

The Last Grains.

Shorty was stumbling forward across the broken shaking ground, his eyes fixed upon the goal—that line of broken, shell-battered earthworks.

Suddenly the world dissolved in a blinding flash and storm of hot upheaval! He was spinning and falling, and the earth leapt up and struck him!

This was Death. Must be. The soul shaken from the bruised body.

No! It was not so bad. He could breathe, and see the sky. But some clumsy ass must have dug his elbow into his chest. The clumsy asses! They would get in other people's way.

Well—he would sleep for just a few minutes, just a few.

Who was the old guy rowing the boat, anyway? Gee! What black, inky water!

He opened his eyes to find himself comfortably installed in an armchair in a handsomely appointed office apartment.

Somehow this discovery failed to surprise him. He should worry, anyway, and it was very pleasant to lean back and rest.

The noise of the door opening suddenly compelled him to jump up, and he encountered an elderly benevolent looking gentleman who cordially seized his hand and pumped it vigorously, exclaiming, "My dear Sir, delighted to see you. But really you are very early. We did not expect you for some time."

A little surprised at the warmth of his welcome, Shorty stammered, "Would you mind telling me where I am?"

The old man beamed upon him for a few seconds, then, diving into a pocket, proffered a card.

With a start Shorty read, "DEATH, Esq., R.I.P."

"What! Then am I dead?"

"My dear boy," said Death, kindly, "If you weren't you would not be here. But, as a matter of fact, we had no notification of your coming. We issue many invitations in the course of a day. The H.E.'s are always busy, and the "Flying Pigs" are so very effective. The gas shells keep me so busy that I have hardly time for a quiet smoke. A large party of Fritzes have just arrived from Ypres, and are being issued with asbestos underwear before being conducted to their quarters."

Shorty sat down suddenly. "Well, I'm damned!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, no, my dear Sir," smiled old Death. "But they are. You yourself have nothing to fear. Now, come Sir, pardon the vanity of a foolish old man. What do you think of Death now you meet him face to face?"

Shorty subjected him to a long, close scrutiny, even walking round him to see that no long barbed tail was concealed behind the well-tailored back.

"Well," he said at last, "You ain't such a bad old cuss! I'm awfully—er—glad to see you."

Old Death grinned delightedly. It appeared to Shorty that he winked. "You've hit it, my dear boy," he said. "What am I to say? Trench feet or toothache?"

To the man of good heart DEATH is but the rest which he must one day surely take; kind and natural; sinking into the all-embracing arms of nature.

Perhaps the most natural thing you do in these unnatural times. The passing may be hard, but who should fear the end?

He dug Shorty playfully in the ribs, and continued, "Each man sees me through the window of his own mind. If that be warped, so is his vision. But I must investigate your case at once. One minute, please."

He skipped nimbly to an adjoining room, the walls of which were covered with shelves bearing countless little shining objects. He selected one, and returning, placed it carefully on the table in front of Shorty, who was astonished to see that it was a tiny crystal hour-glass, neatly labelled with his own name.

With a start he perceived that only a few grains of sand remained in the upper portion.

Old Death smiled pleasantly. "You will notice, my dear sir, that your sands have not quite run out, and you are therefore somewhat of a premature! He! He! He!"

Shorty examined the little object critically.

"Looks very like an egg timer," he remarked.

"Well," tittered Death, "It only timed the shell for you. Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho! Ho! You must really pardon my mirth, young sir, but I meet so many good fellows that their humour infects me. Why, the other day I was crossing our little river on a matter of business, and old Charon hit me up for a rise! And, will you credit that I told him to increase his income by gathering Styx? Oh dear, it's so very foolish of me, I know. Not at all professional. Not at all."

Shorty watched the glass intently. Now and then a grain would fall into the lower half, now almost full—while the upper half held, oh, so little.

He turned suddenly to Death. "When the sands cease to run a man's life is ended?"

"That is so," said Death, with a changed manner.

"But suppose you turn it over. The sand would flow again?"

"None here may do that. None but a higher power than mine."

A wild idea surged into his brain. It would be good to see the boys again! Remembrance of Life entered into his spirit, and he seized the glass.

"No!" screamed Death, divining his intention and seizing his wrist in a grip of iron.

Shorty fought wildly, striving to turn the glass.

It was useless.

His strength was exhausted, and the relentless grip was crushing his wrist.

He screamed, "Oh! my wrist! Let go! Let go!"

A kindly voice was saying, "All right, laddie. I'm only feeling your pulse. You're all right now."

He sat up and looked around.

Long rows of white beds!

"Oh, Doc, I've had an awful time, I've—"

"Now, you be good, laddie, and lie quiet. We're sending you to Blighty by to-night's boat. How will that suit you, eh?"

"But, Doc, I must tell you. I must."

The doctor listened patiently, and after a few soothing words, left him.

Stepping briskly towards the hospital the next morning, the doctor paused to read the bulletin.

"The Hospital ship — struck a mine at 10.25 last night. All perished." J. D. N.