



Victory, William Faulkner

Victory

I

THOSE WHO SAW him descend from the Marseilles express in the Gare de Lyon on that damp morning saw a tall man, a little stiff, with a bronze face and spike-ended moustaches and almost white hair. "A milord," they said, remarking his sober, correct suit, his correct stick correctly carried, his sparse baggage; "a milord military.

But there is something the matter with his eyes." But there was something the matter with the eyes of so many people, men and women too, in Europe since four years now. So they watched him go on, a half head above the French people, with his gaunt, strained eyes, his air strained, purposeful, and at the same time assured, and vanish into a cab, thinking, if they thought about him any more at all: "You will see him in the Legation offices or at a table on the Boulevards, or in a carriage with the fine English ladies in the Bois." That was all.

And those who saw him descend from the same cab at the Gare du Nord, they thought: "This milord returns home by haste"; the porter who took his bag wished him good morning in fair English and told him that he was going to England, receiving for reply the English glare which the porter perhaps expected, and put him into a first-class carriage of the boat train.

And that was all, too. That was all right, too, even when he got down at Amiens. English milords even did that.

It was only at Rozières that they began to look at him and after him when he had passed.

In a hired car he jounced through a gutted street between gutted walls rising undooed and unwindowed in jagged shards in the dusk. The street was partially blocked now and then by toppled walls, with masses of masonry in the cracks of which a thin grass sprouted, passing empty and ruined courtyards, in one of which a tank, mute and tilted, rusted among rank weeds.

This was Rozières, but he didn't stop there because no one lived there and there was no place to stop.

So the car jounced and crept on out of the ruin. The muddy and unpaved street entered a village of harsh new brick and sheet iron and tarred paper roofs made in America, and halted before the tallest house. It was flush with the street: a brick wall with a door and one window of American glass bearing the word RESTAURANT. "Here you are, sir," the driver said.

The passenger descended, with his bag, his ulster, his correct stick. He entered a biggish, bare room chill with new plaster. It contained a billiard table at which three men played. One of the men looked over his shoulder and said,

"Bonjour, monsieur."

The newcomer did not reply at all. He crossed the room, passing the new zinc bar, and approached an open door beyond which a woman of any age around forty looked at him above the sewing on her lap.

“Bong jour, madame,” he said. “Dormie, madame?”

The woman gave him a single glance, brief, still. “C’est ça, monsieur,” she said, rising.

“Dormie, madame?” he said, raising his voice a little, his spiked moustache beaded a little with rain, dampness beneath his strained yet assured eyes. “Dormie, madame?”

“Bon, monsieur,” the woman said. “Bon. Bon.”

“Dor—” the newcomer essayed again. Someone touched his arm. It was the man who had spoken from the billiard table when he entered.

“Regardez, Monsieur l’Anglais,” the man said. He took the bag from the newcomer and swept his other arm toward the ceiling. “La chambre.” He touched the traveler again; he laid his face upon his palm and closed his eyes; he gestured again toward the ceiling and went on across the room toward a wooden stair without balustrade.

As he passed the bar he took a candle stub from it and lit the candle (the big room and the room beyond the door where the woman sat were lighted by single bulbs hanging naked on cords from the ceiling) at the foot of the stair.

They mounted, thrusting their fitful shadows before them, into a corridor narrow, chill, and damp as a tomb. The walls were of rough plaster not yet dried. The floor was of pine, without carpet or paint. Cheap metal doorknobs glinted symmetrically. The sluggish air lay like a hand upon the very candle.

They entered a room, smelling too of wet plaster, and even colder than the corridor; a sluggish chill almost substantial, as though the atmosphere between the dead and recent walls were congealing, like a patent three-minute dessert. The room contained a bed, a dresser, a chair, a washstand; the bowl, pitcher, and slop basin were of American enamel.

When the traveler touched the bed the linen was soundless under his hand, coarse as sacking, clinging damply to the hand in the dead air in which their two breathings vaporized in the faint candle.

The host set the candle on the dresser. "Dîner, monsieur?" he said. The traveler stared down at the host, incongruous in his correct clothes, with that strained air. His waxed moustaches gleamed like faint bayonets above a cravat striped with what the host could not have known was the patterned coloring of a Scottish regiment. "Manger?" the host shouted. He chewed violently in pantomime. "Manger?" he roared, his shadow aping his gesture as he pointed toward the floor.

"Yes," the traveler shouted in reply, their faces not a yard apart. "Yes. Yes."

The host nodded violently, pointed toward the floor and then at the door, nodded again, went out.

He returned below stairs. He found the woman now in the kitchen, at the stove. "He will eat," the host said.

"I knew that," the woman said.

"You would think that they would stay at home," the host said. "I'm glad I was not born of a race doomed to a place too small to hold all of us at one time."

“Perhaps he has come to look at the war,” the woman said.

“Of course he has,” the host said. “But he should have come four years ago. That was when we needed Englishmen to look at the war.”

“He was too old to come then,” the woman said. “Didn’t you see his hair?”

“Then let him stay at home now,” the host said. “He is no younger.”

“He may have come to look at the grave of his son,” the woman said.

“Him?” the host said. “That one? He is too cold to ever have had a son.”

“Perhaps you are right,” the woman said. “After all, that is his affair. It is our affair only that he has money.”

“That’s right,” the host said. “A man in this business, he cannot pick and choose.”

“He can pick, though,” the woman said.

“Good!” the host said. “Very good! Pick! That is worth telling to the English himself.”

“Why not let him find it out when he leaves?”

“Good!” the host said. “Better still. Good! Oh, good!”

“Attention,” the woman said. “Here he comes.”

They listened to the traveler’s steady tramp, then he appeared in the door. Against the lesser light of the bigger room, his dark face and his white hair looked like a kodak negative.

The table was set for two, a carafe of red wine at each place.

As the traveller seated himself, the other guest entered and took the other place — a small, rat-faced man who appeared at first glance to have no eyelashes at all. He tucked his napkin into the top of his vest and took up the soup ladle (the tureen sat between them in the center of the table) and offered it to the other. “Faites-moi l’honneur, monsieur,” he said. The other bowed stiffly; accepting the ladle.

The small man lifted the cover from the tureen. “Vous venez examiner ce scène de nos victoires, monsieur?” he said, helping himself in turn. The other looked at him. “Monsieur l’Anglais a peut-être beaucoup des amis qui sont tombés en voisinage.”

“A speak no French,” the other said, eating.

The little man did not eat. He held his yet unwetted spoon above his bowl. “What agreeable for me. I speak the Engleesh. I am Suisse, me. I speak all langue.” The other did not reply. He ate steadily, not fast. “You ave return to see the grave of your galant countreemans, eh? You ave son here, perhaps, eh?”

“No,” the other said. He did not cease to eat.

“No?” The other finished his soup and set the bowl aside. He drank some wine. “What deplorable, that man who ave,” the Swiss said. “But it is finish now. Not?” Again the other said nothing. He was not looking at the Swiss. He did not seem to be looking at anything, with his gaunt eyes, his rigid moustaches upon his rigid face. “Me, I suffer too. All suffer. But I tell myself, What would you? It is war.”

Still the other did not answer. He ate steadily, deliberately, and finished his meal and rose and left the room. He lit his candle at the bar, where the host, leaning beside a second man in a corduroy coat, lifted a glass slightly to him. "Au bon dormir, monsieur," the host said.

The traveler looked at the host, his face gaunt in the candle, his waxed moustaches rigid, his eyes in shadow. "What?" he said. "Yes. Yes." He turned and went toward the stairs. The two men at the bar watched him, his stiff, deliberate back.

Ever since the train left Arras, the two women had been watching the other occupant of the carriage. It was a third-class carriage because no first-class trains ran on this line, and they sat with their shawled heads and the thick, still hands of peasants folded upon closed baskets on their laps, watching the man sitting opposite them — the white distinction of the hair against the bronze, gaunt face, the needles of the moustaches, the foreign-made suit and the stick — on a worn and greasy wooden seat, looking out the window.

At first they had just looked, ready to avert their gaze, but as the man did not seem to be aware of them, they began to whisper quietly to one another behind their hands. But the man did not seem to notice this, so they soon were talking in undertone, watching with bright, alert, curious eyes the stiff, incongruous figure leaning a little forward on the stick, looking out a foul window beyond which there was nothing to see save an occasional shattered road and man-high stump of shattered tree breaking small patches of tilled land whorled with apparent unreason about islands of earth indicated by low signboards painted red, the islands inscrutable, desolate above the destruction which they wombed.

Then the train, slowing, ran suddenly among tumbled brick, out of which rose a small house of corrugated iron bearing a name in big letters; they watched the man lean forward.

“See!” one of the women said. “His mouth. He is reading the name. What did I tell you? It is as I said. His son fell here.”

“Then he had lots of sons,” the other woman said. “He has read the name each time since we left Arras. Eh! Eh! Him a son? That cold?”

“They do get children, though.”

“That is why they drink whisky. Otherwise . . .”

“That’s so. They think of nothing save money and eating, the English.”

Presently they got out; the train went on. Then others entered the carriage, other peasants with muddy boots, carrying baskets or live or dead beasts; they in turn watched the rigid, motionless figure leaning at the window while the train ran across the ruined land and past the brick or iron stations among the tumbled ruins, watching his lips move as he read the names.

“Let him look at the war, about which he has apparently heard at last,” they told one another. “Then he can go home. It was not in his barnyard that it was fought.”

“Nor in his house,” a woman said.

The battalion stands at ease in the rain. It has been in rest billets two days, equipment has been replaced and cleaned, vacancies have been filled and the ranks closed up, and it now stands at ease with the stupid docility of sheep in the ceaseless rain, facing the streaming shape of the sergeant-major.

Presently the colonel emerges from a door across the square. He stands in the door a moment, fastening his trench coat, then, followed by two A.D.C.'s, he steps gingerly into the mud in polished boots and approaches.

"Para-a-a-de— 'Shun!" the sergeant-major shouts. The battalion clashes, a single muffled, sullen sound. The sergeant-major turns, takes a pace toward the officers, and salutes, his stick beneath his armpit. The colonel jerks his stick toward his cap peak.

"Stand at ease, men," he says. Again the battalion clashes, a single sluggish, trickling sound. The officers approach the guide file of the first platoon, the sergeant-major falling in behind the last officer. The sergeant of the first platoon takes a pace forward and salutes. The colonel does not respond at all.

The sergeant falls in behind the sergeant-major, and the five of them pass down the company front, staring in turn at each rigid, forward-staring face as they pass it. First Company.

The sergeant salutes the colonel's back and returns to his original position and comes to attention. The sergeant of the second company has stepped forward, saluted, is ignored, and falls in behind the sergeant-major, and they pass down the second company front. The

colonel's trench coat sheathes water onto his polished boots. Mud from the earth creeps up his boots and meets the water and is channelled by the water as the mud creeps up the polished boots again.

Third Company. The colonel stops before a soldier, his trench coat hunched about his shoulders where the rain trickles from the back of his cap, so that he looks somehow like a choleric and outraged bird. The other two officers, the sergeant-major and the sergeant halt in turn, and the five of them glare at the five soldiers whom they are facing. The five soldiers stare rigid and unwinking straight before them, their faces like wooden faces, their eyes like wooden eyes.

"Sergeant," the colonel says in his pettish voice, "has this man shaved today?"

"Sir!" the sergeant says in a ringing voice; the sergeant-major says:

"Did this man shave today, Sergeant?" and all five of them glare now at the soldier, whose rigid gaze seems to pass through and beyond them, as if they were not there. "Take a pace forward when you speak in ranks!" the sergeant-major says.

The soldier, who has not spoken, steps out of ranks, splashing a jet of mud yet higher up the colonel's boots.

"What is your name?" the colonel says.

"024186 Gray," the soldier raps out glibly. The company, the battalion, stares straight ahead.

"Sir!" the sergeant-major thunders.

“Sir-r,” the soldier says.

“Did you shave this morning?” the colonel says.

“Nae, sir-r.”

“Why not?”

“A dinna shave, sir-r.”

“You dont shave?”

“A am nae auld enough tae shave.”

“Sir!” the sergeant-major thunders.

“Sir-r,” the soldier says.

“You are not . . .” The colonel’s voice dies somewhere behind his choleric glare, the trickling water from his cap peak. “Take his name, Sergeant-major,” he says, passing on.

The battalion stares rigidly ahead. Presently it sees the colonel, the two officers and the sergeant-major reappear in single file. At the proper place the sergeant-major halts and salutes the colonel’s back. The colonel jerks his stick hand again and goes on, followed by the two officers, at a trot toward the door from which he had emerged.

The sergeant-major faces the battalion again. “Para-a-a-de—” he shouts. An indistinguishable movement passes from rank to rank, an indistinguishable precursor of that damp and sullen clash which dies borning. The sergeant-major’s stick has come down from his armpit; he now leans on it, as officers do. For a time his eye roves along the battalion front.

“Sergeant Cunninghame!” he says at last.

“Sir!”

“Did you take that man’s name?”

There is silence for a moment — a little more than a short moment, a little less than a long one. Then the sergeant says: “What man, sir?”

“You, soldier!” the sergeant-major says.

The battalion stands rigid. The rain lances quietly into the mud between it and the sergeant-major as though it were too spent to either hurry or cease.

“You soldier that dont shave!” the sergeant-major says.

“Gray, sir!” the sergeant says.

“Gray. Double out ’ere.”

The man Gray appears without haste and tramps stolidly before the battalion, his kilts dark and damp and heavy as a wet horse-blanket. He halts, facing the sergeant-major.

“Why didn’t you shave this morning?” the sergeant-major says.

“A am nae auld enough tae shave,” Gray says.

“Sir!” the sergeant-major says.

Gray stares rigidly beyond the sergeant-major’s shoulder.

“Say sir when addressing a first-class warrant officer!” the sergeant-major says. Gray stares doggedly past his shoulder, his face beneath his vizorless bonnet as oblivious of the cold lances of rain as though it were granite. The sergeant-major raises his voice:

“Sergeant Cunninghame!”

“Sir!”

“Take this man’s name for insubordination also.”

“Very good, sir!”

The sergeant-major looks at Gray again. “And I’ll see that you get the penal battalion, my man. Fall in!”

Gray turns without haste and returns to his place in ranks, the sergeant-major watching him. The sergeant-major raises his voice again:

“Sergeant Cunninghame!”

“Sir!”

“You did not take that man’s name when ordered. Let that happen again and you’ll be for it yourself.”

“Very good, sir!”

“Carry on!” the sergeant-major says.

“But why did ye no shave?” the corporal asked him. They were back in billets: a stone barn with leprous walls, where no light entered, squatting in the ammoniac air on wet straw about a reeking brazier. “Ye kenned we were for inspection thae mor-rn.”

“A am nae auld enough tae shave,” Gray said.

“But ye kenned thae colonel would mar-rk ye on parade.”

“A am nae auld enough tae shave,” Gray repeated doggedly and without heat.

III

“For two hundred years,” Matthew Gray said, “there’s never a day, except Sunday, has passed but there is a hull rising on Clyde or a hull going out of Clydemouth with a Gray-driven nail in it.” He looked at young Alec across his steel spectacles, his neck bowed. “And not excepting their godless Sabbath hammering and sawing either.

Because if a hull could be built in a day, Grays could build it,” he added with dour pride. “And now, when you are big enough to go down to the yards with your grandadder and me and take a man’s place among men, to be trusted manlike with hammer and saw yersel.”

“Whisht, Matthew,” old Alec said. “The lad can saw as straight a line and drive as mony a nail a day as yersel or even me.”

Matthew paid his father no attention. He continued to speak his slow, considered words, watching his oldest son across the spectacles. “And with John Wesley not old enough by two years, and wee Matthew by ten, and your grandfather an auld man will soon be—”

“Whisht,” old Alec said. “I’m no but sixty-eight. Will you be telling the lad he’ll make his bit journey to London and come back to find me in the parish house, mayhap? ‘Twill be over by Christmastide.”

“Christmastide or no,” Matthew said, “a Gray, a shipwright, has no business at an English war.”

“Whisht ye,” old Alec said. He rose and went to the chimney cupboard and returned, carrying a box. It was of wood, dark and polished with age, the corners bound with iron, and fitted with an enormous iron lock which any child with a hairpin could have solved. From his pocket he took an iron key almost as big as the lock.

He opened the box and lifted carefully out a small velvet-covered jeweler’s box and opened it in turn. On the satin lining lay a medal, a bit of bronze on a crimson ribbon: a Victoria Cross. “I kept the hulls going out of Clydemouth while your uncle Simon was getting this bit of brass from the Queen,” old Alec said. “I heard naught of complaint.

And if need be, I’ll keep them going out while Alec serves the Queen a bit himsel. Let the lad go,” he said. He put the medal back into the wooden box and locked it. “A bit fighting winna hurt the lad. If I were his age, or yours either, for that matter, I’d gang mysel.

Alec, lad, hark ye. Ye’ll see if they’ll no take a hale lad of sixty-eight and I’ll gang wi ye and leave the auld folk like Matthew to do the best they can. Nay, Matthew; dinna ye thwart the lad; have no the Grays ever served the Queen in her need?”

So young Alec went to enlist, descending the hill on a weekday in his Sunday clothes, with a New Testament and a loaf of homebaked bread tied in a handkerchief. And this was the last day’s work which old Alec ever did, for soon after that, one morning Matthew descended the hill to the shipyard alone, leaving old Alec at home.

And after that, on the sunny days (and sometimes on the bad days too, until his daughter-in-law found him and drove him back into the house) he would sit shawled in a chair on the porch, gazing south and eastward, calling now and then to his son's wife within the house: "Hark now. Do you hear them? The guns."

"I hear nothing," the daughter-in-law would say. "It's only the sea at Kinkeadbight. Come into the house, now. Matthew will be displeased."

"Whisht, woman. Do you think there is a Gray in the world could let off a gun and me not know the sound of it?"

They had a letter from him shortly after he enlisted, from England, in which he said that being a soldier, England, was different from being a shipwright, Clydeside, and that he would write again later.

Which he did, each month or so, writing that soldiering was different from building ships and that it was still raining. Then they did not hear from him for seven months. But his mother and father continued to write him a joint letter on the first Monday of each month, letters almost identical with the previous one, the previous dozen:

We are well. Ships are going out of Clyde faster than they can sink them. You still have the Book?

This would be in his father's slow, indomitable hand. Then, in his mother's:

Are you well? Do you need anything? Jessie and I are knitting the stockings and will send them. Alec, Alec.

He received this one during the seven months, during his term in the penal battalion, forwarded to him by his old corporal, since he had not told his people of his changed life. He answered it, huddled among his fellow felons, squatting in the mud with newspapers buttoned inside his tunic and his head and feet wrapped in strips of torn blanket:

I am well. Yes I still have the Book (not telling them that his platoon was using it to light tobacco with and that they were now well beyond Lamentations). It still rains. Love to Grandadder and Jessie and Matthew and John Wesley.

Then his time in the penal battalion was up. He returned to his old company, his old platoon, finding some new faces, and a letter:

We are well. Ships are going out of Clyde yet. You have a new sister. Your Mother is well.

He folded the letter and put it away. "A see mony new faces in thae battalion," he said to the corporal. "We ha a new sair-rgeant-major too, A doot not?"

"Naw," the corporal said. "'Tis the same one." He was looking at Gray, his gaze intent, speculative; his face cleared. "Ye ha shaved thae morrn," he said.

"Ay," Gray said. "Am auld enough tae shave noo."

That was the night on which the battalion was to go up to Arras. It was to move at midnight, so he answered the letter at once:

I am well. Love to Grandadder and Jessie and Matthew and John Wesley and the baby.

“Morning! Morning!” The General, lap-robed and hooded, leans from his motor and waves his gloved hand and shouts cheerily to them as they slog past the car on the Bapaume road, taking the ditch to pass.

“A’s a cheery auld card,” a voice says.

“Awfficers,” a second drawls; he falls to cursing as he slips in the greaselike mud, trying to cling to the crest of the kneedeep ditch.

“Aweel,” a third says, “thae awfficers wud gang tae thae war-r too, A doot not.”

“Why dinna they gang then?” a fourth says. “Thae war-r is no back that way.”

Platoon by platoon they slip and plunge into the ditch and drag their heavy feet out of the clinging mud and pass the halted car and crawl terrifically onto the crown of the road again: “A says tae me, a says: ‘Fritz has a new gun that will carry to Par-ris,’ a says, and A says tae him: ‘Tis nawthin: a has one that will hit our Cor-rps Headquar-rters.’”

“Morning! Morning!” The General continues to wave his glove and shout cheerily as the battalion detours into the ditch and heaves itself back onto the road again.

They are in the trench. Until the first rifle explodes in their faces, not a shot has been fired. Gray is the third man. During all the while that they crept between flares from shellhole to shellhole, he has been working himself nearer to the sergeant-major and the Officer; in the glare of that first rifle he can see the gap in the wire toward which the Officer was leading them, the moiled rigid glints of the wire where bullets have nicked the mud and rust from it, and against the glare the tall, leaping shape of the sergeant-major. Then Gray, too, springs bayonet first into the trench full of grunting shouts and thudding blows.

Flares go up by dozens now; in the corpse glare Gray sees the sergeant-major methodically tossing grenades into the next traverse. He runs toward him, passing the Officer leaning, bent double, against the fire step. The sergeant-major has vanished beyond the traverse. Gray follows and comes upon the sergeant-major. Holding the burlap curtain aside with one hand, the sergeant-major is in the act of tossing a grenade into a dugout as if he might be tossing an orange hull into a cellar.

The sergeant-major turns in the rocket glare. "'Tis you, Gray," he says. The earth-muffled bomb thuds; the sergeant-major is in the act of catching another bomb from the sack about his neck as Gray's bayonet goes into his throat. The sergeant-major is a big man. He falls backward, holding the rifle barrel with both hands against his throat, his teeth glaring, pulling Gray with him. Gray clings to the rifle. He tries to shake the speared body on the bayonet as he would shake a rat on an umbrella rib.

He frees the bayonet. The sergeant-major falls. Gray reverses the rifle and hammers its butt into the sergeant-major's face, but the trench floor is too soft to supply any resistance. He glares about. His gaze falls upon a duckboard upended in the mud. He drags it free and slips it beneath the sergeant-major's head and hammers the face with his riflebutt. Behind him in the first traverse the Officer is shouting: "Blow your whistle, Sergeant-major!"

IV

In the citation it told how Private Gray, on a night raid, one of four survivors, following the disablement of the Officer and the death of all

the N.C.O.'s, took command of the situation and (the purpose of the expedition was a quick raid for prisoners); held a foothold in the enemy's front line until a supporting attack arrived and consolidated the position.

The Officer told how he ordered the men back out, ordering them to leave him and save themselves, and how Gray appeared with a German machine gun from somewhere and, while his three companions built a barricade, overcame the Officer and took from him his Very pistol and fired the colored signal which called for the attack; all so quickly that support arrived before the enemy could counterattack or put down a barrage.

It is doubtful if his people ever saw the citation at all. Anyway, the letters which he received from them during his sojourn in hospital, the tenor of them, were unchanged: "We are well. Ships are still going out."

His next letter home was once more months late. He wrote it when he was sitting up again, in London:

I have been sick but I am better now. I have a ribbon like in the box but not all red. The Queen was there. Love to Granddaddy and Jessie and Matthew and John Wesley and the baby.

The reply was written on Friday:

Your mother is glad that you are better. Your grandfather is dead. The baby's name is Elizabeth. We are well. Your mother sends her love.

His next letter was three months later, in winter again:

My hurt is well. I am going to a school for officers. Love to Jessie and Matthew and John Wesley and Elizabeth.

Matthew Gray pondered over this letter for a long while; so long that the reply was a week late, written on the second Monday instead of the first. He wrote it carefully, waiting until his family was in bed. It was such a long letter, or he had been at it so long, that after a time his wife came into the room in her nightdress.

“Go back to bed,” he told her. “I’ll be coming soon. ’Tis something to be said to the lad.”

When at last he laid the pen down and sat back to reread the letter, it was a long one, written out slowly and deliberately and without retraction or blot:

. . . your bit ribbon . . . for that way lies vainglory and pride. The pride and vainglory of going for an officer. Never miscall your birth, Alec. You are not a gentleman. You are a Scottish shipwright. If your grandfather were here he would not be last to tell you so. . . . We are glad your hurt is well. Your mother sends her love.

He sent home the medal, and his photograph in the new tunic with the pips and ribbon and the barred cuffs. But he did not go home himself. He returned to Flanders in the spring, with poppies blowing in the churned beet- and cabbage-fields. When his leaves came, he spent them in London, in the haunts of officers, not telling his people that he had any leave.

He still had the Book. Occasionally he came upon it among his effects and opened it at the jagged page where his life had changed: . . . and a voice said, Peter, raise thyself; kill —

Often his batman would watch him as, unawares and oblivious, he turned the Book and mused upon the jagged page — the ranker, the gaunt, lonely man with a face that belied his years or lack of them: a sobriety, a profound and mature calm, a grave and deliberate

conviction of expression and gesture (“like a mout be Haig hissel,” the batman said) — watching him at his clean table, writing steadily and slowly, his tongue in his cheek as a child writes:

I am well. It has not rained in a fortnight. Love to Jessie and Matthew and John Wesley and Elizabeth.

Four days ago the battalion came down from the lines. It has lost its major and two captains and most of the subalterns, so that now the remaining captain is major, and two subalterns and a sergeant have the companies. Meanwhile, replacements have come up, the ranks are filled, and the battalion is going in again tomorrow. So today K Company stands with ranks open for inspection while the subaltern-captain (his name is Gray) moves slowly along each platoon front.

He passes from man to man, slowly, thoroughly, the sergeant behind him. He stops.

“Where is your trenching tool?” he says.

“Blawn—” the soldier begins. Then he ceases, staring rigidly before him.

“Blawn out of your pack, eh?” the captain finishes for him. “Since when? What battles have ye taken par-rt in since four days?”

The soldier stares rigidly across the drowsy street. The captain moves on. “Take his name, Sergeant.”

He moves on to the second platoon, to the third. He halts again. He looks the soldier up and down.

“What is your name?”

“010801 McLan, sir-r.”

“Replacement?”

“Replacement, sir-r.”

The captain moves on. “Take his name, Sergeant. Rifle’s filthy.”

The sun is setting. The village rises in black silhouette against the sunset; the river gleams in mirrored fire. The bridge across the river is a black arch upon which slowly and like figures cut from black paper, men are moving.

The party crouches in the roadside ditch while the captain and the sergeant peer cautiously across the parapet of the road. “Do ye make them out?” the captain says in a low voice.

“Huns, sir-r,” the sergeant whispers. “A ken their-r helmets.”

Presently the column has crossed the bridge. The captain and the sergeant crawl back into the ditch, where the party crouches, among them a wounded man with a bandaged head. “Keep yon man quiet, now,” the captain says.

He leads the way along the ditch until they reach the outskirts of the village. Here they are out of the sun, and here they sit quietly beneath a wall, surrounding the wounded man, while the captain and the sergeant again crawl away. They return in five minutes. “Fix bayonets,” the sergeant says in a low voice. “Quiet, now.”

“Wull A stay wi thae hur-rt lad, Sair-rgent?” one whispers.

“Nay,” the sergeant says. “A’ll tak’s chance wi us. Forrard.”

They steal quietly along the wall, behind the captain. The wall approaches at right angles to the street, the road which crosses the bridge. The captain raises his hand. They halt and watch him as he peers around the corner.

They are opposite the bridgehead. It and the road are deserted; the village dreams quietly in the setting sun. Against the sky beyond the village the dust of the retreating column hangs, turning to rose and gold.

Then they hear a sound, a short, guttural word. Not ten yards away and behind a ruined wall leveled breast-high and facing the bridge, four men squat about a machine gun. The captain raises his hand again. They grasp their rifles: a rush of hobnails on cobblestones, a cry of astonishment cut sharply off; blows, short, hard breaths, curses; not a shot.

The man with the bandaged head begins to laugh, shrilly, until someone hushes him with a hand that tastes like brass. Under the captain's direction they bash in the door of the house and drag the gun and the four bodies into it. They hoist the gun upstairs and set it up in a window looking down upon the bridgehead. The sun sinks further, the shadows fall long and quiet across village and river. The man with the bandaged head babbles to himself.

Another column swings up the road, dogged and orderly beneath coalhod helmets. It crosses the bridge and passes on through the village. A party detaches itself from the rear of the column and splits into three squads.

Two of them have machine guns, which they set up on opposite sides of the street, the near one utilizing the barricade behind which the other gun had been captured. The third squad returns to the bridge, carrying sappers' tools and explosive. The sergeant tells off six of the nineteen men, who descend the stairs silently. The captain remains with the gun in the window.

Again there is a brief rush, a scuffle, blows. From the window the captain sees the heads of the machine-gun crew across the street turn, then the muzzle of the gun swings, firing. The captain rakes them once with his gun, then he sweeps with it the party on the bridge, watching it break like a covey of quail for the nearest wall.

The captain holds the gun on them. They wilt running and dot the white road and become motionless. Then he swings the gun back to the gun across the street. It ceases.

He gives another order. The remaining men, except the man with the bandage, run down the stairs. Half of them stop at the gun beneath the window and drag it around. The others dash on across the street, toward the second gun. They are halfway across when the other gun rattles.

The running men plunge as one in midstep. Their kilts whip forward and bare their pale thighs. The gun rakes across the doorway where the others are freeing the first gun of bodies.

As the captain sweeps his gun down again, dust puffs from the left side of the window, his gun rings metallically, something sears along his arm and across his ribs, dust puffs from the right side of the window. He

rakes the other gun again. It ceases. He continues to fire into the huddled clump about it long after the gun has ceased.

The dark earth bites into the sun's rim. The street is now all in shadow; a final level ray comes into the room, and fades. Behind him in the twilight the wounded man laughs, then his laughter sinks into a quiet contented gibberish.

Just before dark another column crosses the bridge. There is still enough light for it to be seen that these troops wear khaki and that their helmets are flat. But likely there is no one to see, because when a party mounted to the second story and found the captain propped in the window beside the cold gun, they thought that he was dead.

This time Matthew Gray saw the citation. Someone clipped it from the Gazette and sent it to him, and he sent it in turn to his son in the hospital, with a letter:

. . . Since you must go to a war we are glad that you are doing well in it. Your mother thinks that you have done your part and that you should come home.

But women do not understand such things. But I myself think that it is time they stopped fighting. What is the good in the high wages when food is so high that there is profit for none save the profiteers. When a war gets to where the battles do not even prosper the people who win them, it is time to stop.

In the bed next his, and later in the chair next his on the long glassed veranda, there was a subaltern. They used to talk. Or rather, the subaltern talked while Gray listened. He talked of peace, of what he would do when it was over, talking as if it were about finished, as if it would not last past Christmas.

“We’ll be back out there by Christmas,” Gray said.

“Gas cases? They don’t send gas cases out again. They have to be cured.”

“We will be cured.”

“But not in time. It will be over by Christmas. It can’t last another year. You don’t believe me, do you? Sometimes I believe you want to go back. But it will be. It will be finished by Christmas, and then I’m off. Canada. Nothing at home for us now.” He looked at the other, at the gaunt, wasted figure with almost white hair, lying with closed eyes in the fall sunlight. “You’d better come with me.”

“I’ll meet you in Givenchy on Christmas Day,” Gray said.

But he didn’t. He was in the hospital on the eleventh of November, hearing the bells, and he was still there on Christmas Day, where he received a letter from home:

You can come on home now. It will not be too soon now. They will need ships worse than ever now, now that the pride and the vainglory have worn themselves out.

The medical officer greeted him cheerfully. “Dammit, stuck here, when I know a place in Devon where I could hear a nightingale, by jove.” He thumped Gray’s chest. “Not much: just a bit of a murmur. Give you no

trouble, if you'll stop away from wars from now on. Might keep you from getting in again, though."

He waited for Gray to laugh, but Gray didn't laugh. "Well, it's all finished now, damn them. Sign here, will you." Gray signed. "Forget it as quickly as it began, I hope. Well—" He extended his hand, smiling his antiseptic smile. "Cheer-O, Captain. And good luck."

Matthew Gray, descending the hill at seven o'clock in the morning, saw the man, the tall, hospital-colored man in city clothing and carrying a stick, and stopped.

"Alec?" he said. "Alec." They shook hands. "I could not — I did not . . ." He looked at his son, at the white hair, the waxed moustaches. "You have two ribbons now for the box, you have written." Then Matthew turned back up the hill at seven o'clock in the morning. "We'll go to your mother."

Then Alec Gray reverted for an instant. Perhaps he had not progressed as far as he thought, or perhaps he had been climbing a hill, and the return was not a reversion so much as something like an avalanche waiting the pebble, momentary though it was to be. "The shipyard, Father."

His father strode firmly on, carrying his lunchpail. "'Twill wait," he said. "We'll go to your mother."

His mother met him at the door. Behind her he saw young Matthew, a man now, and John Wesley, and Elizabeth whom he had never seen. "You did not wear your uniform home," young Matthew said.

“No,” he said. “No, I—”

“Your mother had wanted to see you in your regimentals and all,” his father said.

“No,” his mother said. “No! Never! Never!”

“Hush, Annie,” his father said. “Being a captain now, with two ribbons now for the box. This is false modesty. Ye hae shown courage; ye should have — But ’tis of no moment: the proper uniform for a Gray is an overall and a hammer.”

“Ay, sir,” Alec said, who had long since found out that no man has courage but that any man may blunder blindly into valor as one stumbles into an open manhole in the street.

He did not tell his father until that night, after his mother and the children had gone to bed. “I am going back to England. I have work promised there.”

“Ah,” his father said. “At Bristol, perhaps? They build ships there.”

The lamp glowed, touching with faint gleams the black and polished surface of the box on the mantel-shelf. There was a wind getting up, hollowing out the sky like a dark bowl, carving house and hill and headland out of dark space. “’Twill be blowing out yon the night,” his father said.

“There are other things,” Alec said. “I have made friends, you see.”

His father removed the iron-rimmed spectacles. “You have made friends. Officers and such, I doubt not?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And friends are good to have, to sit about the hearth of nights and talk with. But beyond that, only them that love you will bear your faults. You must love a man well to put up with all his trying ways, Alec.”

“But they are not that sort of friends, sir. They are . . .” He ceased. He did not look at his father. Matthew sat, slowly polishing the spectacles with his thumb. They could hear the wind. “If this fails, I’ll come back to the shipyard.”

His father watched him gravely, polishing the spectacles slowly.

“Shipwrights are not made like that, Alec. To fear God, to do your work like it was your own hull you were putting the ribs in . . .” He moved.

“We’ll see what the Book will say.” He replaced the glasses.

On the table was a heavy, brass-bound Bible. He opened it; the words seemed to him to rise to meet him from the page. Yet he read them, aloud: “. . . and the captains of thousands and the captains of ten thousands . . . A paragraph of pride. He faced his son, bowing his neck to see across the glasses. “You will go to London, then?”

“Yes, sir,” Alec said.

VI

His position was waiting. It was in an office. He had already had cards made: Captain A. Gray, M.C., D.S.M., and on his return to London he joined the Officers’ Association, donating to the support of the widows and orphans.

He had rooms in the proper quarter, and he would walk to and from the office, with his cards and his waxed moustaches, his sober correct clothes and his stick carried in a manner inimitable, at once jaunty and unobtrusive, giving his coppers to blind and maimed in Piccadilly, asking of them the names of their regiments. Once a month he wrote home: I am well. Love to Jessie and Matthew and John Wesley and Elizabeth.

During that first year Jessie was married. He sent her a gift of plate, stinting himself a little to do so, drawings from his savings. He was saving, not against old age; he believed too firmly in the Empire to do that, who had surrendered completely to the Empire like a woman, a bride. He was saving against the time when he would recross the Channel among the dead scenes of his lost and found life.

That was three years later. He was already planning to ask for leave, when one day the manager broached the subject himself. With one correct bag he went to France. But he did not bear eastward at once. He went to the Riviera; for a week he lived like a gentleman, spending his money like a gentleman, lonely, alone in that bright aviary of the svelte kept women of all Europe.

That was why those who saw him descend from the Mediterranean Express that morning in Paris said, "Here is a rich milord," and why they continued to say it in the hard-benched third-class trains, as he sat leaning forward on his stick, lip-moving the names on sheet-iron stations about the battered and waking land lying now three years quiet beneath the senseless and unbroken battalions of days.

He reached London and found what he should have known before he left. His position was gone. Conditions, the manager told him, addressing him punctiliously by his rank.

What savings he had left melted slowly; he spent the last of them on a black silk dress for his mother, with the letter:

I am well. Love to Matthew and John Wesley and Elizabeth.

He called upon his friends, upon the officers whom he had known. One, the man he knew best, gave him whisky in a comfortable room with a fire: "You aren't working now? Rotten luck. By the way, you remember Whiteby? He had a company in the — th. Nice chap: no people, though. He killed himself last week. Conditions."

"Oh. Did he? Yes. I remember him. Rotten luck."

"Yes. Rotten luck. Nice chap."

He no longer gave his pennies to the blind and the maimed in Piccadilly. He needed them for papers:

Artisans needed

Become stonemason

Men to drive motorcars. War record not necessary

Shop-assistants (must be under twenty-one)

Shipwrights needed

and at last:

Gentleman with social address and connections to meet out-of-town clients. Temporary

He got the place, and with his waxed moustaches and his correct clothes he revealed the fleshpots of the West End to Birmingham and Leeds. It was temporary.

Artisans

Carpenters

Housepainters

Winter was temporary, too. In the spring he took his waxed moustaches and his ironed clothes into Surrey, with a set of books, an encyclopedia, on commission. He sold all his things save what he stood in, and gave up his rooms in town.

He still had his stick, his waxed moustaches, his cards. Surrey, gentle, green, mild. A tight little house in a tight little garden. An oldish man in a smoking jacket puttering in a flower bed: "Good day, sir. Might I—"

The man in the smoking jacket looks up. "Go to the side, can't you? Don't come this way."

He goes to the side entrance. A slatted gate, freshly white, bearing an enameled plate:

NO

HAWKERS

BEGGARS

He passes through and knocks at a tidy door smug beneath a vine. "Good day, miss. May I see the—"

"Go away. Didn't you see the sign on the gate?"

“But I—”

“Go away, or I’ll call the master.”

In the fall he returned to London. Perhaps he could not have said why himself. Perhaps it was beyond any saying, instinct perhaps bringing him back to be present at the instant out of all time of the manifestation, apotheosis, of his life which had died again. Anyway, he was there, still with his waxed moustaches, erect, his stick clasped beneath his left armpit, among the Household troops in brass cuirasses, on dappled geldings, and Guards in scarlet tunics, and the Church militant in stole and surplice and Prince defenders of God in humble mufti, all at attention for two minutes, listening to despair. He still had thirty shillings, and he replenished his cards: Captain A. Gray, M.C., D.S.M.

It is one of those spurious, pale days like a sickly and premature child of spring while spring itself is still weeks away. In the thin sunlight buildings fade upward into misty pinks and golds. Women wear violets pinned to their furs, appearing to bloom themselves like flowers in the languorous, treacherous air.

It is the women who look twice at the man standing against the wall at a corner: a gaunt man with white hair, and moustaches twisted into frayed points, with a bleached and frayed regimental scarf in a celluloid collar, a once-good suit now threadbare yet apparently pressed within twenty-four hours, standing against the wall with closed eyes, a dilapidated hat held bottom-up before him.

He stood there for a long time, until someone touched his arm. It was a constable. “Move along, sir. Against orders.” In his hat were seven

pennies and three halfpence. He bought a cake of soap and a little food.

Another anniversary came and passed; he stood again, his stick at his armpit, among the bright, silent uniforms, the quiet throng in either frank or stubborn cast-offs, with patient, bewildered faces. In his eyes now is not that hopeful resignation of a beggar, but rather that bitterness, that echo as of bitter and unheard laughter of a hunchback.

A meager fire burns on the sloping cobbles. In the fitful light the damp, fungus-grown wall of the embankment and the stone arch of the bridge loom. At the foot of the cobbled slope the invisible river clucks and gurgles with the tide.

Five figures lie about the fire, some with heads covered as though in slumber, others smoking and talking. One man sits upright, his back to the wall, his hands lying beside him; he is blind: he sleeps that way. He says that he is afraid to lie down.

“Cant you tell you are lying down, without seeing you are?” another says.

“Something might happen,” the blind man says.

“What? Do you think they would give you a shell, even if it would bring back your sight?”

“They’d give him the shell, all right,” a third said.

“Ow. Why dont they line us all up and put down a bloody barrage on us?”

“Was that how he lost his sight?” a fourth says. “A shell?”

“Ow. He was at Mons. A dispatch rider, on a motorbike. Tell them about it, mate.”

The blind man lifts his face a little. Otherwise he does not move. He speaks in a flat voice. “She had the bit of scar on her wrist. That was how I could tell. It was me put the scar on her wrist, you might say. We was working in the shop one day. I had picked up an old engine and we was fitting it onto a bike so we could—”

“What?” the fourth says. “What’s he talking about?”

“Shhhh,” the first says. “Not so loud. He’s talking about his girl. He had a bit of a bike shop on the Brighton Road and they were going to marry.” He speaks in a low tone, his voice just under the weary, monotonous voice of the blind man. “Had their picture taken and all the day he enlisted and got his uniform.

He had it with him for a while, until one day he lost it. He was fair wild. So at last we got a bit of a card about the same size of the picture. ‘Here’s your picture, mate,’ we says. ‘Hold onto it this time.’ So he’s still got the card. Likely he’ll show it to you before he’s done. So dont you let on.”

“No,” the other says. “I shant let on.”

The blind man talks. “ — got them at the hospital to write her a letter, and sure enough, here she come. I could tell her by the bit of scar on

her wrist. Her voice sounded different, but then everything sounded different since. But I could tell by the scar. We would sit and hold hands, and I could touch the bit of scar inside her left wrist. In the cinema too. I would touch the scar and it would be like I—”

“The cinema?” the fourth says. “Him?”

“Yes,” the other says. “She would take him to the cinema the comedies, so he could hear them laughing.”

The blind man talks. “ — told me how the pictures hurt her eyes, and that she would leave me at the cinema and when it was over she would come and fetch me. So I said it was all right. And the next night it was again.

And I said it was all right. And the next night I told her I wouldn’t go either. I said we would stop at home, at the hospital. And then she didn’t say anything for a long while. I could hear her breathing. Then she said it was all right.

So after that we didn’t go to the cinema. We would just sit, holding hands, and me feeling the scar now and then. We couldn’t talk loud in the hospital, so we would whisper. But mostly we didn’t talk. We just held hands. And that was for eight nights. I counted.

Then it was the eighth night. We were sitting there, with the other hand in my hand, and me touching the scar now and then. Then on a sudden the hand jerked away. I could hear her standing up. ‘Listen,’ she says. ‘This cant go on any longer. You will have to know sometime,’ she says. And I says, ‘I dont want to know but one thing. What is your

name?' I says. She told me her name; one of the nurses. And she says—
”

“What?” the fourth says. “What is this?”

“He told you,” the first said. “It was one of the nurses in the hospital. The girl had been buggering off with another fellow and left the nurse for him to hold her hand, thinking he was fooled.”

“But how did he know?” the fourth says.

“Listen,” the first says.

“— ‘and you knew all the time,’ she says, ‘since the first time?’ ‘It was the scar,’ I says. ‘You’ve got it on the wrong wrist. You’ve got it on your right wrist,’ I says. ‘And two nights ago, I lifted up the edge of it a bit. What is it,’ I says. ‘Courtplaster?’”

The blind man sits against the wall, his face lifted a little, his hands motionless beside him. “That’s how I knew, by the scar. Thinking they could fool me, when it was me put the scar on her, you might say—”

The prone figure farthest from the fire lifts its head. “Hup,” he says; “ere e comes.”

The others turn as one and look toward the entrance.

“Here who comes?” the blind man says. “Is it the bobbies?”

They do not answer. They watch the man who enters: a tall man with a stick. They cease to talk, save the blind man, watching the tall man

come among them. "Here who comes, mates?" the blind man says. "Mates!"

The newcomer passes them, and the fire; he does not look at them. He goes on. "Watch, now," the second says. The blind man is now leaning a little forward; his hands fumble at the ground beside him as though he were preparing to rise.

"Watch who?" he says. "What do you see?"

They do not answer. They are watching the newcomer covertly, attentively, as he disrobes and then, a white shadow, a ghostly gleam in the darkness, goes down to the water and washes himself, slapping his body hard with icy and filthy handfuls of river water.

He returns to the fire; they turn their faces quickly aside, save the blind man (he still sits forward, his arms propped beside him as though on the point of rising, his wan face turned toward the sound, the movement) and one other. "Yer stones is ot, sir," this one says. "I've ad them right in the blaze."

"Thanks," the newcomer says. He still appears to be utterly oblivious of them, so they watch him again, quietly, as he spreads his sorry garments on one stone and takes a second stone from the fire and irons them. While he is dressing, the man who spoke to him goes down to the water and returns with the cake of soap which he had used. Still watching, they see the newcomer rub his fingers on the cake of soap and twist his moustaches into points.

"A bit more on the left one, sir," the man holding the soap says. The newcomer soaps his fingers and twists his left moustache again, the

other man watching him, his head bent and tilted a little back, in shape and attitude and dress like a caricatured scarecrow.

“Right, now?” the newcomer says.

“Right, sir,” the scarecrow says. He retreats into the darkness and returns without the cake of soap, and carrying instead the hat and the stick. The newcomer takes them. From his pocket he takes a coin and puts it into the scarecrow’s hand. The scarecrow touches his cap; the newcomer is gone.

They watch him, the tall shape, the erect back, the stick, until he disappears.

“What do you see, mates?” the blind man says. “Tell a man what you see.”

VII

Among the demobilized officers who emigrated from England after the Armistice was a subaltern named Walkley. He went out to Canada, where he raised wheat and prospered, both in pocket and in health. So much so that, had he been walking out of the Gare de Lyon in Paris instead of in Piccadilly Circus on this first evening (it is Christmas eve) of his first visit home, they would have said, “Here is not only a rich milord; it is a well one.”

He had been in London just long enough to outfit himself with the beginning of a wardrobe, and in his new clothes (bought of a tailor which in the old days he could not have afforded) he was enjoying himself too much to even go anywhere. So he just walked the streets, among the cheerful throngs, until suddenly he stopped dead still,

staring at a face. The man had almost white hair, moustaches waxed to needle points.

He wore a frayed scarf in which could be barely distinguished the colors and pattern of a regiment. His threadbare clothes were freshly ironed and he carried a stick. He was standing at the curb, and he appeared to be saying something to the people who passed, and Walkley moved suddenly forward, his hand extended. But the other man only stared at him with eyes that were perfectly dead.

“Gray,” Walkley said, “don’t you remember me?” The other stared at him with that dead intensity. “We were in hospital together. I went out to Canada. Don’t you remember?”

“Yes,” the other said. “I remember you. You are Walkley.” Then he quit looking at Walkley.

He moved a little aside, turning to the crowd again, his hand extended; it was only then that Walkley saw that the hand contained three or four boxes of the matches which may be bought from any tobacconist for a penny a box. “Matches? Matches, sir?” he said. “Matches? Matches?”

Walkley moved also, getting again in front of the other. “Gray—” he said.

The other looked at Walkley again, this time with a kind of restrained yet raging impatience. “Let me alone, you son of a bitch!” he said, turning immediately toward the crowd again, his hand extended. “Matches! Matches, sir!” he chanted.

Walkley moved on. He paused again, half turning, looking back at the gaunt face above the waxed moustaches. Again the other looked him

full in the face, but the glance passed on, as though without recognition. Walkley went on. He walked swiftly. "My God," he said. "I think I am going to vomit."

The End