

THE RETURN

A SHORT STORY

Written for "The Listener"

by ISOBEL ANDREWS

LEAVING the house which still shimmered and glowed with the effulgence of his return, Bob went down the narrow known path, opened the remembered gate, stepped on to the recovered street.

The new green was thrusting through the grey of the sycamores which still lined the footpaths. The houses, regimented into a universal neatness and urbanity, hid behind drawn blinds the best bedrooms and the sitting-rooms from the depredations of the early sun.

The tentacles of his mind had for the last four years gone over the scene in endless repetition, lingering over this roof, touching that stone, gathering in these gardens. Limned against alien skies they had taken on a radiance and a beatitude which now brought their re-attainment somewhere short of the dream, slanting reality just a fraction out of line, as in that French film where to get a certain effect in a certain sequence, the camera had been tilted slightly askew.

He crossed the railway line at the same illegal point where he had always crossed, but did so now with an exaggeration of care that brought an apologetic and shamefaced movement to his lips.

The shining converging rails carried his eyes to where paddocks mottled with sheep, ranged with pines, flowed towards the foothills, gently ascending until, backed by the mountains, they finally disappeared in a dark blue haze. A streak of ice-white cloud cut across the summits and hid the forest trees.

A gust of feeling heavy with an unnamed unnameable emotion assailed him as he went down the hill and wandered into the town. Here familiarity wrapped round him like a mist. Town meant one wide meandering street which held the older wooden shop fronts with their verandahs, their plain windows, their wooden doorsteps moulded and scarred by time and the passage of many feet, standing in their shabby indomitable row, pressed down every now and then by an incursion of modernity and change in the shape of the ferro-concrete insurance building, the bank with its four stories of austere brick, the new church, pseudo-Gothic, which had replaced ten years ago the old oblong wooden building with the little porch in the front and the one cracked bell.

A clatter across the way showed Joe Dyer unfastening the old iron shutters in front of his shop ("Phineas Dyer and Son. Estd. 1885. Watchmakers and Manfg. Jewellers.") Seeing Joe, Bob lurked under the verandah of Tom Gallagher's barber shop, not wanting to talk to Joe just then because of Ron, who had got his at El Alamein. Ron, diffident



in ill-fitting battledress, came back to the main street for a moment. Came back between his eyes and the shaving cream, the razors and the gent's Superior Hair Oil in Gallagher's shop window. Because of Ron and not wanting to talk to Joe he walked delicately down the street, taking care that his boots did not ring too loudly in the still empty morning.

Passing the Bank he looked up at the second floor window, knowing that the table and chair which he had left four years ago would still be waiting for him behind the frosted glass. But the way he felt just then he didn't think he would go back there. The way he felt he wanted to go to a place like Tauranga and grow lemons and oranges and lie in the sun.

JUST before the Church the ruin of the Stanton shop paused him. The folks had written saying that there had been a fire and that the old couple had sort of folded up after it, going off to Hastings to their married daughter and leaving the shop as the fire had left it, gutted, unsightly, deserted. He peered through the boards which had been nailed across the windowless frontage, and gazed into the darkened, smoke-smear interior. Silence lapped him like a dark tide. All feeling had for so long been bound up in the desire to come back and to find nothing changed. Death, explosion, fatigue, noise, strange places, and strange people had engendered in him a passion for immutability. His mother's greying hair, his father's stooped figure, the transformation of his sister from a girl of 17 into a pre-occupied pregnant young married woman had all, now that the first flush of return had faded, brought a faint resentment, a feeling of having been cheated.

Now, in front of the Stanton shop, he felt that he wanted nothing so much as he wanted to see the place as it had been when as a boy he would go every Saturday to spend his allowance, or as a young man to buy fishing tackle, a new tie, or just to have a chat with the old man who had lived in the district all his life and knew all the stories about it. He wanted to be exasperated again at the festoon of dungarees, gingham overalls, children's clothes, and long pink underpants which hung over the counter

obscuring the boxes at the back and framing Mr. and Mrs. Stanton as bunting on holidays frames the windows and the balconies of a town. He wanted old man Stanton to scratch his head with a battered pencil and looking out from under craggy eyebrows peering over lop-sided spectacles say, "Drorin' pins? I did have some somewhere, Bob boy, but bothered if I know where I put them." And Mrs. Stanton, dry and birdlike, coming in with "Course you had some, Dad. You remember, you put them up on the shelf with the Beechams and the toothpaste."

He wanted nothing so much as he wanted that, but all he had was silence and the stale smell of the charred wood.

THE sound of hooves and the rattle of unrolled wheels and the way he still felt, not wanting to meet anyone just then, made him gaze fixedly at the Stanton shop, but subterfuge was annihilated by the roar of Timi Tawhero's command to his horse. In response to Stentor, hooves and wheels faltered, stopped, and he had to turn round.

"Hey you, Bob, back again, eh? Good to see you. Good to see you."

Mr. and Mrs. Tawhero were sitting in the same old cart, with the same clutch of children crowding at the back.

Mrs. Tawhero, who never spoke, smiled and nodded as Timi lumbered to the ground. Timi, expansive, his enormity made more enormous by his thick flying overcoat, his dark face made darker by his natty gent's stetson, green with a silly little feather stuck in the band; Timi, thrusting out a map-like hand, pumphandling vigorously.

"Hey, Bob. Glad to see you."

Effort, bringing the right words, the right gesture, the right inflexion, made him respond to the handshake, nod to Mrs. Tawhero, smile at Timi. Effort became feeling and he was suddenly glad to see them.

"Hullo Tim. How are you, Mrs. Tawhero? You're all looking great."

"So," said Timi. "Back again, hey?"

"Back again, Tim. Damn glad to be back, too. How's the family?"

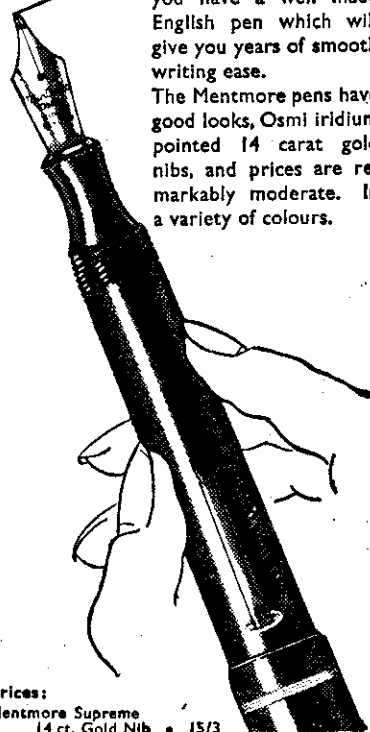
"Fine. Fine. But you're too thin, boy. Too thin. Have to fatten up, eh? Have to fatten you up now you're home."

(continued on next page)

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