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## HIS PEOPLE.

BY FREDERICK SLEATH.

We sat in the squadron mess together Evan Jones and I. Jones is not his real name, but it is as good as any other. He was being demobilised next morning. I was not. He was smiling. I was glum.

Yet I was glad to see him smiling, for Evan was the type of man who deserved much of life, and he had not always received it.

"Jove, Charlie. It's great to think of it," he said to me, suddenly, with a great, glad ring in his voice. "The old life finished to-morrow. No more climbing into your bus at dawn, and sliding away up to meet the rising sun with the thought in your heart that you might never see it set. No coming home with the price of the sunset lying smashed behind you in No Man's Land. God! It's great, Charlie."

I nodded. I knew what he meant. Though that old life had finished months ago with the armistice, real comprehension of its end was impossible until the last railway warrant that the Government would issue had been tucked away in one's pocket. Evan had shown me his warrant a moment or two before. It still lay lightly between his fingers as he finished speaking. I watched him replace it carefully in his note-case, and wondered. I could remember the day when he had dreaded its coming, when he had even hoped that he would not live to receive it.

He had been a queer little figure then, dressed in the poorest of uniforms, shunning the company of his fellows, and being shunned by them in turn when they found his reserve unbreakable.

As our friendship developed I learned more. His father had been wealthy, but had died, leaving him almost penniless and without a friend. He had spent his resources in developing some invention, which no one would take up. Then he had starved.

Books had given me some idea of the life of an underdog, but I never imagined it to be half so dreadful as what Evan told me. Yet it was his friendless state that affected him most of all.

"I tell you what it is," he said to me. "There's a mighty big difference between a friend and a friendly social acquaintance. Give your all to the one, if need be. He's worth it. But the other is no use to you, unless you can really spare the money that pays for his entertainment."

This was the philosophy which he had been following. Poor little devil! His learning-fee had been heavy enough to justify him putting his lessons into practice.

What I liked best about him, however, was his independence. He bluntly refused hospitality that he could not see his way to return. Money was the only thing that could stave off a return of the bitter days; it alone could force the hand of the vested interest opposing his invention, and money he was trying to save.

But he had had little real hope of being successful; so little, in fact, that soon after our arrival in France I formed the opinion that his method of fighting was much too risky.

"Are you trying to chuck your life away?" I asked him, sharply, after an exploit in which he had foolishly stayed on in the midst of a bunch of Fokkers from whom he could easily have broken clear.

He looked rather taken aback at my question, and paused for a moment or two before replying.

"Why, no," he then said slowly. "I was under the impression that I was selling my life pretty dearly."

Which indeed was true, as ever since his joining the squadron he had been the most successful pilot.

It was something of the answer that I expected from him; and yet it drove me wild. I think I gave him the biggest telling-off that any man could give to another; or, rather, I thought I gave him it. He quickly took the wind out of my sails.

"You overlooked certain things in what you said just now, Charlie," he said. "You think I ought to consider my friends and my future, do you? Well, saving yourself, I haven't a friend. And as for a future, that lies with Fate."

"It doesn't. It lies with yourself," I cut in.

"That's what most people think who have a balance of luck in their favour," he replied, with a weary note in his voice. "Fortunately for themselves, most

people do have that balance. It's only those with the balance the other way who see that individual effort is not the sole, nor the greatest, directing factor in life, Lord, don't I know!"

A bullet through my shoulder parted us eventually. After my recovery I went out to Mesopotamia, and there I lost touch with him. It was his fault in not answering my letters.

But I did not forget him. The clearest memory-picture in my mind was of a queer little figure, ill-dressed and solitary, cast up from the depths by the storm of war, and restored to his place among men and the privileges of his class, who yet carried in his manner and person the marks of the depths, and in his soul the fear of them.

You can therefore imagine my surprise when on arriving at the demobilisation squadron, I found a new Evan, happy, companionable, well-dressed, with a pride in his appearance at patent as the disregard of cost which had gone to its making, and above all, with a joy at the coming of peace, where formerly only a dread had existed.

What had made the change? I wondered. Had his invention been successful?

That could not have been the sole cause. Money alone would never have wrought such a difference. I longed to question him, yet hesitated. The old Evan I could hector and advise, out of a conviction that he required my advice and hectoring. This man had need of neither.

So we sat in the mess together, talking of what we had seen and done since our parting, of how lucky we were to have come through alive; of how jolly it was for the war to be over. And all the time I was asking myself—why?

"What do you mean to do, Evan?" I said to him, when our mutual experiences had been recounted.

He looked at me for a bit and smiled his slow smile, as he used to do in the old days, when he knew that I was probing discreetly into his character.

"I am going home to my people," he said, quietly. Then he chuckled gleefully at my astonishment.

"Surprises you, doesn't it?" he murmured.

"It does indeed. Whence, how, and what? Where did you find them?" I said, flippantly, to conceal my curiosity.

"Did you ever hear that I was missing?" he asked, abruptly, like one anxious to give information who first puts a question to test his hearer's knowledge.

"No," I said. "Not in France, surely? I did not see your casualty. And I admit I kept a sharp look-out in the lists for it."

"No. Not in France. In England."

He laughed gleefully again at my surprise. He could be the very devil of a tease when in the mood. I felt a little irritated. I knew that he had gauged the full measure of my curiosity.

"And over what period did this desertion of yours extend?" I queried, with heavy sarcasm.

"But I did not desert, Charlie," he rebuked me. "I was captured. Honest Injun, I was! Held prisoner for nearly three months, too."

"By whom?"

"By my people."

"I give in, Evan," I said, patiently. "Tell the yarn your own way, but for goodness' sake tell me! You've got me slightly curious."

He settled down to his story then, and I heard him through without saying a word.

I can't hope to put it into words as he told it to me. I could never reproduce all the feeling, all the little tenderness of voice and manner with which he transfigured it. Besides, half the time I was thinking back into past states of mind to which he had given expression, and joining them up to the present, and tracing the evolution. To me it was not so much the tale of the mere finding of friends, as of a man finding a soul.

He was home in England at the time, taking a joy-flight over some part in Surrey, when the incident occurred which was the beginning of his adventure.

What happened he could not say with certainty. He had an idea that one of his cylinders must have blown off. Anyhow, something suddenly crashed into his upper plane; a splinter struck him on the forehead. The wing buckled up. He felt himself falling. Then he lost consciousness.

He came to himself with the crackle of flames in his ears. He was lying on the ground, pinned down by a crushed-up wing. What was left of his aeroplane was burning. The fire was creeping slowly along the wing.

Presently he would burn also, for he was helpless. Even if he had been uninjured, the weight of the wreckage would have held him. But he was injured, and badly; there was not the slightest feeling in the whole of his body. If help did not come in the next minute or two—

It was then he saw the girl.

She came racing towards him from the direction of what seemed a house nearly smothered in trees. Apparently he had come down in its grounds. Behind her an old gentleman was running.

Evan described the old gentleman to me in detail, down to the pearly buttons on his white waistcoat and the Flying Corps badge that he wore as a brooch on his lapel. Even at this, their first meeting, he thought the old fellow looked queer.

But of the girl he would only say that she was beautiful and dressed in white. Yet she must have been a wonderful girl.

A gout of flaming petrol fell on the wreckage above Evan's head the moment of her arrival. She beat the fire out with her naked hands, then tried to lift the wreckage away. The old gentleman came up and helped her. But it was too heavy. They failed to budge it.

Another flaming gout fell, and another. The wreckage round Evan began to burn. He saw the old gentleman wring his hands and run away, as though terrified at the spectacle. The girl ceased her efforts to release him and started fighting the flames.

She beat at them with her hands. She poured on earth. She tore fragments from her dress and swabbed the blazing petrol away. The frayed edges of her clothing began to smoulder. He yelled at her to desist. But she continued her battle, and kept the flames from reaching him; though all the while the main conflagration crept steadily down the wing.

Evan gave himself up for lost, and closed his eyes. He opened them again as the swift, clean blows of an axe sounded close to his ears. The old gentleman had returned, and was hacking furiously at the wreckage.

It yielded. They dragged him clear. At the moment the pain of his injuries darted through his body. He yelled and swooned.

Yet ere his senses left him he fancied that he heard the old gentleman shout out excitedly. As in a dream the words came to him: "It's the boy! It's the boy!"

As in a dream he heard those words repeated many times during the weeks of semi-consciousness that followed, while he lay and fought for his life against the deadly weakness that sought to overwhelm him. They comforted him strangely. Somehow he felt that the bitter years since his father's death were only a hideous nightmare, that his father still lived, that his father's were the hands which stroked his brow and eased his bandages when the agony of his wounds made him call out feebly.

But there were other hands as well for which he could not account; hands which he learned to distinguish by the greater gentleness of their movements and the softer caress of their fingers, which he came to associate dimly with a low rich voice and a presence that thrilled him in spite of his weakness.

Yet it was all a topsy-turvy, where fancy succeeded fancy, sweet for the most part and comforting only for those times when his reason waked fitfully and the vague fear of his forgotten past murmured its promptings across his mental stage.

He had forgotten his accident, the old gentleman and the girl who had saved him. Yet the form of a girl had imprinted itself on his subconsciousness, for when he awoke in possession of all his senses he looked for her—looked for her even before he remembered his accident.

But when he did remember he knew who she was, and gazed eagerly round the room in search of her, and felt disappointed because she was not there—that girl who had beaten out the flames, who was very beautiful, and dressed in white.

The old gentleman was there, however, sitting dozing in a chair. He looked very weary, as though from long hours of watching. Hours of watching by his bedside, Evan guessed, for he now realised clearly what had happened.

After dragging him away from the burning aeroplane, the girl and her father—as Evan surmised the old gentleman to be—had carried him into their home and cared for him. This was the man whom he had imagined to be his father, whose hands had eased his bandages when they hurt him.

He gazed at his rescuer gratefully. The old gentleman awoke and saw him looking. "You are better, Jack?" he exclaimed, joyfully, starting up from his chair and coming eagerly to the bedside.

Evan stared at him wonderingly. Why did the old fellow call him Jack?

"My boy! My boy!" the old gentleman murmured. "After all these months, to be home at last!"

His eyes were full of tears. He stroked Evan's hand at it lay outside the coverlet, Evan's hand as it lay outside the coverlet, only stare in surprise.

The old fellow had seemed queer at the beginning. Now he looked even queerer. Not only was he still wearing the R.F.C. badge as a lapel-brooch; he was smothered in flying emblems.

The pearly buttons of his white waistcoat were embossed with tiny gold aeroplanes. A larger one formed his tie-pin. A bunch of miniature badges and aeroplanes hung from his watch-chain. He wore a fob with yet another bunch. While his fingers were almost concealed with badge-mounted rings, shell-metal rings most of them, such as soldiers make, with the badge put on in addition.

"Plumb dotty," Evan mentally described him, and a sudden action on the part of the old man confirmed his opinion.

The drone of an aeroplane had sounded faintly in the distance. At once an expression of fear leaped into his face.

"They shall not get you, Jack. They shall not get you," he muttered.

He listened intently to the sound. As soon as the louder drone of the engine made it clear that the plane was approaching, he darted to the door and looked out; then he stole to the windows and stealthily drew the curtains, completely darkening the room.

"Don't be afraid, Jack. They shall not get you," he said, coming back beside Evan, and speaking as though to himself.

In spite of his wonderment, Evan lay asleep in the darkness.

The day had gone when he awoke again. The room was dimly lit, and warm with shaded glow lamps. The girl was there.

She was seated near the end of the bed, her eyes closed, as weary-looking as her father. She, too, had been watching him. Evan wished that she would open her eyes so that he might thank her. He felt that he could thank people now, he was stronger; and he owed it to this girl, even more than to that funny old gentleman, her father.

The father was there also. Evan found him reading softly almost at his ear. He had only to turn his head to see him. But he did not turn. He was too busy on watching the girl, hoping that she would open her eyes, and see him looking at her, and come to speak to him.

Even the words that her father was reading at first failed to penetrate his consciousness. Then something strange about them began to press on his attention. He turned his head.

A yard away the old gentleman was sitting on his knees on an open Bible, from which he was reading one sentence, over and over again. Evan listened in astonishment.

"For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found," read the old man.

"So that's why he calls me Jack," Evan thought. "Poor old chap! He is dotty."

But he looked at the reader very tenderly; the voice had such an earnest ring to it. And for all his queer ways and notions, this old man had helped to save his life.

"Father."

Evan recognised the rich low tone of that voice.

"Father," the girl repeated, softly, the old man stared up uncomprehendingly from his Bible. "I think Jack is awake."

"So she thinks me Jack also," thought Evan, looking at her inquiringly.

Her eyes dropped before his gaze. "She doesn't," he corrected himself. Her father had risen and was feeling his pulse.

"You are better, Jack," he murmured. "Norah, why do you keep sitting there?" he called to the girl, a little impatiently. "Jack," he added, coming to the bedside, "you recognise Norah, don't you?"

Norah, your sister."

The girl rose and came over to the bed side. Evan looked at her questioningly again. She met his gaze this time, and her eyes held an appeal to him.

"Norah. Yes, Norah," he murmured, and the girl flashed a grateful smile at him.

How suitable the name was to a girl with such a voice.

"There, there. Of course you do," the old gentleman, triumphantly, shall soon have you better completely. Don't talk any more," he commanded. Evan was on the point of beginning to thank him. "You will be stronger tomorrow. Norah, my dear, it is time to go to bed."

He moved to the door and bade her for her with stately courtesy.

"Come, come, my dear. You look tired," he urged, as she hesitated in the doorway. "You cannot sit up tonight, again," she protested. "You are out already. Let me sit up for you."

Please."

"Come, come, my dear," he said, patient firmness. "It is my privilege to sit with Jack to-night. For—"