the quality of flying itself, which, like the Dauphin's war-horse, is " all air and fire."

In a few years people may come to look at our aeroplanes of to-day as we look at stumpy, naïve, mediæval cannon, or at the innocent Puffing Billy of Stephenson, with a kind of affectionate amusement. Still, youth is best ; now is the time, while flying is young, to look at aircraft and to draw them, it being our luck to have seen man make himself free of the air in our day ; in this navigation, at least, we are of the age of Columbus. Any people who look at these drawings a century hence may feel that they are wiser than we, and yet that we had the best of it—we and not they had the visions of the prime.

G. H. Q., France,
January, 1918.

OVER THE LINES

(The property of the Imperial War Museum)

Roads and a village are seen on the ground below, and behind the returning British aeroplane are the white bursts of protective British anti-aircraft or "Archie" shells. As a rule the colour of the puffs of smoke which surround or follow a high-flying aeroplane over the front line is, to the naked eye, the chief means of knowing whether it is German or English.

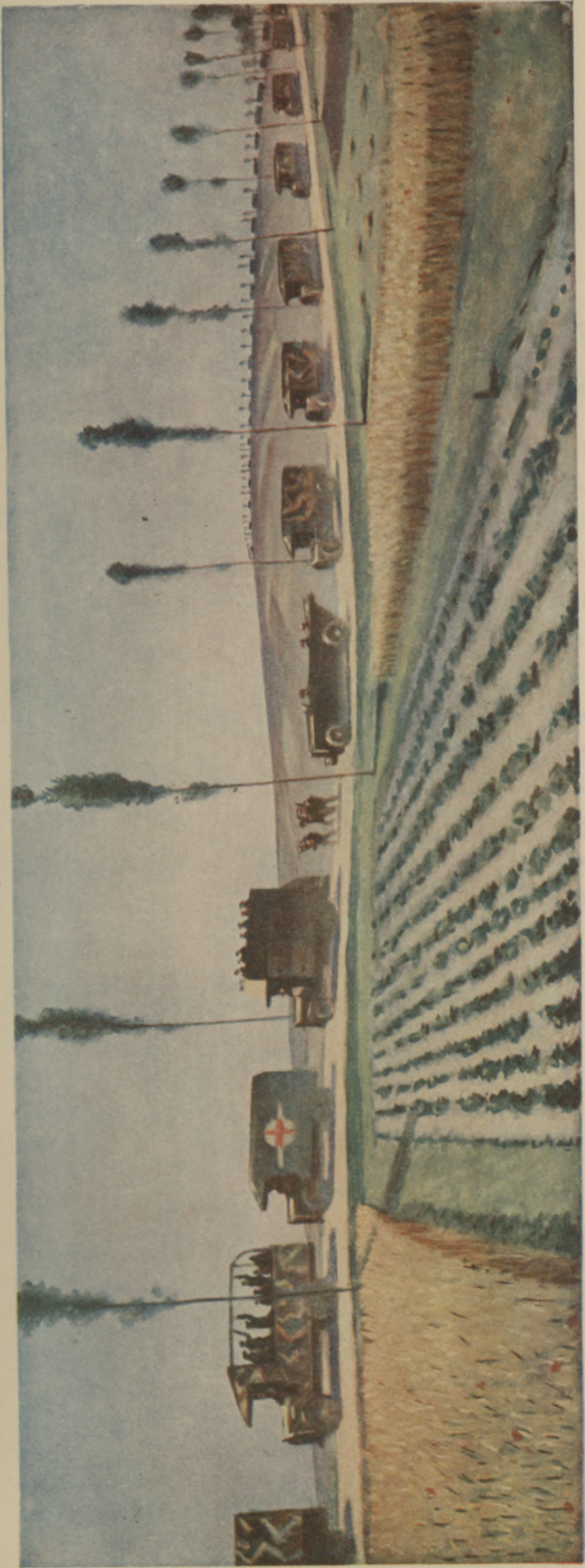


II

THE ROADS OF FRANCE

(Purchased by the Committee of the Canadian War Memorials Fund)


On some of the roads behind the front the war traffic looks like an endless moving frieze, or like a river flowing, always different and always continuous, past the fixed scenery of its banks. The four pictures here show four stages of the approach to the front line. In the first, with its standing crops and unmarred trees, there is no effect of enemy shell fire. In the second the zone of agriculture has been passed, everybody is helmeted, aeroplanes are at work, and the area of frontal light railways and the smaller and ruder construction dumps has been reached.



III

THE ROADS OF FRANCE—*continued*

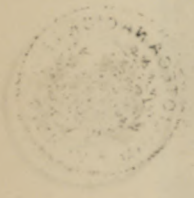
(Purchased by the Committee of the Canadian War Memorials Fund)



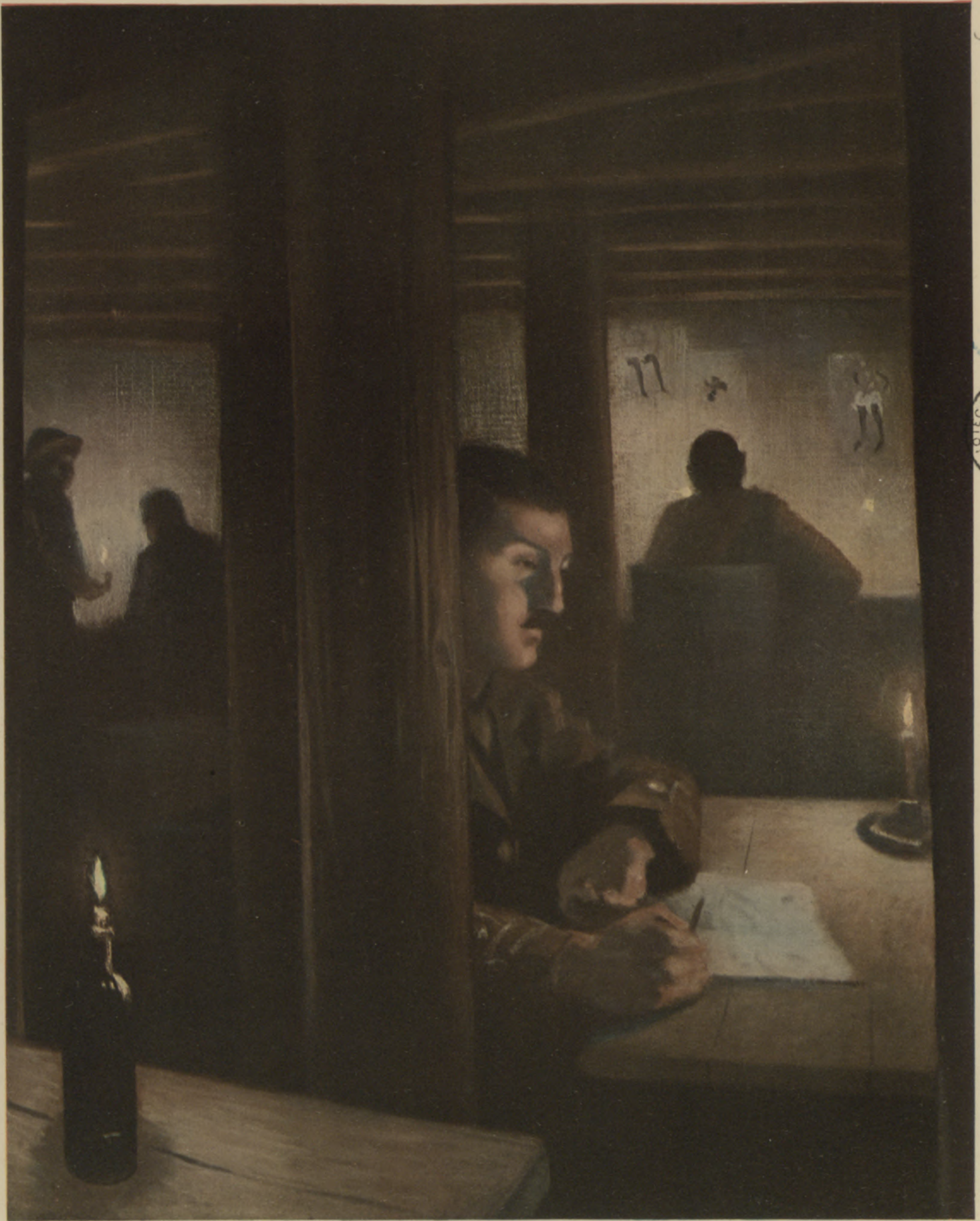
The third picture shows ground recently fought over and captured ; houses and trees are shattered by shell-fire ; a white line of old trench traverses the chalk hills, and old German wire litters the foreground. As the front is neared, the traffic changes its character ; troops " de-bus " and march forward ; motor traffic gives place to horse transport ; conspicuous and vulnerable vehicles of all sorts become fewer and the road is used for only the most necessary purposes of the fighting line. In the fourth picture a stretch of road close to the front line has been reached, an enemy barrage has been put down ahead, shells may be expected at any moment to fall on the road, and troops proceed in small parties, to limit possible casualties.



INSIDE BRIGADE HEADQUARTERS



A typical advanced headquarters in a well-built dug-out. Except in cases of special good fortune, work must be done by candle-light, the air is not exhilarating, and you must be careful not to bump your head against the ceiling. A deep dug-out of this kind gives almost perfect shelter, though the sound of any shell bursting near it is curiously loud.



V

SWOOPING DOWN ON A HOSTILE 'PLANE

(The property of the Imperial War Museum)

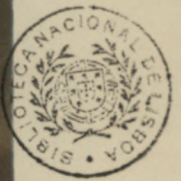
The most rousing moment in an air fight.



A GROUP OF SOLDIERS

(The property of the Imperial War Museum)

From this "conversation piece" the spectator who cares to go beyond its artistic quality can extract any amount of inferences that he wishes as to trench life and its effects on men's faces and temperaments.



FROM A FRONT LINE TRENCH

A No Man's Land of more than average width. That the ground shown has been the scene of a British advance is shown by the wrecked wire and by the old communication trench, with its double border of excavated chalk, running out towards the enemy's line. The landscape is characteristic of the southern, or Picardy, portion of the British front.



VIII

A MULE TEAM

Every foreign cavalry, artillery, or transport officer who visits the Western front says that one of the two things which strike him most is the good handling of our army horses and mules. You may travel for days along roads full of horse traffic and never see a kicking animal or a sore back. Heavy transport horses which were in the retreat from Mons are still working, in good health, at the base, and, apart from transport animals killed by shell-fire, you will not see a dead horse or mule by the road once in a week's constant travel. Those which are not often exposed to enemy fire—the great majority—probably live about as long as they would have done in peace time, thanks to a pervasive system of general and special veterinary hospitals, rest camps, and sick horse halts.



THE ROAD FROM ARRAS TO BAPAUME

(The property of the Imperial War Museum)

The regular Picardy landscape—straight white road traversing gently rolling chalky cornlands—now waste—like a moon-path over a slowly heaving sea. The trees which once lined the road were sawn through by the Germans when they retreated in the early months of 1917.



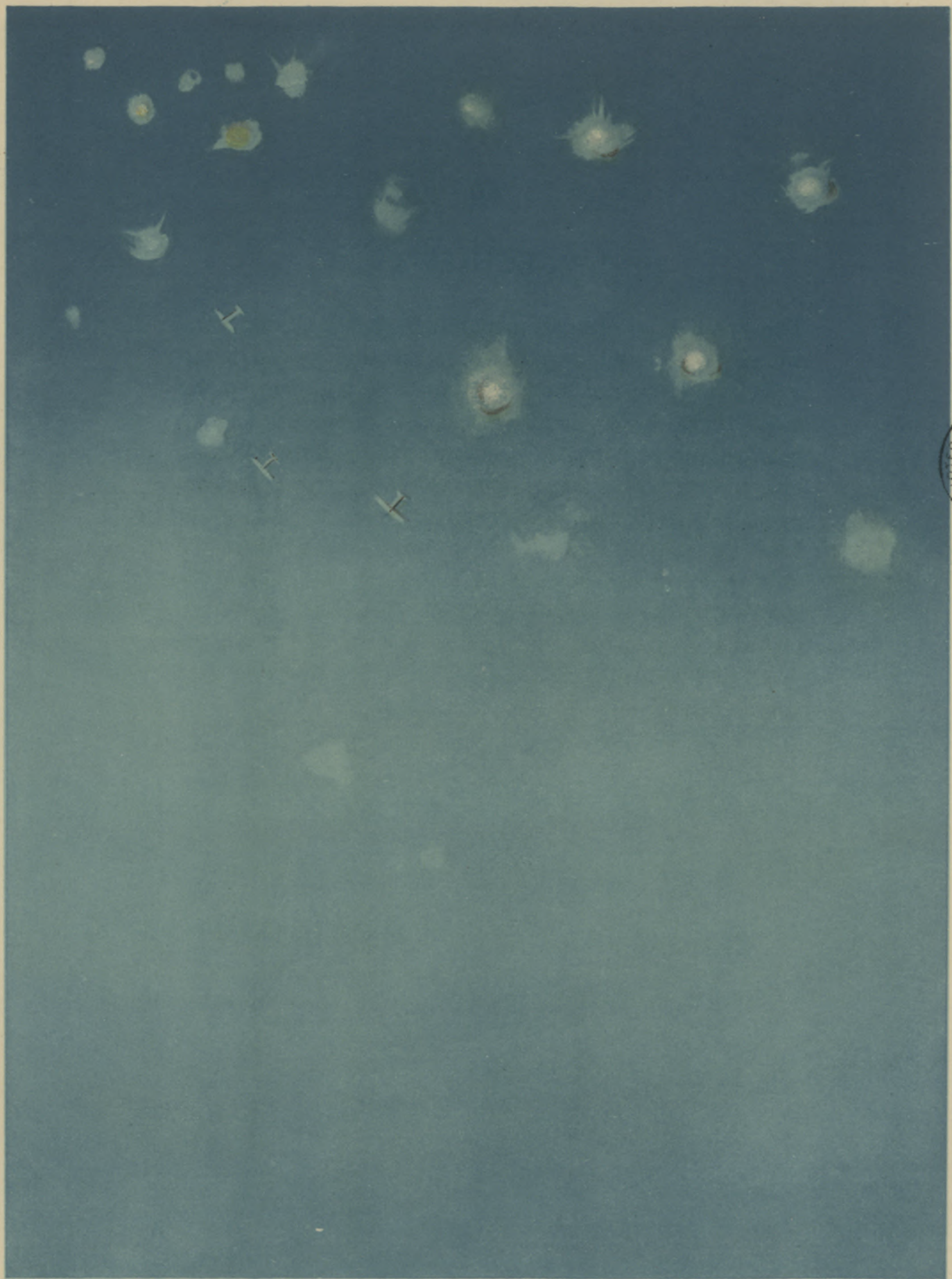
BURSTING SHELL

The burst is here seen from near at hand. At a distance of a few hundreds yards all that is usually visible is a sudden rising of a small stack of dark smoke, elongating itself into a loosely-built tower which leans over with the wind and slowly drifts away. If you are close to a bursting shell a splash of flame seems for the first instant to fill the whole field of vision ; you feel the push of hot air against your face, and then you see all sorts of solid objects radiating upwards and outwards from the original flame—dark specks and blocks of solidity flying through the more slowly rising and less dark smoke. A shell pitched well into a wire entanglement will sometimes remove it with remarkable completeness.



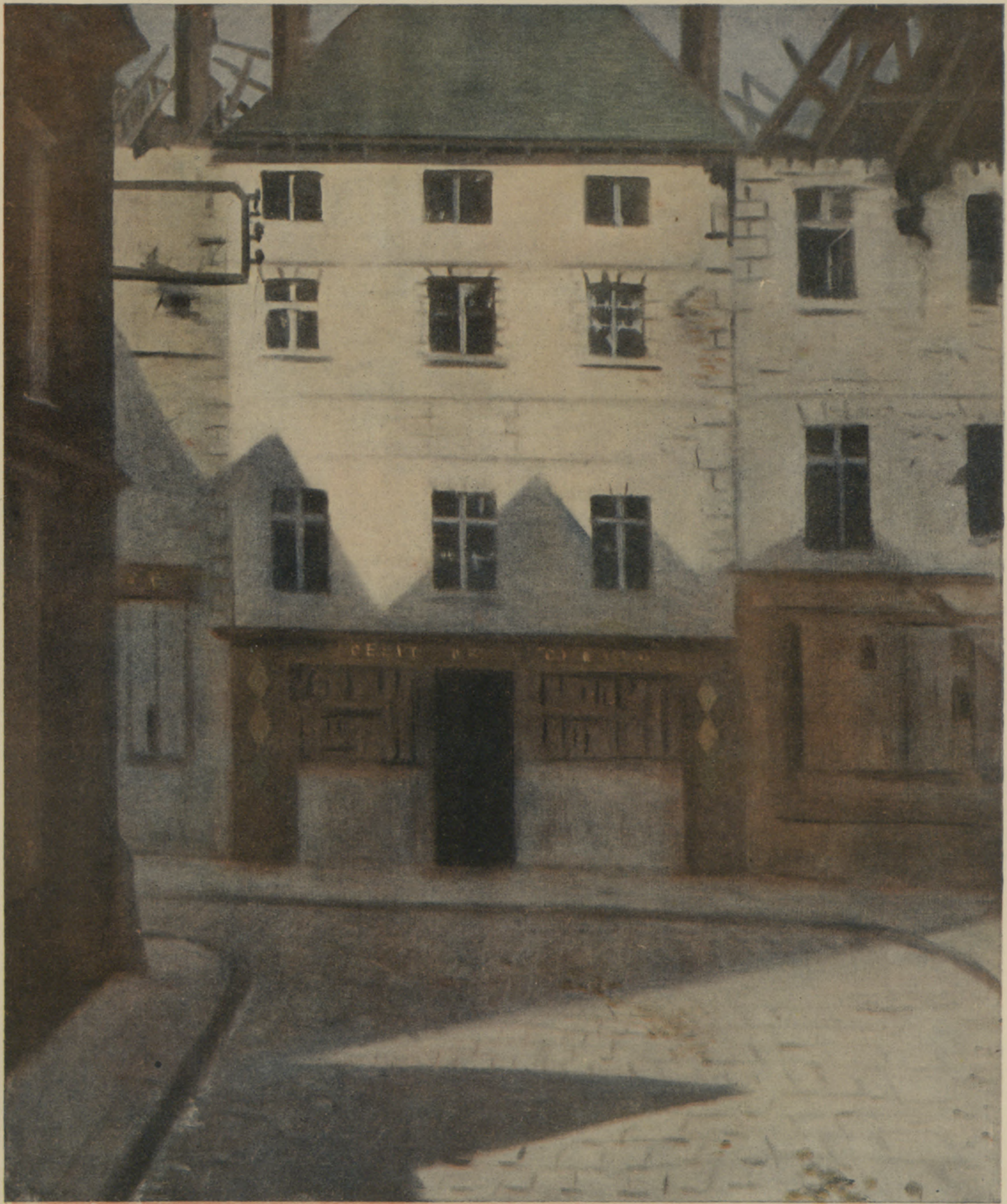
“ARCHIES”

The burst of an ordinary percussion shell seems to come out of the ground, but the burst of shrapnel or of an anti-aircraft shell seems to come out of nothing—at one moment the sky all round an aeroplane is blue, and at the next minute a white ball has appeared somewhere in the blue and is swelling into a large well-packed white cabbage, which swells till it unpacks itself and loses its clearness of edge, but often remains fairly compact and undissipated until it has drifted some miles across the sky. Thus the separate smoke of a dozen or twenty “ Archie ” shells can often be seen drifting in a fleet, and it is easy to tell the order in which they were fired, from their respective sizes and densities.



SURVIVORS AT ARRAS

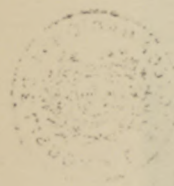
Up to the end of 1916 there were two houses in Arras which had not been hurt by enemy shell or bomb fire. One of them is known to have been Robespierre's birth-place. The other is reputed to have been already the oldest house in the city. If its immunity continues, its seniority will be still more incontestable, for the rest of Arras after the war will have to be built again.



XIII

AFTER A PUSH

(The property of the Imperial War Museum)




This was the aspect of wide tracts of country East and North-East of Ypres during the wet weather battles of October, 1917. In some of the Flanders pushes of the autumn many of our troops would spend a night in making their way up to the firing line across some miles of country like this, picking their way through the mud between the flooded shell-holes, and would then fight an offensive battle at dawn and spend the rest of the day and the following night in consolidating the captured positions under heavy enemy shell-fire and in face of persistent counter-attacks. On ground newly captured from the enemy one gets an impression of almost morbid silence and solitude, perhaps due to one's own sense of the passionate activity which must have filled it a few hours before.



RELIEFS AT DAWN

(The property of the Imperial War Museum)



It looks cheerless, but dawn in trenches—except on the morning of a battle—is really a time of relaxed tension. In quiet times and places the doubled posts of the night can now be held by one sentry apiece ; the strain of keeping watch is much reduced by the light ; the two spoonfuls of rum are dealt out to each man by the platoon Sergeants at the dawn “stand-to,” and the breakfast bacon seems within measurable reach.



RECLAIMED COUNTRY

The artist has here worked upon the ordinary ingredients of Western battlefield landscape—ravaged woods, scarred ground, broken houses, and removed landmarks.



