

ACTING CAPTAIN

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The detachment was a very small one, a single platoon sent from the battalion to guard the dock gates and perimeter, but they had a bugle. Acting Captain Cochrane, the detachment commander, had indented persistently for one, and after two months' nagging on his part, DADOS had grudgingly coughed up a brand new one. It was hanging over old Crocker's bed in the fuggy blacked-out Nissen hut in which the administrative staff were sleeping. There was Crocker, an old soldier who had served in Flanders, Gallipoli, India, and the Far East; he was the cook, Acting Lance Corporal, C3, and used to it. Next to him Taffy Thomas was snoring; the air had grown slowly thicker and more corrupt with fumes from the stove, last night's fish and chips, cigarettes and beer, and all the coming and going since black-out time on the previous evening; so you couldn't breathe it into your lungs without a snore as it squeezed and scraped past your uvula. The fire was still flickering under a weight of grey ash and cinders in the stove.

For no apparent reason Crocker woke up, groaned, yawned, pushed his dirty blankets off, and sat up, vigorously scratching his thin hair. He was wearing his thick winter vest and long pants with brown socks pulled up over the legs so that no part of his flesh was showing except where the heel of his sock was worn through. He listened a moment, to discover whether it was raining; then, finding it wasn't, he

unhooked his bugle from the nail above his head, turned the light on to make sure that the office clock, which he always took to bed with him, indicated 6.30 a.m., put out the light again, shuffled to the door, spat, breathed in, closed his lips inside the mouthpiece of the bugle, and blew reveille. He found he was blowing in E instead of G, but, after faltering an instant, laboured through with it in the same key. It was too dark for anyone to notice; not a streak of grey anywhere.

'Gawd curse the dominoes,' he grumbled, shuffling back to his bed. He shook Taffy Thomas hard, relishing the warm sleeping body's resistance.

'Get up, yer Welsh loafer,' he shouted in his ear. 'You'll 'ave the boss on yer tail if you don't get down there wiv 'is shaving water double quick. Get up. You ain't got yer missus besidejer now.'

Taffy didn't get up as philosophically as Crocker. He was still young enough to resent and rebel against things the old cook had long ago ceased thinking about. Most things were a matter of course to Crocker; air raids, sinkings, death were as normal as cutting rashers of bacon in the dark and peeling potatoes in his ramshackle corrugated-iron cooking shed.

However, Taffy got up. He put his hand on his head to feel how hot his hangover was, and then in a fit of irritated energy pulled on his trousers and pullover and searched about for his razor. 'Well, we're a day's march nearer home,' he said, dipping his shaving brush in the jam-tin of cold water he kept under his bed and lathering his face in the dark.

'You pups are always thinking about leave,' Crocker said, fed up. 'D'you know I didn't see my old lady for three and 'alf years in the last bust-up, nor any English girl. Plenty of dusky ones, of course, and Chinese ones that'd scarcely left school—'

'Yeh, I know,' Taffy interrupted. 'You're a real soljer. I know.'

'Well, I didn't want to write 'ome every time I found a flea

under my arm,' Crocker scoffed. 'I've sat in the mud scratching my arse from one Christmas to the next wivout arsking to see the OC abaht it.'

'It wasn't your fault we didn't lose the war, then,' Taffy said, wiping his shaved face in his dirty towel. 'And if you're moaning about me asking for leave and asking for a transfer, you'd better shut your trap, old soljer, 'cause I'm not going to sit in this dump doing nothing while my missus freezes in the Anderson and coughs 'er heart up every time Jerry drops a load on Swansea.'

'What you going to do, then?' Crocker taunted. 'Stop the war?'

'No,' Taffy answered hotly. 'Win the bleeding thing.'

'Garn,' Crocker laughed jeeringly. 'Get off and polish the cap'n's Sam Browne. Win the war, be damned. What was you doing at Dunkirk if it isn't rude to ask? We never scuttled out of it, we didn't.'

'Aw, shut up and get a pail of char ready for the lads,' Taffy said. 'I reckon you'd still be in your little dugout if somebody hadn't told you the war was over.'

He slammed the door after him, pulled his cycle from under a ripped tarpaulin, and, tucking his bag of cleaning kit under his arm, pedalled through the muddy pooled ruts, past the sentry shivering in his greatcoat and flapping groundsheet like a spider swollen by the rain, down the lane past the knife rest and Dannert wire obstacle that ran from the sidings to the quay where the Irish packet boat lay moored, and out onto the bleak tarred road that was just beginning to reflect a mildew-grey light along its wet surface. The detachment commander was billeted in an empty house on the hill above the harbour. Taffy's first job was to boil him some water for shaving and tea, make a cup of tea with a spoon infuser, shake him respectfully, salute, collect his Sam Browne and yesterday's boots or shoes, and retire to the scullery to clean them up. Then he swept the downstairs rooms, looked round to see whether there were any

chocolate biscuits hidden in the trench coat pocket, threw his sweepings outside for the starlings to swoop and grumble over, and then go back upstairs to fold the blankets and sheets, empty the wash basin and jerry, and let the clean air of the ocean revitalise the room. The whole operation was conducted in silence, broken only by odd grunts and monosyllables from the officer and a sort of absent-minded whistling by the private. Taffy knew his man well enough to leave him alone while he pulled himself together; a glance at his reflection in the shaving mirror was enough to inform him as to the patient's condition. He had a young face, but his narrow grey eyes and almost-pointed teeth, combined with the thin, bony forehead and cheeks, gave him an astringent, intolerant sharpness that only wore off after he had warmed up to the day's task. He was a regular officer who had been commissioned a few months before the war began, and because of his martinet appearance and the facility with which he could fly into an abrupt temper he had spent most of the war drilling recruits on the square at the regimental depot. He had got the square in his blood by the end; muddy boots or tarnished buttons, an indifferent salute, the lazy execution of a drill or an order provoked him immediately to a violent reprimand; all his actions were impatient and smart, his appearance immaculate and important, his opinions unqualified and as definite as they were ill-informed. His nature was bound to insist sooner or later on action; he had got into a bad state at the depot and asked to be posted to a battalion. He considered it a rebuff when he was posted to this small harbour on the featureless north-west coast, and it hadn't improved his frame of mind to consider that a further application for posting would be impolitic while an indefinite stay in his present post could only blur the image of a forceful disciplined soldier which he had so assiduously striven to impress on the depot command. He endured his inactive isolation with some acerbity and sought compensation in other quarters. He was careful of his

career, knowing how easy it is to fall down the Army ladder; he paid court to the daughter of the battalion's colonel with the same regard for tact and proper keenness as he employed in his conduct towards his senior officers. But he was not of a firm enough mould to subsist on long-term expectations of advancement. He had to have his fling. And, what with one thing and another, he usually got out of bed on the wrong side and had to work a little blood out of his system before he could sit on his table and argue politics or swop dirty jokes with Sergeant Crumb, his principal stooge, or Private Norris, his clerk general who had a classics degree, an LLB, a mind of his own, and a stoop that barred him from promotion.

'Quiet night last night, sir,' Taffy said amiably when the hair combing stage had been reached and a measure of civility might be expected.

'Was it, hell!' the OC replied, wincing his face. 'Mix me a dose of Andrews Health Salts, Thomas. They're in my valise.'

'Very good, sir.'

'What sort of morning is it?'

'Nothin' partic'lar, sir. What do you want for tonight, sir?'

'My SD suit and my Sam Browne; best shoes and walking out cap. I don't want any Silvo stains on it, either.'

'Very good, sir.'

The vexed look left the harsh young face as he tilted the bubbling glass down his throat; beads hooked to the uncombed hairs of his moustache; it was pink at the roots and gold-brown at the tips. 'Gosh!' he said, 'it makes you want to live a clean life always, tasting this stuff. God bless Mr Andrews.'

Having returned and breakfasted with the rest of the lads on old Crocker's lumpy porridge and shrivelled bacon and greased tea, Taffy strolled off to collect his wheelbarrow and begin his second task, cleaning the lines. He had sharpened

a beech stick to pick up the chip papers and litter; Curly Norris had suggested the idea, saying it gave the camp a better tone, made it more like a royal park. Curly also wanted to indent for a couple of fallow deer, or if DADOS refused to supply them, purloin them from the grounds of Magdalen College, Oxford. He said Taffy should lead the raiding party, singing the War song of Dinas Fawr.

‘You will probably be put on a charge,’ he said. ‘But what is a charge *sub specie aeternitatis*?’

He was always laughing behind his twinkling spectacles, and even if you didn’t know what he was talking about, which was most of the time, his gaiety infected you and you laughed as well or wrestled with him.

When Taffy arrived outside the office Curly Norris was just completing his housework. The office was swirling with smoke from the newly lit fire and dust from the floor. Curly’s first task was to sweep all the dust from the floor onto the tables and shelves and files. This ritual was always performed alone, before Sergeant Crumb arrived for the day.

Taffy halted his barrow and respectfully tapped the office door.

‘Any old matchsticks today?’ he shouted. ‘Any old matchsticks?’

‘Take your dirty boots off my porch,’ Curly shouted. ‘A woman’s work is never done, don’t you men know that yet?’

Taffy jumped in and screwed his arm round Curly’s neck. They were wrestling on the table when Sergeant Crumb appeared. At his bull’s bellow they stopped.

‘What the hell d’you think this is? A tavern?’

‘Sorry, Sarge.’

‘You’ll apologise to the OC if I catch you at it again, either of you.’ He smoothed the underside of his waxed moustache with a nicotine-stained forefinger. ‘What sort of a mood is he in this morning, Thomas?’ Sergeant Crumb always arranged the morning programme on the basis of Taffy’s report.

‘Got a liver on this morning, Sarge,’ Taffy replied. ‘Shouldn’t be surprised if it turns to diarrhoea.’

‘I saw him in the Royal at closing time,’ Sergeant Crumb said. ‘He was buying drinks all round, so I expected he’d be off his food. Get cracking, Norris. Get the correspondence sorted out, let’s see what there is. Then get down to the stores and warn Rosendale to appear before the OC I saw him in town last night when he should have been on duty. Make a charge sheet out before you go. Section 40 – conduct prejudicial to good order. Get weaving.’

Curly thought it a pity there wasn’t a mantelpiece for the sergeant’s elbows and a waistcoat for his thumbs.

‘Very good, Sarge.’

‘And you get down to cleaning the lines, Thomas. What are you hanging about here for?’

‘Want to see the OC,’ Thomas said.

‘Too busy,’ the sergeant replied, stiffening his weak chin. ‘Get out.’

‘I can see the OC if I want to,’ Thomas replied.

‘A-ha!’ laughed the sergeant, his shallow blue eyes turning foxy. ‘Getting a bit Bolshie, are you? What with you and Rosendale in the detachment we’d better hoist the Red Flag, I’m thinking.’ He straightened up, blew out his chest, hardened his characterless eyes. ‘Get out!’ he shouted.

Curly wasn’t laughing now. He looked serious, bothered, and unhappy. The way these foolish and unnecessary rows blew up, these continual petty litigations springing from bad temper and jealousy and animosity; why did they allow their nerves to become public? Why couldn’t they hold their water?

Taffy stayed where he was, stubborn and flushing. He had a bony ridge at the base of his neck, a strong chin and a knobbly receding forehead. Huge-shouldered and rather short and bandy in the leg, he gave the appearance of animal strength and latent ferocity.

‘That was an order,’ the sergeant said.

‘OK,’ Taffy replied. ‘But I’m asking to see the OC. You can’t refuse.’

The sergeant began to hesitate, grew a little sick at the mouth, fiddled with the paper cutter.

‘What d’you want with him?’

‘I want to get into a Commando,’ Taffy said.

‘You’ll get into a glasshouse, maybe,’ the sergeant laughed unpleasantly, not at all sure of himself now.

‘Yes, for knocking you between your pig’s eyes,’ Taffy said.

An immediate tension, like the shock of an electric charge, and silence.

‘You heard what he said, Norris,’ the sergeant snapped. ‘I’ll want you as witness.’

‘Hearsay doesn’t count as evidence,’ Curly said quietly.

‘What did you say?’ Sergeant Crumb swung livid on him. ‘You bloody little sea lawyer, are you trying to cover him?’

‘No. I’m not covering anybody. I simply happen to know that legal procedure excludes my repeating something alleged to have been said by a person not formally warned.’

Sergeant Crumb wrote some words on a sheet of paper.

‘We’ll see,’ he said, uncertainly. ‘Now get out.’

Taffy shrugged his shoulders and slouched out. He hadn’t meant to say that. Not out loud. All the same, it was OK by him. He pushed his barrow down the muddy path to the stores shed.

Rosendale was shaving in his shirtsleeves. His mirror was a splinter of glass an inch long stuck into a packing case. There was a heap of straw in one corner of the shed; the men were changing the straw of their palliasses; he, as storeman, was in charge; he gave more to some than to others – not to his friends, for he had none, but to the important people, the lancejacks and the lads with a tongue in their heads who determined public opinion in the camp. Rosendale was very sensitive to public opinion, partly because it affected his own advancement, partly because he was politically conscious and wanted to form a cell to fortify his somewhat introvert

ideas. He was inept as a soldier, too untidy and slow to get a stripe; consequently he posed as a democrat refusing to be bought over to the ruling classes by a stripe, as one of the unprivileged millions who would be deprived of power and exploited by the boss class for just as long as they were content to endure it. He wasn't making much headway in his campaign. His ideas were too dogmatic to convince men who saw life as a disconnected series of circumstances and poverty as a natural ill and active political opposition as both unpatriotic and unpleasant, something that might get you CB, or your application for a weekend pass rejected. He was popularly known as Haw-Haw.

'Morning, Rosie,' Taffy said, having recovered his equanimity. 'Had a tidy sleep, love?'

'Be damned I didn't,' Rosendale grumbled. 'I slept in that bleeding straw in the corner there and a goddamn mouse crawled under my shirt and bit me under my arm. I squeezed him through my shirt and the little sod squirted all over it.'

'Well, you'd better brass yourself up, Rosie,' Taffy commented, 'cause the snoop has pegged you for being out of camp last night when you were on duty. I'm on the peg, too. So don't start moaning.' At such moments Rosendale lacked the dignity and calm bearing of the representative of the unprivileged millions. He became an anxious, frightened little man seeking an excuse, a lie, an alibi. 'Curly'll come down with the charge in a minute,' Taffy said reassuringly. 'He'll tell us what to say, Curly will.'

Curly brought the mail with him when he came. There was a letter for each of them. Rosendale was too het up to read his letter; he threw it without interest onto the table and bit his nails until the other two had read theirs. Taffy was a slow reader. Rosendale fiddled and shuffled, tears almost touching the surface of his eyes. 'My missus is bad again,' Taffy said, staring at the soiled cheap paper on which a few slanting lines had been pencilled in a childish scrawl. Big crossed kisses had been drawn under the signature. 'She can't touch

her food again and her mouth is full of that yellow phlegm I told you about, Curly. And the rain is coming in since the last raid.'

'Why doesn't she go into hospital?' Curly said. 'She's on the panel, isn't she?'

'I don't know proper,' Taffy said, rubbing his face wearily. 'I used to pay insurance when I was in the tinsplate works, an' she's been paying twopence a week to the doctor. But *he* don't know what's up with her. I fetched him down last time I was on leave; anybody could see she was had. All yellow and skinny, pitiful thin she was. Not eating a bite, neither, not even milk or stout, but only a drop of pink pop when she was thirsty. I made her bed for her in the kitchen to save her climbing the stairs. I stayed in every night with her. Had to go drinking in the mornings with my brother and my mates. And she was spitting this yellow stuff all the time, see? Very near filled the pisspot with it every day.'

'Well, you've got to get her to hospital,' Curly said. 'What the hell is that doctor doing? It sounds criminal to me.'

'I told her to see another one,' Taffy went on. 'But my mother-in-law it is, she swears by him, see? He's delivered all her kids for her, and he helped my missus through with the twins. So she won't change him. She won't go against her mother, see, Curly?'

'What the hell does a mother-in-law matter?' Curly said sharply. 'Look here, Taff. You've *got* to get home and *carry* her to hospital *yourself* if you don't want her to die. D'you understand? Especially with all these air raids. It's cruel to leave her alone.'

'But what about the kids? She can't take them to hospital with her.'

'Get them evacuated. Or send them to your mother-in-law's.'

'What? That bastard?'

'I'd like to knock your head off, Taffy,' Curly said with cold and exasperated anger.

'I wouldn't care much if you did,' Taffy replied, suddenly plunged in despondency. Like his temper, which had flared against the sergeant, his blues came on him without warning.

'Come on,' Curly insisted crossly. 'Pull yourself together. It doesn't matter about you. It's your wife and kiddies I'm thinking about. Get up to the office and show this letter to the OC. You've *got* to get home.'

'Catch him giving me a forty-eight hours' leave after Crumb has told him what I said,' Taffy said, hang-dog.

'I'll see Crumb at once and ask him to hold the charge back,' Curly said, turning to go.

'What about my charge?' Rosendale asked. He had been hanging round the fringe of Taffy's trouble, like an uncomfortable curate with a dyspepsia of his own. 'Can't you talk it over with me, Curl?'

'Your charge isn't important,' Curly said, hurrying out.

'Bloody intellectuals! They're all the same, the pack of them,' Rosendale muttered.

Sergeant Crumb was already closeted with the OC when Curly got back to the office. The Nissen hut was divided into two rooms by a central plywood partition with a door. Curly stood by the door listening.

They were talking about Sergeant Crumb's wife. It was a matter of long standing, and Curly knew enough about it from the sergeant's occasional confidences to see that he had been ruined by it so gradually and completely that he himself didn't know the extent or nature of the damage. He had joined the Army eight years back to get away from a powerful woman who had him tucked into her bed whenever she wanted him and who was pushing him to divorce his wife. He was afraid of ruining his business, a small garage, by the publicity of a divorce; moreover, he wasn't in love with either of the women though he slept with each in turn. So he joined up to let time and distance settle the mess. Oddly enough it was still unsolved. His wife had gone back to a factory job and taken a small flat. After

several years he had called on her on leave, having been discarded by the other woman who preferred a civilian lover. He was very proud of that night. He had wooed his wife back to him; Gable had nothing to show him, he told Curly, recounting in some detail. So things reverted to the old ways for a while, until he received information from a sister of his who lived near his wife that his wife had another man, somebody in the works, a young fellow in a reserved occupation. It wasn't definitely established; Sergeant Crumb wasn't one to beard lions; he hadn't asked his wife point-blank, nor did he intend offering her a divorce. He preferred to use the welfare machinery of the Army. Through the OC he had got in touch with the regimental paymaster and requested him to investigate his wife's conduct through the local police with a view to stopping her allowance, to which he contributed fourteen shillings a week, if her guilt could be established. Meanwhile he continued to prove his manhood and independence by making love promiscuously wherever he was stationed, and displaying a definite penchant for married women. His heart wasn't affected by the affair any more, his affections weren't involved. That was the whole trouble, it seemed to Curly. It was simply a matter of pride, of getting his own back. He took it out of his staff in the same way, blustering at them, telling the OC of their disloyalties and delinquencies, keeping well in with his chiefs, at once toady and bully. At the same time he was efficient and hard-working, smart at drill and a master of office routine and military redtape. His files were neat and complete, correspondence properly indexed, ACIs and Battalion Orders always to hand. Messing indents, pay rolls, men's documents were all open for inspection. The only man who knew that Sergeant Crumb depended entirely upon Private Norris, his clerk general, was Curly Norris himself. And because of his peculiar comic outlook on life he had no desire to split. It amused him to

contemplate the sergeant's self-importance and it paid him to be useful in a number of small ways. He could get a weekend pass for the asking. He could use the office at nights to type out his private work – some learned bilge he was preparing for a classical quarterly – and as the war was a stalemate and the Command board had rejected his application for a commission after one look at his stoop, he had grown to consider these small amenities as perhaps more important than the restless discontent that produces poets or heroes or corpses.

Having discussed his marital affairs and got the OC to write another letter to the paymaster, Sergeant Crumb, as was his wont, made deposition against the malcontents, on this occasion Rosendale and Thomas. He suggested that each should be charged under section 40 of the Army Act. Curly, hearing the OC melt under the sergeant's reasoned persuasion, shrugged his shoulders and lit a cigarette. He knew it was poor look out for Mrs Thomas' cancer of the throat. Certainly it was no use making any application at the moment. The OC had given him two weekends' leave in the last six weeks, after air raids, to see that his wife was all right. It was Taffy's own fault, the fool, for not getting her into hospital when he was home last. And now they had no money. Curly had already lent him his last train fare, and had no more cash to spare.

Rosendale came in with a pail of specially-sweet tea at that moment, hoping to mollify the powers. But Sergeant Crumb's voice was unsweetened as he told him to get properly dressed and be ready to answer a charge in five minutes' time.

The upshot of it was that both men got seven days' CB and Curly a severe unofficial reprimand for attempting to shield Thomas. The OC always enjoyed a little adjudication. It gave him strength.

'Sod the Army!' Rosendale moaned, bitter and outraged.

'King's Regulations be damned. Better if they'd spend their

time in strengthening the League-a-Nations or finding a living job for the unemployed or making things better somewhere, not pottering around with King's Regulations.'

'What wouldn't I do to Mr bleeding Crumb if I met him in Civvy Street after the war,' Taffy murmured fondly.

'A lot of use that is to your wife,' Curly snapped.

'Go on. Rub it in,' Taffy flared up, goaded to feel anguish at last. Disconsolate, he wheeled his barrow off to the incinerator, and Curly returned to the office to write letters to his friends.

Acting Captain Cochrane was sitting on the clerk's table, tapping his swagger cane against the brown boots Taffy had brought to a nice shine and chatting to Sergeant Crumb over a cup of lukewarm tea.

'Well, Norris,' he said with a sardonic grin. 'You see what comes of playing the barrister to a pair of fools.'

'They're not particularly fools, sir,' Curly replied with proper deference. 'They're both men. Thomas has worked in pits and steelworks, he's taken the rap in Belgium, he's trying to maintain a wife and two kiddies – that's more than most of us have done.'

'He's still a fool,' the OC said. 'He's like the rest of the working people. They've been too blind and stupid to help themselves when they had the chance. They could have had socialism any time in the last twenty years. They've got the vote. Why don't they use it to get a Labour government? Because they can't be bothered to lift a finger for their own interests. I'm a socialist at heart, but it's not a bit of good trying to help the people. They don't want to be helped.'

'It isn't entirely their fault, sir,' Curly replied. 'The middle class hasn't helped them very much – the teachers and clergy and newspaper proprietors and business executives. They've all thrown dust in their eyes, confused or denied the real issues and disguised selfish interests and reactionary politics to appear progressive and in the public interest, as they say. They keep the world in a state of perpetual crisis in order to

crush internal opposition by the need for national unity, and they buy off their critics by giving them minority posts in the Cabinet. Appeasement at home and abroad; give the beggar a penny and expect him to touch his cap.'

'Hot air,' the OC answered, offering Curly a cigarette. He always came in for a chat after giving anybody a dressing down; Curly surmised that it was a maxim of his that a man who is alternately severe and humane wins the respect as well as the affection of his subordinates. As a matter of fact the men distrusted his geniality and called him two-faced. They never knew how to take him; before asking a favour of him they always consulted Taffy or Curly about his mood. They were nervous of him in a surly way; not from fear, but because they disliked being treated curtly without being able to retort on natural terms. 'Would you like England to become communist?' he continued.

'I should be quite acclimatised to the change after serving in the Army,' Curly replied. 'We live a communal life here; all our clothes and equipment are public property; nobody makes any profits; we serve the state and follow the party line.'

'You think the Army is based on Lenin's ideas, do you?' the OC said. 'That would shake the colonel if he knew it.'

'He needn't worry,' Curly said, laughing. 'The Army hasn't got a revolutionary purpose. It has no ideas worth speaking of except a conservative loyalty to the throne and a professional obligation to obtain a military victory. King Charles I's ideas with Oliver Cromwell's efficiency. That's England all over. They never settle their differences, they always keep both sides going. The Royalists were beaten in the field, yet they dominate the Army. The Germans were licked, yet they've got Europe where they want it. There's plenty of class distinction in the Army, black boots versus brown shoes, but no class conflict. I could go on quite a long time like this, sir. It's more interesting than football.' He laughed to hide his seriousness. He hadn't been speaking in

fun, but he preferred to be taken lightly. He knew himself to be a perpetual student, introspective, individualist, an antinomian with a deep respect for the privacy of others. His gentle and slightly neurotic liberalism took the edge off his revolutionary convictions. He lacked the strength to defy what is powerful in men, and he had no heart for extreme action. So he always preferred to be left in peace, to think and observe; his conflicts were within him. He had his own anguish.

‘I tell you what’s wrong with you, Norris,’ the OC said largely. Curly felt something wince in him. To be told again what was wrong with him. People were always presuming to do that, nearly always people who knew too little about him and about themselves. It wasn’t so bad if they spoke from kindness and a desire to help; that hurt, but it was understood by him. But when a man, like this young fascist type with his muddled democratic ideas and his desire to exercise his power over men, proffered him advice, he writhed like a split toad.

‘You haven’t got enough *push*, Norris. That’s what’s wrong with you. Too soft-hearted, not enough keenness. You don’t go for things as if you wanted them.’

Curly laughed.

‘My ambitions aren’t as tangible as yours, sir,’ he replied.

‘Well; get some ambitions, then, for God’s sake. Your life won’t go on forever. Get cracking.’

‘Very good, sir. I’ll submit my scheme for defeating Germany to Sir John Dill immediately.’

The OC shrugged his shoulders, confessing to himself that here was another man who wasn’t worth helping because he refused to be helped. He was browned off with fools.

‘If you want to help anybody, you might help Thomas to get his wife into hospital, sir.’

The OC snorted and narrowed his eyes.

‘I know the difference between seven days’ CB and a weekend leave,’ he said curtly. ‘Thomas won’t pull that old

gag over me again.’ Curly hadn’t enough vigour to insist. He clenched his fists on the table, knowing how important it was that Taffy should get leave, knowing it suddenly with anguish. But, as so often, the conflict smashed itself up inside him like two contrary tides, and he said nothing because the intensity of his feelings made him impotent.

The door opened and Sergeant Crumb came in, followed astonishingly by a very dashing young lady. The sergeant was all smiles and deference, inclining his body courteously to her and pointing with a wave of his hand to the OC.

Curly stood to attention. The OC stood flushed.

‘Lady to see you, sir,’ Crumb said urbanely.

‘Hector,’ the lady said, her rouge parting in a slow private smile. She held out her gloved hand, letting her fur coat fall open.

‘But – but come in,’ the OC stumbled. He pushed open the door of his room and she swept through in a swirl of fur and silk and interesting perfumes. He closed the door after her, humbly.

‘Gives you the impression of expensive cutlery,’ Curly said softly, ‘though I doubt whether she is stainless.’

‘It’s the colonel’s daughter,’ Crumb whispered, his head inclined and movements subdued as though he were in the presence of the saints.

Curly hoped she wanted some love, so that he’d have a little peace to write his letters. But he had scarcely started when the door opened and she came out again.

‘Don’t trouble to see me to the gate,’ she said. ‘I’m sure you’re busy. This private will escort me.’

‘Not at all,’ said the helpless captain, following her out with her gloves.

‘Stand easy, stand easy,’ Crumb said as the door closed behind them. ‘She must have been jilted or something,’ he sneered.

The OC came back in a hell of a tear. ‘Where’s that bloody fool Thomas? Tell him to go to my billet and polish my shoes

and Sam Browne till he can see his face in them. And tell Rosendale I want him to take a message for me. At once.'

'Very good, sir,' Sergeant Crumb leapt to it, realizing the situation was urgent. The room was suddenly in a turmoil, as though the young lady had been a German parachutist.

The OC took a sheet of paper and scribbled a quick note, put it in an envelope, and threw it into the OUT tray.

'Tell Rosendale to deliver that when he comes, Norris.'

He put on his service cap, took his stick and gloves, and went out. He was excited and flustered. Probably going to cool off by catching the sentry sitting down or the cookhouse staff eating the men's cheese rations, or the fatigue party throwing stones into the cesspool they were cleaning.

Rosendale came and collected the letter.

'Forgot to lick the envelope,' he said. 'What is it? Is there a war on?'

'Run away,' said Curly, weary of everything.

Rosendale cycled out of camp and down the road till he was out of observation. Then he opened the letter and read it through.

Dear Eva, [it said] Sorry I can't meet you tonight as we arranged. I'm on duty again and won't be able to see you this week. I seem to have so little free time these days that I doubt whether it's worth our while carrying on any more. What do you think?

Affectionately yours, Hector Cochrane, Capt.

'Hector Cochrane, Capt.,' Rosendale repeated, curling his lip. He cycled down coast to the town, knowing where to go; he had been to the little street behind the gasworks on other occasions. Miss Barthgate was the name, and very nice, too. Smart little milliner, deserved better luck than to fall in love with *him*. Rosendale's mind was working by devious ways. He'd seen the flash dame in the fur coat with rich

smells about her. Maybe he'd get a bit of his own back for that seven days' CB.

He knocked at the door, propping his cycle against the wall. She worked in the parlour; he could see the sewing machine through the window. But the place sounded quiet today, as though she hadn't started working yet.

There was some delay before she opened the door. She was in a loose-fitting frock let out at the waist. Her face was nervous, her dark eyes looked dilated. Her beauty seemed agitated, on pins. 'Yes?' she said, almost breathing the word, at the same time holding her hand out for the note he held between his fingers. Grinning a little, Rosendale handed it to her, watched her read it, waited a long time while she tried to raise her head...

At last she looked up. She wasn't bothering to hide anything. He could see it clear as daylight.

'There's no answer,' she said.

'No,' he replied. 'No answer.' He shuffled, half turning to go. Then he looked up at her shrewdly.

'He isn't on duty,' he said. 'I thought I'd tell you. I shouldn't mind about him if I were you.'

'No,' she said, looking at him vaguely with her unutterable distress.

He had intended to say more, but her look confused him. He turned, mounted his cycle, and pedalled off. She didn't move all the time.

There was a new sensation buzzing through cookhouse, stores, office, and guardroom when he returned. The sentry told it him as he cycled through the gate; and because of it he decided to withhold his own bits of gossip till the chaps would be readier to appreciate it. He didn't want any competition.

The news was that Taffy Thomas couldn't be found anywhere. His denim overalls were on the floor by his bed, his best battledress and respirator were missing. He hadn't answered Crocker's quavering version of Defaulters bugle,

he hadn't come forward to shine the OC's Sam Browne. He'd done a bunk.

Curly was waiting for Rosendale with another message, this time for the Swansea police, asking them to visit Taffy's house at night and instruct him forcibly to return by the next train. The OC had said something about a court martial; it would be the colonel's charge at least. That meant probably twenty-eight days' detention and no pay for himself or his wife. It was a bad business, all things considered; but Curly was glad Taffy had gone. Perhaps he'd save his wife's life; twenty-eight days was cheap at that price.

Acting Captain Cochrane had a considerable liver by the end of the afternoon. The men had been dozy and idle all day. He'd gone round bollocking them right and left. The latrines hadn't been cleaned, the washbasins were still littered with rusty blades and fag ends when he inspected them after lunch. The cesspool stank and the fatigue party complained that there wasn't any hot water for them to clean up afterwards. All the plugs for the washbasins were missing, the kit was untidily laid out on the beds, the rifles hadn't been pulled through since he inspected them last. He was in no mood to be accosted. When he saw Eva waiting for him at the bottom of the lane, he had already had too much.

She was wearing a plain mackintosh, a loose-fitting Burberry, and a little green hat with turned-up brim like a schoolgirl. Her hands were in her pockets, her eyes on the ground. He knew she'd seen him, but she wasn't able to look at him approaching. He walked smartly towards her, very military in his swish greatcoat and service cap flat over his eyes. His face looked narrow and sharp under the severe cap, his fair moustache and rather pointed teeth giving him a stoatlike appearance. When he was within a couple of yards, she looked up and her eyes were wide and lambent, looking at him for some sign.

'Well, Eva,' he said. He coughed and looked at his wristwatch. 'You got my letter, didn't you?'

She stayed looking at him with her pale searching face and her dark transparent eyes. Damn it all, she had a nice face. Was she going to cling? Why did she take things so seriously?

'Well? Say something, Eva.'

His voice was softer, the least bit softer.

'I got your letter,' she said. 'That's why I came to see you.'

'Well, you know I'm on duty, then?' he tried it out, not so sure that he wanted to finish it for good just yet.

'That's what you said,' she replied.

He flushed, but she had turned away from him.

'Well?' he queried, his voice hardening. He wasn't going to be pried into. If his word wasn't enough for her, OK chief!

She looked up again. He noticed she hadn't powdered herself very carefully; her nose had a thick patch on it.

'Hector,' she said, putting her hands on the immaculate breast of his greatcoat, 'Don't you understand, darling?'

He was swept with impatience. His success with women was about equal to his ignorance of them. He wasn't going to have any sob stuff, thank you.

'How the blazes do you expect me to understand?' he said roughly.

'Well,' she said. 'There is something to understand.'

He quailed under her sudden precision of mood; she knew what she was going to do now; she wasn't leaning on him, beseeching him with her eyes. She was very quiet and firm. She looked at him and he got scared.

'There's nothing serious, Eva, is there?' his fear prompted him.

'It is serious,' she said.

'Darling,' he gasped.

He was horrified of the consequences, infuriated with her for getting into this mess, and, for the first time in his life, even if only for a minute, in love.

He spoke slowly, stopping to think.

‘Can’t you see a doctor, Eva? There are some doctors, you know—’

‘I don’t want to,’ she said, still with this ridiculous composure.

‘But – but you ought to,’ he said.

‘I can do as I choose,’ she replied.

He said nothing, sensing a hopeless deadlock.

‘Eva,’ he said at last.

‘Well?’

‘We could get married at the Registry Office next weekend if you like,’ he said, slowly, never taking his worried eyes off her. She was silent, as if listening to his words again and again in her mind.

He felt a growing exhilaration, a new and wonderful simplicity in him, like sunlight slowly breaking.

‘Shall we?’ he asked, holding his hand out.

She looked up again. This was always the most active thing she did, disclosing her eyes. Her hands all the time in her Burberry pockets. She was reluctant to answer; there was a sweetness in the possibility, a reflection of his own momentary sincerity. It was what she had come for, to hear him say that; because he had said these words she was happy. She had no sense of tragedy or of shame. She felt indifferent to the future.

‘No, we can’t get married,’ she said slowly at the last.

Something in him was suddenly overpoweringly relieved. He had no sense of a durable daily happiness, of a long companionship in love; but only romantic impulses, like sunlight, and harsher emotions.

‘But why not?’ he asked, trembling.

‘Because – oh well,’ she mumbled, seeking blindly to bind up her thoughts into the certainty that was still inchoate in her, ‘because you – don’t—’ she turned away, and in profile he saw her lips finish the sentence, ‘—love me.’

Her courage shamed him into a greater confusion. He flushed and lost his head and was just about to gallop into

the breach with protestations of devotion when a four-seater army car swung round the bend and pulled up with a screech and shudder.

‘Christ,’ he gasped, this time in a real fluster. ‘Look out.’

He sprang to the car and saluted.

The colonel half-opened the door.

‘Just coming to see you, Cochrane. Expected to find you in your office, not flirting on the roads.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Hop in. Quickly. I want to get back.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The car surged forward.

Eva watched it go. By herself. She pushed her hair back, rubbing her cheeks, rubbing the cold sweat off her forehead. Heavily she turned and walked slowly along the road.

The colonel looked into the first Nissen hut.

‘These bricks round the fireplace,’ he said. ‘I sent an order to all detachments that they be whitewashed. Why haven’t you done it?’

‘No whitewash, sir.’

‘Get some. Christ. What are you here for?’

He picked up a pair of boots from one of the men’s beds.

‘These boots. Burnt. Look at the soles. Burnt through. Drying them by the fire. Is this man on a charge?’

‘Er, no, sir.’

‘Why the hell not? Nation can’t afford to waste boots every time they get wet. Christ. Send him to me tomorrow under escort.’

‘Yes, sir. I don’t believe they *are* burnt, sir. The man has been waiting for a boot exchange for five weeks. He’s worn them out—’

‘I tell you they’re burnt. Christ man, you’re not a cobbler, are you?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Then talk about something you know.’

By the time the old man drove off Captain Cochrane was utterly emasculate. He saluted with so pathetic and servile a gesture that the colonel didn't even return the salute. And so his day ended. The duties of the evening confronted him. Dinner in mess, then dance attendance on the old man's daughter. Poleworth was the name. Less respectfully, when the subalterns were hidden away in a pub, the name was sometimes garbled to Polecat. She certainly had a pungent odour. Still, hardy men said she was a good sport. She liked to play, they hinted, twisting the yellow ends of their moustaches. Captain Cochrane emptied his whisky flask before deciding on his tactical plan. Marvellous thing, whisky.

Curly took a walk after drinking his mug of tea and eating a piece of bread and marge and a Lyons' fruit pie. He didn't wash or brass up. He wasn't going to town. He wanted some peace of mind, along the sand dunes running from the harbour to the boarding house promenade where the ferro-concrete seaside resort began. Faintly, as though his tedious preoccupations had taken a musical form, the distant sound of hurdy-gurdy jazz songs blaring in the funfair touched his quietness, accompanying him unobtrusively as he climbed the loose sand. Thinking of the industry of pleasure, he watched the sea, fuming like a thin grey smoke far far out beyond the mudflats, and it seemed as though the purpose of the town had been lost, the balance between sea and land ruined, the fundamental element forgotten. Pleasure had broken away from simplicity, the penny-in-the-slot machine had conquered the sea, people had turned their backs and were screaming with laughter. Watching the sea fuming and grey he found himself suddenly investing the solitary person walking slowly and with downcast head across the wet worm-cast mud with all the attributes which humanity, he decided this evening, had rejected. He wanted to speak to this lonely person; it was a woman; heavy she was; heavy with the rejected attributes of humanity; pregnant she must be, and pale with a serious beauty, bearing so much in her.

Following his fantasy, he walked down from the dunes and across the slimy front towards the girl. He walked quickly, keeping his attention on her, refusing to allow the usual inhibitions to stop him accosting her.

Eva felt no particular strangeness at his approach. A little soldier with spectacles and curly hair like a wire brush. It was quite natural. She said good evening. She was glad he had come.

‘I was standing on the dunes,’ he said. ‘And there was nobody but you anywhere at all. And so you became important to me, so that I came to ask you something.’

‘Don’t ask me anything,’ she said.

‘No, I don’t want to,’ he said thoughtfully.

‘Will you take me back to the land?’ she said, looking at him, holding her hand out to him uncertainly.

Her face was as he had imagined it, young and hollow, large hollow-eyed, luminous and vague with distress.

He took her cold hand and led her back to the firm land, the grass and rocks and walls and telegraph poles and houses. In silence.

‘Have you ever tried to die?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘What shall I do now, then?’ she asked again.

‘Walk,’ he said. ‘Pick a flower. Hurt your shin against a rock. Keep doing things like that for a bit. Do you like coffee?’

‘Yes,’ she said, thinking back to the taste of such things. ‘Yes. I like coffee.’

‘Shall we go and have some, and some chocolate biscuits, in the Marina?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ she said, very seriously. ‘That would be nice.’

She looked at the people having coffee and peach melbas and spaghetti on toast at the little green tables, soldiers and girls, commercial men, ponderous wives on holiday with children past their bedtime. The waitresses rustling and slender and deft, rotund and homely – and competent; the

warm shaded lights falling on the flowery wallpaper. The strangeness and the fear gradually left her eyes like sugar melting in a lemon glass. She tasted the hot coffee slowly, and its warmth led her to smile.

‘Why do you look so serious?’ she asked Curly.

He looked at her all the time. She could see the gathering of his thoughts in the dark blue eyes magnified and concentrated by the curved lenses of his spectacles.

‘Funny, you having blue eyes,’ she said.

Looking at each other over the wispy coffee steam, each wanted to be confessed in the other, each desired to share a new yet ancient community of interest. Neither of them could think now of how different they were, the one from the other, how insulated by separate compulsions and circumstances.

‘I live near here. Shall we go and sit by the fire?’ she asked.

‘I’d like to,’ he answered...

‘It’s only an electric fire,’ she said, as he opened the glass door for her.

There were two photographs on the mantelpiece of her little bedsitter. Curly noticed they were both men in uniform. Brothers? Or lovers? Also a sewing machine and dresses half finished. A reading lamp and *Picture Post* and *Lilliput* and a *Sunday Pictorial*.

‘I haven’t got a shilling for the meter,’ she said.

He produced one.

‘You’re very good,’ she said to him, putting the shilling in the slot, bending down as she spoke. ‘You stopped me committing suicide and now you’ve given me food and money and – and what else?’

‘What else?’ he repeated, his sensitive mind crushed by the sledgehammer blow of her casual confession.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, standing up and smoothing her navy skirt down, picking bits of fluff off her knees. ‘I don’t know what I’m talking about.’

Her sick soul was in her eyes.

He stayed with her till late in the night, putting another

shilling in the meter, going and queuing outside the chip shop for some fish cakes for their supper while she set the little table and boiled the kettle and cut some bread and butter. The reading lamp on the table, and she telling him about dressmaking, and the poverty she was in now there was no material purchasable, and the requirements of her clients, and their sexy confidences. She was recovering herself and he watched her judgement returning gradually as her comments on people and things reached further and further out from the touchstone of herself, radiating like ripples from a stone dropped into a pond. She had no politics or plans, no criteria; except herself, her intuitions and feelings, aversions. He wanted to restore herself to her, so that she could continue living from day to day, thought to thought, with continuity.

They were talking about the Army; tonight it seemed a remote, unreal topic, a social problem which could be discussed or dropped as they chose. In the same unreal mood she said:

‘My husband liked the Army. He’s the one on the right there. He had a good time in France, till suddenly it all happened.’

Curly crossed to the mantelpiece and looked at the smiling RAC sergeant in his black beret; a powerful, smiling man, confident and untroubled.

‘He never bothered about things,’ she said. ‘He liked tanks and so he liked the war. I don’t think he bothered about dying, or being away from me. He just married me one leave, that’s all. He wouldn’t have a baby. It never occurred to him. And now he’s dead. A whole year now he’s been dead. I’ve forgotten nearly everything about him.’

Curly looked from the second photograph in consternation.

‘You know Captain Cochrane?’ he asked.

‘He’s been coming here a lot,’ she said. ‘He’s had enough of me now, though.’

How weary she sounded, telling him all these elemental facts in a flat, indifferent voice.

'I should have thought you'd had enough of him,' he said. 'He's a poor piece of work. You shouldn't have let him take you in. He's nothing at all, just cardboard and paste.'

She smiled, lighting one of his cigarettes.

'Would you have saved me, if you'd known me six weeks ago?' she said. 'I met him in the Plaza at a dance, just six weeks ago. Would you have stopped him touching me?'

'It's your own affair,' he said. 'If I'd known you I would have.'

'Could you have?' she teased him. 'Could you make love as gifted as he did?'

'I don't suppose so,' he said. 'I'm not a cinema fan. Nor am I very enthusiastic about that sort of thing. You know what he used to say? He used to say he had a lot of dirty water on his chest and he knew a woman who would swill it out for him.'

'You're not preaching to me, anyway,' she said. 'You're hitting hard, aren't you?'

'I could hit much harder,' he replied.

'I can't help it now,' she said, dejected. 'He offered to marry me; there's that to be said for him; only he didn't mean it.'

Curly went hot and sticky, as though there were filthy cobwebs all over him. And at once the old despair touched him with its dry unavailing fingers, as when he had tried to get a short leave for Taffy Thomas to see to his wife.

It was difficult for him to go now. Yet she didn't want him to stay. She was normal again, and consequently beginning to understand the task that was on her, the mess she had made, the immense fatigue. She turned on the wireless, late dance music, mawkish and sticky. They both stood up.

'Shall I come and see you again?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes. Unless I go away from here.'

'Where to?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'Where do you go to have a baby? Are workhouses open for that? Or I'll go to my sister-in-law. She evacuated to her father's farm in Borrowdale. I won't go yet. Not for a few months. Perhaps I won't go at all.'

She was only talking round and round.

On his way downstairs he bumped into somebody, stood against the wall to let him pass, recognised Captain Cochrane, smelt his hot whisky-sweet breath, and hurried out into the black streets and the unhurried stars.

Anglo-German hostilities, held in abeyance during the daylight, resumed at a later hour than was customary this particular night. The operational orders of the Luftwaffe gave a certain unity to the experiences of Taffy Thomas, Curly Norris, Captain Cochrane and the women with whom they were connected – a unity which would not have existed otherwise. Taffy reached Swansea on a lorry conveying sheep skins from slaughterhouse to warehouse just as the first Jerries droned eastwards along the Gower coast, droned lazily towards the dark sprawling town, and released beautiful leisurely flares into the blackness below. Taffy was hungry and thirsty and broke, not even a fag end in his field dressing pocket. So he didn't mind a few extra inconveniences such as air raids. Life was like that at present. He wasn't expecting anything much. He hurried past his habitual pubs, past the milk bar where he had eaten steak and kidney pies on his last leave and been unable to get off the high stool on which he sat, drunk at one in the afternoon and his kid brother just as bad at his side, bloody all right, boy; and, as the first bombs screamed and went off with a sickening shuddering zoomph down the docks way, he turned into his own street and kicked the door with his big ammunition boots. It was about the same time as Curly went into Eva's flat, and Captain Cochrane bought the Polecat her first gin and lime. Taffy's missus was in bed on the sofa in the kitchen; she couldn't get up to let him in, she'd gone too weak. He had to climb the drainpipe to the top bedroom and squeeze

through the narrow sash. She knew who it was as soon as he kicked the door with his big boots, so she wasn't frightened when he came downstairs; only ashamed, ashamed that she was such a poor wife, so useless a vessel for his nights, skinny thighs and wasted breasts and dead urges.

'Hallo, mun,' he said with his rough vigour, picking up the newspaper and glancing at the headlines. 'Still bad? Where's the kids? Up in your mother's?'

'She fetched them up after tea,' she said. 'gainst there's a raid.'

'By yourself, then?' he said. 'Good job I come. Got anything to drink?'

'No,' she said, ashamed at being such a poor wife. 'I'd 'ave asked Mam to go down the pub for a flagon if I'd thought you was coming.'

'What about yourself?' he asked. 'Still drinking that old pink lemonade? Can't you drink a drop of milk or tea or Oxo or something yet? Still spitting that old yellow phlegm up, too, by the looks of that pisspot. I don't know, bach.' He sat on the edge of the sofa and put his hand idly on her moist tangled hair. 'I don't know what to do. Curly said for to take you to the hospital. I think I'd better, too. Shall I carry you tonight?'

'No,' she said, frightened. 'You can't now. It's blackout and there's bombs again, and I doubt there won't be a bed there. And you got to pay, too.' She pushed her bony hand slowly across the soiled sheet and touched his battledress. 'I don't want to go there,' she said.

She was too weak to wipe the tears out of her eyes.

'Oh Jesu!' he said, getting up in a temper. 'Don't cry, then. I was only suggestin'. Do as you like. Wait till tomorrow if you like. Only I was thinking the redcaps will be coming round to look for me tomorrow.'

'Never mind about tomorrow,' she said.

'The cat's been pissing in the room somewhere,' he said,

sniffing about him. He sat down again and wiped her eyes with the sheet.

‘You got to mind about tomorrow,’ he said.

‘Remember you was jealous of me in a dance at the Mackworth when we was courting?’ she said. ‘You took me out and slapped me in the face, remember?’

‘What about it?’ he asked slowly, nonplussed.

‘Slap me now again,’ she said.

He laughed.

‘I’m not jealous of you no more,’ he said. ‘You get better, and then p’r’aps I’ll get jealous again, see?’

She smiled and let her neck relax on the cushion.

‘You’ll never be jealous of me again,’ she said, looking at him with her faraway eyes.

Her soul was in her eyes, and it wasn’t sick like her body.

The bombs had been falling heavier and heavier, and neither of them seemed to notice. Till the light went out, and then he cursed filthily. The fire was nearly out; it was cold sitting with her all the time. He tucked her icy hands under the blanket.

‘I’m going out for some coal,’ he said.

‘There’s none there,’ she said. ‘The coalman’s killed.’

‘Christ, there’s plenty more men not killed,’ he said. ‘I’ll get some from next door, then.’

‘Don’t go,’ she whispered.

The house shivered and plaster fell in a stream of dust, as if from an hourglass.

‘Can’t sit in the cold all night,’ he said. ‘And the dark. I won’t be a minute.’

He slipped the latch and went out into the burning night, straight out into a screaming bomb that tore the sky with its white blade and flung him onto his face in the little backyard and brought the house crashing down with its mighty rushing wind.

The Luftwaffe’s secondary objective concerned Captain Cochrane’s harbour. The raid began at midnight, by which

time Swansea had nothing to do except stop the big fires spreading and wait for the morning to come. Taffy had called at his mother-in-law's, and seen the children; and at the police station, to tell them his wife was buried and ask them to inform his unit; and he was just walking around, trying to keep himself from freezing and crying and lying down in a doorway, when Captain Cochrane, who had also suffered some emotional disturbance, was getting out of Eva's bed and hastily pulling on his shirt and trousers in the dark. When he was half dressed he pulled the blind back to see what was happening. The searchlights were stretching their white dividers over the harbour; and yes, by God, they had a plane in their beam, a little tinsel plane, and the red tracer bullets were floating up at it from the Bofors by the sidings. Christ, it was a marvellous sight. He was thrilled stiff, trembling to sink his teeth into it, to draw blood. Where the hell were his shoes?

'I'll have to run,' he said brusquely, grabbing his cap and greatcoat. Eva, motionless and dark in bed, said nothing at all. Of course he had to go; a soldier like him.

'Goodbye,' he said, stumbling on the stairs.

Eva lay quietly, heavy and as though waterlogged, thinking of the Germans and the English, the soldiers of both sides, her husband and the excitement, the professional coolness with which, firing his two-pounder from the revolving turret of his pet tank, he died. And Hector Cochrane – she always thought of his surname as well as his Christian name – that boy with glasses was right; he wasn't much of a man. When he had come in tonight, drunk and abased, begging her forgiveness – as if *that* was anything to give or to withhold – her infatuation had dissolved like a sudden thaw, leaving everything slushy. And as she stroked his spiky Brylcreemed hair and let him sob into her lap she had felt how small and worthless the two of them were, clumsy bungling people of no moment, passive and degraded by their own actions. She had let him take her to bed. Anything was as good as nothing. He had written her a cheque.

Captain Cochrane had a haggard jauntiness, arriving at the office the next morning. The ethical code of his profession forbade a man to allow a hangover to take the edge off his morning smartness. He behaved in the exemplary manner of a commissioned officer, inspecting the sleeping huts and the cookhouse and the sump, chewing up slovenly old Crocker for overflowing the swill bins, chasing the fatigue party who were rat-hunting round the sump, getting a shake on everywhere. Then to the company office for his morning correspondence. Ration indents, pay requisition, arrangements for boot and clothing exchange, a glance at the medical report to see who was scrounging today. Sergeant Crumb had everything in order, non-committal and deferential, soothing.

‘Damn good show last night, sergeant,’ he said when he had finished his business. ‘Got a cigarette?’

‘Certainly, sir.’ (Bloody cadger). ‘The Bofors crew are going on the beer tonight, sir, to celebrate knocking that Jerry down.’

‘Yes. Damn good show it was. All burned to death, weren’t they?’

‘Yes sir. The plane was too low for them to parachute.’

‘Well, that’s burned their fingers for them. Something towards winning the war.’

‘Yes sir.’

A phone message. Thanks. Captain Cochrane speaking. Good morning, sir.

This is Swansea police. A private Thomas from your company, sir. Yes? Called in at 0025 hours last night, sir. Said his wife had been buried under a bomb, sir. Christ, has she? That’s bad luck. Have you confirmed it yet? Not yet, sir. Check up on it, please. He’s a bit of a scrounger. If it’s OK, put him in touch with the barracks. They’ll give him all the dope he needs. Money. Railway warrant. OK? Yes sir. If he’s bluffing hand him over to the redcaps. He’s absent without leave. Very good, sir. Goodbye. Goodbye, sir.

‘Thomas’ wife. Killed. They must have had a raid as well.’

‘That’s bad luck, sir. I’ll look up the ACI about coffins. I think the civil authorities supply them, don’t they, sir? RASC only issue them to soldiers. She was ailing anyway, sir, I know.’

‘Check up on it, sergeant. Also ring through to battalion and inform them. We’ll send him a leave pass if necessary. Keep the charge sheet, though. He’ll have to go before the colonel for absence without leave just the same.’

‘Very good, sir.’

‘Anything else, sir?’

‘No. I don’t think so. Oh yes, there’s that return to the adjutant about anti-gas deficiencies. I’ll inspect all respirator contents at 1100 hours.’

‘Very good, sir.’

‘Christ, that reminds me. I’ve left mine in town. Where’s Norris?’

‘Up at your billet, sir, I sent him to clean your kit, sir, being that Thomas your batman isn’t available.’

‘Send a runner up, then. Tell him to go to this address’ – he scribbled it down, Sergeant Crumb hiding the faintest wisp of a smile as he did so – ‘and ask for my respirator. Miss Eva Barthgate is the name.’

He smiled, too. They were both men.

‘Very good, sir.’

Sergeant Crumb saluted smartly and withdrew.

Captain Cochrane yawned and put his feet up for a few minutes, and thought, well, that was that.

Maybe he’d ask the old man to put him in for a transfer to the Indian Army. There were better prospects out there, on the whole.