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THE INCOMPETENT, A MILITARY NOVELETTE

By T. J. W. of the Kilties

Somewhere behind the trenches, out of which the British rushed in their last great advance, there is a grave. Over this grave two pieces of wood have been nailed together in the form of a cross, and on that cross is scratched in indelible pencil,

"CAPTAIN GERALD ROWE, M. C."

"THE COMPETENT"

I

I knew Jerry Rowe long before the war—when war with Germany was thought to be only the wild nightmare of foolish politicians—and when, last October, I saw his name among the "Killed in Action," and thought what it must mean to the people at home, I knew that I must tell his story as I had known it.

Shortly after the outbreak of war Jerry had received a commission and joined the —th battalion then training for overseas. In his course of instruction at the R. S. I. he had grasped the "bookwork" so thoroughly that he gained his certificate without being much hampered by his low marks in the "practical." He soon got the reputation of being the best dressed officer in his regiment—but I knew from his letters that there was some trouble, something I could not understand.

I arrived at the place where the —th was encamped on the morning of a July day, and early in the afternoon I set out to find Jerry. As I strolled up the main roadway of the camp, I saw, on the parade ground, a young officer and his platoon getting into mutual difficulties. To use army slang, the platoon was completely "balled up," and a perspiring sergeant was vainly endeavoring to extricate them. The young officer was standing a few feet away, playing with his cane and looking extremely foolish. I came closer and to my horror saw that it was Jerry.

I watched the parade to the end, it was simply one confusing mistake after another, and when the men were dismissed, I accompanied Jerry to his tent. He threw himself down on his cot and buried his head on his arm.

"You saw?"

"Yes."

"They say—I am no good—I can't drill a platoon—the other fellows call me—"the Incompetent."

For the first time in my life I saw

Jerry Rowe's body shake with violent sobs.

II

"There's a silver lining through the dark clouds shining,
Turn the dark clouds inside out till the boys come home."

—so sang the crowd on the pier and with cheers and tears the great ship swung slowly away and headed seaward. I was lucky enough to be with Jerry, since my battalion had been assigned to the same ship as his. As we began to move away my eyes were on him. He was standing by the rail, looking, not at the singing, cheering crowd, not at the surging mass of khaki, not even at that corner of the pier where I knew the girl he loved was waving her last good-bye—but at the dark water foaming from under the keel. As he started to move toward the group of officers where I was he staggered. I knew that Jerry was drunk.

After our arrival in England, I found that my battalion had been brigaded with Jerry's and that the brigade was to be quartered in a group of huts recently vacated by troops which had left for France. We soon got down to hard work, completing our training and making ready for the great test. I had hoped that Jerry's drill would improve with experience but he showed himself more of an abysmal failure than he had been in Canada.

The weary months of training dragged on. One drizzly night when I was sitting in my hut I heard the officers' call with its three piercing notes. Snatching my belt and cap I doubled to Headquarters. Everything was in a rush of preparation, orders had arrived for France. As I heard the disposition of officers read, I listened for Jerry's name. It did not come until the last—"Lieut. G. F. Rowe will remain at the base." The words buried themselves into my brain, for I knew their disgrace. As I glanced toward Jerry I saw that he had turned white and was grasping his chair with both hands. I pushed through the crowd until I reached him.

"Hard luck, old man."

"No—it's only what I deserve—one of the supernumeraries has taken my platoon—I am what they call me—"the Incompetent."