

CLASSICS TO GO

THE DAY OF THE BEAST



ZANE GREY

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CHAPTER I

His native land! Home!

The ship glided slowly up the Narrows; and from its deck Daren Lane saw the noble black outline of the Statue of Liberty limned against the clear gold of sunset. A familiar old pang in his breast—longing and homesickness and agony, together with the physical burn of gassed lungs—seemed to swell into a profound overwhelming emotion.

"My own—my native land!" he whispered, striving to wipe the dimness from his eyes. Was it only two years or twenty since he had left his country to go to war? A sense of strangeness dawned upon him. His home-coming, so ceaselessly dreamed of by night and longed for by day, was not going to be what his hopes had created. But at that moment his joy was too great to harbor strange misgivings. How impossible for any one to understand his feelings then, except perhaps the comrades who had survived the same ordeal!

The vessel glided on. A fresh cool spring breeze with a scent of land fanned Lane's hot brow. It bore tidings from home. Almost he thought he smelled the blossoms in the orchard, and the damp newly plowed earth, and the smoke from the wood fire his mother used to bake over. A hundred clamoring thoughts strove for dominance over his mind—to enter and flash by and fade. His sight, however, except for the blur that returned again and again, held fast to the entrancing and thrilling scene—the broad glimmering sun-track of gold in the rippling channel, leading his eye to the grand bulk of America's symbol of freedom, and to the stately expanse of the Hudson River, dotted by moving

ferry-boats and tugs, and to the magnificent broken sky-line of New York City, with its huge dark structures looming and its thousands of windows reflecting the fire of the sun.

It was indeed a profound and stirring moment for Daren Lane, but not quite full, not all-satisfying. The great city seemed to frown. The low line of hills in the west shone dull gray and cold. Where were the screaming siren whistles, the gay streaming flags, the boats crowded with waving people, that should have welcomed disabled soldiers who had fought for their country? Lane hoped he had long passed by bitterness, but yet something rankled in the unhealed wound of his heart.

Some one put a hand in close clasp upon his arm. Then Lane heard the scrape of a crutch on the deck, and knew who stood beside him.

"Well, Dare, old boy, does it look good to you?" asked a husky voice.

"Yes, Blair, but somehow not just what I expected," replied Lane, turning to his comrade.

"Uhuh, I get you."

Blair Maynard stood erect with the aid of a crutch. There was even a hint of pride in the poise of his uncovered head. And for once Lane saw the thin white face softening and glowing. Maynard's big brown eyes were full of tears.

"Guess I left my nerve as well as my leg over there," he said.

"Blair, it's so good to get back that we're off color," returned Lane. "On the level, I could scream like a madman."

"I'd like to weep," replied the other, with a half laugh.

"Where's Red? He oughtn't miss this."

"Poor devil! He sneaked off from me somewhere," rejoined Maynard. "Red's in pretty bad shape again. The voyage has been hard on him. I hope he'll be well enough to get his discharge when we land. I'll take him home to Middleville."

"Middleville!" echoed Lane, musingly. "Home!... Blair, does it hit you—kind of queer? Do you long, yet dread to get home?"

Maynard had no reply for that query, but his look was expressive.

"I've not heard from Helen for over a year," went on Lane, more as if speaking to himself.

"My God, Dare!" exclaimed his companion, with sudden fire. "Are you still thinking of her?"

"We—we are engaged," returned Lane, slowly. "At least we *were*. But I've had no word that she——"

"Dare, your childlike faith is due for a jar," interrupted his comrade, with bitter scorn. "Come down to earth. You're a crippled soldier—coming home—and damn lucky at that."

"Blair, what do you know—that I do not know? For long I've suspected you're wise to—to things at home. You know I haven't heard much in all these long months. My mother wrote but seldom. Lorna, my kid sister, forgot me, I guess.... Helen always was a poor correspondent. Dal answered my letters, but she never *told* me anything about home. When we first got to France I heard often from Margie Henderson and Mel Iden—crazy kind of letters—love-sick over soldiers.... But nothing for a long time now."

"At first they wrote! Ha! Ha!" burst out Maynard. "Sure, they wrote love-sick letters. They sent socks and cigarettes and

candy and books. And they all wanted us to hurry back to marry them.... Then—when the months had gone by and the novelty had worn off—when we went against the hell of real war—sick or worn out, sleepless and miserable, crippled or half demented with terror and dread and longing for home—then, by God, they quit!"

"Oh, no, Blair—not all of them," remonstrated Lane, unsteadily.

"Well, old man, I'm sore, and you're about the only guy I can let out on," explained Maynard, heavily. "One thing I'm glad of—we'll face it together. Daren, we were kids together—do you remember?—playing on the commons—straddling the old water-gates over the brooks—stealing cider from the country presses—barefoot boys going to school together. We played Post-Office with the girls and Indians with the boys. We made puppy love to Dal and Mel and Helen and Margie—all of them.... Then, somehow the happy thoughtless years of youth passed.... It seems strange and sudden now—but the war came. We enlisted. We had the same ideal—you and I.—We went to France—and you know what we did there together.... Now we're on this ship—getting into port of the good old U.S.—good as bad as she is!—going home together. Thank God for that. I want to be buried in Woodlawn.... Home! Home?... We feel its meaning. But, Dare, we'll have no home—no place.... We are old—we are through—we have served—we are done.... What we dreamed of as glory will be cold ashes to our lips, bitter as gall.... You always were a dreamer, an idealist, a believer in God, truth, hope and womanhood. In spite of the war these somehow survive in you.... But Dare, old friend, steel yourself now against disappointment and disillusion."

Used as Lane was to his comrade's outbursts, this one struck singularly home to Lane's heart and made him mute. The chill of his earlier misgiving returned, augmented by a

strange uneasiness, a premonition of the unknown and dreadful future. But he threw it off. Faith would not die in Lane. It could not die utterly because of what he felt in himself. Yet—what was in store for him? Why was his hope so unquenchable? There could be no *resurgam* for Daren Lane. Resignation should have brought him peace—peace—when every nerve in his shell-shocked body racked him—when he could not subdue a mounting hope that all would be well at home—when he quivered at thought of mother, sister, sweetheart!

The ship glided on under the shadow of America's emblem—a bronze woman of noble proportions, holding out a light to ships that came in the night—a welcome to all the world. Daren Lane held to his maimed comrade while they stood bare-headed and erect for that moment when the ship passed the statue. Lane knew what Blair felt. But nothing of what that feeling was could ever be spoken. The deck of the ship was now crowded with passengers, yet they were seemingly dead to anything more than a safe arrival at their destination. They were not crippled American soldiers. Except these two there were none in service uniforms. There across the windy space of water loomed the many-eyed buildings, suggestive of the great city. A low roar of traffic came on the breeze. Passengers and crew of the liner were glad to dock before dark. They took no notice of the rigid, erect soldiers. Lane, arm in arm with Blair, face to the front, stood absorbed in his sense of a nameless sublimity for them while passing the Statue of Liberty. The spirit of the first man who ever breathed of freedom for the human race burned as a white flame in the heart of Lane and his comrade. But it was not so much that spirit which held them erect, aloof, proud. It was a supreme consciousness of immeasurable sacrifice for an ideal that existed only in the breasts of men and women kindred to them—an unutterable and never-to-be-spoken glory of the duty done for others,

but that they owed themselves. They had sustained immense loss of health and happiness; the future seemed like the gray, cold, gloomy expanse of the river; and there could never be any reward except this white fire of their souls. Nameless! But it was the increasing purpose that ran through the ages.

The ship docked at dark. Lane left Blair at the rail, gloomily gazing down at the confusion and bustle on the wharf, and went below to search for their comrade, Red Payson. He found him in his stateroom, half crouched on the berth, apparently oblivious to the important moment. It required a little effort to rouse Payson. He was a slight boy, not over twenty-two, sallow-faced and freckled, with hair that gave him the only name his comrades knew him by. Lane packed the boy's few possessions and talked vehemently all the time. Red braced up, ready to go, but he had little to say and that with the weary nonchalance habitual with him. Lane helped him up on deck, and the exertion, slight as it was, brought home to Lane that he needed help himself. They found Maynard waiting.

"Well, here we are—the Three Musketeers," said Lane, in a voice he tried to make cheerful.

"Where's the band?" inquired Maynard, sardonically.

"Gay old New York—and me broke!" exclaimed Red Payson, as if to himself.

Then the three stood by the rail, at the gangplank, waiting for the hurried stream of passengers to disembark. Down on the wharf under the glaring white lights, swarmed a crowd from which rose a babel of voices. A whistle blew sharply at intervals. The whirr and honk of taxicabs, and the jangle of trolley cars, sounded beyond the wide dark portal of the dock-house. The murky water below splashed between ship

and pier. Deep voices rang out, and merry laughs, and shrill glad cries of welcome. The bright light shone down upon a motley, dark-garbed mass, moving slowly. The spirit of the occasion was manifest.

When the three disabled soldiers, the last passengers to disembark, slowly and laboriously descended to the wharf, no one offered to help them, no one waited with a smile and hand-clasp of welcome. No one saw them, except a burly policeman, who evidently had charge of the traffic at the door. He poked his club into the ribs of the one-legged, slowly shuffling Maynard and said with cheerful gruffness: "Step lively, Buddy, step lively!"

Lane, with his two comrades, spent three days at a barracks-hospital for soldiers in Bedford Park. It was a long flimsy structure, bare except for rows of cots along each wall, and stoves at middle, and each end. The place was overcrowded with disabled service men, all worse off than Lane and his comrades. Lane felt that he really was keeping a sicker man than himself from what attention the hospital afforded. So he was glad, at the end of the third day, to find they could be discharged from the army.

This enforced stay, when he knew he was on his way home, had seemed almost unbearable to Lane. He felt that he had the strength to get home, and that was about all. He began to expectorate blood—no unusual thing for him—but this time to such extent that he feared the return of hemorrhage. The nights seemed sleepless, burning, black voids; and the days were hideous with noise and distraction. He wanted to think about the fact that he was home—an astounding and unbelievable thing. Once he went down to the city and walked on Broadway and Fifth Avenue, taxing his endurance to the limit. But he had become used to pain and exhaustion. So long as he could keep up he did not mind.

That day three powerful impressions were forced upon Lane, never to be effaced. First he found that the change in him was vast and incalculable and vague. He could divine but not understand. Secondly, the men of the service, disabled or not, were old stories to New Yorkers. Lane saw soldiers begging from pedestrians. He muttered to himself: "By God, I'll starve to death before I ever do that!" He could not detect any aloofness on the part of passers-by. They were just inattentive. Lane remembered with sudden shock how differently soldiers had been regarded two or three years ago. He had read lengthy newspaper accounts of the wild and magnificent welcome accorded to the first soldiers to return to New York. How strange the contrast! But that was long ago—past history—buried under the immense and hurried and inscrutable changes of a nation. Lane divined that, as he felt the mighty resistless throb of the great city. His third and strongest impression concerned the women he met and passed on the streets. Their lips and cheeks were rouged. Their dresses were cut too low at the neck. But even this fashion was not nearly so striking as the short skirts, cut off at the knees, and in many cases above. At first this roused a strange amaze in Lane. "What's the idea, I wonder?" he mused. But in the end it disgusted him. He reflected that for two swift years he had been out of the track of events, away from centers of population. Paris itself had held no attraction for him. Dreamer and brooder, he had failed to see the material things. But this third impression troubled him more than the other two and stirred thoughts he tried to dispel. Returning to the barracks he learned that he and his friends would be free on the morrow; and long into the night he rejoiced in the knowledge. Free! The grinding, incomprehensible Juggernaut and himself were at the parting of the ways. Before he went to sleep he remembered a forgotten prayer his mother had taught him. His ordeal was over. What had happened did not matter. The Hell was past and he must

bury memory. Whether or not he had a month or a year to live it must be lived without memories of his ordeal.

Next day, at the railroad station, even at the moment of departure, Lane and Blair Maynard had their problem with Red Payson. He did not want to go to Blair's home.

"But hell, Red, you haven't any home—any place to go," blurted out Maynard.

So they argued with him, and implored him, and reasoned with him. Since his discharge from the hospital in France Payson had always been cool, weary, abstracted, difficult to reach. And here at the last he grew strangely aloof and stubborn. Every word that bore relation to his own welfare seemed only to alienate him the more. Lane sensed this.

"See here, Red," he said, "hasn't it occurred to you that Blair and I need you?"

"Need me? What!" he exclaimed, with perceptible change of tone, though it was incredulous.

"Sure," interposed Blair.

"Red—listen," continued Lane, speaking low and with difficulty. "Blair and I have been through the—the whole show together.... And we've been in the hospitals with you for months.... We've all got—sort of to rely on each other.... Let's stick it out to the end. I guess—you know—we may not have a long time...."

Lane's voice trailed off. Then the stony face of the listener changed for a fleeting second.

"Boys, I'll go over with you," he said.

And then the maimed Blair, awkward with his crutch and bag, insisted on helping Lane get Red aboard the train. Red

could just about walk. Sombrely they clambered up the steps into the Pullman.

Middleville was a prosperous and thriving inland town of twenty thousand inhabitants, identical with many towns of about the same size in the middle and eastern United States.

Lane had been born there and had lived there all his life, seldom having been away up to the advent of the war. So that the memories of home and town and place, which he carried away from America with him, had never had any chance, up to the time of his departure, to change from the vivid, exaggerated image of boyhood. Since he had left Middleville he had seen great cities, palaces, castles, edifices, he had crossed great rivers, he had traveled thousands of miles, he had looked down some of the famous thoroughfares of the world.

Was this then the reason that Middleville, upon his arrival, seemed so strange, sordid, shrunken, so vastly changed? He stared, even while he helped Payson off the train—stared at the little brick station at once so familiar and yet so strange, that had held a place of dignity in the picture of his memory. The moment was one of shock.

Then he was distracted from his pondering by tearful and joyful cries, and deeper voices of men. He looked up to recognize Blair's mother, father, sister; and men and women whose faces appeared familiar, but whose names he could not recall. His acute faculty of perception took quick note of a change in Blair's mother. Lane turned his gaze away. The agony of joy and sorrow—the light of her face—was more than Lane could stand. He looked at the sister Margaret—a tall, fair girl. She had paint on her cheeks. She did not see Lane. Her strained gaze held a beautiful and piercing intentness. Then her eyes opened wide, her hand went to

cover her mouth, and she cried out: "Oh Blair!—poor boy! Brother!"

Only Lane heard her. The others were crying out themselves as Blair's gray-haired mother received him into her arms. She seemed a proud woman, broken and unsteady. Red Payson's grip on Lane's arm told what that scene meant to him. How pitiful the vain effort of Blair's people to hide their horror! Presently mother and sister and women relatives fell aside to let the soldier boy meet his father. This was something that rang the bells in Lane's heart. Men were different, and Blair faced his father differently. The wild boy had come home—the scapegoat of many Middleville escapades had returned—the ne'er-do-well sought his father's house. He had come home to die. It was there in Blair's white face—the dreadful truth. He wore a ribbon on his breast and he leaned on a crutch. For the instant, as father and son faced each other, there was something in Blair's poise, his look of an eagle, that carried home a poignant sense of his greatness. Lane thrilled with it and a lump constricted his throat. Then with Blair's ringing "Dad!" and the father's deep and broken: "My son! My son!" the two embraced.

In a stifling moment more it seemed, attention turned on Red Payson, who stood nearest. Blair's folk were eager, kind, soft-spoken and warm in their welcome.

Then it came Lane's turn, and what they said or did he scarcely knew, until Margaret kissed him. "Oh, Dare! I'm so glad to see you home." Tears were standing in her clear blue eyes. "You're changed, but—not—not so much as Blair."

Lane responded as best he could, and presently he found himself standing at the curb, watching the car move away.

"Come out to-morrow," called back Blair.

The Maynard's car was carrying his comrades away. His first feeling was one of gladness—the next of relief. He could be alone now—alone to find out what had happened to him, and to this strange Middleville. An old negro wearing a blue uniform accosted Lane, shook hands with him, asked him if he had any baggage. "Yas sir, I sho knowed you, Mistah Dare Lane. But you looks powerful bad."

Lane crossed the station platform, and the railroad yard and tracks, to make a short cut in the direction of his home. He shrank from meeting any one. He had not sent word just when he would arrive, though he had written his mother from New York that it would be soon. He was glad that no one belonging to him had been at the station. He wanted to see his mother in his home. Walking fast exhausted him, and he had to rest. How dead his legs felt! In fact he felt queer all over. The old burn and gnaw in his breast had expanded to a heavy, full, suffocating sensation. Yet his blood seemed to race. Suddenly an overwhelming emotion of rapture flooded over him. Home at last! He did not think of any one. He was walking across the railroad yards where as a boy he had been wont to steal rides on freight trains. Soon he reached the bridge. In the gathering twilight he halted to clutch at the railing and look out across where the waters met—where Sycamore Creek flowed into Middleville River. The roar of water falling over the dam came melodiously and stirringly to his ears. And as he looked again he was assailed by that strange sense of littleness, of shrunkenness, which had struck him so forcibly at the station. He listened to the murmur of running water. Then, while the sweetness of joy pervaded him, there seemed to rise from below or across the river or from somewhere the same strange misgiving, a keener dread, a chill that was not in the air, a fatal portent of the future. Why should this come to mock him at such a sacred and beautiful moment?

Passers-by stared at Lane, and some of them whispered, and one hesitated, as if impelled to speak. Wheeling away Lane crossed the bridge, turned up River Street, soon turned off again into a darker street, and reaching High School Park he sat down to rest again. He was almost spent. The park was quiet and lonely. The bare trees showed their skeleton outlines against the cold sky. It was March and the air was raw and chilly. This park that had once been a wonderful place now appeared so small. Everything he saw was familiar yet grotesque in the way it had become dwarfed. Across the street from where he sat lights shone in the windows of a house. He knew the place. Who lived there? One of the girls—he had forgotten which. From somewhere the discordance of a Victrola jarred on Lane's sensitive ears.

Lifting his bag he proceeded on his way, halting every little while to catch his breath. When he turned a corner into a side street, recognizing every tree and gate and house, there came a gathering and swelling of his emotions and he began to weaken and shake. He was afraid he could not make it half way up the street. But he kept on. The torture now was more a mingled rapture and grief than the physical protest of his racked body. At last he saw the modest little house—and then he stood at the gate, quivering. Home! A light in the window of his old room! A terrible and tremendous storm of feeling forced him to lean on the gate. How many endless hours had the pictured memory of that house haunted him? There was the beloved room where he had lived and slept and read, and cherished over his books and over his compositions a secret hope and ambition to make of himself an author. How strange to remember that! But it was true. His day labor at Manton's office, for all the years since he had graduated from High School, had been only a means to an end. No one had dreamed of his dream. Then the war had come and now his hope, if not his faith, was dead. Never before had the realization been so galling,

so bitter. Endlessly and eternally he must be concerned with himself. He had driven that habit of thought away a million times, but it would return. All he had prayed for was to get home—only to reach home alive—to see his mother, and his sister Lorna—and Helen—and then.... But he was here now and all that prayer was falsehood. Just to get home was not enough.. He had been cheated of career, love, happiness.

It required extreme effort to cross the little yard, to mount the porch. In a moment more he would see his mother. He heard her within, somewhere at the back of the house. Wherefore he tip-toed round to the kitchen door. Here he paused, quaking. A cold sweat broke out all over him. Why was this return so dreadful? He pressed a shaking hand over his heart. How surely he knew he could not deceive his mother! The moment she saw him, after the first flash of joy, she would see the wreck of the boy she had let go to war. Lane choked over his emotion, but he could not spare her. Opening the door he entered.

There she stood at the stove and she looked up at the sound he made. Yes! but stranger than all other changes was the change in her. She was not the mother of his boyhood. Nor was the change alone age or grief or wasted cheek. The moment tore cruelly at Lane's heart. She did not recognize him swiftly. But when she did....

"Oh God!... Daren! My boy!" she whispered.

"Mother!"

CHAPTER II

His mother divined what he knew. And her embrace was so close, almost fierce in its tenderness, her voice so broken, that Lane could only hide his face over her, and shut his eyes, and shudder in an ecstasy. God alone had omniscience to tell what his soul needed, but something of it was embodied in home and mother.

That first acute moment past, he released her, and she clung to his hands, her face upturned, her eyes full of pain and joy, and woman's searching power, while she broke into almost incoherent speech; and he responded in feeling, though he caught little of the content of her words, and scarcely knew what he was saying.

Then he reeled a little and the kitchen dimmed in his sight. Sinking into a chair and leaning on the table he fought his weakness. He came close to fainting. But he held on to his sense, aware of his mother fluttering over him. Gradually the spell passed.

"Mother—maybe I'm starved," he said, smiling at her.

That practical speech released the strain and inspired his mother to action. She began to bustle round the kitchen, talking all the while. Lane watched her and listened, and spoke occasionally. Once he asked about his sister Lorna, but his mother either did not hear or chose not to reply. All she said was music to his ears, yet not quite what his heart longed for. He began to distrust this strange longing. There was something wrong with his mind. His faculties seemed too sensitive. Every word his mother uttered was news, surprising, unusual, as if it emanated from a home-world

that had changed. And presently she dropped into complaint at the hard times and the cost of everything.

"Mother," he interrupted, "I didn't blow my money. I've saved nearly a year's pay. It's yours."

"But, Daren, you'll need money," she protested.

"Not much. And maybe—I'll be strong enough to go to work—presently," he said, hopefully. "Do you think Manton will take me back—half days at first?"

"I have my doubts, Daren," she replied, soberly. "Hattie Wilson has your old job. And I hear they're pleased with her. Few of the boys got their places back."

"Hattie Wilson!" exclaimed Lane. "Why, she was a kid in the eighth grade when I left home."

"Yes, my son. But that was nearly three years ago. And the children have sprung up like weeds. Wild weeds!"

"Well! That tousle-headed Wilson kid!" mused Lane. An uneasy conviction of having been forgotten dawned upon Lane. He remembered Blair Maynard's bitter prophecy, which he had been unable to accept.

"Anyway, Daren, are you able to work?" asked his mother.

"Sure," he replied, lying cheerfully, with a smile on his face. "Not hard work, just yet, but I can do something."

His mother did not share his enthusiasm. She went on preparing the supper.

"How do you manage to get along?" inquired Lane.

"Lord only knows," she replied, sombrely. "It has been very hard. When you left home I had only the interest on your father's life insurance. I sold the farm—"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Lane, with a rush of boyhood memories.

"I had to," she went on. "I made that money help out for a long time. Then I—I mortgaged this place.... Things cost so terribly. And Lorna had to have so much more.... But she's just left school and gone to work. That helps."

"Lorna left school!" ejaculated Lane, incredulously. "Why, mother, she was only a child. Thirteen years old when I left! She'll miss her education. I'll send her back."

"Well, son, I doubt if you can make Lorna do anything she doesn't want to do," returned his mother. "She wanted to quit school—to earn money. Whatever she was when you left home she's grown up now. You'll not know her."

"Know Lorna! Why, mother dear, I carried Lorna's picture all through the war."

"You won't know her," returned Mrs. Lane, positively. "My boy, these years so short to you have been ages here at home. You will find your sister—different from the little girl you left. You'll find all the girls you knew changed—changed. I have given up trying to understand what's come over the world."

"How—about Helen?" inquired Lane, with strange reluctance and shyness.

"Helen who?" asked his mother.

"Helen Wrapp, of course," replied Lane, quickly in his surprise. "The girl I was engaged to when I left."

"Oh!—I had forgotten," she sighed.

"Hasn't Helen been here to see you?"

"Let me see—well, now you tax me—I think she did come once—right after you left."

"Do you—ever see her?" he asked, with slow heave of breast.

"Yes, now and then, as she rides by in an automobile. But she never sees me.... Daren, I don't know what your—your—that engagement means to you, but I must tell you—Helen Wrapp doesn't conduct herself as if she were engaged. Still, I don't know what's in the heads of girls to-day. I can only compare the present with the past."

Lane did not inquire further and his mother did not offer more comment. At the moment he heard a motor car out in front of the house, a girl's shrill voice in laughter, the slamming of a car-door—then light, quick footsteps on the porch. Lane could look from where he sat to the front door—only a few yards down the short hall. The door opened. A girl entered.

"That's Lorna," said Lane's mother. He grew aware that she bent a curious gaze upon his face.

Lane rose to his feet with his heart pounding, and a strange sense of expectancy. His little sister! Never during the endless months of drudgery, strife and conflict, and agony, had he forgotten Lorna. Not duty, nor patriotism, had forced him to enlist in the army before the draft. It had been an ideal which he imagined he shared with the millions of American boys who entered the service. Too deep ever to be spoken of! The barbarous and simian Hun, with his black record against Belgian, and French women, should never set foot on American soil.

In the lamplight Lane saw this sister throw coat and hat on the banister, come down the hall and enter the kitchen. She seemed tall, but her short skirt counteracted that effect. Her

bobbed hair, curly and rebellious, of a rich brown-red color, framed a pretty face Lane surely remembered. But yet not the same! He had carried away memory of a child's face and this was a woman's. It was bright, piquant, with darkly glancing eyes, and vivid cheeks, and carmine lips.

"Oh, *hot dog!* if it isn't Dare!" she squealed, and with radiant look she ran into his arms.

The moment, or moments, of that meeting between brother and sister passed, leaving Lane conscious of hearty welcome and a sense of unreality. He could not at once adjust his mental faculties to an incomprehensible difference affecting everything.

They sat down to supper, and Lane, sick, dazed, weak, found eating his first meal at home as different as everything else from what he had expected. There had been no lack of warmth or love in Lorna's welcome, but he suffered disappointment. Again for the hundredth time he put it aside and blamed his morbid condition. Nothing must inhibit his gladness.

Lorna gave Lane no chance to question her. She was eager, voluble, curious, and most disconcertingly oblivious of a possible sensitiveness in Lane.

"Dare, you look like a dead one," she said. "Did you get shot, bayoneted, gassed, shell-shocked and all the rest? Did you go over the top? Did you kill any Germans? Gee! did you get to ride in a war-plane? Come across, now, and tell me."

"I guess about—everything happened to me—except going west," returned Lane. "But I don't want to talk about that. I'm too glad to be home."

"What's that on your breast?" she queried, suddenly, pointing at the *Croix de Guerre* he wore.

"That? Lorna, that's my medal."

"Gee! Let me see." She got up and came round to peer down closely, to finger the decoration. "French! I never saw one before.... Daren, haven't you an American medal too?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"My dear sister, that's hard to say. Because I didn't deserve it, most likely."

She leaned back to gaze more thoughtfully at him.

"What did you get this for?"

"It's a long story. Some day I'll tell you."

"Are you proud of it?"

For answer he only smiled at her.

"It's so long since the war I've forgotten so many things," she said, wonderingly. Then she smiled sweetly. "Dare, I'm proud of you."

That was a moment in which his former emotion seemed to stir for her. Evidently she had lost track of something once memorable. She was groping back for childish impressions. It was the only indication of softness he had felt in her. How impossible to believe Lorna was only fifteen! He could form no permanent conception of her. But in that moment he sensed something akin to a sister's sympathy, some vague and indefinable thought in her, too big for her to grasp. He never felt it again. The serious sweet mood vanished.

"Hot dog! I've a brother with the *Croix de Guerre*. I'll swell up over that. I'll crow over some of these Janes."

Thus she talked on while eating her supper. And Lane tried to eat while he watched her. Presently he moved his chair near to the stove. Lorna did not wait upon her mother. It was the mother who did the waiting, as silently she moved from table to stove.

Lorna's waist was cut so low that it showed the swell of her breast. The red color of her cheeks, high up near her temples, was not altogether the rosy line of health and youth. Her eyebrows were only faint, thin, curved lines, oriental in effect. She appeared to be unusually well-developed in body for so young a girl. And the air of sophistication, of experience that seemed a part of her manner completely mystified Lane. If it had not been for the slangy speech, and the false color in her face, he would have been amused at what he might have termed his little sister's posing as a woman of the world. But in the light of these he grew doubtful of his impression. Lastly, he saw that she wore her stockings rolled below her knees and that the edge of her short skirt permitted several inches of her bare legs to be seen. And at that he did not know what to think. He was stunned.

"Daren, you served a while under Captain Thesel in the war," she said.

"Yes, I guess I did," replied Lane, with sombre memory resurging.

"Do you know he lives here?"

"I knew him here in Middleville several years before the war."

"He's danced with me at the Armory. Some swell dancer! He and Dick Swann and Hardy MacLean sometimes drop in at the Armory on Saturday nights. Captain Thesel is chasing Mrs. Clemhorn now. They're always together.... Daren, did he ever have it in for you?"

"He never liked me. We never got along here in Middleville. And naturally in the service when he was a captain and I only a private—we didn't get along any better."

"Well, I've heard Captain Thesel was to blame for—for what was said about you last summer when he came home."

"And what was that, Lorna?" queried Lane, curiously puzzled at her, and darkly conscious of the ill omen that had preceded him home.

"You'll not hear it from me," declared Lorna, spiritedly. "But that *Croix de Guerre* doesn't agree with it, I'll tell the world."

A little frown puckered her smooth brow and there was a gleam in her eye.

"Seems to me I heard some of the kids talking last summer," she mused, ponderingly. "Vane Thesel was stuck on Mel Iden and Dot Dalrymple both before the war. Dot handed him a lemon. He's still trying to rush Dot, and the gossip is he'd go after Mel even now on the sly, if she'd stand for it."

"Why on the sly?" inquired Lane. "Before I left home Mel Iden was about the prettiest and most popular girl in Middleville. Her people were poor, and ordinary, perhaps, but she was the equal of any one."

"Thesel couldn't rush Mel now and get away with it, unless on the q-t," replied Lorna. "Haven't you heard about Mel?"

"No, you see the fact is, my few correspondents rather neglected to send me news," said Lane.

The significance of this was lost upon his sister. She giggled. "Hot dog! You've got some kicks coming, I'll say!"

"Is that so," returned Lane, with irritation. "A few more or less won't matter.... Lorna, do you know Helen Wrapp?"

"That red-headed dame!" burst out Lorna, with heat. "I should smile I do. She's one who doesn't shake a shimmy on tea, believe me."

Lane was somewhat at a loss to understand his sister's intimation, but as it was vulgarly inimical, and seemed to hold some subtle personal scorn or jealousy, he shrank from questioning her. This talk with his sister was the most unreal happening he had ever experienced. He could not adjust himself to its verity.

"Helen Wrapp is nutty about Dick Swann," went on Lorna. "She drives down to the office after——"

"Lorna, do you know Helen and I are engaged?" interrupted Lane.

"Hot dog!" was that young lady's exposition of utter amaze. She stared at her brother.

"We were engaged," continued Lane. "She wore my ring. When I enlisted she wanted me to marry her before I left. But I wouldn't do that."

Lorna promptly recovered from her amaze. "Well, it's a damn lucky thing you didn't take her up on that marriage stuff."

There was a glint of dark youthful passion in Lorna's face. Lane felt rise in him a desire to bid her sharply to omit slang

and profanity from the conversation. But the desire faded before his bewilderment. All had suffered change. What had he come home to? There was no clear answer. But whatever it was, he felt it to be enormous and staggering. And he meant to find out. Weary as was his mind, it grasped peculiar significances and deep portents.

"Lorna, where do you work?" he began, shifting his interest.

"At Swann's," she replied.

"In the office—at the foundry?" he asked.

"No. Mr. Swann's at the head of the leather works."

"What do you do?"

"I type letters," she answered, and rose to make him a little bow that held the movement and the suggestion of a dancer.

"You've learned stenography?" he asked, in surprise.

"I'm learning shorthand," replied Lorna. "You see I had only a few weeks in business school before Dick got me the job."

"Dick Swann? Do you work for him?"

"No. For the superintendent, Mr. Fryer. But I go to Dick's office to do letters for him some of the time."

She appeared frank and nonchalant, evidently a little proud of her important position. She posed before Lane and pirouetted with fancy little steps.

"Say, Dare, won't you teach me a new dance—right from Paris?" she interposed. "Something that will put the shimmy and toddle out of biz?"

"Lorna, I don't know what the shimmy and toddle are. I've only heard of them."

"Buried alive, I'll say," she retorted.

Lane bit his tongue to keep back a hot reprimand. He looked at his mother, who was clearing off the supper table. She looked sad. The light had left her worn face. Lane did not feel sure of his ground here. So he controlled his feelings and directed his interest toward more news.

"Of course Dick Swann was in the service?" he asked.

"No. He didn't go," replied Lorna.

The information struck Lane singularly. Dick Swann had always been a prominent figure in the Middleville battery, in those seemingly long past years since before the war.

"Why didn't Dick go into the service? Why didn't the draft get him?"

"He had poor eyesight, and his father needed him at the iron works."

"Poor eyesight!" ejaculated Lane. "He was the best shot in the battery—the best hunter among the boys. Well, that's funny."

"Daren, there are people who called Dick Swann a slacker," returned Lorna, as if forced to give this information. "But I never saw that it hurt him. He's rich now. His uncle left him a million, and his father will leave him another. And I'll say it's the money people want these days."

The materialism so pregnant in Lorna's half bitter reply checked Lane's further questioning. He edged closer to the stove, feeling a little cold. A shadow drifted across the warmth and glow of his mind. At home now he was to be

confronted with a monstrous and insupportable truth—the craven cowardice of the man who had been eligible to service in army or navy, and who had evaded it. In camp and trench and dug-out he had heard of the army of slackers. And of all the vile and stark profanity which the war gave birth to on the lips of miserable and maimed soldiers, that flung on the slackers was the worst.

"I've got a date to go to the movies," said Lorna, and she bounced out of the kitchen into the hall singing:

"Oh by heck
You never saw a wreck
Like the wreck she made of me."

She went upstairs, while Lane sat there trying to adapt himself to a new and unintelligible environment. His mother began washing the dishes. Lane felt her gaze upon his face, and he struggled against all the weaknesses that beset him.

"Mother, doesn't Lorna help you with the house work?" he asked.

"She used to. But not any more."

"Do you let her go out at night to the movies—dances, and all that?"

Mrs. Lane made a gesture of helplessness. "Lorna goes out all the time. She's never here. She stays out until midnight—one o'clock—later. She's popular with the boys. I couldn't stop her even if I wanted to. Girls can't be stopped these days. I do all I can for her—make her dresses—slave for her—hoping she'll find a good husband. But the young men are not marrying."

"Good Heavens, are you already looking for a husband for Lorna?" broke out Lane.

"You don't understand, Dare. You've been away so long. Wait till you've seen what girls—are nowadays. Then you'll not wonder that I'd like to see Lorna settled."

"Mother, you're right," he said, gravely. "I've been away so—long. But I'm back home now. I'll soon get on to things. And I'll help you. I'll take Lorna in hand. I'll relieve you of a whole lot."

"You were always a good boy, Daren, to me and Lorna," murmured Mrs. Lane, almost in tears. "It's cheered me to get you home, yet.... Oh, if you were well and strong!"

"Never mind, mother. I'll get better," he replied, rising to take up his bag. "I guess now I'd better go to bed. I'm just about all in.... Wonder how Blair and Red are."

His mother followed him up the narrow stairway, talking, trying to pretend she did not see his dragging steps, his clutch on the banisters.

"Your room's just as you left it," she said, opening the door. Then on the threshold she kissed him. "My son, I thank God you have come home alive. You give me hope in—in spite of all.... If you need me, call. Good night."

Lane was alone in the little room that had lived in waking and dreaming thought. Except to appear strangely smaller, it had not changed. His bed and desk—the old bureau—the few pictures—the bookcase he had built himself—these were identical with images in his memory.

A sweet and wonderful emotion of peace pervaded his soul—fulfilment at last of the soldier's endless longing for home, bed, quiet, rest.

"If I have to die—I can do it *now* without hate of all around me," he whispered, in the passion of his spirit.

But as he sat upon his bed, trying with shaking and clumsy hands to undress himself, that exalted mood flashed by. Some of the dearest memories of his life were associated with this little room. Here he had dreamed; here he had read and studied; here he had fought out some of the poignant battles of youth. So much of life seemed behind him. At last he got undressed, and extinguishing the light, he crawled into bed.

The darkness was welcome, and the quiet was exquisitely soothing. He lay there, staring into the blackness, feeling his body sink slowly as if weighted. How cool and soft the touch of sheets! Then, the river of throbbing fire that was his blood, seemed to move again. And the dull ache, deep in the bones, possessed his nerves. In his breast there began a vibrating, as if thousands of tiny bubbles were being pricked to bursting in his lungs. And the itch to cough came back to his throat. And all his flesh seemed in contention with a slowly ebbing force. Sleep might come perhaps after pain had lulled. His heart beat unsteadily and weakly, sometimes with a strange little flutter. How many weary interminable hours had he endured! But to-night he was too far spent, too far gone for long wakefulness. He drifted away and sank as if into black oblivion where there sounded the dreadful roll of drums, and images moved under gray clouds, and men were running like phantoms. He awoke from nightmares, wet with cold sweat, and lay staring again at the blackness, once more alive to recurrent pain. Pain that was an old, old story, yet ever acute and insistent and merciless.

The night wore on, hour by hour. The courthouse clock rang out one single deep mellow clang. One o'clock! Lane thrilled to the sound. It brought back the school days, the vacation days, the Indian summer days when the hills were golden