



**I, Simon, a Soldier**  
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**Published:** 2009

**Categorie(s):**

**Tag(s):** fiction novella story literature fantasy

## Simon's Preface

Sometimes I have imagined a world quite unlike our own: a world where there are not just two mighty nations spread across these thousand and one green islands, since their very creation despising one another and trying to seize one another's possessions—but many nations, of many different cultures and beliefs; where histories are not borrowed and legends are not common property; where there are spoken many languages, not just this overburdened, inadequate one we share with our eternal enemy. Think of more than one word or way to describe an object, beautiful phrases that might baffle us, yet tickle the tongue with delight! (And if this missive ever were translated into the vulgate of an unknown reader of the future, will I make more or less sense?) Perhaps, too, one could conjecture not innumerable gods, half-forgotten gods once said to be ruling and guiding every entity and object from the sun above to this very pen I hold, but only one god—or perhaps better still, none. Imagine a world where there is no need for war—war because as fraternal twins we grew too much alike, too jealous and too monotonous—but instead the harmony of many voices and ideas reigns, and so humans live in uninterrupted happiness. I cannot *really* imagine what that would be like, all those unknown words and possibilities: faces, whole civilizations and races that might look so different from our own.

Then again, I *can* somehow conjecture an even more dissimilar world, one where we have yet to set foot, where indeed we (my people or theirs) cannot be imagined at all. All our buildings, all our art and our vanities, vanished, never were, never will be. All our fulsome grandeur just a smoke-ring, a soap bubble, engendered by a consciousness that does not exist—*nothingness*. Here then is true peace. Jackdaws soar across a sky that has never known our fires, and the badger and fox burrow among the oaks where our museums and pigsties and temples would crowd the land. Deer and elk grazing grassy meadows that we have made battlefields and cemeteries. Would that be a better world? Some day all of us will be dead—you and you and you (and me) and all our friends and your children, too—so in time, given time, there will be no trace of us left upon this planet. Will that at last be the heaven we have only dreamt of?

## Simon's Story

For what seemed a millennium I had been dead, or almost completely dead, a trifling speck of consciousness glowing feebly in a vast starless firmament. Gradually, so gradually it must have taken centuries, dull points of sensation prodded and awakened me; I was subtly illuminated by what I can only describe in my regrettably schoolboyish way as a green-glowing, viridescent light emanating from unseen galaxies impossibly far away, and then in an instant my mind traveled swiftly on a beam of that greenish-yellowish light to rejoin my broken body. Everything—every touch, every sound, every luminous memory—came hurtling back into my open brain: the secret history of my short life, its bittersweet pageant of hours and eras and mirthless tea-times; my mother's smile, my grandfather's coffin, Maisie and schoolmates and teachers and books, too... while cool paternal hands, the hissing of acetylene lamps, the light from lamps with green medical shades, close camphor-scented murmurs enveloped and caressed me before receding. It turned out, friends, that I was not dead after all, but lying immobile on an abrasive canvas cot within a canvas-roofed enclosure that smelled faintly of merbromine and more strongly of horses. The sun had found me through a rent in the cloth and my lips were moist, as if freshly kissed.

At first, I was angry at whatever deities or mortals had pulled me down from the heavens like that and forced me to live again within a body which I innately understood to be no longer whole or fully functional. Secondly, after I had watched the enchanted dance of dust-motes in my wayward shaft of sunlight for several minutes, I found myself furious with my own self for having imagined my premature demise and slipping so easily into what I had believed to be a bosky if underimagined afterlife of cottages and canaries, when I should have been battling for my soul and every cherished delicacy of this world I knew so well—from my favorite gun-metal gray fountain-pen to a flock of storks turned pink by the rising sun to the scientifically instructive playing-cards we undergraduates had once shuffled and divided lustfully among ourselves. Lastly, when the ether had fully worn off, I forgot all that I had dreamed, forgot the sun-splashed clearing and the chestnuts and the smiling forester, and merely wondered where I was and what would be required of me now, and probably again.

This war, the war, or the latest war, the war to end all wars, I tried to calculate within my aching head, had been going on for over a thousand days and nights, or ten-thousand days and nights, I wasn't clear; it must

have been going on for a very long time, in any event. Hadn't it? Hadn't our two insular nations always been at war with one another? And I, I must have always been a soldier.

"Mussed your pretty golden locks real good, didn't they, kid?" I heard a croaky whisper somewhere to the left of me, though I could not as yet turn my head. "Saw you when they brung you in, I did. Nasty little scene out there, all those devils and us," the voice continued, ebbing and flowing with strength and volume. "Yep, saw you dragged in by your yallowy hair. As drained of blood as a hog hung in a smoke-house. Would've bet a week's rations you was dead, me matey."

Mustering all my strength, I was able to raise my head two or three inches, and, feeling as if my neck were pivoting on a rusty axle, I slowly turned toward the possessor of the rasping voice. He was lying on a cot, too, a giant of a man two or three decades older than myself, with ragged sandy hair and a great unkempt beard of a much darker shade (if it were not for our predicament, I would have been sure it was as fake as a street-corner medicine man's). At first sight his skin appeared to be painfully sunburned, and not simply dusted with a reddish powder like paprika, which might have been applied on purpose or might have drifted in between the flaps of this hospital tent. When lying fully stretched out as he was, his feet stuck out over the edge of his cot and exposed his horny toenails and toes, yellowed and misshapen as an orangutan's, to the world. The only other remarkable features of this man were his broad, fleshy hands, which had only five fingers distributed between them. Still, he handled them adroitly and was even then whittling a splinter of wood into a miniature bird.

"A tin turnip," he explained, keen to what I had been staring at. "Bloody awful thing went off too soon. Devils coming out of the ground like termites. Someone handed me the grenade and told me to throw. 'Round these parts someone's always passing you a grenade like it was a peppermill, right? Lucky it didn't take the rest of me with it."

Up until this moment, I had scarcely been aware of what part or parts of my own body might be missing, since I had just begun to realize where my body was, in general. Now I took a quick inventory and was relieved to find every visible limb and digit seemingly in place, although there was a vague itchiness along my right leg which I could not scratch, as it was bandaged like a mummy's from calf to thigh.

"Oh, you're all there, all right," the bearded man said knowingly, and put down his jack-knife and the unfledged bird. "Only a bit fagged, I

reckon. Or fragged! But you never mind, you—they done pieced you back together right fine.” He leaned toward me on his right side and swept back the yellowed sheet, revealing a bloodied bandage taped to his mid-abdomen. “I got this beaut,” he said with the air of a lady showing off a new ring, “the other day, I did. For a while, they was feeding me through a tube stuck smack down in the hole. I could look right in and watch myself churning up the mess. Most fun I’ve had since the draft-board caught up with me.”

I felt the remnants of my last meal rising in my throat, a meal I could remember no more of than where I had been and what I was doing when I thought I had died. Most likely, it was porridge, since all our breakfasts for nearly two years had been porridge. Beating back the porridgy sensation, I asked where I was.

“Can’t you smell the manure, bucko?” my companion said. “It’s a god-darn barn! If I’m not mistaken, we’re right about where the horse stalls was.”

“I—I thought we were in an army tent. Maybe in a desert or in the mountains.”

“Ha! That’s just the roof torn off and replaced with any ol’ scraps. Hain’t no deserts or mountains round here. Hain’t even no real hospitals. Should know, I grew up just down the road a piece.”

Wide awake now, I pulled myself up against the damp wall (there was no pillow) and saw that the farmer was nothing less than correct, though of course the place had been given a hasty transformation and equipped with examination tables, trays, cabinets, and a quadruple row of cots, each of the cots occupied with a groaning or snoring soldier. Everything was coated with a layer of fine red dust, except where it had been brushed away here and there. An overturned watering trough lay down the aisle from us, atop which an orderly in a dirty green scrub-suit sat cross-legged, filling out a crossword puzzle in a pulp-paper digest. I was at the end of the fourth phalanx of cots, against the cold stone wall of the old barn, upon which there were still spots of moss and mushrooms that had not been scraped away. Above me, there was a hayloft, through which the sunlight shone through slats half-patched with canvas and from which there blew a musty breeze, which would precipitate tiny gusts of chaff and dust upon us all. Opposite, through the wide-open doors of the barn, I could see chickens scratching calligraphy in the red dirt and hear the army mules laughing scornfully now and then, as if this deplorable excuse for a hospital had once been their rightful home. Flashes of hard white light beyond promised an approaching storm.

“Ah, righty,” the farmer said, taking in a draft of dusty air, “they made this place overnight. We hain’t a stone’s throw from the trenches.”

Although I did not believe, or care to believe him—I had been temporarily comforted by the impression that this barn must be at the edge of a city whose hospitals were too full to accept any more reservations—I soon came to realize that those rumblings which I had assumed to be emanating from my near-empty stomach were in fact the aftershocks of bombs striking the earth in the not-too-distant distance. What I had presumed to be bolts of lightning in the sky (but a blue daylight sky?) must then be rockets being set off on the horizon. The shock of this new information naturally distressed me a great deal, and so I sulked down under the scratchy wool coverlet of my cot with a very vocal and overextended sigh. I wanted a goose-down mattress and pillows, and I longed for steaming cocoa brought in by Mother and a serious novel to read during this recovery (which would of course be as rapid as the novel was long), as well as breathless conversations on the telephone to Maisie—not the dust and itchiness and stink, yet alone the approaching devastation outside.

“Lovely day, in’t it? By the way, ol’ chap,” my bedside mate said with an amiability more often found in pub or club, a voice from beyond the foggy borders of sleep (for I had almost put myself out again with those cozy recollections of bed and book and chocolate), “the name’s Irving. By way of Dundersea. And Mounthatten. Doctor of philosophy. Formerly. Hedonist. Always. Pleased to make the acquaintance. Now, if you don’t mind... Ta!” Then it was he, not myself, who dropped into instantaneous slumber before I was able to ask whether Irving was his first or last or possibly both names. Could he really be some sort of professor, like the ones I knew back at university? It did not matter, for his interruptions had spoiled my own chance at sleep; I lay awake now staring out across the other snoring cots toward the garulous fowl in the barnyard, pitying my present circumstances but nevertheless optimistic that in my honorably wounded condition I would be home soon. Watching Irving sleep, I noticed a ragged recruitment poster tacked between our beds: a brawny, bare-chested young fellow in jodhpurs and puttees brandishing a bayonet, daring all onlookers to “Do You’re Duty! Shut Up and Fight!” That abominable misprint of a homonym offended my earnest collegiate sensibilities almost as much as the implied exhortation against pacifists. Besides, the poster was obsolete, since the draft was now universal and the enemy on all sides of us meant even housewives and schoolgirls were launching bombs from their

barricaded porches. In her last aerogram, which had been posted I'd forgot how many weeks ago, Maisie had written that at her office even the sound of the typewriters made visitors flinch.

As I was contemplating punctuation and politics, an aging officer, remarkably well-groomed, not a speck of dust on him, with wavy silver hair and wavy silver mustache, and graceful but rather long and simian arms, bared to the elbow as if just scrubbed, approached my cot, swaggering like a cadet, clipboard held high and forward like a shield. Without having to move his contemptuous lips, he announced that he had been assigned my doctor.

"Will I be all right, sir?" I asked, for lack of anything more conversational to say.

The doctor acted as if his patient had said nothing and began tapping my bandaged leg with a metal prong (actually an adapted horseshoe substituting for a medical device, I soon saw). "Feel this?" he said, jabbing the shoe into the underside of my gauzed knee. "Not much," I replied, grimacing. Allow me: It is written that a good soldier does not feel pain for himself—only others, or so they had told us all in the infantry.

"And this?" he asked.

"Possibly, possibly not."

"Feel this?!" His tone was growing more accusatory than interrogatory.

"Oh, a tiny bit, yes."

"This..."

"Y-yes. Yes, sir!" It did not matter now; I was only a private and could care less about promotion, anyway. When they shipped me back home I would not demand any medals for bravery.

"Let me try here." The doctor leaned over my lower extremities and I could smell his manly, equine odor even more on his smock. Perhaps he was a member of the cavalry. "Do you feel this? Do you feel this?"

I could not restrain myself any more than I used to when told my sources were dubious, during the days of upper levels and written exams. "Excusing your lordship, but do you actually expect me not to feel that?"

He gave me a curious but not very surprised look. "That time I didn't touch you."

"I beg to disagree, sir, but I saw you. I absolutely felt it."

"I was only pretending to, private." He dashed off a few lines into his notepad, his silvery mustache smirking. "I'm afraid it'll have to come

off," he said, as casually as if he had said, "I'm crazy for some good hock." Which was, in fact, what I at first convinced myself I had heard.

"I'd love a good stiff drink, too," I agreed.

The doctor gave me a look. "I said," he said, "the leg will have to go. Or else the infection in your bloodstream will spread."

I nearly bit through my tongue. "No, you must be wrong, your lordship, sir," I pleaded. "It'll be all right. Nothing that can't mend itself, given a little time. Look! I can wiggle my toes." Though under the layers of gauze there was no way to prove this.

"Reflex actions." He checked off a box on a pale green form.

"But watch, sir, I can even raise my leg a bit." And this I was able to demonstrate, or nearly. "So, you see, I'll be fine as soon as I'm rested and at home. Only surface wounds. I'll be walking in no time at all." At which point I thought, "how do I know I can't walk now?"

The doctor resumed his amused expression and shoved the clipboard up under his arm like a rifle. "That leg," he coolly explained, taking my limp hand in his soft but strong hand, "has twenty-seven separate particles of shrapnel in it. We have some beautiful X-rays to prove it. You stepped on a land-mine, boy! Blasted devils! The knee-cap is cracked and the tibia is shattered right down to your tarsals. Even if there were no gangrene, you'd never be able to walk again." He dropped my hand, straightened his back, and stared regally down at me, stroking his mustache as if it were a small animal that wanted consoling. "Unless we amputate it very soon, private, your whole body will be lost. As you may not as yet have realized, we are not in the most hygienic situation here..." He left off his mustache and placed his fingertips tenderly on the bandaged leg. "Now, what you feel are merely sensory hallucinations that are—"

"But the pain is real! And I can move my leg!"

"—are quite common in these cases. The pain you feel is illusory, a false pain, as it were, emanating from your brain and not your limb, where the nerves have been severed. That is why we must negate the appendage: because it is dead already and unless abstracted, it will wither away. Unless it putrefies first."

"Why?" I moaned, holding onto the leg as if the good doctor were trying to tear it from its socket then and there. I was doing something else the heroic soldier should never do: sobbing. "It's a good leg! It has always been a great service to me. It is me!"

The doctor gently ruffled the back of my overgrown hair. "Come, come, my golden boy," he murmured, as if remembering a line of

poetry. "There's no reason to worry. These artificial legs they make nowadays are real wonders. Marvels of technology. Very light-weight and streamlined. Sturdy and really quite reliable." He was counting off on his well-manicured fingers, a salesman. "Why, one of the newest models is ten times as efficient as the flesh and blood kind, and with regular lubrication, guaranteed to outlast the one the gods gave you." He smiled and showed all his hard little teeth, his fingers once again playing in my curls. "So, relax, boy, and welcome your new leg as a gift to you from the twin arts of engineering and medicine. Damn me if I wouldn't enjoy such a fine leg myself."

Just then, a gust of wind blew some fragments of straw and so much of the red dust into my eyes the scene took on the unreal crimson hue of an archaic Hell, as invariably represented onstage. Devils. No gods. The doctor brushed my face with a horsy-smelling handkerchief, lingering on my cheek, and I thought of biting into his well-scrubbed, apelike arm. I knew they must have mixed up my X-rays with another soldier's, the way they always mixed our laundry or our mail. But for some reason I could not bring this far more important matter to his lordship the doctor's attention. Instead, I merely stated, "I haven't any choice, I suppose, sir."

The doctor lifted incredulous silver-browed eyes from his clipboard. "Of course you have a choice, soldier. Either watch your leg degrade or let us amputate it. Either obey a command from a higher-ranking officer and lord of this commonwealth, or do not obey it."

I was too weak and exhausted to debate further. I knew deep within my soul that I had no choice. Friends, the Army has done us a great favor by lifting the burden of decision from our bent backs.

So I submitted, with all pretense of willingness, to their surgery, the gleaming vision of a sparkling, spanking-new chrome and stainless-steel leg the only thing I had with which to buoy my spirits. I had also hoped to be pleasantly gassed and awaken some time later already equipped with the artificial appendage, but the operation, alas, did not go so nicely. The field hospital had predictably run out of anesthetic; I fought so they had to strap me down with leather cinches, and when I cried out in pain they shoved a horse's bit into my mouth to clench. And I would have snapped the bit in two if I had not cracked two molars on it first. (I am certain I heard the hirsute nurses, armed with curry-combs and a hacksaw, laughing at that.) With no prosthetic in sight, I was lifted from the operating table—in truth a stable door supported by bales of hay—and carried back to my cot, where I was given a sponge bath by an

underage orderly who thought it amusing to squeeze spongfuls of mer-bromine over my head until my scalp may as well have been in flames. Though I cursed him at the time, I should have blessed him for taking my attention away from the much greater pain I felt south of my equator. Late into that first night, so abysmally atramentous (twelve points for that word!), when I finally dared to place my right palm where my right knee had been and felt nothing, the rest of my body seemed to vanish, too—bodiless and brainless, I floated away toward the dusty hayloft, watching myself writhing on my cot below, watching a half-hundred other sick or injured men writhing on their cots, and it was not until I regained consciousness the next morning that I realized I still had the bit in my mouth.

I awoke slowly then, once I had pulled the bit out—woke into a humming, thrumming, buzzing world. The stone wall I propped myself against throbbed with energy, all those atoms crashing inside all those molecules inside all those elements we had learned about in first-year physics, somehow keeping intact something as solid and hard as granite and mortar. And the floor hummed, cot and coverlet hummed, the air hummed, everything hummed—especially my invisible leg, which I had already almost come to accept, vibrating like a tuning fork rapped against a tomb. The hammer jostled the anvil which jiggled the stirrup of my inner ear, ever so faintly and subliminal, but ever so insistently. All this resonation told me I was still alive, insisted I was alive, alive and one-legged. Oh well, oh well, oh well... I contented myself a bit by slurping my porridge and thinking of my new superhuman supernatural leg, wondering where it was and how soon it might be delivered and affixed to me; maybe they were off polishing it and adjusting it for my own special size. Anyhow, I had plenty of time to wait...

Irving, the farmer or philosopher, was humming, too: perhaps that was where the humming of the entire world originated. Watching swifts or swallows dart in and out of the loft overhead, I found myself humming along after a few bars—it was the hero's lilting leitmotif from a semi-popular operetta I had seen in my hometown a few weeks before leaving for active duty. That had been over two years ago. I was transported back to my rough velvet theater seat, soothed by the susurrations of gaslight and eucalyptus-scented whispers, and I again familiarly took Maisie's lavender-linimented hand. I kissed its warm, moist, aromatic palm; embarrassed, she repossessed her hand, and so, as the hero tragically ended his life with ruby-hilted halberd and choral requiem, I contented myself with fondling the fair hairs, soft as milkweed flax, on the back

of her neck. Somehow, in my reverie, I now imagined the baritone to look very much like the lumberjack or woodsman from my dying dream—or perhaps it was the other way around. I could picture the burly youth unbuckling his cuirass and thrusting the naked blade into his bared bronzed chest... When Irving coughed, the vision, regrettably, vanished like a ripple on a pond. The hero's death had been a farce, anyhow, the prop-sword thrust only into its hilt; he would come back to life in a comic epilogue. Much, I gather, as I had. "Where on earth did you pick up that little ditty?" I asked my fellow foot-soldier, expecting to hear that the parochial crofter or unworldly philosopher had tuned into it by accident on the airwaves.

Irving turned in his cot to face me, but it was not Irving at all, or did not appear to be. This bloke was freshly washed and clean-shaven, looking considerably younger and maybe even a little smaller than Irving had. He also had laundered sheets and pillowslip, and there was one of those girlie magazines spread across his lap. "So, come 'round, have you? The aureate god of dawn tickled your fine fancy? Got some fettle in your mettle? I might could spy a new obelisk erected in your county called Middlesex. So, there is life! Buck up, me bucky, thou buck-toothed buck private—it's another splendiferous day of our ever-winning never-ending war," he continued, eyes brightening, words tumbling; and even the timbre of this plummy new voice bore little resemblance to the farmer-philosopher's—at that instant I couldn't help but catalog qualifiers alliteratively as polite, polished, posh, perhaps even pretentious.

"How do you know that tune?" I repeated, and then, "Who are you, anyhow? Where's Irving?"

"Why, it is Irving, still Irving, alas," he answered, ignoring the former question. "Don't you recognize me without the magpie's nest? Lovely to look upon, am I not?"

It was the former Irving all right, and I would have felt confirmed in my suspicion that the beard had been an histrionic ploy if I did not see the razor and strop on the orange-crate nightstand between us. His large hands, which he now withdrew from behind his head and spread over last year's nubile Nymph of November, proved, indeed, to be incomplete.

"Have they done some sort of operation on your larynx, too?" I inquired.

"Ah, look to my footnotes for an apologia," Irving said. "You must mean the hick shtick. Sometimes it is in the nature of my profession to

absorb the quality of my surroundings. Camouflage, I suppose. Curiously chameleonic, could be. You see, I've played so many roles, I've just about forgotten who I am. Today I have clean sheets and a clean colon for the first time in weeks, so I feel and talk like a poet or a prince."

"I thought you were some sort of professor emeritus," I ventured.

"That rustic rube of a PhD. I blame on temporary exuberance. Must have been the ether in the air. I never lied about what you might call my hedonistic tendencies, however. One does enjoy a good steak and a bottle of the bubbly. I lie hear consulting chastely with my topless muses but drool over the ads for cheap whiskey."

"You must be an actor, then," I concluded, satisfied that an early intuition of mine must have been correct. "Am I wrong?"

"Oh," he said, moving his shoulders up and down as if they were balancing scales and he were weighing the question, "I used to warble with the night-birds a bit, too."

"At night-time in night-clubs?" I asked in a newfound abbreviated manner, hoisting myself up against the wall as far as I could. I could easily imagine him in one of those new-fashioned crooner's tuxedos, with a cummerbund replacing his bandage. "Sung for your supper? Fronted a little combo?"

Irving pointed his chin loft-ward and cast his eyes disdainfully away like a suitor spurned. "My dear backwoods boy," he said with great disgust, "entire orchestras accompany my groans. It is the grand opera which is my bitch-goddess."

"Oh, pardon me," I said hastily. "I didn't mean to imply—"

"I was drafted just as I was closing my run in something you wouldn't know," he amended himself, pumping himself up with a mock haughtiness which he expelled with a sigh. "Ho! You wouldn't know it not because I doubt your cultural acumen, but because it was trash. And we closed in Serutan, of all places." The name of my not overly small hometown fell over us both like a shroud.

"You!" I exclaimed, seeing him transformed, elegant in the vermillion armor of the Scarlet Knight, who of course turned out to be the Hero. It was based on one of those tireless (not tiresome!) legends of when armies rode on horseback to protect the honor of The Gods from The Enemy. Would the military life be so glamorous now! Maisie and I had thought that, for Serutan, Garter and Grail was high-class entertainment, and there is little difference to any of us in Serutan between opera and operetta—or art and artifice, for that matter.

“Yes, me,” he said sorrowfully. “Just as I was on the verge of joining a permanent repertory company that did real music.” Irving, who had been so cheery in the little time I had known him, fell back against his fresh pillow—and it was not hard to tell he was thinking of stentorian declarations of love and stunning leaps across the stage and the silky swish of a diva’s gown. (Diluted and impoverished imagery here admittedly all mine.) “But,” he said, snapping out of his fever-dream as if the footlights had fizzled out and the fireproof curtain had fallen down, “I’ll be back again, as long as I can hold me guts in.” He struck his abdomen to prove he was strong, but the suggestion of a wince on his face disproved all. “The name is Irving Irving,” he said, interrupting his own gesture. (Or perhaps he was merely repeating the name “Irving” for my benefit, to let it sink into my thick skull.) “Did I tell you that already? It seems I’m forever introducing myself.”

Something in Irving’s thespian effusiveness infected me, and though I am often as not (as my professors used to warn me) on the wordy and expository side, I was now a veritable lexicon of myself. I began by introducing myself for the first time and mentioned that I had seen Irving’s final—that, is last—performance (wasn’t it odd that I couldn’t recall any of the other entertainers’ names) and how my fiancée Maisie and I had simply adored it, and then revealing, like a magician drawing cheap scarves from his sleeve, a string of other useless facts about myself: such as growing up alone and reasonably happy but more than annoyed sometimes with my widowed mother, my thoroughly uneventful schooldays, the secret poetry I would write in tiny code on the backs of my favorite girls’ dance-cards, my insolence on the game-fields, the police gazettes I sometimes stole from newsstands—just to laugh at, my irrational fear of celluloid collars and watercress, Maisie of course and much of her personal history and habits, and as well of my having become junior clerk in a corner chemist’s after the islands’ institutions of higher education were shuttered, with not enough hope then for me even to become an apothecary, and how I probably would have been married by now if it were not for this confounded war. Everything nowadays was if not for the war. “I can play the toy-piano passably well,” I added, “but that’s the limit of my musical talents. Perhaps I’m too young to know if I have any talents, though I had once hoped to become, what do you call them, a man of letters. Well, actually, my greatest talent I suppose is in not becoming bored by my own boring life. I’m very seldom bored, although there’s plenty to be bored about in Serutan. We haven’t much but temple bazaars and public hangings in

Serutan. In Serutan, clouds are our cinema, and Serutan thinks books like virgins male or female look best kept on the shelf, uncut and fully intact. But... am I boring you?"

"Well," said my companion as he cracked open a pack of Laughing Lad cigarettes, "I tend to enjoy listening to people as long as they listen to me a little better than I do to them." With that, he smiled and offered me a cigarette. We smoked and talked on and off all day until the wan autumn light dimmed and the orderlies confiscated our cigarettes; we were too tired to protest by then. Later in the night, when I awoke kicking my surprisingly energetic phantom limb, I saw a group of orderlies sitting in the moonlit barnyard, passing cigarettes and a jug of amnesia from one to another.

While the next morning was yet unsullied, the silver-haired doctor, whose name I had learned from Irving was Lord Thomas, for our doctors and surgeons are always shipped special express from the nation's House of Lords, came briskly to my cot-side, carrying a long object wrapped in tattered butcher's paper tied with twine. There was an ovine look on the doctor's wooly face that promised disappointment but would not own up to it. Sheep, baboon, stallion: he really was a menagerie in himself.

"Beautiful day, private," Lord Thomas said, squinting his silver-flecked eyes in the dust, not meeting my own eyes (whose color I have forgotten). A bomb burst nearby as he spoke. "The chrysanthemums are scattering their gold in the ha-has."

Neither horticulture nor agriculture was on my mind.

"Sorry I haven't popped 'round since the operation," the doctor continued in his falsely conversational tone as he began to unwrap the package. Choice morsels for the kitties? (Of course, I thought, it's my new leg!) "We've all been extremely busy with the wounded, as you may have surmised... Ah, in the name of king and country, I do miss those quietly exasperating days of negotiating estate taxes for quibbling siblings! If it's true we've killed ten of those enemy devils for every one of us they've shot down from their newfangled dirigibles, it's a wonder this war isn't over by now. These things do get in the way of our studies, don't they? A nasty imposition." He talked as if the war were a mere fracas over billiards at a fraternal order, I thought, that had gotten out of control and lasted too long. "Be that as it may, I've finally brought your new prosthesis, which you'll kindly allow me to affix and adjust. Before I give it to you, however, you must accept my sincerest regrets, on behalf

of myself and my meager, sadly under-supplied staff." The reason for the look on his face became clear all too soon as he fumbled with the twine.

"You must understand," he went on, "in these trying times, we make do with what we have. And sometimes what we have is, like that horse-steak I ate last night, not always the best." Swiftly, he tore away the last of the paper and held aloft the most miserable mechanical contraption I had ever set eyes upon. It looked somewhat like a corroded typewriter carriage married to an antique carriage's axle rod—but it was, every miserable ounce of it, my new leg.

When Lord Thomas saw my look of dismay, his face regained its usual expression of smug composure. "It really is a dandy model," he argued in his tight-lipped way, though the optimism was forced. "The best of its kind in—ahem—the last war. In fact, that's when it was most recently utilized. I found it at the very back of an old supply cabinet in a roosting-shed we've been utilizing. A tag was attached to it. I believe it belonged to a hero who died on the front. You may be proud of that. Now nearly one-quarter of you will be heroic. Like that idea, private?"

"Then I must deserve a fourth of a medal," I said, controlling my temper by keeping a tight rein on my vocal cords.

My superior officer took the remark in good stride. "Cheer up, bright bonny boy. It's a good leg... only a trifle used." He ran his expert's monkey fingers lovingly down the rusted monstrosity. "But, here, let me fasten it onto you. A little oil, a little spit and polish, and you'll look dashing. The lassies swoon over good-looking soldiers like you, they do."

I shrank from the doctor. "I don't want that piece of scrap metal on me," I stated firmly. "I'd rather be in a wheelchair the rest of my life than go hobbling and bobbing about on that."

"Don't be foolish. It's for your own good, son. Bless the Gods of Limpus, you'll look simply smashing! Waltz the night away. Da da da dee, da dee... Now, let me slip it on..."

I beat him back as best I could, until the doctor's attitude suddenly changed. "As your superior officer," he said, dropping his avuncular pose, "and representative of the royal house, or whatever's left of it, I command you to put this on." Frightened by what I was doing, but doing it nevertheless, I swatted the doctor with the clipboard he'd left lying on the orange crate. At this, the doctor's face darkened and furrowed like a nimbus cloud about to burst. A junior orderly was summoned.

The nasty pimped adolescent came trotting up and gave me an indelicate jab in the hip with a hypodermic needle.

After a moment's flailing, my arms went limp. "You promised me a shiny new one!" I cried like a spoiled child before wilting down into the cot and sinking into mythical Leetha, river of oblivion. When I awoke, feeling an urgent need to piss like a fountain, the artificial limb was securely strapped to the stump of my scabby thigh and locked with a tiny fob-like padlock. (Irving, who should have been my protector, must have slumbered through the entire ordeal.)

At the bottom of that blessed river, I met the handsome youth I had seen in the clearing, seaweed crowning his head like a merman and sitting imperially on a throne of briny rock. His eyes were as blue as they were merry, and his pink lips had a pretty smile on them: I speak in cliches because sometimes cliches are the truest. This time we talked.

"Here there is another, more tranquil world!" he announced, and a great rollicking laugh welled up from the engine of his hairless chest. I realized then that we were both naked and unashamed. "Quite, quite different. As you can plainly see!" A school of slippery, coppery eels swam past us, and he caught one up by the tail.

"Beautiful," I said, unclear myself as to whether I meant the eel, the world, or the merman himself.

"It's all beautiful, this wondrous world," he said, giving the creature a kiss on its snout before setting it free. "Because it's all ours—no other people here. Just my friends the fish and the occasional meddlesome cormorant."

Iridescent bubbles rose up from the depths and tickled us into laughter. Both my legs were there, in that dream. In the water, they looked white as a fish's underbelly, felt powerful as a mule's; and the water, though cold, seemed to fill me with energy like the shock of an electric eel. I embraced the laughing merman like a beloved comrade. And we floated, arm in arm, downstream...

Initially, I had no intention of ever using the leg. I covered it with my greasy sheet and resigned myself to a life of immobility. Sometimes I would awaken and reach down to scratch my right leg, only to recoil when my fingers struck metal instead of the flesh I had expected. It was as if I were touching the very bones which were no longer there: I could fight back the scream, but could not hold back the tears. It was, as any

amputee might tell you, like I had lost a close friend whose ghost still haunted me.

At any rate, I thought in less melancholy moments, I'll be going home soon. There would be Mother and Maisie for consolation; I would be an object of sympathy—and our sad, simple wedding would be an especially sobering yet uplifting sight, something that would elicit tears from the most stoic soul. Maybe, if he were better by then and not singing off on another island, I could ask Irving to be best man. Afterwards, Maisie and I would Make Do and eke out a living (would the chemist's even hire me back? would Maisie stand for an impotent, unipedal husband?). It all sounded terribly, picturesquely, heartbreakingly romantic in a sentimental, melodramatic, operetta-ish way. Why, I could even get a new leg back in Serutan! In my misery I had not thought of that, obvious as it was. There was no sense then in not walking now; I might as well get into practice. So, in the course of a day I decided to change from a figure of pity into an example of fortitude and perseverance. I was actually beginning to feel pleased with myself, as if I had won an intramural debate—whose only judge and jurors and competitors were my many selves. Perhaps the chief reason I changed my attitude, however, was because Irving had fashioned a really quite splendid walking stick for me, whittled out of a black-cherry tree's straight and supple branch that an orderly had brought him from the orchard outside; he had rubbed the fine-grained wood to a high shine with boot-polish and even attached to its top a jaunty swag of pink paper poppies on a leather thong, a loop I could slip my wrist through. It looked almost like one of those a young gentleman of means might take with him on a riparian promenade of the previous century, at his side a laughing lady wearing a broad veiled hat heaped with a salad of cherries and berries. With such a cane, even with a game leg, I would cut a dashing figure among the provincial clods of Serutan.

Irving, who had listened to me whining for days over the idea of becoming an invalid, declared full approval of my change of mind and heart. "I once knew a wooden-legged countertenor," he professed, "who could perform such feats of acrobatics beneath the proscenium that you would have wondered if he had three legs. All it takes is getting over the stage fright, as it were. Determination is the soul of bravery... hmm, am I quoting someone there?" He got out of his cot—I saw then a still surprisingly tall man—and he helped me to my feet, or foot—no, feet, damn it. My first attempted step sent me caroming off a dinner tray into a stall and ended up somehow with both Irving and I entangling

ourselves in the reptilian constrictions of a passing orderly's roll of surgical gauze. Then I remembered the walking stick—and still landed helpless as an upturned terrapin at the feet of another orderly, who condescended to lift me up. After such a start, it would be difficult not to improve.

The antique device had frozen with red rust at its joint, making it impossible for me to ambulate in any naturalistic style, but I perfected a hopping sort of gait after a few days of practice whereby I would balance my weight upon my flesh-and-blood leg and kick out a pace ahead with my cherry-wood walking stick and stiff, metal leg. After getting the basic movements down, it was all a matter of timing and rhythm. Progress was rapid, for I was still young and strong, and soon I was cantering up and down the barnyard as quickly if not so gracefully as a newborn ostrich.

It was during one of these rehearsal jaunts one morning that I ran up against the truant Lord Thomas, who was greatly pleased to see me up and about. The doctor gave me a hearty slap on the back and told me, as if it were a great originality, that I was looking fit as a fiddle.

"Not exactly first violinist material, sir," I said, succumbing to his juvenile humor.

"Still top form, private, top form," the medical man said in his grinning, lock-jawed way, and proceeded to tell me how he would promptly start preparing the paperwork which would send me to the eastern archipelago, which could use a lad with my gumption and guts. "The Army needs more men like you, dear boy." In fact, they could ship me out there in a fortnight or less if I liked. Before I could react, the doctor gave me another apish lung-bursting slap and a pinch on the buttocks for good measure before striding off to the officer's mess hall or the stables.

All my hopes for a return to the warm enveloping bosom of my loved ones disintegrated, and I again fell into an inky black depression. Never again did I want to walk, neither be reduced to riding in a sort of overgrown pram or wheelchair. Henceforth and for the rest of my life I would make that six-by-two feet of a single bed my kingdom; I would live a horizontal existence, as all the sick and dying do. My only consolation was in deep sleep, a coward's substitute for death. In my dreams, I was often visited by Mother and Maisie, but they both pretended as if nothing were wrong—they did not even realize I was asleep, yet alone missing a limb—so they bothered me with trivialities such as asking me to

pass the raspberry syllabub or wanting to mend that embarrassing tear in my trousers. Maisie appeared again and again, twirling like a music-box dancer so I could appraise her new hat or frock. Once she pivoted and it was not Maisie's face that turned to me, but the face of the crop-haired lumberjack by his mountain brook, beaming like a lucky throw of the dice. There he was in his sweat-soaked singlet and muddy boots, arms heavy with a bouquet of leeks and beets from the kitchen garden. There he was, running to meet and embrace me as a long-lost friend might, the vegetables falling around our feet. He was such a surprise that he jarred me from my medicated slumber—how could I ever have forgotten someone I had surely known all my life? The blast from the land-mine must have been too much of a shock for so ephemeral a vision to remain part of my conscious memory for long, but now it all came back: the emerald clearing, the purling stream and the chestnut grove just across from it, as well as the cozy cottage with its cat and canary. The memory, I reasoned, had resurfaced with a purpose. For that friend I would walk again. I would escape to the pine-forest beyond the nearby battleground and its trenches, cross the hills and ford the stream, and enter his sanctuary. He might be one of the enemy—part of this island was or had been their territory, after all—but he would hide me out until the war was over (hadn't his eyes told me as much?), and when it was over, if it were ever over... well, we would have much time to think. Even if the entire scene were only an empire built on clouds and wishes, as my mother used to phrase it—though it all seemed much more real than the very slop we soldiers ate—it was better to risk failure to re-enter it once more than stay where I was in this half-forgotten ward, among cripples and fools who knew the shame of the chamberpot and the dread of waking to damp sheets.

"You look entranced," Irving said to me not long after I had woken from my newly favorite fantasy. "What did you dream of? Going home? Becoming fat and rich? Writing squibs for the ladies' pages that will change the world?" He was looking me up and down the length of my cot, where it would have been difficult to hide any sort of secret. "Ah, I see, a pretty girl."

"Something like that," I admitted, gathering my rags about me. "How did you know?" I decided there and then that I might as well tell my new friend the whole story.

The last morning I had been in combat, as far as I could remember, the leafy hills and canyons around our camp had become oddly quiet, and our division had been able to walk several miles into enemy territory

without so much as one sniper sniping at us. The only sound was the muck muck of our boots in the red mud. After a few hours we began descending into a low-lying valley, where a yellow-green mist, like streams of diluted celery soup, could be seen drifting out of the surrounding pinewoods. Fortunately for myself, I had lagged behind the rest of the troops, discussing ancient ethics and epics with a schoolteacher who until recently had been discussing the same hallowed lines with bright orphan boys, and so from a rise above the valley we had not yet entered we witnessed our comrades dropping like mosquitoes doused with pesticide. The history teacher insisted on forging ahead into the deathtrap to help save what men he could, but, not feeling so duty-bound, I elected to run. In the opposite direction. "I'm afraid I was afraid," I confessed to Irving, not until that moment realizing the full import of what I had or had not done. "You could I guess call me a right regular coward."

"Oh, I could call you any number of things," Irving said. "Lucky is one. That must have been the regiment that vanished into thin air nearly a month ago. You must be the only survivor."

"I hadn't realized that... No one has told me a thing, and I doubt even the doctors know what happened to me. I'll miss some of those men, though I can't quite remember their names... "

"So, then, aren't you glad you ran? Smart thinking in my book, sonny boy. Better to be a live coward than a dead hero. Does it sound like I'm quoting someone again? I don't always mean to." Irving folded his arms. But that was not the end of my story.

Although the gas did not kill me, some of it did get in my eyes, so I was running half-blind. For a while, I stumbled through the brambles and bushes, and by the time my eyes cleared I was in a recently burned-out meadow on the other side of the valley; gunfire echoed off the hills behind me. At last I was able to sit down on a fallen tree and raid the few remaining rations in my rucksack. A little mistake, there: red fire ants came swarming out of the log when they smelled my crumbs and set to attacking my backside right through my summer uniform. I took off running down a steep hillock across a boulder-strewn moraine, toward a clear blue stream to wash away my predators, and—but Irving no longer appeared to be listening to my tale, which was just about to reach its wistful climax (at this point I was not sure how much of my memory I was inventing). No, he was not paying attention at all—instead, my neighbor was staring up at the mildewed poster of the weapon-wielding youth on the wall near us. When my voice trailed off, Irving explained,

without apologizing for having interrupted my account, his sudden pre-occupation with the picture.

“What a hideously unnecessary thing to have on the wall. I actually never even noticed it before this instant. How crude. ‘Shut up!’ indeed. I suppose one of these cretin subalterns around here pinned it up.”

“It’s been here all the time,” I said, annoyed that I had not been able to finish my adventure, knowing that if I tried to now it would lose its full dramatic impact. And knowing, too, that I could not be sure how much of my tale was even true. In any event, I did not see anything extraordinary about the poster; the subject, or ones very much like it, was replicated a hundred-thousand times across the islands.

“I remember posing for that ages and ages ago,” Irving lectured in a bilious tone, “when I was just about as young as you. For the last war. Didn’t recognize me, did you? Oh, yes, we entertainers, as you call us, sometimes have to do a bit of modeling for artists to get by. And sometimes the artists try to get a bit of the model, as well, if you know what I mean. All in a day’s work!”

“Ahhh,” was all I was able to say in the face of these continuing coincidences.

Irving scratched his chin, which was once again being conquered by thick bristling whiskers. “They try to make us look like gods in those pictures,” he said with some disgust. “Heroic and omnipotent. As if any one god could actually persuade one man to so much as change his socks if the color were offensive. Gods! They’re weak as worms. Truth be told, soldier boy, I don’t believe in the gods! ...Shocked you, didn’t I? Afraid someone might hear me?” Eyelids drooping and voice lowered, he added, leaning across the gap between our cots: “The gods are all dead. We killed them with our constant wars. Your king conspired with their queen to kill them. We all conspired.” Presently he was whispering, as he committed the ultimate blasphemy. “The enemy doesn’t believe in them, either. And they admit it. That’s their advantage. That’s why they’re winning.” As Irving was speaking, an orderly was distributing that evening’s dinner: hard tack and beans. We cut short our scandalous conversation to fill our mouths, which had been empty since the spot of porridge we’d had that morning. When I bit into a earwig secreted inside my biscuit, I vowed then and there that I would make my escape that very night. I would pray to any number of gods for deliverance (wouldn’t Irving like that!), and delivered I would be.

When the orderlies had once more overindulged in their bootleg gin and horse-trough wine, and they were all sleeping a sound vinous sleep in the smallest hours of the morning, I made my unwitnessed exit, stage right, noises softly off. Out the stable doors I slipped in my awkward creaking fashion, shying between canteen and latrine, guided by kindly moonlight, hardly believing I was so fortuitous to have woken not one gossipy gander in the barnyard. Happening by on her way to more important abodes, the good goddess of fortune smiled at me for just one moment: On a clothesline near the half-bombed farmhouse that served as a dormitory for doctors and other high-ranking officers, I found a full suit of khakis—from singlet to tieback knickers and from tunic to topee—which I readily exchanged for my soiled hospital gown. Perfect fit. The jaunty riding boots I found dangling by their laces from a fence-post were a bit more problematic—a few pebbles and weeds wedged against my false foot, however, and I was serviceable. I limped on, slowly but steadily, testing the trodden path before me with my trusty walking stick, really quite pleased with myself. No eastern front for me! Not far from the farmhouse began the mud-caked road I recognized that would lead me away from the killing grounds over that rise, there, and toward that fateful valley, beyond those trees over there, where my regiment had perished; with me in a chicken-feed pillow-slip I had a map of the territory that I had providentially stolen from a distracted officer's duffel-bag during one of my practice turns about the barnyard and then hidden, along with a few scraps from various meals, within my straw-stuffed mattress. The ocher-colored earth so very like caked blood and which I so vividly remembered had mostly dried during my convalescence, and so I was able to hasten as best I could down the road, a sort of mincing mechanical man who would not wind down until dawn. On I went clop-tap-clunk clop-tap-clank... By the time the newborn sun first kissed my brow I had lost the road, or it had lost me, and I was upon the summit of a wind-whipped tor which overlooked the mustard fields (why hadn't I remembered them?) across which my long-awaited sanctuary lay. Not a living creature was in sight but a flock of carrion-crows circling over the poisoned valley, on the other side of where I would now go. I broke my fast with half a biscuit, which I had saved despite half a worm, and prepared for a perilous descent through the forest below. The only sound was that of Lord Zephyr and the dawn chorus; the bombardments, I had duly noted the previous morning, had shifted toward the north. I imagined Irving snoring melodiously away back in the casualties barn, dreaming of rose-smothered curtain-calls and about to

be thrust onto quite another stage by cockcrow. Poor Irving, poor fallen soldiers one and all! Not one really a chum I could totally trust. After a bit of bushwhacking I found a deer-trail that was more than willing to lead me through the gnarled pines and down a steep granite slope. Though I was naturally enough exhausted and aching in joints both real and phantom from the long hike (the leather straps of my new leg cut mercilessly into my flesh, and the steel rods gouged into the stump, partially reopening the wound), with the full light of day balanced on my shoulders I surged ahead as best I could through the trees and toward the yellow fields, certain that on their far side, across the stream and into the sheltering woods, true friendship and salvation were near at hand. The trail ended in an oblong meadow stretched before me, bristling with sheep-shorn grass, a meadow which I was positive was the one I had crossed not many long weeks before. Beyond this meadow the late crop of mustard flowers lifted their saffron heads and all cried as one, "Onward!"

At last I was close. To which god should I offer up a prayer of thanks? Being a modern person of the type even Serutan is not unacquainted with, I did not often think of the gods, though I had not exactly fully forsworn them the way Irving had. On holidays I would visit a temple or two with my mother out of a certain sense of duty or nostalgia, and sometimes we would lay a laurel-wreath upon an oracle's long-abandoned dais, that was all. No one really remembered the gods in any detail, but since the old king paid allegiance to them, so did we. Now I simply promised some indeterminate entity in the heavens above that I would make a humble sacrifice of some sort in the near future, even if it meant little more than a cat leaving a vole or mole on its master's doorstep. There were other, more immediate, matters to consider—how, for instance, would I explain myself to my rescuer, the handsome forester? And would he really take pity upon me?—but of course, with only one leg as I was, that should be easy! The second-harvest flowers guided my way like a boulevard of gold. No, I would not falter and fall. Breathlessly, I limped in graceless, painful gait toward the broad stream (looking more like a river now, replenished by recent rains up in the mountains, I supposed) I heard across the fields, murmuring wildly to itself. I came to the water's sandy edge at last and rested against one of the boulders I remembered. On the opposing rock-strewn bank, another, darker forest began, and there was a clearing indeed and that was where the forester's homestead should have been, should have been... but was not. I knew it had to be the right location, my tattered map insisted it

was so, and because I recalled so indelibly an unusual forking in the stream at that point, with its stand of birches along the bend like pale, quaking sentinels—though despite my surety I could perceive no cottage, no campfire, and not a trace of the woodcutter’s former presence—neither were there ashes, and not one bit of sawdust, nary a broken twig, the only chestnuts but a windfall under the trees like scattered game-pieces. Could I or the map possibly be mistaken, was the fieldstone hovel further up- or down- stream? Or maybe it was sequestered deeper in the evergreens than I had remembered; angry clouds were crowding out the morning sun and nothing seemed as clear as five minutes before; I wondered if this were even the right field with the right stream. Over the stream-bank now, I chose to wade the rapids to go in search of my dearest friend and savior, wherever his ramshackle paradise might be. My boots sank a little in the soft yellow sand. Soon I was in freezing water up to my waist and I felt my artificial limb stiffening, but I knew I could not turn back. The stream might be wide, but it could not possibly be that deep. I used my walking stick to gage the depths, and it told me the bottom was still—just barely—navigable. Did I see something ahead, beyond a boulder, something wavering, a broad pale palm waving, a red-cheeked and smiling face? Above the din rock and water made I too thought I heard a voice calling out to me—a human cry, not a bird—and then there was a sun-shot break in the black clouds and I saw something of a wink and glint of brass or bronze between the distant boughs, perhaps an arm upraised in a gesture of welcome or warning, as a torrential rain began to fall upon me like bullets and my chin hit the rocks.

The weather-worn book I’d found on the wobbly three-wheeled tea-server that had been converted like almost everything around this jerry-rigged hospital into something else (in this case, a mobile library) was one of those overly ornamented, gilt-dipped volumes, no doubt part of a matching series, that were popular near the turn of the last century, some fifteen or twenty years ago. Anyone might know the sort, with elaborate tricolor woodcuts in the “old style,” a transparent sheet of vellum cloth over the title illustration as if it were something so precious one must only cautiously peek the way one might under a girl’s petticoat, and a semi-whimsical font in ponderous black and a particularly lurid red. The hard-board cover, faded maroon and missing its original paper jacket of course and all the more obscene for it, was deeply embossed in untarnishable gold—an antique cartoon of a laughing satyr—and an

attached red sateen ribbon extended from its innards like the long and slick tongue of a snake. Even in my present state, which was despicable, I was fascinated by this ghastly relic of another era that now seemed so hopelessly outmoded yet strangely sad. The book was a play and under the red dust I'd blown off it, it was called *The Great Panjandrum's Pajamas, A Pastoral Satire*. I had never heard of it in any of my college classes, and I eagerly opened it to a scene at random, anything to take me away from the nightmare of this time and place:

"ENTER PANJANDRUM, trilling on a little tinker's hornpipe, dressed in the attire of a merchant mariner, cap masking his horns. He capers across the stage, swaying back and forth to the rhythm of his mad melody, bees or flies abuzz about him, and halts only when he sees—

"MILLICENT (doffing the milk-pails from the yoke across her shoulders and situating herself on a rustic bench): Hark! It is some wandering sailor, no doubt lost, far as he is from the sea here in lonely Arkadee.

"PAN.: Ah, my fair miss, are you from these parts?

"MILL.: Which parts might you be speaking of, good sir?

"PAN. (moving closer): Those parts I look down upon seem quite comely to me.

"MILL. (drawing up her collar): Sir, I am but a simple milkmaid. My father is a poor cobbler who lives in yonder vale, and that I call home, too.

"PAN.: Lucky that vale, to keep you in its embrace. But see, I am lost at sea though I am seasick on land, and my legs grow unsteady before your visage.

"MILL.: No wonder, most good sir, for your feet are cloven!

"PAN. (somewhat nonplussed and tugging at his chin-whiskers): A birth-defect, only, miss, and not one to shame me with, for elsewhere I am—"

Irving, half-risen from his cot, had seized the curious book from me. "Where in heaven do they find such atrocities?" he cried, clapping the book shut with the sound of thunder.

"I was finding it amusing," I said, thrashing in vain with my one good arm to take the book back from him. "In an old-fashioned, outdated way, I mean."

Irving pouted behind his newly sculptured goatee. "Curses, I haven't aged well, have I?"

“You? You look even younger than before. As for me—”

He thrust the book back onto my lap, looking totally crestfallen. “No, I mean the play, son. But forgive me my juvenilia, I had written only bad poetry before I published that. At least no one ever read it—I expect you’ll find half the pages still stuck together.”

I examined the slender volume’s gold-lettered spine. “But,” I said, “the author is someone named Milo M. Mills.”

“Well, I had the wisdom even then to use a pseudonym, you overeducated under-read pup. Let me spare you the dastardly details: the Great God Panjandrum has his way with any pretty thing he meets upon his picaresque peregrinations, upending skirts and lowering drawers whenever he gets or gives a chance. He loses the titular pajamas in an especially stomach-churning bit of farce involving two vestal virgins of whatever sex and a duchess who hiccups whenever she feels something stirring way deep down in her fat jiggling loins. That’s a good passage, though, when they’re all behind a myrtle-bush and the bush is shaking and hiccuping and through a convenient back-lit scrim you can only see a sequence of disconnected appendages thrust through the foliage at pertinent moments. No one could ever have been able to stage that quite right—it would take, excuse the impertinence, a bit of prosthetics and a bearded merkin or two.”

I picked up the book in my claw, so to speak, and looked at it a little amazed and a little more amused. “So you’re a playwright, too? I might have guessed! Maybe you can tutor me in some of the finer points of style and substance, since it now looks as if I might be here forever.”

Irving reached across that yawning chasm between our beds and took my good hand in his much larger, almost monstrous right hand and squeezed it so I nearly cried out—but I was glad he did. We had no more cigarettes to smoke, or we might have smoked then and been happy.

My left arm, I might have explained already, was severed by the impact of the underwater mine, or so the good Lord Thomas would tell me later—that was why while I was in my coma he had taken the liberty of equipping me with this awful makeshift device of dowels and springs he called an arm and hand, something that looked more like the offspring of an arcane carpenter’s tool and a crustacean than any imitation human limb I had ever seen. Irving, bless him, had helped by whittling a humerus out of a pine plank, and someone else had attached a rooster’s foot to its extremity, its talons cleverly connected by wires to the pulley-like elbow-joint so by agile gyroscopic movement not unlike that of an

angler casting out a line I could even manage to pick up light objects. I suppose one could have called it ingenious, given that it was the best one might devise out of the sort of things one might find in a barrister's upper desk-drawer, and that in this remote spot, by this point in the war, apparatuses for the handicapped were all but nonexistent—but that someone would not be me. In other words, I was not too enamored with this new part of me, but bang as I might I could not break or even bend it, and besides any such behavior would only bring another orderly running up brandishing another “naughty, naughty!” needle. With this thing attached to me that seemed even less human than my atrocious leg, I told Irving or anyone else who might be listening more than once, I could justifiably say what it meant to feel “half a person.” And I would have told the doctor, too, if his visits had not become rarer and rarer. Where was he—out riding the ponies and golfing with grenades?

This is not to say I was any happier than I was before I made my aborted escape. Indeed, I was much more despondent than I have so far made it seem, and this is largely why: For days, while I lay helpless like the victim of a sorcerer's spell in my short-lived comatose state, unable to see or speak or move or feel but able to hear everything from the sound a pearly snail makes inching up a damp wall to the roaring ocean-tides of blood in my veins, I listened to the doctors and orderlies revolving around me, listened as to a incomprehensible play on the wireless, the most prominent actor among them Lord Thomas, of course, who had memorized his lines with argentine clarity and repeated them daily to anyone within earshot: “Brave lad! Look at him sleeping like the pretty prince in a folk tale, all porcelain-white and pink as a love-note you'd send to your sweetheart, isn't he, wouldn't you? You see, he'd gone back to rescue his squadron from that poisoned valley you've heard of, not wanting to believe they really could all be dead. If only he had asked, we could have driven him there to prove to him that it was true! But the poor chap wanted to be a quiet hero, I suppose, and went limping back there in the dead of night to search and rescue whatever starving souls he could find. If a couple of our scouts hadn't happened to be reconnoitering in that quadrant that very morning this boy might have drowned, lying in those rising waters the way he was found. They never did locate that arm, or who knows, I might have been able to reattach it—but the rest of him is as good as new, especially that leg we gave him, just a bit more rust, so I don't know how we'll keep him down long enough until he recovers sufficiently to ship out again. He's obviously got what it takes to be an exemplary soldier. I'm going to see that he is

promoted just as soon as I can. Such loyalty to his king and country! This is what the war is all about, lads." All of this spoken, naturally, without an iota of sincerity, all of it for show, to prove what a miracle-worker he was, someone who could raise the dead... if the medals resplendent and pension good.

It was during one of our unending games of "Jack-Ass," when I had once again completed all but the tail of the ass, that I finally decided to confide in Irving that I was no would-be hero and I was going to try to escape again just as soon as I had regained what strength I could, before I was given another worthless stripe and sent even further afield, to those most far-flung and primitive isles, where, it was rumored, the enemy now had resorted to eating us and making leather jerkins out of our skins.

"But this time," I whispered, although that was not necessary—none of the other nearby soldiers could have cared, they were so damaged, and the orderlies at the opposite end were dancing atop the upturned horse-tough with each other as someone's mouth-harp wheezed and the red dust flew about—"this time, we should go together."

Irving crooked a bushy eyebrow. "Say what?" he said. "First you have this dotty idea of escaping again—and why they haven't court-martialed you yet is beyond me, despite our doctor's delusions—and next you want me to come with you? Haven't you lost enough of yourself yet? Really, Simon, you have a most puzzling mind."

"You can't want to waste away in here forever," I protested.

Irving's eyes were lost under the forest of his ginger-colored brows while he stroked his new ginger-streaked goatee. "I happen to be waiting out my time," he said, "with this hole in my side being just bothersome or interesting enough to them to keep me away from the playing fields. Maybe by the time they do think I'm hale and hearty again there will be a lull in the battles."

I made all sorts of expressions of disbelief.

"You may mock me waving that tiresome thing around, but as far as I can tell entropy is the only thing I have going for me. Things must wind down eventually, you know, and when they do, I will slip into some other life far from these khaki-draped nightmares. I might even take up cooking, start a pastry-shop, do a thousand things with treacle and lard."

I wanted to tell him again of the secret of the fieldstone hovel and the athletic youth whom I knew must love me and would hide us both away until the war ended or forever, whichever came first, but this time in my mind I could already hear Irving's donkey laughter, see his gold-capped

molars flashing in his mouth open wide enough to swallow a lie, his tongue wagging like a buffoon's, and his uvula ringing with jollity. "An airy-fairy daydream for a fancy-nancy boy!" I could imagine him saying, fluttering his lashes. "Would you be wanting eiderdown for your bed and lace knickers under your short-pants? Red, red ribbons for your golden curls?"

Instead I told him of Maisie's marriage plans, which must continue despite strife and scarcity. She would be filling out all the blurry forms for the both of us and making up a little love-nest in that corner we would carve out of my and Mother's fourth-floor flat. She would want blood-red cherries on the chintz and ruching on the bedspread and a nice "olden" pot of rushes in the gas-grate and a pasteboard palace for her kitties. Mother would already be knitting matching mittens and scarves for us. Maisie's nearest living relative, a distant aunt, would have already made an old-fashioned burnt offering for us at one of the local temples to a god I had scarcely ever heard of. Another relative (here I grossly inflated my family's position in society) might have been so presumptuous as to send an invitation to the royal court, hoping to receive well-wishes and maybe even a photograph in return. None of this was true or very likely to become true, because I had received no mail from anyone in such a long time; indeed, nearly all communication from the home-front, even telegrams, had ceased months before, and neither Mother nor Maisie had ever been very faithful correspondents, anyway, busy as they had often enough repeated they would be with their own lives and struggles to survive in a new era when a loaf of bread now was said to cost as much as a two-seater automobile had when I first left my birthplace. With no news, I invented, I said it was urgent that I get home as soon as I could—well, because if I didn't, we would have three besides my mother and the requisite officer at our perfunctory civil ceremony. Irving did not know exactly how long it had been since my last leave, so I did not tell him that such a thing was not even possible, that indeed Maisie and I had never ventured further than holding hands and kissing as chastely as siblings—that even the marriage itself was something we had only dreamed about in the way two inexperienced lovers relate their own lives to the idealized lovers they have just witnessed upon the stage. There had never been any banns proclaimed or rings exchanged, and only Mother had insisted that I begin to think of such things as far as my best girl Maisie was concerned. But for Irving my elaborations only brought derision of another sort than I had expected from him previously—derision and more.

"You, with an heir!" Irving cajoled me, pulling up his sheet in delight and wrapping it about his head as if it were a wedding veil or a baby's swaddling clothes. "And the lamb is a ram and a colt is a stud-horse!"

"Nevertheless," I insisted. "Please stop it or they'll be injecting you next."

Irving only collapsed into deeper folds of the sheet and further convulsions. "You've got a wooden funny-bone, my boy," he told me. "I hope for your sake a tenth of this is true and Maisie is pricing cradles even as we speak, for I've decided I am going with you this time, after all." And with that, he had turned a deadly serious look upon me, with his devilish goatee jutting, pointing at me, accusing, insinuating, all those things a strong jaw and a sharp bobbing beard can convey. It was nevertheless a look he would sometimes give me when playing cards and now as then I countered him with a, "You must be bluffing."

But his beard was adamant. "Simon, Simon!" he said, stroking those beloved hairs. "I do like you! And I can't have you doing anything dangerous again like following moths in the moonlight. Or thinking you have to go rescue a fair damsel from her own damned fate. You simply can't leave here alone, even if they make so little real attempt to guard this place against deserters. After all, all the seriously wounded might as well be dead to them—unless they prove useful again. We're science experiments at best. And out there, our protectors—or the enemy—may no longer have enough bullets to go around, but they can still attack with shovels and rakes. Think things through! You are too, too naive. That is why I've decided to depart with you."

I came all over a little silly in my gratitude. "Bravo!" I exclaimed as I had long ago at the opera house, and, bewareing spies all around, continued under my breath: "That's splendid news, Irving, my friend. To be frank, I was a little worried I might not be able to convince you, or make it alone this time, but with a mate around to keep me going..." To stop my effusions, Irving reached across the gap between our cots as he had before, and so I did, too, realizing too late that I had offered the chicken-foot. I started to switch hands, but Irving's smile widened and he took my claw in his own three-fingered hand, anyhow, and gave it a manly shake, or a close approximation. We swore partnership, but his brows glowered once again and met quizzically across the bridge of his nose.

"Just don't trust me completely," he warned, not entirely as if in jest.

I could think of nothing to counter such words, if that was what I meant to do, and so he too lowered his voice even further to a rasping stage-whisper and made his own confession:

"Listen, young man, I must level with you," he said, leaning into me so close I could smell the sour porridge in his breath and see the wax inside his hairy ears, "I'm everything I told you I was and more, or none of it all, it doesn't matter what you choose to believe, but here's another tale for you: I'm here all because of a mistake."

"Brother, aren't we all," I said with a tease on my lips, then in several painful motions unbent my knees to lie straight-legged on my cot, while angling my improvised arm outward from my breast, as if to fend off whatever else he had to say. These days whenever I had to move it was like adjusting the limbs of a half-stuffed scarecrow.

"A mistaken identity," Irving elaborated. "You see, I'm more than I seem and not quite that at all. For I was born one of the enemy."

Even in the close warmth of that dusty barn I might have shuddered. "Impossible," I said. "You're just as human as I am."

"You foolish child. Of course the enemy is just like you, or us, whatever, you know what they used to preach in the temples. We are one, of course, born of the same earth, these islands, and bound to it as one, too. All the rest, you ought to know, is—is merely a plot device. To keep us from dwindling away into sheer boredom with our too similar selves. We just hate our own reflection."

I had turned to my mossy wall and was trying not to hear what else he had to say, having pulled the ragged pillow they'd given me over my head. But Irving went on:

"Back in the last war, which was the same as this war, because nothing ever really stops, we know, I was in a theatrical troupe in your enemy's capitol—what did you use to call it here? You would have been just a child. Ah, the Theater—I was a regular trouper, too, thought it was the way I would eventually get my plays produced, so I would take any role, do any bit of slapstick or song-and-dance that might get me noticed. In time I liked the acting better than the writing, anyway. How nice to have someone else come up with all your wittiest lines. And with a little training I found I could sing, too. By the way, I was from a wealthy land-owning family, that's how I had had the means to publish my work so lavishly, but theater directors tend to discount that sort of privilege, I regret to say... " He paused and spat on the floor. "Now, I know you want to know what the country of the enemy is really like—but I tell you, it's exactly the same as here. We drink and eat the same mess, shit and fuck with all the same proprieties, and generally make just as big of fools of ourselves as your countrymen do. You really

can't tell us or our houses apart. Come, you must have known that already."

I was no longer looking at him but could picture him sitting on the edge of his cot, arms folded across his broad chest, back straight in his night-shirt, assuming the rigid persona of a royal figure in a children's *matinée*, a make-believe make-believer. "But none of that matters," he continued, pounding the cot with an ill-formed fist, perhaps both. "It's just that once, not in the wretched capitol, but in the county seat of an outlying protectorate, during a radical play about the war in a little theater that had none of the licenses and only an underground reputation, we were bombed from above, from one of your damned balloons, I suppose, and what was left of the cast and audience went flying in every direction. Naturally I flew out of there, too, still dressed in the current uniform of the enemy, right down to the tassels on my boots, and I ran right into the enemy's—that is, your side's—approaching troops. They had their rifles raised and cannons poised, and I assumed I would die very quickly, with very little fuss. But once they got a good look at me in that clown suit, they welcomed me with open arms, and I tell you I was such a good actor and I had practiced your accent—yes, you all have an accent—with such precision and knew so much about your ways and the protocol of your military that it was very easy for me to pretend to be just a bit combat-addled, and so they sent me over here in deluxe wrapping; I even had a very realistic fake identification card that was an important prop in our sadly unfinished play!" Another pause, which Irving would call a "beat." "Soon enough I was out of one of your finest hospitals with an extra twenty pounds around my waist and ready to join a dramatic academy on this side, for, you see, actors have no real allegiances except to their muse, and after all our sides share many of the same old scripts and playwrights. From that point on, fame—or something like it, and so you must forgive me if you have assumed things about me that are not true, but then again that is the actor's lot..."

It all seemed a nightmare within the nightmare within which I already lived. Irving, my best friend here—one of them? How could I trust him with anything now? And yet, now that I had opened up my heart and revealed my plans to him, how could I not? I knew by then that I would not be going directly back to the forester I somehow, strangely loved. (Oh, but I knew that I would eventually have to find him—though it would be in another direction, for with the incessant bombing he must have finally had to leave his secret haven at last.) Like it or not I would have to take Irving, who might be the enemy but was also my friend,

with me, for we had already made a pact, even if half that pact had been unspoken. Not that I came to these conclusions immediately—it would take me several days of soul-searching before I could see Irving again as not quite a demi-devil but a fellow human being who merely wanted out of here as much as I did. Be that as it may, believe or not this newfound liberality of mine, but it would take many faltering words over the next series of days before I was able to look Irving in the eyes again, see they were still the same eyes I had trusted before, and convey to him my desire to take him with me when we left this place—for being half the person I was, or feeling like it, I knew I would need his strength and his wisdom in negotiating the world without, in tracing the long-diminished footprints of my beloved woodsman.

So, at last, now that he was waiting quietly for me to speak at length, I told him of my encounter that fateful afternoon in the woods on the diverted way to the valley with my company, so many weeks, even months, it seemed before—and yet it was still not winter and the days remained warm. I told him in more words than I've already used, but in a more tempered tone, tuned to just the right key, about how I felt certain the youth had recognized me as a friend, maybe a friend he'd never seen, but a friend nevertheless, and one who could help and shelter me. Or, now—us. I felt a deep-breathing doubt emanating from the cot so near beside me. Details—I knew I must have details to convince him, so I described the bounty of chestnuts and their almost human odor, the striped tiger-cat luxuriating in the sun, and of course as subtly and delicately as I could, imitating a sonnet from days of yore and pretending to be quoting someone else, I fear I spoke of the young woodsman's "marmoreal form and exceedingly benignant visage," a kindred soul so very alone yet not lonely and yet so very eager to welcome me. I even told him of the canary's song, clear and fluting from within its wickerwork cage, its dee-dee-deedle and rising arpeggios like harp-strings breaking one by one.

"Whistle that again, please," Irving submitted his imperial request, across our gulf in what was now darkness, when at least I can believe anything.

I tried and perhaps improvised more than I should have.

The whole cot next to mine seemed to quake in his muffled laughter, for he must have buried his mighty head beneath his pillow but could not stop his colossal body from pitching and tossing in its narrow boat; I feared someone around us might awake or an orderly might order us to be quiet, although no one seemed to have noticed, and gradually he began to speak: "A canary—a coloratura—Clarissa! You are far too

young and impressionable, me boy-o. Don't you see, don't you hear what you are mimicking in your crude, amateurish way? How I wish I believed in the gods again so I could laugh with them, as they must at you!"

Sensing no response from me, for I gave him none, the comic bass in the dark continued: "Don't you see how we transpose scenes from our dreams into reality, or the other way around? A common fancy, a mere maggot, has pricked your brain, boy—and this tale you tell is not very original, is it? A common illusion resulting from battle trauma or combat fatigue. Some of these more forward-thinking analysts find the whole matter very interesting. Believe me, I've played enough doctors medical and otherwise in my time and done the research. I'm sorry to say so, but the whole subject is tiresome, and your version is a plagiarism, to say the least." He was not saying this with his usual mock-arrogance, but matter-of-factly, the way an examining physician might say, "Response normal—good. Eyes, good, ears, good."

"It was neither dream nor fabrication," I said, "or I would not be here. One doesn't nearly die chasing a daylight specter. That youth was as flesh as blood as I used to be."

The cot continued to vibrate as if it were a steam-powered engine shutting down or starting up. "He was there," was all I would answer such mockery with. "He was there."

"And so was Clarissa, or Miss Gertude Langley, which is her real name, in Garter and Grail, if you can remember." Irving's voice had now assumed the restrained but gently chiding timbre of an exams-tutor, the dull bassoon in his orchestra of assumed personalities. "Our pulchritudinous ingénue with the strictly conservatory attitude, that is."

Something, some memory was awakening within me. "Oh, it was she, wasn't it," I recalled, speaking slowly, remembering, "who played the mystic maiden that rises out of the sacred lake of the moon-goddess? Maisie said she had never heard such a lovely, pure voice—like a bird's."

"Lovely! Pure! I had a bite of that tart our very first rehearsal. There should have been a swinging door for Gertie's dressing room—but mind it doesn't swing back on you as the next admirer enters! But all of that is by the by. The tune you so ineptly whistled is an approximation of the last few bars of the very aria she sings before she is betrayed by the False Knight. A short but striking turn, she always consumed too much of the reviews. But don't you see now how your imagination has merely borrowed too heavily from other sources?"

I was not convinced, for I might have mixed up the tunes, and I probably couldn't have heard the distant bird anyway above the rushing waters, but I knew the woods and that friend I'd never met were as real as the pain in my backside from pressing into that prickly cot for far too long. "How do you explain the rest, then?" I asked Irving.

He seemed to be turning and considering in his own cot, and I could just see his white form rising to sit up and pronounce the rest: "The rough-hewn cabin you borrowed from the scene where lives the hermit who thinks he has once drunk from the golden grail of the gods and therefore achieved immortality, even though he is about to die with his song. The cat and chestnuts I cannot account for and are inconsequential, but I am sure the timber feller, if you understand my pun, is one of the living oaks in the Forest of the Dead, that chorus of basses and baritones who sing the "O Defiant Sawyer" song. You recall how they metamorphose into stalwart and strapping young men, strong as oaks and naked but for carefully placed leaves, who do their circle-dance around the sleeping enchantress. Oh, I had one of them, too—we all did, that's the acting life."

"I must have been sleeping myself during that act," I argued, half-certain he was making up most of what he had just told me. I would not, could not be persuaded I was guilty of any folly but a too-literary loquaciousness. And I did not want Irving to go on and compare me to some courageous yet foolhardy tenor in another of his farcical music-hall romps. I didn't want him to think I would be leading him into the wilderness in pursuit of a daydream. So I reminded him of our pact and why our escape was necessary. "You can believe I'm deranged or deluded if you like," I also told him, seeking but not finding the glimmer of his eyes in that moonless night, then looking up between and past the rafters to find instead random stars dislocated from their constellations and glimmering there like so many eyes winking, instead. "I may be a fool or a child or both, but you know as well as I that as soon as we're on our feet, they'll send us off to whatever front's suffered the most casualties. You've heard the orderlies young and old talk about what they've heard from the officers. East, west, north, south, they need men everywhere." In the dark I was senselessly pointing directions with my new arm, until I knocked over my water tumbler, which shattered on the floor, causing a light to be switched on far down at the other end of the barn and rousing an orderly at the night-desk from his half-sleep with the subsequent volley of curses from other soldiers on their cots.

Whether Irving had listened to any of what I had just told him before the glass broke, I do not know, for he was such a good actor his snores might have been real or they may have been false.

Two mornings later I had a brief interview with Lord Thomas, a stethoscope around his neck like some religious effect, swinging a small medical valise not unlike a woman flaunting a stylish purse. After some preliminary inquiries whose answers he ignored, he informed me he would be moving on to sunnier trenches and fortresses on islands distant from this one, places where he was needed more than here, "where my work is just about done," as he put it, eyes flashing silver and silver in his hair and voice, as if coins were tumbling down upon me. "Look at you, nearly fit as a footballer and ready to strike twenty enemy dead with one blow. Your prosthetics have only made you the more powerful, and it is with great pleasure that I can inform you that a smart little medal and an extra pair of stripes may be coming your way soon." I was glad that Irving still seemed to be sleeping and would not witness this terrible scene or the wet and salty anguish in my eyes. "Look around you! All my lads are doing splendidly," the doctor glibly extemporized, perhaps noting my discomfort, "and somehow none has impressed me as you have. You are a model soldier. Healthy or near-healthy and very willing soldiers I have here, one and all, products of my expertise and the Army's meticulous, but they sometimes scarcely seem to appreciate the advantages we have given them... and sometimes I think they would probably have been more satisfied with those worm-eaten wooden appendages we used to provide, as if men were pieces of furniture that only need a part replaced now and then! But everything in life takes some getting used to... Don't cry, son, I know you are proud to serve your country, just as I have been proud to serve you. I pray the gods look down upon you with their great good grace and humor but don't transform you into a white ox or stallion or something similarly splendid before you have done all you can for us mere mortals. I thank you, my dear son, my charming boy, and depart from you with a particularly bittersweet joy." With that prepared speech, he was instantly and piously on his knees, pressing my fleshly hand between his hot hands—and I swear I felt his silver mustache graze my lips as he kissed my cheek or thereabouts with fervent lips. And then he was gone, and I did not see him again.

That very night we, Irving and I, were given an unexpected opportunity to escape, or one of those opportunities that seem unexpected only at the time (for hindsight and the chicanery of fate make such events seem inevitable), and things happened thusly: Although the ever-lazy orderlies had been put on special alert since the night I had shattered my glass, thinking I was up to my old tricks, and an unarmed guard had recently been posted in the barnyard, they had all rushed into a nearby pasture to help put out a fire ignited mysteriously in a sheep-shearing shed that served as the officers' mess hall. Upon first hearing the uproar, I suspected Irving of having bribed one of the stupider orderlies into setting the fire, but for what I could not guess—one last pack of contraband cigarettes? a skin-trade magazine? I did not have time to reflect on the matter, because Irving had already seized my shoulder in a gorilla grip and was guiding me through the smoky gloom toward the wide-open barn door. A few other patients looked on, but none of them was strong or foolhardy enough to follow our example (I suppose I had not noticed for a long time before how badly off most of these men were). Outside, a few hundred paces off, we saw the shed aflame in the field, surrounded by half-dressed men shouting ineffectually at each other because the water from the pump had run out. Two draft-horses, bone-white and as colossal as the ones you might see on a public monument, galloped right past us, fire and fear in their huge eyes and their breaths steaming in the autumn night. We paused just a moment to catch our own breaths and then went quickly and quietly (being barefoot) the other way into the chill moonless night, Irving still leading the way, pulling me along by the hand as if I were his child. Near the laundry hut he grabbed a duffel-bag, and after we had gone a little further into the bushes we opened it to find not complete uniforms but garments enough to make us look like half-respectable vagrants. Irving donned a pair of long woolen undergarments like tights with a tunic belted over them, making him look something like an extra from *Garter and Grail*, and I had khakis enough to appear soldierly from a distance. Footwear was another problem; for now we would have to go on barefoot, or partially so—Irving with his huge callused feet and I with my tripod of wooden walking stick, invincible steel foot, and another foot painfully aware of every pebble and thorn. It was getting colder, and a very light rain was tickling our faces. For obvious reasons I thought of Mother then, and how she would admonish me to always carry an umbrella and wear my rubbers and dress warmly, even in the summer because there still might be drafts—and I also thought of those fur-lined white leather gloves Maisie always wore

when we went driving and how I wished I had them now in this cold more than Maisie's warm hands themselves. Seeing me shivering there, for a moment unable to face the dark world ahead, Irving took me in a bearlike embrace and pounded my back and ensured me that the dawn would be coming soon, bringing with it another balmy day. So I rallied and followed him down the starlit way, which is to say it wasn't really lit at all except by occasional distant missile-flare and a certain pinkish phosphorescence in the rain clouds.

"Where are we going?" Irving demanded without turning around, although he was the one leading me. With my stiff leg and hobbling gait I could barely keep up with his martial pace, although thankfully the road we had found was smooth and fairly flat. The woodsman, if he did exist—and I knew he did—must have retreated in this direction, away from the battles, through the thickly forested hills, and, at night, north through these farmlands. Irving repeated the question.

"Nowhere," I answered. "Away. Anywhere. My mind is an atlas. I have all these routes memorized. The river wends that way, and the true wilderness is beyond. There we'll be safe."

And I did feel safe already, in a way, even if I was at least partially lying to myself as well as Irving: This was a land that seemed familiar to me, at least from "naturalist" or "realist" novels I had read detailing the rural life in late autumn—the grouse nesting beneath the thorny gorse, the tawny-husked barley, bulrushes and leaf-stripped willows stippling the waters of meandering brooks, the rye stubble and winter wheat and trampled flax and stooks of corn, those checkered fields alternately as sere as fallow and straw-strewn, lately harvested—what used to be called the "aftermath." Only the "simple country people" were missing in this rainy midnight hour. Like one of those bucolic poets of old I wanted to relate to Irving in proper meter and shapely stanzas how I felt the energy of the world again invisibly humming and teeming around us, contained in elements of earth and fire and water, like the correct combinations the alchemist blends together; it was only an intangible essence in the chill air—that which moves, the spirit of life—that seemed alien to me in this countryside—something I could reach for but not grasp or inhale myself, though I knew I was not dead any more than Irving was; only the land itself was dead or dying at the end of the year. Maybe, as Irving might say, the gods had deserted us here, leaving only their finely wrought creations behind, though they be enchanted and quiescent. None of this, however, did I attempt to explain to my new traveling companion; we passed a ruined mill I remembered and I

realized with a start that we hadn't gone far yet at all. And yet the rain had stopped, the sky was unblemished once more, and our clothes were dry—so we might have been walking already for hours.

A half-mile on or more, Irving started when we heard a forlorn sound almost like an infant's first faint laughter; it was only a warbler—or possibly a thrush, I'm no good as an ornithologist—lying beside the road, one wing outspread, blindly beating the dust. Touched by some emotion I had long forgotten, I watched as Irving cupped the small bird in his giant's hands, bloodying his palms—it appeared to have been shot only minutes before. “Can they be so hungry as to shoot songbirds?” I asked Irving, who jumped as if he had not realized I was next to him. The bird, its blue so blue and white so white even in this nonexistent light, so very innocent and fragile, an easy symbol of everything I felt I had lost in this war, had, I saw, expired in his palms. Irving sighed and lay it atop a fencepost, for the kites or shrikes to find. I wanted to cry again but did not want Irving to see me blubber like the sentimental boy they all thought I was. Since we had left the barnyard he had not looked me in the eyes once, even when he had hugged me, and he kept fidgeting with his pitiful short-changed hands, as if he were badly in need of something better to do with them—hold a shot-gun? hold his own pizzle to piss?

“No!” I cried when intuition struck, whirling back to the bird on the fencepost—as I had somehow known, it wasn't dead at all, merely in shock, but would be dead if left exposed there like that. I scooped it up in my right hand and held it to my breast between the brass buttons of my khaki shirt, feeling the warbler's fragile heart competing with my more fearful one. And so we walked on. Irving seemed not to have even noticed what I had done—but then again, maybe he was the one who was crying. And silently we walked on.

“If you did believe again in the gods, do you think praying to them would do any good?” I asked my friend after we had passed yet another empty or abandoned farmstead and its sterile, charred fields. “I mean, to ensure us a safe passage.”

“No,” Irving stated. “Even if I did believe, which I never will again.”

“And why must that be so?”

“Because it is so.”

“But why so?”

“Just so, you so-and-so!”

I tried out a laugh, but it sounded too hollow and cheerless in this wasteland. “Tau-tol-o-gy,” I thought might be what I meant to say and then said it aloud like an instructor, syllable by syllable. “A funny

word. Meaningless, really. Irving, why do we have only these words? Why don't we have more? Or others less inadequate?"

Irving stopped walking ahead of me for a moment. "Whatever are you chattering on about, silly boy?"

I leaned for a moment, the bird in my breast pocket, against a conveniently placed tree-trunk, both to rest my aching joints and to try to put my thoughts into words I knew: "I mean, other languages. Why have we got just this maddening one?"

Irving was exasperated with me, but sat willingly at my feet to rub his own swollen feet. "Because," he explained as to a child, "we are all of the same dirty blood, as I've told you. A long, long time ago, before our histories were written, who knows, maybe there were more. Languages, I mean. It must have been terrible, no one understanding each other. How could you ask to borrow your neighbor's plow, when he might have been thinking you were asking for something else entirely—his winter cloak, or his daughter?" I could see his hot breath rising from his beard in the night air.

"To go back to my first argument, wouldn't it be better if the gods existed, and we didn't?" I said, helping to pull him up from the frost-rimed grass, though I fell over doing so and tumbled into his ample lap, my warbler luckily unharmed. In another moment I had dusted him off and he, me. "Sorry, but these are just the sort of things I think all those endless, endless hours in bed," I concluded, as if nothing had happened, and taking up my dandy's walking stick again.

I could tell in the dark that he must be glowering again—I could almost see those theatrical eyebrows greeting each other in the furrows above his nose! "I sometimes think it would be better," he grumbled, "if this entire world had ever existed at all." But now I could see he was looking around, to his sides and behind him, as if he had lost something along the way, and his voice had fallen into not a stage-whisper but a real one. "And you must know that I only believe in devils, and only devils have ever bred you and me."

"But why is that? And why are you whispering like that? There's no one else about but the hedgehogs, safe in their hedgerows."

"Would you please stop talking so much, you nattering ninny?" Irving had never been so touchy with me before, but I guessed it was just his nerves and the dying bird and this foreign land that had once been his own—no, that was wrong, I forgot, I forget; he had never been a farmer, never even been one of us.

We were now approaching a shell-blasted barn next to a grain silo which loomed monumentally before us like an ancient observatory. Up in the immense black sky, like an ancient astronomer myself, I could connect the points of all the constellations I had loved even as a city child under intrusive streetlights: The Wheelbarrow, the Three Star-Crossed Lovers, the Manticore, the Executioner, the Urn of Memory. I tried to pay little real attention to my foot that was freezing and bleeding, the only foot that could freeze and bleed, I mean, and I was breathing warmth onto the trembling bird, which now pecked testily at my fingers. In that cold clear air before dawn, lost in this unpeopled landscape as I felt we were, I might have been dreaming as I walked—something soothing had come to rest inside me as an image of love does in sleep, and staring into the heavens I no longer was afraid of anything. “Simon, there’s something I really must tell you,” Irving announced, looking right and left before moving his chin close to my ear like a courtroom conspirator. His actions, at once sinister and comic, seemed no more realistic to me than a scene from his own play. “Simon, I have to tell you the truth,” Irving insisted into my ear. “I can’t go through with this, I simply can’t. Look at me, damn you! I’m giving you your one and only chance to run now, because beyond that next shuttered farmhouse the military police are waiting to arrest you and force you back into the hospital.”

I laughed like one subtly drugged, ruffling the bird’s pretty blue and white feathers. “It is indeed just another scene from one of your fantastic operettas, Irving?” I murmured, not having given too much heed to what my companion had actually said, eager to go back to my starry dreams.

“Listen, Simon, listen,” Irving pleaded. “This afternoon I went to Lord Thomas while you were sleeping after your sweet goodbyes and informed him of your plans, in exchange for his agreeing to allow me an honorable discharge—otherwise, you were right, I had already been informed that they were planning to send me back to the front lines next week. I didn’t really think we could escape before then, but with the fire—dear boy, I was selfish, and I’m sorry that I betrayed you—it was a moment of weakness and cowardice—and that’s why I’m giving you this last chance to run.”

“For a stage professional, you cannot tell a good joke,” I said, undaunted, too happy to be free and under these giddy configurations of stars to think. But only to dream, to dream forever... Like clockwork toys we continued shuffling toward the silo, slaves to our spring-wound momentum. “Or are you trying to frighten me, Irving?”

“Don’t believe me, then!” bellowed Irving, and almost simultaneously there was a rifle report and the bird went flying miraculously out of my hands

My left arm, I might have explained already, was severed by the impact of the underwater mine, or so the good Lord Thomas would tell me later—that was why while I was in my coma he had taken the liberty of equipping me with this awful makeshift device of dowels and springs he called an arm and hand, something that looked more like the offspring of an arcane carpenter’s tool and a crustacean than any imitation human limb I had ever seen. Irving, bless him, had helped by whittling a humerus out of a pine plank, and someone else had attached a rooster’s foot to its extremity, its talons cleverly connected by wires to the pulley-like elbow-joint so by agile gyroscopic movement not unlike that of an angler casting out a line I could even manage to pick up light objects. I suppose one could have called it ingenious, given that it was the best one might devise out of the sort of things one might find in a barrister’s upper desk-drawer, and that in this remote spot, by this point in the war, apparatuses for the handicapped were all but nonexistent—but that someone would not be me. In other words, I was not too enamored with this new part of me, but bang as I might I could not break or even bend it, and besides any such behavior would only bring another orderly running up brandishing another “naughty, naughty!” needle. With this thing attached to me that seemed even less human than my atrocious leg, I told Irving or anyone else who might be listening more than once, I could justifiably say what it meant to feel “half a person.” And I would have told the doctor, too, if his visits had not become rarer and rarer. Where was he—out riding the ponies and golfing with grenades?

## Simon Interrupts Himself

Long, long, long ago, we were told at the dawn of our schooling, there may (or may not) have lived a very beautiful people with beautiful ideas and beautiful arts called the Adalandans, of the blessed isles of Adalandis. It was from these people that our lingering faulty ideas of gods and devils could have come; unlike our mostly nameless deities, however, their gods all bore honorary titles and controlled men's destinies as weather and war do ours. We have forgotten these people's and their gods' proper names, for after the great fires and after the great waves, after their cities and islands disappeared from the maps—maps that might have offered a pale reflection of our own civilization—a lot of other history happened and books were written to remember it all, but after many centuries the waters rose and fell again, and only a few vague memories survive along with these shabby gods we now only pay passing tribute to. Even though their era was so very long ago it might have been on another planet or parallel world, I like to imagine those Adalandans and how they lived in such peace and prosperity. Others of course have written poems and plays and novels about that antediluvian culture, but it is not art I am trying to shape from my dreams—just another possibility. Another way to live. Maisie used to laugh at me when I told her about such things, for that *was* all just a pretty myth, *wasn't* it? Our island nations are unquestionably the only significant cultures ever to arise on this earth. We have only storytellers to blame for such ideas—but at least, I argue, they make us feel somehow more worthy.

Nowadays our temples are mostly underused, empty, or even in ruins, I know, but as much as anyone else I still fear the gods and devils who survived holocaust and flood, and I wish there were not as many as we have islands in our archipelagos; how much easier, as I have said before, to have just one of each—one god, one devil—or neither, and then to be truly free to chart our own destinies. (Forgive me please, my friends, the insertion of these paragraphs I might have worked into an essay in my first-year advanced-placement philosophy course, were I not forced out of that class and into a uniform.)

Then again, some storybooks also say our inhabited islands used to have an emperor or empress who ruled for a lifetime each, not just nominally and figuratively the way our present rulers do, but with force and might—though their lifetimes were always being cut short by their relatives or rivals. Our enemy suffered under a similar totalitarian, monarchical system. Under those despots, our ancestors did in fact use to pray

with much pomp and ceremony to just one god, instead of many. Our demonic enemy did so, as well. How this appeals to me, especially in my present condition! In fact, even further back, say our teachers, there may have been just one country, instead of two, which is why we share the same language, the same customs, the same warlike habits. We used also to send out ships to explore and exploit the rest of the world. What we discovered remains a mystery. That was, after all, a long, long time ago. The older generations do not like to talk about such a past. Ah, but everyone knows these things and does not admit it...

## Simon Continues

When the great steam-powered whistle filled the world, burst the world wide open, deafening us travelers one and all, and the ensuing silence swiftly reassembled a new world in its place—then, and only then, did I dare to open my eye: I saw the plain that stretched from horizon to horizon, burnt golden by the summer and not a hayrick or donkey-cart in sight, the only movement the bowing of ripe wheat before the unheard wind outside the well-sealed train windows. I felt for the work-blistered and warm palm of my companion, remembering the enveloping fingers that had reached across our laps and encircled and held fast and blindly caressed all five digits of my right hand, but his hand had vanished; and I knew then that it must of course have all been a dream, how I had woken in the middle of the night to find my kind woodcutter alongside me, though sleeping and dreaming himself, his coarse shoulder against mine, his right elbow casually angled over my left knee—which I couldn't feel, of course, for it was no longer really my left knee. When had he boarded this railway train, and would he be going where I was going? For those hours we sat next to each other, so close, I was deliriously happy at last. My friend, my dearest friend! (At first I had thought it was Irving, come to join me on the way home, but then in this dream within a nightmare I remembered what had happened, and I smelled the pine-forest in his hair and knew it could not be Irving.) The men across the booth from us and the other man in his corner were all sleeping and would not know, even if I were to more passionately embrace my friend—though I did not want to wake him, either. My eye was accustomed to the dark, so even in the faltering amber light that came only from the corridor outside our compartment I could see that my friend was dressed in a suit of charcoal-gray gabardine, the rough fabric offset with incongruous black velvet pocket flaps and black velvet buds that fastened onto little velvet loops all the way to the neck like an antiquated waiter's jacket. His buttonhole held a carnation stained as with black ink, and looking closer I saw that around the bulging upper portion of his left arm was a tightly knotted ribbon of black velvet—as if he were dressed for a funeral. Whose? Where? But that must be why he was taking this train and leaving his sanctuary. His sunburned face, half eclipsed by the dark, with its upper eyelid tinged pink, and his fine white-blond eyelashes just barely vibrating against his lower eyelid, in rhythm with his gentle snores, and his ruddy right cheek, just sprouting its first golden-red hairs, and half his lips, pinker than his eyelid and

even more tender, lay so close to mine against the abrasive upholstered seat I could have kissed it—but then only have awakened him into the horror of this world’s death and despair. I sat there, smelling his warm breathing body that, beneath the gabardine and the odor of pine-sap soap, still lingered with the smoky scent of chestnuts, and I could not sleep, but I did sleep, and I did awake, and of course he was not there and most likely—certainly—had never been there. Whether the whistle had blown only in his dream or mine, I could not tell, although we were not approaching a crossing or station. Outside the window of our compartment, through the engraved tracery of the window, I saw the world flattened with my one eye: the flat wheat-fields flat as a sheet of molten gold; and above in the flat, unblemished sky, a dirigible—one of our new ones—hovering several moments there like a lumbering fat bee and then moving on (to pollinate other, more distant, fields with destruction). I had already nearly forgotten my grieving friend, at least for the time being. We were all of us on this train-ride bored, waiting for something to happen. I felt for my walking stick, thinking I would rap for the conductor or a porter as a rich man might for the meal-car’s menu to be brought to him, then remembered the stick was lost somewhere near that ancient observatory—or rather, grain silo—and that the orderlies had presented me with a cripple’s cane, fashioned from a bleached and polished elk’s antler, as a parting gift. (Though the “cane” would not have taken long to fashion, I was surprised to be treated so generously, especially after my second aborted escape—most likely they only did it because they knew I had been their favorite Irving’s special chum.) No, on second or third thought, I would not call for anyone—I knew it would be useless, anyway. No one would have answered my queries even if anyone had come. Maybe there was engine trouble, maybe we were waiting for another train to pass. Maybe they were just torturing us further. There were still the three other soldiers in my compartment; two of them—the one with his head swathed entirely in bandages except for his opaque eye-glasses and the other with the steel clamp holding his broken mouth shut—were still playing their game of cards with half a deck. The third, the one who sat in a little wheeled box like a mechanic’s dolly because he had no legs, was still droning in his corner. He had left his crossword puzzle unfinished on the grease-smearred floor before him, and I hated the idea of all those unanswered clues; I wanted to finish it for him but would not dare. The periodical, I had already seen, was two years old but seemed so oddly crisp and new I had wondered when I first borrowed it if the past years had really been just a dream, that I was

on my way to the battlefield instead of returning from it. But every time I looked down at the stiff leg jutting before me or at the black glove masking the hideous fowl's foot, or felt the wires strangling my chest and the spasmodic pain in my ears and in my dead eye, I knew it could not be so.

However, I did remember well how it was over a year and a half before: At that time, whole and healthy, I had been in the crowded car of a very different sort of train, and it had been speeding the other direction instead of stranded on the rails in the middle of nowhere like this. It had been filled with the earnest boyish chatter of a crowd of young draftees like myself, still optimistic that the end was in sight, nevertheless inflated with the sense of power our newly pressed uniforms and polished boots gave us. We all looked alike then, with close-cropped heads and shaven jaws and boot-camp physiques (we would look alike later, too: filthy and unshaven and rail-thin every one), and we were each of us not wondering what it was like to kill and be killed, but thinking about more important things, such as what the weather would be like at the front and whether or not our girlfriends would remain faithful until we got back. "I told Matilda," the cherub-cheeked recruit next to me had said, "that no matter how hard she scrubs, I'd be able to smell the spit or spunk of another man on her when I get home, I did." I did not have such worries about Maisie, for unlike these Matildas and Mabels I heard so frequently about, Maisie was not a modern girl who would smoke or drink or wear makeup, and she preferred to stay in nights. Maisie liked cats and her war work, which consisted of making bouquets of paper petunias for the graves of the dead soldiers listed weekly in the papers. Maisie was a whiz of a stenographer and was not the sort whose boss would ever test her bony knee.

*Maisie.* How long had it been since I had last heard from Maisie, since postal services had been cut off in the combat zone? I wondered how many letters she must have written to me by now, each one shorter and more frustrated, her calligraphy growing ever more slanted and uneven, and I wondered what she must be thinking: that I was dead, a prisoner of war, or too sick to answer. My mother, too, must be thinking these same things. So many letters I had begun to them both—but only in my head, for lack of inclination, and later, for lack of actual pen and paper. Again and again I could never think of the right way to begin to tell them of all the things that had happened: "Dear Maisie, Don't worry, I am still alive, or at least some of me is..." "Dear Mother, Would you

still love half a son? A third? Because there's not much left of me to love... " Dear Maisie, Dear Mother, dear me...

The locomotive hadn't always been idling here in the midst of these wheat-fields; for two days before we had been making good time as we crossed the country and the bridges and causeways connecting our islands. It was a good train, or once had been. I liked my compartment and my companions, even if they never spoke. I had never traveled in a first-class carriage before, although it was no longer in first-class condition: the leather seats were ripped and scarred, the plush armrests and headrests faded and coming unstuffed, the etched glass in the many-paneled doors and windows cracked or missing, the electric lighting constantly sputtering and going out or simply nonexistent, the corridors filthy and overflowing with garbage. I won't even mention what passed for the w.c. When I first boarded the conductor had said something to a departing officer with his arm in a sling about all the second- and third-class trains being out of commission or in use elsewhere; this one should have been retired with the last century. Walking up and down the few cars linked together, I soon saw we were all military men here, all of us wounded beyond repair—so much so that I felt I was one of the luckier ones. There were men with no eyes, no ears, no mouths; and others who seemed to have even the entire tops or one side or other of their heads removed. Many of the bandages were red and bleeding or yellowed and suppurating, and there seemed to be no doctors or medics mixed in with us to tend to even the most superficial needs. I saw one very young soldier who lay twisted like a discarded marionette in a berth, a pool of something black and viscous dripping beneath him—and I was certain he had expired during our trip, or would soon be dead. No one would meet my eyes; I suppose my one-eyed gap-toothed smile is repellent or the other men would simply rather be ignored as much as possible. Despite all these horrors I still felt some relief in knowing that I was on my way home at last—and all these returning soldiers, too, would find their beds and nurses and at worst an existence less fraught than that of the trenches and battlefields. There was no sound in these railway cars but that of the chug-chug of the steam engine and the bone-rattling rhythm of the iron wheels turning on the iron tracks. No one whimpered or so much as whispered, and we were all the better for it, not to try to converse or commiserate. All the men around me, up and down these once-posh compartments, seemed lost in their own worlds and miseries—twiddle your thumbs, lads, nod your head no no no until you are dizzy, bite at the buttons on your sleeve, read a blank page over and

over, squeeze your eyes shut and cry or scream in silence. Were we cured, were we mad, we were both and neither. And we made not a sound.

However. The night before (or was it a hundred nights before?) I had been wakened by what I first thought was merely a new, slower counter-rhythm within the mechanical monotony of the train, a sound that gradually detached itself from those iron wheels and began to bear semblance to a haunting if maudlin melody of a sort I had once known and shunned—cupping my ear in the time-honored manner and leaning into the corridor, I found it was indeed music, someone’s wobbling gramophone playing a sentimental waltz from my mother’s unsentimental youth, far down at the other end of the train. The faint music, as these things do, seemed to flow down the dark aisles and beckon me toward it. Although it would take a great deal of effort with the swaying and shifting of the cars, and with most of the almost useless “emergency” lights switched off for the night, I struck out like a woodlands wanderer with my new antler-cane—knocking its rubber tip against slumbering boots and book-bags—and set off in the direction of the music. Everyone seemed to be deeply lost in sleep, even the roly-poly conductor who had nothing to do on this journey but eat from a bottomless bag of pastries and warn us not to flush while standing at a station. I must have walked through six or seven cars, all of them full or mostly full of wounded and wasted men. Opening and closing the heavy doors to cross to each succeeding car strained my every muscle, and I nearly tripped and fell over innumerable real and imagined objects, but by this point the auger-sharp waltz was drilling a hole in my aching head, and I had no choice but to proceed. Outside I could see nothing but nothingness, not a star or even a distant depot light.

At last I came near the end-car, where the music was loud and the lights bright. I moved across the clattering metal space between cars and pressed my face up to the warm glass of the door. Inside I could see an extravagantly appointed carriage, with intimate clusters of tables and chairs instead of booths or berths, brightly lit by electric sconces, and crowded with officers in their fine white dress uniforms, waltzing ladies in polychromatic gowns to the music wafting from a speaker shaped like a very large scallop. Porters stood at attention with napkins over their arms or were pouring sparkling liqueurs into little fluted glasses held aloft by elegantly bored people with lorgnettes or tiny opera glasses dangling from their lace or celluloid collars. I saw pyramids of waxy white grapes on platters and snowy tiers of frosted cakes and bucket

after bucket of crushed ice, each with a half-empty bottle of silvery wine nestled atop. There was the symbol of our country, a pangolin with wings (“Armed and Free”), carved of glassy ice, rising from a sea of plum-dark punch. Mysterious veiled women, presumably too beautiful for public viewing, sat beneath the etched windows of that slowly rocking carriage, and heroic young officers bent over them, bowing deeply over the white dress caps pressed into their abdomens and inhaling the feminine beauties, as if they were the prime perennials in a show-garden, which I suppose in a way they were. For a moment I was certain I saw the slim graceful figure of Lord Thomas, brilliant silver-white hair brushed behind like wings, mustache waxed and a monocle screwed down over his eye, an expensive-looking woman floating between his arms—but he or his double whirled away in an instant and was replaced by a stout general bedecked with ropes of gold braid and his equally stout and gold-bedecked wife. They in turn were replaced by two small children, the boy in a sky-blue cadet’s uniform and the girl in—But at that point another face, the sweating hairy-nostriled face of one of the porters, met mine on the other side of the glass, and with a scowl imploding his brick-red face he flung down the green baise shade over the window with a conclusive snap.

This afternoon, this eternity out in the wheat-fields it seemed as if I had dreamed all that, too, and it is possible that I did, but just as possible that it was exactly so. Yet nothing really mattered, for I knew after these fields there would be ones of flax and then of barley and then other corns and soon we would be nearing my home county and Serutan, my hometown. I knew we had to be getting very close now; an entire afternoon before we had passed by the ruins of my old university—it was still smoldering, and two or three blackened towers rose up out of the smoke, arms raised in surrender. The stone bridge where we had used to watch the rowing teams pass under in a blaze of color and sweat and swears now ended halfway across the river, like a question someone had begun to ask but could not go on with. A thousand trite memories, akin to those words spoken at an old-boys’ dinner, came rushing back as the train lumbered through that once-green and happy vale! The ceremony of the Errant Knights, getting lost in the Philosopher’s Maze, freezing winter exams in the old gymnasias, freezing showers and rough flannels, the day first-year fags burned their short-pants, the valedictory racing of the pangolins... The bell-tower lab-partners used to climb to kiss the lucky capstone or each other lay a felled giant on the quad below, and I thought for the first time in months of those cloistered classrooms I had

loved, with their grassy smell of athletes just in from the fields mixed with the funk of unhygienic young scholars, and their air thick with chalk-dust and rhetorical questions; and I thought of the old dons in their sacramental robes who seemed to float above the world like those legendary birds who never touch the earth, and those demigods, the tutors, who might invite special “pets” back to their digs for tea and a healthy wrestling with the classics; and I tried to think of my friends and schoolmates—but odd about them, I couldn’t remember a one.

The train did start again, the world did start to unscroll out the windows once more, and I fell back to sleep as it seemed everyone on the train must have—and when I opened my eye again it was almost night and indeed I saw the familiar suburban stations rolling past. When I got off the train at the high-street stop I knew I would be met by neither Mother or Maisie, but I could simply call them on a public telephone or hail a cab and be at my mother’s door in a few ecstatic minutes. Yes, I would surprise Mother and then go with her in the waiting cab to find Maisie, who would no doubt be in her prim little bedsit, listening through an open window to her aged neighbor practicing his doleful sixteen-stringed pandoura across the courtyard and crocheting a little formless scrap before the electric hearth. As soon as tomorrow we could go to the justice and sign all the forms and be united forever. I was already cured of or at least well-abstracted from certain strange yearnings and would learn to love my true love again.

For weeks, I was told much later, I had been raving there on my blood-stained cot, torn away and apart as I had been from my dream of a new world safe from the old, and with this new opening in my head that seemed to admit of all sorts of dangerous thoughts and fantastic fears: that spider on the wall, kill it! It has the face of a great beauty and it wants to crawl into my ear and sing a death-song. Those turkey-fowl I hear making a fuss and a muss in the barnyard—they are bewitched maidens who have come to carry me into the afterlife. A cloud seen between the barn’s rafters—a banner unfurled by a neglected god! In my maddest delusions I thought the woodsman had come to lay his body at my side, and I could feel the heat the muscles of his chest made heaving against me, feel the breath and beat of him, his heart pulsing and burning within him, within me like a quivering gas-jet, but when I rolled over to embrace him in return, he fell and vanished into a heap of manure and duck feathers. Irving would appear from nowhere to box me on the ears and tell me I was a bloody bloody fool, I should never have done what I

did or thought what I thought. He had hoary ram's horns half-hidden by his woolly hair. His bellowing laughter deafened me. He trounced me all over with willow-whips and birch-switches like an irate schoolmaster. He was a devil, then a thousand devils! All this and worse, but in time I did actually get better, the medicine helped, the medicine deadened the pain, the wounds healed, or nearly so, and I found moments of true joy, however fleeting and tenuous, in the dancing shafts of sunlight on my blanket or in the miracle of birdsong on a cold winter's day.

No one need know of my dishonorable discharge, and why, since I was no longer insane? That had been a temporary condition of the combat zone, brought on by the bullet that had grazed my skull and the bullet that had taken out my right eye and the bullet in my guts, all of which had left me gibbering on the ground. The medics had a ready term for it: Shell-shock. They had carried me all the way back to the field hospital on a litter, like huntsmen bringing in a fallen deer, and there they had operated on me to remove the bullets and sew up my eye, which would never again open in this world, and there and later they had given me the drugs that would calm and subdue and suppress me. The new surgeon, Lord Stanway, had not been like Lord Thomas at all. He was younger and smarter and crueler. He did not reassuringly pat my back or tousle my hair, and when it came time to finally be rid of me, he had said only, in his officious way, as if talking to his clipboard and not me, "We're all terribly disappointed in you, soldier, and so we must let you go." I shrank back in my covers as if he were going to brand me like a sheep with the long steel pen he jabbed into the air about us. "Before," he explicated, biting down hard on his words, "when you marched back into enemy territory and came back here missing another limb, Lord Thomas had thought you were a fine example of a soldier who would not let a minor physical setback keep him from doing his duty, from bravely revisiting hell to save a pal or two... This time, however, you came back from the the non-combat zone, shot to bits and half-blinded and expecting us to put you back together with a little mucilage and a lot of pity." The doctor scribbled something briskly and violently on his form. "Well, this time we're not going to allow you the privilege of going back to the front, private—we are sending you home, certified mentally disabled." He snapped his clipboard at me and about-faced, stirring a cloud of that nefarious red dust up into my remaining eye. It had not rained again for several days, and the dust was thick once more on

our blankets and rations. (I would be kept up half that night, if not with my own sneezes, then from the sneezes of the many other patients.)

“Dirty rotten geezer, ain’t he?” the first new occupant of Irving’s cot in weeks, a spotty lad who could not be more than fifteen, had said as soon as the dust settled. The boy had found another couple of the pictorial magazines Irving had kept stashed within his flour-sack pillow, and the soiled centerfolds were unpleated down the length of the cot. He looked as healthy and lusty as any other child his age, if it were not for the fact that the bottom half of the cot was empty. “Blimey, what in the king’s frigging name happened to you, anyway?” he asked, as if seeing me for the first time. “Looks like they crammed you into a birdcage and carved away at you like a jack-o’-lantern.”

I had by then recovered sufficiently to talk about my accident; I might have even seen the suitable irony in Irving’s last words: “They promised not to shoot!” “I walked into a machine gun,” I told the boy. “But that’s all right, it was one of ours.”

The boy, who was obviously new to this business, did not understand or appreciate my sense of humor. He smirked and returned wondrous-eyed to his Queen of the May, one of Irving’s favorites girls, who was straddling a cannon, waving an enemy flag.

“Private,” the similarly legless man in the wheeled box said to me from the train-compartment corner—the first of only a few words he uttered the entire trip, “I am sorry to interrupt what might be your advanced case of catalepsy, but I can’t get this infernal clue and it’s driving me batty. You wouldn’t know what an eleven-letter word for ‘an elementary reductive mathematical function’ is?” He tapped at the puzzle with his racing-form pencil.

I thought. “I can’t really make my mind work that way since, since... but maybe now we’re talking, do you have any news of the war?”

“Only that we’re winning,” the man, who wore the tinplate Badge of Valor on his chest and a stripe or two more on his sleeve than I did, smiled and said. “Only that we’re winning.” But his smile was grim.

“But have we won any battles lately?”

“Come,” the little boxed man said through clenched dentures, “isn’t it enough to thank the gods, whichever they are, that we *are* winning?”

By then I had noticed that the train was not decelerating as we approached within blocks of the main downtown stop of Serutan, where surely the conductor knew at least one passenger was to scheduled to disembark. “Excuse me,” I said to my newly talkative companion, “but there’s something wrong—I should be getting out here.” With mounting

anxiety I watched Serutan's central buildings hurrying away from me, as if in a panic. "Wait a minute!" I cried aloud to no one or nothing in particular as I hoisted myself up with my cane before stumbling to the half-curtained door of the compartment. Was there no emergency brake lever on this train? The other three soldiers looked on me with only passing interest.

The little man was the only one of them to speak: "You've miscalculated, private, we won't be stopping here. Don't you know we're still a few towns from the asylum? Brilliant, ain't it? They'll build a sweet little nest for us there, they will! No more bayonets and beans for us!" And with that he began to laugh so hysterically his undersized teeth fell from his mouth and he nearly fell out of his box, and I was hobbling and tapping as fast as I could down the corridor. So now it all made sense! They would be sending all the soldiers deemed "insane," temporarily or not, to just another institution—for how long—the rest of our lives? I realized then that I was on the Madman's Express and that I might never see Mother or Maisie again except through the grille of a visitor's booth. And yet I was saner than I ever was! I had no more delusions about saviors in the trees or a life apart from the war and this world. I was willing to live in the bare gray reality that had been granted me, and I would be grateful for that. Yes, I would even, as I had long ago hoped, have proper artificial limbs fitted in Serutan, and I would have this wound in my head and the other wound in my bowels tended to with civilian care and expertise. Maybe even a glass eye! The conductor looked up and with a mouth full of fairy cake shouted out something to me as I shoved past him, but he was too fat to run far or fast, and I flew past with my cane and steel leg; I was nearing the end of the train. There, I would reach the serene luxury of that last car, find Lord Thomas, make him understand, get out of this dreadful mess. I thrust aside door after door of the open passages between cars until I came to the last—and I flung myself upon its handles. Though the door would not budge and the shade was still fastened down, and there was neither sound nor light within, I pounded on the glass for admittance. No one answered, no one called, no one came. I was ready to break the glass with my cane when I heard the conductor trudging down the corridor behind me, so there was no more time. With all my might I slid open the heavy side-door between the carriages and threw myself from the racing train, threw myself like a piece of tossed rubbish out into the black night and the cold air.

But I did not end myself there. I was more than lucky—all the gods of the universe had conspired to ensure that I would live for at least a bit

longer. For I had landed lightly as a thistledown on a sack of undelivered mail—a burlap sack atop a small mountain of such sacks, tossed down from the platform onto the rails for who knows how many months. Several of the sacks had burst, and letters and postcards and packages and periodicals spilled all over me. In the feeble light from the depot I thrashed and grasped at this correspondence that would never be delivered—I held one large envelope up to my eye and thought I could see that it was postmarked ten months before. Had our civilization declined so far that even the mails no longer got through? I feared to see what other changes might have been wrought in my happy little hometown, but I found my beret and found my cane, a beam of white, at my feet, slid to the bottom of the heap to the side-track, and got up just a bit shaken and only slightly more discombobulated than I had been five minutes before. There were no other trains in sight; I tapped my cane in the obscurity before me like a fully blind, elderly man and managed to get to the nearest steps, climb them, and haul myself up onto the platform.

The depot was deserted but unlocked, and within the unheated, unlit station my tap-and-step, step-and-tap resounded against the high, once proudly municipal walls as if I were in the depths of a drafty mausoleum, like one of those described in those flights of fancy called history books as ancient wonders, and I a trespasser in this subterranean land of the dead. There was a myth I remembered about an old sage on a burning boat who crossed a river into a forbidden place like this—but where was the dragon barring my passage, and, indeed, were there no longer any passenger trains, no more ticket sales or news vendors or even watchmen? On the other side of the building I wondered if I would find a cab, if cabs ever came to this district this late at night. If there were still cabs operating anywhere within the town at all.

Like a ragged-winged moth I gravitated toward the few remaining lights of the town's shops and offices, trying to imagine the joy on first Mother's careworn but beatific old face and next on Maisie's unremarkable but robust face when they saw me again. What would either say—or would they merely stand there, throats dry and words all misplaced? Of course they would discover new mercies to bestow on me, and tears and laments, but there would also be reawakened much happiness. How I would rejoice when soon after the ceremony Maisie helped me to check into the county hospital to have the awful wires, straps, and corroded joints exchanged for those long-awaited, attractive, sterile, and up-to-date prosthetics! Predictably, my pulse was racing at this idea, so I

placed my one real hand over the wire mesh wrapped around my chest, to calm the uncertain heart within—but the touch of the wire against the flesh of my palm merely repulsed me.

On the streets there was little of that invigorating traffic of yore, only a few battered automobiles and tradesmen's buggies with their half-starved donkeys, an abandoned ice-wagon reflected upside-down in the puddle beneath it, no pedestrians, not a single stray dog; and I saw that much of the business district, as I had feared, had been shelled or burned; a few buildings were even still smoking, the smoke white against the black sky. I suppose I should have been made more depressed or enraged by all that I witnessed, all that I had lost, but I could no longer remember exactly what had been where or why I should be mourning such inevitable destruction when I myself might not be whole but was still young and alive. Maisie and I would find some sort of a future together. Maybe we would emigrate with Mother to the colonies, if that were still possible. I lurched along for another block or so but could not find a cab, but that, too, did not bother me, for I soon enough saw a streetcar rapidly approaching, and I knew this to be the line that would take me almost directly to my mother's house.

At first the driver did not want to let me in, as I had no money, or at least not enough forgotten change I could fish from my many buttoned-down pockets. I had not even considered money, it had been so long since I had handled it. My life, it seemed, had subsisted on a peculiar kind of charity for many months. There were no other people either waiting at the stop or already on the car, but still the driver refused me and threatened to depart. Then I reluctantly showed her my discharge papers—she took one look and saw the large red stamp like the brand of a sinner and begrudgingly ordered me to hop aboard and be quick about it. The streetcar was littered with newspapers and other trash, and the seats were so vandalized as to be almost nonfunctional. The public transport system had once been beloved by the community. Now this car's only merry feature was the colorful row of old "Shut Up and Fight" posters plastered above the windows, a dozen young beardless Irvings looking down on me and snarling. I crouched near the driver, who I now saw was hardly more than a pigtailed girl, and who seemed to have hatred seared into her soul. She told me not to lean so frigging close and to mind where I spat and not to expect any more special favors. We rattled on alone through a blue-gray-green miasma that was smoke and a sulfurous fog mixed, and I saw (not, sadly, to any disbelief) that whole neighborhoods of the town were now fallen brick-heaps and stage

facades with no buildings behind them; charred remains of schools and museums and stores once familiar to me now stood out blacker than black against the mist, making this whole new otherworld all that much more foreign to me. My sealed eye throbbed and my other eye itched and watered from the cinder-filled air. The streetcar skirted collapsed office-towers and just managed to squeeze through the crumbling arches above which the old limestone aqueduct no longer completed its elevated course to the suburbs. The only human beings I saw were solitary women standing under flickering lamp-posts and, once, a gang of bald adolescents kicking what looked like a bloody head—probably a football—through the ash and rubble of an alley that wound away into utter darkness. I remembered what Maisie had last written about barricades and home-made bombs and saw now that she probably hadn't been exaggerating, even then. There were few lights shining anywhere—perhaps a partial blackout was in effect and those were as likely enemy dirigibles I heard pattering in the distance as they were ours. "This *is* still Serutan, isn't it, we haven't driven too far?" I asked the driver, though of course I knew better.

"We've had our share of *incidents*," the surly young woman replied, if you could call it a reply, her cap so low over her forehead I could not check her eyes. "But ain't so bad as some."

The streetcar whined to an unexpected halt, some six blocks from my mother's tenement block, alongside a park where the trees were all dead and the flower-beds trampled. "End of the line!" the maiden shouted, quite unnecessarily, as I could see that an elm had hurled itself over the tracks like a suicide. "Everybody out, fuckers!"

"I'm going! Wait up!" I shouted back, not entirely off the steps before the streetcar began to begrudgingly reverse. I smacked my cane against the retreating vehicle's side as it went past, to no avail, of course. Once again I was alone and the streets, my old neighborhood, was eerily quiet. Few windows were on in the houses along the way, and those that were had their shades drawn down and only the occasional shadow-show of silhouettes admitted of any life in this district. Overhead I saw the utility poles leaning against each other like drunken comrades, and their power and telephone lines dangled like lethal vines, trailing and sparking on the sidewalk before. Half the way to my mother's building, which I prayed to no god would still be there, I saw the disused ages-old temple in its small patch of myrtle on a side road. Oddly enough, there was an amber-hued, lambent light reflecting off the pallid marble walls inside its tiny chapel—coming closer I saw that the

room was filled with bright backyard marigolds, the cheapest flower and the stinkiest, and the smoking offerings of a score or more of the devout. The war come home had also evidently made many newly pious citizens of its populace. Useless; whatever deity had once visited here had long ago forgotten this site. This custom of the votive candles was one even my own proper mother would once have mocked. These flowers, too, smelled worse than piss.

Inside the chapel I found myself kneeling, after a fashion, in the warming glow of the candles, which I was only able to do with my false leg twisted to the side, like the limb of a disarrayed storefront manikin. Why was I kneeling—which god was I supposed to be praying to? The god of missing things, the god that will put broken pieces back together? Lately I had been thinking of my missing limbs more frequently, absurdly picturing my lost arm and leg and eye frolicking in the verdant pastures of the world beyond, awaiting the day when the rest of my body would rejoin them. That depended, naturally, on a belief that every part of one's body claims a corresponding fraction of one's soul. Most people, I considered, would probably say the soul exists independently of the body—but they have never had an amputation, and so do not feel the resultant loss of completion, not just physically, but spiritually. It disturbed me to think that I would only be complete again in death, but there was nothing I could do about it except to hope that I would be able to locate my own body parts amongst the millions of pieces of human flesh patient in perpetuity, waiting for reunion and solace.

Staring into the little lard-oil candles glowing within their scarlet and cobalt glasses, I thought of all the hopes and wishes they represented, and of all the prayers there were in the world that needed answering. The gods, if they existed, had never answered any of my prayers, or if so, in a manner much different than I had expected. Well, I would relight a candle that had gone out, anyway. I could no longer smoke and had no matches, though there was an open box at the edge of the altar. In rising and reaching up for it, I tripped over a bundle of rags on the marble pavement that I had not seen and fell headlong against the base of the altar, knocking over and extinguishing a cluster of candles that had been arranged there. My walking-antler went spinning across the moist stone floor.

"Eh, what's going on here?" the bundle shuddered and spoke and assembled itself into an old man who scattered marigolds and seized me by the shoulder in a bony grip. I saw then that he was must be a warden of the chapel, one of those who are usually homeless old men who beg

for coins or crumbs. This one was particularly loathsome, with eyes that were mere bleeding holes and wild white hair hanging in sticky knots over his forehead and a smell which I had blamed on the flowers. "Trying to steal the offerings?" he cried, biting at my ear and shaking my shoulder, digging his talons into my flesh.

I managed to fling the creature off me and lift myself fully to my feet, then propped myself against the sweating wall. The old man staggered back a pace, then crumpled and withdrew like a grizzled spider into a cobwebby corner, sobbing and blithering. He was probably deranged; these keepers of ancient secrets always are. I gave him a tap and gentle kick with the toe of my boot, the way one does with a rat to ensure it is dead. I didn't want to him to die, but I did want him to speak to me, and at length he did: "Are you the enemy?" he said with a gasp. "If so, you can kill me if you like and steal my alms, but touch not this temple!"

At that sort of grandiosity I had to laugh. "The question should be," I said, turning to set a few of the candles back in a row on the edge of the altar, "are you my enemy? Is everyone here my enemy?"

He seemed to stare at me with his hollow eyes, eyes like those wounds left in a boiled fish. "You're drunk!" he hissed from his corner, pawing at the floor for my feet. He seemed to be the drunk one, drunk on votive wine, like the beggar he was.

"No," I said, "but I might as well be. Whose temple is this?" I had regained my cane and was tapping the low ceiling of the chapel.

He looked petulant, standing there in his rags. "Why, a god's, of course."

"Yes—but which god? You don't know, do you, you old charlatan?"

"It matters not. The gods are watching you and they'll strike you down, you vandal! Now flee this holy place!"

"Gladly. My mother is waiting for me." And I left that awful place that stunk with the smell of death—animal fat and human depravity and rotting marigolds.

The last two blocks were the hardest to walk, angry as I was with my experience in the temple and feeling the pain of every joint, real, imagined, and artificial. I felt my empty stomach tighten when I saw the skeletal row of crumbling buildings along the way. There was a good chance that Mother would have had to move from here with all her neighbors, into safer dwellings—but there was the old first-rate public-housing block, grimed by nearby fires with a checkerboard of broken windows, but still standing whole and strong like a fortress. Just as I

might have dreamed, the windows of the fourth story, where Mother lived and I had once lived with her, shone with anticipatory light, and so I knew she must be home and awake and always waiting, late as it was. I gathered my energy to climb the front steps. The lobby of the building was like most of the town filled with bursting bags and bins of garbage, and I soon discovered that both occupant and service lifts no longer worked. That was no great surprise, though now I would have to climb yet more stairs—those five interminable flights. After my long arduous journey I feared that now so close I would never make it. My legs were not equipped to tackle any but the broadest and lowest steps, and so I almost immediately collapsed on the landing after the ground floor. “Mother!” I cried to myself, and then I think I slept a little.

When I awoke I felt the urine under me—my urine or maybe another’s—yet I was refreshed enough to pick up my cane, call forth my remaining strength (such as it was), and begin my ascent once again. The stairwell was crowded with garbage of all sorts and old furniture and broken bicycles and discarded children’s toys, but I forced my way past them, knocking this and that over, and dragged myself up toward the next landing, and the next. And the next. Mother was still a half-flight above when I heard the far-off sound of a door unlatching, a chain pulling, and soon an angry voice calling. “Bloody hell, who’s there making a racket at this hour?” the voice carried down the hall in that half-whispered tone people assume will only be heard nearby but is actually more penetrating than shouting aloud, a voice that was definitely not my mother’s, but another woman’s.

I was crawling up the steps now on turned-out knees and splayed elbows, trying to steady myself and trying to see into the gloom. The steps were bare and rough, and the splinters drove themselves into my knees like needles. “Who’s there, I say?” the voice demanded at the other end of the corridor, and I raised myself over the last step to see if I could make out my accuser. It was a wonder the other neighbors hadn’t been aroused; I counted the doors—one, two, three—down this floor of the building, my way lit only by the light coming from the half-open door at the end, which was my mother’s door. The indistinct contour of a woman in a night gown stood in the yellow light, holding the door half-ajar with one hand and holding a cigarette in the other. On my hands and knees I crawled toward the woman, but she came out a few feet beyond the door to stop my progress. It was Maisie.

It was Maisie, but a Maisie who looked a good ten years older than when I had last seen her. There were stern new lines engraved deeply

on her brow, and her hair, once kept in virginal braids, was heaped high and haphazardly as a scrubwoman's. Her dirty white chiffon nightgown was ripped and covered with cigarette burns or moth-holes, her threadbare stockings rolled up just below scabby or bruised kneecaps, her skin looked jaundiced and sickly in the yellow light from the door. She stood there dropping ashes on the floor, blowing exasperated puffs of smoke from her nostrils. Maybe it was just the light, but I had some trouble convincing myself it was Maisie after all, despite knowing better at this distance. My Maisie, plain as she was, had never looked so hardened and embittered. And she had never smoked like the fashionable girls. "Oh," she said softly as I turned my face upwards toward hers, "it's *you*. Almost couldn't tell. Well, we might've known."

I was too exhausted to shout any more, and if I knew if I were to speak my voice would be too strained to express what I truly felt. Instead I just lay there, panting, and sweating in my soiled army uniform, which a few days ago had been clean and neatly pressed. I hadn't shaved in several days, either, since before I had boarded the train, and my last haircut had been lopsided to accommodate the bandage still plastered to my right temple, and then there was my crumpled body, still twenty feet from her in this darkness—how, indeed, had she recognized *me*?

"Simon," Maisie said, as if pronouncing a word she had never heard before. "Simon, your mother—I thought you—" At least she had thrown down the burnt-out butt of her cigarette. Still, she had not come any closer and she may have been crying—or not. Her eyes I saw, squinting to focus, were cloudy but dry, too dry for tears to spill out of them.

"Mother?" I rasped.

"Oh, Simon, how can I? I, we needed a place to live, and your mother, she—and what has happened to *you*?"

It was then that I heard a whimpering and a muffled mewling, and I remembered. "Maisie," I whispered, "your cats—they'll get out the door."

"Bloody cats! Ha! Bloody, bloody cats!" It was then that she slid to the bare floor, too, and sat down hard against the wall, legs thrust out straight before her in the short, torn gown. She unrolled one of her stockings a bit farther down and found another cigarette and a tiny tin of matches under its hem. Maisie rattled the tin, broke the cigarette in two, and tossed the other end to me. "My last match, my last smoke," she said with a smile that could only be called sarcastic, looking cross-eyed at the cigarette in her mouth as she lit it. In the flare of the match I saw

the traces of makeup on her once pure and untouched face; ugly beads of sweat had erupted through the ghoulish gray powder on her forehead, and her lipstick had been smeared downwards as if she had been rubbing her mouth; even when she smiled, it looked more like a frown. What is strangest is that she looked prettier this way than I had ever remembered her.

I reached for the stub, automatically planted it in my mouth, and, remembering I had no matches and no longer was allowed to smoke, spat it out.

"Why," I said, not a question, watching her sitting there dejectedly puffing. It was obvious that she, too, had given up on the world. "Sorry, but I can't... can't think... of anything else to say."

"It's this wonderful war," she said, for once gently, as if consoling one of her kittens, turning toward me. "Things are different, people are... things have changed, gotten harder. One gets used to it, I suppose."

"But surely, you or mother could have—"

"You don't even *know*, do you? Never even got a frigging telegram?" She leaned back against the cracked plaster wall and blew a tired wisp of smoke out toward me. "Your mother... well, things change—things happen... "

I heard the mewling again, closer, and she looked up with a grimace on her face behind the smoke and shouted, pounding on the wall behind her, "Colin! It wants its bottle! Colin!"

Instantly a tall, stoop-shouldered fellow appeared in the opening in the doorway; I could not make out much of him, since he blocked much of the light from within, but he seemed much older than I; he wore a mustache as men had so often done in the previous era, and he was in his shirtsleeves—one of his braces had come half-unbuttoned in the front and his dingy collar was undone, but these small bits of accidental slovenliness made me have the utmost compassion for him. Though I could not see his eyes or mouth at all in the shadows, just that fair blond or white mustache, I was sure his face must hold the most tender and caring expression. I wanted him to stay and talk, but Maisie shooed him back into the flat. "An old acquaintance who's lost his way, now you go fetch its dummy and the bottle I left out. Simon here will be moving on soon." The older man had already retreated without a word, drawing the door behind him further shut, so now there was even less light than before. I looked toward Maisie, all interrogation in my eyebrows. "Don't you see I *had* to," she said, crushing the rest of her cigarette into the floor. *This*, I felt with the one last ounce of irony held within me, was

like the denouement of too many mediocre melodramas we had once witnessed upon the town's stages. I looked down as if from the ceiling upon our battered bodies with something like derision. There we were, two fools, two failures. A bit of theater only suitable for a carnival puppet-show.

But I watched and hovered outside myself in detachment for another moment longer. At that point a substance or essence brittle as it was bitter broke apart within me, whatever hard, delicate emotion I had carried so carefully these two years and hundreds of miles and several flights of stairs; it simply shattered like a crystal, piercing my heart, and I realized I was silently crying and beating my head so hard against the wall my wound was reopened and blood trickled into my eye. "Don't," Maisie commanded. "Don't, Simon," and she began to crawl toward me down the dirty floor—but I backed away, flinging my blood-soaked beret at her, then tearing my bandage from my forehead and flinging that at her, too. "You're getting married," I cried at her. "Married!"

"Yes," she said, "but not to you, to, to—"

"Whore!" I shouted with all my energy, not caring if all the building heard me.

"Simon, give me a chance... " She was still crawling toward me, a ludicrous figure in her rolled-down stockings and slattern's robe.

"I've already given all I have to give, damn it." I backed away further down the hall, toward the stairs, and with trembling fingers started to unbutton my tunic. Maisie continued following me on her grubby hands and knees to the edge of the stairwell, which I had begun to half-slide and half-stumble down, all the way undoing fasteners and loosening stays and unsnapping snaps. I let go my trusty cane, and it bounced and echoed down the steps, all the way to the bottom. As Maisie watched from the top step, I unlaced my boots and tossed them after the cane. Next came my belt and my disgraced khaki trousers and socks and the rest, as best I could. Lastly I tore off my private's one-striped shirt, and it was in shreds before I managed to get it off my grotesque arm. "Look at me!" I shouted up toward Maisie, fully exposed; I could no longer quite see her face, but I hoped it was crying at last, and crying hard. With my uniform gone, I shook and broke the little rusted lock holding the band that held my artificial leg to its stump, and tossed that monstrosity down the steps, too. My left arm I struck over and over against the wall as I descended further, until it detached and went skittering downwards, the black leather glove still attached. Lastly, with my right hand and my teeth, I tore madly at that chicken-wire girdle holding in my abdomen,

but it was too tight and I could not fully unknot it or pull it all the way off. The unhooked metal strands gouged into my skin, hurting me further, and I fell back at last, sprawled on the steps, sweaty, filthy, bloody, bits of my body scattered up and down the staircase. It was then that Maisie came to me—though in that moment of my delirium I thought it was perhaps the woodsman I had never really met but once had loved—and he, or rather, she, knelt beside me, my friends, took my head in her arms and speechlessly embraced me, pressing against my heart that was beating so strongly it felt as if it might burst from its wire cage

## Simon's Farewell

Down there are the burning deserts; high up here are the frozen fields of snow. Far below these glacier-capped cliffs you can see the distant black sands glittering like obsidian, or stars on black water; here all is less than white—this world is colorless, no color has ever been scattered by the sun here. And like the midsummer sun at the poles the sun never stops shining; there is no nightfall and also none of that gauzy dawning so beloved of poets. All is a blind daze to the traveler—but there are no travelers. Only me.

The old books called this land Limpus, but that no longer means anything to me. I have come many miles and my thirst is terrible, but I know the snow is poison; I must not taste or swallow it. For some reason I am not hungry, though I am very thin, so thin these freezing winds seem to blow right through me—no wonder, for I am dressed only in gauzy muslin pajamas. I feel there must be icicles growing inside my brain, though the thought of that makes me almost laugh. Here one is above the clouds and close to the constellations, and you can somehow see them not in the sky but reflected in the snows like the wandering shadows of stars, their immemorial patterns all lost and broken up and scattered. I walk on, I have been walking forever, I walk toward nothing.

But—up ahead, see!—there is something, something that seems to glitter even more harshly than the snow, and after many days it takes shape within the whirling, inexorable snow. It is a castle made of stone—no, a house only, but a tremendous one and very solid. It stands there in its acres of ice, alone, immense, real. Now there are colors. The stone is almost golden in hue, the enormous windows blue, filled with sky, making this impossible, unknown architecture seem strangely weightless despite the heavy stone. This house should not be described, but I will try: Stone turrets pierced by lancet windows rise to astonishing heights at either end, and between the red-bricked steeple-like chimneys, along a sort of parapet, are crenelated false battlements. The sharply peaked roof, of greenish-black slate, is supported beneath by pediments and arched attic dormers, and a narrow rail contained by bars like arrows tipped with ornate barbs wraps around them, all to no purpose but decorative. From the summits where dwell drainpipes with spouts like dragons and copper-green gargoyles under the eaves, what I think are called buttresses swoop out to support the opposing wings of the house, and beyond them emerge still other towers and other galleries and

archways and pergolas and pillars with pediments, as well as high sunlit porticoes, the roofs of which are supported by maidens bearing vases on their heads. All that, and much more. A long time, a very long time, elapses before I have made a passage through the deep snow to the front door: a mighty door such as I have only seen on the largest and oldest temples, made of a wood as dark and impervious as iron, with iron bands and studs binding it across and strong iron hinges and a gorgon's-head knocker I can barely reach even standing at my tallest. The sound might be like that of a gong of a buoy heard from the bottom of the sea; I can hear the echo repeated and multiplied down what sounds like many bifurcating and trifurcating hallways and corridors. After several minutes no one answers, but the door swings open at my touch, and I enter.

The vestibule or entry-hall is cavernous, and it rings again and again with the sound of my warning cry; a grand central staircase, richly carpeted and lined with marble statuary and vast gilt-framed oils (landscapes so dismal and murky they might be covered with mosses and lichens) goes one way—up and up—and a dimly beckoning passageway goes the other, inward. No one answers me; no ready butler or footman comes tripping my way, even after several minutes. Seen from below the stairs look as tortuously forbidding as the interior of a conch shell, so dizzying I must not climb it now, but go under the filigreed arches into what seems at first like a torch-lit tunnel. Mirrors stretch from floor to ceiling along the oak-paneled passageway, but in their wavering glass I am no more than a silvery, spectral figure. The floor is cushioned with wool rugs, thickly padded, and I make no more sound than a ghost, indeed. Between the many highly polished fumed-oak doors are oak columns supporting drooping ferns with tapestries behind that like the paintings are too dark to read. A warm draft has touched me through my thin pajamas, so I follow its invisible trail to the one door far down along this hall from which a very welcome light pours. I go there, shielding my eyes, wary of seeming the intruder. Inside the enormous room more light glares, then softens: lunar light from the globes of gas-lamps on either side of an immense mantel set with whole gardens of silk flowers and branches of evergreens; and animated, crackling light from the gargantuan logs burning below; and scintillating light from candles burning in silver candlesticks that I know would be heavy and cold if I were to hold them; and prismatic light from painted glass lanterns that emanate aromatic, prismatic smoke. This is a dining room, and down at the other end of the fireplace is the mahogany table, broad

and long as a barn-door, set with silver and crystal and linen for dinner, though there is no food—yet—on the shining plates, and the wine-glasses are dry. Above and along the ivory-inset wainscoting runs the narrow shelf that holds the gilt-edged serving dishes and meat-carving tools, waiting to be utilized. But there before the hearth on a sideboard nearer to me I see myself and the whole room reflected obliquely in a samovar bubbling and hissing like a steam-engine and as hot to the touch, a shining drop about to fall from its silver faucet into the porcelain teapot below. In the reflection of that tea-drop, I can see a face, presumably my own again. I wait and wait, but the drop never falls. At last I turn away. On the glass-topped tea-trolley with its elaborately chased tea-caddy, one delicate painted cup with a shepherdess caressing a lamb on it has overturned, and there is a moist stain down the embroidered napkin that hangs half over the edge of the glass. Other cups are piled nearby, some empty, others half-full. It is just past tea-time in this house of the gods, but the gods have fled.

Cautiously I lift one eggshell-thin cup, almost large as a punchbowl, to my lips and sip its tar-black liquid; it is as tasteless as the clearest spring water, but one drop completely refreshes me. Next to the cup there is a triangle of bread glistening with butter on a pretty saucer big as a platter; I take one bite and it too is tasteless, but I am fully sated. I see a milk-white bowl of enormous scarlet strawberries there on the table, too—they may be real or made out of glass, yet I have no desire for even one, though it has been a very long time since I last nourished myself.

Then a shiver runs down my back as if someone has traced my spine with a goose-feather; I turn around and see that the many-mullioned window opposite is half-open and a drift of crystalline snow has already risen beneath it. The window itself, like most of the others here, is draped and roped with thick layers of damask and velvet, translucent crepe valances shirred back on thick gilt rods. I go to the window, which, like all the others, looks out on only sky, but the casement-edge is too high and I imagine the sashes too weighted for me to pull down even if not unreachable. Now I realize that I am no more than a child's height here, and I know once again what it is like to be a child and see under tables, see their complicatedly carved legs and struts, but not across them. There is not a chair here I could climb into without a step-stool. Even the napkins, once unfurled, could serve me as half a bed-sheet. Each stair-step, I understand, will take the skills of a mountain-climber. For the first time I am frightened, but not for long. There is too much exploring to do.

I leave the abandoned dining room and go back down the dimly illuminated passage with its murky mirrors and gas-flame torches (torches reproduced endlessly more murkily and as if subaqueously in the facing mirrors), back to the entry hall and the plushly carpeted staircase like the mossy slopes of a mountain range and begin my ascent. There are too many floors and wings and too many rooms to describe them all, though I am here for a long, long time—searching for what I cannot tell you or myself. The numberless bedrooms fascinate me the most—the high beds with their posts like trees, their canopies like tents, wide as the sky itself, the worsted-crochet spreads so huge and so finely wrought they must have taken years to weave and knot; and the looming wardrobes like temples, filled with their clothes—the beaded gowns, the frock coats, the morning wrappers and evening jackets, the riding habits and hunting tweeds, the night-shirts, shirtwaists, waistcoats, and also their glorious uniforms complete with aigrettes and ribands and epaulets. Hat boxes, shoe boxes, jewelry boxes, glove boxes, cuff and collar boxes, sewing boxes... In one bedroom I find a tortoise-shell cosmetics case open on a dresser and a pearl-white dressing robe like a little nacreous pool at the foot of the unmade bed, as if it had just been dropped there, and the robe is both cool as silk and warm as skin to the touch. In the adjoining bathroom the water in the sink is still running from the golden tap and the air is steamy like a hothouse. In another bathroom, the bathtub is a marble pool with living black swans floating upon it, gold-plated carp swimming in it. In another, half a bride's trousseau lies scattered across the onyx-faceted sinks and cabinets and glossy ebony-tiled floor.

Somewhere there is a ballroom suitable for a hippodrome and somewhere else a theater where the grandest of operas might seem puny and elsewhere a music room with a long, funereally black piano as monumental as the sarcophagus of an ancient king. The sumptuousness and scale of everything awes me again and again. In the basement, the kitchen is as large as a train station and its black, cast-iron stove is as long and radiant with heat as a locomotive. The pantries are filled with light, lined with row upon row upon row of blazing silver dishes and utensils, and the limitless larders are overflowing with a world's worth of foodstuffs. Cellar after cellar is overflowing with casks of wine and oils and cheeses; and, beyond those, lockers, bunkers, storehouses, stock rooms, warehouses filled with wonders I could not name or number. (Perhaps a future translator could catalog of a few for me.) And it would be impossible as well to enumerate the innumerable things with which they decorate their stately rooms above: extinct stuffed birds under bell-jars,

terrariums with living basilisks and serpents inside, lustrous butterflies impaled on jewel-tipped hat-pins and arranged into vases like bouquets of everlasting flowers, enameled fans glazed with foamy blossoms and frothy seascapes, cedarwood-carved clocks that are like miniature factories with their multiple bell-towers and automaton sextons and gingerbread facades, a hundred other clocks constructed of ormolu or chrysolite or topaz or lapis lazuli, and hairy moa feathers and peacock plumes in heavy crematory urns, families of lewd terracotta figurines, cheap chalkware circus clowns (incongruous souvenirs), minstrels and damsels made of moon-white bisque, lacquered screens and watercolored lampshades, tassels and ribbons and fringes and lattices and lacework and bibelots and baubles and other things I have run out of appellations for. (Here as well my translator is free to add or invent more.) I mention all this just to illustrate how full and teeming with life and objects this house is and why I am compelled to explore every chamber, every stairwell and alcove and inglenook and dumb-waiter and water-closet.

Surprisingly, though I have searched from sub-basements and root-cellars to ateliers and garrets and lofts in the highest attics, I have still not come upon any of those legendary troves of diamonds and gold or any other predictable fortunes overflowing their massive platinum coffers—though there are so many rooms, I still might. The House of Limpus is a wealthy one, indeed, but the wealth is in its décor and furnishings and the sense of blissful domesticity in its exquisite disorder of all the necessary appurtenances and accouterments of daily life. Real life indeed is met and cherished here, I know—ordinary life made extraordinary because it is so cherished and rigorously sustained.

One entire wing of the house is given over to the sprawling library, and it is impressive with its forest of architraves and columns, its wheeled ladders that climb to the heavens, its circular wrought-work staircases that rise up layer after layer of the highly organized stacks, its dizzying ceiling-murals depicting the violent creation of the world, its stained-glass oriels and its green-glass flooring and its rows of alabaster-shaded reading lamps bent like the heads of nodding scholars, the map-drawers and countless wooden folio cabinets and carrels and nooks like chancels and interminably tessellated mosaics depicting legends I've never heard of—but the books, lovely as they are in their dyed shagreen and calf-bound and silk-sheathed casings or in their rainbow of parchment wrappers, are all, I have discovered, in a language I cannot comprehend; even their alphabet is not ours.

Even the warren of servants' rooms, far up narrow tower stairs and under the highest eaves as if in another country, amaze me. I see where the seamstress has dropped her ruffled satin ruche to the floor, where the butler has just lowered the trouser-press from the wall, where his pantry boys or stewards have left their harlequin socks and sleeve-garters half in and half out of their drawers, where a bevy of maids has scattered their love-letters and knitting and stockings and stays across their row of vestal beds. In one corner, before a ceramic-tiled stove that is chastely immaculate and still warm to the touch, stands a tambour in its frame, upon its drum the embroidered scene of a lake and a belvedere bereft of sky—and I wonder: will it be blue or threaded with clouds? Above the stove is an oleograph of a harbor teeming with fishing scows and racing punts and boating parties; it is amusing how up here in Limpus they cannot forget those misbegotten islands and their inhabitants below. I walk through these tidy, white-washed rooms, thinking of the lives of their occupants—how must it be, to serve the gods? Do they cower and quake, or do they happily go their way, for they are gods, too? It is all quite puzzling.

But only the children's nursery, truly saddens me: the crumpled marionettes, the dolls dozing with their eyes wide open, the wreckage of toy trains and woodblock towns, the illegible slate-boards, the incomplete tea-set, the pram littered with biscuits, the whirligigs and tops, the tinker's monkey on a string, the jig-saw pictures missing bits of faces and clouds, the picture books left broken-backed upon the bare plaster floor. Under a low dormer, resting against a slanting wall, there is a child's hoop, and it and an oblong twin, the shadow it meets on the floor, seem to me the very image of despair and emptiness: ever and forever, evermore. There is a croquet set useless upon its racks, in this land of ice, and there are badminton rackets and cricket bats and golf clubs scattered here and there like weapons lost and abandoned after a great battle. Here there is also an open crib like a day-bed, just my size, piled with stuffed animals and velveteen pillows, with a net sachet of sweet valerian buds tossed atop the jumble. I hold the heart-shaped object in my hands and take just one whiff that sends me instantly into deep and dreamless sleep.

I awake to what feels like a harmonious vibration in the water-pipes, but it is too persistent to be mere transitory shudders or murmurs of the house's drains; with some concentration the sensation becomes more clearly auditory, and there is indeed a musical quality to it. So I rise from the crib, surprised to find the bedclothes so tumbled and twisted,

and follow the sound out the door and down the angled passageway that connects two perpendicular wings of the house. I cross a tunnel-like gallery lined with glass-fronted cases that contain relics of another history—there is the dull glint of rusted armor, the quick coruscation of swords and sabers and scimitars; there are indecipherably engraved brass or bronze trophies standing taller than I am, and other objects that look vaguely mercenary or sacramental—and I climb a spiraling flight of cockle stairs such as only servants might use, and pass into a higher hall, one with glass-green sunlight cast through louvers overhead, so that I feel as if I am treading under a forest canopy. And still I can hear the sound, just a little louder with every step, and it has shaped itself into half a refrain, though it is not one I know or remember. It is a humming, a high melodious humming that might be male or female. The sound one might make while sitting up late at night in a chair, reading a book by a lantern brought low and near, rocking, rocking. I can see the door now in the sylvan light, far down at the end of the long hall—it is narrow and arched like so many of the windows in this great house, and it is covered with gold leaf, though even from here I can see that the leaf is veined and peeling and the large iron hinges are tarnished, as if no one has entered or tended to this entryway in many years. The softly insistent humming is so near now it might be right at my ear, inside my ear, and it is a whole song now; I must know it, I have to know it. I walk down the hall, closer, closer. There is the door. Open it.

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