

A Box of Bengal Lancers

By N. de Bertrand Lugrin



Scientists may differ about the Mystery that inspires this Canadian Story

PHILIP FERRIS was tired. Second in command, he had lived and suffered through as severe a campaign as falls to the lot of most soldiers.

And he wanted to forget. In his own country he could not forget; there was a vivid reminder to him there in every hour of his waking day. But here it was different. No one knew him. No one cared anything about him beyond a casually expressed curiosity which he would never dream of gratifying. And the change was benefiting him. Already he was sleeping better, really resting when he went to bed. For months he had not been able to relax. His nerves, like taut strings on a musical instrument, responded to the slightest vibration, and over and over again in the night, he would spring up at some fancied bugle call, word of command or buzz of a trench telephone. He was putting on a little flesh, too, his leg was less stiff, and his insulted and demoralized stomach which had been obliged to give forced reception to an uncommonly impolite piece of shrapnel did not trouble him at all now. Only one thing bothered him occasionally. He was lonely. English-born and Canadian-bred, he was reticent to a fault, and he longed for a friend. There were plenty of people "at home" who cared, but they all belonged to "it," and it was "it" that he was trying to get away from just now, "it" that he must get away from if he expected to be fit to go back again to "it." Sometimes he did not mind being a stranger in a strange land, and then again he would be seized with a spasm of loneliness that hurt worse than physical suffering; and more than anything else in God's earth, he would long to meet someone who would understand his needs without telling; his necessity for quiet, almost silent communing, and who would not preliminarize friendly overtures by a furtive glance at his game leg and ask what he thought of the war situation.

Finally Ferris made up his mind that he must go back. He was as well as he ever expected to be. He had had the "two weeks complete rest and change" which the doctor had prescribed, and he felt quite sure that he could persuade the medical board to pass him if he was able to disguise his limp. He had a commission to perform first, however, a commission which was one of his reasons for coming to this special western American city. He had promised a dying German officer to deliver a letter, or to try and deliver a letter. Not knowing the exact address, and not liking the job in the least, he had put it off from day to day, until now, his time up, he felt he must get it to its destination if possible. He decided to give himself one more day, take a long drive in the country in the afternoon, and in the evening attend to the letter. Then he would return to British Columbia. It was in the afternoon that he met Peter.

FERRIS had stopped his car at the top of a hill to see the view, which comprised a deep valley in the foreground filled with cherry trees, lovely as brides, a wide stretch of turquoise blue water, and then the mountains rising in dazzling splendour from out the purple mists of their foot-hills. As he was about to drive on he chanced to see a small boy sitting on the tall gate-post of a fence on his right, his fat legs forming a frame for the name "Hillside Place." The fence surrounded more orchard land and a white house trimmed with green that merged delightfully into the natural landscape.

Straightway, after one glance at the boy, Ferris forgot the view. It was not that the small chap was so uncommonly wistful-eyed, though that would have caught his attention at once, it was the remarkable resemblance of the childish face to some other face

he knew. And yet, when he tried to place the resemblance it was quite impossible. Ferris looked at the boy and the boy looked at him, and presently, in response to Ferris' invitation, he got down from the tall post, not without difficulty.

Thence ensued a conversation in which Ferris learned that the gate-post was an "aeroplane," that the boy's name was Peter, that he was "going on six," and that his seeds had come up in the garden that morning. But when Ferris asked him if he would have a drive with him he said "no" very gravely and pressed for a reason suggested quite frankly, "you might be a kidnapper."

Ferris had the first hearty laugh that he had had in months, and it was the laugh, doubtless, that attracted the attention of a Chinese gardener who was diligently at work spading up around the cherry trees, for he came at once and called to Peter, "Mama want you now quick."

Peter, however, took not the slightest notice. He was stroking softly the polished mudguard nearest him, and he wanted to know if it was Ferris' own car. Ferris said it was his for the day, and that, as it seemed selfish for him to enjoy it all alone, he would go in with Peter and ask his mother if he might come with him for a drive into the city.

So Ferris walked behind Peter along a wide, bricked path, and between rows of lilac bushes just showing their first tinges of purple, to the verandah of the farm house. And then as though the lilac were not colour and perfume enough, the verandah had a mantle of honeysuckle, which, all gold and white and sweet-smelling, was irresistibly intoxicating to a million bees which buzzed around it, and two or three little humming birds that spun away on imperceptible wings as Ferris and Peter approached, but immediately returned again. The verandah was a place of pure delight. It was entirely encased in fine mesh netting and had wide screen doors, so that no bees or other mirauding insects might intrude upon its strictest privacy. There was matting on the floor, chaises longues with piles of bright cushions, a bowl of lily-of-the-valley on a low table, books and papers on another table, a guitar lying across a sea-grass chair, in fact it was such a warm, sweet, shady, lazy place that Peter's information—

"Mother is in the dairy making butter" seemed entirely inconsistent.

Ferris looked hard at Peter. Perhaps he was not the son of the house. Perhaps his mother was a servant. It seemed impossible, but the west holds the most irrecon-

cilable incongruities. Peter did not enlighten him. He bade him with charming dignity to be seated, and, excusing himself, went into the house.

He was gone twenty minutes, but Ferris, at ease in a deep chair with green cushions, feasted his eyes on the attractions around him, and the erstwhile neglected view of sea and mountain, feasted his nostrils with the score of perfumes, his ears with the drowsy hum of the bees and the buzzing of the humming birds and felt himself lulled into the most delightful inertia. When Peter at last came back, running out and landing with a little jump in front of Ferris, the latter started and realized he had been half asleep. Peter was dressed in an entirely fresh little outfit of crisp, white clothes, and his curly head shone from recent grooming. Unable to speak for happy excitement, he thrust his little hand into Ferris' hand, and nodded a smiling "yes."

Peter and Ferris drove away, to the intense disapproval of the Chinaman, who watched them from the gate, muttering indignantly in abominable gutturals.

"I have not been riding a motor car since my faver went away," explained Peter, when he was sufficiently composed to talk. "And I am not allowed to go wif de Wiggins or any of my muvver's friends, 'case I get a' accident."

"It was good of mother to let you come with me," said Ferris, with a faint misgiving. "You are quite sure, Peter, that she did say 'yes'?"

"Y—y—yes," stammered Peter, eagerly, "she saw you froo de curtains, and she said 'yes, yes, yes, you may go,' like dat, and she put me on all dese clean fings. An' my muvver says she is so glad dat we picked de lillies dis morning, cos' you could smell dem while you waited for me. Every day my muvver and me fix all de verandah pretty, 'case anybody come, but' most always not anybody come." Peter shook his head with brief mournfulness, and Ferris hastened to change the subject, though with some unwillingness.

THEY had a beautiful ride and chatted like old friends, always on more or less impersonal topics. Peter had an odd little way of stammering when he was excited and a most confidential manner without telling anything about himself, and Ferris, who did not want to presume on such a chance acquaintance, did not even ask him his father's name. He learned of how Peter's cat had killed a pigeon, and when Ferris had offered sympathy he was told that the pigeon was "happier wif God." His opinion was asked as to the relative value of "dogs that made faces, and des plain dogs." He said he had "six chickens and a cock-a-doodle, but he didn't like the cock-a-doodle because it always pretended that it laid the eggs just



England had declared war, the soldiers were stamped on and broken.