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and she said, in a high excited voice, did you bring back a German helmet and people round them laughed. They went to the car and he said you drive. She was pleased but foolishly nervous as she let in the clutch. He was here. He hadn't changed as far as she could see. The children liked him. She had been a little afraid they mightn't.

What kind of a trip did you have?

Good.

It's lovely to have you back.

It's good to be back.

Is it for always?

I hope so.

Daddy did you kill any Germans?

Lots son.

Did it hurt them?

You bet.

Everything all right he said to her when they reached their home.

Oh yes. Much the same.

They went up the neat path. She could feel the neighbours watching from behind their curtains. That Mrs. Purcell's got her husband back. Yes, he's back, she wanted to shout. Back, but I don't know him. He's just a man like Mark, but we can't talk to one another. I'm scared to think what we'll say when the children've gone to bed.

Well it all looks good to me.

I'll make some tea. We've got a special party.

Asparagus sandwiches and Mummy got a tin of salmon from Mrs. Worth.

What's salmon?

Fish in tins. Pink fish. Hasn't he ever seen salmon?

No. There's lots of things he hasn't seen but there's plenty of time.

THEY had the party. It was all very nice and they kept up the polite conversation.

Suddenly she wanted to cry. It was so silly to feel like this, but she found herself biting her lips to keep them from trembling. She got up and went into the kitchen. There was a mirror over the sink and she stood staring into this, watching her eyes, deep with tears which slowly brimmed over and trickled down her cheeks. What a fool. What an absolute fool. Why had she expected so much of him? He was like that, inarticulate, shy, and he would never change. She had never wanted him to change. But now she felt that the four years had passed him over, but had not left her untouched.

When the men come home you must be understanding. They will have changed. They have gone through so much, you cannot expect them to be the same men who left you.

But he hadn't changed. He was the kind who went through anything and came out the other side apparently the same person. He seemed to have a faith in humanity that didn't falter. He would come back to those three feeds and a roof over his head and be satisfied.

But she? She'd done too much in the four years. Father and mother. Provider, comforter, everything. She couldn't sit back now and accept things. She couldn't give him the reins and say go ahead, I'll be the woman of the family now. I'll sit at home and darn socks. She couldn't let the men of the world bring disaster on her again. . . .

He came into the room.

Not crying?

Just a little.

Why?

Oh . . . things.

But it's all right now. I'm back. I've been damned lucky but we can start again where we left off.

She looked at him. Can we?

Why not?

She wanted to say because I've moved on. Because I'm not there where you left me. I'm way ahead. But she couldn't say the words.

When they come back, humour them. Help them to forget what they've been through. It's your job to bring back normal living to them.

So back she went, down the years.

Yes. We're where we left off. We're terribly lucky when you think of those others . . .

He looked at her. We won't think of them.

She started to say something. All those dead. They've got to mean something to us. They died so we'd remember them. We can't just wipe them out . . .

But she smiled a little sadly. No. We won't think of them. When the children were in bed, they settled down in the same old way with the evening paper, each silent behind the flimsy rampart in the manner of four years ago, but to her the words were meaningless and futile. It still went on, this ceaseless massacre, this endless sacrifice of human flesh, this searing of the people's soul.

How could he sit, quietly absorbing the printed word when in his mind there must still lie the record of the fiendish action?

Mark, she said.

Yes.

Can't you, isn't there something you could tell me about it all?

He glanced up from the paper. What do you want to know? There's so little I can tell you really. I mean you've read it all. It's here. He tapped the page before him.

But that's impersonal.

And that's what war's got to be. Impersonal. If you think of it any other way. . . . He stopped.

There was a breathless silence.

Yes, she said.

It mustn't happen again. That's all. It mustn't happen again.

He picked up the paper and began to read.

IT was growing too dark to see, so she turned on the light. Here it all was. The same room, the table covered with dirty dishes, the little pot of flowers, the chairs pushed back, and a crumpled serviette on the floor. The same. And Mark. He was a man sitting there. A man whom she dimly knew, who had been through terrible things, and who sat quietly saying it mustn't happen again. He was a man to whom she must relinquish the governing of her life and the lives of her children. From now on, her hands were woman's hands and her mind must be a woman's mind. But he was unknown to her. There was nothing about him that she knew.

You can't go round remembering slaughter, he said. You can't live your life with the dead hanging like carcasses round your neck.

You've got to find normality and memories of atrocities won't help. I don't mean wipe it all off. Just get on with the job of living as decently as you can.

Three feeds and a roof over your head.

Well, she said, we'd better do the dishes.

He folded the paper carefully, stood up, and went out into the kitchen.

Of course. This was Mark. He liked to wash.



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