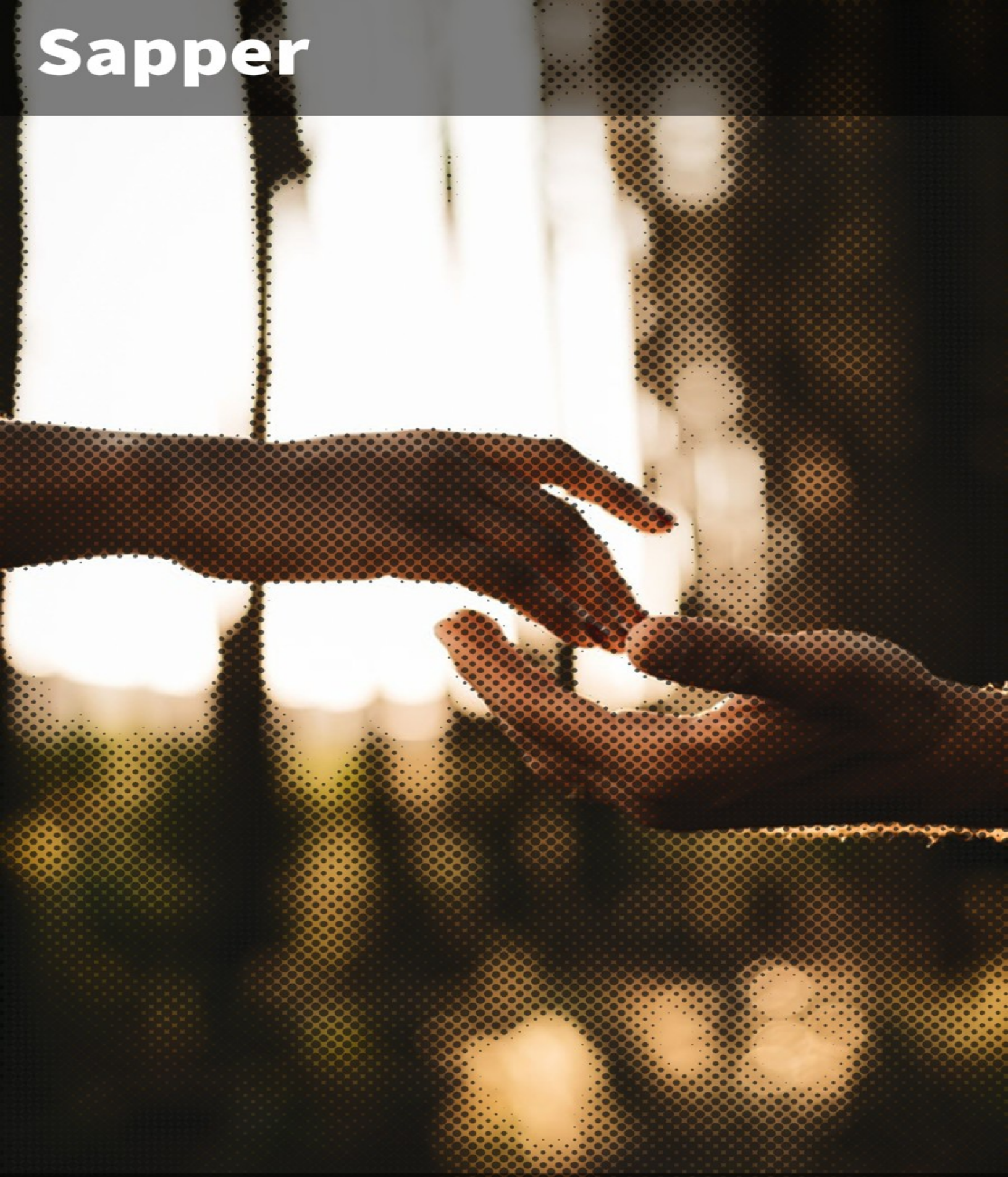
Sapper



The Human Touch

Sapper

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§ I

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It was about the size of an ordinary tennis lawn at the top, and it was deep enough to contain a workman's cottage. It was a crater—a mine crater. Suddenly one morning the ground near by had shaken as if there was an earthquake; dugouts had rocked, candles and bottles had crashed wildly onto the cursing occupants lying on the floor, and IT had appeared. Up above, a great mass of earth and debris had gone towards heaven, and in the fullness of time descended again; a sap-head with its wooden frames had disappeared into small pieces; the sentry group of three men occupying it had done likewise. And when the half-stunned occupants of adjacent dugouts and saps, and oddments from the support line had removed various obstacles from their eyes and pulled themselves firmly together in order to go and investigate, they found that the old front line trench had been cut in two and blocked by the explosion. About twenty yards of it had lain within the radius of destruction of the mine, and had passed gently away; so that instead of a trench to walk along, the explorers found themselves confronted with a great mass of newly thrown up earth which blocked their way. One, more curious than discreet, climbed on top to see what had occurred. He had even got so far as to inform his pals below that it was "Some 'ole," when with an ominous 'phut he slithered a few feet backwards and lay still, with his boots drumming gently against one another.

"Gawd!" A corporal spat viciously. "Wot the 'ell's'e want to go and get up there for? Don't show yerselves, and get a hold on 'is legs. That's right; 'eave 'un in."

In silence the investigators looked at the price of curiosity, and then they covered up his face and took him away. And somewhere in the Hun lines a sniper laughed gently and consumed what was left of his breakfast sausage.

Thus did the crater occur, and with it four vacancies in the roll of the South Devons. Viewed impersonally it seemed a very small result for such a very large hole; but in a performance where the entire bag of a fifteen-inch shell is quite possibly a deserted patch in an inoffensive carrot field, cause and effect have taken unto themselves new standards.

The main result of the crater was the activity produced in the more serious band of investigators who came on the scene a little later. The front line was cut; therefore, the front line must be joined together again. The far lip of the crater was adjacent to our own front line; therefore, the far lip must be held by a bombing party. And so, through both the walls of earth which blocked the trench, a gallery was pushed by sappers working day and night, while every evening a party of Infantry crept out to the far lip, and sat inside during the night watching for any activity on the part of the Hun.

Which brings us to a certain morning when Shorty Bill sat at the bottom of the crater, and ruminated on life. On each side of him two black holes appeared in the walls of the crater—holes about six feet high and three feet wide—which

led by timbered shafts to the two broken ends of the front line trench. In front there rose steeply a wall of earth, along the top of which ran a strand of barbed wire.

It was like sitting at the bottom of a great hole in the dunes, where one's horizon is the broken line of sand and coarse grass above. There was no wind, and the sun warmed him pleasantly as he lay stretched out with his tin hat tilted over his eyes. The fact that there was nothing but fifty odd yards between him and the gentlemen from Berlin disturbed him not at all; the fact that he was thirty odd yards in front of our own front line disturbed him even less.

The sun was warm, the sky was cloudless; he had breakfasted well; and—this was the main point—he was in possession of a letter: one might almost say the letter. It had come with the mail the previous day, and as Shorty's correspondence was not of the bulk which had ever caused the regimental postman to strike for higher wages, it had occasioned consider able comment. And spice had been added to the comment by the fact that Shorty had just returned from leave in England.

Shorty, however, was not to be drawn. Completely disregarding all comments, scandalous and otherwise, he had placed the letter in his pocket, to ponder on and digest at a future date, when separated from the common herd. And now, with his eyes half closed, he lay thinking at the bottom of the crater. Beside him, close at hand, was his rifle; and though to a casual observer he might have seemed half asleep, in reality he was very far from it. Almost mechanically his eyes roved along the edge of tumbled earth in front of him; his brain might be busy with

things hundreds of miles away, but his subconscious mind was acutely awake: watching, waiting—just in case a Boche head did appear and look down on him from the other side. Shorty didn't make mistakes; in the game across the water it is advisable not to. More over, other people did make them, and had you looked at Shorty's rifle you would have seen on the stock a row of little nicks—cut with a knife. Those nicks were the mistakes of the other people...

Short, almost squat, with a great scar across his cheek, due to faulty judgment as to the length of reach in a bear's fore paw, he looked a tough customer. He was a tough customer, and yet those grey eyes of his, with the glint of humour in them, told their own story. Tough perhaps, but human all the while. A man to trust; a man who wouldn't let a woman or a pal down. And as an epitaph few of us will deserve more than that: many will ask for less—in vain...

A noise behind him made him look round, and a man stepped out of one of the wooden galleries.

"Hullo, Shorty," remarked the new-comer. "You're here, are you?" He sat down beside him and stretched himself comfortably. "Nice and warm, it is, too."

For a moment Shorty did not answer, and then he spat reflectively. "What was it you taught them guys at Oxford, son?" he remarked gently.

"Higher mathematics, Shorty. A dull subject, and sometimes now I wonder how the devil I ever stuck it."

"Was it much good to 'em?" Shorty's tone was still soft and mild. "Were you one of the big noises at your school?"

The new-comer shuddered slightly. "We will pass over the word school, Shorty," he gulped; "and as for the other part

of your question, I dare say other people would be able to answer you better than I can."

"Wal, I guess it cuts no ice either way. But if you intend to go back, if you're a sort of national institootion like Madame Tussaud's waxworks or the Elephant and Castle, you'd better be making tracks for your ticket now."

John Mayhew, sometime tutor in the realms of the purest and highest and deadliest mathematics, who would keep his pupils occupied for an hour trying to follow one step on the board, looked at his friend in mild surprise.

"I don't want my ticket now, Shorty."

"Oh, don't you? I was thinking I could come and certify you as being insane." Shorty sat up and scowled. "After all these months, training you and turning you into a man—wasting me time on you showing you tricks, an' little ways of making the other man pass out first—you goes and comes into this blinking crater same as if you was blowing into a fancy resturant with your glad rags on. Yer gun hung over your shoulder, yer 'ands in yer pockets—singin' a love song. Oh, it's cruel!" With a hopeless gesture of resignation he dismissed the subject, and lay back once again.

"But, damn it, Shorty, I knew you were here." There are many undergraduates who would willingly have given a month's pay to have seen John Mayhew's face at that moment. Men who had battled on paper for hours, only to confess themselves utterly defeated; men who had heard John's famous remark, "Well, gentlemen, I can supply you with information, but I regret that I cannot supply you with brains," would have given a month's—nay, a year's pay to have seen him then. Utterly crestfallen, he contemplated

the irate little man beside him, and confessed miserably to himself that his excuse was poor.

"Knew I was here!" Shorty Bill snorted. "You didn't know nothing of the blinking sort. You never knows where I am. There might have been a crowd of Boches in here for all you knew. Come round a corner, I tells yer again and again, unless you knows yer all right, with yer gun ready to stab or shoot. Don't go ambling about like a nursemaid pushing the family twins."

John Mayhew preserved a discreet silence, and for a while the two men watched an aeroplane above them, and listened to the 'plop of a British Archie, which was apparently trying to hit it. A cannon-ball from one of our 60-pounder trench mortars passed overhead, its stalk wobbling drunkenly behind it, and from the German trenches came the dull crack of the explosion; while away down the line a machine gun let drive a belt at some target. But everything was peaceful in the crater: peaceful and warm...

"What have you got there, Shorty?" Mayhew broke the silence, after watching his companion for a while out of the corner of his eye. Clutched in Shorty's hand was *the* letter, at which every now and then he stole a furtive glance.

"A letter from a little gal I met in England, son. Nice little gal."

"Good. Are you going to get spliced?"

"Wal, I dunno as she's that sort." Shorty Bill frowned at the sky "She ain't...wal...she's not..." He seemed to have some difficulty in finding his words.

John Mayhew smiled slightly; for a mathematical genius he was very human. "I see. But perhaps if we never do

anything worse, Shorty, than she's done, we'll not do so badly."

Once again did his companion sit up. "You're right, son: right clean through. They're the salt of the earth some of them girls; and I reckons it was our fault to start with. Care to see?" He paused and went on shyly, "Care to see what she says?"

In silence Mayhew took the letter, and for a second or two his eyes were a little dim. The cheap scent, the common pink paper, the pathos of it all, hit him—hit him like a blow. Two years ago he would have recoiled in disgusted contempt—the whole atmosphere would have struck him as so utterly commonplace and tawdry. But in those two years he had learned in the Book of Life; he had realised this his pre-war standards did not survive the test of Death: that *they* were the things which were cheap and tawdry. He had got bigger; he had got a little nearer the heart of things...

"DERE BILL" (so ran the letter), "I likes you: better than any of the others. Why have I got to do it, Bill? I hates them, and a lady come down to-day and give me a track. Blarst her! It will always be you, Bill. Come home soon again. ROSE."

"P.S.—Am nitting you a pare of socks."

The letter dropped unheeded from Mayhew's hand, and his mind went back to his own leave. Then again it was the woman who had been all that mattered. She didn't use cheap scent or pink paper—but...

"It's a leveller," he muttered. "By God! this war is a leveller."

"What's that, mate?" demanded Shorty, picking up his precious letter. But John Mayhew made no answer; he was back with his thoughts...back on leave...

A little picture came to him, a picture full of that Cursed cynical humour that chokes a man, and then makes him laugh—with the laughter of a man who is in the pit...

The man had driven up in a taxi just in front of him. He got out and his wife stood by him while he fumbled in his pocket for some money. Then the girl—she was just a girl, that's all, with the suffering of the world in her eyes—leant forward and touched his on the arm.

"I think, Bob, I'd like him to wait, old boy. I don't want to have to go looking round for one, after..."

He looked at her, and she looked away quickly—too quickly. Instinctively his hand went out towards her; then it dropped to his side, and he turned to the driver.

"Will you wait for this lady? I'm going off by the leave train." He took his bag from the man and grinned gently at his wife. "Jolly good idea of yours, old thing. Let's go and find a seat."

Round every Pullman were gathered small crowds of officers and their friends, while the wooden barrier beside the platform was crowded with men in khaki and their womenkind, each little group intent on its own affairs; each little group obsessed, with that one damnable idea—"Dear God! but it's over; he's going back again."

They met on a common footing—the women. Wife, mistress, mother, what matter the actual tie in the face of that one great fact—that helpless feeling of utter impotence. For a week or ten days they had had him, and

now it was the end. There was so much to say, and only such a little while to say it in; so many things had been forgotten, so many things they had wanted to ask about, which, in the excitement of having him back, had slipped their memory. And now, the system was claiming him again, the inexorable machine was taking him away.

Mayhew had wandered slowly up the platform, catching a word here and there. A small child held in her father's arms was diligently poking his face with a wet finger, while her mother, with one eye on the clock and another on her offspring, was speaking disjointedly.

"Ain't she a wonder, Bill? An' you will tell me if you gets yer parcels: I'm sending them regular. That's all right, old gal. I'll do fine."

Close beside them two flappers giggled hysterically, with their arms round the necks of a couple of gunner-drivers; and pacing up and down a youngster, with his arm through that of a white-haired man, was talk ing earnestly.

Mayhew, his seat taken, got to the end of the platform, and leaned against a pile of baggage. The stoker, smoking a short clay pipe, was leaning unconcernedly from the engine, and the steam was screeching through the safety-valve. Then, above the uproar, he heard the girl of the taxi speaking close by. To move meant being seen: and at such times there is only *one* man for the woman.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" she said; "but it's been good having you again." She raised her swimming eyes to the man and smiled. "I'm not going to cry, Bob—at least, not very much. You will write, old man, won't you. It's all the little things I want to know: whether your servant is looking

after you, and whether you're comfortable, and if you get wet, and your clothes are mended." She smiled again—a wan little smile. "You once said you couldn't tell me any of the interesting things, because of the Censor. Dear, the things I want to know, the Censor won't object to. I don't care what part of the front you're on—at least, not much. It isn't that that I want to hear about. It's just you; you, my darling. And more especially—now." She said the last word so softly that he scarce heard it.

For a while the man looked out over the network of lines into the blue of the summer's morning. To save his life at the moment he could not have spoken without breaking down, and as a nation we do not break down in public. The night before, in the hotel where they were staying—well, that is different perhaps. And the place on which we stand is Holy Ground—so let us leave it at that...

"Of course I'll write, old thing," he got out after a bit, and his tone was almost flippant. "I always *do* write—pages of drivel."

An Australian beside him was kissing a girl whose painted cheeks told their own tale.

"Here's a quid, Kid," he was saying. "You'd better take it; it's about the lot I've got left."

"I don't want it, Bill." The girl pushed it away. "Oh, my God, what a bloody thing this war is! Have made you happy, old man?" She clung to his arm, and the soldier looked down into her eyes quizzically. "Yes, Kid. You've made me happy right enough."

He tilted up her face with his hand and kissed her lips. "Poor Kid," he muttered. "You've got a rotten life, my gal—and you're white inside. Take the bally flimsy; I wish I could make it more. I'd like to think you could take a bit of a rest. There, there—don't cry: I'll come and see you again in six months, or may be a year."

They moved away, and John Mayhew followed them with his eyes. "Pages of drivel," he repeated mechanically. "God! but this is the devil for women."

"Take your seats, please." The guard's voice rose above the din.

"Good-bye, my darling, and God bless you." For just a moment he watched the man called Bob hold her two hands, and with his eyes tell her the things which it is not given to mortals to say. Then he kissed her on the lips, and without a word she turned and left him. Once she looked back and waved—a little flash of white fluttering for an instant out of the crowd. And then a kindly taxi driver helped her to find the step she couldn't see; and the curtain had rung down once again...

"It's different for *me*. No one else can feel quite as we do; no one else can love quite as much." With so many that thought is predominant; to so many it seems so real.

My lady, go down on your knees and thank your God that it isn't different for you—that it's just the same. You don't think so now, but it's true nevertheless. To you—just now life

seems utterly inconceivable without him. To-day it seems hideous that forget fulness can come to those we love—if the worst occurs. But the greatest gift of God is that it does come—in time...

And never forget, lady, that his understanding is greater *after* than before. He wouldn't have you suffer; he wouldn't have you grieve—too much. Just for a little perhaps—but not too long. He under stands; believe me, he understands. You're not being disloyal...

"What d'yer think of the little gal's letter, mate?" Shorty Bill's voice broke in on Mayhew's reverie. "She ain't altogether a devil dodger's wife, I suppose, but she's white: white clean through."

"And nothing else matters this outfit, Shorty."

John Mayhew smiled thoughtfully. "We were getting just a bit above ourselves before the war. We were thinking in 'isms. You can take it from me, old man, most of these damned rituals amount to a snow-ball in hell when you come to the goods. We were getting a bit too complicated, Shorty; we've got to get simple again. We've got the goods here, and I don't give a ten cent piece whether a man's a Catholic or a sun worshipper if he just sees straight, plays the game, and takes his gruel without whining."

"I guess you're right, son." Shorty produced a dangerous-looking pipe. "But speaking of being simple, there's a little thing I want to show you, which is an improvement on that throttle hold under the ear. An' it's as easy as falling off a log. What the devil are you laughing at?"

John Mayhew controlled himself with an effort. "You're never heard, Shorty, of the law of inherent connection. I

know you hav'n't, old boy; so don't bother about it! Just carry on and show me this toe hold of yours."

§ II

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Now with Shorty Bill killing was a science. As far as was humanly possible he had eliminated chance; and though no one can ignore the rum jar and five nine which descend impartially upon the just and the unjust, at the same time, where it was man to man, the betting was five to one on Shorty. And he specialised in making it man to man. As a sniper he had been known to lie for hours—right through the heat of the day—disguised in dirt, bits of brick, and a fly barrage, waiting for his target, immovable, seemingly a bit of the landscape. As a prowler in, strange places he had been known to disappear into No Man's Land, when the great green flares started bobbing up at nightfall, and return in time for stand to. He never volunteered much information as to his doings on these occasions; he rarely took any one else with him. But sometimes in the morning, after one of these nocturnal excursions, he might be seen on the fire step, sucking his pipe and carefully making a nick in the handle of his own peculiar weapon. It was half knife, half bill-hook, and a man could shave with it.

And so, although Shorty at the moment was ruminating on love, he had not come to the crater for that purpose only. He had a little job in his mind, which he proposed to carry out that night, and it had struck him that the crater was the best place from which to conduct his preliminary investigations. It concerned a certain sap head, and the

occupants thereof, and Shorty was far too great an artist to plunge blindly into anything without a very careful previous reconnaissance.

To him, in fact, it was a sport—a game; and the sport of it lay in the bigness of the stakes. The other man's life or his—those were the points, and no abstruse doubts or qualms on the abstract morality of war ever entered his head. The game is beating the Boche; and beating the Boche, when reduced to its simplest terms, is killing him. At that Shorty left it. But to some the matter is not quite so simple; to some the slaughter of the individual seems but a strange antidote for the madness of their rulers. And theoretically they are doubtless right. The trouble is that war concerns not itself with theories. There is no good indenting for timber to build yourself a dugout, if you can comfortably pinch it through a hole in the fence round the R.E. dump. It is the practical side of the question on which a man must concentrate, before he dabbles in the theoretical; and shooting second won't help the concentration. Thus it is in hard logic; only, as I said, to some...it's difficult...

It was in a dugout, I remember, down Arras way, that the point cropped up. It concerned killing, and the German temperament, and ours, and—one, to whom killing was difficult. Leyburn started it—Joe Leyburn of the Loamshires—who was killed at Cambrai just after he'd brained a Boche with a shovel lying outside his dugout.

"When an Englishman sees red it is the result of a primitive instinct; with the German it is the direct result of a

carefully acquired training. The inculcation of frightfulness is part of their military system, and from the very nature of the brutes their frightfulness has a ring of artificiality about it."

Leyburn paused and lit a cigarette. Then, after a moment, he continued thoughtfully: "There's nothing quite so pitifully contemptible as when the bluster ing frightfulness collapses like a pricked bubble before the genuine article. You can see the man's soul then, pea-green in its rottenness, and it's a sight which, once seen, you never forget. It's like looking on something rather slimy—in a bottle: a diseased anatomical specimen—pickled."

"Yes, we're a nasty body of men," remarked the doctor, "but we do our little best. Am I right in supposing that there is a story behind your words, Leyburn; or is this thusness due to port?"

Joe Leyburn grinned gently. "You unholy old sawbones," he answered genially, "have we lived together these many moons, and at the end you accuse me of thusness after two glasses. No, I was thinking of little Jack Bennett. I don't know what brought him to my mind, except that I saw an account of his marriage in the paper this morning. Does any one remember him?"

"Sandy-haired little fellow, wasn't he?" remarked the second-in-command reminiscently. "In B Company for a few days after I came, and associated, somehow, in my mind with Plymouth Brethren."

"That's the man, only Plymouth Brethren is a bit wide of the mark. His religious proclivities were quite orthodox, with no leaning towards fancy persuasions. As a matter of fact

when war broke out he was in training, or on probation, or whatever occurs prior to becoming a padre."

"Reading for Holy Orders is the official designation of the condition," grunted the second-in-command; "though to listen to 'em after they've done it, it defeats me what the deuce most of 'em ever read. Of all the drivelling, platitudinal ineptitudes—"

"Hush!" murmured the doctor. "We have a second-lieutenant amongst us. It behoves us to consider his susceptibilities."

Second-Lieutenant James Paton—aged forty-two—roused himself from his gentle doze. "So I should dam well hope," he remarked. "And if Joe is determined to inflict us with his yarn, for heaven's sake don't interrupt him, or we'll be here all night."

"I can't call it a yarn"—Leyburn's fingers were drumming idly on the table—"it's not one at all; it's only a sort of psychological fragment which bears on that subject of seeing red. I was commanding B Company at the time when young Bennett joined us, and so I naturally took a fatherly interest in his welfare. He struck me immediately as being a thoroughly good type of subaltern, and his principal job in life—the platoon's comfort—came to him naturally. He was a real good boy—the way he looked after his men, and they loved him. Number Seven he had, with Murgatroyd as his platoon sergeant—you know? the fellow who stopped one at Givenchy six or seven months ago."

"When Bennett came we were out of the line—back west of Bethune—so he had lots of time to get settled down; and he was with us three months before we went over the lid

again. At the time I had no idea he was anything in the Church line. He was quiet, and I doubt if the only story I once heard him tell would have amused the doctor, but...Sit down, Pills; you needn't bow.

"As I say, his platoon was very efficient, and he seemed in close touch with them—was, in fact, in close touch with them. Moreover he preached the platoon commander's end-all and be-all with gusto: 'Kill, Capture, Wound, or Out the Boche and continue the practice.' And so it came as all the greater surprise to me.

"We popped the parapet at dawn one morning in April down La Bassee way—small show—you were sick I think, Bill?"

The second-in-command nodded.

"Everything went like clock-work, and we got our objectives with very few casualties. Bennett had gone over with the leading wave, and he was the first person I saw when I dropped into the trench. There was a dead Boche lying in the corner, and the strafing going on was unusually mild. Bennett must have been there ten minutes before I arrived, and I was annoyed to find he wasn't doing any thing in the way of superintending consolidation. I walked up to him to curse him—and then I saw his face."

Leyburn was silent for a moment or two, and his forehead wrinkled in a frown. He seemed to be seeking for the right word. "I've never seen a similar look on any man's face before or since," he went on after a while. "For a moment I thought it was fear—craven, abject fear; but almost at once I saw it wasn't. He was standing there motion less, with his eyes fixed on the dead German. His face was working like a

man with shell-shock, and his right arm holding his revolver was rigid and motionless by his side.

"'What the devil are you wasting your time for?'" I asked him. 'And what's the matter with you, any way?'

"He seemed to make a physical effort to tear his eyes away from the body, and then he looked at me. 'I've killed him,' he said, and his lips moved stiffly; 'I've killed him.'

"'And a damn good thing too,' I cried. 'What's that to make a song about? Get on with your job, and put the men on to consolidating.'

"For a time he almost seemed not to understand me; then, slowly and mechanically, he turned on his heel and walked away. I saw him once or twice again that morning, and he was working hard with his men, shifting sand bags. But on both occasions there was a look in his eyes which at the moment I hadn't the time to try and understand. Afterwards I realised it was horror."

The doctor nodded shortly. "Yes, to talk about killing and to do it are not quite the same thing. A regimental aid post would be a good and useful experience for many people I wot of."

"It was horror," went on Leyburn, "the horror of having killed a man—that expression on his face. He talked to me about it one evening after dinner a week or so later. We were alone, and he was very anxious I should understand. It was then I found out he had been going into the Church.

"'I saw him,' he told me, 'standing by the traverse—that Boche. He was looking sort of stupid and vacuous, and his jaw was hanging slack, as if he was half dazed. He was fumbling with something in his hands, and I—well, I can't

say I thought it was a bomb; I can't say I really thought about anything at all. I just saw him there, and we looked at one another. Just two ordinary men looking at one another; no heat, no panic, no nothing—only he was a Boche, and I was an Englishman.'

"I remember the boy seemed almost meticulous in his analysis of the occasion; he seemed to be trying to make a case against himself.

"'I don't think,' he went on, 'that my life was in danger. In fact, I'm certain it wasn't. It was no case of him or me; it was just two men. And then suddenly there came to me a temptation so extraordinarily strong, that I couldn't resist it. I don't think—no, I don't think I shall ever have that temptation again; but, if I ever do, the result will be the same. It was a fascination—an unholy obsession—which said to me, "You can kill that man." And I did.'

"As he said it, Bennett's head went forward towards the fireplace, and he stared at the flames. He was speaking in a lifeless monotone as he dissected himself for my benefit, and I didn't interrupt him. 'I levelled my revolver at his face,' he continued, 'and he watched me. He never moved—he just seemed dazed. I could see his eyes, and there was a film over them, a film of lifeless apathy. Then he moved—suddenly; and as he moved I fired. For a moment he remained standing, and then he tottered forward, and fell at my feet. It was then the unholy temptation left me; and I realised—what—I—had done.'

"'You see,' he told me, 'I was going to be a parson, before the war. I was qualifying myself to preach the gospel of Christ—of kindness, of mercy, of love. I was qualifying

myself to be a help to other men, to be a friend who guided them and on whom they might rely. And then came the war, and it seemed to me that that could wait. It seemed to me that my job was to help those other men actively—by deeds not words; to lend a hand in getting the Hun under, so that such a set-back to what God would have on earth could never happen again. But thought of that sort is abstract. It was right, I know; I feel now that I was right—when I can get the concrete case out of my mind. That poor, hulking blighter the other day is the concrete; Prussian militarism the abstract. The trouble is that to the individual it's the concrete that fills the horizon. And, dear God,' the boy got up with his hand to his forehead, 'as long as I live, the picture of his face will haunt me...'"

For a while we were all silent, while Joe Leyburn filled his pipe. Then the doctor spoke thoughtfully. "I've seen 'em like that too; in a C.C.S. some times one hears a man raving. It's much like one's first operation as a student."

"No, I'm damned if it is," answered Leyburn.

"Then it's the natural dislike to seeing blood and mess; with young Bennett, it was something a good deal deeper. It was futile going over all the time-honoured, hoary arguments, about a sense of proportion, and the fact that there is a war on, and we're out to win it, and that there's only one way to do so. He knew all that as well as I did. His trouble was that the individual's outlook had swamped the big one: he was endowing Germans with a personality. A fatal mistake; it can't be done. If the other man surrenders—well and good; you can dabble in his personality then to your heart's content. But if he doesn't, you've got to kill

him; such is the law—and the fact that Bennett's first effort appeared to have been half-baked was—well—unfortunate. But as I pointed out to him, where the laws are brutal and primitive, you don't dally over their execution. The thing has *got* to be done, however much he disliked it. It was what he'd let himself in for, and there was no more to be said on the matter. Moreover, if he did say anything on the matter, he would be failing in his very obvious duty.

"I took that line—it seemed to be the only possible one—and the boy listened to me in silence. When I'd finished he shook his head.

"'It's only because I know that what you say is right that I haven't gone off my chump,' he said quietly. 'With my brain I know you are correct; with my brain I know one can't stop to talk about the weather when you meet a Boche; but, with my soul, I see a woman and some kids and a half-dazed stupid face, and she'll be waiting and waiting, and—I did it.' He got up wearily. 'Don't worry, sir,' he said; 'I won't let the company down. I expect you think I'm a fool; I'm not; but the individual side of war has hit me for the first time. And as long as I live, nothing will ever be quite the same again.'

"And that's the end of Part One. Doc, pass the whisky." We waited for him to fill his glass.

"Part Two," continued Leyburn, "is where the psychological interest comes in. I think we agree that most Englishmen feel much the same as that boy did—though perhaps not quite so strongly. His case is more or less typical in its dislike to shooting the sitting bird, in its dislike of killing without the element of sport or danger. As a race we like to give the things we kill a run for their money. And

as a race the Huns do not. With them it is merely a business, the same as it has to be with us; but there is this fundamental difference. We do it with compunction, as a matter of grim necessity; they do it without thought, as a matter of drill.

"Had the positions been reversed in Bennett's case, would the average Hun have given the matter a second thought? And so"—Leyburn leaned forward to emphasise his point—"to the casual observer it might seem that the Hun was the better soldier."

"Quite so, Joe," remarked the doctor, "but he ain't."

"As you say, doc, he ain't. But why? In that boy's case the thing he had done haunted him. He felt he hadn't played the game, and it showed for weeks in his eyes and his bearing. Murgatroyd, his sergeant, noticed it—and Murgatroyd was a shrewd man.

"'Let him be, sir,' he said one day to me. 'He just wants a bite in the nose—like as 'ow a terrier wants a nip from a rat—and he won't know himself." Murgatroyd was right.

"It took place on the Somme just beyond Fricourt. I'd taken one through the knee, and was lying out watching. Suddenly I saw a Boche—a great hulk ing-looking blighter—with the utmost deliberation shoot two of our wounded who were lying in a shell hole. Then he started crawling away with his revolver still in his hand. Just a business—you see—a drill. I was reaching down to pick up a rifle from a dead man beside me when I saw young Bennett. He'd got up and—regardless of the strafing—he was making for that Boche. So I pulled out my glasses and watched. His face was snarling and his teeth were showing in a fixed sort of grin;

and in his hands he held a rifle with the bayonet fixed. The German saw him coming and took deliberate aim: as a matter of fact, I found out after he got him through the shoulder. But he didn't stop; he just went for that Boche with his bayonet. I saw the Hun's face, and it was white with terror. I saw his hands go up, and he was mouthing with fear. It was the slimy thing in the bottle and the red fury of the primitive man; it was fright fulness bolstered up by artificiality, and the brand that is spontaneous—up against one another." Leyburn paused and grinned. "I watched him kill that Boche four times, and then in my excitement I slipped down the side of the shell hole."

"Which is the reason," said the second-in-command, musingly, "why we beat the Hun every time when it's man-to-man. Sport versus business, leading, versus driving; there's only one answer, old boy, only one."

"Precisely," murmured Second-Lieutenant Paton, waking up suddenly. "Waiter—a lemon. I ordered some to-day specially for the grog."

But then, it's absurd to expect a second-lieutenant of forty-two to be anything but frivolous; and any way, the digression from Shorty Bill is unpardonable.

§ III

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We left him at the bottom of the crater with John Mayhew, sedulously inculcating his willing pupil with his improved method of throttling the wily Hun when it came to close quarters. And if there was anything incongruous in this eminent pillar of Oxford diligently striving to master the art

of the garroter at the bottom of the mud hole, it certainly did not occur to Shorty Bill.

"I reckons you're not quick enough, son," he murmured reflectively as for the fourth time in succession he sat on Mayhew's stomach with *the* weapon an inch off his throat. "Your right hand, somehow, don't seem to jump to it."

"It's rather a new departure for me, Shorty," gasped the winded mathematician. "Still—I'll get it; you mark my words, I'll get it."

With a look of determination on his face he struggled to his feet and removed some of France from his face.

"It's a thing you want a lot of practice at," remarked Shorty professionally. "You can't afford to make no mistakes. Now in your gaff—teaching figures an' all that sort of thing—mistakes don't matter. You spits on the black-board and begins again. 'Ere it's different."

For one fleeting moment John Mayhew shook silently. A sudden vision of many gowned dignitaries of various ages expectorating on their morning's labours, proved almost too much for him. Then he controlled himself, and assented gravely. If the point of view was novel to him, how much more was his novel to Shorty? And in this great citizen army of ours to-day, there is every point of view living side by side. The angles are getting rubbed off, the corners are being rounded; we're beginning to see things from the common footing. And the common footing isn't yours or mine or his—it's ours. We've all got to come into line, and realise that the big noise—as Shorty would say—of the constituency be fore the war, is a very small squeak in France. Wherefore don't laugh at the other man's point of