Gerald Kersh

author of "They Die with Their Boots Clean" etc.

Clean, Bright & Slightly Oiled

CLEAN, BRIGHT AND SLIGHTLY OILED

Also by

GERALD KERSH

—

THEY DIE WITH THEIR BOOTS CLEAN
THE NINE LIVES OF BILL NELSON
THE DEAD LOOK ON
THE HORRIBLE DUMMY AND OTHER STORIES
BRAIN AND TEN FINGERS
FACES IN A DUSTY PICTURE
AN APE, A DOG AND A SERPENT
THE WEAK AND THE STRONG
NEITHER MAN NOR DOG

CLEAN, BRIGHT AND SLIGHTLY OILED

BY

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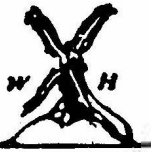

WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD

LONDON :: TORONTO

FIRST PUBLISHED 1946

THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN COMPLETE
CONFORMITY WITH THE AUTHORISED
ECONOMY STANDARDS

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN AT THE WINDMILL PRESS
KINGSWOOD, SURREY

Contents

To Whom it May Concern

THE notes I made in the past six years fill a filing-cabinet, and weigh more than a guardsman could carry. Looking over it I was reminded of one of those fantastic Russian hors d'œuvres tables before which you stand with a watering mouth, not knowing where to make a start. You blink, irresolute, at red, black and grey caviare; at spicy things, bitter things, smoky things, vinegary things, sweet-sour things, distinctly fishy things, high-smelling cheesy things. Great armour-plated fishes have been disembowelled for this teaspoonful of roe . . . the slime of the deep has been dragged for that bit of peeled pink prawn . . . Prybilov Island has run red with blood to provide you with yonder sliver of smoked seal. You don't want to miss anything—yet you can't taste a bit of everything at one go. At last, in humorous desperation, you grab haphazard and see what God sends.

This book is not meant to be sat down to and solemnly chewed and digested. It is a light plateful of bits and pieces, to be picked at over an aperitif. If I wanted to stick a shovel into the zakuski-wagon of reminiscence, I could heap up a platter that would make you sick. So I am handing it out in three or four instalments, each complete in itself as the saying goes. The next volume of my Wartime Notes will be called *"SELL THE PIG AND BUY ME OUT!"*. The title of the third is: *"I THINK THAT MAN WAS I"*. They will appear in due course: there's no hurry.

GERALD KERSH.

London. May 1946.

ONE

Red as a Beetroot or White as a Sheet

"I SEE a bit in the paper," says Lance-Corporal Punishment, "and so it says that book you wrote ought to be shoved away with the boot-brushes. Didn't it, Meaty?"

"When was that?" asks Meaty.

"The other day. It didn't half give you a coating. 'More spit than polish', it said. Laugh? I died laughing, didn't I, Meaty? Wait'll ole Gerald sees that," I said, "then there'll be some blinding and bloodying," I said. "I bet that shook you, Gerald. Like that Seven Days Peck Harris give you for skiving a Bren-Gun Parade. I'll never forget the look on poor old Gerald's face when the Iron Duke shot 'im out of Number Six Company Office. It was like poor old Gerald 'd been fired out of a bloody bazooka: *woosh!* Peck Harris was Company Commander, Meaty. The one that 'ad the brindle Staffordshire pup: the pup what used to jump up from behind and 'ang on to your thumb as soon as you stood at ease before marching into Orders."

Meaty says: "Old Foxy Fox used to have one of them. It could kill a mastiff, he reckoned; but he was always a bloody liar. Used to be a Provost Sergeant in the Tower, last war: he was used for shooting spies, or something. Happiest days of old Foxy's life, they were."

"Well, they say you get an extra rum ration, on a firing-squad; and no more parades for the rest of the day, or something."

"I know a man in Great Harwood, a butcher, I forget what name—he's a hangman in his spare time—so this bloke breeds them terriers for fighting. Chains two pups up so that their noses almost touch, see, and leaves a pan o' water and a nice meaty bone between 'em: lets 'em stay like that three days and nights without food or drink, see; then lets 'em go. They mix it. The one that wins gets the bone. The one that loses is

chucked into the Canal. *Splosh!* I bet 'is dog could beat Foxy's."

"Peck Harris's pup looked leggy to me."

"Poor old Gerald looked leggy alright. Come out so sudden 'is feet never touched the ground. 'I got seven days,' 'e says, 'is there no justice in this here world?' You would of cracked yourself laughing. Poor old Gerald: white as a sheet, tears in 'is eyes, shakin' like a leaf——"

"Red as a beetroot."

"It's a dirty lie!" I shout.

They roar with laughter. "Shove 'im away with the old boot-brushes!" says Meaty, choking.

"Mr. Agate said that my book ought to be kept on every Guardsman's shelf, together with——"

"Wouldn't keep it there long," says Lance-Corporal Punishment, with gloom. "Not in our 'ut. I put a new razor-blade down for two seconds the other day, and the minute I turned my back somebody won it."

"Aygit? The geezer that writes them bits? Reads some books and then gives 'em a ballocking in the papers; that one? Little pitchers of 'imself all over the place. I dessay they *pay* 'im for all that."

"He is a critic," I tell Meaty, "a literary critic."

"You sort of send a cricket a book, kind o' style, and so 'e does a bit about it," says Lance-Corporal Punishment. "I dessay a man like that, 'e gets a lot o' books free of charge."

"Thousands," I say, making a big gesture.

"Does 'e flog 'em when 'e's read through 'em? Or send 'em back?" asks Meaty.

"Some he flogs, some he keeps, and some he throws away," I say.

"It's a lovely life," says Lance-Corporal Punishment, "I wouldn't mind being a cricket myself. I couldn't half criticise. I——"

"A bloody fine Aggit *you* are," says Meaty.

"I'm a bloody better cricket than what you are, any day."

Meaty says to me:—"The other day, so the Company Commander asks old Punishment to describe some wallah what went

absent, and all old Punishment can say is: 'Sort of short-arsed Guardsman, sir, that snuffles when 'e talks.' Might of been anybody. . . . Might of been you, Gerald."

"Ever see poor old Gerald do a Slow March?" asks the Lance-Corporal. "Remember when Colonel Edwards come, and we march past? Laugh? Eh, Meaty?"

"Old Gerald leans over backwards when 'e slow-marches. It's dead funny. If we didn't get the Quick March in time 'e'd be lying flat on 'is back with 'is feet waggling," says Meaty. "Waggle-de-waggle-de-waggle. . . ."

"Or else poor old Gerald goose-steps."

"At Caterham, Kelly used to call 'im General Hindenburg."

"Old Gerald *was* a trier," says Lance-Corporal Punishment, "but 'e overdone it. Once, when the Sarnt told poor old Gerald to swing 'is arms further back, 'e knocked Spencer out stone cold from be'ind, just swinging 'is arms."

"They give poor old Gerald a dose of drill when 'e got that Seven Days, though," says Meaty, chuckling. "Poor old Gerald done fourteen drills that week, plus a nice basinful of spud-bashing. Laugh? 'E was the only defaulter that week, and the Picquet-Sarnt give 'im a proper chasing. I laughed till I cried."

Lance-Corporal Punishment stood in an extraordinary posture, his head forward and his backside protruding. "Old Gerald standing to attention," he says, and snuffles: "Sir, I was only trying to do my duty". . . . What a chancer! So Peck Harris looks poor old Gerald up and down and says: 'Seven days C.B. *Fall in!*' And out comes poor old Gerald, red as a beetroot."

"White as a sheet."

"Like a hop-step-and-a-jump winner at the Tabloid Sports."

"Remember old Gerald putting the weight at the Tabloid Sports?"

"With that sweater on?" asks the Lance-Corporal, as if he didn't know.

"The Iron Duke says: 'Blimey, we've got somethink 'ere,' 'e says, 'stand back, men.' Old Gerald looked like 'e was going to put that weight from the football-field to the Brigade Naffy. . . ." Meaty chokes on a laugh.

"That moustache bristling out, eh?"

"Feeling 'is muscles, eh?"

"Sticking out 'is chest, eh, Meaty? So 'e takes a run, and 'e stops, and 'e takes another run, and 'e stops again, and 'e takes another run, and 'e lets fly. People ducked seventy-five yards away, didn't they, Meaty? They thought old Gerald was going to put that sixteen-pound shot through the Officers' Mess."

"I covered me eyes with me 'ands," says Meaty. "I couldn't bear to see it."

"——and the shot goes three foot in the air and comes down on poor old Gerald's foot," says Lance-Corporal Punishment. "Even the Sarn-Major peed 'imself laughing. So did I."

"Me too," says Meaty.

"So the C.Q.M.S.I. says: 'Try again: try 'olding the shot in both 'ands and chucking it backwards over your 'ead.' So poor old Gerald says: 'Yessir,' and 'e tries. Talk about Buster Keaton! Eh, Meaty?"

"Talk about Laurel 'n 'Ardy! Eh, Punishment?"

"Talk about Nellie Wallace! Old Gerald puts this shot with both 'ands, and crowns 'imself with it—*bomp!*"

"Well, it went up in the air and 'e 'ad to run away from it," says Meaty. "Then 'e tries to do the long jump on one leg. Said 'e'd ruptured 'is cartridges."

I cry: "Cartilages!"

"What a chancer," says Lance-Corporal Punishment. "I caught 'im trying to cut off a mile and a half on the cross-country run. Said 'e'd lost 'is way."

Meaty adds: "That time on observation exercises. Officer points to some 'ouses about three miles away: you couldn't see 'em, 'ardly. 'Look theah for thirtuh seconds, and then tell muh what you see.' So old Gerald takes a quick look, and says: 'Three houses, sir, one with a pointy gable-end and a gate with chipped stone-collar paint with *Saint John's Villa* in small Roman letters on the top bar; gravel path; lace curtains tied with green cord; clothes-line with two pairs of smallish-size woollen pants, two pairs of peach-coloured cami-knickers, six pairs of socks, and a vest 'anging on it; rabbit-'utch with one

female white rabbit in the background, and a red setter bitch about five years old sunning 'erself on the doorstep.' The officer gets out a telescope and looks, and it's just like old Gerald says, so 'e says: 'Remarkable!' and give 'im full marks."

"Old Gerald was bluffing?" asks the Lance-Corporal.

"No, 'e *lived* at St. John's Villa? But the way 'e screwed 'is eyes up, you'd of thought 'e was a gorblimey bleeding eagle."

"I never see anybody bob as much as old Gerald did before a C.O.'s Parade," says Punishment. " 'E'd 'ave 'is kit on the night before, almost. Remember the time the Drill Sarnt said: 'What's the matter with you, man? Are you an idiot?' And old Gerald says: 'Yes sir.' 'E used to go into a sort of trance on C.O.'s Parade."

"Stood as though 'e'd just *done* somethink and was afraid to move."

"And marched like a duck with the piles. Old Thingummy, when *'e* was Adjutant, 'e said: 'For God's sake take that man round the corner and learn 'im 'ow to Slow March.' Ah, we 'ad some good times then, didn't we, Gerald?"

"We did, Meaty, we did," I reply.

"Nothing like it up at the Camp now," says Lance-Corporal Punishment.

". . . But the way old Gerald put that weight!" cries Meaty.

"And the way 'e 'opped!" shouts Punishment. "Eh, Meaty?"

"That long jump! Oh Christ, that long jump! And 'im doing that sprint, three-halfpence-twopence, bompity-bompity-bomp! What a game, what a game!"

"That'll be about the time Russia come into the war. . . ."

"Germany marched on Russia before them Tabloid Sports, Meaty."

"Just after."

"Just before."

"Remember old Tommy Leeming. 'E wanted poor old Gerald to do that 'opping act in the concert."

"So what did you say, Gerald?"

"It would take too long to repeat just now," I muttered.

Now the truth of the affair is as follows:

* * * * *

One day, when I was out on Field Training, something disturbing happened. I heard a sharp crack, and felt as if an elastic band had snapped inside my left knee. Looking down, I found myself standing on one leg, like a flamingo: the other had bent, and was locked back.

The Sergeant said: "More of your little jokes, Kersh?"

"My knee's locked," I said.

"Are you chancing your arm?"

"I tell you, Sarnt, my knee's locked!"

"A likely story! Was I born yesterday? Unlock that knee, and make it snappy!"

I couldn't. "Feel it and see," I said.

"*I* don't want to feel your horrible legs. Take 'em to the M.O.—doctors are used to that sort of thing: I'm not. Go sick."

Next morning I went to see the M.O. About thirty seconds before my name was called, my knee cracked again, even louder than before, and straightened. All the professional malingerers glanced at me with bitter envy: it had all the appearance of a clever trick made twice as impressive by an unearthly noise. They wanted to know how I did it, and when I told them that I hadn't the faintest idea, a young soldier known as Sciatica said: "*You* might want a favour from *me* one o' these days"—and turning away he rehearsed a few assorted groans, for to-day was his big day, and he was to perform in Aldershot before a Specialist.

The M.O. was a kind man, but he had been imposed upon, and had grown suspicious. "It cracks and locks back, does it?" he said feeling my knee. H'm. Sergeant McFall, is there a route march to-day?"

"There is, sir."

"Ah, *I* see. I *see*. M. and D. Iodine. Next. . . . Oh, Kersh. . . ."

"Sir?"

"Be ashamed, man, be ashamed!"

Sciatica came in howling, and I hobbled off to the Route

March. It was a thirty-five mile one. I covered the last ten miles on one leg, hopping. Then the knee unlocked and swelled: it looked, as Hitchens said, like a hairy blanc-mange. I took it back to the M.O.

"Sergeant McFall," he said, "I believe there are Tabloid Sports to-day?"

"Yes sir, there are."

"Just as I thought, McFall."

"Me too, sir."

"Sticking-plaster. M. and D. And Kersh. . . ."

"Yes sir?"

"Pull yourself together, man, pull yourself together."

"Yes sir."

That afternoon I made athletic history. I hopped the one-mile run; I did the hundred yards on a leg and a half; performed a high jump of which Grock might not have been ashamed, and achieved a long jump of three feet six inches. Then I put the weight, in the manner described by Lance-Corporal Punishment; after which the other knee clicked like a garden gate and locked itself.

The Sergeant said: "Enough is as good as a feast, sonny-boy. Carry this lark too far and you'll regret it to the longest day you live."

"Can I help it if my knee locks?"

"Knee locks! An intelligent man like you! Knee locks! Knee locks!" And he murmured another word. "That's what it is, if you ask me. A hairy great ape like you. Haven't you got no sense of proportion?"

"Yes Sarnt, but——"

"What you're after is to skive the night-stunt."

"Night stunt?"

"Trench digging in the dark, nine o'clock."

So I marched a few miles, and dug a trench near the golf-course, and marched back. Next morning I had to bang my legs straight with my fists, and then I couldn't bend them again. I returned to the sick-bunk and reported. "Now my other knee has gone, sir."

"Gone where?" asked the M.O. The Sergeant was convulsed

with silent laughter. I explained: it had gone backwards; it had gone purple; it had gone.

"You're for guard duty to-day, I see?"

"Yes sir."

"Eh, Sergeant McFall? Eh?"

"Eh, sir?" said the Sergeant, with a grim smile.

"Kersh. . . ."

"Sir?"

"So you're for picquet, eh?"

"Pig-buckets, sir."

"What does he mean by pig-buckets?"

"Guarding the swill-bins, sir. Once upon a time a man concealed a leg of pork in a swill-bin and smuggled it out of Camp, sir. Guard's duty to scrutinise incoming swill and see it goes into the proper——"

"I see, I see. Kersh. . . ."

"Sir?"

"Play the man, Kersh, play the man. Have self-respect, man, have proper pride! Strap the knee up. M. and D. And Kersh. . . ."

"Sir?"

"I'm getting sick and tired of this little game of yours."

Thereafter I hopped. Sometimes my right leg folded back; more frequently it was my left leg. Without warning I assumed the shape of a figure four, to the suffocating delight of my companions, who thought that I was doing it on purpose. They brought friends from remote parts of the Camp, offered me cigarettes, and said: "Go on, hop!" The sick-bunk Sergeant said:

"I might as well warn you, to save your time and ours, that it's no use pretending to be off your nut these days. That game's played out. One or two geezers get their ticket with Schizophrenia, but then they've *got* Schizophrenia. Anyway, they don't hop."

"It's my knees, Sergeant, not my brain."

"Not much wrong with your knees if you can hop about three feet in the air on either foot."

"What can I do if my knees lock?"

"Oh, go and get a key cut. Scram. Oh, Kersh. . . ."

I paused at the door. "Samt?"

"Hop it," he said, and laughed aloud for the first time in living memory.

And so I did. At the end of that year I had to be operated on. Mr. Paton removed a semilunar cartilage with a complete bucket-handle tear. He gave it to me: it looked exactly like a chewed wishbone. I kept it for luck and then gave it to an American soldier in exchange for a Zippo lighter.

So the cartilage of my left knee is in Tennessee. The one they afterwards cut out of the right knee is in Hampstead. The tonsils Mr. Steeler excised between times must have floated out to sea by now. I am getting scattered. God knows where it will all end.

* * * * *

"Ah," says Meaty, "we don't get any laughs like that now."

"Camp's dead," says Lance-Corporal Punishment.

"Never be the same again."

"Used to 'ave a bit of fun then."

"Different class o' people now," says Meaty. "I remember old Gerald keeping up a stream of dirty jokes for three hours by the clock one Sunday. It was a Church Parade. Old Gerald never went—said 'e was an Acrostic."

"Agnostic."

"I bet 'e made it up, just to get out of Church Parade. Old Gerald would of said 'e was a Chinaman, to get off a Church Parade."

"Remember the time old Big Bill Thompson caught old Gerald on that printing lark?"

"Laugh? 'E says to poor old Gerald: 'You're a lit-ry man, I 'ear?' Old Gerald says: 'Yes sir'. 'You know all about newspapers, and that?' 'Yes sir.' 'Printing, and reporting, and all that?' 'Yes sir'. Old Gerald thinks 'e's on somethink dead cushy. 'I shall be happy to tell you anything you want to know about the newspaper business, sir.' 'Good, you're just the man I've been looking for. Go and pick up all the waste-paper in the Company Area and stick it in the salvage-sack, you horrible man!' You should of seen old Gerald's face! Red as a beetroot."

"White as a sheet. Ah. . . . we used to 'ave some fun then, Meaty."

"Them was the days, Punishment."

Nostalgia is creeping in—the nostalgia of the old soldier who is in perpetual mourning for the day before yesterday.

Drawing deep breaths, the mythologists and fabulists of Pirbright make their elbows comfortable and settle their chins over their collars. Meaty shuts his left eye, as if he is focusing the rose-coloured perspective-glass of reminiscence; Lance-Corporal Punishment hooks his heels over the top bar of his stool and eases his haunches into the most convenient hollow of it's worn oak seat, and then, folding his arms, falls into the position of an ancient Persian story-teller. You half-expect him to drone: *Once upon a time there was a time when there was no one but God.* . . . But he grunts:

"You don't know this place 's changed. Not long ago it used to be the loveliest village you ever see in your life. Didn't it, Meaty?"

Meaty nods. "Pretty as a picture," he says, "Wasn't it, Gerald?"

I know that Brookwood, from the Station to the Arch, and Pirbright, from the Arch to the "White Hart", have been nothing but a limbo of stillborn brickwork for the past forty years; so I say "Ah!" . This *Ah!* is meant to be non-committal: I breathe it out. Then I think of something, pause, and say "Ah" again, with a certain emphasis. For the place has grown on me: wherever I go, a certain part of my heart yearns for this eyesore of a thrown-up village in the Surrey dust-bowl, which never could have been pleasing to any stranger's eye in living memory.

"Why, back in 1940," says Lance-Corporal Punishment, "Back in 1940 I remember . . ."

Like a faded woman prowling in the half-dark beyond the light of a street-lamp, the Past looks back at us and winks; but we must hurry on. Glancing over our shoulders at the next corner, we see nothing but the rain-washed pavement. *You had something there,* says Memory. . . .

"Why, back in '40. . . ."

TWO

Notes In The Brookwood Hotel

FROM where I am sitting I can hear everything that goes on downstairs. The three homely ATS have got lively on a bottled egg-nog made of pure sherry-type wine, pure dried egg, and pure powdered milk. I know that it is the thin girl's twenty-second birthday, and that she calls the fat one her Bosom Friend—describing curves with her hands and winking at the non-descript girl, who never says a word. The voices come up: they make a point of pretending to quarrel in public. . . .

"She goes to bed and she lies down, and she puts a photo of 'erself in front of 'er, and she looks at it and looks at it, and then she says: "Ooo Corks! I wasn't even good-looking *then!*"

"You ought to talk!"

"Ooo Corks! Somebody whipped me dog-end. Hi, you, you give me back that dog-end you whipped."

"See, Bet? She's so rotten she won't even give you a draw of her old dog-end. Oh, all right, *take* your old dog-end anyway."

"Keep it now: you made it all lipsticky. I don't like the colour, being fair."

"Fair and False."

"Wouldn't touch it, now, with a disinfected barge-pole."

"Look at 'er making eyes at George, Bet!"

"You leave George alone. George is my fiancey."

"Fiancey! Ooer! By Gad, sir!"

"Nobody loves a fat girl, but oh how a fat girl can love. Eh, Bet?"

"Lend us a penny, Bet. Anybody got a comb?"

"All right, but it's got a back to it. And boil it afterwards: I don't want to mix the breed."

"Breed? Breed what of? Mice?"

Brouhaha of catcalls, squeals, and titters, drowned by a burst of song:

Roll me over, Roll me over
Roll me over, lay me down and do it again . . .

But the Dogged Tenor who has been trying to sing *Silent Night, Holy Night* for the past half-hour, now makes himself heard. He is a sturdy character with a one-track mind. If he decides to sing, say *On With The Motley,* he will sing *On With The Motley*. Whatever else the company may sing, the Dogged Tenor will sing his own song. The pianist, who is at daggers drawn with him, rushes the singing from song to song—*Roll Me Over, Bless 'Em All, Lili Marlene, Trees,* everything he can think of—but in the end his hands tire and the singers grow hoarse. Then up comes the screaming voice of the Dogged Tenor, as it does now:

Sah-ha-lent naht.
Oh howoly na-haht!

He is a Welshman, and he manages to make everything sound severe—just as Abdale, the Worksop Nightingale, made every-sound comic. I was squadded with Abdale: he never slept. I thought that I was an insomniac until I met Abdale. He would wake me up at four in the morning and say: "You awake?" I would reply: "No." Then Abdale would say: "Is it raining?" His favourite song was *Laugh Clown Laugh:* he put a sob into it which twisted a smile out of the most embittered men in the Battalion. Abdale fell asleep only once in the first eight weeks, and then he walked in his sleep and beat down the door: he dreamt that Les Essex was drowning, and had to be saved.

Abdale's uncle had a tumour as big as a baby's head: I forget where.

* * * * *

The ATS have changed since the desperate days of 1940. These handmaidens of Mars have hardened a little and grown cheerful. Five years is a long time: about one-tenth of an ordinary lifetime. I remember buying three ATS a shandy in Fat Fan's, when we were falling back in Africa. One of them—a Cockney—said: "They ought to give us arms, too."

"Daggers?" suggested a Surrey girl.

"No, little guns: just little ones. Daggers are sort of Dago. Little pistols."

"What good'd they be, anyway?"

"Well," said the Cockney girl, blushing, "Say they invade. . . . Well, I mean to say . . . It'd give you a chance to kind of *defend* oneself. . . ."

The Sheffield girl said that there might be something in the idea, at that, but added: "Still you don't need no guns if you don't give 'em any encouragement."

The third girl, a thin, pale girl with a ladylike accent, said: "I don't think it's right for women to carry *weapons,* but I *do* think they ought to issue us with some *poison.*"

Times have changed; people are different; a new generation has learned certain facts of life and of death since 1939. Boys who were in jerseys and shorts when the first siren sounded have killed men and begotten sons; girls who at that time were confiding the secrets of newly-discovered pubescence to envious twelve-year-old contemporaries have become mothers. There are five-year-olds who have never seen a lighted window at night or tasted ice-cream.

In blasted ruins, under the settling dust, infants boast of their wrecked homes:

"Our kitchen ceiling come down."

"That's nothing! Mum got cut wiv glass."

"My Mum got cut worse than your Mum!"

"So what? We got buried!"

I heard those very words one Sunday morning, ten minutes after a V.I. bomb had burst near Victoria Street. One small boy was rushing up and down with outstretched arms, droning: "Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm! . . . I'm cutting off now! . . . BANG!" Across the street a grocer whose shop-front had been blown away was chalking BUSINESS AS USUAL on a strip of plywood: scraps of his ceiling were clinging in his hair; his wife was sweeping a debris of glass and plaster out into the street. Stretcher-bearers carried past a blanketed heap, out of which protruded something like a smashed fruit—a smashed fruit with a moaning voice. An old lady, sucking a cut finger, said: "I don't know what they'll be up to next,

I'm sure." She was the mother of a forty-year-old labourer who, badly shaken, was trying to soothe a girl. She was crying, while he was saying: "Cheer up, it won't be long now!" over and over again. A Scots soldier, grinning with delight, told me that when he heard the bomb coming he dived into what he thought was a shelter: it was a women's lavatory. The attendant threw him out. "It's all experience, is it no?" he said: "Have *you* ever been in a Ladies' before?" I said that I had not. "It's all doors," he said. Then another bomb came over and burst with a bang that rattled our teeth. "Fiendish, f——ing fiendish," said the soldier, and walked away whistling. Couples, in light suits and summer dresses picked their way over the splintered glass and continued their Sunday promenade.

Later, in a pub in Long Acre, when fifty people were all saying: "Whoosh—Bang!" at the same time, a blonde girl from a near-by factory told me, with quiet satisfaction, that she had been machine-gunned in the street at the beginning of the Battle of Britain, and had five bullets in the stomach.

* * * * *

But this pub—the "Brookwood"—seethes with stories. It is the clearing-house of the Scots and the Coldstream Guards. The Crematorium is a few yards distant—the famous Crematorium in which the American visitor is alleged to have said: "What's cooking here?" The far end of the "Brookwood" Saloon Bar is always occupied by an undertaker, a butcher, and a graveyard attendant; it needs only a doctor to make the group complete. There is always some fresh scandal in the locality. The latest was in connection with a proposed extension of the American section of the Cemetery. The authorities flattened part of the Common with a bulldozer. The inhabitants of Dawnay Hill roared with rage. Their houses had looked out upon a desolation of barbed wire, burst sandbags, scrapped dishes, and an extraordinary assortment of dumped household rubbish; broken bicycle-frames, battered kettles, punctured chamber-pots, and thousands of tin cans. The bulldozer swept all this away, the Yanks (damn their impudence) proposed to plant flowering shrubs and all that kind of thing. The inhabitants

were not going to stand for it. One of the locals wrote to the *Daily Mirror*. It was Revolt.

* * * * *

Somebody says: "Well, for my part, I just as soon be dead in Brookwood Cemetery as alive on Dawnay Hill." The speaker is an embittered old sweat, who, when he is not rifling the garden of the Officers' Mess, is out poaching on the Common.

The Monk, who is supposed to know more tricks than any other two men in the Brigade of Guards, says: "They won't bury you, Jock; they'll chuck you in the dust-'ole."

"They'll bury me all right," says Jock. "I've taken good care of that. Yes, I've got all *that* taken care of, it is all provided for."

This sombre man, who has lived a quarter of a century in the army, has been saving up his money for the past fifteen years to treat himself to a really nice burial. The Monk divulges the secret in a confidential whisper audible at twenty yards, and concludes by saying: "They say you can't take it with you, but I bet you old Jock does." Then, talking between his teeth, a bull-headed Midlander says: "It costs more to die than what it does to live."

At this, the Monk feels himself called upon to tell a story:

* * * * *

"Well, what I mean to say is, you take the case of a certain party I know. She's a woman. She got married to a bloke, and this bloke used to knock her about something terrible. All you could hear, all day and half the night, was Biff, Bang, Wallop! She was under the doctor six months of the year. He used to crown her with vases, chuck cups of tea all over her, lam her with the leg of a chair, and once he nearly did her in with an overmantel—sloshed her round the head with it, and gave her concussion of the brain. He got three months for that. As soon as he come out he threw her down three flights of stairs. She used to be a pretty girl once, but this geezer pushed all her front teeth in and wouldn't let her get false ones. He was one of them kites that thought if his wife washed her face and

combed her hair she was trying to get off with other men. This went on for about twenty years until she was pretty well punch-drunk. Of course, her love turns to hate."

The Monk likes this phrase and says it twice.

"Her love turns to hate. Her love——"

"We heard it the first three times," says Jock.

"Well, her love turns to hate, and she told my Mum many a time that if she wasn't a religious sort of woman she would of put ground glass in his food many a time, or soaked the arsenic out of a few fly-papers, or given him a bit of an overdose of the old Liverpool Virus. I heard her say myself that if it wasn't a hanging matter she'd let him have it with the good old coke-hammer while he was asleep. He slept pretty heavy because he was always on the beer. He never give her no housekeeping, and then if there was nothing to eat in the house, he'd give her one in the eye for neglecting her wifely duties," says the Monk, with enjoyment, "one in the eye for Neglecting her Wifely Duties; or maybe something to go on with with a candlestick across the jaw. He drove the kids away from home, and was carrying on with two other women. At *least* two other women. And he'd come home, up to the back teeth in booze, covered with powder and lipstick from head to foot, and go to bed with all his clothes on; in his muddy boots. And if his wife dared to raise so much as a finger to unlace his muddy boots, he'd kick her round the room like a rubber ball until he was tired. So taking it all-in-all, between you and me and the lamp-post, she didn't have too good a time of it, what with first one thing and then another. Well, when the War come it got a thousand times worse because this geyser was making good money at a factory, and took to drinking spirits, with what results you can imagine."

Monk Mason rolls this on his palate and feels that it will bear repeating:

"With what results, you can imagine. But one day he goes to the factory after he has had one or two, and gets caught in some machinery: some sort of flywheel. It picked him up and swung him round, and bashed his brains out, all over the place, and it sort of killed him. Yes, between you and me, it

just about put paid to old Joe. And so some of his friends shovelled him up and broke the good news to his old woman, who wasn't what you might call exactly broken-hearted about it. In fact, her words was: "I wish it had happened twenty-five years ago, and it serves him bloody well right, the lousy sod." And then the firm where this bloke worked give her a matter of £150 compensation. He wasn't entitled to it, because it was all his own fault, but they give it to the widow just the same.

So now she's all right, and she's all right, and she starts wondering should she open a shop, should she buy a piano, should she get herself a new hat, or what should she do with this windfall? Some people say she ought to open a boarding-house—being used to keeping house for four people on nothing at all a week. And some say she ought to buy herself some war savings with it. I maintained she owed herself a good time, so she should take that hundred and fifty smackers and go to Blackpool, and blow it in; have a proper couple of weeks of it. But then all the neighbours started getting at her, and one says that after all what has been *has* been, and you ought to respect the dead, and all that kind of bull and boloney. And do you know what the end of it all was? She spent that hundred and fifty giving that old bastard a smashing burial and putting up a white marble angel over his grave with something about Sacred to the Memory of poor old Joe, Deeply Mourned by his Loving Wife Sarah: and Not Dead but Gone Before; and God Took you from us only because the Angels were Lonely; and Hoping We Shall Meet You in Paradise. I caught my death of cold reading it all. And that is just about all she had to show for all them years she suffered. If you ask me, death is over-rated."

* * * * *

At this point there is a shocking upheaval in the kitchen. Women and children are screaming, a man is shouting, and there is a thunderous banging. Investigation shows that Miss Wilkinson, turning out a cupboard, has found a nest of mice in a box. This, she decided, was a heaven-sent opportunity to acquaint the hotel cat with the nature of its duties. She set the

cat on the mice, and—being a woman of generous temperament, permitted my dog to take part in the massacre. The cat attacked the mice. The dog attacked the cat. The cat turned on the dog, who shrieked in terror. George liquidated one of the mice with a heavy mallet. Another mouse bit Miss Wilkinson's sister-in-law Gladys in the thumb and escaped. The third mouse died of fright.

A little girl who is staying in the hotel with her mother has enclosed the body in a match-box coffin and is burying it in the garden with solemn hymns, having procured three wilted chrysanthemums to lay upon its grave.

* * * * *

The Monk says: "What I don't like about mice is, they got fleas."

"Even mice have got their troubles," says Jock.

But the Midlander who doubts everything says: "*I* never see a mouse scratching hisself."

"I bet you a million pounds mice *do* scratch themselves," says the Monk. "It stands to reason. I mean to say!"

"I see an article where it says mice cause fevers," says somebody else.

"Don't be silly," says the Monk. "They don't get near enough to you to breathe on you or anything."

"Germs, you bald-headed ape," says Jock. "They create *germs*."

The Midlander growled: "Did you ever see a germ?"

"No."

"No more did I. If you ask me, no more did anybody else. I don't believe in all that rubbish. Mice are natural. There always have been mice. At home we're overrun with mice, and never had a day's illness in our lives. Don't you believe all you read in the paper."

The Monk, having thought the matter over, says: "After all, when you come to think of it, cats never get fever, and they actually *eat* the bloody things."

* * * * *

It was here, at this bar, sitting up on the same stool in March, 1941, that I heard the strange story of the Friend of Benson.

Staff-Sergeant Benson was Musketry instructor: a vigorous young man with powerfully-developed jaws and prominent, glaring eyes. He had a voice like a tuba and a weakness for amateur theatricals. When spoken to with improper familiarity by privates on parade he would say: "Don't call me Sergeant—call me George. Don't let's be regimental—let's be pals. Come round to my bunk and I'll let you read my private letters—I'll let you open 'em if you like. Gertcher!" He got himself sent away to Africa and was killed in his first attack.

Benson, speaking of a Yorkshireman with one of those Scandinavian names that the Vikings left behind said:

"Six-foot-two, strong as a bullock, twenty-eight years of age, nine years in the Guards; and his mother-in-law used to give him a good hiding if he came home late. Tenderest heart in the Brigade of Guards. One night we stopped out a bit to have a drink and a game of snooker. Asked me to come home with him—scared of his mother-in-law. We get indoors. Mother-in-law must be seventy-odd, not a day less. She gets hold of a chopping-board and lets him have it over the head. Board splits down the middle. The old lady says: "That'll teach you for another time," and scrams out of it. And old —— cries like a child. I ask him: "Did the old lady hurt you?" He says: "Hurt me? No. That's just it. I hardly felt it: I'm afraid she's breaking up, Benson, I'm afraid she's breaking up at last."

"Is that the honest truth?" I asked.

Benson answered: "Honest truth, except that he didn't really cry like a child: tears came into his eyes. That might have been because of the crack the old lady gave him; but he honestly did sound sorry for her."

* * * * *

This kind of thing gives critics something to get hold of . . . "Self-conscious toughness," "Tough guys with hearts of gold," "Tough, sentimental soldiers"—Tough this, Tough that, and Tough ad nauseam. The fact is that soldiers really are

tough, because they have to be and sentimental, because, as transplanted men, they live nostalgically, far from home. Nobody believes the truth about soldiers.

One of the best sellers of To-morrow is sure to be an Army novel full of tearful mutiny and unnatural vice, with much talk of blood and guts on every page, and a Sensitive Hero who is tortured by the Sergeant-Major; and then the literary reviews will talk of "stark realism". Theoreticians who see only what they want to see; dialectical anglers, who dig in flower-beds to find worms!

The common soldier is a normal man in strange circumstances, to which he must adjust himself. For the sake of his spiritual health and strength he must rise superior to an abnormal environment. He must be tough (I have begun to hate that word) or be useless as a soldier. He tends to sentimentality; expresses his love of home in long-drawn-out anecdotes and banal songs. What the devil do they want him to do? Write third-rate poetry or send maudlin and incomprehensible prose to Mr. Tambimuttu, Mr. Szymanski, Mr. Val Baker, Mr. Moore, or other progressive editors of high-priced highbrow anthologies? God forbid! He is suspicious of the intellectual in his hut: he hates to be taken down word-for-word by the Young Man With The Notebook who scribbles furtive lines and coyly peeps from the adjacent cot.

The truest kind of reporting comes out of the experiences of men involved in the little problems of their fellow-men. Our intellectuals are not so involved: the ordinary British soldier won't let them be, because he doesn't like them. So the intellectual footslogger-faute-de-mieux frequently finds himself back in the cafés, discharged because of neuroses; or on his backside at a Company Office Desk, where he spends his days in clerical work and his nights in introspection: a misfit with a mission, itching to tell the world the sufferings of the plain man in uniform.

Much he knows of the plain man!

According to him the average British soldier wants to revolt, snarls at discipline, goes mad, stabs sergeants, deserts, is a coward, bullies his inferiors, crawls to his N.C.O.s, truckles to

his officers, has a friendly regard for his enemy, fears that he may kill a Beethoven in a bayonet-charge, listens to birds singing all day long, commits suicide, and wants to go unwashed.

The intellectual is always wrong. If his conception of the British soldier were half-accurate, the S.S. would be drinking in the Café Royal, and I'd be dead or otherwise Underground. For your barrack-room dialectician goes down like a skittle when the game gets rough. It is the sturdy, disciplined man who wins wars, saving his tears for to-morrow. It is he who walks the knife-edge between Battle and Murder and comes home sane, more often than not.

Does he love the Army? No. He wants to go home. But does he go home? No. He sees the war to its finish and works out his nostalgia in sad, silly songs about moons, and Junes, and skies above, and love. But by God he fights!

THREE

Love, Capital and Labour

SOLDIERS are always falling in and out of love. They are much preoccupied with reflections upon the tender passion, and so it sometimes happens that they dream themselves into a lot of trouble.

There was one old sweat named Tom, a swaggering, battered-looking veteran with a Palestine ribbon, who became infatuated with another man's wife near the Camp and pursued her deliberately for several months until, at last, in a moment of weakness, she gave herself to him (as the lady novelists say) among the gorse-bushes beyond the rubbish dump near the brick pill-boxes on the hill, beyond the rifle-range.

He came back to Camp covered with bits of heather, with a crushed spider on his left knee, and sat down and brooded.

Somebody asked: "What's the matter with you?"

The Lance-Corporal said: "Old Tom's in love."

"Who's in love?" said Tom.

"You're in love."

"I am not in bloody love!"

"Well you was a couple of hours ago," said the Sergeant.

"Certainly you was in love a couple of hours ago," said the Lance-Corporal, "sitting there looking goggle-eyed at that little pitcher of that light-hair bride and picking your nose and moaning."

"Loveliest girl in the world, he said," said another soldier.

The Lance-Corporal said: "That's right. Sat there looking just like whassiname on the pictures . . . what's his name, Knocker?"

"Wallace Beery," suggested Knocker White.

"Tyrone Power," said the Lance-Corporal.

"Donald Duck," said the Sergeant.

"Oh, shut up," said Tom.

"Rudolph Valentino," said the Lance-Corporal, "poor old Passionate Jack. I bet she turned him down."

"Wimmen! Gor' blime, wimmen! What a sex!" said Tom, "a married woman too! Got her husband up in the North. There's wimmen all over for you. What a sex!"

"What is this twerp bellyaching about now?" said the Sergeant, "he chases this bride for months and months——"

"Put brilliantine on 'is 'air, too," said Knocker White.

"Cost him a small fortune in brilliantine," said the Lance-Corporal.

" 'Eld 'er 'and in the pictures," said the man in the next bed.

"——and then he still grouses," said the Sergeant.

"Old irresistible," said the Lance-Corporal.

"I don't know what they see in him," said Knocker White.

" 'E 'ipnotises 'em," said the man in the next bed.

"And you a married man too," said the Sergeant sadly, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself carrying on with married women."

"Let's write to his wife," said the Lance-Corporal, "to keep an eye on him. None of us here don't stand a chance with old Tom about. Proper bloody Bluebeard."

"Henry the Eighth," said Knocker White.

"Roger the Lodger," said the Sergeant.

"Breaking up homes," said the man in the next bed; "what would her husband say if he found out?"

"I knew a bloke, a bloke called Willie," said Knocker White, "and so this 'ere Willie's old woman started carrying on with a bus conductor——"

"Tram driver," said the man in the next bed. "I see the case in the papers."

"Don't be silly! Tram driver! *Bus* conductor! So this Willie got to know about it, and one evening he nips off his bus——"

"——you mean tram."

"——*bus!* Nips off 'is bus, nips into an ironmonger's, buys a four-and-sixpenny meat-axe, nips 'ome, nips in quietly, catches 'is wife larking about on the kitchen table with this 'ere

milkman, chops the milkman right down the middle, cuts his wife's 'ead off, gives 'imself up and gets twenty years."

"Serves 'er bloody well right," said the Sergeant.

"You got it all mixed up," said the man in the next bed, "the husband was the milkman, and this other geezer was a tram driver."

"Anyway, I don't blame 'im," said the Lance-Corporal. "I'd do the same if I was in his place."

"I wouldn't do no twenty years for anybody," said the Sergeant, "would you, Tom?"

But Tom sat, numb, stunned, frozen by some new and dreadful thought. You could always tell when Tom thought of something: he started like a Mexican Jumping Bean and then went into a kind of trance.

After a while, he said: "My old woman wouldn't do a thing like that."

"Why should she, when she got you, you gorgeous beast," said the Sergeant.

"My old woman's not that sort," said Tom, picking the crushed spider off his knee and looking at it with disgust.

" 'E's got spiders now," said Knocker White. "I knew a bloke that *liked* spiders. Made friends with them. Once he found a bloody great spider as big as a soup-plate with hairy grey legs, in a bunch of bananas, and he trained this spider to run up and down his arm."

"Morbid," said the Sergeant, "bloody morbid."

"Well, one day this geezer does something to annoy this spider, and it bit him in the wrist. Wrist swelled up, went blue, went green, and in the end they 'ad to take 'is arm off at the shoulder."

"Serve him right for being morbid," said the Sergeant.

"Marvellous how they spin them webs," said the man in the next bed.

"I read in one of them magazines," said the Lance-Corporal, "about how they get married. A she-spider and a he-spider get together, and when they've sort of had their fun, do you know what a she-spider does? Kills the old man and eats him."

"Serves him bloody well right," said the Sergeant, "serves

him right for being such a mug. If I was a spider, I wouldn't get married."

"Yes you would."

"I bet you I wouldn't. Not to no she-spider. I hate spiders."

"They all do."

"I never heard anything so ridiculous in all my life," said the Sergeant, "for Christ's sake chuck that horrible squashed spider away, Tom. It makes me sick to look at it."

Tom dropped it with a start and jumped on it. Then he went to bed and brooded.

* * * * *

About five weeks later, Tom came back to Camp after a week's leave. I asked him if he had a good time. He said: "I made a proper bloody fool of myself again."

"How come?"

"I made a proper idiot of myself. I started thinking see? That blonde-haired bride started me off thinking. I mean to say, she's a respectable married woman—carrying on like a tart behind her husband's back. And one thing led to another and I started thinking to myself, blimey, what wouldn't I do if I was in her husband's position. I thought to myself, blimey, I thought, say I was that woman's husband and I come home after a couple of years and find she'd been mucking about with every Tom, Dick and Harry on the heath! I think to myself, if I was that woman's husband, I'd choke her. And I kept thinking like that all the way home. I didn't tell my wife I was coming, I thought I'd give her a bit of a surprise. I made a proper bloody fool of myself. I let myself in, shut the door quietly—it's about 10.30 at night, see—opens the bedroom door, and then, blimey, if a man don't say, *whose that?*

"So I says: 'Why, you bastard,' and hit him right on the jaw, a lovely one, smack on the point. He goes over, hits the washing stand, knocks it over—jug, basin, soap-dish, slop-pail, you ought to have heard the noise! Then all lights went on, and it was my brother-in-law. Him and his wife got bombed out. My old woman let 'em use our bedroom while I was away, and she slept in the little room upstairs. I made

a proper bloody idiot of myself. So now my old woman says I don't trust her, and you've got no idea of what I have had to put up with. Won't let me touch her. . . . Women!"

* * * * *

I knew another soldier who was soured by domestic trouble. He was separated from his wife and bitterly begrudged the money he had to pay for her support. He was always seething and bubbling with suppressed rage, off parade and on parade. He was a regular soldier, a Lance-Sergeant, a chapel-goer, highly respectable; a most exemplary character. But all the time he fumed and sizzled and crackled, blowing himself up to a white heat of revolt against the world and its injustice.

"Why should I pay out my hard-earned money for that woman?" he said one day when he and I were alone in the hut, "what for? Is it right? Is it just? She's no wife of mine—so why should I slave my fingers to the bone to support her in the blinking lap of—of—of blooming luxury? We've been separated for two years, and week in and week out, month in and month out, year in and year out——" he was almost dancing in his fury, "year in and year out, mind you, I've got to pay."

I asked: "Why did you leave her?"

"She was no good," he said.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Carrying on with another man?"

He was indignant. "Carrying on with another man? What put that idea into your head? Why, she'd never think of such a thing."

"Extravagant?"

"Her? Good Lord, no. She could make a shilling go further than anybody else I ever knew."

"Bad cook?"

"Bad cook? Why give that woman a turnip and she'd make you a steak and chips out of it."

"Dirty?"

"Dirty? Good Lord, you could eat fried eggs off the floor and mop them up with a bit of bread. The scrubbing-brush

was never out of her hand, except when she was handling the saucepans."

"Just incompatability of temperament, I suppose?"

"No, we hit it off all right."

"What happened then?"

His eyes smouldered as he replied: "You're an intelligent man, and I ask you! First year of the war I was away in France, trenches, Dunkirk, all that sort of stuff. It's nearly eighteen months before I get home. Nearly eighteen months, mind you. And then I get home. Well, what's the first thing you want to do when you get home for the first time in eighteen months?"

"Well . . ." I said, "well . . . the usual thing, I suppose."

"That's right. What's the first thing a man wants to do when he gets home for the first time in eighteen months? Wants to go to the lavatory. Isn't that right? Right. I come home, go straight to the lavaory. I'd been looking forward to a decent lavatory. Go in, bolt the door, and what do I see? *Newspaper hung up*. Newspaper! I went straight up to my wife and I said: 'Come here,' I said. 'What is this? A fried-fish shop,' I said. 'If I come home after eighteen months I expect to find a lavatory not a common craphouse!' And she said: 'Don't you dare to use language like that in my presence.' And then I smacked her in the face, walked out and haven't seen her since."

He paced the floor, grinding his teeth, muttering: "Newspaper! Newspaper! And I should pay hard-earned money to a woman like that!"

* * * * *

Only great poets can talk of love without making bores or fools of themselves. None but the exceedingly great can talk of love from the molehill of personal experience without betraying kinship with the spaniel or the goat.

The more people talk the less they feel of love. I have no great sympathy for those furiously-boiling, pout-mouthed kettles of emotion that humidify the world with their gasping.

When I lived in the Black Huts in Pirbright Camp, I saw a

certain quiet soldier pull his folded ground-sheet out of his small pack, stuff it under his coat, and walk out into the sombre, dripping autumn twilight. He had never gone out of camp since I had arrived. "I wonder where he's off to," I said. A man who knew him well whispered:

"Finished his three in thirty-nine. Went crackers about some girl. Got married. Recalled five weeks later." (He mentioned a place a hundred and fifty miles away). "Wife joined up in the ATS or something: comes down to say good-bye. Would've got sleeping-out pass for the night. Nowhere to sleep."

"So——?"

"So he's gone to meet her at station—say Hallo and Good-bye, kind of." He glanced at the quiet soldier's pack, and said, with a sad smile: "Canal Bank, I daresay. Damp, if you get what I mean. Need that ground-sheet."

"But *why* nowhere to sleep?"

"Landladies. Bitches. Profiteering: making fortunes."

"We could have managed it somehow," I said.

"You don't know *him*. *I* do. Independent."

Two years later I heard that the quiet soldier had been killed in North Africa.

* * * * *

Lord, how it all comes back! I have only to shut my eyes and there is the picture, clearly defined in black and white as if it were on a luminous screen under the dark, whispering, hazy, nicotine-drenched stuffy dome of my skull—my dimly-lit, fire-bucketed, panic-bolted, overcrowded skull which, like an old-fashioned picture-palace, seems to hold the staleness of half the world! I see those dreary, draughty Black Huts. In each hut, thirty squealing little iron beds. On each bed, a pile of three small, square coir-fibre mattresses, otherwise known as "biscuits". On each pile of biscuits, a precise block of bedding —four blankets and a knobbly little pillow. In every hut, a quota of long scrubbers, hand scrubbers, soft brooms, bass-brooms and fire-irons. The planks of the floor have been worn thin by a quarter of a century of harsh and vigorous scouring with bitter Government soap. By every bed stands a rifle. Near

every rifle somebody had pinned a picture—a Kodak-snapshot of a plump Mama, or a wife, or a girl-friend, or Betty Grable, or a favourite brother. Jack Spratt has pinned up a picture of Katharine Hepburn, smiling from ear to ear. Upon it in what he believes to be a cunning imitation of feminine handwriting, he has scrawled, *Fondest love and kisses to my adored Jack from his loving Kitty-Kat.*

One very old soldier, who has stamped his heels until his stomach has fallen into his pelvis, and shouted himself into duodenal ulcers—a sick old soldier reminiscent of an old pair of drawers worn beyond mending, thriftily used as a duster and so rubbed, wrung and flapped about that the last few fibres are too tired even to hold dust—has pinned up a photograph of himself. He has no one else in the world. From time to time he takes a long look at this picture, in which he is a very fine figure of a man, twenty years old; the top of his bearskin is seven feet above his polished boots. He stands as if he had grown straight up out of the concrete; his heels twelve inches apart, the butt of his rifle mathematically in line with his right toe-cap . . . "properly at ease", as they call it. But now he has had it, as the saying goes. He is an officer's servant, waiting for his ticket. The time will come when, indescribably awkward in a civilian suit, he will go to the C.O. for his discharge, and then go clumping down the dusty road, past the Officers' Mess, past the last Guard Room, and so out of Camp for ever . . . to that Civvy Street which all old soldiers pretend to yearn for . . . the loose, free and easy Civvy Street, in which you may put your hands in your pocket, eat fish and chips in public out of newspaper, go around hatless and in dirty boots, if you like, and in general be a free man. But when you get there you know that, in those blank, bleak huts that seem to be settling into the gritty dust of the Camp, you have left a piece of your heart and some of your soul: and in a little while you will want to go back, and then you'll become a bore, talking, talking, talking, about Nobby Clarke and Dusty Smith and Tug Wilson and Stitch Taylor and Knocker White; and the time the Drill Pig had it in for you; and what you said to the Sergeant, and what the Sergeant-in-Waiting said to the

Sergeant-Major, and what the Regimental Sergeant Major said to the Captain; and how poor old Bunker Lloyd, Officer and Gentleman, who got his packet in the Desert, used to give the men caramels and bars of chocolate if they were good . . . You chatter on and on, choking with laughter at this or that, choking with indignation at that or the other, until with an incredulous start you realise that it does not mean a blind, bloody thing to anyone but yourself, and your heart sinks, and you feel lonely in this world where men wear pointy shoes and never call anybody "Sir".

Alas, Old Sweat!

Next to him, sleeps another employed man, nicknamed Pozzy. He works in the cook-house. He is a mild-eyed, pensive man, who is always eating something but remains slight and fragile in appearance, so that Sergeant-Major Thompson refers to him as the Rasher of Wind, or occasionally, the Human Hair-pin. There is simply no flesh on Pozzy's bones. Yet he can lift 400 lbs. or pick up a side of bacon as if it were a slice of bread and butter—casually without seeming to notice it.

When we get talking Pozzy grows philosophical. "What did you do before you joined the Army?" I ask.

Pozzy thinks carefully, chewing and chewing at a wine-gum, and finally says: "Well, to be quite frank, I was a butcher."

"Have your own business?"

"Well, no, not exactly my own business. No, to be perfectly frank, I worked for Bludgen in Nottingham."

"When the war is over, I suppose you will go back?"

"Well, I don't want to beat about the bush, so I'll tell you frankly—yes, I daresay I *will* go back."

"One day, I suppose, you'll open a shop of your own?"

This is a hard one. Pozzy chews on it for a couple of minutes and says: "To be quite frank I've been working it out, do you know what, it takes money. Yes, to put it in a nutshell, it costs you money to open a business of your own. See what I mean?"

"I bet he's rolling in money," says Knocker White.

"I bet he's stinking with bloody money," says Jack Spratt.

The Lad from the Elephant says: " 'E's the sort of bloke

if 'e fell into the River Thames at Blackfriars, 'e'd come up in a new suit of clothes with a pocketful of fishes."

Pozzy says: "I got a few pounds saved up. Not enough, though."

"Find a partner," suggests Knocker White. "I wouldn't mind going into the meat racket myself."

"Ah, but do you know the business?" asks Pozzy.

"I could pick it up, couldn't I?"

"To be quite frank, what was you before?"

Knocker White is somewhat disconcerted. He hums and haws, and at length replies: "I fiddled a living."

"Ah," says Pozzy, "but doing what?"

"This and that," says Knocker White with some embarrassment; and adds as an afterthought: "I was a sort of salesman."

Pozzy says: "Butchery is an art."

"It is a bloody fine business," says Jack Spratt; "what I mean to say—you've got to eat meat. Is that right? Right. Well then. See what I mean?"

Stitch Taylor, an ex-paper-hanger, and a shrewd, calculating man says: "You got to eat meat. You got to eat bread, but are bakers all millionaires? You can't go about bare-footed, but some of the poorest bastards I ever knew was snobs. (*Snobs* is an Army language for Cobbler.) You got to have bread. Can you show me a baker with a million pounds in the bank?"

The Lad from the Elephant says: "What about Lyons's?"

Knocker White says: "Well, they got teashops too. And besides, it's dead easy to make a million pounds if you have got about a thousand teashops. Christ Almighty! If I had about a thousand teashops, I could make a million pounds, I bet you."

"Go on then, do it," says the Sergeant, "that's all I ask, do it."

"Do what?" asks Knocker White.

"Go and get a thousand teashops."

"Other people do," says the Lad from the Elephant; "you've got to start somewhere."

The Sergeant says: "Oh, I get it. Take me, for instance: one day I go into a Lyons's teashop and pay twopence for a

cup of tea, so I say to myself, I say: "Why, what a mug you are to go and pay twopence for a cup of tea! I mean to say, what does a cup of tea cost? Nothing. If you buy a quarter of tea, and half a pound of sugar and a pint of milk, well, say a cup of tea costs you a farthing. But buy ten ton of tea, and twenty ton of sugar, and a few thousand cows full of milk, and then, go and sell it at twopence a cup and it costs nothing, or less than nothing. Twopence clear profit. So I say to myself, I say, Christ! I say what a mug you are to go and waste twopence on a cup of tea, so I go out, and I buy a thousand teashops, and there I am. Bomp! A millionaire. . . . Don't be so soppy!"

Knocker White says: "You don't understand, Sarnt. You go out and you buy a coffee stall. Save a few quid and buy another coffee stall. Save a few more quid and buy a teashop. Another teashop. Buy a Corner House, buy another Corner House. Buy a few more teashops. Buy a few more Corner Houses. Then a few more teashops."

"And what do I use for money to buy the coffee stall with?" asks the Sergeant.

"Get credit," says Knocker White.

The Sergeant says: "And who the hell do you think would give me credit?"

Knocker White does not know. He comes back to his original point and says: "There's plenty of money in the meat racket. The other day, my wife went to buy a bit of heart. I like stewed heart——"

Pozzy becomes animated, he says: "Heart is not meat."

"What is it then?"

Pozzy explains: "Stuff like kidneys, stomachs, livers, and brains are offal."

"I see you know the business," I say.

"Went into butchery as soon as I left school," says Pozzy.

"Was your father in the business?"

"No, my Dad was a small-holder; a few pigs."

"*Dirty* bloody animals," says the Lad from the Elephant.

Pozzy is indignant. "There's lots of things a pig won't eat!"

I ask: "What made you go into the butchery business, Pozzy?"

He chews another wine-gum and says: "Well, you see, I was always fond of animals, to be quite frank, I went into the butchery because I was always fond of animals. Once I saw somebody killing a lamb. You don't kill a lamb the same way as you kill a beast——"

The Lad from the Elephant says: "A lamb is a beast."

"A lamb is *not* a beast! A bullock is a beast. A lamb is a *lamb*. Don't be ignorant. I saw this lamb being slaughtered and the butcher done it the wrong way—poor little lamb run around for five minutes. It was terrible. Gets me, to be quite frank. I made up my mind to do that job properly. So I went into the butchery. I never made a mess of any animal except my first, and then I couldn't touch meat for months. But ever since then, I never made any one of them suffer unnecessary. I am very fond of animals. That is why I got to be a butcher."

Knocker White says, with a sneer: "You don't mind eating them though!"

Pozzy starts chewing and says: "When I am in Rome I do as Rome does. Yes, to be quite frank, I do eat meat, but I don't like it." He chews, and adds: "Lambs and things, they eat grass and stuff. Eating lamb's like eating grass, in a way. I read somewhere, where it says flesh is grass."

* * * * *

At this point a dull, thick voice says: "Tek coal."

This voice belongs to a strange, silent man named Larsen. The invading Danes left this name and a dozen like it in the far north of England centuries ago. He is what they call a Geordie; a man of the Northern Frontier. Thick-set, squat, blond, he is half as strong as an ox and rather more humble. He was born to live underground, a coal-miner like his father before him.

His face is covered with blue dots, where little splinters of coal buried themselves under the skin and remain for ever. Larsen is the only man in the hut who chews tobacco. Offer him a cigarette and he will take it and eat it.

"What do you mean, take coal?" asks the Sergeant.

"Tek coal," says Larsen again. "Tha must ha' fires. I'm na rich."

"Go and buy yourself a couple of mines," says the Sergeant, giggling like a girl.

Stitch Taylor laughs and says: "I used to work on the coal-face. I went down when I was 14. I turned it up."

I ask him why. He says: "Lost my nerve. There was a pony in our pit, a real vicious one."

"They can be orkward," says Larsen, dispassionately.

Stitch Taylor, that big, black saturnine man continues: "We used to call that pony Cram. He was always crammed—vexed-like. One day, he went mad and went for me, and there I was, squashed into a crack and poor old Cram coming at me with his teeth like a tiger. I kept him off with my lamp—shoved it into his mouth. But he took a lump off my shoulder and this finger." Taylor holds up a hand, the fourth finger is missing. "Would have torn me to pieces if he could. I don't blame him. I was fighting him off for twenty minutes, and after that—I wasn't afraid of the pit, mind you, but somehow I couldn't go down again."

"Ponies is out of date," says Larsen.

"Machinery," says the Lad from the Elephant, "there's nothing to touch it. Ponies! Ha-ha!"

"You leave ponies alone," says Larsen.

FOUR

Little Man and Story-Tellers

THOSE were the days, I say again. The spirit of the land seemed to burn with a clear white light against the murk of Europe. I never met—I never will meet—a better man than the British soldier when he feels that the end of the world is coming. I loved that desperate period when black was black and white was white, and light was light and darkness was darkness. Now comes Blind Man's Holiday. I hate this dismal rat-grey twilight. I hate this little hour. I hate the squeaking and the scraping behind the wainscot. This is the hour of the mice—damn their beady eyes..

Well, I shall be able to tell my grandchildren that I have seen a noble sunset. Only if I have any grandchildren, which is unlikely, they won't listen to me. They will be loathsome, untidy, raucous young men with rumpled hair; or smelly, neglected young women in greasy corduroy trousers. They will laugh at me for a god-forsaken old fool, and when, with senile persistence, I try to tell them of the glory that was Britain's, they will say: "Listen, Comrade Grandfather, why don't you lie down and die, you doddering old anachronism? Are you aware that there are two classes in society? What is your social basis? What do you know of the true reality of life? The trouble with you is, that you have no political background . . ."

The infants will be serious minded, and talk of the economics of spinning tops and the refractive indices of glass marbles. I and my generation will belong to the woody, chewed-out butt-end of a sweet, rich period. If, by any chance, I happen to meet a fellow-dodderer down the road to the cemetery, and exchange reminiscences, nobody will have the faintest idea what we are talking about . .

"Remember poor old Pute, and the time he got jankers for

skiving spud-bashing when we were Company-in-Waiting?''

''Poor old Pute! Didn't he get the M.M. back in 1940?''

''Yes, poor old Pute! Never forgave them for that M.M. By rights poor old Pute ought to have got the V.C. It was like this. Jerry's got hold of a farmhouse on the road. Strong machine-gun position, and there we were, stuck. Couldn't go back, couldn't go forward. So the Sergeant-Major says: 'Lie low until the mortar-platoon comes up and then we'll smoke 'em out.' Mortar-platoon doesn't turn up. Poor old Pute says to the Sergeant-Major: 'Sar-Major, I don't mind telling you I am just that cheesed-off lying on my belly like a bloody snake. I don't mind telling you, Sar-Major, I'm just jarred off.' So the Sar-Major says: 'You're browned off, I'm browned off, we're all browned off, Corporal, but you do as you're told and wait.' But the minute the Sergeant-Major turns his back, old Pute—he second most impatient man in the Brigade—picks up the old bundook and crawls to the house. Jerry opens fire on old Pute with all the machine-guns in the bloody world, but for some reason or other, they don't touch him. And old Pute gets to the house, tosses in a couple of hand grenades, jumps in, and finished off the five that are left alive with a bayonet and takes the position single-handed. So he gets the M.M. But poor old Pute thought he ought to have got the V.C. and he swore that the Sergeant-Major had got it in for him because he disobeyed orders. I mean to say, a V.C. is a nice thing to have. It brings you in a pension of a quid a week regular. He was talking about it to his dying day.''

''That wasn't long?''

''Not very long, no. Poor old Pute got his basinful somewhere near Hell-Fire, up in the desert, when we give Rommel such a bashing. Funny, isn't it? Do you remember how everybody used to talk about nothing but Rommel? It was Rommel this, and Rommel that. And now . . .''

''Yes . . . Do you remember how when there was some extra bit of red tape or regimental procedure, we always used to say: 'And that's pushed Rommel back another ten miles.' I remember when I fell over my feet marching in to Company Orders for a leave pass and the Captain made me march out

again and march in properly. Everybody said: 'That'll push Rommel back another ten miles.' "

"Serves you bloody well right, Gerald. You was always falling over your feet."

"That's a dirty lie! I was as good in foot drill as any wartime soldier."

"You used to bob, Gerald, bob and weave. Too anxious to do it right, that was your trouble. Over-anxious. Always overdoing it. If you was ordered to right-turn, you done an about-turn for good measure. But you never really looked like a Guardsman. Wrong sort of face for it. We always used to say you ought to have been wearing a fur hat, not an S.D. cap."

"I made you look pretty small when it came to a bit of shooting."

"Well, yes, I'll grant you that. Remember that time when you won a hundred cigarettes in the Company shoot? I somehow knew you were going to win."

"How did you know I was going to win?"

"Well, your name was last on the list of competitors, see? And the last shall be first. It says so in the Bible. I forget where."

The grandchildren will exchange knowing looks, and write to the proper authorities, filling in the usual forms, and then a psychiatrist, having arrived at the conclusion that we are a confounded nuisance to ourselves and everybody else will send us to be painlessly put to sleep.

* * * * *

I don't say, of course, that everybody in the British Army, even in the Brigade of Guards, was a model soldier and a good citizen. We had our quota of hopeless cases, just like anybody else. There were a few enemies of society among us—outlaws, wolf-heads, men beyond the pale. There was, for example, G.D. I had met him in the old days when I worked on the *Daily Mirror*. Good God, what rubbish I wrote then! *Do Englishmen Make Good Lovers by a Frenchwoman: Guide to Sex Appeal by a Divorcee: Self-Defence for Girls by an Expert: Is Rape Possible By One Who Knows: My Best Friend Told Me By a Betrayed*

Husband: He loves The Charwoman By a Crippled Wife: How To Make Cami-Knickers Out of Dusters By A West-End Dressmaker: If Hitler Was a Woman . . . By a Psychiatrist. I wrote such stuff that I blush to recall it. I was writing, of course, for a living. I had dependants to support and, rightly or wrongly, enjoyed an occasional meal myself. So I was solvent, from time to time.

One Friday, after I had seen the cashier, I went to the "Falcon" with about £25 in my pocket, and there I got into conversation with a genial, good-looking, nicely dressed man at the bar. He was thirty years old, good humoured, cultured, and what they call charming. We bought each other drinks, exchanged cigarettes and played games on the pin and marble machines by the door. He knew my name; he said he had read one of my books. This, of course, raised him immeasurably in my estimation. Obviously a cultivated, discriminating, intelligent, thoroughly decent sort of man. He had read one of my books. He had bought it. A cash customer. We became good friends in fifteen minutes. He indicated that he also had often thought of writing his life story. I was too full of good fellowship to say: "Who hasn't?" It's a fact that everybody has a life story in mind, and a secret, nibbling lust for self-revelation. There is a time in every man's life when he discovers everyday things and finds them wonderful. A man falls in love, is turned down, marries somebody else, loses his job, finds another, and lives happily ever after—he must write a book about it. A girl takes a fancy to a photograph of John Barrymore; doesn't marry him, marries an ironmonger instead, becomes pregnant, gives birth, finds it hurts a bit, gets fat, falls in love with Spencer Tracy, and doesn't run away with him, goes on living with the ironmonger—she must write a book about it.

But when G.D., in his elegant way, said that he had thought of writing his life story, I banged him on the shoulder, called him fellow-author, and said that if I could help, I should be only too delighted.

"Let's walk to a quieter place," he said. We went to the Savoy. And then he told me that he was a criminal.

He said: "I am, I suppose, one of the three best confidence tricksters in the world. In my time—I am not much over thirty —I have made, literally, hundreds of thousands of pounds. I shan't go into any details right now. My real name is so-and-so. You may have heard of it in connection with the affair of the Pencil Monopoly."

This struck a note. I said: "Wasn't it something to do with a timber merchant, and didn't somebody or other go to a French gaol for five or six years? The gaol at Poissy?"

He said: "That is correct, Mr. Kersh, I am the man who served five years in Poissy for that trick. Everything was well under control, and then——"

"You made that one little slip the detective story writers always tell us about?"

He laughed and said: "Oh, you can take it from me, criminals don't always make that much publicised One Little Slip. I never in all my life made a slip—I mean a mistake which I wasn't able to make good. No, no, it wasn't a slip. Or perhaps if you wanted to split hairs, you might define it as a slip. No, it was nothing like that. I will tell you about it sometime."

"But why, my dear G.D., do you tell me even the little you have told me just now?"

"Quite simply," he said, "I want to give it up. I am tired of it. But of the tens of thousands that I have made, what have I left? Nothing. Except a taste for good living and a very unpleasant recollection of five really abominable years. I'll be quite frank with you; I'm scared of gaol. It frightens me. I don't want to have to go there again. And therefore it amounts to this—I have lost my confounded nerve. But what can I do? I have been in the racket ever since I left school—drifted into it quite naturally. I am scarcely fit for honest work any more. I have got so accustomed to the—shall I say—the excitement. I assure you, one really feels something of the thrill of the huntsman, and also something of the—the—the intellectual thrill of the chess player. It really is fun to play my game with, say, a cast-iron, hard-as-nails City man, who knows all the answers and can't be fooled, and lead him neatly

into a trap and take some of his profits off him."

He looked at the ceiling with a whimsical smile and repeated ten names, counted them off on his fingers. I knew at least five of these names. He continued: "Men like them. I took Twenty-five Thousand Pounds from A., I got Seventeen Thousand Five Hundred Pounds each from B, C and F; Ten Thousand Pounds apiece from D and E, and a total of ninety-odd thousand from G, H, I and J. But no more. I can't get the feel of the gaol off me. What the Americans call 'The smell of the bucket'. I understand exactly why the virtue went out of Samson when they cropped his hair. Yet I have got to do something. In due course, I dare say, I will settle down as some kind of salesman. Without being vainglorious I think I may say that I could sell practically anything to practically anybody. But not yet. I still feel a little raw, a little strange. I am finished with this racket of mine, Mr. Kersh, and it struck me that I might make myself a little money by selling my story. But somebody would have to write it for me. I believe that stories of this sort fetch pretty good prices. When you saw me in that pub in Fetter Lane, I was—let's face it—screwing up my courage to go and ask for an interview with the Editor. Can you imagine that? That, perhaps, will go to show just how much self-confidence I have lost. I am very glad I ran into you. You're a *real* writer: you can make drama out of anything, and you can make people live, *really* live. Yes, luck was on my side to-day. Do have another whisky? The point is, would it be worth your while?"

"You mean worth my while to write your story for you?" I asked.

"Yes, yes. I daresay you're accustomed to working for pretty astronomical fees?"

I murmured: "Quite high, quite high. Yes, high-ish, high-ish. But then, of course, for a story like yours one might get a really solid slab of money from, say, the *People*, or the *News of the World*, or possibly the *Sunday Express*, even. Then again, as I would write it, it would make quite a good book. We would reserve the right to republish it in book form. Might make quite a bit of money."

"Would we get money down? I mean some money to go on with?"

"Well, once I have the story and can give them one or two instalments and a reasonably detailed synopsis, we might get an advance. Yes," I said, "I don't think there would be much difficulty in getting an advance."

"This is a different world. I know nothing at all about this world," said G.D., "I mean this literary world of yours. I have never even touched the fringes of it. I hadn't hoped to run into a writer of your calibre. I had been thinking of some kind of . . . what do you call them . . . ? Some sort of hack writer simply to put my story into readable English since I have absolutely no knack of it myself. But . . . my God! Would you really? You wouldn't write my story for me, would you really? Honestly?"

I said: "I will indeed. Let's get together and beat out some preliminaries. When?"

"Whenever you like," said G.D. "I am doing nothing these days, nothing at all."

"Where do you live?"

"I live, for the moment, at 19 Macaulay Crescent, W.C.1. Near the Royal Free Hospital. Not much of a place, but clean, and the landlady is an absolute dear. She brings me tea, cups of tea, every ten minutes. My God, Kersh, there really are some sweet people in the world. I have paid her no rent for three weeks, and whenever I start making apologies about it, she gives me another cup of tea and says some proverb or other . Spanish woman, De Silva—that would be a Spanish name? Or would you say Portuguese?"

"I would say Portuguese," I said, "but what time is convenient for you?"

"Any time. Between 11 and 12 to-morrow? I'll be in all morning."

I said: "That'll suit me perfectly."

"Is that a date?" asked G.D.

"About 11.15," I said.

We talked for half an hour about the prices that were being paid for lurid reminiscences. G.D. with some deference, sug-

gested that there might be some chance of making a film of his story. I made a note of that. It occurred to me there was a good story here, and, what was more, a popular one. As we were saying good night, he said: "Oh, of course, Kersh, now that we are doing business together, you might lend me a pound on account."

"Why sure," I said, handing him the money.

Suddenly I found myself alone in the Strand, with a tingling right hand. G.D. had gripped it very hard as he said good night.

Next morning I went to see him at 19, Macaulay Crescent, W.C.1. There was no such address.

At last G.D. had touched the fringes of the literary world. He had touched me for one pound.

Three years later, I met him again at Brookwood.

He was not in my Battalion but he was in battle dress, and, with two pips on each shoulder, carrying himself like an Officer and a Gentleman. I was a private. We met in the bar of the "Brookwood". I had hit a streak of cold, slatey poverty and had occasion to wonder where my next glass of beer and packet of cigarettes were coming from. G.D. had money in his pocket. He was showing a fellow-officer a trick with a tumbler and a piece of paper. There was a five-shilling bet involved. G.D. won it. Then I caught his eye. He smiled widely, offered me a manicured hand, patted me on the shoulder —every inch an officer and a democratic gentleman, and told the barman to give his friend Kersh a beer, a *pint* of beer. I drank his health in a kind of coma, ostentatiously calling him "Sir".

In a little while, I slung on my respirator, put on my cap, and said good night. He followed me. "I go this way," I said, jerking a thumb in the direction of the Pirbright Arch.

"So do I," he said, and walked with me.

God knows of what strange brass some men are made! G.D. picked up the conversation where we had dropped it that night in the Strand. He had said: "Now here, if I may say so, is food for your satirical pen. I was telling you about Poissy and the affair of the Pencil Monopoly. Now here is a very curious thing.

Some little while before—fifteen months to be precise—I was in need of a little money, rather urgently, and so (it was in Biarritz) I took a Canadian millionaire for Five Hundred Pounds by means of the Spanish Prisoner trick. Of all the corny tricks on earth. The older and cornier the trick, I observe, the more shrewd men fall for it: this will provide food for thought—you have a philosophical mind, Kersh, old boy. Well, this Canadian was a very tough guy indeed. He was about six foot three, built like a Chinese wrestler, and when he lost his temper he was an absolute murderer. He was bound to find out exactly what kind of sucker I had played him for, so as soon as I had the money in hand, I took the first available train for Paris. I got into Paris and booked a room at the Scribe Hotel. Then I went down to the bar—you know downstairs, where all the show-cases are—to have a drink and there, standing right next to me, was this Canadian, and I thought *Well this is it. A damn good hiding and if I am lucky enough to survive it, the police.* But this Canadian put his hand on my shoulder and said: 'Son, you must need money pretty bad to play a low-down trick like that. Why didn't you just ask me for it?' Then he smiled and went away. Explain it how you like: that finished me. When I was in Poissy I got hold of *Othello* and I read something that made it clear in a kind of way, *The robb'd that smiles steals something from the thief.*"

I smiled.

He fumbled in his pocket, pulled out pound-notes, and, in a sick and tired voice said: "I owe you a pound, I think."

"Go with God," I said, and walked away.

He followed me waving money and stammering: "Here—here—here——"

But I pretended not to see. I got a glimpse of him standing on the moonlit road near the Black Arch. He turned and walked towards the Brookwood Hotel, dragging a long, ragged black shadow that seemed heavier than the stones of the pavement, it moved so slowly.

FIVE

Aspects of Frustration

I WAS called to the colours in August, 1940, August 13th. I went then to No. 13 Company in Caterham, lived in No. 13 hut. It was like getting into an exclusive club. I volunteered for the Army, Navy, and the Air Force, for the Infantry, the Artillery, the Royal Corps of Signals, and offered also to be a man in a submarine or in the turret of a bomber. About a year after I volunteered, I was told that there were vacancies—vacanies, mark you—in the Coldstream Guards. In the train on the way to Caterham, I went over the papers in my pockets. I have two large inside breast pockets, packed always, with strange odds and ends. Now I wanted to tidy my life a little. There was men's work to be done. I tore everything up and scattered it like fine rain between London and Caterham. One bit of paper remained. I did not know what to make of it, and as I sat, with my pockets hanging like the withered breasts of an old Squaw, staring at half a cigarette packet upon which I had scribbled the following words:

Charing Cross Road. Midget. Remarkable Love Affair. Man was seventy centimetres tall. Crockery merchant. Cut throat. Story?

I had been several days squadded when I remembered in what circumstances I had written this.

I should have forgotten it again but G.D. recalls it. The man who told me about the midget was like G.D.—out for money; but this was an honest man in his way. I met him in a lounge bar near the B.B.C. We had been introduced several weeks previous. I will call him Ell. The bar near the B.B.C. was so full of noise that conversational ascendancy had to be slipped across quickly like betting slips.

Ell said: "Would you give me a pound for a story?"

I said: "It depends upon the story."

"About a midget," said Ell.

"Write it yourself," I said.

He said: "It ought to be completely factual. It is a true story. It might take research. I haven't much time. It is absolutely true. A midget—a very little midget indeed. Have you ever known a midget? I mean intimately? Oh, don't worry. I'm not trying to tell you the story William Saroyan wrote. This is an absolutely true story. Do you know anything about midgets?"

"All I know is, that they are smallish people," I said.

"Exactly. People like other people only somewhat shorter," said Ell.

I said: "It can be quite an affliction."

Ell said: "I knew a little man who was under thirty inches tall. He came from near my home town. Now there was an affair for you! Son of well-to-do parents, but seventy centimetres high. He passed the first twenty years or so of his life quite comfortably. His mother adored him, his father hated the sight of him. Never mind, he hated his father and adored his mother. Well, they both died. He inherited all their money. It was quite a little fortune. Went in for gambling and lost nine-tenths of it, and had enough left to keep him a roof over his head and buy him rolls and coffee. The trouble was, this little midget, he was very proud, ashamed, he didn't like being poor, he didn't like being little so he lived on rolls and coffee and kept himself to himself, and read books, and played chess with himself—working out problems, and resigning himself to this silly fate of his.

"Then he met some girl or other, a normal girl of ordinary size (but taller than usual if anything) and fell in love with her, declared his passion, proposed marriage. He was only seventy centimetres tall. The girl was a silly sort of girl, good-natured in her way, she didn't want to wound him by telling him to go to the devil, and it wasn't in her nature to laugh in his face, so she put him off by saying that she couldn't possibly entertain the idea of marriage with such a poor little

man. She did not say little. Just poor. He was not in a position to provide for her, she said. And she was right: he was not. But he said he would go and make money. Know what he did? Sold himself to a Freak Show. Then he met a dilapidated old showman and had an idea. This midget was well read, quick witted, a bright little fellow; so he worked out an act. Guess what? No don't. You'll never guess. He and his new friend got a crockery manufacturer to make a grotesque image out of earthenware—a kind of fat-bellied oriental idiot about two foot six inches long, lying on its back.

"This figure was hollow. It was perforated with cleverly placed holes under certain ridges in the casting, scarcely visible; and the mouth was a kind of slot. The idea was, that this poor little man should be inside this hollow china man and tell people about themselves . . . answer questions and so forth.

"Pretty mystifying, eh? Wooden dummy, a metal dummy—there might be a man inside, yes? But an earthenware statue, two and a half feet long, reclining, mark you, supported on four glass tumblers with a mirror underneath, speaking in a bass voice with a cultivated accent, and having an answer for anything anybody chose to ask it. Bewildering, eh? Uncanny, I believe, and the old showman, with his professional air put it over very, very well indeed.

"I believe that the head of the figure came off. So that this little tiny man could creep in. In any case, the act was a great success, and made money. My little man never saw daylight. He came out, I suppose to eat and to sleep; but if he had shown himself in public he would have destroyed the value of the act, and he didn't want to do that because of so desperately wanting money to marry this quite ordinary girl of his.

"He kept writing passionate letters full of enthusiasm and optimism. She had sworn that she loved him. Surely, therefore, she would wait? She said that she would, of course. But the peculiar part of it is that she was not at all good-looking. She married some other fellow who ill-treated her systematically but got killed in an accident. Our little friend knew nothing of this. He went on living in this horrid little crockery coffin, by day, hiding himself by night, sick and deathly pale saving every

penny. His only relaxation was reading love poems and trying to write them. This went on for nearly seven years. Who is that gentleman in the Bible who waited seven years? Jacob? Aha. But this little man was a good Catholic.

"Well, at last, he wrote to his girl, you see, and says he has such and such a sum of money and asks her how she feels about marrying him now—right away. Work it out for yourself. Are husbands with money so easy to find? I assure you, no. The girl thinks it over and says that, damn it all, all things considered, she doesn't mind if she does. So my little friend says good-bye to his partner, the old showman, and goes away twittering with joy like a little canary. And you know what he does. Word of honour! He has a tiny little morning suit made for his wedding, honest to God and a diminutive top hat, an extraordinary fellow!

"So, he marries this plain girl of his—tall as an English girl with rat-coloured hair, worried-looking and bagging like an old married woman—which indeed, damn her, she was! There was quite a ceremony. Our little dwarf was happy. He had spent seven years in slavery for this, and by God he didn't begrudge one single hour of it. And yet I say again—she was a plain woman, several years older than he and without a trace of feminine charm.

"Love, what? What, don't you think, eh?

"Yes, so he was married at last in a cut-away coat. He was a good little man, not at all warped and dwarfed in mind as some midgets are. No, no. He was a man in size midget, if I may put it that way, with as much decency as you might find in somebody seven feet tall.

"Six months after the wedding, he shot himself with a little two-two pistol. It was more than big enough to kill that poor little fellow. Left no letter, nothing. Killed himself just like that. Presumably the marriage was no good. This has nothing to do with anything you might have read anywhere else: it is exclusive, true. I don't believe he was able to consummate the marriage with that great big fool of a girl. Yes, he put a two-two bullet into his head. It came out the other side and smashed a coffee-pot. The widow inherited his money, about forty-five

hundred pounds—and married a confectioner who had a business of his own. Is that story worth a quid? Thank you. Now I'll buy you a drink.

"What do they say in that religious ceremony—

We learn that we are dust

Good health!"

This may or may not be true. Ell needed a pound, and was trying to earn it. Many of us have done strange things in our time for a pound or less, when we have needed it. One day in Camp, a certain soldier came to me and said: "Lend me thirty-eight shillings?"

I asked him if it was urgent. He said: "Well, yes, urgent."

At that time I was writing the Army column *Private Life of a Private* for the *Daily Herald.* Everybody believed that I was paid hundreds of pounds for every article. In point of fact, I got between two and three guineas. I didn't have thirty-eight shillings but said that if the matter was urgent, I could find it. He repeated: "Yes, call it urgent."

He looked drawn, exacerbated, utterly wretched. "You aren't going to make a fool of yourself?" I asked.

He said: "I got a week-end. I got to get home. I won't do anything foolish. I haven't my fare. I have to get home. I'll let you have it back. I have nothing to draw. I can't be bothered to ask anyway."

Forty-eight hours later, he came back. Deathly pale, with smudged eyes and drooping shoulders, and said nothing to anybody for several days. About a week later, I was walking out of Camp when he caught up with me and said: "I had to get home. My wife's uncle was messing about with my daughter."

I said: "Why, my God, I'd send that bastard to prison for three years!"

He replied: "No. Kids in court for that. No. If you don't mind, no."

"What did you do?"

"He won't do it again," he said, "I'm much obliged to you."

That was in 1941. In 1943 I received a letter four times re-

addressed, containing a one pound note, a ten shilling note, and and eight shilling postal order.

If Ell had gone absent to kill that man, no one would have blamed him. He would have got nothing but sympathy. I know of one man who absented himself for forty-eight hours to "chastise", as he put it, his cousin who was "annoying" his wife. Having given his cousin what he called a Lesson, he returned to Camp and gave himself up. His Commanding Officer gave him fourteen days detention in the name of discipline, and a nod and a smile of moral approval as man to man.

There are, however, delinquents at whom soldiers laugh because they are silly. They suffer none the less; but they are ridiculous.

* * * * *

In 1941, everybody was laughing at the case of a certain Mr. X. X, when war was declared, was about twenty-five or twenty-six years old. He wanted to go to war with his generation, but he had a weak heart. His heart was so weak that Medical Officers who had passed blind men as belonging to Category A., hurried him out of the Recruiting Centre in case he might fall dead at their feet. He went from Euston to St. Pancras, from St. Pancras to Paddington, from Paddington to Marylebone, from Marylebone to the outer suburbs, persistent, lying like a commercial traveller, changing his name like a confidence trickster, hoping against hope that one of the doctors might turn a dead ear to the rattling and the crackling in his wheezy worthless chest. Still nobody would have him. He was a cardiac failure.

His feelings were hurt. Could he not, at least, put on battle-dress and sit at a Company Office desk? No. He was scarcely fit, they maintained, to lift a pen from an inkpot. He brooded for a while, wandering about the streets. Like a turbid stream rushing down from clayey hills, the currents of life in the London streets were running thick brown. The blues and the greys were being washed away. Everybody was in khaki. It seemed to X. that, whenever he went into a teashop, a restaurant, or a bar—whenever he wanted a taxi or boarded an

omnibus—a contemptuous eye flickered over him as a curled lip writhed over an unspoken reproach because he was not in battle-dress.

He couldn't stand it any longer. He went to a tailor and ordered a suit of battle-dress with the double chevron of a Corporal, together with a cap bearing the badge of the R.A.S.C. He bought himself big boots, web anklets, and a belt; blancoed the webbing, burnished the brass, and had his hair cut to the bone, looked at himself in the mirror and saw that he was something like a soldier.

But something was missing. He wondered what. He put on his uniform and walked about the streets, holding himself very erect, and banging down his heels observing every soldier whom he passed, until one afternoon, he exchanged a word or two with an old Guardsman who had an inch of green-and-mauve ribbon on his bosom.

This was the Palestine Ribbon. Poor X. did not like to ask, for fear of revealing his unsoldier-like ignorance; but having observed this ribbon, he knew exactly what he needed to make his appearance proper from a military point of view. He went to a shop, bought some ribbons haphazard, had them sewn on to his blouse, and was happy for a few days. People looked at him as he passed. A taxi driver called him Corporal, and a battered old Welsh Borderer, with a few service ribbons on his breast, looked at him, said: "Jesus Christ!" and offered him a drink. Everything was all right. If he could not be a soldier among soldiers, thought X. at least he was inconspicuous—a man in uniform among uniformed men.

He had money of his own, and was used to eating and drinking in some of the more expensive restaurants and bars in London. One evening, he stopped for a glass of sherry at the downstairs bar of the Ritz. Men of all ranks were drinking there. Rear-Admirals stood cheek by jowl with Acting Unpaid Lance-Corporals; Air Vice-Marshals exchanged the time of day with Warrant Officers. X. found himself standing between a pale Flight-Lieutenant and a burly, scowling old gentleman with a wine-coloured face, and foaming eyebrows, who was dressed in a blue lounge suit. The old gentleman stood on X.'s left-

hand side. X., sipping his sherry, expanded his poor chest and allowed his ribbons to be seen. The old gentleman looked at him, blew out his mouth and dragged down his eyebrows until the purple of his face seemed to be frothing like a bowl of mulled claret.

"Seen some service, sir, I see," he said.

X. replied: "Oh, here and there, just a little you know."

The old gentleman said: "Remarkable man for your age, if I may take the liberty of saying so, sir."

"Do you think so?" asked X. smiling.

"Sir, you must be. May I ask how old you are?"

"I shall be twenty-seven next month."

"By God, sir, I thought you were at least a hundred and twenty."

"Sir?"

"Sir," said the old gentleman, "you are wearing the Jellalabad Medal of 1842, the New Zealand Medal of 1845 to 1866, the Sikh War Medal of 1845 to 46, the Indian General Service Medal of 1854, the Crimea Medal of 1854-6, the Order of the British Empire—Military—which is obsolete, the Order of the Garter, the India Medal of 1799, the Zulu Rising Medal of 1906 —damn it all, the Sudan Medal of 1896-7, confound you, sir, the Naval Good Shooting Medal, the Irish Commemoration Medal of the King's Visit in 1911, the R.A.F. Long Service and Good Conduct Medal, the London and North-Eastern Railway Medal, the National Life Boat Institution Medal, the L.C.C. Fire Brigade's Zeal and Fidelity Medal, blast your impudence, and the Order of the Nile! And there, sir, there—there, confound you, next to the American Purple Heart, you are wearing the Order of the Redeemer of Greece; and unless my eyes deceive me, the Order of Danilo of Montenegro together with the Khedive's Bronze Star of 1882-91. What, sir, is the meaning of this? You are an imposter, sir!—damn it all, I'll hand you over to the Military Police. You're little better than a Fascist. By God, I shouldn't be in the least surprised if you had been dropped, confound you, by parachute from some infernal flying machine!"

The old gentleman seized X. by the slack of his blouse, and X.

fell to the floor, struck down by a heart attack and awoke in jail.

He got off lightly. But generations will be born, generations will die, and still soldiers will laugh at him. They will say: "The funny thing is, this geezer *wanted* to get *in* the Army. Mental! Doolaly! Stone crackers! And so this geezer, so he gets himself a suit of battle-dress . . ."

Shortly after the arrest of the unhappy X., a tailor's presser named, unless my memory deceives me, Katzenellenbogen, on seven days privilege leave, dressed himself up as a Guards Officer and showed himself about town. He was picked up in no time at all. He made one or two of those little slips of which we read from time to time in crime stories. He was wearing patent leather shoes, his belt was the wrong way round, his tunic buttons were in twos in the manner of the Coldstream Guards, he was wearing a Scots Guard badge on his cap and he was carrying a silver-headed imitation malacca cane. He pleaded artistic temperament and was treated with something like leniency. He must be out of prison by now.

* * * * *

Still, soldiers live, off parade, in a dream world. I remember a man called Kew.

He was called Kew because he was a Company Quartermaster-Sergeant—a *Q*. I worked for him, one week, as a sort of subsidiary Company Clerk, filling up forms and checking figures.

I remember a thick white Monday in January, when there was a silence in Pirbright: the fog had us by the throat, and there were no parades. In the Company Store Kew and I sat muttering over some columns of figures relevant to equipment that had been lost. There was a Guardsman who had deserted: the Military Police had caught him somewhere in Hampshire, and he was under close arrest.

"Guardsman Guildford," I said, "seems to have nothing left but his rifle—rusty at that."

Kew said: "Never mind the rusty. He'll clean it. You mark my words, he'll clean it. Yes, Guildford'll clean that rifle all right. Lost the rest of his kit, eh?"

"Um-hum."

"Oh dear," said Kew, "that's going to cost him something."

I asked: "How long has Guildford been absent?"

"About nine weeks."

"Did he say why?"

"No, Kersh, no he didn't say why."

"Just went absent, Kew?"

"I dare say he just sort of went kind of absent, kind of style."

I asked: "What'll he get?"

Kew bit a nail and replied: "It's hard to say. It depends. Guildford's got a bad record: might get anything. Poor woman!"

"I beg pardon?"

"I said Poor Woman."

"What poor woman, Kew?"

"His Mum."

"Who is she, Kew?"

Kew said: "I don't know and I don't care."

"Then what're you worrying about?"

He looked left, looked right, clutched my wrist, and said: "Know what?"

"No; what?"

"A man's best friend is his mother."

I said: "You don't say!"

"I bloody *do* say!" said Kew. "A man's best friend is his bloody mother. I've had friends and I've had enemies, and I tell you—a man's best bloody friend is his mother. My God! To go and let your bloody poor old mother down—Kersh, *what are her feelings?* Christ, the poor woman! See her? There she sits . . ."

He snapped at his nails—*Ut-ut-ut.*

"Poor old lady's son's in disgrace," said Kew. "In bloody disgrace. And what can she do? Nothing. Oh, the poor old lady! Kersh, you mark my bloody words—a man's best friend is his mother. My God Almighty, Kersh—think a second, Kersh. You had a Mum. Yes? Right. Right Kersh? Right. She gives birth to you. *Christ!* Birth! God. . . . God. . . . God. . . ! Milk, Kersh, she gives you milk—straight out of her own chest, Kersh—pure milk, Kersh. Got that? My God,

Kersh! Works her bloody poor old fingers to the bone, Kersh —those little hands. Good God Almighty, man! What she goes through, eh? Eh? Tells you how to say your bloody prayers. Scrubs the bloody floor. She'd run to bloody hell for you—eh? Eh? You cut *your* bloody finger, and she bloodywell bleeds. You grow up. Don't you? Okay. You leave home. Right? Okay. Ever thought about it, Kersh? *How does that little woman feel that bore you?* Eh? Out of her own chest she gave you milk, remember. I've had friends and I've had enemies, and I tell you—a man's best bloody friend is his mother. Got that? My God! I tell you, without a word of a lie, I'd run to bloody hell for my mother. God bless her! Sweetest little old lady. Ever realise what it is to have a bloody kid? Eh? Dear oh dear oh dear!''

He struck himself on the forehead with a lean brown fist.

"Ah-hah," I said.

"Then don't you let me catch you being . . . you know what I mean . . . don't you let me catch you neglecting your mother," said Kew.

When I heard that he was dead I asked for news of his mother.

He had never seen his mother. Kew had been left in the doorway of a foundling hospital one dark night when he was about two days old. Several men had seen him peeping into a little heart-shaped locket which he wore about his neck on a thin gold chain.

This locket contained a picture of Marie Dressler, cut out of a magazine.

SIX

How Not To Become An Officer

THE Army was very good for me, but I was not very good for the Army. As a soldier I did my best, which did not amount to much. Apart from the fact that I was always falling over my feet, I somehow didn't look right. I spoiled the appearance of the Coldstream Guards. Officers, inspecting the Battalion, always paused to take a second look at me. I was a dark, Asiatic blob in those orderly rows of pink English faces; a foreign body. Being conspicuous I had to be extremely careful. As Sergeant-Major Wacky Jones so neatly put it, I stuck out like a punch in the mouth. It made me nervous. However hard I tried to be a good Guardsman, I was certain in the end to make a fool of myself. On my first C.O.'s parade at Pirbright, when we titivated ourselves like actresses and tiptoed about like ballet girls between the puddles in the Square, I committed an appalling crime. I had scoured myself from head to foot, sharpened my trousers to a knife-edge, polished my boots and brasses, spring-cleaned my webbing, shaved myself so conscientiously that I came out in a rash, looked myself over for two hours beforehand to be quite certain that nothing had been left undone; and then, falling in on parade I remembered, with a throb of terror, that I had not put the bolt in the magazine of my rifle. My heart turned to ice-water and ran down gurgling into my lower gut. This was the end. The Regimental-Sergeant-Major, Charlie Yardley, came stamping across the Square. From a distance of twenty-five yards he detected a speck of dust on the cap badge of a man in the centre rank and said: "You there, Smithers, look at yourself! A regular soldier too. You'd better start pulling yourself together, Smithers, Are you forgetting you're a Guardsman? . . . And you, you over there——" He had seen a loose buckle—"What do you think you're playing at? Sloppiness! Slackness! What's the use of a loose pouch? . . . And you, son, stand up straight!

Stand up as if you owned the earth! You're in the Guards now. Act accordingly! . . . And you, yes you, do you call those boots clean? What are we coming to? What's the use of a Guardsman with boots like a pair of rusty stoves? . . . And you in the rear rank—the fourth man—where do you think you are? The Connaught Café? Stop chewing! Stop swallowing! You're on parade now, not in a fried fish and chip shop. And you—what do you think you've got on there? A horse collar? Go to the tailor and get that blouse fitted round the neck. You look like an old lady in a backless evening dress. Silver, don't think because I haven't said anything that I can't see your dirty filthy hands. Dirty flesh is a serious offence in the Brigade of Guards, and everywhere else too. Haven't you any self-respect? Do you want me to spit on my handkerchief and scrub you like your mummy used to? I never thought I should live to see the day when Guardsmen went around with half Pirbright Common under their finger-nails. Good soldiers can be clean . . . Jakes, what's the matter with you, St. Vitus dance? Stop bobbing and weaving, man. A Guardsman stands still, my lad, if a wasp stings him on the end of the nose . . . Edwards, what do you call that thing on your upper lip? A moustache? What do you think you are? A film star or something? Either grow that moustache, son, or cut it off; but no Ronald Colman, Charlie Chaplin, or other ridiculous moustaches are permitted in the Brigade of Guards . . . You ought to be ashamed of yourself, growing a silly little thing like that. They'll spend hours in front of a looking-glass, whittling away with a penny razor-blade to make themselves look like Vic Oliver or something, but will they scrub their finger-nails? Oh dear no! . . . Jackson, that is a good pair of boots and very nice webbing."

Jackson glows, and becomes moist-eyed with joy. Charlie Yardley goes; nothing escapes him. "You over there—yes you—how long have you been in the Army? Ten weeks? Ten weeks in the Army, and you still wiggle your nose on parade? I can see you want to sneeze. Well don't. Control yourself. You can sneeze all you want to when you're ordered to stand easy . . . Oh! Oh! What have we here? Roberts, your

collar's unhooked. Hook it up man. Myers, next time you use blanco, use it a little more sparingly. You don't overdo things in the Brigade of Guards. Apply it thinly, man, thinly, thinly. And you there, stop looking frightened. It's incorrect to look frightened. If you're frightened, don't look frightened, is that clear? A nice thing, the Germans are on the doorstep and there he is, looking frightened. If he goes white when he looks at me, for goodness sake, what's he going to look like when he sees General Goering or Herr Hitler. Sherwood, you'd better get cracking on that scabbard—it looks as if you had been using it to poke the fire. . . ." Then he came to me. I felt his eyes, like little bits of ice, slipping from my forehead down to the soles of my feet. I trembled. Now it was coming. But he said, in his brusque yet kind way: "This is what comes of bobbing. This is what comes of getting into a flap. See? You come fluttering out, all dolled-up like a girl on her wedding night and you forget to put the bolt and magazine in your rifle. And so now you're useless. You're not armed and no damn good. I ought to put you in the book for this, but I won't, just this once. But be warned: never let this happen again."

I was fortunate in my N.C.O.s and Officers.

I believe Yardley is Captain and Quartermaster now. I hope he gets to be a Colonel; I hope they make him a General; I have a great affection for old Charlie Yardley who, by sheer solid kindness and patience has made thousands of men love, honour and obey him. I don't believe he has ever had to punish a man. Like Spider Kelly, he believed that it could all be done by kindness.

Another Sergeant-Major who inspired a strange kind of affection was the great, the fabulous Freddy Archer of the Scots Guards. They cursed him from hell to breakfast but they would not have parted with him for his weight in gold. He was supposed to be the most regimental man in the Brigade of Guards. Stories will be told about Freddy Archer long after he is dust. He is already something of a legendary figure—it is difficult, in investigating him, to get at the truth. He inspires awful fictions. Anything might be true of Freddy Archer. Wherever there are Guardsmen, there are tales told of Freddy

Archer's fanatical adherence to the letter of the law. For example: he went on leave for seven days. He returned to Camp three minutes late; put his own name down in the book and marched himself in, insisting on the proper punishment. . . . His children attend a little pay parade for their weekly pocket money. . . . When he reads the sports page in the evening newspaper, he puts on gym kit. While I was in Pirbright, Freddy Archer was attended by a fat old batman, and followed about by a fat old white bull terrier. At that time we used to go on a cross-country run every Wednesday. Freddy Archer, of course, ran with us; he could cover the ground like an antelope. One day he looked at his batman and said: "You're getting fat. And that dog's getting fat too. Cross-country run for the two of you to-morrow." So on the following day, the fat batman and the fat terrier galloped out of Camp with the rest and plodded over the five-mile course. Even I passed them. It took them about two-and-a-half hours. The dog beat the batman by a length and a half and they reported to their master in a state of collapse. Archer looked at his watch and snapped: "You idler! You're an idle man! Cross-country run for you again next week. And you," he said to the dog, "you're idle too. No bone to-night." And, the story goes, that night the dog did not get his bone for standing idle on parade.

The strange story is told, also, of Freddy Archer and his father. Archer Senior was one of the oldest bandsmen in the Scots Guards. He had remained a Private, while his keen and energetic son had risen to the rank of Regimental-Sergeant-Major.

One day, the old man missed a parade. Freddy Archer put him in the Cooler. Justice had to be done, father or no father. They remained the best of friends, however. He used to get his Battalion out in full battle-order and take them round and round at the double for twenty minutes on end—but believe me or not, he ran with them, backwards, similarly equipped. It is a fact: he ran backwards in battle-order for twenty minutes in order to keep his eye on the men. He was always what they call a character and because of this they would have forgiven him anything. The place was never quite the same when Freddy

Archer was promoted to Lieutenant and Quartermaster. Everyone who had been damning his eyes suddenly took to mourning him and boasting about him, embroidering the legends to which he had given birth.

* * * * *

Archer and Yardley worked their way up. In the course of time any N.C.O. who stays long enough without getting into any serious trouble may become an officer. But when I was in the Army there was a sort of mania for Pips. It was moderately easy to get a commission in the beginning. I started to get one myself; filled in the usual forms, and put down all the most impressive names I could think of as references, was approved by Captain The Lord Hugh Kennedy as a person and proper to submit himself for approval, and, in due course, went to London to appear before a Board. They asked me questions. What was my profession? Journalist? A plump old Brigadier looked up abruptly.

"What do you think of layout?" he asked me.

I suspected a trap. I fenced: "It depends on what you mean by layout."

The Brigadier said: "I mean to say"—and his face contorted itself in a spasm of distaste—"I mean to say all this business of using all this different kind of type; big type, little type, all this different kind of type. What do you think about it?"

I said: "I think it is absolutely disgusting, sir."

"So do I. To my mind, Mr. Kersh, good material doesn't need layout. Poppycock!"

"How right you are, sir!" I cried with fervour, clapping my hands in ecstasy, "how very right! And how well you put it!"

"Good wine needs no bush, does it?"

"Absolutely, sir—no bush at all, sir."

"This *Daily Mirror* sort of stuff—this *Daily Express* sort of stuff. Why? What for? What paper do you read?"

"*The Times*, sir."

"So do I. For which paper do you write?"

"The *Daily Mirror*, sir," I said, and added, "but I never read it."

The Brigadier said "I like Popeye."

A scarlet Colonel at his right-hand said: "*Jane*. Is there such a person?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

The Brigadier said: "Always undressing. Ever met her?"

I said that I had not had that pleasure.

The Brigadier muttered: "Strange life. Dressing, undressing; you would think she would get tired of it. . . . Do you play any games, Mr. Kersh?"

The whisper had got around that it was a good thing to tell them you played games, so I said: "Rugby football, soccer, cricket, tennis, squash, and badminton, sir; and of course, boxing and ice-hockey."

"Of course," said the Brigadier nodding.

We were getting along like a house on fire.

"Politics?"

I was not going to be caught out on that one. I replied: "I have always been too busy to bother about politics, sir, but if anything, I should say that I was a sort of Liberal Conservative."

"And what exactly is a Liberal Conservative?"

"Well, a Conservative with liberal views," I said.

"So you're not a Bolshevik then?"

I expressed respectful indignation at the very idea. He continued: "You know what *you* are? You're an Imperial Socialist. But you don't quite realise it. *That's* what you are."

"I wish I had your turn of phrase," I said.

Then he asked me the stock question: "If your employer gave you fifty pounds and a fortnight's holiday, what would you do?"

If such a thing had happened to me I should have pinched myself to find out whether was awake and then gone and frittered the money away in bars and restaurants. But I said: "I should go on a nice long walking tour."

"In Wales?"

"Yes, sir."

"Religion?"

"I am by way of being an Agnostic, sir."

"Do you like the Army?"

"Very much, indeed, sir."

"Well, I think that will be all."

I could tell that everything was all right. His Majesty's Commission was as good as in my pocket.

But, thinking the matter over in the train, I said to myself: "What the hell do I want to be an officer for? Where will it get me? As soon as I put a pip on my shoulder I set myself socially apart from the ordinary man in uniform. I cut myself off from intimacy with the common grousing soldier. As soon as I become an officer all the Dusties, Tugs, Knockers, Gingers, and Macs will call me Sir, and conceal their thoughts from me; put on a respectful face and stand to attention when they talk to me. The average Englishman whose personality I love and whose friend I am so proud to be, the plain man with whom I have laughed so much and cursed so much and drunk so much, will turn to wood when I come near. As an officer, however earnestly I go in for hearty fraternisation and fatherly tenderness, there will be a barrier between us, and if I break down that barrier I shall be a bad officer. I am not cut out to be a leader. Since I know no half-measures and cannot compromise in matters involving comradeship, I have nothing to gain by being an officer, and plenty to lose in the way of warm intimacy. What will a commission bring me? Better clothes, better grub, better pay, a servant to clean my boots? Bah! I don't want a servant to clean my boots. I like cleaning my own boots; there is something soothing in the gentle rhythm of spit-and-polish. As for food, I never did care a damn what I ate. Social scale? I never had any social status; I have no right to a social status! it is my duty to be everywhere, brother to a Prince or companion to a beggar if I be found worthy as the saying goes. To command men? No! I'll command men in my own way, as I always have commanded men (not being a follower of any man) I will command my own virtue and be damned to the Right to Command, to the insignia of authority that gives such power to the shiny elbows of your Civil Servant turned Adjutant.

I am quite happy as I am. I am learning to be a soldier and hope by God's grace to go into action against an enemy whom I hate with all my heart. I want to do this as one of the mob—I shall see more of the game that way."

So, when I got back to the Camp, I went to Sergeant-Major Duke—the Iron Duke as they call him—and said: "I've changed my mind. May I be struck off the Potential Officer's List?"

Sergeant-Major Duke looked me up and down, shrugged his shoulders and said: "Some people are worse than bloody women. Don't make their minds up. Are you sure now? All right. I'll tell Captain The Lord Hugh Kennedy."

And so, on that occasion, I didn't take my chance of promotion.

* * * * *

I had had pipe dreams of myself on active service—a hero, battered and magnificent, rallying a last desperate handful of exalted men and achieving glory on the field. Such things do happen, after all. But not to me. My Army career was remarkably inglorious. The only scars I have to show are surgeon's scars. After a couple of operations on my legs it was established that, as a soldier, I was fit for nothing but spud-bashing, floor swabbing and latrine cleaning.

It is a pity; I was looking forward to achieving something to be coyly modest about. I would rather have been a man of action in the war; but it came to pass that I was nothing but a Platoon Leader of the Twenty-Six Lead Soldiers, a rallyer of desperate words. Blasted into Category C, unfit for service overseas, I pelted the enemy with paper and slung ink at him. It was all I could do.

In 1941, the Director of Public Relations at the War Office, Colonel Walter Elliot, asked me to write a pamphlet on Infantry Training. The Army was in the shadow just then. Nobody wanted to have anything to do with the old-fashioned foot-slogger. It was half-believed that the Army was not necessary, and that only the Air Force and Navy really mattered. I was transferred to the Reserve for three months to write this little

book, and turned out the first part of *They Die With Their Boots Clean*. The War Office decided that this was not quite the thing to bear the imprint of His Majesty's Stationery Office, but said that if I chose to expand it a little, and I could find a publisher bemused enough to print the stuff, they would have no objection to its publication. So I turned it into something like a full-sized book and Heinemann's published it. It was one of the best-selling books of the war. From then on, for about three years, I was writing about twenty thousand words a week for the United Nations. At intervals I was ordered to rejoin my Unit; pottered impotently about Pirbright Camp getting in everybody's way, unfit to march, unfit to drill, doing odd jobs in the Quartermaster's Office and the Cookhouse, until I was called out again to do another job of writing.

Eventually I was sent to the Army Film Unit to write scripts. After a few months, it was decided that for the sake of law and order and the common decencies, I had better become an Officer. Brigadier Turner, Deputy Director of Public Relations had me sent to a W.O.S.B.

Times had changed since the carefree days of 1940. Now, before you went to Sandhurst, you had to prove yourself worthy. It was necessary to convince the Authorities that you were a fit and proper person to carry the responsibilities of an Officer and a Gentleman. Sergeants who had led platoons through hell and high water had to demonstrate that they were capable of leading men. There was no nonsense about the new Selection Board. You had to be just so. Among other things it was necessary to do a battle course—jumping over ditches, climbing over walls, swinging yourself on the end of a rope over a pit full of sharp spikes, crawling under a canvas sheet, taking a running jump through a suspended barrel, and so on. You had to prove—and there could be no doubt about it—that you ate with a knife and fork. You had to converse. You had to watch your step. When I arrived, I asked one of the Camp staff whether I might use a telephone. The man said: "Better ask the Sergeant-Major."

I replied with the traditional Private's phrase: "Eff the Sergeant-Major."

Five minutes later, the Sergeant-Major called me to his side and said, between grinding teeth: "Did you say *Eff* the Sergeant-Major?"

I said: "Who, me?"

"Yes, you."

"Would I say a thing like that, Sar-Major?"

"That's all right! I know!"

"If you know, sir, why do you ask?"

"That's all right! I know!"

This was a bad beginning. I did not like the set-up. I could see how every word had wings. The men of the staff were not soldiers: they were tale-bearers, narks. Everyone had to fill in a great form, giving details of his age, height, weight, appetites, hobbies, tests, work, play, and personal habits. There was a smell of the Gestapo about it all; an atmosphere of quiet watchfulness. We were under observation. One or two Sergeants of the old school, good intelligent soldiers, were uneasy. They didn't like it.

* * * * *

I was asked: Had I brought pyjamas.

I had never worn them myself, I said, and was not going to start now. The words were scarcely out of my mouth when a lean, agile member of the Camp staff went running towards the Sergeant-Major's Office. Every word was going back.

The Colonel said few words to us. He said that we were to consider ourselves as officers, potentially. There was no need to salute Staff Officers when we saw them, but it would not be taken amiss if we said "Good morning". We were to be at our ease. We were to behave just as if we were at home. We could drink beer if we bought tickets. We were to eat like officers in a Mess. An officer would sit at table with us. We should take it in turns to sit upon the left hand and the right hand of the officer and have conversation. We were one big happy family. Our intelligence having been measured, and our physical capacity weighed, we were to be given over to the Psychiatrist. After three days it would be decided whether we were quite all right from the New Point of View. I felt in the pit of my stomach, a little flutter.

It happened that I was among the first to sit next to the Captain at table. The Mess was hung with trophies of weapons. I spoke of, Brown Bess, the musket of Waterloo, and how it was all right as far as it went, but misfired as often as not . . . wherefore the Duke of Wellington ordered his men every morning to fire their muskets and reload with all possible care since, in those days, the first volley sometimes decided the issue of a battle. I pointed out a flintlock Bess converted into a musket fired by the percussion-cap; touched upon the octagonal barrel of the Sharp Capping Carbine, and, pointing to a specimen upon the wall, talked of the Needle Gun, and its deficiencies. Henry VIII, I said, apart from being a bit of a lad, had the makings of an expert in fire-arms. Apropos of Henry VIII——

The Officer said: "Tell me Mr. Kersh, what are your politics?"

I said: "I am by way of being a Liberal-Anarchist."

"Liberal-Anarchist?"

"Oh yes, as a party, as a political party, it's numerical strength is not, as you might say, vast. It should be called Anarcho-Liberal. But it was founded in 1856 when William Ewart Gladstone and Mikhail Bakunin met at the cross-roads at the time of the memorable flight of Richard Wagner. My religion, by the way, is Tissist."

"Tissist?"

"Yes, Tissist. You must, surely, have heard of the Tissists. The founder of our creed was Tissot. The principles of our religion are extremely simple. Ask yourself the question, does God know all?"

"Well, yes . . .

"To know all is to forgive all, is that not so, sir?"

"Um. . . ."

"God knows all. God forgives all. To know is to forgive, to forgive is to love. Therefore do what you bloodywell like, if you will pardon the expression; see?"

He turned away and spoke to the man who was sitting opposite me, desperately endeavouring to eat the abominable turnip soup as he supposed an officer ought to eat turnip soup —poking himself in the eye with a raised finger, tearing off

shreds of bread, and making a fool of himself in general. Left alone he would have eaten inoffensively, of course, being a decent man instinctively well-mannered. But he felt the eyes of the world upon him. He was worried. Sweat was trickling down his face.

The Officer said to him: "I beg your pardon, what did you say your name was?"

"I didna say my name was anything. Mac So-and-So, George."

The Officer said suavely: "What do you think of the Russians.

Mac So-and-So said that he did not know what to think of the Russians."

The Officer said: "Don't you think there's a great deal to be said for their way of life?"

Mac So-and-So dropped his knife and fork, plunged a hairy hand into the leg pocket of his battle dress, dragged out a crumpled newspaper, folded very small, and said in a stage whisper: *"Comrade! Here's the latest 'Daily Worker'!"*

I could see, in the ambient air, a black cross over the head of Mac So-and-So.

To the right of him sat another anxious man. This man said: "I'll be glad when the war's over."

The Officer asked: "Why?"

"Bells."

"I beg your pardon, bells? How do you mean?"

"I'm a bell-ringer, sir."

"You mean professionally, a professional bell-ringer!"

"No, I'm a painter and decorator, bell-ringing is my hobby."

"Ah-ah," said the Officer, and registered, as it seemed, another black cross.

Then I asked the Officer if I might use the telephone. I had, I said, something to discuss with the Rev. Monsignor Kuhar, Minister Plenipotentiary of Yugoslavia. He looked at me coldly, not believing a word of it. But the fact of the matter was that I really did have something to discuss with the Minister Plenipotentiary of Yugoslavia.

Soon we went into Intelligence Tests.

Now I cannot for the life of me pass an Intelligence Test. They ask you questions like this: *"Do you know the answer to* 2 × 2?" to such a question I reply: *"Four"*.

The correct answer is: "Yes."

There was also a chinoiserie of complicated patterns: we had to decide which belonged to which. I might have made out on this at the age of ten, when I was good at such games, but now they baffle me.

Then they projected on a screen certain magic-lantern slides, more or less macabre. We had to look at each picture and then write a little story about it in two minutes.

There was one picture of a man climbing a rope. That was the whole picture—a rope bisecting the screen and a man clinging to it with a look of horror on his face. About this, I evolved a piece of nonsense about somebody who climbed up a mountain and went down into a tomb and found Jesus Christ still alive. On my right, sat a man—a steady man—who dashed off his story in a few seconds. In the interval I asked him what he had written about the man on the rope.

He replied: "I said: *Everybody says that the Indian Rope Trick is impossible. This isn't the case. I have seen a photograph of it.*"

On the evening of the second day there was a relaxation, a free film show. The film was *Pardon my Sarong* starring Dorothy Lamour. Everybody was expected to attend. I said, in the Mess, that for my part I would see myself damned first. Intelligence Tests, yes; informers, yes; but not *Pardon my Sarong*. What was I fighting for? *Pardon my Sarong?* Over my dead body! So I went back to the Nissen Hut, went to bed, and fell asleep. I heard the others coming in and pretended that I was still asleep. It was very cold, and I felt for the moment alone in the world. Everybody clumped in. Feeling angry and somewhat annoyed I wanted to stay alone. I breathed regularly, and kept my nose under the blankets. Then I heard a Potential Officer of a Rifle Brigade Sergeant say: "Take it easy. Have a little consideration. Man asleep here."

Something clicked above my head. Looking out of the narrow slit of one partly-raised eyelid, I saw the Rifle Brigade Sergeant

take my greatcoat off its hook, open it, shake it gently and approach me. He covered me with it, and then everybody went to bed.

It was not that I was ill, it was not that I was fragile and in need of protection. I was asleep. Men who have been tired have respect for sleep.

God send them deep sleep and no dreams!

* * * * *

I couldn't do the Battle Course: my right leg was still in plaster. Technically, however, I got over a hole in the ground. The Officer pointed out a wet trench under a framework of wooden beams from which hung a thick black rope.

"You have to get across that," he said. "How do you do it?"

"Get hold of the rope and swing across?" I suggested.

"Right."

Later we had Discussion. It was all informal. We marched in in dozens, wearing armlets numbered One to Twelve. There were arm-chairs in a semicircle about a cold fireplace. We sat. An officer said: "Now just imagine that you're alone, having a chat, an informal chat. Informal. On a topic, you understand—any topic, any topic you like, informally. You have views. You air those views. Nobody's listening. Quite clear? You're having an informal discussion."

The Officer, the Colonel, a Psychologist, a Civilian Visitor and two other men withdrew to the back of the room. The Colonel had a whistling nostril which went *Phtweee-phtweee* as he breathed. The Officer had a scratchy fountain-pen and a coarse note-book. We, the potential officers, sat glumly and waited for someone to say something. At last, the man whose hobby was bell-ringing said:

"Japan."

"Ah, Japan," said a Regular Sergeant.

"What do we do with Japan when we win, Number Nine?" asked the bell-ringer. He scrutinised the Regular Sergeant's armlet, and repeated: "Number Nine."

The fountain-pen scratched at the note-book like a rat at a

panel. Number Nine hedged; he said that it all depended, and a frightful silence fell.

"After all," said the Bell-ringer.

"After all what?" asked Number Three.

Number One said: "Problem of Population."

"Define it," I said.

"Population?" said Number One.

"It depends what you mean," said Number Eleven.

"Everybody wiped out," muttered Number Five.

"Problem is, how d'you get population up again," said Number One.

"Six?" said Number Nine, looking at me.

"Population up again?" I said.

"Up again," said Three.

"Yes," said Five, "what're we going to do about it?"

"Re-populate," I said.

"Say that again," said Six.

"Re-populate."

"Ah, but how?" asked Three.

I said: "Breed more children."

"How?" asked Three.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you?" I asked.

The fountain-pen on the note-book made a noise. Number Seven turned a titter into a hiccup.

Our half-hour expired and we filed out of the Discussion Room. The officers crammed their notes into secret pockets and dispersed in muttering groups. Everybody felt a little uncomfortable. Mac So-and-So relieved himself by growling an oath of such frightfulness that I would not repeat it, even to myself; and Number Three blinked at me and said: "I mean to say, eh? After all, eh? I mean?" After twelve years of leadership it had come to this: he was bewildered and depressed. What had all this to do with taking a platoon from Nowhere to Somewhere? Number Three wanted to get away from this place, back to the Sergeant's Mess where men were men.

So we went to tea. The Sergeant-Major had hinted that we had better not mess about with the ATS. There was a sodden quiet. Number Nine hurt himself, trying to cock up the little

finger of his right hand in lifting a teacup. One man, a gentlemanly fellow who worked in a shipping-office, was very happy. A crop-headed Quartermaster-Sergeant murmured that he wished he was back in the Hut. At the head of the table the Officer was saying: "Now don't you think, seriously, that there's a lot to be said for this Russian business?" A burly Lancastrian technician answered: "What Russian business?"

"Communism"

"Eh, I don't know anything about that."

"How about you, Number Four?"

"Sir?"

"Communism. Don't you think—"

"—No Sir."

"No need to *Sir* me, Number Four!" said the Officer, cordially.

"Okay," said Four, eating a slice of slab-cake as if it were a lettuce-leaf.

Mac So-and-So crawled out of a crack in the conversation and growled: "Home this time Saturday."

"Where d'you live?" I asked.

"Camp," said Mac So-and-So, chewing a bit of bread and blinking at one of the Tower Muskets on the whitewashed wall.

Even the Officer appeared to be fed up with it all. There was something wrong somewhere . . .

* * * * *

And all the time a gritty east wind was blowing. Now and again the dark, swollen sky seemed to choke on a mouthful of ice-water, and there was a sudden splutter of bitter rain. While sounder men were covering the Battle Course, I limped up and down the Camp with nothing to do but think. I got myself into a thoroughly bad temper. With time so precious and life so short, and the days running away like grains of rice out of a burst bag, here was I, mucking about among the puddles in a W.O.S.B. Camp. I had been tested for intelligence. I had been tested in tactics. I had been tested for my powers of discussion. If I could have walked I should have been tested for physical fitness. I had been tested for table manners. I

had been tested for my powers to make a speech on the eve of battle. I had been tested for my power to command a Company. (You pretend you are a Company Officer, and a man comes in, and you chat with him lightly but firmly). I had stood by, immobile on account of my leg, while the rest of my group were being tested at bridge-building. Next, I was to be examined by a Psychiatrist, and after that by the Colonel-in-Charge.

Why? What for? Because I had been told to take a Commission in order to write scripts for the Army Film Unit. But I had already, over the past year, proved my ability to write scripts for the Army Film Unit. I had already demonstrated that I was capable, quite successfully, of writing all kinds of odds and ends for the Army. I had written nearly two million words for the Army. Then what the devil was I doing in this gallery, biting my nails for three days? I could have written another fifteen thousand words for the Army in three days. And so now I had to see a Psychiatrist! There was another man in the Camp who found himself in the same angry little boat.

He was an expert laundryman, and had to take a Commission in order to run a field laundry.

"All I want to do is to wash their dirty shirts, Kersh. All I want to do is to wash their dirty socks. All I want to do is to wash their dirty pants. That's all I want to do, and that's all I'm fit to do. So what the hell do they want to make me discuss bloody Japan and jump over hurdles for? I don't know anything about Japan. I don't want to know anything about Japan. All I know is, washing shirts and socks and pants. That's all I want to know. That's all I need to know. Am I going Out There to show him how I can jump over a hurdle, or dive through a barrel, or crawl under a sheet, or not make a noise when I drink soup? Eh? . . . Do you notice how there's soup at every meal, Kersh? It's a trap! They listen to every spoonful! I always left mine. I was too wide for 'em. I wouldn't mind betting they listen outside the lavatory door too. And the questions they ask you! Do I play football? No, I don't play football, and I won't play football. I don't play football because I'm not interested in playing football. I'm

interested in washing their dirty shirts, and their dirty socks, and their dirty pants. That's how I serve my country, isn't it? And now Psychiatrists! Well, if their psychiatrists start trying to pull me to pieces, I'm going to say: 'I'm here to wash your dirty shirts, and your dirty socks, and your dirty pants, and whether I pick my nose when I'm alone, or love my mother, or hate my wife, has got nothing at all to do with it.' I'll tell them straight!"

There was another good man ill-at-ease just then; the little Sergeant of the Rifle Brigade. He was a technician, a most admirably skilful man with his hands. It was a joy to watch him at the bridge building exercise. This fine fellow, who was afflicted with a kind of palsy at table under the cold glaring eyes of the Officer, and who handled his knife and fork as a timid man handles an axe—this man, having a job in hand, became a man in command, in command of the situation and the men involved in it. He was the boss, the Gaffer, by virtue of his quick keen eyes, and nimble wits. It was a treat to see how with a nod here and a word there he sent the potential officers skipping.

There was a big natural hollow in the ground. Out of this hollow there protruded a couple of tree-stumps. By the rim of the hollow lay several logs, a length of rope, and a lump of broken machinery weighing about fifty pounds. This was the problem: The enemy was coming. He would be upon us in forty-five minutes. The mass of rusty iron was a piece of delicate and indispensible machinery, the hollow was a rushing river. The stumps were the piles of a bridge that had been swept away. It was necessary to build a new bridge in forty-five minutes. The machinery must not get wet.

"Carry on."

The Rifle Brigade man, Number Twelve of the Group, took over without hesitation. He was the boss, now. He knew exactly what to do: lash the logs to the stumps, which represented the piles of the broken bridge, and so find a dry way for his machinery and his men to the other side of the rushing river. A child could have seen that that was the only thing to do. But only a man of indomitable will could have done it.

The little Sergeant was everywhere at once. He placed his men like a chess-master, where each would be of most use, and then got to work, giving his orders in crisp words, wasting neither an ounce of energy nor as much breath as is used in the utterance of a superfluous syllable. He was magnificent. My three days had not been wasted, for here was something I would have waited a week to see.

As they were lowering the first log into position, one of the men on the edge of the hollow began to slip. The Sergeant steadied him, saying, in a voice which was strangely soothing in spite of its authoritative ring: "Goooood, goooood, mind the water, Number Four . . . Goooood . . . Half an inch *your* way, Three . . . easy, easy, goooood—*good!*" The first log was down. The little Sergeant edged himself along it and lashed it into position. He had arranged that the end of the log on his side stayed embedded by its own weight: I had seen him kicking a little niche into the clay with his sharp little iron-tipped heels. Following his example, and obedient to his quick, exact gestures, three men on the other side of the hollow were getting a log from their side to another stump. The Rifle Brigade Sergeant, dripping with sweat, his eyes glowing, was perched upon the end of the log he had made fast, giving instructions to the three nearest men to work over the thin end of the middle log. At the same time, he was telling the men on the other side to make all fast. In a second or two of delay, he cut off a spare length of rope and draped it about his neck. He had a knife handy; trust him! Then he arranged matters so that the strongest and most agile of his men got near him until the middle log was passed down. He ordered the men from the other side to stand by and catch the end. This was done. The middle log fell into position. "Make *fast!* Goooood—*good!*" He had taken off his necklace of rope, lashed two logs together in half a minute, and was on his way back to his side of the hollow. The bridge was built. Now the men had to carry the machine across it. The enemy was only five minutes away.

The Rifle Brigade Sergeant was half-way across with the rusty mass of iron when the Officer announced that time was up. But the little Sergeant and the men working with him got the

machinery over to the other side before knocking off.

He stood up, grinning and panting. He was five minutes late, was he? All right. But his men were armed, weren't they? All right. The enemy, properly engaged, might miss him, mightn't they? All right. So he still had a chance, having done his best, hadn't he? All right. And the job was, getting the machinery across, wasn't it? All right. If he had been hit that bit of machinery would be at the bottom of the river by now, wouldn't it? Not in enemy hands? All right!

Mr. Attlee was present on this occasion. He looked like an old-fashioned black tooth-brush attached to a death-mask, upon which somebody had irreverently perched an Anthony Eden hat. He didn't stay for the end. Ah, these statesmen, these statesmen, bunged up with politics and party affairs—they don't know what they are missing of labour, these Labour politicians!

When I congratulated the little Sergeant later on, he blinked at me rather sadly and said: "I was a bit too late though. But if I could have picked my men I would have cut seven or ten minutes off the job. I'm not saying anything against anybody, mind you. Considering they're not used to this kind of thing, they done wonders. I wouldn't go so far as to say there's an Art in it; only you got to make your mind up and then kind of *feel* your way along a job."

"Well, it won't be long now," I said, "before you have the picking of your own gang."

He pulled a face, shook his head, lit a cigarette and said: "Lot of eyewash. *They* won't give *me* no Commission."

"Why not?"

He thought, screwed up his face, seemed to fumble for the right word with the tip of his tongue along the inside of his upper lip, spat a crumb of tobacco over his left shoulder, shrugged his shoulders heavily, raised his eyebrows whimsically, grinned cynically, and said nothing.

After that he beckoned me aside and said: "What *is* this Psychiatrist?"

I said: "Psychiatrists are big shots. They examine you."

"Looney doctors?" he asked.

I said: "Yes, sort of looney doctors. They decide what you're

good for. Only loonies go to see a Psychiatrist of their own free will."

"I've never seen one, did you?"

"Not yet."

"What do they ask you?"

"Questions about yourself."

"And what do you say?"

"Anything you like. Don't be scared. Say what you think, straight out."

"Fellow I knew, overdoing it, nerves and all that, he got sent to one of these Psychiatrists. He got asked questions. *You* know. All he wanted was a bit of rest. *I* don't want no Psychiatrists. I'm all right. God Almighty, before you know where you are, you could wake up and find yourself in Colney Hatch or something."

I said: "Take it easy, be yourself, and give him a straight story."

"That's all very well, but they put the wind up me. Apart from the usual medical inspections, I have never seen a doctor in my life. I can't say I'm keen on it," said the Rifle Brigade Sergeant, and went away dejectedly.

* * * * *

The Psychiatrist was a careful, saving kind of man. When I was let into his consulting-room, he was meticulously picking up crumbs of John Cotton Empire Mixture from a blotting-pad and putting them back, one by one, into the packet from which he had been filling a half-crown briar pipe. This pipe had been broken at the stem and repaired with black insulating tape such as electricians use.

The Psychiatrist was a tall, pale, cool man with blue-grey eyes which gazed impersonally over my shoulder or at his note-book. Before him lay all the forms I had filled in, together with my intelligence Tests, and other papers, in a Manila folder. We plunged into consultation.

I was a writer, was I? And what sort of things did I write?

All sorts of things, preferably stories.

What kind of stories?

Just stories, any kind of stories.

Did I like the Army?

Yes.

Why did I like the Army?

Because I like the people in it.

What had I written lately?

Well, in the past couple of years, quite a bit: three novels: *They Die With Their Boots Clean; The Nine Lives of Sergeant Nelson;* and *The Dead Look On.*

Some films: *Faces In A Dusty Picture* which I proposed to publish as a novel; the dialogue of a full-length film for Leslie Howard; a film for Michael Bacon; a Mixed Battery film for the Army Film Unit; commentaries on *Shock Troops; The Island of Malta* and *The Ship, King George V;* and a number of synopsises.

Radio?

Seven programmes for the series *Ack-Ack-Beer-Beer;* three programmes for *Into Battle;* three for *For Gallantry;* a complete radio adaptation of *They Die With Their Boots Clean.*

In journalism; a weekly article of two thousand words in the *People;* the Army Column *Private Life of a Private* once or twice weekly in the *Daily Herald;* a newspaper serial dealing with the escape of a British Soldier; a series of Army articles for *London Calling;* and many others for *John Bull.*

I had also written some dozens of short stories, turned *Private Life of a Private* into a pamphlet, converted *The Dead Look On* into a play; written the chapter on the Lower Ranks in the book entitled *Britain's Modern Army;* and all sorts of other things.

When I came into a room (said the Psychiatrist) did I not feel that I was somehow different, somehow apart, from everybody else in that room?

I said, no, I couldn't say that I did.

Yet as a writer, an author, an observer of mankind, Mr. Kersh must surely feel that he is, as it were, looking *down,* or at least looking *on* from some place *apart?*

No, I couldn't say that. Psychiatrists looked down from a place apart. A writer who writes about his fellows must be involved in mankind: otherwise he is dust and ashes, I said.

What was my pet aversion?

Cruelty.

What sort of cruelty?

Any sort of cruelty—especially that in which people find pleasure. And since we were on this subject, might I add that I regarded as equally evil the pleasure some people find in submission to cruelty. Might I be permitted to say they both were equally revolting to me.

The Psychiatrist wrote in an exercise book. He had something there. I had an active dislike for sadism and masochism; this was very suspicious. Here was a shady affair . . .

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At last I was allowed to go away. The Colonel had a word or two with me before I left. I saw, he hoped, the real purpose of these War Office Selection Boards?

I said "Selecting men?"

He said: "I mean from the viewpoint of the Future."

"Vocational Training?" I suggested.

He shook his head ever so slightly and said: "The post-war world is going to need leaders. We are selecting the right sort of leaders. . . ."

A few weeks later, I was summoned into the presence of Brigadier Turner in the Commanding Officer's Office at the Army Film Unit. Brigadier Turner was one of the most charming men in the War Office. He had a fatherly instinct, a genial manner, and a keen intellect. He said to me: "Kersh, I had hoped that you might write scripts for us. But it appears that you have not succeeded in passing your tests. The War Office Selection Board have decided that you are not a fit and proper person to be an Officer. You are a Guardsman, a private soldier. A Guardsman script-writer is unthinkable. You will return to your Unit at once."

I fell in with a good smart stamp, saluted, marched out and away. So I found myself again in Pirbright Camp. I was received by old friends with some enthusiasm. The Commanding Officer, when I marched in, regarded me with a mixture of amusement and distaste. The Medical Officer got a couple of

sharp cracks out of my left leg and my right leg, and I was sent to a hut full of men whom nobody really wanted. At length I was told to proceed to the Map Reading Centre and make myself as useful as I could. There was not much for me to do. The Adjutant also intimated that, if I found time hanging heavily on my hands, it would be a good idea to go to the Educational Centre and assist in the education of the Drummers. But nobody was being educated just then: I had hit a slack period. I slunk and loitered about Pirbright Camp avoiding the eye of every man who was doing a job of work.

* * * * *

I filled in some of the time arranging notes and remembering stories. The world was full of fine stories then; strong, fantastic stories. Some of them were true, like the queer business of the Blasted Restaurant. Others—the story of Mrs. John, for instance —were apocryphal.

There was a very poor old charwoman named Mary Ann John. One night in 1941 she is supposed to have gone to heaven and come back again.

* * * * *

On this night, the most wonderful and astonishing night of her life, Mrs. John slept deeply for once. She did not hear the sirens, and even the advancing thunder of the exploding bombs failed to awaken her; she was a very weary woman, quite worn out. When a five-hundred-pound bomb burst two streets away and her window blew in, she started awake, but she was so desperately tired that she could not immediately grasp the significance of what was happening. She caught a glimpse of lurid light flickering somewhere in the night beyond the shattered window-panes, heard something that might have been the throbbing of a sick headache expressed in terms of sound up in the sky. Then there was a windy hiss. The whole world seemed to burst open. She saw an unbearable glare of white-hot light, shut her eyes, and then felt herself fly away on a hot blast like burnt paper up a chimney.

"What has happened to me?" she wondered. She felt indescribably light and free. Was she flying? A long time passed before she dared to open her eyes. When she did so she saw something sad and strange. Far, far below her London burned. She saw the dancing fires. They became pin-points: she was rushing away at breathless speed. In five seconds the whole earth lay beneath her, round and silvery, no bigger than a sixpence. It became a speck and disappeared. All the stars dropped away from her and went out like sparks from a fire-work. There was nothing but darkness and a roaring wind, bitterly cold. Mrs. John was swept upwards. "What *will* those Germans do next?" she asked herself.

But before she had time even to think of an answer, she felt herself seized, swung round, and dragged to a standstill. Blinking about her with terrified eyes, she saw that she stood in a strange and terrible place of shadows—literally, of shadows. Her heart sank as she looked down an infinite corridor, cold and awful, dreadfully grey, endless. As she stood and shivered she heard a voice say: "Mary Ann John, come with me." The voice was stern and expressionless; it proceeded from a gentleman clothed from head to foot in something like a cowled robe which might have been woven from the combings of a rain-cloud. He beckoned. She followed. Looking back she saw, now, that the infinite corridor lay behind her. Turning her head again she beheld the interior of an unimaginably vast domed place, bright and shining as a bubble that catches the rays of the sun. Tier upon tier, in this stupendous hall, beautiful bright angels stood in silence. The quiet was profound. Every face was turned towards the remote end of the hall. Mrs. John also looked in that direction, and saw nothing but a radiance . . . a glorious refulgence of such ineffable splendour that she covered her eyes with her hands.

She knew, then, that she had died, and that she was standing now before the Throne of God.

Then she felt a coldness, as when a cloud passes over the face of the sun. A great black angel was standing behind her. The Black Angel laid a hand upon her head, and the touch of it was like the absolute cold of outer space.

Out of the radiance came the Voice of God. It said: "The case of Mary Ann John. The Prosecution may speak."

Mrs. John looked at the face of the Black Angel, and she shuddered: it was dark and sad, sublimely terrible in its complete pitilessness. The Black Angle spoke in a voice like the crash of breaking ice:

"Lord God, King of the Universe, according to Thy Laws I call for the damnation of Mary Ann John. She has lied. She has stolen. She has committed perjury. She has neglected her duty to Thee. She has blasphemed Thy holy Name. She has sinned the sin of covetousness and mocked Thy holy Saints. She has defiled Thy Gospels. She died in mortal sin, unrepentant. The evidence in detail is written in the Records. Lord, I call for a verdict of Guilty."

Mrs. John began to cry: "I didn't mean any harm, I'm sure, my Lord," she said, as the tears ran between her fingers over the backs of her scarred hands.

The voice of God said: "My child, have you nothing to say for yourself?"

Mrs. John could only sob: "I'm sure I never meant to do anything wrong. . . ."

"The Defence will speak," said the Voice out of the Light.

The Black Angel stood aside. A great white angel appeared. Now he laid his hand on Mrs. John's head and she felt a sweet peace in all her veins. The White Angel spoke:

"Father, what my brother says is true. Nevertheless, let Mary Ann John be admitted into Paradise. It is true that she has stolen but, Lord, never for herself; only for her children, and then only once when they were very young and there was no bread in the house. She stole two silver spoons and pawned them for two shillings. Of the food that she bought with this money she herself did not taste one mouthful, although it was winter and she had not eaten for three days. Later, when she found work, she redeemed the silver spoons and sent them back. Father, let this be forgiven. It is true that she has committed perjury, lying upon Thy Book. But not for herself, only for her husband, who was on trial for beating her. He threw her out of a window and broke her arm. To save him, she swore

by the Almighty God that had fallen by accident. Thus, Father, she committed Perjury in Thy Name! Her husband rewarded her for this by running away and leaving her to support three young children. Hence, Father, the theft of the two silver spoons. It is true also that she has been covetous; but not for herself, my God! Out of pity for her own children she envied the warmly clothed children of the lady whose floors she scrubbed; and once she started to steal a woollen vest—she hid it under her skirt, intending to give it to her youngest son who was sickly. But her heart failed her and she put the garment back in its drawer. Thou wouldst not judge her for that? Father, it is true that she has blasphemed Thy Name. She was worn out with watching, and when her child died one midnight she cried out and said: 'If there is a God, where is He?' Father, have pity! She was sick at heart and blind with sorrow. Dear God, consider the life of this woman, Thy child, through sixty bitter years! Her poverty was terrible, and yet she gave to the poor. She gave herself, wholly, so that there was nothing left but a shivering bundle of bones in a withered envelope. Of the two sons that remained to her, one became a worthless criminal. She worked day and night to give him money because she knew that if she did not he would steal, and she wanted to save him from sin. In the end he became a soldier and died gallantly to save a friend. The other son married, but died, and this woman worked to feed his children. They ill-used her and laughed at her, and yet she bore it all in patience and was kind to them until they were old enough to go away and leave her, desperately lonely and poor, to struggle alone. Father! she neither ate nor slept, if her neighbours needed her help. What time had she to pray to Thee, oh God, since all her life was toil? And yet I say that the life of this woman, Mary Ann John, was one great prayer, from the time when, a girl of ten, she nursed her younger sisters, until to-night when, too weary to stand, she lay down to sleep her last sleep on earth before the bomb fell that killed her. Mercy for this woman, Lord God!"

Mrs. John wept again. The Voice spoke and it trembled a little as it rolled and reverberated in the shining Hall of Judgment:

"This woman has done no wrong. My child, the Kingdom of Heaven is yours."

The mighty assembly rose, with a great shout of joy, and the Black Angel smiled. As he smiled, his face became beautiful. The Voice said: "Mary Ann John, all that you desire is yours."

With trembling hands the old woman smoothed her apron and looked right and left over the wondrous fields of Paradise. She blinked at the assembled Saints and Angels; glanced timorously at the shining Archangels; patted her hair with an unsteady hand and said: "And now . . . may I go home, please?"

Instantly, everything disappeared like smoke. She caught a glimpse of a glorious Face, smiling in gentle pity. Then that also disappeared and she felt herself hurtling down . . . and the stars rushed up past her, and the earth flew towards her and she was aware of a sudden coldness and a blackness, and a deadly sickness. Then there was a crash and a rumble, and she found herself lying, shaken but quite unhurt in the ruins of the little house, looking up at a fireman who was stooping to pick her up.

"I'm all right," she said. Only for a moment, she felt a strange and poignant sense of loss. Then she brushed herself down and remembered that at six o'clock in the morning she had an office to scrub, and so she hobbled away.

* * * * *

That may or may not be true: there is no way of proving it. But the story of the Blasted Restaurant is honest-to-God fact, confirmable by the Metropolitan Police, the A.R.P., and one old beggar who picks a wretched livelihood out of the garbage-cans and the gutters between Charing Cross Road and Carnaby Street.

* * * * *

The old beggar used to come, in the small hours of every morning, to the café in D—— Street. The proprietor of the café always gave him a parcel of food. I believe that the food consisted of leavings: bones that still had bits of cutlet clinging

to them, and slices of bread and butter only partly eaten. But the old beggar was grateful, for he was one of those unhappy men of no known antecedents, who are never seen by daylight, who come out after dark by the dustbins of the West End.

I mention him first. He, among others, lives to bear witness to the truth of this story. Only the old beggar lives to mourn that amiable little café-proprietor, who had a goldfish which he kept in a bowl in the café. It seems that he had something of a weakness for goldfish. He always kept at least one, which swam disconsolately in meaningless circles. From time to time his goldfish died, and then he would shake his head sadly—for he was a man who had sympathy with all God's creatures—and buy another one. His neighbours knew how he used to worry about his goldfish, and how he used to debate whether ants' eggs were really good for them to eat.

It happened in the small hours.

The sirens had howled, and were silent; and then out of a black distance, there came a sort of pulse-beat. The bombs began to fall. The café in D—— Street was always open until four or five o'clock in the morning. Strangely enough, it continued to be open a day or so after the fantastic incident of the bomb. It was, I believe, a five-hundred-pound bomb. It came down with a hiss and a crash, and a house next door to the café went up in the air in a shower, and down to the ground in rubble.

Those whom it concerned ran to the spot. The house was blasted. There was a ruin luridly lit by yellow fire. But the café next door remained quite untouched. Its windows were unbroken, and its black-out screens undisturbed. The bomb might have fallen fifty miles away. Behind the curtains the lights still burned. A policeman looked in, and saw a perfectly normal scene of the more respectable night-life of Soho. The little square glass-topped tables stood in perfect order. The counter, or coffee-bar, was undisturbed. The big glass showcase containing cakes and whatever sweets the war had left available, stood, shining in the light of the bulbs. As usual, there was a drift of blue smoke under the ceiling. The policeman remembers—it is odd how little things like this hit a man's mind

in moments like these—he remembers seeing two flies, engaged in courtship on the unsullied surface of a mirror.

And the café was full of people.

This is exactly what he saw:

At the table nearest to the door, sat a man and a woman. The man was leaning forward over an untouched cup of coffee, holding the woman's hand. They were both young. He was dark, small-boned and slender, and in his eyes there was a look of strange anxiety. He was well-dressed. So was the woman. She, also, had not yet drunk her coffee. Her face was sad. Upon a mass of reddish hair, arranged in a kind of well-planned unconventionality, there was perched a very small and exquisite black hat. She was dressed in light clothes, which were quite unruffled. The policeman said: "Are you all right?"

Then he looked closer and saw something extraordinary. Between the first and second fingers of the man's free hand, there hung something grey and fluffy. It was a bar of cigarette-ash. Where the ash met his fingers, there were two blisters. He was dead, and so was the woman. Yet that force which had killed them, God knows how, had flicked away their lives with such consummate delicacy that it had not disturbed the ash of the cigarette or the poised cups brimful of coffee.

Nearby sat a man alone. He was wearing his hat, which was pushed to the back of his head as if in perplexity. The hand that had pushed it there remained, lightly touching his forehead. He was well-dressed, but needed a shave. Clenched tightly in his other fist there were two pennies, and this was all the money they found on him. Behind him sat, again, a man and a girl. The girl's eyes were very wide open. She was looking at the man opposite her with an expression of the most whole-hearted affection, as if his face was a wonderful book in which she was in the course of reading great and profound secrets. Yet there were no great and profound secrets in his face. On the contrary, his thickish lips were curled in an expression of crudity and triumph. There was something coarse and savage about him, in spite of his carefully pressed striped suit. Before sitting down, he had pulled up the legs of his trousers in order to preserve the knife-edge creases in them, and so he was

displaying a good deal of lavender-coloured sock.

Against the opposite wall, half-sitting and half-leaning there, reclined a woman. Her appearance left no doubt as to her means of livelihood. Her clothes were at once cheap and sensational; she was past her first youth, yet too youthfully dressed. She must have tried very hard to retain an appearance of juvenility; perhaps, in half light she succeeded in maintaining that appearance. Between her lips there was a cigarette, unlit. Her right hand held a little lighter of white metal. She looked tired. Her eyes were half open, but the rest of her face looked asleep, and upon the bar at her elbow there stood a cup containing the dregs of tea—a pattern of tea-leaves which, perhaps, some fortune-teller might have interpreted as a message of doom, because she, too, was dead.

Farther back, at another table, there were two very old men. One of them was a Greek. His left hand, beautifully shaped and meticulously clean, was holding a little piece of turned wood. It was a pawn in a chess game. He had the white pieces. The game had been going on for a long time. It had been a desperate struggle. Neither of the old men could have been very skilful players, for the board was nearly empty. (Or can they have been masters?) The old Greek had been poised for his winning move when the Black Angel came down. His opponent had an air of bewilderment and frustration.

His game was lost.

There were other customers in the café, but they also were all dead. They had died suddenly and, unmistakably, in perfect peace.

The waitress had snatched a penultimate moment to sit behind the bar upon a kind of hinged stool fixed to the wall. She sat with her chin on her left hand: dead.

In her eyes there was a look of weary contemplation, and in her left hand a tea-cloth.

Only one person lay on the floor, and that was the amiable little proprietor of the café. He had been on his way to the counter when the blast struck. His face was composed in a little professional smile of welcome—his invariable expression; an affected smile, behind which there was always a little spark

of real affability that shone through like light breaking out of a crack in a mask.

Only one thing in that place remained alive: the goldfish.

While the policeman, who felt that he was in the presence of something great and terrible, backed to the door, the old beggar arrived. He, who had long ceased to care whether he lived or died, had come for his parcel of food. When he heard that his benefactor was dead he said nothing at all, but shrugged a ragged shoulder and shuffled away in the direction of Wardour Street.

SEVEN

"Hang Yourself, Brave Crillon! We Fought at Arques and You Were Not There"

In the Map-Reading Centre I swept the floor, shuffled the stationery, unrolled the maps and re-rolled them, arranging them in order upon their proper shelves. I moved chairs—a quarter of an inch this way, an eighth of an inch that way—and dusted the window-ledges. I stood the ink-pot at an angle of thirty-five degrees; shifted it; replaced it and knocked it over; cleared up the mess and was glad of something to do. Occasionally an old familiar face poked itself through a partly-opened door and grinned at me. I felt extremely foolish. For the sake of appearance I kept a pen or a pencil in my hand, and a sheet of paper in front of me. There was, at this time, nothing for me to do. I manicured my nails, made and unmade chains of paper-clips, read the newspapers, observed that men were fighting and dying; went to the Y.M.C.A. for a cup of tea and a bun, came back, unrolled and re-rolled a map or two, looked out of the window and saw nothing but my own reflection, shuddered away, sat down, got up, went to the Y.M.C.A. for a cup of coffee and a fruit-cake, came back, changed the pen-nibs, went to the lavatory, re-read the newspapers.

I filled in time writing verses. I was writing for the *People* then, under a pseudonym, "Piers England". Every week several letters arrived asking for poetry—soldiers' poetry. So I wrote *A Soldier, His Prayer,* put it on my page, and said that I didn't know who had written it. I could see nothing here to brag about. Yet the *Prayer* achieved a sort of notoriety. Three years later, five thousand miles away, it was quoted at me near the Pacific Coast. . . . Did I know who had written it?

Stay with me, God. The night is dark.
The night is cold; my little spark
Of courage dims. The night is long.
Be with me, God, and make me strong.

I love a game, I love a fight,
I hate the dark: I love the light,
I love my child: I love my wife. . . .
I am no coward. . . . I love my life. . . .

Life with its change of mood and shade,
I want to live. I'm not afraid,
But me and mine are hard to part.
Oh Unknown God, lift up my heart!

You stilled the waters at Dunkirk
And saved your servants. All your work
Is wonderful. Dear God, you strode
Before us down that dreadful road.

We were alone, and hope had fled.
We loved our country and our dead
And could not shame them; so we stayed
The course, and were not much afraid.

Dear God, that nightmare road! And then
That sea! We got there—we were men.
My eyes were blind, my feet were torn—
My soul sang like a bird at dawn!

I knew that death is but a door;
I knew what we were fighting for—
Peace for the kids, our brothers freed,
A kinder world, a cleaner breed.

I'm but the son my mother bore,
A simple man, and nothing more,

But—God of strength and gentleness—
Be pleased to make me nothing less!

Help me again when death is near,
To mock the haggard face of fear.
That when I fall, if fall I must,
My soul may triumph in the dust!

I have seen bigger eggs hatched with less cackle.

Almost before the paper was off the press, a clergyman, a soldier, and several ladies claimed authorship of the verse. The cleargyman said that he had written it, but wanted nothing—would we be so kind as to send a cheque to Charity in his name? The soldier said that his natural modesty had kept him from signing his name, but now the murder was out: would we pray forward money by return? The ladies were prepared to settle for sums ranging from half a guinea to five hundred pounds.

We ignored these letters.

In 1943, Harrap published a collection of *Poems From the Desert*. The Eighth Army's paper, *Crusader*, had run a poetry competition. My piece was a prizewinner.

General Montgomery wrote:

The twenty-seventh poem has a unique history. Written on a scrap of paper, it fluttered into the hands of a soldier sheltering in a slit trench, during the battle of El Agheila.

I kept my mouth shut.

A year or so later, a lady in Australia claimed authorship. Reuters gave out the claim as news. Harry Ainsworth, my Editor, published a cool grey paragraph of incontrovertible negation.

There the matter rests.

* * * * *

Parsons are strange creatures.

Encouraged by the success of *A Soldier, His Prayer,* I wrote some more verses appropriate to the Christmas of that year. *A Song Sung in the Dark,* I called them: by Anon.

I never did fancy myself as much of a poet. By the following Tuesday, two misguided men and three peculiar women claimed that they had written the poor little verses. One of the false claimants was a Parson, again—another Parson. Well, well, the Lord will forgive him the lie, no doubt; but the bad taste that makes him feel that such poetastry as mine is worth lying about, that is a thing of the devil! He had better watch his step, this Parson: or one of these dark nights a fiery-eyed thing with bat-like wings will carry him off, leaving behind nothing but a clerical hat and a smell of sulphur.

* * * * *

People have found it hard to believe that I was not at Dunkirk and El Alamein. Soldiers who have fought at places I have described in *Bill Nelson* and *Faces in a Dusty Picture* have called me a liar to my face when I told them that I had never been there. How could I possibly write as I did if I had not been there to see? How did I know how men behaved in those shattering circumstances? How could I describe the feel of the Libyan Desert, if I had got no closer to it than the outer rim of the Pirbright Dust Bowl?

Firstly, knowing my men, I knew how they would behave in any circumstances.

I have been bombarded: one bombardment is much the same as another.

I have been in Deserts: and if you have seen one desert you have seen them all. I haven't had an easy life. I have seen something of trouble; of mud, hunger, and the rain. I know what it feels like to be homeless and alone in the dark, head down and collar up against the wind, crying to God for peace and quiet.

I have known comradeship too, and in my friendships and my enmities I have learned a little.

I have learned that darkness is darkness on any road, and that wherever man is there comes hunger, fear, isolation, and

sickness of heart. Then, a wet pavement becomes a freezing sea in which a man feels himself sinking as his fingers slip from the bobbing wreckage of a last hope. Then, a dusty street becomes a desert in which a man may wander without help until he falls. Then, between the cracked washstand and the penniless gas-fire in a little furnished room, lies the emptiness of outer space in which a man may hang suspended for ever, unseen and unheard.

Pain is pain. Man is man. There is only one Fear of Death, only one Black Night of the Soul; and when that comes, wherever you are, you are on the Road That Leads To The Sea.

Only the background changes.

* * * * *

Speaking of loneliness and deserts, I am reminded of a story which endangered my life when somebody passed it on to me one evening in the "White Hart". I laughed so suddenly that I inhaled a mouthful of potato-crisps, and had to be shaken and thumped before I could breathe again.

It seems that there was a certain Lieutenant-Colonel in Africa who, half-mad with anger and impatience at our recoil from Rommel's first thrust, went to certain personages with whom he had some influence, and got permission to go into the desert alone and see what he could do. He selected a fine, fast camel which he loaded with food, water, a radio transmitter-and-receiver, anti-tank grenades, hand-grenades, and ammunition; armed himself with a commando-dagger, a loaded stick, a revolver and a tommy-gun; shouted *Giddy-ap, Ayesha!* and galloped off into the quivering distance.

Weeks passed. His friends feared—let us say half-hoped—that he was dead. With the Lieutenant-Colonel gone they could fight in peace and quiet. And so they did. But still the Germans came crashing through, and still the British fell back. The lone raider was almost forgotten when Headquarters were shaken by a stupendous radio message from the heart of the desert. It said: *ROMMEL CAPTURED STOP WHAT SHALL I DO ABOUT IT STOP LT COL BLANK.*

Headquarters replied: *CONGRATULATIONS ON MAGNIFICENT ACHIEVEMENT TREAT WITH ALL POSSIBLE CARE AND BRING TO HQ ALEXANDRIA GUARDS HURRYING TO MEET YOU.*

There was a long silence. We could hardly wait. General X. said that Lieutenant-Colonel Blank deserved a knighthood. General Y said that a barony would be too little. General Z swore that Blank should have the V.C. or he'd know the reason why.

Then another message came through. It said:

CANNOT UNDERSTAND YOUR MESSAGE STOP WILL REPEAT MY FIRST COMMUNICATION STOP SAID CAMEL RUPTURED WHAT SHALL I DO ABOUT IT STOP LT COL BLANK.

* * * * *

From the Map-Reading Centre, I was transferred to the Films Division of the Ministry of Information as a Specialist. My colleagues were as nice a bunch of boys and girls as ever wore corduroy. I suppose most of them earned their livings before the War, but I cannot for the life of me imagine how. They were held together by the plush-covered iron hand of Jack Beddington, the Director of the Division.

Beddington used to be a salesman of oil, and had learned the art of talking people into things. Rolling his sly, cinnamon-coloured eyes and smiling disarmingly, he managed to squeeze the uncorseted teats of slatternly ideology into the toothless mouth of under-nourished inspiration. The fact that he knew nothing whatever about films made no difference at all. Formidable, innumerable were the films he produced! Films on Artificial Insemination, Wasting Bread, Pimples, Coal, Black-outs, Bathing in Less Water, Death, Herrings, Cows, Weaning, Cancer, Jam, Syphilis, Soap, Paper, Sugar, Child-birth, China, Crockery, Mice, Death, Old Razor Blades, "Send Less Christmas Cards"—Jack Beddington made a film about everything. He was a handler of men, women, and Affairs of National Importance. Say, for example, an efficiency expert discovered that people were using too many paper-clips. Bed-

dington would receive a Memorandum. The Memorandum would get into a File with a communiqué, a telegram, a sixteen-page letter, a sample paper-clip, diagrams, and what have you. The file would begin to bristle with blue, pink and green labels marked Urgent, Priority, Immediate.

Literary men would be called in. There would be Script Conferences. A five-minute film was needed, at once—but at once! Miss Twee would write a couple of thousand lines in which, pointing out the thundering machinery, leaping fires, and sweating toilers in paper-clip factories, she indicated that paper-clip wasters were sabotaging heavy industry.

This was very nice, said Jack Beddington, but not quite the thing—it was excellent, Miss Twee, but somehow it was no bloody good to man nor beast.

Geezle; let Geezle have a try at it. So Geezle goes to work, black as a Nigger Minstrel from the ribbon of his typewriter, and turns in a script about the history and the future of the paper-clip. Chuck one away, and bang goes to-morrow. Yes, yes, yes, says Jack Beddington, this is perfectly charming. You ought to write a book about it. I laughed and burst into tears. It kept me up all night. But for all that, it is a confounded bore. Let Beep have a go.

Beep has a go. H weighs a paper-clip and discovers that 792,000 trillion paper-clips will make a Destroyer. It is all done factually, informatively. First there is a Destroyer: it cuts through a heavy sea. A grave voice tells the audience the dreadful facts. A fat slob of a shorthand-typist, chewing a lump of toffee and talking to another mammifer about Boys, throws a clip into a waste-paper basket . . . *Montage!* Millions of toffee-chewing girls and puffing book-keepers hurl silvery showers of paper-clips into baskets. Whoof! Gurgle! Gurgle! Down goes a Destroyer, paper-clip by paper-clip. *Clip-carelessness is Barratry.*

There is a conference. Twee says: "Is it visual?"

Beep says: "The montage is exquisite but is it montic?"

Widget takes a nicotined-stained forefinger out of a nostril which he has been exploring with perseverance worthy of a better object, and says: "Where is your Marginal Release?"

McAgony says: "The figures are a little astronomical. Instead of a Destroyer, how about a rivet?"

Now we are getting somewhere. Soon we shall have it. Beep says that he needs time to consider. Rivets are rivets, and Destroyers are Destroyers. Beddington tells him to think it over. Meanwhile there are films to be made on Opaque Glass, Odourless Onions, Cafein-free Coffee, Silent Celery, Denicotinised Cigarettes, Ginger Wine and Imperforate Women and Soundless Song.

In the end, the film is made. It is inserted into a programme so that people have got to sit through it if they want to see George Formby. As soon as *Tips About Clips* flashes on to the screen, everybody knows that a Ministry of Information short is on the way. They go to the lavatory, rest their tired eyes by shutting them, chat with their neighbours, change their positions, and clear their throats. Here and there some conscientious cinema-goer sees the thing through. Instead of throwing away the next paper-clip that comes his way, he puts it in his waistcoat pocket for his wife to throw away. And so it may be that, after all, as many paper-clips are saved in Great Britain as will fill half a slop-basin. The effort was not in vain, and only cost a few thousand pounds.

* * * * *

My first assignment was a Conversation Piece. What we needed was a little more friendship among the Allies. Poles were knifing Scotsmen; Scotsmen were dirking Poles. Yugoslavia—of course—was in a ferment. The Serbs were murdering the Serbo-Croats, the Serbo-Croats were clubbing the Slovenes. The Monarchists were biting one another's ears off, and the Socialists were raising Hell. The Greeks were being misunderstood. The Free French were nattering, the Dutch were muttering; the Belgians didn't know whether they were going or coming; something had to be done.

Somebody got the idea of making Conversation Pieces. It was divinely simple. A foreigner meets an Englishman. They talk for five minutes and all misunderstanding disappears. It was just like that. I had to write a piece in which an English Soldier meets a Greek.

I set my piece in Africa. The English Tommy and the Greek Infantryman are both lost. The Englishman opens the conversation in good broad Cockney and the Greek replies in the accents of the Piræus. Needless to say, neither of them understand what the other is talking about. The Englishman, thereafter, doing most of the talking, makes clear what he wants to say by means of pictures drawn with the point of his bayonet in the smooth sand.

So hand in hand they go into the sunset, united for ever.

Beddington thought that this was by no means a bad idea, but the Greeks threw it out. In fact, they appeared to be bitterly offended by it. Their feelings were hurt. What the hell did I mean? Was I insinuating that the average Greek soldier could not speak English? Was I not aware that the Greeks are linguists, and that even ten-year-old boys in Athens speak perfectly fluent Greek? This was something like the tone of the protest. My script went into the Files, the Undying Files.

By way of a joke, I wrote a piece of nonsense which I gravely submitted to the Director:

OUTLINE OF CONVERSATION PIECE EMPHASISING COMMON WAR-AIMS

Scene: A Blasted Heath. Enter a GREEK and a VEGETARIAN, followed by a BRITISH TOMMY and a SHIPWRECKED FREE NORWEGIAN SAILOR.

BRITISH TOMMY:

But look here, I say! What are you fighting *for*, you know?

THE GREEK:

I fight, plizz, for Greece.

FREE NORWEGIAN:

Den you are by Yumping Yesus a bloody Nazi—because ay tank de Yermans haf fight for Greece.

BRITISH TOMMY:

Oh, I say, blimey and all that—do have a cucumber sandwich, won't you? (*offers one*). You can't say you're fighting for home and kids, and all that tommy-rot, you

know. Because I mean to say, what are the poor old Hunny-Wunnies fighting for? They've got homes and little ones too, what? I say, look here, you'd better be rather more ideological and what not than that, don't you rather think? I mean to say, most of the best people simply haven't got homes, let alone kids. Can't you sort of clench a fist and say: "For Guildford Street, Stalin and the Holy Synod?" Or "Synagogues rather than Demogagues," or something? Homes and children are vieux jeu, don't you think? Look at me: do I say "I'm fighting for England?" (*Archly*) Not to be jejune! Why, a German might just as well say "I'm fighting for Germany."

(*Enter* THREE YUGOSLAVS, *screaming.*)

FIRST YUGOSLAV:

I fight for Serbia!

SECOND YUGOSLAV:

For Croatia!

THIRD YUGOSLAV:

Down with Serbia and Croatia; For Slovenia!

(*Exeunt, with drawn knives.*)

VEGETARIAN:

I am fighting for lightly-cooked vegetables.

GREEK:

Plizz, you are in the Spinach Civil War?

(*Enter an* AMERICAN SOLDIER, *covered with swimming medals.*)

AMERICAN:

We are fighting for Gard's Own Country—prasperity for all, and niggers to burn.

GREEK:

Plizz, you have burn your knickers? You have burn your bridges, zis is to say?

AMERICAN:

I'm fighting for my unborn children! I'm——

BRITISH TOMMY: (*blushing*).

Oh, I say, look here—you can't talk about things like that to *mixed* audiences. No, by the Hammer of Malet Street!

(*Enter a* SCOTSMAN, *hooting and tooting.*)

SCOTSMAN: (To TOMMY.)

Whisht, ye bluidy forrreigner!

BRITISH TOMMY:

And what, may I ask, are you fighting for?

SCOTSMAN: (*with a yell*).

The grrreaterrr glorrry o' the Scots Nationalist Parrrty! Tae hell wi' England!

(*Exit, piping.*)

FREE NORWEGIAN:

Ay fight de Yermans because ay want to go home. Ay want to go home because ay want to be alone.

GREEK:

Zees, plizz, is *my* war-aimings too.

(*Enter a* DOCUMENTARY BOY *arm-in-arm with a* CORDUROY GIRL.)

DOCUMENTARY BOY:

I really don't see how one can make anything sufficiently tedious out of human interest of this sort.

CORDUROY GIRL:

From non-theatrical to non-theatrical is the aim of the higher vertebrata.

(*Exeunt, mincing.*)

GREEK:

Well! Well, I will be . . . how you say eeet. . . ?

BRITISH TOMMY: (*hurriedly*).

Artificially inseminated.

GREEK:

Alas, poor Greece, War is me!

. . . and so on, and so forth.

This made Beddington laugh. But one of the boys, having read it, ate up a segment of thumb-nail and said: "No seriously! Doesn't Kersh realise this isn't *visual?*"

It must be somewhere in a file to this day.

Touching the matter of Files: In this same Ministry a respectable gentleman, riffling a couple of pounds of closely-written, multi-coloured flimsy paper marked SECRET, and observing

that it had no earthly meaning, was possessed of a devil. He picked up a slip of paper and a blue pencil, intending to write the word *Balls*. But the pencil broke, and as he sharpened it the gentleman remembered where he was: he compromised, wrote *Round Objects*, inserted the slip, and pushed the file aside.

Many weeks later the file came back to him with a note from the Director-General which said: *Who is Mr. Round, and to what does he object?*

But I digress.

My Greek Conversation Piece came to nothing. I don't think any Conversation Piece ever came to anything. One script of mine was regarded as usable: it dealt with Careless Talk in Factories. This was a rush-job. I rushed into conference with a man from Security; rushed in a camouflaged car to a secret factory; rushed away to a typewriter, and rushed back to the Ministry twenty-four hours later with the complete treatment. "Nice job," they said.

I asked: "When can I see the picture? Next Thursday?"

Comrade Slater laughed his deep-throated laugh and looked at me quizzically. *What a wag you are!* said his twinkling blue eyes. "It ought to be ready in six months," he told me.

I screamed with laughter. "Joking aside," I said.

"Perhaps a little under six months," said my fellow-toiler.

"Do you really mean to tell me," I said, "that it'll take six months to make a wretched little ten-minute film? Six months for a ten-minute film that's supposed to be a rush-job?"

"About six months. Perhaps a little under six months."

"But exactly *why?*"

"Because that's the way it is,"

"But *how*, Slater? *Why*, Slater?"

"Because that's the way it is, Kersh."

And that was the way it was.

The Film Industry was crazy enough at the best of times. But when the Civil Service took to Film Production in Great Britain I had a nightmarish vision of a libidinous old hag in sheer black stockings coupling with a corpulent mule on a steel filing-cabinet . . . I thought of the rhinoceros (obstinate, thick-

skinned, conservative beast) that moves in circles, always coming back to drop his dung in the same place; and saw the Department as a grunting, pachydermatous paper-eater, grazing and grazing, and voiding file upon file for ever and ever; snorting with rage over an irritant weed, squirting it away in *Priority* labels, and cooling itself in mud while queer little birds pecked gorged ticks from under the cracks in its impermeable hide . . . a clacking, scallop-mouthed, dirty-butted rhinoceros in well-saved spats and a high collar, quite sure of a reasonable pension; armour-plated, heavy-gutted, blind.

Libidinous hags, corpulent mules, spatted rhinoceroses . . . this way lay madness!

It was no way for a man to live.

* * * * *

Yet I had met civil servants with imagination, and film-people with common-sense.

Apart from technicians—who must keep their wits on a short lead, and, as good craftsmen, have no need to go crazy—the only practical men in films are on the business side of the industry. On this side, the sweetest plums are picked by the man who can play Temperamental Artist among the Accountants, and Hard-Headed Business Man among the temperamental artists in the Studio. He cuts the cake both ways.

A plain business-man, in conference with an earnest artist, occasionally loses his head to the extent of a few thousand pounds of his own or his partner's money; but an artist *manqué* turned business-man will eat up financiers as fire eats up dry grass.

Artistically-minded business-men have imagination and some faith in men. Business-minded artists have imagination and no faith. In the end they make better business-men, bigger money-makers . . . art-dealers.

Still, your commercially-biased artist is a lost man in the end . . . a bored man, a tired man, a craftsman without a craft, a swallower of sleeping-pills . . . a yawning selecter of elegant pistols; a layer of velvet cushions in gas-ovens. He

has lost the Spark in picking up the money: now he has the money, and, not wanting it, fears to lose it for fear of Nothing.

Sad destiny!

Better play for what you really want to win.

Can you hedge part of your stake—your Self—in the hope of cutting your loss in case you lose yourself?

No one has done it yet. No one ever will.

* * * * *

The film industry seems, somehow, to bring out the worst in me. I am always getting involved in it, but never cease to be saddened by the awful expense of spirit in a waste of shame that is a Film Company in action—the emotional diarrhœa of fat-headed actors, the hair-tearing of frenzied directors, the lying, the faking, the scheming, the serpentine-wriggling, the lunatic waste of time and money, the whoring, the posing, the bullying, the cringing, the wheedling, and the pandering that goes to spoil a few strips of celluloid. I have got myself mixed up in some very cock-eyed productions, and perhaps, therefore, I have seen the industry at a disadvantage . . . caught it with its pants down as the saying goes.

I worked with Leslie Howard on a film called *We're Not Weeping*, afterwards re-titled *The Gentle Sex*. A nice young lady called Moie Charles had written the original script, which was, as Howard said a little too feminine. So would I be a dear and rewrite the dialogue, making it a little more masculine? I rewrote the dialogue, and Howard said that, all in all, it was a little too masculine now, and gave it back to Miss Charles. Would she make the dialogue a little more feminine? She put it back pretty much as it had been before, for which I don't blame her.

Then Howard said to me: "Gerald, old man, do you think you could take this and make the dialogue just a little more masculine?"

I said: "Of course, Leslie, old man"—and handed back my rewrite of Miss Charles's original.

Then Howard, seeing that at last we were really getting somewhere, gave it all back to Miss Charles just to feminise a

little, and she at once handed back her original, and all went merrily.

Poor Leslie Howard—he couldn't make up his mind about anything. Towards the end of his career, he seemed to be playing an endless game of solitaire, as if he hoped to wear out the patience of time itself. Having reached the film stars' menopause—that dreadful moment when to act young is to look old, and to act one's age is to acknowledge one's years—he tried to stand still. Vanity of vanities! He was rich and popular enough to have grown old with dignity—yet he was afraid. He feared oblivion. Had he hoped to live for ever as a Scarlet Pimpernel? Didn't he know that an actor—however great he is—lives only as long as his contemporaries? An actor may travel a little way beyond living memory in print; but then he travels like the visiting card of a forgotten acquaintance in the pocket of a discarded coat.

Where is Garrick? Where is Kean? Where is Irving? We have their names on paper: nothing more remains of them except a few words of current critical opinion.

Howard, when I knew him, wanted to do things: he wanted to direct, produce, put things on, take things off. But he was a man on a moonlit road, with a Thing behind him. Fear was on his heels. Ten thousand, twenty thousand, fifty thousand pounds couldn't have made a serious hole in his capital. But he was afraid of losing money, afraid of losing prestige . . . in general, afraid of losing. And once a man is afraid like that, he might as well lose and get it over.

This often happens to handsome actors. The better-looking they are in youth, the deeper their dread in middle age. Howard felt his face cracking. Woe to the book that hopes to live by virtue of its binding! He fled hither and thither until he ended in the sea, where, by God's grace, he found a peaceful solution to everything.

We were to have made a great and stirring picture about the Army. After twenty thousand written words of synopsis, after a million spoken words of discussion and more indecisive pauses than man could count, nothing was done about it. He was afraid of falling down on a job. People might laugh at him—

that would be dreadful. No doubt he realised that the world saw him and liked him, not as Howard the Man, but as the tragic poet of the *Petrified Forest* and the gay adventurer of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*—as Howard, the Face, Howard, the Voice.

He cared about the brief illusion he had created; wanted to live up to it.

It is a very dangerous thing to be widely admired; I mean, to have a Public. A popular man must hold on to his sense of humour as a traveller holds on to his compass; or he is lost.

* * * * *

The Ministry was not sorry to lend me to Sir Alexander Korda, to work with him and Wesley Ruggles on a picture called *The Perfect Strangers*—another piece of nonsense, starring Robert Donat in a bowler hat and Deborrah Kerr in an apron, or some such frippery.

The less said about this the better.

I liked Korda. But—Robert Donats, bowler hats, Deborrah Kerrs, Ruggleses—Wuggleses—there was a war on. We were, it is true, ducking every five minutes as the V1's came down. In France the Armies of democracy were smashing to Paris, Germany was beginning to fall back. Heads were rolling, blood was flowing, desperate legions were joining battle on the torn-up plains.

I behaved improperly. Having talked Colonel Morrow Krum into getting me accredited as an American War Correspondent (Brigadier Turner had said that as far as I was concerned accreditation as a British Correspondent was neither necessary nor possible) I got a uniform, put it on, and made contact with a man I knew who was in London on leave from one of the hot spots in North France. He had better be nameless. I showed him my finger-printed Accreditation Cards, and said that I wanted to get to France without any chi-chi, as soon as possible.

The nameless man said: "We take off after dawn to-morrow. Will you be ready then?"

I was ready. We flew in a little, fast, vicious-looking plane,

the name of which I forget, from an Air Port which I do not choose to remember.

I had not flown before. I cannot say that I enjoyed it, but it was more exhilarating than story-conferences.

In point of fact, I had been writing too much, and needed a little action.

EIGHT

Bits Out of My French Diary

I

THE hard-handed peasants of Normandy are digging out bottles. The conquerors squeezed the land pretty dry, but the man of the Cider-country took care to hide a few bottles of their best stuff—ancient Calvados, for the most part, and an indescribably virulent, pale green Marc which tastes something like the aftermath of an operation under ether, and goes off with a *Wuff!* if you put a match to it. In Mortagne they hid it in the unlikeliest-looking vessels. One farmer pressed into my hands an old dinner-pail full of the stuff. Another offered me a cupful out of a particularly vile-looking bottle that had once contained lubricating oil. In Rennes a one-armed old soldier with nothing but a thumb and two fingers on his hand, dragged me into a dark passage, took up a floorboard, and put into my arms a half-gallon jar. It looked like lemon squash, but turned out to be Calvados again—Calvados of undreamed-of fireiness. I took it back to the airfield.

The hospitality of these American pilots is terrific—you need to be lined with zinc in order to survive it. In about fifteen minutes I had been compelled to swallow a tooth-glass full of Rye whisky, a half-pint of some sweet white wine, a great slug of synthetic gin, and half a cup of something I have never seen or tasted before—a liqueur that resembled boiling tar and stuck to the roof of the mouth. They are brave men, those pilots! Later we sat and talked in the twilight. I was due to fly away next day soon after dawn. But they were going to kill or be killed. There was something about them that sweetened even the Calvados. May they live a hundred years! Orgazaly the surgeon and Major Joe French talked of literature. Waldon Henley, becoming sentimental, recalled to mind his orange groves in Florida. Then Morrison, the Memphis Rebel, in the

accents of the deep south, mentioned his forty-six hundred acre plantation. The moon was coming up.

"As soon as I get back home, I'm going to get me a wife, and about ten kids," said Morrison.

There was a pause. Henley took advantage of it to thrust into my hand a mixture of red wine, white wine, and whisky, which he said would help me to relax. Then Joe yawned and said: "What's that thing about late larks singing?"

"It *was* Henley who wrote that?" I asked.

"Gerald, I leave that to men like you," said Weldon Henley. "I never wrote that."

"I meant W. E. Henley," I said.

Weldon Henley ruminated. ". . . Wait—you come and stay with me in Florida."

"Gerald," said Morrison, "I can give you duck-shooting."

"My house is always yours," said Major Joe.

"And mine," said Orgazaly. "My wife would be very happy to meet you. Yonkers."

"Come and stay," said Joe.

"Come and stay six months," said Morrison, "I threw the key of my house into Quiet River the day I got it—come and stay a year."

"I have a boat," said Weldon.

"Morrie," I said, "*Was* it you who sank that cruiser at Brest? Or was it Colonel Laughlin? Tell me."

"We both hit it—Laughlin sank it," said Morrison.

"Fact?" I said.

"Laughlin sank it, Gerald."

"How far away is that moon?" asked Weldon Henley.

"About two hundred and thirty-nine thousand miles," said the Doctor.

"Is that all? It looks nearer," said Morrison. "Have a snort?" He threatened me with an open bottle.

"Not on any account," I replied.

He filled my glass with whatever came to hand.

"Well . . . ?" said Major Joe French, rising.

"Sure hope we may get a crack at Jerry to-morrow," said Morrison.

In the nick of time I caught Major Joe in the act of putting all his bedclothes on my bed. And another man called Abrams pressed into my hand five pairs of clean socks and a glass of Calvados. Henley, upon an afterthought, gave me a packet of safety-razor blades, and a glass of Calvados. Morrison gave me a dagger and a glass of Calvados. The surgeon, Orgazaly, gave me a glass of Calvados and cigars. Colonel Casey gave me half a pound of Blue Boar Tobacco, and a glass of Calvados. Then they all gave me their hands to shake.

Half a dozen R.A.F men and Airborne troops came in by some inadvertence, after some unrecorded act of suicidal heroism, and were put up for the night with uproarious cheers.

Soon, the place was silent. Major Joe, sleeping a foot away, gave out a gurgling noise and a muffled shriek. The last thing I saw was the moon, rolling up beyond the window like the eye of a man who has been sandbagged from behind. Then I slept.

That was the night before a jittering thing, taut as a guy-rope, a creature that once had been Kersh, rode to Chartres in the Cub—the plane that achieves a speed of about sixty miles an hour and in which one feels something like a mouse tamped into a cellophane cigar container.

On the way over the Pilot and I exchanged a word or two in the high-pitched scream which alone can penetrate the roar of the little noisy engine. That Cub! It reminded me of one of those under-sized, extra tough men who shout loud and pick quarrels with the universe.

We were passing a farm-house,, and a man waved to us. The Pilot said that he never could quite get over how small human beings look from a height. I replied that I did not like heights, and preferred not to think of it. But, as we were going over Laval, I found myself brooding upon the problems of Distance. It is a fact that a few yards can take away the human significance of anything. At five hundred yards a man is no more than a hyphen. At eight hundred yards he is a comma. At one thousand yards he is a full-stop. At fifteen hundred yards, to the naked eye he is nothing—invisible. This is why, in modern war, it is possible to kill without passion and to bomb cities without a second thought. At fifteen thou-

sand feet a human being is among the gods, and is mysteriously detached from flesh and blood. He drops a block-buster and says good-bye to it. By the time it has landed he is miles away in the free air. It is all very strange.

* * * * *

In Paris again I heard another story. It came out of my conversation in the Coupole, when we were referring to dogs and dog-lovers. Somebody likened Winston Churchill to a pedigree bull-dog, Monsieur Desiré said, half-seriously: "We have never, even in the worst days of the shortage, served anything like that here."

It is the destiny of man always to be inextricably involved in dogs and horses: especially in dogs. Dogs were the very first allies of man.

Dogs, in the literal sense of the word led to Dogs in the abusive sense, and so we came back to collaborationists. A man who was smoking a pipe of red clay, such as I have not seen for more than a dozen years, started to tell me—in a highly academic accent—of an incident which, he thought, had all the elements of Greek tragedy. It is possible that he had made it up—he had the appearance of a creative artist. It was concerned with a Dog of a German and a Thoroughbred dog, a pup owned by a young Parisienne of good family who had, as it appeared, fallen in love with a German flying man of the soulful type.

The German flying man, a fighter pilot, was full of romantic dash and verve, and was something of a hero. He was (said my informant) one of the dark Germans, something like an Italian in appearance, but very German nevertheless, and he wore his hair in the style affected by his Führer. A battle scar, received in a fight over the Channel, made his face interesting as well as handsome. The young woman was tall and statuesque and she was a woman—like certain others we have in England—who was apt to develop extreme fantastic loves for men of a masterful, conquering type. They tend to commit suicide when their ideals crash. . . . You know the kind?

She fell in love with the German airman and he, it seemed,

The dark romantic German hero gave it a long burst and cut the unhappy animal in two. It must have been a quick death, at least. He was, moreover, not particularly sorry afterwards. What does a dog matter? Only you and I matter.

But after that, the girl could not bear the sight of the man. She spent many weeks in seclusion then—it sounds like a four-penny novelette—took to assisting the Underground Movement.

And that, as far as the man with the clay pipe knew, was the end of the story. Where the woman got to after that, or what became of her, nobody seems to know.

2

The heavy-muscled oxen that serve the French as plough-horses stand with bowed heads as the convoys rush over the battered roads: nothing but death will liberate *them*. The ploughmen, however, wave their hands and peel off a couple of work-stiffened fingers in a sprawling V-sign, while the women and children yell words of encouragement which the engines shout down. *MINES CLEARED TO HEDGES,* say the red-painted signs. The roads rush towards you and suck away: the speedometer-needle tickes the mark of 60, and the jeep seems to dance. All along the roads lie rusting tangles of German iron—gutted trucks, burnt-out troop-trailers, tanks split asunder—like the remains of ancient beasts that have crept into the ditches to die and rot. Here, an eighty-eight-millimetre cannon leans over at an impossible angle; there, a blackened staff-car with a bonnet shaped like a vulture's beak, gapes at the clouds like a fantastic bird.

The jeep slows down. Here is a little town. Everything is closed: if it were not for the roar of our passing, it would be silent as midnight. Then children come running—a little girl trying to throw a flower; a little boy trying to give us a handful of pears; a baby with a green apple. There's no time to stop: they pass in a flash. Soon we have to crawl behind a vegetable-cart. Half a dozen girls in their Sunday clothes are V-signing with all their might on the piled boxes. One of them, carried away by enthusiasm, hurls down a tomato and hits me in the

Two Mâquis men are sitting near me, eating carrots. One has a rifle, the other an automatic pistol. They have not sat there five minutes. A youth comes in with a paratrooper's tommy-gun; whispers in their ears. They jump up. The man with the pistol flicks open the holster and draws the weapon; then they run out. Monsieur Désiré says to me: "Germans over there somewhere. . . . They'll get them." Then he talks, and tells me things. He saw the Germans shoot down thirty children with automatic carbines.

". . . without motive, sir; for nothing; to amuse themselves, perhaps. *Pa-pa-pa-pa-pa-pam!* Children. And at Vincennes I have seen what they did to prisoners. They dug out their eyes with their thumbs, and tore out their finger-nails. That's all. The Germans! What do you make of them, monsieur? They are . . . not *Christian!* What is to be done with them?"

"I don't know, Monsieur Désiré; I don't know."

"Kill them all?"

"You can't kill sixty million people, Monsieur Désiré."

"True enough, monsieur. How can we kill children? It is not our character. Or women, either—one does not kill women. But these madmen . . ." Monsieur Désiré shrugs a shoulder. Then he says: "Some of them had dogs. They simply left them behind to cry their hearts out. A dog—what does a dog know? A dog must love somebody: a dog does not know the difference between a German and an ordinary man like you or me. In three or four years a dog grows attached to a person; and an ordinary man grows attached to a dog. Rather than leave a dog to break his heart, an ordinary man would shoot him—that would be kinder. But not the Germans. No. They are not the same as men like you and me."

At this, a lady who is sitting at an adjacent table says: "They are either cruel or sentimental. For me, I would rather have a cruel German than a sentimental one; because when they are sentimental they are even more disgusting, since they are cruel at the same time." She turns to me and grasps my hand. "Monsieur," she says, "we are very grateful to you. We are very tired, and very grateful. You will never know what we have suffered."

"They were brutal, madame?"

She replies: "Brutal, yes. But worse than that, they humiliated us. Hunger, we did not mind so much as the feeling of being crushed. Once, just here, I was talking in English. I speak English a little. I was warned to shut my mouth. Things like that, piling up over four years . . . they make you sick at heart, they make you tired . . . they make you cry." She looked at my badge. "You are a War Correspondent?"

"Yes, madame."

"I am a painter. My husband is an artist, too, in America. His name is Bolegard—do you think I shall be able to see him soon?"

"Soon, I hope."

"I hope so too. Monsieur, will you come and drink some coffee with me and one or two of my friends?"

"With great pleasure, madame."

"We are so happy to see you here . . . after all these years."

* * * * *

I went away to another café. As I was sitting on the terrace, a blind beggar, led by a black dog, stopped on the pavement and played "God Save the King" on a home-made fiddle; then asked for alms.

"Are you pleased now?" I asked him.

"It's all the same to me," he said.

He was very old; so was his dog. Both were terribly thin and weary. I had a packet of biscuits in my pocket. I took them out. The dog smelt them; sat on his haunches and lifted a paw. Two large tears ran down his black cheeks: he was a sort of spaniel. "Yes, yes," I said, and gave him the biscuits. The blind man heard the dog eating and his face brightened.

3

Paris, August 28th. The Americans had made headquarters in the Place de l'Opera and were throwing away some card-

board boxes. At the bottom of one of the boxes an enquiring bystander had discovered some broken biscuits. He snatched a handful. Someone saw him. A group appeared, and became a crowd: the broken biscuits evaporated. I watched while a few disconsolate optimists scraped the bottom of the box. Scarcely a crumb was left. As I turned to go away the Man In The Striped Shirt spoke to me.

He was a battered man of fifty or so, with something of the appearance of a depraved character—a cheerful, hard-boiled, broken-nosed, scar-faced fellow with skin like morocco leather and a pair of heavy, chapped, pendulous hands covered with brownish hair. He grinned like a benevolent goat and tore open a couple of cigarette-ends which he proposed to re-roll into a new cigarette.

"Biscuits!" he said.

"It is War," I answered.

"Have you got a cigarette?" he asked, in English.

"No, not one."

"It doesn't matter." He shrugged a shoulder—it made a disturbance in my landscape, because he was not wearing a jacket and had on a pink-white-and-black-striped shirt. There was something appealing about him, although he was not the sort of man you would bring home to meet your wife. We got talking. He said some good things. This vagabond—he said I could call him Paul—was of the sort that survives. He had begged, borrowed and stolen his way through life in two wars, and there he still stood, calm and toothy and not ill-fed. We went to the Café de la Paix, and had a drink, and I listened while he made conversation. Paul knew the Germans: he had scrounged off them too.

"Proper women do not like Germans," he said, "because they are too fussy. A woman does not like a fussy man, because fussiness implies too much self-esteem: nothing but perfection is good enough for him. The Germans are conceited. They are hard people, yes. But not hard in the right way. Do you understand? They are heavy and unfinished, untempered; they do not take a fine edge. And they have a way of making everything cheap. This is because they have base, childish minds.

That is why the Germans must always lose in the end. What I dislike especially about Germans is, that they have no *manners*. Polite, oh yes, they can be charmingly polite. But never by *instinct*. An Englishman is polite . . . just like *that*" —he snapped his fingers—"before he thinks about it. But a German is polite as if he is making politics. A German has no regard for the feelings of his fellow-men. I admit that I have been amiable to Germans, but I don't like them at all. They are not well-balanced."

He went on:

* * * * *

. . . You can't imagine what pleasure it would give me if only you could understand my attitude. I have lived for fifty years on what I could get, and to me people are divided into two classes? Amiable and Mean. I am a nobody and a nothing now, but once upon a time I intended to be a journalist. It all came to nothing, and here I am; for the past thirty years I have managed to survive on other people's generosity—in a little while I shall beg of you a small loan; I live on small loans. A species of beggar; that is what I really am. I don't like working . . . I am an idle man. If I had been born two or three thousand years ago in Greece, I should have been a philosopher or something of the sort.

Did you ever hear about the German Major Theiss?

He was a very promising young Nazi, sir, and a bit of a fool in spite of his cunning, as I shall tell you. This Major was not yet thirty, but a pig. He is the only German whom I may claim to have killed. It is true that I killed him as it were by proxy, indirectly; but if it had not been for my efforts he might still be alive, and that would be a pity.

This Boche was a bad type.

He was a person of ordinary size and ordinary appearance, except for his skin, which was as clear and fresh-looking as the skin of a baby. On the whole, I daresay he might have been regarded as quite attractive-looking—he had a *clean* air. But he was a pig, nevertheless: cruel. He liked to play dirty tricks.

But that was the least of it. He was a type that abused even

his position as conqueror. He wasn't content that he had the best of everything while the French had nothing. He did bad things. . . .

Theiss was one of those who were so busy at the Vincennes Prison—he "questioned" those suspected of working with the Mâquis—and you understand what I mean when I say "questioned"? I have been told that several of those he "questioned" died as a result of his attentions. That, of course, I cannot vouch for myself because I was not there. But these things get around. . . .

Well I got to know him. I get to know people. I just walk up to them and get to know them, the same as I got to know you. He developed a weakness for a young lady named Gilberte. What he saw in her, God only knows: she was not exactly an oil-painting—a large girl who looked much older than she was. Not my type—I prefer slender, svelte, dark types of women, with dark and mournful eyes, if you understand what I mean. Brunettes. Gilberte was an artificial blonde, heavy and stodgy, with a complexion like half-baked bread and bulgy blue eyes. A German type, perhaps? I'll introduce you to her if you like . . . she is a good sport, and very amiable.

As I was saying, this German Major became, so to speak, amorous of Gilberte. Now Gilberte was a . . . you understand? She made her living as best she could . . . eh?

And this brings me to the question of ladies of Gilberte's profession in time of War, in enemy-occupied territory. It is easy to condemn. But what are they to do? They are in business, the same as anybody else. The wine-merchant sells his wine to the enemy; the restaurateur sells his food to the enemy; and poules sell themselves to the enemy. There is no emotion in it: it is purely and simply a matter of commerce.

Gilberte associated with this German as a matter of course. In fact it was I who acted as go-between. It is not a very nice thing to do . . . but since a man has to live, especially in wartime, what can one do?

A moment, sir! I also acted as go-between in certain other ways. Understand? I was in touch with certain friends working

in the dark—gentlemen of the Mâquis. One of them was a respectable person who sold coal. Another . . . never mind. The details of the whole story would take me a week to explain to you. You get me, however? Having brought the Major and Gilberte together, I got in touch with my friends. Gilberte kept us informed of the movements of this German, do you see? We knew, therefore, that at certain hours of the day we would find him in Gilberte's apartment.

So one fine evening five of us waited, inconspicuously, of course, until the Major left Gilberte's apartment. He was stupid to have been so confident of his safety, eh? In brief: my friend the coal-merchant grabbed him by the neck and cut off any noise he might have made. We took him down to a basement-room in the same block of apartments.

And there we conducted what you might describe as a sort of trial. We said to him: "Have you anything to say for yourself?"

Of course, he had nothing to say for himself, because we had gagged him in case he made a noise and brought half the German army down upon us. He just glared with his large clear eyes, and tried to get his hands free. I had his pistol—a very fine Mauser, which I sold afterwards to a personal friend for two thousand francs, dirt cheap at the price. I can get you one too if you like: fifteen hundred to you.

My comrade the coal-merchant said: "So, Boche, since you have nothing to say in your defence, can you tell us any reason why sentence of death shouldn't be passed upon you?" He still said nothing. So the coal-merchant said: "Boche, we find you guilty. You may consider yourself condemned to death."

Then the problem was how to dispose of him. It is, you understand, inconvenient to have dead German officers all around the place, especially in time of war. It was likely to be very noisy to shoot him, and messy to kill him any other way; because after all, we are men of certain sensibility. It was I who solved the problem. Gilberte had a gramophone. I went and borrowed it with a record called "Bessie Couldn't Help It". It is sung by a negro with a most fantastic voice. I can remember some of the words:

Bessie couldn't help it
Any more than you could, or I could.
Bessie couldn't help it
Though she tried to be good—oh, so good!

This abominable noise blared out, we had wrapped several thicknesses of the German's own tunic round the muzzle of his pistol, and, just when all the brass instruments in the band did their damnedest to burst our ear-drums, the coal-merchant shot the major very scientifically through the heart. Shots at close quarters in the head make a mess. Then somebody upstairs stamped on the floor and told us to stop that damned noise, and so we turned off the gramophone. Then we took the German's uniform off him and dressed his dead body in an old suit of overalls. Two of us held him under the arms and carried him out, and we all sang drunkenly. We conveyed the impression that we had been making a night of it and we all went out quietly past the concierge who was half-asleep.

We didn't dare go far. We found a nice quiet corner and dumped him there. Then we got to hell out of it—specially me, because I had the German's pants on under my own and I wasn't anxious to be found dressed like that. . . .

Incidentally, immediately after the Liberation one of Gilberte's colleagues (if one may use that term) told the F.F.I. that Gilberte was a collaborationist. They started to shave her head but fortunately her case was explained before they had shaved off much more than half of her hair, and so she was released. She is not unattractive, and I will introduce you to her if you like. Or do you prefer the dark, passionate type? I do.

4

In certain dark corners of Normandy there is a rumour current that the Russians have cut their way across to France. I started it; I couldn't help it—it sprang up around me in the region of Messagnes, when, as the most savage-looking non-

combatant that ever carried a fountain-pen, I got out of a jeep to stretch my legs. By that time I had a two-day-old growth of bristle all over my face, and several hundred miles of wind and rain had beaten my moustache into a sinister shape. My field-jacket was buttoned to the chin. The jeep was riding light: it had bumped, therefore; I was aware of a soreness and so I walked with the rakish, stiff-legged swagger of the born horseman. My cap was pulled down over my eyes.

"Are you a Russian?" asked a little boy. Without waiting for an answer he cried: *"Alors—vous êtes un Brave!"* To amuse him, I stuck my hand into my bosom, bent my right leg, twirled my moustache, and smiled enigmatically. It was a clownish thing to do. Half a dozen children screamed applause, and an old man came and shook me by the hand and said that he had always liked Cossacks . . . *Vive* Stalin, *vive* Lenin and Trotsky, *vive* General de Gaulle and long live the Tsar. I got out of the village quickly, fearing a diplomatic incident. My driver was much impressed.

He was an extraordinary man and his name was Jesse Kupchin. I found him by a remarkable stroke of luck—the kind of heaven-sent luck that causes a starving man to find a five-pound note in the street. Such things do not happen often in the course of a lifetime. Imagine a lean, dark, keen-looking young man with a certain wildness in his eye, carrying ammunition without weapons; wearing on top of his head an absurd little fur-lined cap shaped like nothing in this world, and on his bosom an Air Force badge and a Chaplain's badge. We jolted together in that jeep across seven hundred miles of battered road. At least two hundred of these miles were through forbidden territory. I told Kupchin on one occasion that, unless my instincts were deceiving me, we were riding through an enemy minefield. He replied: "Dat's okay, boss. I'm regular, see? And you're Aces, see? So dat's okay 'cause we're pals—see?"

I discovered him one dawn in the Place de l'Opera. He was a courier and had to get transportation to Houdan. He pronounced this place-name *Oh-damn*. I had been told that I was to accompany him: he knew all the answers, and would show

me the way. North France was an open book to him. He was a Brooklyner of Brooklyn.

In about forty-five seconds Kupchin and I struck up a friendship. I mentioned that I was thirsty and wanted a drink of water. He rushed straight into the Hotel Scribe, woke up the manager and said: "Lissen, de boss wants a drink, see?" A little later after he had walked me up to the Eiffel Tower, I asked him where the devil was his car. He said he did not have one . . . that we had to trust to luck for transportation, and that we had come this way simply because he wanted to have a look at the Eiffel Tower. Then I said that this was no way to get to Houdan and things ought to be better organised. Seeing a jeep parked and unattended I got into it and said to Kupchin: "Let's go."

"Dis ain't your jeep?"

"I'll buy it after the war," I said, "meanwhile, let's try it out."

Kupchin said: "I never stole a jeep before."

"You've got to start sometime," I said, "and besides it's I who am stealing this, not you."

"Geez, dis is going to be good, boss," said Kupchin and drove off.

We scattered a cluster of bicycles like a cloud of gnats. "Incidentally, have you ever driven a jeep before?"

"Boss, I was a taxi-driver in New York, ain't that enough?"

"How do you like France?"

"It's swell, chief, but dey can't talk proper."

Near the Boulevard Ornano—everything seems to happen to me near the Boulevard Ornano—the jeep coughed and stopped.

Kupchin lifted the bonnet and raised a dirty disturbed face. "Boss, de distributor's bust. Dat's loused us up."

By this time I was feeling not unlike Dillinger on the run. I swear I started talking out of the corner of my mouth: "Distributor? Bust? Then get another."

"Okay, chief."

We looked about and found another jeep outside a small hotel. The owner was looking. I said to Kupchin: "Keep right

behind me so that I cover you, and when I waggle my fingers you grab the distributor out of that jeep."

"Do dat in five seconds."

The driver of the other jeep was shaving at a ground-floor window. I said hello, and he grunted. I asked him if he had seen the sights of Paris and he replied that he had not—no sights worth seeing anyway, only a lot of god-damned buildings. Then I stared fixedly at a window high up in a house on the corner.

"Wheee!" I said. He put down his razor instantly and followed the direction of my gaze.

"What? What? I don't see nothing," he said.

"Look carefully," I said and twiddled my fingers behind me, while with the other hand I pointed urgently upwards.

"I still can't see nothing."

I heard a dull clank behind me. "You must have missed it," I said.

"What was it anyhow?"

"Oh, you ought to have seen."

Then Kupchin came up winking and nodding at me in a manner that would have aroused suspicion in a blind baby. I dragged him away. He walked behind me with his hands in his pockets. Any decent policeman would have shot us on sight we had such an air of ferocity and guilt. But we clapped on the new distributor and rushed away at mad speed. "Are you sure you know the way to Houdan?" I asked.

"You bet," said Kupchin, getting sixty miles an hour out of the jeep. He had not the faintest idea, but was working on the general principle that, if you keep driving round and round long enough you must ultimately get somewhere in a jeep.

We got to Versailles.

"Dat's a swell place," said Kupchin, "it's some sort of palace, or sumpn, see? De King of France lives dere. See?"

"Jesse, you sure know your way about."

"Chief, I told ya, I'm regular."

"Regular's the word, Jesse."

"And Chief—you're aces, see? Just give me orders. See?"

"Right: take me straight on to Rennes."

"Rennes? Sure——" He stepped on the gas and the jeep bounded like a kangaroo.

"I warn you, it's a hell of a distance to drive a jeep, Jesse. But on the other hand, you see the world that way."

"Chief, if *you* wanna go to Rennes, *I* wanna go to Rennes."

I sat back, twirling my moustache. We ran into a rainstorm. "Jesse," I said, "won't you get wet?" He had no tunic.

"Sure," he said, "but I'm regular, see? I might care about getting wet or I might not care about getting wet: it depends on the company I'm in, see? Wit you, Chief, it's okay."

"It's my fault: I ought to have pinched a jeep with a top on it."

"Can't tink of everything, Chief."

Fourteen hours later, plastered with mud from head to foot and sitting in a deep pool of dirty water, we rolled like a water-cart into the ancient town of Rennes.

It was there that the one-armed veteran unearthed the bottle of fire-water. Looking at Kupchin and me he said, with deep feeling: "Ah, what true Democracy! In your armies it is plain that officers of high rank make no *chi-chi* with ribbon and lace, but sit in good fellowship with private soldiers. Drink up and have another!"

I translated this to Kupchin, who said to the one-armed man: "We. . . . Regular . . . see?" He thought he was speaking tolerably fluent French.

So the gentlemen in the Officers' Quarters on the Ninth Air Force field were astounded at the appearance of two scarecrows, asking for a cup of coffee and a tin of insecticide.

As I was sitting at the Colonel's table I heard the voice of Kupchin, three yards away, raised in a war-cry: "I'm regular, see? And I only take orders from one guy, see? Dat's de Chief, see? And I'm telling ya—he's Aces, see?"

They looked at him and wondered who he was, this fierce, lean, glaring little man with the Air Force Badge, the Padre's Cross, and no tunic. He said: "I wear dis Air Force Badge because I got admiration for dose boys. And I wear dis Chaplain's cross for prayin', see? Look—I was here on D-Day,

see?'' The Colonel—Laughlin, the man who sank the cruiser at Brest—rubbed weary eyes and said nothing.

I flew away next morning early, and heard, later, that Kupchin, having looked for me all over the place, filled up the faithful jeep with petrol and oil, and drove disconsolately away back along the wet roads to Houdan.

In 1945, when I was in New York, I tried to find Kupchin. I wanted to buy him a drink. But the weary, yawning Old World seemed to have swallowed him.

I have an affection for that man.

NINE

The Affaire Cinderella

LOUSY from head to foot, flea-bitten about the wrists and ankles, tired to the bone, guilty to the soul, and looking as if I had been gnawed by dogs, I get back to England at last, knowing that I have let myself in for God knows what penalties. Nothing much happens: the War Department withdraws my Accreditation. (They re-accredited me later, and gave me the blue card of the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force.) I have got off lightly—I have got away with worse than murder. Unpremeditated murder will get me a mere twenty years.

But I am demonstrably guilty of sneaking out of the British Isles without a Permit, travelling as an unauthorised person in a military aircraft, landing in a Certain Zone, flying over Forbidden Territory in another Military Aircraft, landing without authority on a Military Airfield, misdirecting a Colonel, travelling without authority in an Army Transport, insinuating myself into a Theatre of Operations, carrying arms as a Non-Combatant, firing a couple of shots as such, stealing a Jeep, kidnapping a Courier, immobilising another Jeep, stealing oil and petrol, falsifying Orders, misappropriating bandages, stowing away on a Military Aircraft, entering Great Britain without a permit, slinking past Camp Guards, riding as an Unauthorised Person in a Military Vehicle, and misbehaving in general.

I am informed that I cannot legally be hanged or shot, but that I may consider myself lucky if I get off with three hundred years in San Quentin. My record being what it is, I may be paroled after two hundred years; and then the British Authorities will get me.

So I say as little as possible.

But somewhere a drum throbs. South of the River a listener-

by-night picks up the rhythm. A signal-fire burns on the Surrey side of the Thames and, as dawn breaks, peculiar puffs of smoke make dots and dashes on the horizon near Surbiton. Another tom-tom beats.

I get off the train at Brookwood, where I have fled to the shadow of Miss Wilkinson's wing. I reach the bar. Lance-Corporal Punishment and Meaty look at me, exchange glances, shake their heads and whistle.

"What a chancer!" says Punishment. "Eh, Meaty?'

"Eh, Punishment?" says Meaty. "What a chancer!"

"Chanced 'is little arm again, didn't 'e, Meaty?"

"Didn't 'e, eh, Punishment?"

"I always said 'e'd overdo it, Meaty—didn't I?"

"Punishment, you take the bloody words out of my mouth."

"*Your* mouth, Meaty? What *am* I? On dust-'ole fatigue?"

"No, but no jokes. Poor old Gerald. Eh, Punishment?"

"Done it this time, eh, Meaty?"

"Be sort of a pity, kind of, to lose poor old Gerald, won't it?"

"I mean to say—pinching bloody aeroplanes. Eh, Meaty?"

"Pinching bloody aeroplanes is chancing your arm, Punishment. But bloody well abducting generals is coming the old soldier. Eh?"

"Eh, Meaty?"

"Eh, Punishment?"

I ask: "What is all this?"

Meaty says: "Look—a straight face like Buster Keaton. Eh? Christ, what an actor. Eh, Punishment?"

"What d'you know about that, eh, Meaty?"

"Oh," says Meaty, "if old Gerald got away with that pig-swill picquet, he'd get away with the three-card trick."

I protest: "I deserted my post whilst on active service, in good faith! I stand guard over the pig-buckets," I say, "and when I ask how long this Guard lasts, somebody tells me I knock off at six sharp. At six sharp I knock off——"

"He knocks off," says Meaty, writhing with glee at the recollection. "Whilst on active service, old Gerald knocks off. So there's a new subaltern on Picquet. Should of reported a

sentry absent. Forgot to report it. Asked 'Anything unusual?' —wrote 'No'. Remembered later, didn't like to put it down: old Gerald got away with it. Good ole Gerald! What a chancer! Stuff me gently, what a chancer!"

Lance-Corporal Punishment says: "Ah, but what about *Cinderella*, eh?"

"Ah," says Meaty, "old Gerald chanced his little arm once too often there."

I shout: "I chanced nothing!"

Meaty soothes me with a poke in the ribs. "That's right, that's right," he says. "Eh, Punishment?"

They howl with laughter.

"Old Peck Harris *Cinderellaed* poor old Gerald," says Lance-Corporal Punishment. "Eh, Meaty?"

"Old Peck Harris pantomimed poor old Gerald, didn't 'e, eh, Punishment?"

The Lance-Corporal pretends to be serious. "Ah, but seven days' C.B. was stiff for missing one parade," he says.

"It was too bloody bad," says Meaty, with a straight face.

"Fiendish."

"Bloody horrible."

"I cried my eyes out, Meaty. Didn't you?"

"I couldn't sleep a wink all night when old Gerald got that seven days—could you, Punishment?"

"I bloody near blew my brains out, Meaty."

"So did I, Punishment."

Meaty chokes as he says: "Old Gerald's face! Black with rage!"

"White with emotion!"

"Purple as an abalebtic stroke!"

"Said 'e was doing 'is duty—eh, Meaty?"

"I never see a man look so green about the gills, did you, Punishment?"

"Only once, on the boat to Africa, when Monypenny brought up a ball of paper."

"Paper? What d'you mean paper?"

"Old Monypenny's wife fluffed about old Monypenny carrying on with a greasy-headed tart that wrote old Monypenny

a letter. Monypenny swallowed the letter. Three days later it came up, when we was in mid-ocean. Christ, that man could vomit! Was Monypenny green! Green as bloody grass. And when that letter come up—on raggety-edge Woolworth writing-paper—*plop*, with yesterday's rissole!"

"Just like old Gerald."

"Livid," says Meaty, with relish, "livid. Old Gerald was livid when 'e come out of Number Six Company Office. Livid."

"If old Gerald could get away with *Cinderella*, 'e could get away with the Crown-bloody-Jewels."

"But I mean to say," says Meaty. "Kidnapping Generals. No. Enough is as good as a feast."

"Better."

"As good as."

I drum my balled hands on the bar and shout: "I didn't kidnap a General! I didn't get away with Cinderella!"

"Next thing, old Gerald 'll say 'e didn't do *Cinderella*," says Meaty, spluttering. "Eh, Punishment?"

"Listen . . ." I say.

* * * * *

I shall never hear the end of that wretched pantomime "Cinderella". Whenever I meet a soldier whom I happen to know, the conversation always doubles back to it. I ask them about Africa, and they tell me about "Cinderella". I ask them about their wounds, their wives, and medals, or their families—and they tell me about "Cinderella".

The other day, Major Elwes wrote to me from Germany saying that he was engaged in correcting the outlook of German Youths, and that he proposed to put on "Cinderella"—my variation of "Cinderella".

I met him when he came home on leave and the first thing he said was: "What fun we had with 'Cinderella'."

As Joad might say—it depends what you mean by fun.

It happened in the winter of 1940 when I was at the Training Battalion. I was told that Sergeant Leeming wanted to see me. I wondered what I had done wrong this time, and went to the Post Bunk over which Leeming presided. He was a

mild sort of Sergeant, an old regular Guardsman. His hobby was collecting pine-cones, painting them red and gold, sticking them on bits of wire, and calling them artificial flowers. The Post Bunk was full of the things. He had a bit of an artistic turn, had Tommy Leeming: he also tinted snapshots of his friends making the lips very red, the eyes very blue, and the cheeks very blushing.

He said to me: "I hear you're a writer, Mr. Kersh?"

I answered guardedly: "It depends what you mean by writer."

Leeming said: "Captain Elwes wants to put on a pantomime this Christmas. He is in favour of *Cinderella*. I prefer *The Babes in the Wood* myself. What do you think?"

My professional interest being aroused, I said that I was in favour of *Aladdin*. One could have fun with *Aladdin*. But on the other hand we could do a good deal with *The Babes in the Wood*. What a wicked uncle the Drill-Sergeant would make! Yet again, "Cinderella" was by no means a bad idea since that ill-treated girl had been put to swabbing fatigues like any Guardsman.

Leeming said: "Well, Mr. Kersh, do you think you would like to re-write the whole thing?"

"In prose or verse?" I asked, intending to be funny.

He replied: "In verse, Mr. Kersh, rhyming verse, you understand? Not this new sort of verse, *rhyming* verse—you know what I mean."

"And when do you want it?"

"Well, well in a few days because there is the casting to do and rehearsals."

"I see. I'm to write 'Cinderella', brought up-to-date, in rhyming couplets—about twenty thousand words of verse—in a few days; in the few minutes I get off between parades, is that it?"

"Well, perhaps Captain Elwes could get you excused one or two parades."

I said: "Look here. I'm on Bren Gun now and I've done it all before. I have fired my course and I can take a Bren gun to pieces and put it together again blindfolded, standing on my

head with one hand tied and drinking a bottle of beer at the same time. Get me off a few musketry parades, let me use one of the office typewriters, and you shall have a Cinderella that will make Guards' history."

Captain Elwes spoke to Mr. Grenville, the Musketry Officer, and I was let off musketry parades, given the use of a typewriter in Headquarters Company Office, and told to go ahead and write "Cinderella" in verse at the double. As a matter of fact, I had all sorts of brilliant ideas. The Ugly Sisters were to be two ugly Guardsmen, of course, ordering Cinderella about in the manner of Sergeants on Parade:

Wash the coals!
Dust the ham!
Stuff up mouse-holes!
Boil the jam!
Polish the plate!
Shine the grate!
There's the blacking!
(They hurl a pot at her)
Get cracking!
Mow the grass!
Kill the bugs!
Polish the brass!
Shake the rugs!

And so on. Then, of course, a kitchen cat who spoke like a Chicago gangster and a lady-like mouse. (In the end, the mouse calls the cat's bluff, and gives him a good hiding in a sensational fight scene.)

The mouse spoke in prose and said things like:

Love is an illusion.
It has all the symptoms of a disease.
Love begins with a pain in the chest,
an empty sensation in the abdomen,
nervous instability, tendency to
hysteria, insomnia, loss of appetite,
and hallucinations.

It makes you hold your breath, it
leaves you holding the baby.
Love is horrible . . .
I have had three hundred babies and
I know, my dear . . .

My Mickey! But my dear, what a mouse.
Every inch a rodent . . .
I fell into his paws, we were one,
united in the shadow of the cheese.
I was drunk with ecstasy.
To me, he was more beautiful than
Gary Cooper, he had a snout that
quivered, his kisses were as insidious
as Liverpool Virus but he turned out to
be a rat . . .

Next day I saw him offering some of
that self-same cheese to a slut with
pale whiskers. My tears were in vain.
Soon I saw before me the fruit of my
sin—eleven of them, all shapes and
sizes, squeaking their poor heads off
for nourishment.
Love is over-rated.

In any production of "Cinderella", there must be a Butcher's Boy, who is hopelessly in love with the heroine. We discovered a local Mickey Rooney, a drummer named Alf Reed, for whom I wrote such lyrical lines as these:

'er 'earts's as sweet
as sausage meat!
'er eyes are clear
as pre-war beer.
There ain't no scrag-end
to 'er neck
And she 'as made my life a
wreck.

I love 'er liver,
Love 'er lights,
All my days and all my nights . . .
love 'er lips like cherries ripe;
love 'er trotters; love 'er tripe,
love 'er sweetbreads, love 'er brain—
love 'er till I writhe in pain!
Though a butcher, yearnings nark us
How I love 'er 'ole damn carcass!

When I come to think of it, it was pretty good. The back-chat of the Ugly Sisters was, although I say so, masterly; and there was something like a ballet too, when they were getting ready to go to the Ball, spraying scent from an enormous syringe and belabouring each other with powder-puffs.

Instead of a Fairy Godmother, I put in a wicked old crone, rouged and powdered, and dressed like a demi-mondaine of the 1870's. She was Lady Luck, fickle, false—the capricious kept woman of Destiny; crafty Luck, *á votre service!*

Like most women I favour cads,
salauds, knaves and adventurers!
But like most women I settle
down in the bed of the dull,
steady man in the end . . .
I am a femme fatale.
Like all such, I am perverse
and frigid.
It is impossible for me to be
faithful to one man for long
because something drives me on
to seek new thrills. . . .
The planets are my dice!
The spinning cosmos is my
roulette wheel!
The infinite night is my
table-cloth!
Nations hang on my whims,

All the fortunes of war are
suspended on the see-saw!
Yet I am here.
What for?
To decide whether a snotty
skivvy goes to a dance.
That is just like me. . . .

She harangues the audience, crotchety old tart, waving her black walking-stick, and philosophising. Above her there is a higher power, she says. What is good luck? What is bad luck? God knows. Little Red Riding Hood grew up and married the Sergeant-Major. Then it might have been luckier for her to have gone to an early rest in the wolf's guts. Perhaps Cinderella, here, might do better to marry the Butcher Boy . . . well, well, well!

Lady Luck, the Fairy Godmother of the past, helps Cinderella to get to the ball. We couldn't run to a coach, white mice and a pumpkin, so I had the old girl waving her wand and causing certain fortuitous mishaps. An evening dress directed to the lady next door is delivered to Cinderella by mistake. A man offers her a lift in a Rolls-Royce. Cinderella gets to the ball.

At the Palace, the barman is trying to invent a new cocktail. He mixes gruesome and unheard-of liquors. But Lady Luck turns up and puts a strange bottle into his hands. The contents of this bottle, added to the mixture, will have, as she explains, a queer effect. It will make everybody who drinks it say exactly what is in his mind. Lady Luck herself takes a sip of it and becomes as drunk as a coot. The Major-Domo, swallowing a glassful, falls unconscious and is dragged out. Butch, the Butcher Boy, takes his place. Father Time comes in, dragging his corney old feet and singing:

King and Clown I mow 'em down.
Mow 'em down, mow 'em down.
King and Clown I mow 'em down,
My fair lady . . .

He too takes a glass, shrieks *Wow* and rushes out yelling; and then everything speeds up. The guests come in: Admiral Epsom, that uproarious old Salt; General Apathy of the High Command, Count Chi-Chickens, the Japanese Imperialist, Don Cascara Sagrada, the Man Behind Franco's Purge, Vuarien of Vichy—that notorious Parisite. . . .

The Ugly Sisters rush about husband-hunting. Cinderella and the Prince fall in love. But then there enters Mrs. Milk, of Cowes and Cannes, and she recognises Cinderella's dress as the dress that should have been delivered to her. But Cinderella hides, the lights are dimmed, and the Prince announces a special Christmas Pantomime which he is putting on for the benefit of his guests.

This was positively Shakespearian—a pantomime within a pantomime. "The Babes in the Wood" in the middle of "Cinderella". It had never been done before. It was called "The Boobs in the Wood". The Uncle was Stalin, played by Gerald Kersh—his first and last appearance upon that or any other stage—and the Boobs were Hitler and Mussolini.

The Boobs came to a ridiculous end. Uncle Joe Kersh strides off laughing in a strong Georgian accent. Mrs. Milk sees Cinderella and pursues her off-stage with the intention of tearing the dress off her back.

After that, the Cat and the Mouse having fought it out, and the slipper having found its proper foot, the thing ends happily, and the Mouse takes the credit for it all.

It was a monumental work, and I preserve a copy of it in my archives.

* * * * *

But just as I was in the middle of the ballroom scene I was told that I was wanted on Company Orders. I was marched in and charged with having missed a Musketry Parade. About Captain Harris there was an air of doom. Like the man in the song, I felt chills running up and down my spine.

He said: "You, Kersh—very cleverly as no doubt you thought—have been playing one officer off against another in order to get off your musketry parades."

I said: "But, sir, it was understood that I was excused Musketry Parades to write 'Cinderella'."

"I know nothing about 'Cinderella', and I am going to make an example of you. *Cinderella! Cinderella!*"

There was a steely inevitability in his voice: I thought I knew then how a condemned man feels when, standing rigid on the gallows, he hears the quiet grating of the sliding bolt.

I said: "I thought I was excused that Musketry Parade, sir. I never wished to do more than my duty."

(I had meant to say *less* than my duty.)

"Seven days C.B.," said Captain Harris.

I did my seven days.

Our Company was what they call in Waiting that week: that is to say, we were doing fatigue duty for the Battalion. I had to peel potatoes over in the Sergeants' Mess Cook House; at the same time, I had to turn up, spotless and elegant, for extra drills. Now to get from my cook-house to my hut, and to take off my denim overalls, and get into my best suit and my web-equipment and be back on to the Square in time for my punishment drill, was next door to one to physical impossibility. The men in my hut knew it, and they knew that I had been punished by mistake. They commiserated with me in my absence. But a glum old Sergeant said: "You can stick your pity where the monkey puts his nuts. Bloody fine lot of Guardsmen you are! In my time, when a pal dropped a big'un through no fault of his own, we mucked in. We saw he got on parade without being pushed. We mucked in. Come on, muck in, muck in!"

And whenever I arrived, breathless and streaming with sweat from the cookhouse, somebody was always there with a pair of boots beautifully polished, a set of web-equipment impeccably cleaned, and a best suit of battle-dress ready and waiting. And so I got through my fourteen extra parades by the skin of my teeth. Quietly, inconspicuously, thirty well-disciplined men united to help me, since they regarded me as the victim of a misunderstanding.

Captain Elwes explained the matter. So, after I had "paid

off'' my seven days I got my Privileges back. What these Privileges were, I never discovered. But I got them back.

* * * * *

I was officially ordered to work, for the next seven days, on ''Cinderella''. I had begun to wish that she had never been born; that she had died as she had lived, alone by the ashes.

''The Babes in the Wood'' might have turned out better. . . .

* * * * *

Meanwhile the contagion of the Stage had been spreading about the Camp. The men in the caste were behaving like the dears and the darlings in the back bar of the Café Royal. Corporals were talking about their Art, a Lance-Sergeant had hysterics, a drummer, emotionally exhausted, punched another drummer on the nose for saying that he didn't look like a Visiting Diplomat. One of the A.T.S. in the chorus (the one to whom Sergeant Leeming kept saying: ''How much would you take to haunt a house'') developed a species of nervous tic. Captain Elwes lost two stone in weight, and one of his front teeth fell out. The typists in Headquarters Company Office talked of nothing but the Stage. Butch asked me if I knew anybody in Hollywood. Lady Luck had an attack of the screaming meemies. The man who was to play Prince Charming shaved off his moustache and suddenly appeared to be pale and naked as a maggot; lay awake at night worrying, and nearly had a breakdown. Sergeant Benson, who played the barman, developed a tendency to call everybody ''old boy''.

If it had gone on much longer, we might have lost the war.

* * * * *

By the time we got around to the Opening Night, we were a bundle of nerves.

One of the men who had nothing to do but walk across the stage in a green swallow-tail coat was sick all over the patent-leather boots of another man who had nothing to do but stand in the background and grin; and this grinning man, disorganised, forgot his line which consisted of an ejaculation

"Hey!" For the life of him, he could not remember this "Hey"; said *"Hi"* in an uncertain voice, and then went and cried his eyes out in the dressing-room he was sharing with seventeen other pantomimists.

One of the young ladies had palpitations. Another, overcome by emotion, left a little puddle on her chair, and was only half-conscious of it. Butch burst into tears twice during the first act. His voice, he said, had cracked; it was a case of emotional crisis. The two Ugly Sisters took the thing too seriously and had a quarrel in real earnest: one of them had spoiled the other's double-take. The Cat complained that the Mouse had stolen a gag; the Mouse nearly scratched the Cat's eyes out. Captain Elwes was here, there, and everywhere. With his left hand, he was adjusting Cinderella's wig; with his right hand he was pencilling lines on somebody's face. He had hired costumes from Nathan's, and we were all dressed up. I procured a bottle of whisky and distributed it in teaspoonfuls to the caste. My intention had been to save a third of the bottle for myself; but I turned my back for half a minute to comfort a weeping Sergeant, and then, looking round, found the bottle empty. This was no joke: I was not far from a nervous breakdown on my own account.

The first performance achieved, the entire caste danced to the tune of "Roll Out the Barrel". Colonel Wynne-Finch rose and thanked me in full view of the audience. I was told that I ought to make a speech, but did not know how to make a speech. I giggled, picked my nose, tore off my false moustache, shuffled my feet, and made a perfect fool of myself.

"Cinderella" had a record run. It ran for three nights. Several good Guardsmen were ruined for life, and Sergeant Leeming came to a dreadful end. He had always been a formidable man at Camp concerts: now he thought he could get away with anything. Later, he tried to put on an act in which "God Save the King" was mixed up with "Pop Goes the Weasel".

They broke him. He had a nervous breakdown, got his ticket, and is now a Postman.

The theatre never was any good to man or beast.

What happened to Butch? I don't know. The last time I heard of him, he was somewhere on the East Coast. My informant said that he was as good a drummer as ever, but had acquired a habit of clutching at his heart and singing. When spoken to harshly, the man said, Butch burst into tears. Lady Luck went away to be an Officer. Cinderella, rumour has it, is happily married.

This is the whole truth of the Affaire Cinderella.

TEN

As You Were

THAT was in 1940—a long time ago. Boys have become men since then, and cities have been blown to dust. And here am I back in the "Brookwood Hotel", in the saloon bar. It is a bar like any other railway hotel bar, yet the Wilkinsons' personalities have taken hold of it. George, leaping from beer-pump to beer-pump and pouring out an incomprehensible gallimaufry of outlandish toasts, juggles pint-size glasses: at intervals, he talks metaphysics in a nicotinous baritone.

In the spacious part of the evening, before the mob thunders in, George and I exchange badinage with Dickson the Undertaker, Field the Butcher, and Ryan, who is a functionary in the great cemetery across the road. Dickson, especially, is a persecuted man: everyone picks on him. He says: "Your very good health," lifting a glass.

One of us says: "I wonder if he means that. He's looking us up and down."

"Aaah!" says George, clutching his throat.

"Shop!" shouts Field. "Measure him up, Dickson!"

"No, joking aside," says someone else. "How's business?"

This is calculated to start something.

A certain bystander says: "All nailed down?"

Another giggles: "All boxed up?"

"Under the hammer?" says a third.

"Retrenching," says Field.

"Life with the lid *on*," says George. "Give me strength to bear it!"

Dickson remains calm. One of us pretends to feel George's arm, and says: "Poor old George. Treat him right. Not too tight under the arms. Give George a good bit of oak."

George says: "Some of these coffins—wear them for six months, and your elbows are sticking out."

"Cheers," says the Undertaker, drinking.

An old regular says: "I'm browned off. You can lay me out and screw me down. . . ."

"As if it matters what happens to your carcass," says George. " 'Dust unto dust, and under dust to lie . . .' "

"When your time comes you'll sing a different tune," says a newcomer.

Up jumps the Man With The Dictionary, like a hammer in a piano. "Can't sing tunes when time comes," he says.

At this, the argument starts. Everybody talks at once.

"How d'you know you can't?" asks Field.

"Define me *Sing*," says the Newcomer.

"To utter words in tuneful succession in accordance with a set tune," says the Man With The Dictionary.

"Ever hear a dead man sing?" asks an Artilleryman.

"Depends what you mean by Dead," says the Man With The Dictionary. "Do you mean 'ceased to live'?"

"Say I do mean that," says the Newcomer, "so what?"

"Right," says the Man With The Dictionary. "What d'you mean by 'cease'?"

"Okay. Define 'to live'."

"To live is to be alive."

"Give me an example," says a total stranger.

"You," says the Man With The Dictionary. "You're alive. Is that or is that not a fact?"

The total stranger, sensing a trap, says: "For the sake of argument, yes. Alright."

The Artilleryman, who has been biting his nails, says: "You say 'ceased to live'. What do you mean by 'cease'?"

The Man With The Dictionary says: "Bring to an end; stop doing. For example: 'Cease fire'. You stop firing. Get it?"

"I get 'cease'. What about 'fire'?" asks the total stranger. "Define me 'fire'."

"Fire is the active principle operative in combustion," says the Man With The Dictionary.

"Life," says Field, "the thing is Life. What's it got to do with Life?"

"It depends what you mean by 'Life'," says the total stranger.

The Man With The Dictionary has it pat: "State of ceaseless change and functional activity peculiar to organised matter, and especially to the portion of it constituting an animal or plant before death!"

"Ah, but how d'you mean, 'death'?" asks Dickson.

"Ceasing to be."

"It depends what you mean by 'be'," says the total stranger.

"Exist," says the Man With The Dictionary. "Exist, occur, live."

"Okay. But what do you mean by 'live'?"

The Man With The Dictionary explains: "To have life. To be alive."

The Artilleryman, who is a thorough kind of man, asks: "May I? You said 'Functional Activity'. What d'you mean by that?"

The Man With The Dictionary sighs. But by God's grace Lance-Corporal Punishment shouts: "Oh, talking about activity! You ought to have seen old Gerald when old Peck Harris give him them seven days."

"Livid with horror," says Meaty.

"Blue with fright!"

"White as a sheet, eh, Punishment?"

"Red as a beetroot, Meaty—eh?"

END