

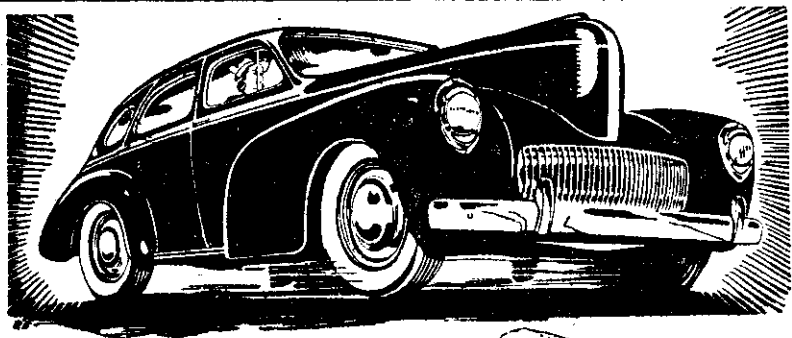
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★ SHORT STORY ★

THE MAN WHO DUG UP A DOOR

Written for "The Listener" by
J. HENDERSON

NICK came into Ward 11 with a small handbag in one hand and a red-checked dressing gown tucked under his left armpit. The staff nurse led him to the bed next to mine. It had been white and empty and lonely for a week. I'd been wondering who would be the next man to occupy it.

The nurse hoped he'd be happy here, smiled, and went away. Nick undressed, put on his red-checked dressing gown, shoved the small handbag into his locker, and looked around, rather vaguely.

"That's a beaut dressing gown you've got," I said. "A real knockout. Where'd you get her?"

Nick grinned and said oh, you couldn't get a dressing gown like that now, no, not even for twice the price. He'd got it just before he went into Trentham with the First Ech, and while he was overseas he'd think, now and then, of his red-checked dressing gown and wonder if his wife had put it away carefully and safely, as she had promised. And, when he got back, there it was, safe and sound, good as ever, and he'd been wearing it for a year now, and he was still very much attached to his red-checked dressing gown.

"That's fine," I said, "that's fine."

Nick sat down at the end of my bed and rolled a cigarette.

We yarned a bit, and then he began telling me all about Crete, in long, quick, nervous sentences. You could see he wanted to get it off his chest again. I guessed Nick hadn't been talking to many soldiers for months, for he'd been discharged from the Army a year ago, and was a civvy once more in grey-checked sports coat, red tie and slacks. But his mind, of course, was still that of a soldier. And, even when you're out of the Army, with everything behind you, all your old experiences and sufferings and agonies and joys boil up steadily within you, brew up like yeast, and every now and then you find you've got to get them off your chest to someone who understands. It was like that with Nick.

So I listened to all Nick had to say, and he went all over Greece and Crete, Mount Olympus, and Maleme, and the parachutists, and that long forced march over the mountains, and machine-gunning the Austrians from the top of that cliff. "They dived into a long ditch for cover, but we could still look down upon them from our positions on the cliff, though they didn't know it, and they must have been very puzzled as they died there."

Listening to Nick, I kept saying: "Sure, sure, yes." and "Gee, eh?" and "Go on?" and "Hell, yes, the same happened to us," until he'd got it all off his chest, in a matter of three days or so. Mind you, we wouldn't talk of war all the time, of course. And, when Nick got going, he'd deliver great chunks of war-talk. And so he got the war-poison out of his mind, for the time being.

AFTER his operation, a very small one, Nick said: "It would be good to write a war book, and have it all finished and done with, for ever, wouldn't it?"



"... Led him to the bed next to mine"

"I reckon that would help a lot, if a bloke could do it," I said.

His wife came and visited him, bringing shortbread. And one afternoon she brought their little son, Ralph. Ralph crawled all over the ward floor, and was very happy, and didn't wet himself once, and we old soldiers were all very proud of what Nick and his wife had done.

When the operation scar healed up, Nick opened his locker, brought out his handbag, packed his pyjamas, got into his grey slacks, grey sports coat, and red tie, tucked his dressing gown under his left armpit, and said goodbye. But before he went he said to me:

"Come round for a feed and a yarn and a beer or two on Saturday night. You know where we live."

SO I went round to Nick's Government house on Saturday afternoon. It was a nice little house, with a nice smell about it, and I was glad Nick and his wife—yes, and little Ralph—had a nice little house, now.

And just before we had tea—ham, lettuce salad (radishes, spring onion,

(continued on next page)