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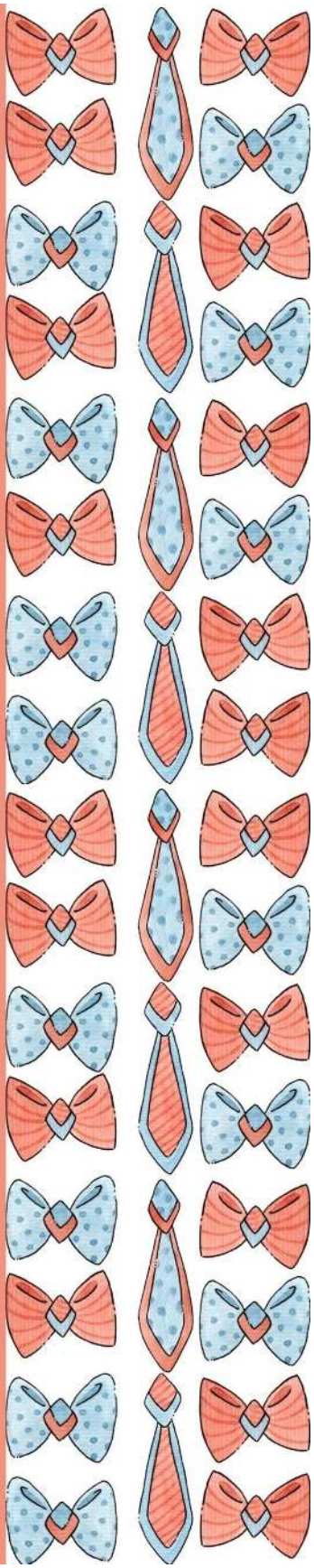

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One

The Uttermost Part

I have always admired the sagacity of Balak, King of Moab, about whom we learn something in the Book of Numbers. He was threatened with invasion by a powerful foe and felt unequal to offering armed resistance. He invoked the aid of spiritual powers by inviting a prophet, Balaam, to come and curse the army of the invaders. Balaam suffered himself to be persuaded and bribed by the king. All kings—and the statesmen who nowadays regulate the conduct of kings—understand the business of managing men so far. Persuasion and bribery are the methods of statecraft. But Balak knew more than the elements of his trade. He understood that spiritual forces, if merely bribed, are ineffective. To make a curse operate there must be a certain amount of conviction in the mind of the curser. Balaam was not convinced, and when he surveyed the hosts of Israel from the top of a hill felt himself compelled by the spirit within him to bless instead of curse. The king, discouraged but not hopeless, took the prophet to the top of another hill, showed him a different view of the camp of Israel and invited him to curse the people from there.

At first sight this seems a foolish thing to have done; but properly considered it appears very crafty. From the fresh viewpoint, Balaam saw not

the whole, but only the "uttermost part" of the hosts of Israel. I suppose he no longer saw the first-line troops, the army in battle array. Instead he saw the base camps, the non-combatant followers of the army, a great deal that was confused and sordid, very little that was glorious or fine. It might conceivably have been possible for him to curse the whole army and cast a blight upon its enterprise, when his eyes rested only on the camp-followers, the baggage trains, the mobs of cattle, the maimed and unfit men; when the fine show of the fighters was out of sight. Plainly if a curse of any real value was to be pronounced it must be by a prophet who saw much that was execrable, little that was obviously glorious.

It is Balak's sagacity in choosing the prophet's second point of view which I admire. If any cursing of an army is done at all, it will be done by some one, whose post is behind the lines, who has seen, not the whole, but only the uttermost part, and that the least attractive part of the hosts.

It was my luck to remain, all the time I was in France, in safe places. I never had the chance of seeing the gallantry of the men who attack or the courageous tenacity of those who defend. I missed all the excitement. I experienced none of those hours of terror which I have heard described, nor saw how finely man's will can triumph over terror. I had no chance of knowing that great comradeship which grows up among those who suffer together. War, seen at the front, is hell. I hardly ever met any one who doubted that. But it is a hell inhabited not by devils, but by heroes, and human nature rises to unimaginable heights when it is subjected to the awful strain of fighting. It is no wonder that those who have lived with our fighting army are filled with admiration for the men, are prepared to bless altogether, not war which we all hate, but the men who wage it.

The case is very different behind the lines. There, indeed, we see the seamy side of war. There are the men who, in some way or other, have secured and keep safe jobs, the *embusqués* whom the French newspapers constantly denounce. There are the officers who have failed, proved unfit for command, shown themselves lacking in courage perhaps, and in mercy have been sent down to some safe base. There are the men who have been broken in spirit as well as in body, who drag on an existence utterly dull, very toilsome, well-nigh hopeless, and are illuminated by no high call for heroic deeds. There the observer sees whatever there is to be seen of petty spite and jealousies, the manipulating of jobs, the dodging of regulations, all that is most ignoble in the soldier's trade. There also are the men with grievances, who, in their own estimation, are fit for posts quite other than those they hold. Some one described war at the front as an affair of months of boredom punctuated by moments of terror. If that philosopher had been stationed at a base he might have halved his epigram and described war as months of boredom unpunctuated even by terror.

Yet even behind the lines, in the remotest places, that which moves our admiration far outshines what is sordid and mean. We still bless, not war, but soldiers. We forget the failures of man in joyful contemplation of his achievements.

Here are the great hospitals, where suffering men succeed each other day after day, so that we seem to see a mist of pain rising like a ceaseless cloud of incense smoke for the nostrils of the abominable Moloch who is the god of war. A man, though long inured to such things, may curse the Moloch, but he will bless the sufferers who form the sacrifice. Their patience, their silent heroism, are beyond our praise.

Here are huge cemeteries, long lines of graves, where every morning some are laid to rest, with reverence indeed, but with scant measure of the ritual pomp with which men are wont to pay their final honour to the dead. These have passed, not in a moment amid the roar of battle, but after long bearing of pain, and lonely, with the time for last farewells but none greatly loved to say them to. Yet, standing above the lines of rude coffins, viewing the names and numbers pencilled on the lids, our hearts are lifted up. We know how great it is to lay down life for others. The final wailing notes of the "Last Post" speak our feeling: "Good night. Good-bye. See you again, soon."

Here, among those less worthy, are men who are steadily doing, without much hope of praise, things intolerably monotonous, doing them day after day for years, inspired by what Ruskin calls "the unvexed instinct of duty." Often these are old men, too old for field command. They have spent their lives in the army, have learned, have worked, have waited in the hope that some day their chance would come. Soldiers by profession and desire, they have looked for the great opportunity which the war they foresaw would give. The war came and the opportunity; but came too late for them. They can look for nothing but the dull duties of the base. They do them, enduring minor hardships, facing ceaseless worries, going calmly on, while the great stream of war on which they hoped to float moves on, leaving them behind. With them are others, younger men, who have seen some fighting, have been wounded or broken in health. Often they have struggled hard to secure the posts they hold. They might have gone home. They counted it a desirable thing to be employed still, since actual fighting was impossible, somewhere in touch with fighting men.

I wonder how much Balaam divined of the greatness which, no doubt, was in "the uttermost part" of the host when the king showed it to him. I suppose

he understood something of it, for once again, to the indignation of Balak, he blessed instead of cursing. I am sure that any one who has lived long among the men at our bases will feel as I do, that his pride in what is great there far outweighs his disappointment at the other things he saw. I never saw the fighting or the actual front, but even if I had seen nothing else but the fighting I could scarcely feel greater admiration for our officers and men or more love for them.

I have, of course, no tales of adventure to tell. Perhaps I am too old for adventuring, or never had the spirit which makes adventures possible. Yet I own to a certain feeling of disappointment when the doctor who examined me in London told me with almost brutal frankness that he would not allow me to be sent to the front. To France I might go, and even that permission, I think, was a concession. But in France I must remain in places where hardship is not extreme. Doctors are powerful people in the army and in certain matters their word is the supreme law. But fortunately there are always other doctors. And I think I could in the end have managed to get to the very front, in spite of that first man, though he held high rank and was much be-tabbed. But by the time I found out how to get round his prohibition I had become so much interested in my work that I did not want to leave it and even felt grateful to that doctor for sending me to France in the position of a man marked P.B., letters which stand for Permanent Base, and mean that their bearer will not be asked to go where fighting is.

For one other thing I am thankful to the doctor who examined me. He did not ask me to be vaccinated, inoculated, or half-poisoned in any other way. If he had demanded such things of me before I held my commission, I might have had to yield, and I should have disliked the business greatly. Afterwards I remained an unpersecuted heretic and never underwent any of these popular

operations. For months, I know, a form was constantly filled up about me and sent to the medical staff of the base at which I was, stating the awful fact that I had escaped the safeguards provided for me, and was still alive. I used to expect that trouble of some sort would arise, but none ever did. Perhaps the authorities were merciful to me because I made no attempt to propagate my opinions; which indeed are scarcely opinions. I should not dream of denying that inoculation of every known kind is excellent for other people, and ought to be rigorously enforced on them. My only strong feeling is that I should escape.

My medical examination was a much more rigorous and unpleasant business than my interview—I can scarcely call this an examination—with my particular chief, the Chaplain-General. He appeared to be satisfied by previous inquiries that I was a fit and proper person—or as little unfit as could reasonably be hoped—to minister to soldiers in France. He took down my answers to half a dozen questions on a sheet of paper which somebody afterwards must have lost, for I had to answer the same questions again by letter after I got to France.

Up to the point of my interview and examination in London, the negotiations with regard to my commission as Chaplain to the Forces were conducted with dignified deliberation. My letters were answered a fortnight or so after they were received. There was no sense of urgency or hurry. We might have been corresponding about a monument to be erected at a remote date to some one still alive and quite young. This, if slightly irritating, gave me a feeling of great confidence in the Chaplains' Department of the War Office. It was evidently a body which worked methodically, carefully, and with due consideration of every step it took. Its affairs were likely to prove efficiently organised. I looked forward to finding myself part of a machine which ran

smoothly, whose every cog fitted exactly into the slot designed for it. No part of the War Office was likely at the moment to adopt a German motto; but the Chaplains' Department was plainly inspired by the spirit of Goethe's *Ohne haste, ohne raste*.

I have heard other men complain that the Department is dilatory, not merely deliberate, and that it is often impossible to get an answer to a letter at all. There is a story told of a man who wrote offering his services as chaplain, wrote again after a decent interval, continued to write for many months, and finally received, by way of reply, a nice little tract—not even on patience, but on conversion. I do not know whether that story is true or not. No tract was ever sent to me, and my letters were answered—after a time.

After my visit to London, the interview, and the examination, the whole spirit of the proceedings changed. I was involved in a worse than American hustle, and found myself obliged to hustle other innocent people, tailors and boot-makers, in order to get together some kind of a kit in time for a start to be made at the shortest possible notice.

I am told that the whole military machine works in this way in dealing with individuals. There is a long period of leisurely and quiet thought—it sometimes appears of complete inertia. Then there is a violent rush, and all sorts of things happen in a minute. I do not know for certain whether officers in other branches of the service suffer in this way. My experience as a chaplain made me feel like a bullet in a gun. For a long time I lay passive, and, except for the anxiety of anticipation, at rest. The man who held the weapon was making up his mind to fire. Then, without any special warning to me, he pulled the trigger, and before I could take a long breath I was flying through space to an unknown destination, without even the comfort of knowing that I had been aimed at any particular object.

But my faith in the Department was unshaken. I remembered the cautious deliberation of the earlier proceedings, and came to the conclusion that whereas there had been for many months an ample supply of chaplains at the front, and a regular flow of reinforcements from home, a sudden and desperate shortage had occurred—owing to casualties in battle, or some kind of pestilence—and that it was necessary to rush new men to the scene of action at the highest speed. This explanation seemed to me reasonable. It did not turn out to be true. There was no particularly urgent demand for chaplains when I reached France.

I am now inclined to think that the Chaplains' Department does its business in this particular way with deliberate intention. It desires first to produce an impression of stability, wisdom, and forethought. It proceeds slowly, and for long periods does not proceed at all. It also wishes its servants to feel that it is vigorous, filled with energy, and working at terrifically high pressure. Then it does things with a rush which would put to shame the managing directors of the New York Underground Railway.

Two

Getting There

I made my start from Victoria Station on a January morning. I had worn His Majesty's uniform for no more than two days, and was still uneasily conscious of my strange clothes. I was uncertain about the proper adjustment of straps and buttons. I came for the first time in my life into touch with the army. I, a man of over fifty, went back with a leap to the emotions of forty years before. I was a new boy in a big school.

Others—some who have had the experience and more who have not—have described that start from Victoria or Waterloo. They have said something about the pangs of farewell, though I cannot imagine how any one who has been through it wants to talk about that. They have said a good deal about the thrill of excitement which comes with the beginning of adventure. They have described a certain awe of the unknown. They have tingled with intense curiosity.

I confess chiefly to bewilderment, the discomfort of strangeness and an annoying sense of my own extreme insignificance. I was a new boy. I wanted to behave properly, to do the right thing, and I had no way of knowing what the right thing was. I was absurdly anxious not to "cheek" anybody, and

thereby incur the kind of snubbing, I scarcely expected the kicks, which I had endured long ago when I found myself a lonely mite in a corner of the cloisters of my first school.

I sat, with my bundle of papers tucked in beside me, in a corner of a Pullman car. Opposite me was an officer. I recognised, by the look of his Sam Browne belt, that he was an old boy, that he had been there before. I did not know then, being wholly unskilled in pips and badges, what he was. My impression now is that he was an artillery captain, probably returning to the front after leave. It seems ridiculous to be afraid to speak to an artillery captain; but nothing would have induced me to begin a conversation with that man. For all I knew he might have been a general, and it might have been the worst kind of bad form for a mere padre to speak to a general. I even thought of saluting him when I first caught his eye, but I did not know how to salute.

It was he, in the end, who spoke to me. We had reached the end of our train journey and were gathering coats and haversacks from the racks above our heads. I left my papers—*Punch* and *The Bystander*—on the seat.

"You ought to take those with you," he said. "You'll find lots of fellows jolly thankful to get them over there."

So I was going to a land where men could not easily come by *Punch* and *The Bystander*. In a general way I knew that before he spoke. I had heard of the hardships of war. I was prepared for my share of them. But I had somehow failed to realise that it might be impossible, under certain circumstances, to buy *Punch* if I wanted it.

The boat, though we arrived beside it early in the morning, did not actually start till afternoon. I might have gone to an hotel and had a comfortable luncheon. I was afraid to do anything of the sort. Military discipline is not a thing to play tricks with. I had made up my mind about that before I started,

and in the orders given me for my journey there was not a word about luncheon. I went hungry—foolishly, no doubt.

I heard a story once about a sergeant and several men who were cut off by the Germans from their battalion. They held out for forty hours and were finally rescued. It was found that they had not touched their iron (emergency) ration. Asked why they had gone hungry when they had food in their pockets, the sergeant replied that the eating of iron rations without orders from a superior officer was forbidden. His was a great devotion to discipline—heroic, though foolish. My abstinence was merely foolish. I could not claim that I had any direct orders not to go to an hotel for luncheon.

While I waited on the deck of the steamer I met M. He was alone as I was; but he looked much less frightened than I felt. He was a padre too; but his uniform was not aggressively new. It seemed to me that he might know something about military life. My orders were "to report to the M.L.O." when I landed. I wanted very much to know what that word "report" meant. I wanted still more to know what an M.L.O. was and where a stray voyager would be likely to find him.

It was not difficult to make friends with M. It is never difficult for one padre to make friends with another. All that is necessary by way of introduction is a frank and uncensored expression of opinion about the Chaplains' Department of the War Office. The other man's soul is knit to yours at once. I cannot now remember whether M. or I attacked the subject first. I know we agreed. I suppose it is the same with all branches of the service. Combatant officers are, or used in those days to be, one in heart when discussing the Staff. I never met a doctor who did not think that the medical services are organised by congenital idiots. Every one from the humblest A.S.C. subaltern to the haughtiest guardsman agrees that the War Office is the

refuge of incompetents. Padres, perhaps, express themselves more freely than the others. They are less subject to the penalties which threaten those who criticise their superiors. But their opinions are no stronger than those of other people.

Even without that bond of common feeling I think I should have made friends with M. No franker, more straightforward, less selfish man has crossed the sea to France wearing the obscured Maltese Cross which decorates the cap of the padre. It was my first real stroke of luck that I met M. on the deck of that steamer. As it turned out he knew no more than I did about what lay before us. His previous service had been in England and he was going to France for the first time. An M.L.O. was a mystery to him.

But he was cheerful and self-confident. His view was that an exaggerated importance might easily be attached to military orders. If an M.L.O. turned out to be an accessible person, easily recognised, we should report to him and set our consciences at ease. If, on the other hand, the authorities chose to conceal their M.L.O. in some place difficult to find, we should not report to him. Nothing particular would happen either way. So M. thought, and he paced the deck with so springy a step that I began to hope he might be right.

Our passage was abominably rough. M., who dislikes being seasick in public, disappeared. I think what finished him was the sight of an officer in a kilt crawling on his hands and knees across the wet and heaving deck, desperately anxious to get to the side of the ship before his malady reached its crisis. M.'s chair was taken by a pathetic-looking V.A.D. girl, whose condition soon drove me away.

It is one of the mitigations of the horrors of this war that whoever takes part in it is sure to meet friends whom he has lost sight of for years, whom he would probably lose sight of altogether if the chances of war did not bring