Sapper

The Lieutenant and Others

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Published by Good Press, 2022

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EAN 4066338095763

Table of Contents

PREFACE

Table of Contents

It is perhaps unnecessary to state that none of the sketches in this book refer to any particular individual. They are not arranged in chronological order; they do not pretend to be anything more than mere impressions of the grim drama now being played across the water.

Some of those pictured in these pages have gone across the Vale of Shadows: may the earth lie lightly on them, one and all. Others there are who, perchance, may think they recognise themselves here and there: to them I dedicate the book.

The setting in most of the sketches is the salient of Ypres: there may be some who will recognise—not, I trust, without a throb of pleasure—Hooge, Frizenburg, the Meningate, and other health resorts of that delectable neighbourhood.

But should I lift in the smallest degree, for those who wait behind, the curtain that shrouds "somewhere in France," and show them the tears and the laughter, the humour and the pathos that go to form the atmosphere over yonder, I shall be well satisfied.

I am no artist in words, but—"Each in his separate star shall paint the thing as he sees it for the God of things as they are."

I. — THE LIEUTENANT

Table of Contents

A FORTNIGHT IN FRANCE
MAY 10 TO MAY 24, 1915

§ I

Table of Contents

Gerald Ainsworth was the only son of his parents—and they made something in tins. He had lots of money, as the sons of people who dabble in tins frequently do. He was a prominent member of several dull night-clubs, where he was in the habit of seeing life while other people saw his money. He did nothing and was generally rather bored with the process. In fact, he was a typical product of the twentieth century—with his father's house in the country full of footmen and ancestors, both types guaranteed by the best references—and his own rooms in London full of clothes and photographs. He was a very fair sample of that dread disease, "the Nut," and it was not altogether his own fault. Given an income that enabled him to do what he liked, certain that he would never be called on to work for his living, he had degenerated into a drifter through the pleasant paths of life—a man who had never done one single thing of the very slightest use to himself or anybody else. Then came the war, and our hero, who was not by any means a bad fellow at heart, obtained a commission. It was a bit of an event in the family of Ainsworth—nee Blobbs—

and the soldier-ancestor of Charles I.'s reign smiled approval from the walls of the family dining-room: as I have said, it was guaranteed to behave as all well-brought-up ancestors are reputed to do.

Gerald was becomingly modest about it all, and, to do him credit, did not suffer from uniformitis as badly as some I wot of. It is possible that a small episode which occurred in the drawing-room of the baronial hall had something to do with it—for, I will repeat, he was not a bad fellow at heart. And this was the episode.

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Table of Contents

Coming in one Saturday afternoon on week-end leave in the full glory of his new uniform, he found the room full of girls—his income would in time be over five figures, his return for the week-end had not been kept secret, and there may or may not be a connection. Also there were his mother and father and one very bored man of about thirty in plain clothes.

"This is my son, Gerald," cooed the old lady. "So splendid of him, you know, joining the Army. This dreadful war, you know. More tea, my dear. Poor things, out there—how I pity them. Quite terrible. But don't you think it's splendid, the way they're all joining?"

The bored man in mufti looked more bored. "Why?" he asked resignedly.

"Why!" echoed a creation on his right indignantly. "How can you ask such a thing? Think of all the hardship and suffering they'll have to endure. Isn't that enough?" and she

glanced tenderly at Gerald, while six other creations bit savagely at muffins because she'd got it out first.

"I don't quite follow the argument," answered the bored man patiently. "If a man has no ties, I don't see that there is any credit in his joining the Army. It is his plain duty, and the gravest discredit attaches to him if he doesn't. Don't you agree with me?" and he turned to Gerald.

"Certainly," answered Gerald, with the faintest hesitation. The line of argument was a little new.

"And what regiment are *you* going to join?" remarked another creation, with dangerous sweetness.

The bored man smiled slightly. "The one I've been in for ten years. I've just come back from Central Africa and cross the day after to-morrow."

As I have said, it is possible that this small incident tended to make the disease of uniformitis a mild one in our hero's case, and to bring home to him exactly what the pukka soldier does think of it all.

Time went on as time will do, and over his doings in the winter I will not linger. Bar the fact that he'd been worked till he was just about as fit as a man can be, I really know nothing about them. My story is of his coming to France and what happened to him while he was there till, stopping one in the shoulder, he went back to England feet first—a man, where before he had been an ass. He was only in France a fortnight, from the time he landed at Havre till the time they put him on a hospital ship at Boulogne; but in that fortnight he lived and, not to put too fine a point on it, deuced nearly died as well; so he got his money's worth.

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Table of Contents

And now, for I have lingered too much on the introduction of my hero, I will get to business.

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Table of Contents

The train crept on through the night—now pulling up with a series of nerve-shattering jolts, then on again at its apparently maximum speed of twenty miles an hour. In the corner of a so-called first-class carriage Gerald Ainsworth stared into the darkness with unseeing eyes. The dim shapes that flashed past him seemed like the phantasmagoria of a dream. For the first time for three days he had the time to think. He recalled the lunch in Southampton when he had said good-bye to various people who seemed to have a slight difficulty in speaking. He remembered dining in the hotel whose sacred portals are barred to the civilian, still in ignorance of where he was going—to France, the Dardanelles, or even farther afield. Then all the bustle of embarking the regiment and, later, disembarking. And now he was actually under way, starting on the Great Adventure. There were others in the carriage with him, but only one was asleep and he did not belong to the regiment. To him the Adventure had ceased to be great; it was old and stale, and he had spent most of his time cursing at not being able to raise a motor-car. For when you know the ropes—be it whispered—it is generally your own fault if you travel by supply train. But of that the man who

sat staring out of the window knew nothing. All he knew was that every minute carried him nearer the unknown—the unknown of which he had read so much and knew so little.

His equipment was very new and beautiful—and very bulky. Prominent among it was that abomination of desolation the fitted mess-tin. Inside it reposed little receptacles for salt and pepper and plates and dinner napkins and spirit lamps that explode like bombs. Aunts are aunts, and there was none to tell him that the roads of Flanders are paved with fitted mess-tins. His revolver was loaded—in fact, five of those dangerous weapons reposed in the racks. The gentleman who slept was armed only with a walking-stick...

Gerald Ainsworth muttered impatiently under his breath as the train stopped for the twelfth time in an hour.

"Putrid journey, isn't it?" said the man opposite him, and he grunted in acquiescence.

Somehow he did not feel very much like talking. He recalled that little episode in the drawing-room of months ago; he recalled the man in mufti's cool, quiet face—his calm assumption that there was no credit in coming to fight, but merely disgrace if you did not. He realised that he and his like were on trial, and that the judge and jury were those same quiet-faced men who for centuries—from father to son—have carried the name of England into the four corners of the world, without hope of reward—just because it was their job; those men who for years have realised that the old country was slipping, sliding down from the place that is hers by right of blood; those men who were hanging on, waiting for him and his like to come and do their bit. He

realised that the trial for which he had trained so hard was approaching; that every minute carried him nearer the final test, from which he might or might not come alive.

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Table of Contents

And how many of those others—his judges—lay quiet and still in unmarked graves?...

In the dim light he looked critically at his hand. It was perfectly steady; shame-facedly—unseen—he felt his pulse, it was normal: he was not afraid, that he knew—and yet, somehow, in the pit of his stomach there was a curious sort of feeling. He recalled the first time he had batted at school before a large crowd: he recalled the time when, lying on an operating table, he had seen the doctor fiddling with his instruments: he recalled those horrible ancient newspapers in the waiting-room at his dentist's: and grimly he realised that the feeling was much the same. It was fear of the unknown, he told himself savagely; moreover, he was right. Yet he envied fiercely, furiously, the man sleeping in the opposite corner who came to war with a walking-stick...But the man who came to war with a walking-stick, who slept so easily in his corner, who swore because he could not get a motor-car, had had just that same sinking sensation one night eight or nine months ago.

He recalled the girls whose photographs adorned his rooms in London; he recalled the night-clubs where women, of a type, always kind to him, had been even kinder since he had put on a uniform; he recalled the home his father had bought—the home of a family, finished and done with,

wiped out in the market of money, wiped out by something in tins; and somehow the hollowness of the whole thing struck him for the first time. He saw himself for what he really was—the progeny of an uneducated man with a business instinct, and yet the welcome guest of people who would have ignored him utterly had the tins proved bad. And suddenly he found himself face to face with the realities of life—because in that slow-going, bumping train his imagination had shown him the realities of death. So far the only shells he had ever heard had been fired at a practice camp in England; so far he had never seen a man who had died a violent death; but that train, crawling through the still summer night, and his imagination supplied the deficiencies. He was face to face with realities, and the chains of England seemed a bit misty...And yet a week ago they had seemed so real. Can Bernhardi have been right, after all, in some of the things he said? Is war necessary for a nation? Does it show up life in its true colours—when money ceases to be the only criterion?

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Table of Contents

Bernhardi may have been right, but, anyway, he is a horrible fellow.

When Gerald Ainsworth woke up the train had grunted to a final halt at a biggish station, and the early morning sun was shining in a cloudless sky.

§ II

Table of Contents