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MAY: 1945

by PETER BOYD

The boys of Company F,—th. Infantry Regiment were in rare high spirits. No wonder: the war — to all practical purposes — was over, the little tents were erected, there was nothing to do. Walter Gruen and James Rigney — two corporals — sat in front of their tent smoking in silence. They watched the boys lazing around, shooting crap, writing a letter to the girl back home telling her that soon they would be back—

Suddenly the quiet of the forest was rudely interrupted and the mood of the boys immediately changed: what could that mean? It was the regimental messenger with his noisy motorcycle—do we have to pack up and move again—can we never have a moment—? The shrill, hated whistle of the first sergeant called the men together. The captain looked at his men proudly and then said: Men, the war is over. The enemy has surrendered. I have no further details as yet. As you were—

Pandemonium broke loose. The boys yelled, danced, threw their helmets into the air and simply did not know what to do—

Only Walter Gruen stood aloof and did not join in. He leaned on a tree and watched the madness for a moment and then walked deeper into the forest. James Rigney noticed the strange behavior and — worried — followed him. «Walter»—he started hesitatingly—«what is it? It cannot be that you are unhappy? You of all people ought to be jubilant—» He sat down on a fallen tree and gently pulled Walter down to himself. Long silence. Finally Walter spoke: «Of course I am happy, much happier than words could express it, Jimmy, you surely know that—» He broke off, his voice trailing into silence. Finally he spoke again: «Look at this tiny path, Jimmy. If you follow it for another ten minutes or so you will come to the end of the forest and will see below in a valley a little town. I was born in that town and grew up there—until I went --- I had to go — to America. There used to be a bench—maybe it is still there and I sat there a long time that last, sad evening. I was not alone. My friend was with me. We had met there—in the dark for he could not be seen with me ---Hitler, you know—»

Jimmy nodded—he understood. But then he said: «Why don't you go and see the little town. Maybe it was not bombed, perhaps your house is still there and — who knows — even your friend? The war is over, the captain can surely let you go. Please, do it—»

Walter Gruen stood before his captain and requested a pass. After having given the reason for his request the captain said: «I can give you a pass, corporal. Better go tomorrow morning for we do not know how long we might stay here. Will a 6-hour-pass be enough?»

«Yes, sir, thank you, I won't need 6 hours—»

*

Walter arose very early, he was excited and had not slept much. He went along the little path to the end of the forest: there was the old wooden bench and there lay — in the morning-sun — the sleepy, tiny town. Nothing seemed to have changed: he could not find any bomb-damage. The gray and red roofs reemed intact, the steeple of the church was there—everything was peaceful. He sat down on the bench—it was too early to visit anyone. Was it real? Could

11 years have gone by? Did those horrible things really happen? It was as if it had been just yesterday—Walter remembered every word they had spoken on that last evening up here on this very same bench.—Both were depressed, but Wolfgang even more than Walter though he had tried to hide his feelings.—They had watched the lights go out in the houses down below—it was around midnight when they parted and went back on different roads—

He got up and slowly descended into the town. His heart beat a little faster but he was rather calm for it seemed that nothing, nothing at all had changed. Without any detour he went straight to Wolfgang's house. His parents house? No—strangers lived there now—it was of no interest any more.

Walter smiled when he saw the old, somewhat rusty nameplate. He rang the bell—it rattled just as it always had done. Nothing—really nothing had changed here. He was almost jolly —

Mr. Stadler — he was of course older and grayer now — opened the door and reeled back in horror upon seeing the American soldier. But Walter put him quickly at ease: «Good morning, Mr. Stadler, remember me? I am Walter—Walter Gruen—»

The old man could only stammer: »Walter—Walter—is it possible—you?« He called out to his wife—«hurry, Emma, look who is here»—Mrs. Stadler wiped her hands on her apron and led the way into the parlor. It struck Walter how much she looked like Wolfgang—the same soft features, the same sky-blue eyes. She had aged but she was still beautiful. She once was known all over town as the beautiful Stadlerin—

There was the old parlor with its white drapes, with the gilded frames around the family portraits—the slipcovers on the rickety chairs—nothing, nothing had changed here—Walter unpacked his gifts: tobacco for Mr. Stadler and chocolate for his wife.—Both were touched and Mrs. Stadler exclaimed— «Wilhelm, is he not just like his dear parents were? Always giving—always bringing joy to others»— And then she gushed—Mr. Stadler stuffed his pipe—and Walter was glad that he did not have to do all the talking—in fact he could hardly have gotten in a word—«do you remember? Could one ever forget.—Yes, those wonderful old days—ach gott—and you and our Ursula—you were such good friends—I sometimes thought—»

Walter barely listened, his eyes wandered around the room—then he saw the piano and on it stood Wolfgang's photo—with black crepe for a frame. Mrs. Stadler's eyes had followed his and now she broke into tears—(Mr. Stadler suddenly had trouble with his pipe—why would it not burn—?) «Yes, Walter, our Wolfgang was killed two years ago—in Russia. In every letter he talked about you, he had such hopes that after the war—»

«Oh—I am so terribly sorry»—it was all Walter could stammer, he was ashamed to sound so banal—but his head simply failed him—Wolfgang—my Wolf—Mrs. Stadler squeezed his hand: «Do not talk—Walter, I understand what you feel and cannot express now—»

The room was stuffy, airless. Walter had not noticed it before—but now he could barely breathe. He rose suddenly, looked at his watch and lied, «I am sorry, I must go for I have only a short pass.» The two old people saw him to the door, «please, Walter do come again—» «Yes—if I can—gladly.—Good-bye—»

He left the town quickly and stopped only when he arrived at the bench. He had to rest, it was very warm and the hill seemed steeper than before. With bitter irony he talked to himself: Nothing has changed? Everything has changed. There was the bench, there in the valley lay the town—he barely saw it. A town—there are thousands of little towns—this one meant nothing, nothing anymore, nor did the bench. He rose and strode into the forest—toward his company.

Suffering from the Disease

An interesting letter to *Time And Tide*, London, March 3d, 1966, reprinted without comment.

DISCIPLINE AND HOMOSEXUALITY

From Captain P B Marriot, DSO, DSC, Royal Navy (retired)

Sir: 'Tenax' has been brave to query legalised homosexuality. May I comment on a particularly important aspect on which little is ever publicly expressed and on which, it seems to me, very few people indeed are qualified to speak?

In practice, in the vast majority of cases, homosexuality is associated with other crimes and is both a symptom and a cause of a demoralised society. For nearly 20 years I served in submarines where the uninformed might expect homosexuality to flourish. That it does not in fact do so is because the morale and discipline of a submarine crew is of an exceptionally high standard, and for no other reason. To the best of my belief, there was no single instance of homosexual practice in any one of the large number of submarines I was lucky enough to serve in.

More recently, I was the executive officer of a large modern carrier with a total ship's company of about 1,600 men. If there is any place where curious things are likely to occur, it is in these large overcrowded ships often kept at sea for prolonged periods. They do, occasionally, but in view of the extraordinary statistics which are sometimes quoted in other contexts, to a remarkably small extent.

In a ship's company of this size there will inevitably be a few genuine pathological oddities, perhaps half-a-dozen. There will be, however, a far larger proportion of border-line cases who depend entirely on the good influence of their officers and stronger messmates for their survival. For these, too, the protection which the law gives them is a vital factor.

From time to time homosexual outbreaks can be expected. There are those who genuinely suffer from the disease, but these are few. There are those who carry it; but mostly the thing is contagious and one man can infect a whole mess, particularly of young men perhaps lacking in character but in no sense homosexual by nature.

Homosexual practices are almost invariably associated with other disciplinary offences and low morale in a particular quarter. It is indeed a fact that the proportion of men who are sent to detention quarters for other offences but who are found to have dabbled in homosexual practices at some time or another, is very high and of these the proportion of genuine queers, who cannot be redeemed by ordinary disciplinary measures, is minute.