

Additional Resources for “‘Mind the Wire’: David Jones and World War I Telephony”

David Jones’s frontispiece for *In Parenthesis*



Scene 1

PART 3

Private Watcyn calls Lance-Corporal Lewis from round an earth wall's turn, who nudges Private Ball who drags forward saturated limbs; water pours from his left boot as he lifts it clear. Scrapings and dull joltings, heavy, ill-controlled lurching, disturbed water gurgles with each man's footfall; they move ten yards further.

Mind the wire, china²⁰

—keep yourself low.

Bodies move just at head level, outside the trench; hollow unreal voices, reaching the ear unexpectedly, from behind or round the traverse bend, like the shouting at the immediate door comes on you from a far window:

I've found it Bertie, I've got 'D' and 'C'.

Telephonic buzzing makes the wilderness seem curiously homely; the linesman's boot implicates someone's tackle passing.

Sorry son—sorry.

He continues his song; he beats time with his heels thudding the trench-wall, his trade in his lap:

Kitty Kitty isn't it a pity

*in the City*²¹—it's a bad break, Bertie.

They bend low over, intently whistling low, like a mechanic's mate. They secure it with rubber solution; they pick their way, negotiating unseen wire, they remember the lie of the land with accuracy; they kick tins gratuitously, they go with light hearts; they walk naked above the fosse, they despise a fenced place; they are warned for Company Office. They pull at his decanter while he sleeps; they elude quartermasters; they know the latest—whispered however so low.²²

The night dilapidates over your head and scarlet lightning annihilates the nice adjustment of your vision, used now to, and cat-eyed for the shades. You stumble under this latest demonstration; white-hot nine-inch splinters hiss, water-

Scene 2

PART 3

Good night chum.

Good night.

The repeated passing back of aidful messages assumes a cadency.

Mind the hole

mind the hole

mind the hole to left

hole right

step over

keep left, left.

One grovelling, precipitated, with his gear tangled, struggles to feet again:

Left be buggered.

Sorry mate — you all right china? — lift us yer rifle — an' don't take on so Honey—but rather, mind

the wire here!⁸

mind the wire

mind the wire

mind the wire.

Extricate with some care that taut strand—it may well be you'll sweat on its unbrokenness.

Modulated interlude, violently discorded—mighty, fanned-up glare, to breach it: light orange flame-tongues in the long jagged water-mirrors where their feet go, the feet that come shod, relief bringing—bringing release to these from Wigmore and Woofferton. Weary feet: feet bright, and gosselled, for these, of Elfael and Ceri.

We're relieving the Borderers—two platoons of their 12th that was—in wiv the Coldstreams!⁹—relieved be our 14th.

Sergeant Snell was informed as to the disposition of units.

The colonnade to left and right kept only shorn-off column shafts, whose branchy capitals strew the broken sets. Where

Scene 2 cont.

PART 3

over a little where the stretched out surface skin raw rubbed away at his clavicle bone. He thought he might go another half mile perhaps—it must be midnight now of some day of the week. He turned his tired head where the sacking-shield swayed.

Where a white shining waned between its hanging rents, another rises and another; high, unhurrying higher, clear, pale, light-ribbons; very still-bright and bright-showered descent.

Spangled tapestry swayed between the uprights; camouflage-net, meshed with plunging star-draught.

Bobbing night-walkers go against the tossing night-flares.

Intermittent dancing lights betray each salient twist and turn; tiny flickers very low to the south—their meandering world-edge prick out bright.

Rotary steel hail spit and lashed in sharp spasms along the vibrating line; great solemn guns leisurely manipulated their expensive discharges at rare intervals, bringing weight and full recession to the rising orchestration.

As suddenly the whole world would slip back into a mollifying, untormented dark; their aching bodies knew its calm.

What moved in front is rigid with a clumsy suddenness:

Message back—they've halted mate.

What's that.

We've got to halt, pass it back.

He just muttered halt without a turn of the head.

Get on get on—we'll lose connection.

They've halted I tell you, pass it back.

Dark chain of whisperings link by link jerked each one motionless.

A mile you say?

About a mile sir—straight on sir—machine gun, sir, but they're spent, most of 'em—but further on sir, by Foresters