" On the afternoon of the 21st we gained a small local success. Our line was advanced on a front of six hundred yards, over an average depth of a quarter of a mile. All the ground gained was successfully consolidated. Up to date eighty-six unwounded prisoners have passed through the corps cage, of whom three are officers."

Thus ran the brief official notice so tersely given in the " Intelligence Summary," known to the ribald as " Comic Cuts " ; later it will appear even more tersely in the daily communiqué which delights the matutinal kipper and twin eggs of England. It's all so simple ; it all sounds such a ridiculously easy matter to those who read. Map maniacs stab inaccurate maps with pins ; a few amateur strategists discourse at length, and with incredible ignorance, on the bearing it—and countless other similar operations—will

have on the main issue. And the vast majority remark gloomily to the members of the breakfast table that there is nothing in the paper as usual. Nothing, my friend! I wonder . . . .

This is not a story; there is no plot; it is just what happens every day somewhere or other in the land of glutinous, stinking mud, where the soles are pulled off a man's boots when he walks and horses go in up to their bellies; where one steers a precarious and slippery course on the narrow necks of earth that separate shell holes, and huddled things stare up at the sky with unseeing eyes. They went "over the top" themselves—ten days ago—in just such another local success. Nothing, my friend! Perhaps you're right; it's mainly a sense of proportion that is needed in war, as in other things. . . .

"Good morning, dear old soul." The machine-gun officer emerged from a watery hole of doubtful aspect, covered with a dented sheet of corrugated iron and a flattened-out biscuit tin—the hole that is, not the officer.

"We have slept well, thank you; and the wife and family are flourishing. Moreover —you're late."

The Sapper regarded him pessimistically through the chilly mist of an October dawn. "Entirely owing to my new and expensive waders being plucked from my feet with a sucking noise. A section of haggard men are now engaged in salvage operations. Shall we proceed?"

"We shall—in one sweet moment, not before. Sweet, brave heart, because——" He put his head round the corner. "Jones —the raspberry wine—*toute suite.* Just a hollow tooth full, and we will gambol like young lambs the whole long weary way."

"It is well," remarked the Sapper, returning the empty mug to the soldier servant. "Personally I like it burnt at night, with a noggin of port. You put it in a mug, add three spoonfuls of sugar, set light to it, and let it burn for seven minutes. Then add some port, and drink hot. Man, you can lead an army corps. . . ." His voice died away as the two officers departed on their three-mile

squelch to the front line, and the unshaven Jones gazed after them admiringly.

"A hartist!" he murmured admiringly, "a plurry hartist. Personally, the raspberry juice, any old 'ow for me." He disappeared from view, and further disclosures would be tactless. . . .

And so we lift the curtain on the dawn of the 21st. Doubtless the setting is frivolous, but it has served to introduce two of the supers who go to make up the final scene. In the portion of the front line for which they were bound there lay the battalion which was cast for the principal part, and it is the prerogative of stars to have their entrance led up to. . . .

The mist hung thick over the shell-torn ground as the two officers walked on. In places, stretches of half-demolished wire and blown-in trenches showed where the Germans had put up a fight. Stray graves, ours and theirs, were dotted about promiscuously, and little heaps of dirty and caked equipment showed that salvage work was in progress. Away to the left a few crumbling

walls and shattered trees marked a one-time prosperous agricultural village, from which with great regularity there came the sighing drone of a German crump followed by a column of black smoke and a shower of bricks and débris. But the place was dead; its inhabitants gone—God knows where. And soldiers: well, soldiers have a rooted dislike to dead villages near the trenches.

A strange squat object loomed suddenly into sight—a well-known landmark to those who wandered daily behind the lines. Derelict, motionless, it lay on a sunken road, completely blocking it; and the sunken road was heavy with the stench of death. It is not good for the Hun to take liberties with a tank, even if it is temporarily *hors-de-combat*.

A man limping wearily, his head bandaged, his face unshaved, his khaki coated with half-dry mud, plodded heavily towards them.

"Can you tell me the way to the dressing-station, sir?" He had stopped and, swaying slightly, stood in front of the two officers.

"Straight on, lad. You'll find it somewhere back there." The machine-gun officer pointed vaguely into the mist. "About half a mile."

"You ain't got a drop of water, 'ave you, sir? The water party got lost last night, and we've only had about a teacupful this last twenty-four hours."

But when going up to visit the trenches water-bottles are a useless encumbrance, and, with a tired sigh, the wounded Tommy resumed his thirsty way in the direction of the dressing-station.

"Cooked, poor devil," remarked the Sapper, as he disappeared. "Pretty nearly finished."

"But he'll be his mother's own bright boy again when he gets his nose inside that aid post. We go left here, I think."

They paused for a moment to get their bearings—a matter of some importance and no little difficulty.

It may seem an easy thing to walk up to the trenches. One goes on, and ultimately one arrives, the casual reader will surmise. And

with luck the casual reader will be right. But there are certain small points which may have escaped his ken and which render the task of reaching the front line a trifle harder than walking to the club for lunch.

In the first place the aspect of the ground is not of that cheerful and varied type which has inspired so many gifted landscape painters. No trees and little rivers, no cottages and flowering paths delight one's eye. It is impossible to say: "Take the turn to the left after passing the cactus bush, and keep straight on till you come to the asparagus bed; and then you'll see the front trench on your right."

The local cactus bush or its equivalent is hurled into space twice daily, thereby largely interfering with its use as a landmark. The local asparagus bed or *its* equivalent differs only from the remainder of the ground in the fact that a mule passed peacefully away on it some weeks previously. And one day even that difference vanished. The mule passed away again—in small fragments.

Even the front trenches where they exist

have a variegated career. At certain periods quite a large proportion of them are in the air at the same time, in company with the village just behind; and when they come down again it is more than likely their position will change to the next row of damp and unpleasant holes.

That is the trouble: the whole ground is one huge hole. Holes are the only features of the landscape: big holes, little holes, damp ones, smelly ones; holes occupied and holes to let; holes you fall into and holes you don't—but, holes. Everywhere holes. The cactus bush is a hole; the asparagus bed is a hole; the trenches are holes. The whole country looks like a disease. A large amount of the wandering must perforce be done at night; and should the casual reader still doubt the difficulty of finding one's way, let him imagine three voluntary descents, and as many compulsory ones, into the wet brand of hole; let him further imagine a steady downpour of rain, no sign of a star, and a shrewd suspicion that if he's walked as far as he thinks he has in the right direction he

ought to be in the front line; and then let him imagine—holes. Whenever he moves he either negotiates or fails to negotiate—holes. Having, in scrambling out of holes turned round twice he doesn't know which way he's facing; he only knows there are —holes. Toc—toc—toc; the slow tapping of a German machine gun sounds from the direction he had fondly imagined Battalion Head-quarters to be; the swish of bullets come nearer as the Hun sweeps the ground; a flare goes up, showing—holes. Another compulsory descent; a phut! as a bullet passes over his head, and the swishing passes on. Shortly that swishing will come back, and in the meantime are there not—holes? But as for the front trench, whither he is bound, the contest is unequal. No man can fight—holes.

A further point which is worthy of remark *en passant* may possibly escape the notice of the uninitiated. It is a well-known fact, and will be vouched for by all who have experienced the Somme, that that part of the ground which is not hole is carried, like the

unexpended portion of the day's rations, on the person. Acres of soil have been removed from their original abode and have been carried laboriously to other acres. They have then been brought back again ; not by boot only, but by hand, and face, by hair and teeth. It is reported—though I will not vouch for the accuracy of the statement—that on one occasion a relieving battalion completely defeated a small German counter-attack by standing on the parapet and kicking viciously towards the advancing Huns. The enormous mass of soil thus propelled not only crushed the hated foe but effectually buried him. However, that is by the way. We are digressing far from the Sapper and the machine-gun officer who stood by a derelict tank in the damp mist of an October dawn and cogitated on the direction of their particular piece of front line.

"It is amazing," said a voice behind them, "that man can have descended to such a state of congenital idiocy as to do all this to an inoffensive carrot field."

The Brigade-Major, followed by the

Brigadier, joined the two officers. Behind them the signal officer plucked France from his face. And then of a sudden five officers disappeared. A droning roar rose with extreme rapidity to that pitch of loudness that denotes undesirable closeness; a mass of black fumes and flying mud shot up twenty odd yards away; a flight of cockchafers seemed to pass into the distance as the jagged fragments whizzed overhead—and five faces appeared as suddenly from the ground. Holes have their uses at times.

"This sunken road is always hairy," remarked the signal officer—known to his intimates as Sigs—giving the General a hand-up from his particular lair. "It were unwise to linger, sir."

"Another quarter-mile and we hit Essex Trench," remarked the Brigade-Major. "Sally's head-quarters are there." The five officers passed on, squelching loudly, and once again peace and silence reigned in the sunken road. . . .

And now we come to the principal actors in the drama. Crowded in Essex Trench,

damp with mist, were the men of the South Loamshires. A few were scribbling notes, and an all-pervading smell of frying bacon permeated the air. One or two, wrapped in great-coats, with a macintosh sheet over them, still slept peacefully—but the whole regiment was stirring into life. The morning of the day had come. To many it was a new experience; to others it was stale—going over the top. But, new or old, not a man but realised that by evening the roll of the regiment would have many gaps; new or old, not a man but realised that his name might be one of those gaps. Just the luck of the game; perhaps nothing, perhaps a Blighty, perhaps . . .

It is well without doubt that the lower the intelligence the less the imagination. To ninety per cent. of these men the situation lost much of its edge; to the remaining ten the edge was sharpened. What is to be is to be, in war as elsewhere. Fatalism as regards one's own prospects is inevitable; essential. But fatalism is an unsatisfying creed; the word "Why?" is apt to creep into the back

of a man's mind, and the word "Why?" when the intelligence is low, is a dangerous one. For the word "Why?" can only be satisfactorily answered by the realisation of the bigness of the issue; by the knowledge that individual effort is imperative if collective success is to be obtained; by the absolute conviction that no man can be a law unto himself. To the ten per cent. these facts were clear; but then, to the ten per cent. the "Why?" was louder. The factor of their composition which said to them "Why?" —clearly and insistently—even as they lay motionless under their coats or outwardly wrangled for bacon and tea—that very factor supplied the answer.

To the thinkers and dreamers there comes at such times the greater knowledge: the knowledge which lifts them above self and the trivialities of their own lives; the knowledge that is almost Divine. They appreciate the futility—but they realise the necessity. And in their hearts they laugh sardonically as the shadow of Dream's End clouds the sky. The utter futility of it all—the utter

necessity now that futility has caught the world. Then they realise the bacon is cold —and curse.

To the ninety per cent. it is not so. Not theirs to reason so acutely, not theirs to care so much ; to them the two dominant features of this war—death and boredom—appeal with far less force. For both depend so utterly on imagination in their effect on the individual. Death is only awful in anticipation ; boredom only an affliction to the keen-witted. So to the ninety, perhaps, the " Why ? " does not sound insistently. It is as well, for if the answer is not forthcoming there is danger, as I have said. And one wonders sometimes which class produces the best results for the business in hand—the business of slaughtering Huns. . . . The small one that rises to great heights and sinks to great depths, or the big one, the plodders.

But I have digressed again. It is easy to wander into by-paths when the main road is prosaic, and the study of a body of men before an attack—the men who fear and don't show it, the men who fear and try not to show

it, the men who don't care a hang what happens —cannot but grip the observer who has eyes to see. Almost does he forget his own allotted part in the drama; the psychology of the thing is too absorbing. And it can only be realised when seen first hand.

Let us leave them there for the time—that battalion of the South Loamshires. Sally—as the C.O. is generally known—has talked with the Brigadier and the Brigade-Major. He knows that zero hour is 11.30 a.m.; he knows his objective—Suffolk Trench; he knows the strong point at its northern end which the sappers are going to consolidate. The Sapper has found his section subaltern and his section nursing coils of barbed wire and shovels, and has been informed with much blasphemy that the guide had lost his way, and the party had been wandering all night. The machine-gun officer has delivered words of wisdom to various guns' crews—both Lewis and otherwise—who came under his eagle eye at intervals along the trench. Just the prosaic main road; the details are tedious; the actual orders uninteresting.

The attack would either succeed or it would fail; the strong point would either be consolidated or it would not. The orders—the details—are necessary adjuncts to the operation; of no more interest than the arrangements for pulling up the fire curtain. Only if the fire curtain sticks, the play is robbed of much of its natural charm to the onlooker.

"Bring me some more breakfast. That walk gives one the devil of a hunger." The Brigadier was back once more in his dug-out, while, outside, the mist had lifted and the autumn sun shone down on a world of mud.

The Brigade-Major was shaving; the Staff Captain—a non-starter in the morning's walk—was demanding corrugated iron from the unmoved Sapper.

"I tell you this roof is a disgrace. Cascades of water pour through into the soup at dinner. Why don't you do something?"

"What do you propose I should do, brave heart? Sit on the roof and catch it?"

The subject was a complicated one, touching deep problems of supply and demand, to

say nothing of carrying parties; so let us leave them to their warfare.

The signal officer was looking wise over something that boomed and buzzed alternately; the machine-gun officer may, or may not, have been enjoying another toothful.

In short, the supers, the stage-managers had departed. The last directions had been given, and the play was due to start in an hour and a quarter. All that could be done for its success had been done by those who were behind; now it was up to the men who sat and sprawled in the mud-holes in front, with the blue smoke of their cigarettes curling upwards and their equipment and rifles stacked beside them.

A desultory bombardment on each side droned stolidly on, while away to the front three British aeroplanes, seemingly come from nowhere, tumbled and looped round two Germans like mosquitoes over a pool. A row of sausage balloons like a barber's rash adorned the sky as far as the eye could see. Just an everyday scene on the Somme, and meanwhile the actors waited.

"Come up to the top. There's ten minutes to go." The Staff Captain and the Sapper—their dispute settled—strolled amicably to the top of the hill behind the dug-out and produced their field-glasses. Away in front Essex Trench could be seen, and the men inside it, standing to. For them the period of suspense was nearly over—the curtain was just going up.

"One minute." The Sapper snapped his watch to and focused his glasses. "They're off."

Suddenly from all around, as if touched by a spring, an ear-splitting din leaped into life. In the valley behind them it seemed as if hundreds of tongues of flame were darting and quivering, sprouting from what a moment before was barren ground. The acrid smell of cordite drifted over them, while without cessation there came the solemn boom—boom—boom of the heavier guns way back. Like the *motif* of an opera, the field-guns and light howitzers cracked and snorted, permeating everything with one continuous blast of sound; while the sonorous roar and rumble

of the giant pieces behind—slower, as befitted them—completed the mighty orchestra. Neither man could hear the other speak ; but then, they were both watching too intently for that.

Hardly had hell been let loose when a line of men arose from Essex Trench and walked steadily to their front. Just ahead of them great clouds of smoke rose belching from the ground ; clouds into which they vanished at times, only to reappear a moment later. They were advancing behind a creeping barrage, and advancing with the steadiness of automatic machines.

"Good lads! Good lads!" The Staff Captain's lips framed the words ; his voice was inaudible.

Every now and then a man pitched forward and lay still ; or muttered a curse as he felt the sting of something in his arm. A section on the left dropped suddenly, only to worm on again by ones and twos, trying to avoid the dreaded toc-toc—slow and menacing —of a German machine gun. Then the bombers were there. Crouching back, a man

would pull the pin out of his bomb, run forward, and hurl it into the trench where the Germans were huddled in groups. And away behind the South Loamshires, on the shell-pocked ground that now boiled and heaved like some monstrous sulphur spring, with thick black and yellow fumes drifting slowly across it, there lay the first fruits of the harvest: a few of the gaps in the evening's roll-call.

On the flank a machine gun was going, taking them in enfilade. In front, Germans —numbers of Germans—glared snarling at them out of the trench, or whimpered in a corner with arms upraised, as was the nature of the beasts. A non-commissioned officer picked up a bomb and hurled it at the advancing platoon sergeant; only to cry "*Kamerad*" when it failed to explode. . . .

And so the South Loamshires, or such as were left of them, came to their objective; the first part of the play was over. The machine-gunner who had enfiladed them passed in his checks, fighting to the end, brained with the butt of a rifle.

Occasionally a wounded man crawled into the trench; a German officer sat sullenly in a corner stanching a gaping hole in his leg. Behind them, toward the Essex Trench, the air was now clearer; the bombardment had moved over the line they had won, and thundered down on the German communications.

"Runner!" A Company Commander stood shakily trying to patch up a wound in his arm. As far as he could tell from a hasty reconnaissance, he was the senior officer present. "Give this to the C.O.: 'Objective won. Situation on right doubtful. Estimated casualties two hundred.'" He handed the man a slip of paper.

At a steady lope the runner went over the back of the trench, into the barrage of German shrapnel and high explosive. They saw him reach it, stop suddenly, twist round, and slither slowly forward.

"Runner down, sir." A sergeant standing by spoke almost casually.

"Runner!" Once again the officer called; once again a man went off at a jog-trot.

They saw him reach his predecessor; stop a moment, and bend down. He looked round and shook his head and went steadily on. The luck of the game—that's all. And it's only when one's sitting still—waiting, that one asks "Why?" Ten minutes later he was with the C.O., waiting for the answer to take back.

And so the drama is over; the play has been a success. From the wings the Staff Captain and the Sapper have returned to Brigade Head-quarters.

"Saw 'em getting over the top, sir. Then they got into the smoke and we lost 'em. Like a witches' cauldron."

"We shan't hear anything for two hours." The General thoughtfully knocked the ashes out of his pipe. They were his men who had gone into that witches' cauldron; with them daily he lived and daily died. Their Dream's End was his too. But—a sense of proportion, always. "We might as well have lunch," he remarked casually.

Gradually the bombardment died away,

though from time to time the guns burst into sullen mutterings, as though hungry at being baulked of their food.

The same old aeroplanes—or different ones—buzzed busily about; the same old stoical balloons looked more rash-like than ever.

And then suddenly outside the brigade office there was a stir.

A runner had hove in sight, and the signal officer emerged to get his tidings.

"Good," he muttered to himself; "the old man will be pleased." He went into the General's dug-out.

"Message just through, sir, from C.O. South Loamshires: 'Objectives obtained. A. A. A. Situation on right somewhat obscure. A. A. A. Estimated casualties 200 all ranks. A. A. A. Will be consolidated to-night. A. A. A."

The "old man" *was* pleased.

And so, on the afternoon of the 21st, we gained a small success. We advanced our line on a front of six hundred yards over an average depth of a quarter of a mile, etc. etc.

It wasn't much, my friends at home; but —that runner will run no more, and some eighty odd of that odd two hundred have cooked their last ration of bacon. Their "Why?" is answered.

No, it wasn't much; but it wasn't—nothing.