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PROLOGUE

I

The officer lying back in the home-made chair tilted the peak of his cap over his eyes and let his book slip gently to the ground. A few moments later, after various unavailing waves of the hand, he pulled out a handkerchief of striking design and carefully adjusted it over his face. Then, with his hands dug deep in his pockets to remove even a square inch of skin from the ubiquitous fly, he prepared to slumber. And shortly afterwards a gentle rise and fall of the centre bulldog, so wonderfully portrayed on the bandana, announced that he had succeeded.

To anyone fresh from England who desired to see War the scene would have been disappointing. There were no signs of troops swinging down a road, singing blithely, with a cheery smile of confidence on their faces and demanding to be led back forthwith to battle with the Huns. There were no guns belching forth: the grim Panoply of War, whatever it may mean, was conspicuous by its absence. Only a very fat quartermaster-sergeant lay asleep in the sun and snored, while an ancient and dissolute old warrior, near by, was engaged in clearing out a drain as part of his Field Punishment, and had just discovered a dead dog in it. He was not singing blithely: he had no cheery smile of confidence on his face: he was just talking—gently to himself.

The field was on a slight ridge. Above the camp there floated one of a line of sausage balloons, and the cable to which it was attached stretched up taut from some point near the farmhouse behind. A triangular flag, like a burgee, flew straight out in the breeze from half-way up the cable, and the basket, looking absurdly small, hung down like a black dot below the balloon.

Peace was the keynote of the whole situation. In front the country lay stretched out, with its hedges and trees, its fields and farmhouses. In certain places there ran long rows of poles with strips of brown material stretched between them, which a spectator would rightly conclude was camouflage erected to screen the roads. Only from what? Where was the Boche in this atmosphere of sleep and quiet?

Beyond the silent countryside rose a line of hills. They seemed to start and finish abruptly—an excrescence in the all-pervading flatness. On the top of the near end of the line, clear cut against the sky, the tower and spires of a great building; at the far end, on a hill separated—almost isolated—from the main ridge, a line of stumps, gaunt tooth-pick stumps standing stiffly in a row. There was no sign of life on the hills, no sign of movement. They were dead and cold even in the warm glow of the afternoon sun. Especially the isolated one at the far end with its row of sentinel trees. There was something ghostly about it—something furtive.

And then suddenly a great column of yellow smoke rose slowly from its centre and spread like a giant mushroom. Another and another appeared, and the yellow pall rolled down the side twisting and turning, drifting into the air and eddying over the dark, grim slope. Gradually it blotted out

that isolated hill, like fog reeking round a mountain top, and as one watched it, fascinated, a series of dull booms came lazily through the air.

"Jerry gettin' it in the neck on Kemmel." Two men passing by were regarding the performance with perfunctory interest, while the purple bulldog still rose and fell, and the dissolute old warrior did not cease talking to himself.

"Derek scooped the bally lot as usual." An officer appeared at the entrance of a tin structure in one corner of the field with a bundle of letters in his hand. "Look at the dirty dog there—sleeping like a hog—in the only decent chair."

He disappeared inside to emerge again in a moment with a badminton racket and a shuttlecock. "On the bulldog—one round rapid fire." He fired and with a loud snort the sleeper awoke.

"You are charged with conduct to the prejudice, etc.," said the marksman severely, "in that you did spread alarm and despondency amongst the troops by disguising yourself as a disease and making noises indicative of pain."

Derek Vane stretched himself and stood up. "We are feeling well, thank you—and require nourishment. Does tea await me, and if not—why not?" He took his mail and glanced through it. "How they love me, dear old boy! What it is to be young and good looking, and charm. . . ."

There was a loud shout and the deck chair became the centre of a struggling mob. Shortly afterwards a noise of ripping canvas announced that it had acted as deck chairs have acted before when five people sit on them at the same moment.

"Look out, you mugs, you've broken it." Vane's voice came dimly from the ground. "And my face is in an ants' nest."

"Are you good looking and charming?" demanded an inexorable voice.

"No. Get off, Beetle; you've got bones on you like the human skeleton at Barnum's."

"What are you like?" pursued the same inexorable voice.

"Horrible," spluttered Vane. "A walking nightmare; a loathly dream."

"It is well—you may arise."

The mass disintegrated, and having plucked the frame of the chair from the body of an officer known to all and sundry as the Tank—for obvious reasons—they moved slowly towards the mess for tea.

In all respects an unwarlike scene, and one which would disappoint the searcher after sensation. Save for the lorries which bumped ceaselessly up and down the long straight road below, and the all-pervading khaki it might have been a scene at home before the war. The yellow fog had cleared away from Kemmel, and over the flat country the heat haze rose, shimmering and dancing in the afternoon sun. In the field next to the camp an ancient Belgian was ploughing, his two big Walloon horses guided by a single cord, while from behind the farm there came the soft thud-thud of a football.

And then it came. In a few seconds the air was filled with the thumping of Archie and the distant crackle of machine-guns.

"By Jove! there he is," cried the Tank. "He's got him too."

The officers halted and stared over the dead town of Poperinghe, where flash after flash of bursting shrapnel proclaimed a Boche aeroplane. They saw him dive at a balloon—falling like a hawk; then suddenly he righted and came on towards the next. From the first sausage two black streaks shot out, to steady after a hundred feet or so, and float down, supported by their white parachutes. But the balloon itself was finished. From one end there glowed for an instant a yellow furnace of fire. Then a flame shot up, followed by clouds of black smoke. Like a stone, the basket crashed down, passing the two white, drifting specks on the way, and leaving behind it a long streak of black.

Rolling from side to side like a drunken man, the aeroplane was coming towards its next quarry. Lewis guns, machine-guns, Archies were now all firing full blast, but the pilot continued on his course. Tracer bullets shot up like lines of light, but so far he had come through untouched. From the balloons the observers dived out until at one moment there were ten in the air. And each balloon in turn followed its owners, a flaming, smoking remnant . . .

Then came the end—as suddenly as it had begun. A tracer bullet seemed to pass right through the aeroplane. Like a tiny ball of fire the bullet struck it, and then went out. The plane swerved violently, righted and swerved again. Then it spun down, rocking from side to side, while a burst of white flame roared all round it. And, falling a little faster than the plane, two black spots, which did not steady after a hundred feet. They crashed fifty yards from the tin hut, and almost before they reached the ground the officers were on the spot. A little distance away the aeroplane was blazing,

and they could feel the heat as they bent over the pilot and his observer. They were both dead, and the pilot was unrecognisable; a bullet had entered the base of his skull from behind. But the observer was not much damaged outwardly. He lay—arms outstretched—looking up at the sky, on the ground that the farmer had just ploughed. He seemed to smile cynically at the hoarse cheering now spreading from field to field, from camp to camp. Perhaps even then he had realised the futility of it all . . .

For a few seconds Derek Vane looked at him gravely, while close by two excited men from different units argued raucously as to which battalion had brought the aeroplane down.

"I tell yer I saw the ruddy bullet hit the perisher right in the middle," cried one claimant. "It were old Ginger's gun, I tell yer. E's a fair corker is Ginger with a Lewis."

The smile spread till it was almost a grin on the dead man's face.

Muscular contraction, of course, but. . . . With a sudden movement

Vane stooped down and covered the face.

"Sergeant-Major." He turned to the N.C.O. beside him. "Armed guard round the plane at once till the Flying Corps arrive. Bring these two bodies into the camp on stretchers."

Five minutes later they sat down to tea and an unopened mail. The farmer had resumed his ploughing—the football enthusiasts their game. Twenty-five Lewis guns and twelve Vickers sections were all composing reports stating that

their particular weapon had done the deed, and somebody was putting another fog cloud on Kemmel.

In fact, the only real difference in the scene after those ten short minutes was that by the ruins of a deck chair two German airmen with their faces covered lay very still on stretchers. . . .

II

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Two hours later. Vane handed his steel helmet to his batman and swung himself into the saddle on his old grey mare. There was touch of Arab in her, and she had most enormous feet. But she fulfilled most of the requirements a man looks for in a war horse, which are not of necessity those he requires in a mount with the Grafton. She scorned guns—she repudiated lorries, and he could lay the reins on her neck without her ceasing to function. She frequently fell down when he did so; but—*c'est la guerre*. The shadows were beginning to lengthen as he hacked out of the camp, waving a farewell hand at a badminton four, and headed for Poperinghe.

Poperinghe lay about a mile up the road towards his destination, and Vane had known it at intervals for over three years. He remembered it when it had been shelled in April '15 at the time of the first gas attack, and the inhabitants had fled in all directions. Then gradually it had become normal again, until, after the Passchendaele fighting of 1917, it had excelled itself in gaiety. And now in

May 1918 it was dead once more, with every house boarded up and every window shuttered. The big cobbled square; the brooding, silent churches, the single military policeman standing near his sand-bagged sentry-box—and in the distance the rumble of a wagon going past the station—such was Poperinghe as Vane saw it that evening.

A city of ghosts—deserted and empty, and as the old grey mare walked sedately through the square. Vane felt that he understood the dead airman's smile.

Sometimes a random shot would take effect, but the bag was soon removed. That very afternoon a driver with his two horses had been hit direct. The man, or what was left of him, had been removed—only the horses remained, and a red pool coated with grey dust. The mare edged warily around them, and a swarm of flies, bloated, loathsome brutes—buzzed angrily up as she passed.

"It's not fair, old girl," said Vane bending over and patting her neck; "but I s'pose it's only in keeping with everything else these days—it's not fairness that counts; it's just luck—fatuous idiotic luck. It's not even a game; it's a wild-cat gamble all over the world. And may Heaven help us all when the bottom does drop out of the market."

The grey mare ambled placidly on up the main Ypres road undisturbed by his philosophy. The dead of her kind were already forgotten, and the nose-bag on the saddle would be all the better for emptying. On each side of the road were gun positions, and Vane kept a sharp look out as he trotted on. If there was one thing he loathed above all others it was the gunner humorist who, with malice aforethought, deliberately waited to fire his gun until some

helpless passer by was about a yard from the muzzle. But at the moment everything seemed quiet. The evening hate was not due yet; and Vane reached Brandhoek cross roads without having his eardrums burst.

On the Decauville track close by stood eight trains, stacked with rows and rows of cylinders, and he contemplated them grimly. Each train was drawn by an ugly-looking petrol electric engine. The whole eight would shortly run at close intervals to the nearest point to the front line. Then Vane, with a large pushing party, could man-handle the trains into the position decided on—a few hundred yards behind the outpost line. And as a method of fighting it struck him as poor.

Whatever may be said about Might and Right, there is an element which must appeal to every normal being in the triumph of strength and hardihood over weakness. It may be wrong; it happens, however, to be natural. But there is nothing whatever to appeal to the average man in the ability of some professor of science, working in his laboratory miles away, to produce a weapon which strikes down alike the strong and the weakling with an agony which makes death a blessed relief. Gas—just a refinement of modern war introduced by the brains of many eminent gentlemen. And it must be in the nature of a personal triumph for them to realise that their exhaustive experiments with guinea pigs and rabbits have caused thousands to fear at first they were going to die, and later to fear still more that they were not. . . .

Vane nodded to the gas officer and got on board the little tractor which was to take him to the front trenches.

Chugging along through screen after screen of brown camouflage which hid the little railway line from the watchful gaze of Kemmel, he seemed to be passing through some mysterious land. By day it was hideous enough; but in the dusk the flat dullness of it was transfigured. Each pond with the shadows lying black on its unruffled surface seemed a fairy lake; each gaunt and stunted tree seemed to clothe itself again with rustling leaves. The night was silent; only the rattle of the little train, as it rumbled over bridges which spanned some sluggish brook or with a warning hoot crossed a road—broke the stillness. Great shell-holes filled with rotting debris flashed by, the mouldering ruins of an old château frowned down as they twisted and turned through the grounds where once men had flirted and women had sighed. Now the rose garden was used as a rubbish heap for tins; and by the over-grown sundial, chipped and scarred by a stray shell, two wooden crosses stuck out of the long rank grass. At last they reached the Canal, and the engine stopped near the Lille road.

Close by, the flares lobbed up, green against the night; and a white mist covered the low-lying ground. Across the road lay trees in all directions, while, through the few that remained standing, a cold bright moon threw fantastic shadows. On each side of the road, screened by the embankment from machine-gun fire, sat groups of men waiting for the trains.

At last Vane heard the first one—faintly in the distance. It loomed up suddenly out of the mist and crept across the road. Without a word the men detailed to push it seemed to rise out of the ground. Silently they disappeared with it, like

ghouls at some mysterious ceremony. With muffled couplings it made no sound; and in a few minutes it was ready in position, with its leading truck where once the owner of a farm had sat before the fire, after the day's work.

And so they came—eight in all. Any noise—any suspicion on the part of the Boche, a bare quarter of a mile away, and a machine-gun would have swept the ground. But the night was silent, the flares still went peacefully up, and the wind had not changed. It blew gently and steadily towards the German lines. Only there was now just a faint smell of pineapple in the air; one of the cylinders was leaking. . . .

Figures loomed up unexpectedly out of the mist; occasionally a low curse could be heard as a man stumbled into a shell hole. . . .

"Everything all right; everybody clear?" The gas expert peered at Vane in the darkness. "Right! well, let her go."

A series of reports sounded deafeningly loud, as the detonators of the cylinders were fired by electricity; a steady, hissing noise as a great wall of white vapour mingled with the mist and rolled forward towards the Germans. The gas attack had begun. To an airman returning from a bombing raid, who circled for a moment above, it looked like a sheet being slowly spread over the country below; a beautiful—an eerie—picture. To those on the ground who watched it, it seemed as a solid wall of dense fog moving relentlessly forward—like the mist that comes creeping over the Downs till those caught in it can scarce see their hand in front of their face. To the Boche it was death. . . .

Patrols going out the next night found men twisted and blackened with the smell of pineapple still on their swollen lips; in the hospitals behind, men writhed and muttered hoarsely, struggling for breath and struggling in vain. The attack had been successful—and all was as it should be. Undoubtedly the Germans started gas in a country where the prevalent wind was south-west—and it doesn't pay in war to be a fool. . . .

Vane wished that one or two German men of science had been occupying the Boche outpost line instead of. . . . War—modern war!

"It will go clean through their helmets," said the gas expert. "One hour in most cases, and when it gets weaker, twenty-four—or even more. That's the stuff to give 'em."

At last the performance was over, and the trains having delivered the goods returned to their own place.

"Most successful." The gas expert, rubbing his hands together, came up to Vane as he stood on the Lille road. "I think we've got quite a number of the blighters. And not a single casualty!"

"Good," said Vane. "But what a filthy method of fighting."

"The Germans started it," returned the other.

"I know they did," laughed Vane. "That's probably why it's so filthy."

The gas officer looked thoughtful. "I'm not certain that I agree with you, Vane. War is such a filthy business, however you look at it, that one would be a fool not to harness science in every possible way . . ."

"Don't you believe it," scoffed Vane. "Science has harnessed us. We've started the bally motor with the gear

in, and now we're running after it trying to catch up. Can I give you a lift back on my private stink machine? . . ."

They strolled up the road together to where the tractor was waiting.

"Man no longer the master of his destiny, you mean?" said his companion.

"Don't make me laugh too loud," returned Vane, "or the Boche might hear; unless you've killed 'em all . . ."

"You're wrong, my friend—utterly wrong." They came to where the railway track crossed the road and he halted to pull out his pipe, before getting on to the little engine.

"I tell you, Vane . . ."

And at that moment a flight of cockchafers seemed to sweep down the road. Vane felt the stinging pain in his right shoulder, and then he looked foolishly at the gas expert . . .

"You were saying," he began . . .

But his late companion had taken a machine-gun bullet through his heart.

CHAPTER I

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The beach at Paris Plage is associated in the minds of most people who went there before the war with a certain amount of gaiety. There were bands, and fair ladies, and various other delights generally connected with popular French watering-places. Incidentally the beach is a beach—not a collection of sharp boulders. There is real sand—lots of it; the sort that gets hot and comforting in the sun, and invites people who have eaten too much luncheon to sleep. And during the war, though the bands and other delights have departed, the sand has remained a source of pleasure to hundreds of people in need of a temporary rest cure. They have come from the big hospitals at Etaples; they have come from the officers' rest-house. Some have even come in motor cars from the trenches just for the day, and one and all they have lain on the beach and slept and then departed the better for it.

On a certain afternoon during the height of the German offensive in the spring of 1918 a girl was sitting on the beach staring out to sea. On the horizon a black smudge of smoke stood up against the vivid blue of the sky; while, close in shore, a small sailing boat was barely making headway in the faint breeze.

The girl was a V.A.D., and the large French family which had planted itself close by cast little curious glances at her

from time to time. And she was worth looking at, with her fair hair, deep blue eyes and that wonderful complexion which seems to be the exclusive property of the British. Madame remarked on it to Monsieur, glancing at the white faces of her own daughters three, and Monsieur grunted an assent. Personally he was more occupied with the departed glories of Paris Plage than with a mere skin of roses and milk; at least the worthy man may have deemed it desirable to appear so.

"Pauvre petite," went on the kindly matron, "but she looks tired . . . so tired." She heaved a deep sigh. "Mais que voulez-vous? c'est la guerre." She watched her offspring preparing to paddle, and once again she sighed. There was no band, no amusement—"Mon Dieu! but it was triste. This accursed war—would it never end?"

Margaret Trent's looks did not lie; she was tired. The rush of work just lately had almost broken her physical endurance, and there seemed but little chance of any slackening in the near future. She felt that all she wanted was rest—utter, complete rest, where such things as bandages and iodine were unknown. And even as the longing came to her she knew that a week of it would be all that she could stand. She could see beyond the craving ache to stop—the well-nigh irresistible cry of her body for rest. She could feel the call of spirit dominating mere bodily weariness. And it drove her on—though every muscle cried a halt.

Before the war she had been in that set which drifted pleasantly through life, and yet she had not been of it. She danced perfectly; she played tennis and golf and went to

the proper places at the proper times—but she was different. She had in her a certain idealistic dreaminess, an intense love of the beautiful in life. Sordid things filled her with a kind of horror, and when the war came she tried to banish it from her mind like a dreadful nightmare. But there were stories in the papers, and there were letters from friends telling of losses and unspeakable sufferings. There was war all round her and one day the great unrest got hold of her, and would not be put aside. She felt she had to do something . . .

And so she became a V.A.D. and in the fulness of time arrived in France. Her friends prophesied that she would last a month—that she would never stand the sight of blood and wounds. Her answer had been two years at Etaples. And to those who know, that is an answer conducive of many things.

At times she tried to recall her outlook on life four years ago. She had enjoyed herself up to a point, but all the time she had been groping towards something she did not possess. She had read carefully and with discrimination, and the reading had only filled her with an added sense of her own futility. She felt that she wanted to do something—but what was there for her to do?

Marriage, naturally, had come into her mental horizon. But there had only been one man who had ever attracted her sufficiently to make it anything but an idle speculation. There had been a time, one season in London, when this man had been her constant companion, and she had been far from disliking it. At times he had seemed to be serious, and as a matter of fact the subtle difference between her

and the stock pattern crowd had interested him more than he admitted even to himself. Then one day she discovered that a certain flat and its occupant were very closely connected with his bank account. It was by pure accident that she found it out. A chance remark which she overheard at a dinner party. . . . And the night before at the Grafton Galleries she had allowed him to kiss her as she had never before allowed a man . . .

It revolted her; and the man, astonished at first at her sudden change of manner, finally became annoyed, and the episode ceased. They still met; there was no quarrel—but they met only as casual acquaintances.

It was at that stage of her reflections that a shadow fell across her and she looked up. For a moment the coincidence failed to strike her, and then with a surprised little laugh she held out her hand.

"Why, Derek," she said, "I was just thinking of you."

Vane, his right arm tightly bound in a sling, sat down beside her.

"I thought you looked pretty weary," he laughed. "Jove! but it's great seeing you again, Margaret . . .! And the peace of it all." He waved his left hand round the deserted beach. "Why, it's like old times—before the world went mad" . . . He fumbled with his cigarette case, until she took it out of his hand, and struck a match for him.

"What ward are you in?" she asked, when he had made himself comfortable.

"Number 13; got here yesterday."

"I come on night duty there to-night. What's your trouble?"

"Machine-gun," he answered briefly. "A nice clean one through the shoulder. And the man beside me took the next bullet through his heart." He laughed shortly. "What a gamble—what a dam silly gamble, isn't it?"

She looked thoughtfully out to sea. The train of ideas his sudden appearance had interrupted was still half consciously occupying her mind.

"Four years, isn't it, since we met?" she said after a while.

"Four centuries, you mean. Four wasted centuries. Nothing will ever be the same again."

"Of course it won't. But don't you think it's just as well?" She faced him smilingly. "There was so much that was all wrong, Derek; so much that was rotten."

"And do you think that four years' insanity is going to prove the remedy?" Vane laughed cynically. "Except that there are a few million less men to carry on the rottenness"—

Margaret shook her head. "We wanted something to wake us up; it's been drastic, but we're awake."

"And what most of us want is to go to sleep again. Don't you feel tired, Margaret, sometimes?"

"Yes—I suppose I do. But it's the tiredness that comes with doing—not drifting. . . . It's we who have got to make the new Heaven and the new Earth, Derek . . ."

Again Vane laughed. "Still as idealistic as ever, I see. Six months after peace we shall be scrambling and fighting and snarling again—after jobs and money and work."

Margaret Trent was silent, tracing a pattern in the sand with her finger. "The worry of scrambling after a job is not

likely to hit you very hard," she said at length.

"Which is perhaps as well," he returned lightly; "for I'm certainly too weary to take the trouble. I shall go away, if I'm alive to do it, to the South Sea Islands and live on fruit. The only proviso is that it should be sufficiently ripe to drop into my mouth, and save me the trouble of picking it."

The girl turned and looked at him suddenly. "You've got it rather bad, old boy, haven't you?"

"Got what?" he asked slowly.

"Mental jaundice," she answered. "Your world askew."

"Do you wonder?" he returned grimly. "Isn't the world askew?"

"And if it is, someone has got to put it back."

"That's what the little boy said when he pulled the chest of drawers over on top of him and lay struggling under it. But he couldn't do it himself. It's got beyond us, Margaret—and God seems to have forgotten. There is just a blind, malignant Fate running the show."

She looked at him gravely. "You're wrong, Derek—utterly wrong. The game is still in our hands, and we've got to keep it there. What are you smiling at?"

"I was wondering," he answered, "whether the last time I was told I was wrong, the sentence would have been concluded similarly. Unfortunately, the speaker died in the middle, thereby proving his contention."

"Oh! but you're little," she cried, striking her hands together. "Don't you see that you've got to look beyond the individual—that you've got to think Big?"

"We leave that to the newspaper men," he retorted cynically. "Our smiling heroes; our undaunted soldiers! They

are heroes, those Tommies; they are undaunted, but it's because they've got to be. They're up against it—and the Juggernaut of Fate knows he's got 'em. And they know he's got 'em. They just eat and drink and are merry for to-morrow they. . . . Ah! no; that's wrong. We never die out here, Margaret; only the other fellow does that. And if we become the other fellow, it's so deuced unexpected I don't suppose it matters much."

"But, we've got to go through with it, haven't we?" she said quietly.

"Of course we have," he answered with a laugh; "and the knowledge of that fact cuts about as much ice with the men in the mud holes up there as brave little Belgium or suffering little Serbia. I tell you we're all dazed, Margaret—just living in a dream. Some of us take it worse than others, that's all. You want the constitution of an elephant combined with the intelligence of a cow to fight these days."

"And yet," she said with a grave little smile, "under-lying it all, there's the big ideal surely. . . . If I didn't think that, if I didn't know that, I . . . I couldn't go on."

"To which particular ideal do you allude?" he asked cynically. "The League of Nations; or the triumph of Democracy, or the War to end War. They all sound so topping, don't they? received with howls of applause by the men who haven't had their boots off for a week." He thumped the sand savagely. "Cut the cackle, my dear girl; cut the cackle. This little performance was started by a few of the puppets who thought they had a winning hand, and the other puppets called a show down. And then the game passed out of their hands. They write books about it, and

discover new Gods, and pass new Acts of Parliament—but the thing takes no notice. It just goes on—inexorably. Man has been dabbling with stakes that are too big for him, Margaret. And the trouble is that the cards up in the trenches are getting mighty tattered."

She looked at him curiously. "I'd never have thought it would have taken you like that, Derek . . . Not quite as badly."

"You formed your opinion in the bad old days, didn't you?" he said lightly. "When we danced and made love at the Grafton Galleries." She flushed a little, but did not lower her eyes. "Such a serious girl you were too, Margaret; I wonder how you ever put up with a brainless sort of ass like me."

"Because I liked you," she answered quietly, and suddenly it struck Vane, almost with a feeling of surprise, that the girl sitting beside him was more than attractive. He wondered why he had let her slip so easily out of his life. And the train of thought once started seemed a not unpleasant one. . . . "You'll get it back soon, Derek—your sense of proportion. You've got to."

"So that I can help build the new Heaven and the new Earth," he laughed.

"So that you may help build the new Heaven and the new Earth," she repeated gravely rising to her feet. "I must go back or I'll miss my tea."

"Have a cup with me in the village." Vane scrambled up and fell into step beside her. They passed Monsieur still snoring, and Madame nodding peacefully over her knitting, and crossed the deserted promenade. Then in silence they

walked up into the main street of the little town in search of a tea shop.

"Do you realise, Margaret," he remarked as they sat down at a small marble-topped table, "that I haven't seen or spoken to a woman for six months? . . . Heaven help us! Aren't there any cakes?"

"Of course not," laughed Margaret, "nor milk, nor sugar. There's a war on up the road. You want about ten drops of that liquid saccharine." In the sunny street outside, soldiers in various stages of convalescence, strolled aimlessly about. An occasional motor car, containing officers—on duty, of course—slowed down at the corner opposite and disgorged its load. A closer inspection of one of them might have revealed a few suspicious looking gashes in the upholstery and holes in the mud-guards. Of course—shrapnel—but, then shrapnel did not occur by the sea. And on what duty could officers from the shrapnel area be engaged on at Paris Plage? . . . However, let us be discreet in all things.

In a few hours that shrapnel scarred car would be carrying its freight back to Boulogne, where a table at the restaurant Mony had already been secured for dinner. Then back through the night, to call at various dilapidated farms and holes in the ground, in the area where shrapnel and crumps are not unknown. . . . But just for a few brief hours the occupants of the car were going to soak themselves in the Waters of Forgetfulness; they were going to live—even as the tripper from the slums lives his little span at Margate. And they were no whit less excited at the thought . . .

They did not show it by an excessive consumption of indigestible fruit, or by bursting into unmelodious song.

True, the greatest of all the "Q" men, who had come officially from a Nissen hut near Poperinghe to study the question of salvaged materials at the base, had waved a friendly hand at all the ladies—beautiful and otherwise—whom they met. But then save for salvage he was much as other men. And with that exception they just lay back in the car and thought; while the trees that were green rushed past them, and war was not.

Thus had they come to the sea. To-morrow once more the flat, dusty country with the heat haze shimmering over it and every now and then the dull drone of some bursting crump, or the vicious crack of high explosive. Behind, the same old row of balloons; in front, the same old holes in the ground. . . . But to-day—peace. . . .

Vane thoughtfully stirred the pale straw-coloured concoction reputed to be tea on the table in front of him. The remark Margaret had made to him on the beach was running through his mind—"The new Heaven and the new Earth." Yes, but on what foundations? And would they be allowed to anyway? Reconstruction is work for the politician—not for the soldier. . . . Most certainly not. . . . The soldier's ignorance on every subject in the world except fighting is complete. And even over that he's not all he might be: he requires quite a lot of help from lawyers, doctors, and successful grocers. . . . In fact, the only thing he is allowed to do quite on his own is to die . . .

Vane smiled a little bitterly, and Margaret leaned across the table towards him. "You'll get it back soon, Derek—believe me, old boy."

"That's very possible. But will the people at home? I'm jangled, Margaret, I know it—just for the time. . . . However, don't let's talk about me. Tell me about yourself. . . ."

The girl shrugged her shoulders slightly. "I don't know that there's much to tell. I've never been so happy in my life as I am at present . . ."

"In spite of all that?" He pointed out of the window to two soldiers limping painfully by on sticks.

"Yes—in spite of all that. One gets accustomed to that—and one's doing something. After all, Derek, you get accustomed to death and mutilation up there in front. It doesn't affect you. . . ."

"No, not to the same extent as it did. In a way, I suppose not at all. But you—you were so different." He thoughtfully drained his tea cup, and set it down again, and for a space neither of them spoke.

"I can't help laughing at the comparison," said Margaret suddenly. "Five years ago you and I were sitting in Rumpolmayer's, surrounded by sugar cakes, being smart."

"They're doing that now in London except for the sugar cakes."

"We shouldn't have been silent for a moment, and we should have enjoyed ourselves thoroughly . . . I wonder—"

"It was our only standard, wasn't it?"

"And now we can sit over a cup of weak and nasty tea—without milk and not talk for effect. . . . What's going to happen, Derek, to you and me afterwards? We can never go back to it?"

"No—you can't put back the clock—and we've grown, Margaret, years and years older. So have thousands of

others—the boys up yonder, their people at home. But what about the business train to Brighton, and the occupants thereof? . . . Have they felt this war, except to make a bit more boodle out of it?"

"They're only a small minority."

"Are they? They're a damned powerful one." He laughed a little bitterly. "And they're artificial—just like we were before the war."

"That's why it's we who have got to do the rebuilding. Even if it's only the rebuilding the house in our own little tiny circle, with simplicity and reality as the keystones. . . . You see, if you get enough tiny circles sound and good, in time the others may follow. . . ."

"Dear lady, you've become very optimistic." Vane's eyes smiled at her. "Let's hope you're right." He paused and looked at her quietly. "Margaret. I've never asked you before—but you're different now—so different. Incidentally so am I. What was it, that made you alter so suddenly?"

Margaret rose to her feet, and shook her head. "I'll tell you some day, Derek, perhaps. Not just now. I must be getting back to the hospital."

"Will you come out and have tea with me to-morrow?" For a few moments she looked at him as if undecided, and then suddenly she seemed to make up her mind.

"All right," she said with a smile. "I'll come, I want to deal with this jaundice of yours. One must live up to a professional reputation."

CHAPTER II

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A hospital is much the same anywhere, and number 13 General at Etaples was no exception. On each side of the big marquee ran a row of beds in perfect dressing. The sheets were turned down on the design so ably portrayed in the War Office Sealed Pattern X.B.451.—"Method of turning down sheets on Beds Hospital." On "Beds Barrack" the method is slightly different and is just as ably shown on Sealed pattern X.B.452. During moments of intense depression one is apt to fear the war-winning properties of X.B.451 and 452 have not been sufficiently appreciated by an unintelligent public.

The period of strain incurred on entrance was over as far as Vane was concerned. For the sixth time since leaving his battalion he had, in a confidential aside, informed a minion of the B.A.M.O. that he was a Wee Free Presbyterian Congregationalist; and for the sixth time the worthy recipient of this news had retired to consult War Office Sealed List of Religions A.F.31 to find out if he was entitled to be anything of the sort. In each case the answer had been in the negative, and Vane had been entered as "Other Denominations" and regarded with suspicion. One stout sergeant had even gone so far as to attempt to convert him to Unitarianism; another showed him the list, and asked him to take his choice.

In the bed next to him was a young Gunner subaltern, with most of his right leg shot away, and they talked spasmodically, in the intervals of trying to read month old magazines.

"Wonderful sight," remarked the Gunner, interrupted for a moment in his story by the eternal thermometer. "Firing at 'em over open sights: shrapnel set at 0. Seemed to cut lanes through 'em; though, God be praised, they came on for a bit, and didn't spoil our shooting."

Vane, sucking a thermometer under his tongue, nodded sympathetically.

"A bit better than sitting in a bally O.P. watchin' other fellows poop at the mud."

"How did you get yours?" he queried, as the Sister passed on.

"Crump almost at my feet, just as I was going into my dug-out. . . . Mouldy luck, and one splinter smashed the last bottle of whisky." The gunner relapsed into moody silence at the remembrance of the tragedy.

Two beds further along the Padre was playing a game of chess with a Major in the Devons; and on the opposite side of the tent another chaplain, grey haired and clean shaven, was talking and laughing with a boy, whose face and head were swathed in bandages.

The R.C. and the C. of E. exponents hunting in couples as these two always did. . . . They are not the only two who before the war would have relegated the other to the nethermost depths of the deepest Hell; but whose eyes have been opened to wisdom now.