

Aftermath

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He hardly limped at all any more, but he still could not push from his mind the fact that a part of his body was—well, no longer a part. He had been lucky. The concussion from the shell had mercifully blacked him out and he had no memories of the interval between the explosion and his wakening in the blessed quiet of the evacuation hospital with its still more blessed morphine. Luckier still he was, in the fact that Uncle Sam's payroll included the best surgeons in the business: surgeons who knew exactly where to cut the bone and tissue in his shattered leg so as to insure that the artificial limb he now wore would perform just as it was performing—nearly as well as the lost one. Odd, though, how he could seemingly still wiggle the toes of the missing foot, flex and bend it just as he used to do. The doctors had explained it, of course. The nerves controlling such things had not been damaged and, consequently, when his brain commanded, they still performed such duties, even though the plastic foot he now wore had little need of the services.

He pushed open the polished chrome door of the little short-order shop and once again he was conscious of a sense of gratefulness for the little things of life to which he should have now become accustomed after nearly a year of discharge from army life. Things like clean socks, real coffee, a bed at night, Coca Cola, the feel of a steering wheel in his hands, white shirts, a daily shave, the smell of the city, this blast of warm air he felt now as he entered the cafe. The crunching cold of Korean winter was in his mind now as the heat from the room engulfed him and suddenly he was drowned again in relief for being out of the war alive, being home, being safe!

He ordered the coffee and, engrossed in watching it steam from the glass tube of the shining urn on the counter, did not hear the middle-aged man seated on his right until he had repeated his question twice. "Discharged, eh?" he was saying in a voice which plainly meant to imply that its owner knew all about discharge emblems, service ribbons, campaign stars, and such. The tall young man dropped his own eyes to the small veteran's pin in the lapel of his light gray civilian suit and nodded. "Had overseas duty?" the older man went on.

"Some," replied the veteran.

He started to rise, but the questioning went on. "Pretty rough over there, I guess?"

"Sometimes," was the answer.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the inquirer, with a sudden burst of impatience, said, "You young vets are all alike! Tight as a clam! Moody as a mule! Why don't you talk about some of your experiences? Do you good! We here at home are not so . . ."

"Listen," the other broke in. "We have-beens aren't organized into silence. There's no agreement among us to keep things to ourselves just because soldiers of other wars have. But I'll tell you why we do—and why they did! It's because you people here at home wouldn't believe the things we'd tell you! Because you can't believe them! Because you can't possibly conceive the sheer, utter hell of a battlefield! Because . . ."

They were stirring now, the memories, surging out of the crevice in his brain where he had placed them. No, not placed, but where they had burned themselves, and where they stayed except when his guard was down and they came rushing forward with all the terrible vividness of the original experience, choking, smothering, overpowering. The expressions on men's faces when they are wounded. Fear on some—fear so stark that even a camera couldn't record it. Surprise on others, surprise even before realization. The rubbery, greasy look of a man's intestines when the tissue that covers his belly has been ripped away and the organs crowd each other through the hole. The blood from a wounded man that gushes and gurgles, spews and spurts, pours out and runs off in tiny crimson rivers. The way a man goes down when hit by a burst from a machine-gun—slowly and by the numbers like a man doing a knee-bending exercise. The pathetic futurity of a soldier trying to open his first-aid packet with one hand and the mangled, bleeding stump of what had been the other. The crack and crash of ninety-millimeters. The soft whisper of descending mortar shells. The sibilant, sucking sigh of a man breathing with shrapnel through

one lung. The grotesque distortion of a falling body after being hurled into the air by a land-mine. The powdery color of men who died yesterday and still lie where they fell. The terror of darkness. The cruel, cold, impersonal killing power of artillery. The tension within a man that causes him to duck when a match is struck behind his back. The cries of wounded men who can't be reached and who know it—some praying to God and others swearing with the same passionate fervor with which they previously had fought. The blast-blinded soldier who continues in the attack without even a weapon—groping and stumbling his way forward, anxious only to close with the enemy who has maimed him. The mud and the cold and the rain and the . . .

The young man shook his head violently and drew a cigarette from his pocket. He had re-lived it all in the split second now passed and, looking into the eyes of his questioner, he knew that he could not speak. He was right. A civilian could not understand! He dropped a dollar bill beside the cup of steaming coffee and before the counter boy could produce the change, was half-way to the door. "Keep it," he called back over his shoulder. "It's bonus money."