

THE STRANGER TAKES A LOOK

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IF THE dispersing crowd in the Grande Place notice him at all, it is only with the most cursory interest. Food for gossip he may be, but even gossip is not very important. The important thing, this Easter Sunday in Hondebecq, is the prospect of planting the potatoes shortly. That is what all the men and a good many of the women are thinking about. Easter of course is a festival; the young communicants will walk in procession this afternoon, boys in dark suits and peaked caps, girls in white, like little brides; priest and beadle, *maire* and schoolmaster, will marshal them about the portable image of the Virgin under its little canopy. This was done during the war even. But it is a very brief respite from the real business of life, and a matter of routine, and directly it is over, if the weather serve, one can get on with the potatoes.

It is not the Easter procession that the stranger has come to see. Stranger he is, because every one knows every one else in the village, and his face is strange. Also he wears tweed jacket, flannel trousers, and a shapeless hat, and carries a stick. The only strangers known to the village are English. Without doubt he is an Englishman, come back, as one has known them to do, queer people, any time these ten years. What for?

To look at the place where they came to fight the war! Something to look at, that is. As if one did not chiefly require to forget all about it. But being English, he is, one remembers, from what one saw of that nation ten years ago, incredibly rich and idle, and can afford such follies.

Of course, Camille Vanacker, the village *mutilé*, will make up to him, in the hope of getting a tip. Quite right. The English are rich, and Camille is a poor devil who has lost both arms at Verdun. There they go.

The Englishman listens, and gives money, but does not pursue the matter. Verdun is only a name to him. He moves with a sort of uncertainty across the Place. One takes a look at him, but one saw so many, it is very odd if one can recognize him, in civilian dress. He goes into the Lion of Flanders, orders a drink of white wine, in his strange French, stands by the counter smoking his pipe, scrutinizing all the faces, as though he expected to be greeted by some one. But no one greets him. What with death and change, refugees coming in and old inhabitants who have made their fortunes moving out, ten years is enough to obliterate any acquaintance he had. The middle-aged men were all away too. No, no one knows him.

Presently he goes. As in all these villages, a few steps take him off the cobbles of the village, out of the sound of children, pigeons, cocks, and church bells, into the green country. To his left, the flat arable—cut chessboardwise with tiny ditches crossed by diminutive roads, lined by trees—stretches from a slow-moving stream, up a low ridge, out of sight. To his right, pasture, then a windmill above a tiny wood. That wood is the only uncultivated piece of land to be seen, and even it has been planted and is being cut for timber. The stranger takes a good look. It is not because he forgets the road. It would be truer to say the road has forgotten him, it is so changed, utterly lonely and forsaken; all those little sign-boards—"D.A.C."; "Lorries this way"; "C.C.S."; "No tanks"—are gone.

He walks along, listening to the stillness, as another would listen to an unaccustomed noise. It is not only the *bump-bump* of lorries, the *pit-pat* rattle of limbers drawn by mules, the *slog-slog* and dusty chatter of infantry he misses. Nor the drone of *aéroplanes* going right back to St.-Omer. There ought to be something behind all these, dull and low, a mere background of noise, but always there, the murmur of the battle that went on, year after year, over hundreds of miles. It is the lack of that which makes him strain his ears until they feel a sort of ache.

Gazing in the direction from which it ought to come, he sees, beyond the mill, a line of telegraph-poles, running out of sight. He knows what it is. The *route nationale* to Lille, thirty kilometers away. But the thing which stuns his imagination is

the fact that to-day, if he wanted to, he can walk right along to Lille. No one will stop him. There will be no gradual lessening of glass in the windows, and roofs on the houses, no camouflage netting beside the road, no place where cheery voices will hail him with advice to walk in the ditch. No final scramble in up-turned earth, to the brink of the weed-grown river of death, dammed between the two hastily thrown up banks called trenches, where men live like rats in holes. There will be nothing there, nothing. Roads and bridges have been rebuilt, wire and posts pulled up, trench and tram-line filled in and smoothed down, and cultivated. He knows. He has already been to Ypres. He does not want to go again. The War may have been "legalized murder" as it is now called. But Post-War is murder on show, with a small price for admission to defray expenses. Even then they cannot show you War. With a sudden descent from lunatic waste to careful meanness, they can only show where War has been. He may walk to Lille, and a good deal farther, he may walk off the earth, and never see War again.

And there is one other physical sense, which memory makes to crave something it cannot recapture. He sniffs the air. Smell of country, of green crops just showing, of rich damp earth turned over and ready for roots. Even if it were not too early, there will not be any wild flowers here, like the wild flowers he remembers in the Somme before June, 1916. And none of that is what his nose is asking for. What it misses is the proper smell of that road, the Flemish border lane that

for so long was the main street of a great straggling camp of fifty thousand English-speaking men. The proper smell is brazier-smoke, and manure, and disinfectant, and tobacco. It had to be discovered, because no story and hardly a history book mentions the fact that, to fight, a man must live. The usual heroics about dying for one's country are not merely idle. They are the reverse of the fact. To fight, one must not die. To fight for a few minutes one must live for weeks. Even Wellington's Hundred Days did not contain ten of fighting. So with a great modern war you get cooking, sanitation, transport, and comforts, just as in a great modern peace. Or as his nose more briefly describes it, brazier-smoke, and disinfectant, manure, and tobacco.

His reflections are interrupted by one of those deep-seated instincts that are all the stronger for being so unconscious; he can only feel something, in the slope of the road, that makes his feet want to turn to the left. He is beside a bit of hedge, almost an English hedge, ending in a gate. He goes to it and peers over. Yes, there is no doubt about it. It is the big pasture at R-33 on the map. How often he came back there, he cannot think, but it is the place he remembers best, in all those wanderings from camp to billet. It is what he has been looking for, the reason of his detour by out-of-the-way Hondebecq, instead of following the usual route of tourists, visiting the Front. The thing they call the Front, preëminently a place where men have died, soon saddened and sickened him, but at R-33 perhaps

one might catch a glimpse of the place where men had lived. Better here than anywhere else. The biggest and best known camp was only a war-time affair, inhabited by soldiers, cleared away since the Armistice. But the low two-storied old house, there at the back of the pasture, under the elms and round its cobble-edged manure-heap, is a place that had kept its civilian character all through the war, and has survived, more or less intact, now that war is gone. He looks and looks, and slowly he understands why it seems so strange. The pasture is empty. Not a soul stirs. Not even a pig is in sight.

Leaning on the gate, he closes his eyes, to recall how it used to look. Slowly the picture comes back. The quagmire about the gate, the "road" built of fagots and brick-ends from bombarded houses that led to the house, the tents to the left, the transport parked to the right. He can feel the rough surface under his feet, can hear the lugubrious jollity of men doing odd jobs, the squawking and fidgeting of the mules being as awkward as possible. At the corner of the barn, to the left, the cookers blacken everything; but on some of the hard ground just by the entry, the lip of the old dry moat it may have been, a party of men are falling in, to go up to the line for some special duty. He passes in front of them, watching the N.C.O. checking their equipment.

He knows before he gets there that the third file from the left is that lanky boy who never seemed to have hardened to the life, nor to have swallowed the nature of the business in hand, a boy with brown eyes

always trying to see something beyond their scope, like an animal's. That boy had once asked him, "'Ow long is this war goin' on, sir?'"

"Oh, two or three months. Year, maybe!"

"A year?" with a gasp of horrified incredulity.

That boy was going to be killed and knew it. There were men like that. In his dream he tries to warn the boy to go sick, get told off for other duty, anything; and the effort wakes him from his day-dream. There is nothing there. He has not moved. He has but closed his eyes for a moment. The pasture is empty. Right back there, as if stubbornly wedged in a corner, the old house stares him out of countenance. He stares back. He bears no grudge. It was water-tight. You could get cooking done well, and washing done, there. What else did a soldier want? It wasn't home; it could have no permanent relation to him. But there had been order, discipline, some sort of civilized restraint there. And looking at the barn where he has so often forbidden men to smoke, he derisively lights his pipe. The worst misfortunes pass. Wars do end, sometime.

Something is coming along the lane; he hears the *flop-flop* of hoof and rattle of springless wheel. How often has he not heard it, rations, or tents, or some odds and ends of impedimenta being brought up! How often has he not waited for some such slow-moving vehicle, at that very gate, spinning out the vacuity of soldiering, by seeing something done right, which otherwise would only be half done, because it was everybody's business! Here

comes a farmer, in black Sunday best with the big horse in a tumbril, doing some small job that must be done on these farms, whatever the day. He swings the gate open for it and gets "Merci, m'sieu!" from the man, whose face is strange. Nothing else. The man thinks him a fool if he thinks about him at all, idling there.

But as the horse and tumbril recede toward the house, they become once more part of the dream, the rattle and hoof-fall become the sound of transport moving. He stands at that gate, as the battalion comes back from the Somme, for Messines. The G.S. wagon has been to rail-head and brought, among other things, the post-bag from brigade. In the guard-tent there by that very gate, let the R.Q.M.S. sort it out. The battalion is, of course, three quarters new drafts; there are a lot of letters, and a fair number for men who would never get them unless the angels took over the work of the post corporals. But the deliverable ones are passed to the N.C.O.'s, one per company, who are waiting; and then arises, all over the pasture, the boisterous sardonic fun inseparable from the New Armies, the banter of men who would never take a war quite seriously, and who, instead of being sentimental at such a moment, are calling to each other:

"Look what mother's sent her blue-eyed boy!"

"'Ere's an illustrated. Pictures of our last show. O Lor'!" Shy deprecation. "Fat lot they know!"

"Father's wounded. He is, I tell you. He's a special constable. He sat on a spiky railin' to rest 'is pore leg, and got punctured!"

"She says she's going to have another, she reckons!"

"Well, what d'you expect, going home on leave?"

The smell, the noise, the look of khaki sprawling on trampled grass, beset him. It had been so real, so absorbing. He, no less than all those fellows, had adjusted himself to it, had sat on some old bit of board (if he could get one) in somebody else's field, to read little bits of news from an England to whom the war was somewhere else, some one else's; an England which, like himself and all those men, could never take such a preposterous affair quite seriously.

He opens his eyes, and the sound, the sight, the odor, vanish. Nothing! there is nothing there. Some birds are chattering in the elms; the grayish spring day is waning. It is no good standing there, waiting for something to come back which will never come back. At least one hopes not. He has still some time to put away before his train; he will follow the lane down to the *pavé*, have a last glance from the high land there, and so back to the village and the station. That will be a good wind-up, for he feels that he will not come that way again.

So he goes between pasture and arable, here a cottage, there a farm, hiding well back behind elms, with the gleam of pond or moat about it. The cross-roads look lopsided. Then he recollects that the oaks that line the *pavé* were gapped by shell-fire in the final flurry of 1918. That, of course, had been his last sight of the place, two streams of retreating divisions and evacuated civilians all

mixed up, and his battalion coming up to relieve, jammed in the crush, and the brigade-major borrowing him from his colonel and posting him there with an N.C.O. to sort things out. He must certainly have a drink in the Estaminet de la Croix—In t'Kruyshook, they called it more often—in memory of the five-nine that had just missed him and hit the gable above his head. He pushes open the door. A woman with an apron over her Sunday dress gives him good day. He must have white wine—the rasping vinky-blinky of that immortal song about the *mademoiselle* of Armentières. Here it is, strong and sour as ever, but good stuff to march on. Between glasses, he asks:

"Were you here, in the war?"

"No, monsieur; we are refugees installed here!"

Of course. The proprietors he might have known had either lost all the males of the family or made so much money, and anyhow gone elsewhere. He has nothing to talk about to this woman, no common memory or wonderment. He drinks and muses. And there comes over him an odd feeling of some one wanting him, just outside the window. He stares. Nothing. Surely there is the shuffling of feet, murmur, the grating of heavy boots and rifle-butts on the cobbles, as if his platoon were standing easy, waiting the order to move. He goes to the window.

"What is it that there is, monsieur?"

"Some one?"

"No, monsieur!" she replies. But he is so certain that he goes out of the door, round the corner of the house, and a few yards down the

pavé. He is not so far wrong. They are waiting for him, "properly at ease" in the drill-book phrase, if ever men were. Without even reading the little notice-board of the Graves Commission, he leans on the fence of the little cemetery and scans their names. They are not really his platoon; they are a mixture of all sorts, gathered from one of those last actions in the fields below there—Private This, Sapper That, Gunner Someone. And he understands why he is a Stranger. These have not relapsed into Peace and England, as he has. The War has survived them. He feels their appeal, almost their reproach, warning him that sooner or later he must follow, for all his luck.

After a few minutes, he leaves them, goes back into the *estaminet*, finishes his wine, and pays. The woman has not been anxious. She knows the English are mad, but honest. As he leaves the place she says, as though certain that he will not return, "Adieu, monsieur!"

He replies, "Adieu," partly to her, and partly, as he closes the door, to that straight road, along the low ridge above the shallow valley that he had traversed time and again, the tide-mark to and from which the battle had flowed, ebbed, flowed again, and finally ebbed. He glances at his watch. Just time to catch his train, to Calais, to England, home. Into the dusk, the stranger hurries away.

MASQUE

MONROE HEATH

Ring down the curtain! Now I am alone,
I may put off this mask of merriment,
The costume of this comedy that's spent
To buy a fevered laugh for every groan.
That done, now may I call myself my own
And harken to my harried soul's lament,
Which I have stifled lest it furnish vent
To each spectator's hidden grief and moan.

Alone! I have the luxury of sighs.
But sighs do not suffice, and tears arise.
Enough—too much of contemplating woe!
The more I weep, the more my sorrows grow.
Regard no more life's miserable ends.
On with the play! Bring back my masks and friends!