

It was in July of 1914—on the Saturday of Henley Week. People who were there may remember that, for once in a way, our fickle climate was pleased to smile upon us.

Underneath the wall of Phyllis Court a punt was tied up. The prizes had been given away, and the tightly packed boats surged slowly up and down the river, freed at last from the extreme boredom of watching crews they did not know falling exhausted out of their boats. In the punt of which I speak were three men and a girl. One of the men was myself, who have no part in this episode, save the humble one of narrator. The other three were the principals ; I would have you make their acquaintance. I would hurriedly say that it is not the old, old story of a woman and two men, for one of the men was her brother.

To begin with—the girl. Pat Delawney

—she was always called Pat, as she didn't look like a Patricia—was her name, and she was—well, here I give in. I don't know the colour of her eyes, nor can I say with any certainty the colour of her hair; all I know is that she looked as if the sun had come from heaven and kissed her, and had then gone back again satisfied with his work. She was a girl whom to know was to love—the dearest, most understanding soul in God's whole earth. I'd loved her myself since I was out of petticoats.

Then there was Jack Delawnay, her brother. Two years younger he was, and between the two of them there was an affection and love which is frequently conspicuous by its absence between brother and sister. He was a cheery youngster, a good-looking boy, and fellows in the regiment liked him. He rode straight, and he had the money to keep good cattle. In addition, the men loved him, and that means a lot when you size up an officer.

And then there was the other. Older by ten years than the boy—the same age as myself—Jerry Dixon was my greatest friend.

We had fought together at school, played the ass together at Sandhurst, and entered the regiment on the same day. He had "A" company and I had "C," and the boy was one of his subalterns. Perhaps I am biased, but to me Jerry Dixon had one of the finest characters I have ever seen in any man. He was no Galahad, no prig; he was just a man, a white man. He had that cheerily ugly face which is one of the greatest gifts a man can have, and he also had Pat as his fiancée, which was another.

My name is immaterial, but everyone calls me Winkle, owing to—— Well, some day I may tell you.

The regiment, our regiment, was the, let us call it the Downshires.

We had come over from Aldershot and were week-ending at the Delawnays' place—they always took one on the river for Henley. At the moment Jerry was holding forth, quite unmoved by exhortations to "Get out and get under" bawled in his ears by blackened gentlemen of doubtful voice and undoubted inebriation.

As I write, the peculiar—the almost sinister—nature of his conversation, in the light of future events, seems nothing short of diabolical. And yet at the time we were just three white-flannelled men and a girl with a great floppy hat lazing over tea in a punt. How the gods must have laughed!

“My dear old Winkle”—he was lighting a cigarette as he spoke—“you don’t realise the deeper side of soldiering at all. The subtle nuances (French, Pat, in case my accent is faulty) are completely lost upon you.”

I remember smiling to myself as I heard Jerry getting warmed up to his subject, and then my attention wandered, and I dozed off. I had heard it all before so often from the dear old boy. We always used to chaff him about it in the mess. I can see him now, after dinner, standing with his back to the ante-room fire, a whisky-and-soda in his hand and a dirty old pipe between his teeth.

“It’s all very well for you fellows to laugh,” he would say, “but I’m right for all that.”

It is absolutely essential to think out beforehand what one would do in certain exceptional eventualities, so that when that eventuality does arise you won't waste any time, but will automatically do the right thing."

And then the adjutant recalled in a still small voice how he first realised the orderly-room sergeant's baby was going to be sick in his arms at the regiment's Christmas-tree festivities, and, instead of throwing it on the floor, he had clung to it for that fatal second of indecision. As he admitted, it was certainly not one of the things he had thought out beforehand.

He's gone, too, has old Bellairs the adjutant. I wonder how many fellows I'll know when I get back to them next week? But I'm wandering.

"Winkle, wake up!" It was Pat speaking. "Jerry is being horribly serious, and I'm not at all certain it will be safe to marry him; he'll be experimenting on me."

"What's he been saying?" I murmured sleepily.

"He's been thinking what he'd do,"

laughed Jack, "if the stout female personage in yonder small canoe overbalanced and fell in. There'll be no fatal second then, Jerry, my boy. It'll be a minute even if I have to hold you. You'd never be able to look your friends in the face again if you didn't let her drown."

"Ass!" grunted Jerry. "No, Winkle, I was just thinking, amongst other things, of what might very easily happen to any of us three here, and what did happen to old Grantley in South Africa." Grantley was one of our majors. "He told me all about it one day in one of his expansive moods. It was during a bit of a scrap just before Paardeburg, and he had some crowd of irregular Johnnies. He was told off to take a position, and apparently it was a fairly warm proposition. However, it was perfectly feasible if only the men stuck it. Well, they didn't, but they would have except for his momentary indecision. He told me that there came a moment in the advance when one man wavered. He knew it and felt it all through him. He saw the man—he almost saw the

deadly contagion spreading from that one man to the others—and he hesitated and was lost. When he sprang forward and tried to hold 'em, he failed. The fear was on them, and they broke. He told me he regarded himself as every bit as much to blame as the man who first gave out."

"But what could he have done, Jerry?" asked Pat.

"Shot him, dear—shot him on the spot without a second's thought—killed the origin of the fear before it had time to spread. I venture to say that there are not many fellows in the Service who would do it—without thinking: and you can't think—you dare not, even if there was time. It goes against the grain, especially if you know the man well, and it's only by continually rehearsing the scene in your mind that you'd be able to do it."

We were all listening to him now, for this was a new development I'd never heard before.

"Just imagine the far-reaching results one coward—no, not coward, possibly—but one

man who has reached the breaking-point, may have. Think of it, Winkle. A long line stretched out, attacking. One man in the centre wavers, stops. Spreading outwards, the thing rushes like lightning, because, after all, fear is only emotion, like joy and sorrow, and one knows how quickly they will communicate themselves to other people. Also, in such a moment as an attack, men are particularly susceptible to emotions. All that is primitive is uppermost, and their reasoning powers are more or less in abeyance."

"But the awful thing, Jerry," said Pat quietly, "is that you would never know whether it had been necessary or not. It might not have spread; he might have answered to your voice—oh! a thousand things might have happened."

"It's not worth the risk, dear. One man's life is not worth the risk. It's a risk you just dare not take. It may mean everything—it may mean failure—it may mean disgrace." He paused and looked steadily across the shifting scene of gaiety and colour,

while a long bamboo pole, with a little bag on the end, wielded by some passing vocalist, was thrust towards him unheeded. Then with a short laugh he pulled himself together, and lit a cigarette. "But enough of dull care. Let us away, and gaze upon beautiful women and brave men. What's that little tune they're playing?"

"That's that waltz—what the deuce is the name, Pat?" asked Jack, untying the punt.

"'Destiny,'" answered Pat briefly, and we passed out into the stream.

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A month afterwards we three were again at Henley, not in flannels in a punt on the river, but in khaki, with a motor waiting at the door of the Delawnays' house to take us back to Aldershot. I do not propose to dwell over the scene, but in the setting down of the story it cannot be left out. Europe was at war; the long-expected by those scoffed-at alarmists had actually come. England and Germany were at each other's throats.

Inside the house Jack was with his mother.

Personally, I was standing in the garden with the grey-haired father ; and Jerry was—well, where else could he have been ?

As is the way with men, we discussed the roses, and the rascality of the Germans, and everything except what was in our hearts. And in one of the pauses in our spasmodic conversation we heard her voice, just over the hedge :

“ God guard and keep you, my man, and bring you back to me safe ! ” And the voice was steady, though one could feel those dear eyes dim with tears.

And then Jerry's, dear old Jerry's voice—a little bit gruff it was, and a little bit shaky : “ My love ! My darling ! ”

But the old man was going towards the house, blowing his nose ; and I—don't hold with love and that sort of thing at all. True, I blundered into a flower-bed, which I didn't see clearly, as I went towards the car, for there are things which one may not hear and remain unmoved. Perhaps, if things had been different, and Jerry—dear old Jerry—hadn't— But there, I'm wandering again.

At last we were in the car and ready to start.

"Take care of him, Jerry; he and Pat are all we've got." It was Mrs. Delawnay speaking, standing there with the setting sun on her sweet face and her husband's arm about her.

"I'll be all right, mater," answered Jack gruffly. "Buck up! Back for Christmas!"

"I'll look after him, Mrs. Delawnay," answered Jerry, but his eyes were fixed on Pat, and for him the world held only her.

As the car swung out of the gate, we looked back the last time and saluted, and it was only I who saw through a break in the hedge two women locked in each other's arms, while a grey-haired gentleman sat very still on a garden-seat, with his eyes fixed on the river rolling smoothly by.

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It was on the Aisne I took it. Through that ghastly fourteen days we had slogged dully south away from Mons, ever getting nearer Paris. Through the choking dust, with the men staggering as they walked—some asleep, some babbling, some cursing—

but always marching, marching, marching ; digging at night, only to leave the trenches in two hours and march on again ; with ever and anon a battery of horse tearing past at a gallop, with the drivers lolling drunkenly in their saddles, and the guns jolting and swaying behind the straining, sweating horses, to come into action on some ridge still further south, and try to check von Kluck's hordes, if only for a little space. Every bridge in the hands of anxious-faced sapper officers, prepared for demolition one and all, but not to be blown up till all our troops were across. Ticklish work, for should there be a fault, there is not much time to repair it.

But at last it was over, and we turned north. A few days later, in the afternoon, my company crossed a pontoon bridge on the Aisne, and two hours afterwards we dug ourselves in a mile and a half beyond it. The next morning, as I was sitting in one of the trenches, there was a sudden, blinding roar—and oblivion.

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I will pass rapidly over the next six weeks

—over my journey from the clearing hospital to the base at Havre, of my voyage back to England in a hospital ship, and my ultimate arrival at Drayton Hall, the Delawnays' place in Somerset, where I had gone to convalesce.

During the time various fragments of iron were being picked from me and the first shock of the concussion was wearing off, we had handed over our trenches on the Aisne to the French, and moved north to Flanders.

Occasional scrawls came through from Jack and Jerry, but the people in England who had any knowledge at all of the fighting and of what was going on, grew to dread with an awful dread the sight of the telegraph-boy, and it required an effort of will to look at those prosaic casualty lists in the morning papers.

Then suddenly without warning, as such news always does, it came. The War Office, in the shape of a whistling telegraph-boy, regretted to inform Mr. Delawnay that his son, Lieutenant Jack Delawnay of the Royal Downshire Regiment, had been killed in action.

Had it been possible during the terrible days after the news came, I would have gone away, but I was still too weak to move ; and I like to think that, perhaps, my presence there was some comfort to them, as a sort of connection through the regiment with their dead boy. After the first numbing shock, the old man bore it grandly.

“ He was all I had,” he said to me one day as I lay in bed, “ but I give him gladly for his country’s sake.” He stood looking at the broad fields. “ All his,” he muttered ; “ all would have been the dear lad’s—and now six inches of soil and a wooden cross, perhaps not that.”

And Pat, poor little Pat, used to come up every day and sit with me, sometimes in silence, with her great eyes fixed on the fire, sometimes reading the paper, because my eyes weren’t quite right yet.

For about a fortnight after the news we did not think it strange ; but then, as day by day went by, the same fear formulated in both our minds. I would have died sooner than whisper it ; but one afternoon I found

her eyes fixed on mine. We had been silent for some time, and suddenly in the firelight I saw the awful fear in her mind as clearly as if she had spoken it.

“You’re thinking it too, Winkle,” she whispered, leaning forward. “Why hasn’t he written? Why hasn’t Jerry written one line? Oh, my God! don’t say that *he* has been——”

“Hush, dear!” I said quietly. “His people would have let you know if they had had a wire.”

“But, Winkle, the Colonel has written that Jack died while gallantly leading a counter-attack to recover lost trenches. Surely, Jerry would have found time for a line, unless something had happened to him; Jack was actually in his company.”

All of which I knew, but could not answer.

“Besides,” she went on after a moment, “you know how dad is longing for details. He wants to know everything about Jack, and so do we all. But oh, Winkle! I want to know if my man is all right. Brother and

lover—not both, oh, God—not both!” The choking little sobs wrung my heart.

The next day we got a wire from him. He was wounded slightly in the arm, and was at home. He was coming to us. Just that—no more. But, oh! the difference to the girl. Everything explained, everything clear, and the next day Jerry would be with her. Only as I lay awake that night thinking, and the events of the last three weeks passed through my mind, the same thought returned with maddening persistency. Slightly wounded in the arm, evidently recently as there was no mention in the casualty list, and for three weeks no line, no word. And then I cursed myself as an ass and a querulous invalid.

At three o'clock he arrived, and they all came up to my room. The first thing that struck me like a blow was that it was his left arm which was hit—and the next was his face. Whether Pat had noticed that his writing arm was unhurt, I know not; but she had seen the look in his eyes, and was afraid.

Then he told the story, and his voice was

as the voice of the dead. Told the anxious, eager father and mother the story of their boy's heroism. How, having lost some trenches, the regiment made a counter-attack to regain them. How first of them all was Jack, the men following him, as they always did, until a shot took him clean through the heart, and he dropped, leaving the regiment to surge over him for the last forty yards, and carry out gloriously what they had been going to do.

And then the old man, pulling out the letter from the Colonel, and trying to read it through his blinding tears: "He did well, my boy," he whispered; "he did well, and died well. But, Jerry, the Colonel says in his letter," and he wiped his eyes and tried to read—"he says in his letter that Jack must have been right into their trenches almost, as he was killed at point-blank range with a revolver. One of those swine of German officers, I suppose." He shook his fist in the air. "Still, he was but doing his duty. I must not complain. But you say he was forty yards away?"

"It's difficult to say, sir, in the dark,"

answered Jerry, still in the voice of an automatic machine. "It may have been less than forty."

And then he told them all over again ; and while they, the two old dears, whispered and cried together, never noticing anything amiss, being only concerned with the telling, and caring no whit for the method thereof, Pat sat silently in the window, gazing at him with tearless eyes, with the wonder and amazement of her soul writ clear on her face for all to see. And I—I lay motionless in bed, and there was something I could not understand, for he would not look at me, nor yet at her, but kept his eyes fixed on the fire, while he talked like a child repeating a lesson.

At last it was over ; their last questions were asked, and slowly, arm-in-arm, they left the room, to dwell alone upon the story of their idolised boy. And in the room the silence was only broken by the crackling of the logs.

How long we sat there I know not, with the firelight flickering on the stern set face of the man in the chair. He seemed unconscious of our existence, and we two dared not

speak to him, we who loved him best, for there was something we could not understand. Suddenly he got up, and held out his arms to Pat. And when she crept into them, he kissed her, straining her close, as if he could never stop. Then, without a word, he led her to the door, and, putting her gently through, shut it behind her. Still without a word he came back to the chair, and turned it so that the firelight no longer played on his face. And then he spoke.

“ I have a story to tell you, Winkle, which I venture to think will entertain you for a time.” His voice was the most terrible thing I have ever listened to. “. . . Nearly four weeks ago the battalion was in the trenches a bit south of Ypres. It was bad in the retreat, as you know ; it was bad on the Aisne ; but they were neither of them in the same county as the doing we had up north. One night—they’d shelled us off and on for three days and three nights—we were driven out of our trenches. The regiment on our right gave, and we had to go too. The next morning we were ordered to counter attack, and get back the ground we

had lost. It was the attack in which we lost so heavily."

He stopped speaking for a while, and I did not interrupt.

"When I got that order overnight Jack was with me, in a hole that passed as a dug-out. At the moment everything was quiet; the Germans were patching up their new position; only a maxim spluttered away a bit to one flank. To add to the general desolation a steady downpour of rain drenched us, into which, without cessation, the German flares went shooting up. I think they were expecting a counter-attack at once. . . ."

Again he paused, and I waited.

"You know the condition one gets into sometimes when one is heavy for sleep. We had it during the retreat, if you remember—a sort of coma, the outcome of utter bodily exhaustion. One used to go on walking, and all the while one was asleep—or practically so. Sounds came to us dimly as from a great distance; they made no impression on us—they were just a jumbled phantasmagoria of outside matters, which failed to reach one's brain, except as a dim dream. I was in that

condition on the night I am speaking of ; I was utterly cooked—beat to the world ; I was finished for the time. I've told you this, because I want you to understand the physical condition I was in."

He leaned forward, and stared at the fire, resting his head on his hands.

"How long I'd dozed heavily in that wet-sodden hole I don't know, but after a while, above the crackle of the maxim, separate and distinct from the soft splash of the rain, and the hiss of the flares, and the hundred and one other noises that came dimly to me out of the night, I heard Jack's voice—at least, I think it was Jack's voice."

Of a sudden he sat up in the chair, and, rising quickly, he came and leant over the foot of the bed.

"Devil take it," he cried bitterly, "I know it was Jack's voice—*now*. I knew it the next day when it was too late. What he said exactly I shall never know—at the time it made no impression on me ; but at this moment, almost like a spirit voice in my brain, I can hear him. I can hear him asking me to watch him. I can hear him

pleading—I can hear his dreadful fear of being found afraid. As a whisper from a great distance I can hear one short sentence—‘ Jerry, my God, Jerry—I’m frightened ! ’

“ Winkle, he turned to me in his weakness—that boy who had never failed before, that boy who had reached the breaking-point—and I heeded him not. I was too dead-beat ; my brain couldn’t grasp it.”

“ But, Jerry,” I cried, “ it turned out all right the next day ; he . . . ” The words died away on my lips as I met the look in his eyes.

“ You’d better let me finish,” he interrupted wearily. “ Let me get the whole hideous tragedy off my mind for the first and the last time. Early next morning we attacked. In the dim, dirty light of dawn I saw the boy’s face as he moved off to his platoon ; and even then I didn’t remember those halting sentences that had come to me out of the night. So, instead of ordering him to the rear on some pretext or other, as I should have done, I let him go to his platoon.

“ As we went across the ground that morning, through a fire like nothing I had

ever imagined, a man wavered in front of me. I felt it clean through me, I knew fear had come. I shouted and cheered—but the wavering was spreading; I knew that too. So I shot him through the heart from behind at point-blank range, as I had trained myself to do—in that eternity ago—before the war. The counter-attack was successful.”

“Great heavens, Jerry!” I muttered, “whom did you shoot?” though I knew the answer already.

“The man I shot was Jack Delawnay. Whether at the time I was actively conscious of it, I cannot say. Certainly my training enabled me to act before any glimmering of the aftermath came into my mind. *This* is the aftermath.”

I shuddered at the utter hopelessness of his tone, though the full result of his action had not dawned on me yet; my mind was dazed.

“But surely Jack was no coward,” I said at length.

“He was not; but on that particular morning he gave out. He had reached the limit of his endurance.”

"The Colonel's letter," I reminded him ;
"it praised the lad."

"Lies," he answered wearily ; "all lies, engineered by me. Not because I am ashamed of what I did, but for the lad's sake, and hers, and the old people. I loved the boy, as you know, but he failed, and *there was no other way*. And where the fiend himself is gloating over it is that he knows it was the only time Jack did fail. If only I hadn't been so beat the night before ; if only his words had reached my brain before it was too late. If only . . . I think," he added, after a pause—"I think I shall go mad. Sometimes I wish I could."

"And what of Pat ?" I asked, at length breaking the silence.

The hands grasping the bed tightened, and grew white.

"I said good-bye to her before your eyes, ten minutes ago. I shall never see her again."

"But, great heavens, Jerry !" I cried, "you can't give her up like that. She idolises the ground you walk on, she worships you, and she need never know. You were only doing your duty after all."

“Stop!” he cried, and his voice was a command. “As you love me, old friend, don’t tempt me. For three weeks those arguments have been flooding everything else from my mind. Do you remember at Henley, when she said, ‘He might have answered to your voice’? Winkle, it’s true, Jack might have. And I killed him. Just think if I married her, and she did find out. Her brother’s murderer—in her eyes. The man who has wrecked her home, and broken her father and mother. It’s inconceivable, it’s hideous. Ah! don’t you see how utterly final it all is? She may have been right; and if she was, then I, who loved her better than the world, have murdered her brother, and broken the old people’s hearts for the sake of a theory. The fact that my theory has been put into practice, at the expense of everything I have to live for, is full of humour, isn’t it?” And his laugh was wild.

“Steady, Jerry,” I said sternly. “What do you mean to do?”

“You’ll see, old man, in time,” he answered. “First and foremost, get back to the regiment, arm or no arm. I would not have

come home, but I had to see her once more."

"You talk as if it was the end." I looked at him squarely.

"It is," he answered. "It's easy out there."

"Your mind is made up?"

"Absolutely." He gave a short laugh. "Good-bye, old friend. Ease it to her as well as you can. Say I'm unstrung by the trenches, anything you like; but don't let her guess the truth."

For a long minute he held my hand. Then he turned away. He walked to the mantelpiece, and there was a photograph of her there. For a long time he looked at it, and it seemed to me he whispered something. A sudden dimness blinded my eyes, and when I looked again he had gone—through the window into the night.

* * * * *

I did not see Pat until I left Drayton Hall after that ghastly night, save only once or twice with her mother in the room.

But an hour before I left she came to me,

and her face was that of a woman who has passed through the fires.

“Tell me, Winkle, shall I ever see him again? You know what I mean.”

“You will never see him again, Pat,” and the look in her eyes made me choke.

“Will you tell me what it was he told you before he went through the window? You see, I was in the hall waiting for him,” and she smiled wearily.

“I can’t, Pat, dear; I promised him,” I muttered. “But it was nothing disgraceful.”

“Disgraceful!” she cried proudly. “Jerry, and anything disgraceful. Oh, my God! Winkle, dear,” and she broke down utterly, “do you remember the waltz they were playing that day—‘Destiny’?”

And then I went. Whether that wonderful woman’s intuition has told her something of what happened, I know not. But yesterday morning I got a letter from the Colonel saying that Jerry had chucked his life away, saving a wounded man. And this morning she will have seen it in the papers.

God help you, Pat, my dear.