

THE DANCER: A STORY

BY S. G. TALLENTS

I

It was nearly midnight, and three men were sitting in a room at the top of a house in Adelphi Terrace, smoking, after the theatre. One of them, dressed in plain clothes, sat in the window seat, his profile dark against the sky. The other two sat in arm-chairs on each side of a small table, on which a heavily shaded reading lamp threw a circle of light about a tray of glasses and decanters. Each was in uniform, and one of them, Ivan Fitzgerald, wore the red tabs of a staff officer.

'I liked that funny man,' said the other, Tom Cameron; 'he's a first-class fellow.'

Ivan nodded, his pipe between his lips.

'Delia was n't bad,' Tom went on, 'but she's nothing to what she was in that last piece of hers. I used to go and see her once a week regularly. But I wonder why she always makes herself such a guy in a black dress whenever she dances now.'

Ivan laid his head back and blew a ring which drifted sideways across the pale square of the window.

'Did either of you fellows know Philip Templeton?' said Oliver Dane, still watching the London sky from his window seat.

'Yes,' said Ivan, putting his pipe back between his teeth. 'He was up at Oxford with me. You remember him, Tom, surely. That very quiet fellow at New College. He never did anything special up there, but I

should have thought you'd have known him. One used to see him dining at the Club sometimes our last year. He took Greats the same year as I did, and I used to meet him at lectures sometimes.'

'Oh, I remember him,' said Tom; 'an awful quiet fellow.'

'He and I went out with a draft together,' said Oliver, 'about the end of 1914. We'd been with the reserve battalion about a couple of months, without coming across each other much. But we marched up from the railhead together that night, and I got to know him quite well. I remember getting out of the train and finding the station yard full of ambulances and stretchers. The Huns had started shelling some hospital or other, and they'd had to move at short notice. There was a poor devil lying on the ground just by our carriage door — a stretcher case. It was rather a grisly introduction to the front — made us both feel rather homesick, I think — and Philip opened out to me as we marched our draft up. It's curious the things that stick in one's mind. It was starry and the roads were stiff with frost. I remember coming suddenly on a horse's grave just outside a village — a white heap of lime by the wayside. And then one saw the flares lifting and sinking in the distance, and Philip began to tell me how he'd spent his last day at home fishing.'

'We found the battalion in a dirty little village somewhere near Bethune, and spent a couple of days there with nothing to do except to march one's

platoon about a muddy field. Everyone else had been in trenches already, and Philip and I felt like a pair of new boys, gone to school for the first time and considering how we should get through it all. We were n't allowed far from billets, but we used to go for short, weary walks together to get away from the company mess for a bit. And then the battalion went up into the line. The whole brigade marched down through Bethune, and I remember looking back and seeing the old church tower standing out against a scarlet sunset. And then we were halted somewhere behind Cuinchy, and I was sitting next to Philip on a stubble field when I heard my first bullet go by.

‘We did n't get into trenches until quite late—nearly midnight. My platoon was in support, just behind the firing line; and after a bit Philip, whose company was next mine, came and sat down with me in a hollow of the trench. It was a very lively spot just then—rapid fire on and off all night long. And quite soon we heard that the battalion in front of us on our left had had a post rushed. Evelyn Moore came along and told us about it, and said very likely we should be sent in to push the Huns out again. He told us that a man who had come out in the same boat with us had been killed when the post was rushed, and that brought things home to us rather. Somehow we had n't expected to be killed our first night in the line.

“‘What's the last thing you remember of peace?’” Philip said to me suddenly.

‘I think I talked about a walk I'd had all along the edge of the Cotswolds.

“‘The last thing I remember was a dance,’” said Philip. He'd been dining, he said, in Belgrave Square and had found himself stranded, as one sometimes does at dinner—both the girls

next him talking to their other neighbors. Opposite him there was a girl in a gray dress. Very slight, he said, she was and rather pale, with a mass of brown hair with gold in it bound back on either side of her forehead. Philip had seen her once or twice at dances, though he did n't think she frequented them regularly, and he'd always been a little puzzled by a sort of aloofness there was about her. Just then, he said, there was a flicker of amusement in her face, as she sat there, like himself, deserted by her neighbors. And then their eyes met, and a gleam of laughter, the lightest shadow of friendliness, fell across the table between them before she looked away.

‘In the motor going on to the dance Philip asked who she was. “Miss Earle,” said his hostess. “Have n't you ever met her?”

“I don't think so,” said Philip.

‘His hostess did n't think she went out much. Her mother was dead and she stayed at home a good deal to look after her father. She was a wonderful dancer, and at one time there had been an idea of her going in for it professionally. But she was supposed to have given that up now that she was getting older and wiser.

‘The dance was in Grosvenor Square. It was extraordinary, sitting in that frozen trench, to hear Philip describing the house all filled with roses, with red ramblers in pots standing at every corner of the staircase and a basket full of them over the landing at the head of the stairs. It was a very crowded dance and for some time he could n't catch the girl in gray. But at last, he said, she passed him in the doorway, going to sit a dance out. He asked her for a dance, and she smiled and assented; and he asked her for another, and she made him a little mocking bow. And finally they agreed to dance two running.

“When his first dance with her came round, Philip was waiting for her. There was a semblance of space for dancing at that moment and he wished that she’d been there, ready for a moment’s dancing before the crowd filled the room again. But couple after couple came through the doors, and the space was absorbed by men and girls jostling and watching for their partners. And she did n’t appear till dancing was out of the question.

“Do you think it any good trying to dance?” said Philip.

“None,” said she. “I want you to take me for some fresh air, will you?”

“I should love to,” Philip said. So they gradually forced their way down to the hall and out into the street.

They walked to the corner of the square in silence; and there the girl stood for a moment, lifting her face to the deep blue London sky.

“What an escape!” she said.

“Don’t you like dances either?” said Philip.

“I love dancing,” she said, “but not that,” showing with a sweep of her arm the house they had just come from.

“Somebody told me you were going to be a professional dancer,” said Philip.

“Ah,” said she, “if only I could!”

“Why not?” said he. “I’m sure you’ve got the heart of it in you.”

“What makes you think that?” she said, looking at him to see whether he was mocking at her.

“My bones within me said it when I caught your eye at dinner.”

“By now, Philip said, they were at the corner of Upper Grosvenor Street and Park Lane. The girl turned to him, and put her head on one side and said,

“Would you like to see me dance?”

“Very much,” said Philip.

“Honor bright?” said she.

“Honor bright.”

She stood looking at him for a moment, as though to make certain that he meant what he said.

“You’re sure you won’t be ashamed of me?”

“Nonsense,” said Philip.

The girl held up her dress and made him a deep curtesy. Then she began to dance upon the open pavement while Philip leaned back against a railing and watched her.

He could never tell himself afterwards, he said, what the dance had been. With any other girl that he could think of it must have been a fiasco. But with her it was impossible to do anything but watch. At one moment she seemed to be dancing a story. She came toward him and retreated and swung to right and left, and then her fancy seemed to break away from the story, and she was dancing like a child in sheer merriment and gayety. The passengers on a late bus hustling down Park Lane looked on amazed. A policeman on the other side of the road seemed doubtful if it was his duty to stop her. To and fro she went, swaying in rhythmic gesture, her whole body alive with vivid, throbbing movement. Then the rhythm of her dancing quickened. Her feet flickered like shadows on the pavement. And still the measure quickened; until, with the stamp of a gray heel on the pavement, she stopped defiantly a yard in front of him and the dance was ended.

“Bravo,” said Philip, “bravo!”

“I never dance,” said she, as though evading his compliment, “except for my friends. I want to count you among my friends. May I?”

“It’s an honor to be elected,” said Philip.

“Now we must go back,” said she.

“Oh!” said Philip disappointed.

“I do like you for doing that,” he said.

"You are n't shocked?" she asked him. "When I meet people I want to be friends with, I always want to be friends quickly. And because my dancing's the best thing about me, I like to dance for them."

'At that they turned and walked side by side back toward the square. The girl put her hand lightly on his arm.

"Promise to dance again for me when next we meet," said Philip.

"Over hill over dale,"

she chanted lightly,

"Thorough bush, thorough brier,—

And who can tell which it may be?
You see I'm working to be a professional. But father does n't like the idea and he has expected me to stay at home a good deal since my mother died. You won't find me often at dances. But when we meet again, yes, I'll dance for you, surely."

"I shall keep you to your promise," said Philip. "I shall come up to you, wherever I find you, and I shall say — 'Did not I dance with you in Brabant once?' and you, like Rosaline, must answer — 'Did not I dance with you in Brabant once?' and then and there you must dance for me."

'By now they were back at the house, where the ball was being held. The opening bars of a valse were creeping out through the windows. In the distance a clock struck one.

"Ding dong bell," said she. "Play-time's ended."

Philip said she stood for a moment at the top of the steps and gave him her hand rather shyly. And then, almost before he could take it, she drew it away and they were mounting the stairs together demurely and another partner had caught her and she was gone.'

Oliver Dane got up from the window seat and came across and took a cigarette from the table and lit it.

'Philip made the whole thing awfully vivid to me,' he said, half apologetically, 'and I've never forgotten it. But it's rather difficult to tell a story second hand.'

He sat down again by the window, and the glow of the cigarette lit up his face as he leaned back against the arm of the window seat.

II

'I'm off,' said Tom. 'Are you coming my way, Ivan? It's awful late. I should have bolted before, only I thought Oliver was going to explain why Delia always dances nowadays in black, curse her. Is n't there enough black in London without having to go to a music hall to see it?'

Ivan, sitting in the armchair on the other side of the table, did n't move.

'He was killed afterwards, was n't he, Oliver?' he said.

'Yes,' said Oliver. 'I was going to tell you about it.'

Tom, on his way to pick up his cap and belt from a side table, stopped and turned round. He looked puzzled.

'Are you going to explain why Delia dances in black or are you not?' he said.

'Wait and hear,' said Ivan. 'I'll give you a lift home afterwards. My mother said she'd send the car for me.'

Tom put back his belt and sat down again a little impatiently in his chair, fidgeting with his cap upon his knees. Ivan poured out a drink for himself and Tom, turned out the lamp and lit a cigarette.

'Go on, Oliver,' he said.

Oliver came across to the table again and slowly poured himself out a whiskey and soda. Then he returned to his seat by the window, and for a few moments there was silence in the room.

'I did n't see very much of Philip that winter. He went to a different company directly we came out of the

trenches, and I did n't know any of the fellows in his mess well. But about May he went home on a week's leave, and, when he came back, the battalion was in rest at Bethune and all the companies were messing together. Coming back from leave's always far worse than going out for the first time, and I could see that Philip was simply miserable. He was happier when we got back into the trenches again, and he seemed to be more confident too. His first month out at the front, he said, he really had n't an idea of what went on the other side of our wire. But now he used to volunteer constantly for patrol work and spend half the night out between the lines. He told me once that it all came from a night when he had been sent out to clear up a derelict trench that joined on to one of our saps. His company had to occupy it the next morning, while another battalion did an attack on the left. That night's work, he said, showed him how little danger there was in going out at night; and it gave him a taste for the excitement of night work, too. But I don't think that altogether accounted for the change. He was always at his best up in the line — seemed to forget himself altogether. Back in billets he was restless and rather morose sometimes. I saw a lot of him about then. He took to me, I think. I don't know why. I was younger than he was, of course; and you know what a difference a few years make when one's fresh down from the 'Varsity. But that may have been a reason for it. In some ways he himself was rather like a child puzzled by the war and the life we were leading out there. Anyway he always seemed to like talking to me. But he never talked very freely until the night before he died.

'We were somewhere up behind Richebourg that night, and Philip's company was for it just before dawn.

The ruins of a farm in front of our line had to be taken — I've forgotten its name now. He and I were sitting together over a brazier and thinking, as everyone thinks on such nights, of home.

"Do you remember the girl I told you about that night at Cuinchy?" said Philip suddenly to me.

"Yes," I said.

"I met her again when I was back on leave last month," said he.

'I said nothing, and waited for him to tell me more if he felt inclined. The light of the brazier lit up his face dimly and I could see that he was wrestling with his memories and wondering whether to set them free.

"I wrote to her," he said at last, "as soon as I got back to London, and I heard from her. Her father, she said, had got some job or other behind the line here, and she had been left free at last to devote herself to dancing. She and I dined together one evening, and as I was seeing her home, 'Are you going to dance for me,' I said, 'before I go back to France?'"

"'I'd love to,' said she, 'only my piece won't have started properly before you go back. But we've got a rehearsal on Friday. If you'd like to come to that, I'll dance you a farewell.'"

"'Friday,' said Philip, "was my last night in England, and I told her indeed I would come."

'He dined alone, he said, in some little Soho restaurant, and after dinner he strolled round to the stage door of the theatre. He'd never been to a rehearsal before, and sitting there in the trench, with an hour at least to go before he had to be ready to start, he gave me a minute account of what had happened.

'There was a taxi waiting outside the door, and a small group of men with cigarettes in their mouths were

waiting to go in for their evening's work. A chorus girl was gossiping with a soldier. Philip went through the door and gave his name to the doorkeeper sitting by the entrance. The man had orders, he said, to let him in and led him across a corner of the stage and told him to sit down anywhere he liked in the stalls.

He pulled aside the covering from a seat near the centre gangway, sat down and looked about him. There were a few people sitting in the stalls on his left, and he could see some girls laughing and talking in one of the boxes. On the stage men in shirt sleeves were laboriously drawing up a wooden boat with a painted sail. On the right others were setting the front of an inn, and there was a hitch over the chestnut tree which was supposed to stand over it. One branch had caught across another and a man was calling to have it raised and lowered again. In front a boy was laying out the sheet of a new lyric from the orchestra.

Gradually other men came into the theatre. The producer appeared on the stage and gave some directions in a loud voice. A man, who appeared to be the manager, came and sat in the stalls in front of him. Others came round him, taking directions from him or discussing the changes which had to be made at the last moment in the revue. The musicians came up, one by one, into the orchestra. Then a scene was played. The leading lady, singing hardly above a whisper for the sake of resting her voice, moved to and fro in time to the music, while the chorus danced in support of her. Several times she stopped the orchestra to have some point in the scene changed or to repeat the movement of a dance until the chorus were in accord. A man on Philip's left sat with a watch in his hand, recording how long each

part of the performance was going to take.

The scene ended and a comedian in plain clothes came on for the next. The leading lady came round from the stage to discuss the piece with the manager. Her dresser sat holding a glass in front of her while she plaited her hair afresh, talking and laughing merrily while her fingers moved. Girls from the chorus came and sat in rows on Philip's left, putting up their feet on the seats in front of them. Then Philip heard a voice behind him say:

"Did not I dance with you in Brabant once?" Philip made room for her beside him and she sat down. She was wearing a cloak, but he had glimpses of a silver dancing dress beneath it.

"I wish you were n't going back to-morrow," she said. "But I don't know, really. There's only one place for men at present, and that's with the infantry in France. It's harder for women to choose. Sometimes I wonder if I ought to have gone for a nurse. I nearly went and worked at munitions once. But at the last moment it seemed better to stick to dancing. I can dance, and I'm not sure I can do anything else half so well. At first I thought the war was going to take all the joy out of dancing. But somehow it has n't. It's shaken off so many of the old chains. And it's put me on my mettle. Here's death challenging us all, and dancing's my defiance. So while there's room and time for dancing——"

She threw her hands apart with an expressive gesture.

"Good," said Philip.

"I asked you to come to-night," she said, "because dancing was the best farewell I could give you. We often play, you know, at rehearsal, but to-night I'm going to dance really and truly. I shan't say good-bye to you first, and I shan't come and say good-bye to you afterwards. There's noth-

ing left of me when I've finished dancing. Besides, I can't say things as well as I can dance them. You'll understand, won't you?"

Philip nodded. She spoke, he said, of her dancing almost reverently, as though it were a thing apart and greater than herself. He understood; but before he could answer —

"Let's have Miss Earle's dance next," he heard the manager say in front of him. "Are you there, Miss Earle?" he called out, looking round for her.

She put her hand on Philip's for a moment as she passed him. He glanced up at her. She had the same whimsical, understanding look on her face that he had intercepted once across a dinner table in Grosvenor Square. Only to-night the excitement of her coming dance shone through it, and, as she went forward to speak to the manager, the gold gleamed in the mass of her hair.

The conductor joined her for a moment, and she seemed from the gesture of her hands, to be giving him instructions about the music for her dance. Then she went quickly along a line of stalls and disappeared at the back of the boxes.

The orchestra turned over her music. The conductor gave them a few instructions. She came on to the stage from the left, up to the footlights, and putting her arms across her face to shade her eyes from their glare, and speaking to the conductor:

"Real dancing to-night," she warned him.

"I don't know how to convey to you properly the description Philip gave me of that last dance of hers. He himself could n't get the words he wanted, though he forgot everything else while he was talking to me — "like a dying man to dying men," I remember thinking. And it's bound to sound cold and

formal at second hand. But it was clear what an extraordinary impression her dance had made on him. You can't tell what a man's anchors are till he's up against death, and I doubt if Philip had ever been anchored properly to anything. A man looking for anchorage — that was one of the first impressions I had of him. But it was amazing the effect this girl's dancing had had. I should have laughed if I'd heard the story from anyone else's lips. But I'm sure from the way he spoke about it that he felt it to be the one real thing he had come across.

"It's no use my trying to give you his account of her dancing that night in his own words. All I can do is to give you the picture of it that his account has left on my mind. He made it extraordinarily real to me. I'm not sure if I can convey any of that reality to you.

The dance opened with a slow and leisurely movement that she marked with clear and finished steps. Passing to and fro across the stage, with the least touch of mischief and expectancy in the firm carriage of her head, she seemed to be watching her steps, emphasizing their precision and carefullest they should slip for a moment out of the delicate and formal texture of her dance. To and fro she went, backward and forward, and then, almost insensibly, as though a new spirit were blowing through the bars of that strict measure, her feet began to quicken upon the boards and her body to join their quickened movement.

To and fro she went, backward and forward: but now it was as though she were straining at the leash of the music instead of following, leading it on a magical quest in search of color and of life. To and fro she went in a quick swaying measure. The gilded theatre and its scenery had vanished. Winds from a greater world than theirs

were breathing into the gleaming circle of her dance. And still the music, falling further and further into the background, quickened its pace; while her sweet and vital body, like a spirit of gey, melodious laughter, hovered and poised and quivered above it.

'Again the dance slowed, returned to an echo of its opening. Again she seemed to be watching her own flying steps, but this time watching lest any fragment of the bright life of the dance should escape her dominion. Forward she went like a queen, and like a queen again drew back, and for a moment stayed her steps. Then she was off in final surrender to the swift challenge and adventure of her dancing. Her feet ran like foam driven by the wind. Life itself seemed caught into the fire of her quick traveling spirit, as she moved, a darting patch of color, flung to and fro across the web of the music. And then, when that glowing passion of rhythm had brimmed, brimmed to a bright sea of heavenly dancing, she stopped and for a moment stood poised, and with a gesture that seemed to take her dance and scatter it like spray into the surrounding darkness, suddenly she was fled.'

Oliver leaned out of the window, and for a moment the other two watched him in silence. Then he began his story again:

'Philip got up and went away,' he said, 'to get ready for the attack. Ivan has heard this part of the story before. We watched his party start out into the darkness; and presently, waiting behind there in the trench, we saw the flash and burst of bombs ahead of us, and lights sailed up from the German front line; and then machine guns opened and we gave them back rapid fire from our line. Gradually the firing became spasmodic and presently it died away. And a messen-

ger came back from Philip to say they'd got the post and wanted nothing but some more wire to carry on with. A thick fog came on about dawn, and in the mist we heard bombing start again in the direction of the farm and the sound of revolver shots. And suddenly as these got fewer, a single cry, clear and triumphant, came ringing through the fog — "Delia!"

'Two days later my company took the farm again and held it. I happened to be one of the first to enter, and I found Philip lying face downward behind a low fragment of wall, his arms drawn sharply into his sides. There was a knot of dead Germans in front of him in the grass — they looked almost like a group of waxworks lying there in their gray uniforms. I think Philip must have caught them with his revolver, just before he died. This was his. I took it off his body that day and his people sent it back to me as a keepsake.'

Oliver held up his hand and showed the luminous dial of his wrist watch. The others leaned forward, staring at the round patch of light that shone faintly in the darkness of the room. All three men were silent, thinking each in his own fashion of the ties, weightless and invisible, that bind the hearts of men. And in their minds the picture of that ruined farm changed to and fro with the sight of the stage where they had watched a solitary black figure dance that evening.

Ivan crossed to the window, and looked out with Oliver into the night. The grinding noise of a train broke through the silence. It died away, and the footsteps of a passer-by grew faint down the street. Overhead was a clear sweep of cloud and stars. Here and there beyond the river the black outline of a factory chimney rose against the sky. All about them lay the

glimmering darkness of London. The drifting lights of a barge, half discerned and constantly hidden, were passing down with the tide. Below the window the tall trees stood still and silent, with hanging and compassionate branches. A clock behind them in the room struck one.

The Cornhill Magazine

There was a pause, and then Ivan got up.

'I was waiting for Big Ben to strike,' he said, 'I forgot ——'

'Damn the war,' said Tom. 'Good-night, Oliver.'

He took his cap and coat and Ivan followed him out of the room.

SOME MEMORIES OF MALTA

BY CAMILLE CHEMIN

FAITHFUL to the traditions of the 'hospitalers' of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Malta has been called during this war the nurse, the grand hospitaler of Malta.

The huge hall, close on three hundred yards long, with its friezes adorned with armorial bearings, in the old hospital at Valetta, which once saw the Knights of Saint John, in the heroic times of the Turkish invasions, care for the wounded companions of Villiers de l'Isle Adam or the fever-stricken travelers on their way back from Egypt or the Holy Land, has now seen, side by side with the glorious Anzacs of Gallipoli and the English evacuated from Mesopotamia or Jerusalem, our Annamites or Malgaches, who had come to work on the French front, Serbs fresh from their awful exodus, our mutilated soldiers or our typhoid fever cases from Salonica.

Around the old historic hospital and the lazarets founded by the Grand Master Lascaris, the hospitals have sprung up in large numbers during these hundred years of salutary English administration, and it was in the

roomy Poor House Hospital, on the hill, near the Mussulman cemetery, near the leprosy hospital (close on one hundred and eighty lepers are still cared for in Malta), it was at Poor House Hospital, I say, that I went to see our poor dead fellows — an awful sight, alas! unrecognizable as they were, after the explosion of the Saint Laurent in the bay of Marsamuscetto. It was in that other bright hospital, near Fort Saint Elmo, with its loggia-like galleries overlooking the sea or an inner courtyard ablaze with flowers that, when visiting our sick, I was often welcomed by the calm smile of kindly 'sisters,' and the smiling humor of old English doctors. Near the mighty ramparts, on the dazzling heights, above a stone field sown with dusty cactus, rises the white façade of Cotonera Hospital, whence the patients, looking through the sun-bathed arcades, over a platband set with carnations, anemones, and geraniums, can take in the blue width of the sea, and, rising one above the other in the golden light, the far-off domes, the bastions of the port, the campaniles