Sapper

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THE END

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I. — JIM BRENT'S V.C.

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If you pass through the Menin-Gate at Ypres, and walk up the slight rise that lies on the other side of the moat, you will come to the parting of the ways. You will at the same time come to a spot of unprepossessing aspect, whose chief claim to notoriety lies in its shell-holes and broken-down houses. If you keep straight on you will in time come to the little village of Potige; if you turn to the right you will eventually arrive at Hooge. In either case you will wish you hadn't.

Before the war these two roads—which join about two hundred yards east of the rampart walls of Ypres—were adorned with a fair number of houses. They were of that stucco type which one frequently sees in England spreading out along the roads that lead to a largish town. Generally there is one of unusually revolting aspect that stands proudly by itself a hundred yards or so from the common herd and enclosed in a stuccoesque wall. And there my knowledge of the type in England ends.

In Belgium, however, my acquaintance with this sort of abode is extensive. In taking over a house in Flanders that stands unpleasantly near the Hun, the advertisement that there are three sitting, two bed, h. and c. laid on, with

excellent onion patch, near railway and good golf-links, leaves one cold. The end-all and be-all of a house is its cellar. The more gloomy, and dark, and generally horrible the cellar, the higher that house ranks socially, and the more likely are you to find in it a general consuming his last hamper from Fortnum & Mason by the light of a tallow dip. And this applies more especially to the Hooge road.

Arrived at the fork, let us turn right-handed and proceed along the deserted road. A motor-car is not to be advised, as at this stage of the promenade one is in full sight of the German trenches. For about two or three hundred yards no houses screen you, and then comes a row of the stucco residences I have mentioned. Also at this point the road bends to the left. Here, out of sight, occasional men sun themselves in the heavily-scented air, what time they exchange a little playful badinage in a way common to Thomas Atkins. At least, that is what happened some time ago; now, of course, things may have changed in the garden city.

And at this point really our journey is ended, though for interest we might continue for another quarter of a mile. The row of houses stops abruptly, and away in front stretches a long straight road. A few detached mansions of sorts, in their own grounds, flank it on each side. At length they cease, and in front lies the open country. The poplar-lined road disappears out of sight a mile ahead, where it tops a gentle slope. And half on this side of the rise, and half on the other, there are the remnants of the tit-bit of the whole bloody charnel-house of the Ypres salient—the remnants of the village of Hooge. A closer examination is

not to be recommended. The place where you stand is known in the vernacular as Hell Fire Corner, and the Hun—who knows the range of that corner to the fraction of an inch—will quite possibly resent your presence even there. And shrapnel gives a nasty wound.

Let us return and seek safety in a cellar. It is not what one would call a good-looking cellar; no priceless prints adorn the walls, no Turkey carpet receives your jaded feet. In one corner a portable gramophone with several records much the worse for wear reposes on an upturned biscuit-box, and lying on the floor, with due regard to space economy, are three or four of those excellent box-mattresses which form the all-in-all of the average small Belgian house. On top of them are laid some valises and blankets, and from the one in the corner the sweet music of the sleeper strikes softly on the ear. It is the senior subaltern, who has been rambling all the preceding night in Sanctuary Wood—the proud authors of our nomenclature in Flanders quite rightly possess the humour necessary for the production of official communiqués.

In two chairs, smoking, are a couple of officers. One is a major of the Royal Engineers, and another, also a sapper, belongs to the gilded staff. The cellar is the temporary headquarters of a field company—office, mess, and bedroom rolled into one.

"I'm devilish short-handed for the moment, Bill." The Major thoughtfully filled his pipe. "That last boy I got a week ago—a nice boy he was, too—was killed in Zouave Wood the day before yesterday, poor devil. Seymour was wounded three days ago, and there's only Brent, Johnson, and him"—

he indicated the sleeper. "Johnson is useless, and Brent——" He paused, and looked full at the Staff-captain. "Do you know Brent well, by any chance?"

"I should jolly well think I did. Jim Brent is one of my greatest pals, Major."

"Then perhaps you can tell me something I very much want to know. I have knocked about the place for a good many years, and I have rubbed shoulders, officially and unofficially, with more men than I care to remember. As a result, I think I may claim a fair knowledge of my fellow-beings. And Brent—well, he rather beats me."

He paused as if at a loss for words, and looked in the direction of the sleeping subaltern. Reassured by the alarming noise proceeding from the corner, he seemed to make up his mind.

"Has Brent had some very nasty knock lately—money, or a woman, or something?"

The Staff-captain took his pipe from his mouth, and for some seconds stared at the floor. Then he asked quietly, "Why? What are you getting at?"

"This is why, Bill. Brent is one of the most capable officers I have ever had. He's a man whose judgment, tact, and driving power are perfectly invaluable in a show of this sort—so invaluable, in fact"—he looked straight at his listener—"that his death would be a very real loss to the corps and the Service. He's one of those we can't replace, and—he's going all out to make us have to."

"What do you mean?" The question expressed no surprise; the speaker seemed merely to be demanding confirmation of what he already knew.

"Brent is deliberately trying to get killed. There is not a shadow of doubt about it in my mind. Do you know why?"

The Staff-officer got up and strolled to a table on which were lying some illustrated weekly papers. "Have you last week's *Tatler*?" He turned over the leaves. "Yes—here it is." He handed the newspaper to the Major. "That is why."

"*A charming portrait of Lady Kathleen Goring; who was last week married to that well-known sportsman and soldier Sir Richard Goring. She was, it will be remembered, very popular in London society as the beautiful Miss Kathleen Tubbs—the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Silas P. Tubbs, of Pittsburg, Pa.*"

The Major put down the paper and looked at the Staff-captain; then suddenly he rose and hurled it into the corner. "Oh, damn these women," he exploded.

"Amen," murmured the other, as, with a loud snort, the sleeper awoke.

"Is anything th' matter?" he murmured, drowsily, only to relapse at once into unconsciousness.

"Jim was practically engaged to her; and then, three months ago, without a word of explanation, she gave him the order of the boot, and got engaged to Goring." The Staff-captain spoke savagely. "A damn rotten woman, Major, and Jim's well out of it, if he only knew. Goring's a baronet, which is, of course, the reason why this excrescence of the house of Tubbs chucked Jim. As a matter of fact, Dick Goring's not a bad fellow—he deserves a better fate. But it fairly broke Jim up. He's not the sort of fellow who falls in love easily; this was his one and only real affair, and he took

it bad. He told me at the time that he never intended to come back alive."

"Damn it all!" The Major's voice was irritable. "Why, his knowledge of the lingo alone makes him invaluable."

"Frankly, I've been expecting to hear of his death every day. He's not the type that says a thing of that sort without meaning it."

A step sounded on the floor above. "Look out, here he is. You'll stop and have a bit of lunch, Bill?"

As he spoke the light in the doorway was blocked out, and a man came uncertainly down the stairs.

"Confound these cellars. One can't see a thing, coming in out of the daylight. Who's that? Halloa, Bill, old cock, 'ow's yourself?"

"Just tottering, Jim. Where've you been?"

"Wandered down to Vlamertinghe this morning early to see about some sandbags, and while I was there I met that flying wallah Petersen in the R.N.A.S. Do you remember him, Major? He was up here with an armoured car in May. He told me rather an interesting thing."

"What's that, Jim?" The Major was attacking a brawn with gusto. "Sit down, Bill. Whisky and Perrier in that box over there."

"He tells me the Huns have got six guns whose size he puts at about 9-inch; guns, mark you, not howitzers—mounted on railway trucks at Tournai. From there they can be rushed by either branch of the line—the junction is just west—to wherever they are required."

"My dear old boy," laughed Bill, as he sat down. "I don't know your friend Petersen, and I have not the slightest

hesitation in saying that he is in all probability quite right. But the information seems to be about as much use as the fact that it is cold in Labrador."

"I wonder," answered Brent, thoughtfully—"I wonder." He was rummaging through a pile of papers in the stationery box.

The other two men looked at one another significantly. "What hare-brained scheme have you got in your mind now, Brent?" asked the Major.

Brent came slowly across the cellar and sat down with a sheet of paper spread out on his knee. For a while he examined it in silence, comparing it with an ordnance map, and then he spoke. "It's brick, and the drop is sixty feet, according to this—with the depth of the water fifteen."

"And the answer is a lemon. What on earth are you talking about, Jim?"

"The railway bridge over the river before the line forks."

"Good Lord! My good fellow," cried the Major, irritably, "don't be absurd. Are you proposing to blow it up?" His tone was ponderously sarcastic.

"Not exactly," answered the unperturbed Brent, "but something of the sort—if I can get permission."

The two men laid down their knives and stared at him solemnly.

"You are, I believe, a sapper officer," commenced the Major. "May I ask first how much gun-cotton you think will be necessary to blow up a railway bridge which gives a sixty-foot drop into water; second, how you propose to get it there; third, how you propose to get yourself there; and fourth, why do you talk such rot?"

Jim Brent laughed and helped himself to whisky. "The answer to the first question is unknown at present, but inquiries of my secretary will be welcomed—probably about a thousand pounds. The answer to the second question is that I don't. The answer to the third is—somehow; and for the fourth question I must ask for notice."

"What the devil are you driving at, Jim?" said the Staff-captain, puzzled. "If you don't get the stuff there, how the deuce are you going to blow up the bridge?"

"You may take it from me, Bill, that I may be mad, but I never anticipated marching through German Belgium with a party of sappers and a G.S. wagon full of gun-cotton. Oh, no—it's a one-man show."

"But," ejaculated the Major, "how the——"

"Have you ever thought, sir," interrupted Brent, "what would be the result if, as a heavy train was passing over a bridge, you cut one rail just in front of the engine?"

"But——" the Major again started to speak, and was again cut short.

"The outside rail," continued Brent, "so that the tendency would be for the engine to go towards the parapet wall. And no iron girder to hold it up—merely a little brick wall"—he again referred to the paper on his knee—"three feet high and three bricks thick. No nasty parties of men carrying slabs of gun-cotton; just yourself—with one slab of gun-cotton in your pocket and one primer and one detonator—that and the psychological moment. Luck, of course, but when we dispense with the working party we lift it from the utterly impossible into the realm of the remotely possible.

The odds are against success, I know; but——" He shrugged his shoulders.

"But how do you propose to get there, my dear chap?" asked the Major, peevishly. "The Germans have a rooted objection to English officers walking about behind their lines."

"Yes, but they don't mind a Belgian peasant, do they? Dash it, they've played the game on us scores of times, Major—not perhaps the bridge idea, but espionage by men disguised behind our lines. I only propose doing the same, and perhaps going one better."

"You haven't one chance in a hundred of getting through alive." The Major viciously stabbed a tongue.

"That is—er—beside the point," answered Brent, shortly.

"But how could you get through their lines to start with?" queried Bill.

"There are ways, dearie, there are ways. Petersen is a man of much resource."

"Of course, the whole idea is absolutely ridiculous." The Major snorted. "Once and for all, Brent, I won't hear of it. We're far too short of fellows as it is."

And for a space the subject languished, though there was a look on Jim Brent's face which showed it was only for a space.

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Now when a man of the type of Brent takes it badly over a woman, there is a strong probability of very considerable trouble at any time. When, in addition to that, it occurs in

the middle of the bloodiest war of history, the probability becomes a certainty. That he should quite fail to see just what manner of woman the present Lady Goring was, was merely in the nature of the animal. He was—as far as women were concerned—of the genus fool. To him "the rag, and the bone, and the hank of hair" could never be anything but perfect. It is as well that there are men like that.

All of which his major—who was a man of no little understanding—knew quite well. And the knowledge increased his irritation, for he realised the futility of trying to adjust things. That adjusting business is ticklish work even between two close pals; but when the would-be adjuster is very little more than a mere acquaintance, the chances of success might be put in a small-sized pill-box. To feel morally certain that your best officer is trying his hardest to get himself killed, and to be unable to prevent it, is an annoying state of affairs. Small wonder, then, that at intervals throughout the days that followed did the Major reiterate with solemnity and emphasis his remark to the Staff-captain anent women. It eased his feelings, if it did nothing else.

The wild scheme Brent had half suggested did not trouble him greatly. He regarded it merely as a temporary aberration of the brain. In the South African war small parties of mounted sappers and cavalry had undoubtedly ridden far into hostile country, and, getting behind the enemy, had blown up bridges, and generally damaged their lines of communication. But in the South African war a line of trenches did not stretch from sea to sea.

And so, seated one evening at the door of his commodious residence talking things over with his colonel, he did not lay any great stress on the bridge idea. Brent had not referred to it again; and in the cold light of reason it seemed too foolish to mention.

"Of course," remarked the C.R.E., "he's bound to take it soon. No man can go on running the fool risks you say he does without stopping one. It's a pity; but, if he won't see by himself that he's a fool, I don't see what we can do to make it clear. If only that confounded girl—" He grunted and got up to go. "Halloa! What the devil is this fellow doing?"

Shambling down the road towards them was a particularly decrepit and filthy specimen of the Belgian labourer. In normal circumstances, and in any other place, his appearance would have called for no especial comment; the brand is not a rare one. But for many months the salient of Ypres had been cleared of its civilian population; and this sudden appearance was not likely to pass unnoticed.

"Venez, ici, monsieur, tout de suite." At the Major's words the old man stopped, and paused in hesitation; then he shuffled towards the two men.

"Will you talk to him, Colonel?" The Major glanced at his senior officer.

"Er—I think not; my—er—French, don't you know—er—not what it was." The worthy officer retired in good order, only to be overwhelmed by a perfect deluge of words from the Belgian.

"What's he say?" he queried, peevishly. "That damn Flemish sounds like a dog fight."

"Parlez-vous Français, monsieur?" The Major attempted to stem the tide of the old man's verbosity, but he evidently had a grievance, and a Belgian with a grievance is not a thing to be regarded with a light heart.

"Thank heavens, here's the interpreter!" The Colonel heaved a sigh of relief. "Ask this man what he's doing here, please."

For a space the distant rattle of a machine-gun was drowned, and then the interpreter turned to the officers.

"'E say, sare, that 'e has ten thousand franc behind the German line, buried in a 'ole, and 'e wants to know vat 'e shall do."

"Do," laughed the Major. "What does he imagine he's likely to do? Go and dig it up? Tell him that he's got no business here at all."

Again the interpreter spoke.

"Shall I take 'im to Yper and 'and 'im to the gendarmes, sare?"

"Not a bad idea," said the Colonel, "and have him——"

What further order he was going to give is immaterial, for at that moment he looked at the Belgian, and from that villainous old ruffian he received the most obvious and unmistakable wink.

"Er—thank you, interpreter; I will send him later under a guard."

The interpreter saluted and retired, the Major looked surprised, the Colonel regarded the Belgian with an amazed frown. Then suddenly the old villain spoke.

"Thank you, Colonel. Those Ypres gendarmes would have been a nuisance."

"Great Scot!" gasped the Major. "What the——"

"What the devil is the meaning of this masquerade, sir?" The Colonel was distinctly angry.

"I wanted to see if I'd pass muster as a Belgian, sir. The interpreter was an invaluable proof."

"You run a deuced good chance of being shot, Brent, in that rig. Anyway, I wish for an explanation as to why you're walking about in that get-up. Haven't you enough work to do?"

"Shall we go inside, sir? I've got a favour to ask you."

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We are not very much concerned with the conversation that took place downstairs in that same cellar, when two senior officers of the corps of Royal Engineers listened for nearly an hour to an apparently disreputable old farmer. It might have been interesting to note how the sceptical grunts of those two officers gradually gave place to silence, and at length to a profound, breathless interest, as they pored over maps and plans. And the maps were all of that country which lies behind the German trenches.

But at the end the old farmer straightened himself smartly.

"That is the rough outline of my plan, sir. I think I can claim that I have reduced the risk of not getting to my objective to a minimum. When I get there I am sure that my knowledge of the patois renders the chance of detection small. As for the actual demolition itself, an enormous amount will depend on luck; but I can afford to wait. I shall

have to be guided by local conditions. And so I ask you to let me go. It's a long odds chance, but if it comes off it's worth it."

"And if it does, what then? What about you?" The Colonel's eyes and Jim Brent's met.

"I shall have paid for my keep, Colonel, at any rate."

Everything was very silent in the cellar; outside on the road a man was singing.

"In other words, Jim, you're asking me to allow you to commit suicide."

He cleared his throat; his voice seemed a little husky.

"Good Lord! sir—it's not as bad as that. Call it a forlorn hope, if you like, but..." The eyes of the two men met, and Brent fell silent.

"Gad, my lad, you're a fool, but you're a brave fool! For Heaven's sake, give me a drink."

"I may go, Colonel?"

"Yes, you may go—as far, that is, as I am concerned. There is the General Staff to get round first."

But though the Colonel's voice was gruff, he seemed to have some difficulty in finding his glass.

As far as is possible in human nature, Jim Brent, at the period when he gained his V.C. in a manner which made him the hero of the hour—one might almost say of the war—was, I believe, without fear. The blow he had received at the hands of the girl who meant all the world to him had rendered him utterly callous of his life. And it was no transitory feeling: the mood of an hour or a week. It was deeper than the ordinary misery of a man who has taken the knock from a woman, deeper and much less

ostentatious. He seemed to view life with a contemptuous toleration that in any other man would have been the merest affectation. But it was not evinced by his words; it was shown, as his Major had said, by his deeds—deeds that could not be called bravado because he never advertised them. He was simply gambling with death, with a cool hand and a steady eye, and sublimely indifferent to whether he won or lost. Up to the time when he played his last great game he had borne a charmed life. According to the book of the words, he should have been killed a score of times, and he told me himself only last week that he went into this final gamble with a taunt on his lips and contempt in his heart. Knowing him as I do, I believe it. I can almost hear him saying to his grim opponent, "Dash it all! I've won every time; for Heaven's sake do something to justify your reputation."

But—he didn't; Jim won again. And when he landed in England from a Dutch tramp, having carried out the maddest and most hazardous exploit of the war unscathed, he slipped up on a piece of orange-peel and broke his right leg in two places, which made him laugh so immoderately when the contrast struck him that it cured him—not his leg, but his mind. However, all in due course.

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The first part of the story I heard from Petersen, of the Naval Air Service. I ran into him by accident in a grocer's shop in Hazebrouck—buying stuff for the mess.

"What news of Jim?" he cried, the instant he saw me.

"Very sketchy," I answered. "He's the worst letter-writer in the world. You know he trod on a bit of orange-peel and broke his leg when he got back to England."

"He would." Petersen smiled. "That's just the sort of thing Jim would do. Men like him usually die of mumps, or the effects of a bad oyster."

"Quite so," I murmured, catching him gently by the arm. "And now come to the pub over the way and tell me all about it. The beer there is of a less vile brand than usual."

"But I can't tell you anything, my dear chap, that you don't know already!" he expostulated. "I am quite prepared to gargle with you, but——"

"Deux bières, ma'm'selle, s'il vous plaît." I piloted Petersen firmly to a little table. "Tell me all, my son!" I cried. "For the purposes of this meeting I know nix, and you as part hero in the affair have got to get it off your chest."

He laughed, and lit a cigarette. "Not much of the heroic in my part of the stunt, I assure you. As you know, the show started from Dunkirk, where in due course Jim arrived, armed with credentials extracted only after great persuasion from sceptical officers of high rank. How he ever got there at all has always been a wonder to me: his Colonel was the least of his difficulties in that line. But Jim takes a bit of stopping.

"My part of the show was to transport that scatter-brained idiot over the trenches and drop him behind the German lines. His idea was novel, I must admit, though at the time I thought he was mad, and for that matter I still think he's mad. Only a madman could have thought of it, only Jim Brent could have done it and not been killed.