

- JOURNEY'S END -

A SHORT STORY BY LIONEL STEVESON, VANCOUVER.

I.

Walter Marbury was glad that his train made its forty-three second stop in Slanter Station before five o'clock in the morning: there was no crowd of old acquaintances on the platform to give him a greeting in which surprise would probably exceed delight.

Despite his habitual carelessness he felt some reproaches of conscience for never having written to his good friends in Slanter during his whole five years of overseas service. It had seemed so dim and far away when he was in the trenches, like another world which could have no possible interest in him—which was almost inaccessible to his communication. But now that following one of his extraordinary whims, or perhaps drawn by some intangible lure of the West—now that he stepped onto the deserted platform in the golden sunrise light he felt memories of the old life flooding vividly back, giving new brilliance and perspective to all his thoughts, just as the returning sun transmuted the scene on which he gazed.

He recalled the old rancher Joe Dorgan for whom he had held the anomalous position of pupil, or in the local parlance, "mud-pup," synonymous with unpaid "hired-man." He recalled loquacious Mrs. Dorgan, and the private but hearty merriment which her inopportune remarks had often provided for him. But the pictures of the old couple were softened in his memory and their many imperfections smoothed away. More vividly than all he recollected their little niece Marjorie, who had smuggled a dozen ruddy apples into his kit-bag, and had blushed so prettily when he very naturally kissed her on saying good-bye. It was the lingering impression of her friendship which had led him to forget a certain ungracious coldness in the farewell of his erstwhile employer.

Walter looked about the familiar scene of the village as it lay with its main street leading directly to the station. "Not a thing is changed," he thought, "every building the same—no, there's something new!"

He had espied in the centre of the triangle of green sward adjoining the depot a grey granite column fenced in with a chain, and bearing a bronze plate. In idle curiosity he wandered over to make a closer inspection.

"Dulce at decorum—h'm, Latin phrase printed in old English script—Roll of Honor—killed in action—pretty good number for this little hamlet—probably I knew some of these fellows: J. R. Hending, good lad; Philip Gross, Walter Mar—eh—what the—!"

He tilted his hat with a lazy movement, a quizzical look in his eyes. Then he read the inscription again that there might be no error, and found his own name still correct and unmistakable. He swore in a few phrases that need not be repeated, for they are the private copyrighted possession of the soldier, and brook no trespass from the civilian tongue.

"Well, this adds dramatic value to my projected call on the Dorgan estate." He turned abruptly and strode up the familiar street, the sun casting before him an attenuated shadow of his long legs.

II

Joseph Dorgan was milking the eleventh cow when a figure obscured the light which had been streaming in upon him through the open byre door.

"Does old Rusty still give her thirty pounds?" queried a languid voice.

"Aye, and still kicks when she's finished her mash," returned old Joe, rather testily, for the cow shifted her foot in an ominous manner. But there was no interruption in the steady rhythm of the twin lacteal streams. "D'ye think ye

could manage her again if I let you finish her off? I want to give the calf some fresh hay."

So without another word Walter Marbury took his seat on the stool, and Dorgan stumped off with his pitchfork. Some quarter hour later he met Walter bearing two full pails of milk and remarked. "We'll come into the house now. Th' old woman should have breakfast ready by this time."

Walter grinned appreciatively, with a rueful wish in the back of his mind that the women-folk might accept his coming in the same impassive manner.

As he had anticipated, Mrs. Dorgan greeted him with a full-throated bay of astonishment, and laid two heavy, floury hands on his shoulders while intently regarding him up and down. Then a door opened softly, and a ghost of a scream attracted Walter's attention much more effectively than Mother Dorgan's bellow had done. He spun around, and took some seconds to realize that the fair girl of nineteen who was hastily curling a golden strand of hair back from her brows was the same mischievous Marjorie whom he had lifted bodily between his hands at their parting.

"It's great to be back on the old place after all," he exclaimed, trying to hold by the tenacity of his steady gaze a light which he had surprised in Marjorie's eyes. He failed, of course, and her expression had become a quiet and entirely meaningless smile before Mrs. Dorgan said with her usual brusqueness, "So you didn't get killed after all; think of that now, and we subscribed to have your name on the monument."

"Very sorry I can't oblige you with the news that I'm a revenant," said Walter, but his remark was ignored, and Marjorie put in softly, "I suppose then you must have been seriously wounded. You scarcely look strong and well again yet."

"No," replied Walter, regretfully, for he saw her first tender glance vanishing farther and farther beyond recall. "I went through the lot without a scratch, not even trench feet. Some people were lucky like that."

"There, now," declared Mr. Dorgan, whose tactlessness was not a natural gift like his wife's, but was aggravated by being intentional, "there, you've went and spoiled the on'y reel romance in the village. It's just the idear of your heroic death against fearful odds that's kept Marjie for a year past from encouragin' poor Tom Larris, and him just mad about her."

This time Walter was not quick enough. He only caught the flutter of a skirt above a hasty heel as the door closed upon the wearer's precipitate retreat.

"Oh," he said, with polite interest, "and who is Tom Larris when he is at home?"

"Don't you remember him, the postmaster's son? He got badly wounded."

"He hadn't enlisted in my time, had he?"

"Oh, no, he couldn't go till 1917. He was on work of national importance."

It was Mrs. Dorgan who sustained this conversation. Her husband was deep in discourse with a plate of hot-cakes. The lady took her turn at the assault.

"We thought you sure was dead, for that you never wrote when I sent you that passel of socks, back in 1917."

"Socks?—I did not get any parcel from you, or anybody else."

"We heard the next month you was killed, so I thought that was why you didn't write."

"Oh, well I was transferred to another unit about that time and I suppose they couldn't trace me."

"Funny the postmaster didn't know. When we moved here right from the prairie they sent everything on to us. Never