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"HOPE": Short Story

(Continued from previous page)

time by two, see? That will give you the bare minimum."

It had gone on far too long now . . . watching the fit men, the lucky ones, the sensible ones who had gone to a doctor early—in bed for a few days, then up and about enjoying the work in the sunshine. God, how he'd envied them!

This constant painful longing to be free! Once he had walked out the door of the ward. He could smell newly-mown grass and feel the ground warm beneath his feet. But he wanted to feel the sun and the wind. And the gold and blue of the distant hills! Their colour was as elusive as the happiness he had thrown away.

This feeling of hopelessness! No one could say he hadn't fought against it. If existence here weren't so confoundingly drab! True, there were books. He could read till his eyes ached; but one needed more than that. And the monotony of these dreadful meals. One had no appetite anyway. Three times a day to drag oneself from a doze, to sit up wearily and take the tray . . . to face without enthusiasm the inevitable round of meat, potatoes and bread—the cooking soulless and uninspired—and to master one's revulsion for great quantities of milk. One learned to gulp it resolutely almost without sensation, good or bad. One must be careful not to reach the bottom but to leave the sediment in the cup. "Hygienic dirt" old Highley used to call it.

NOBODY could say he hadn't given it a go. He had done all he could; had eaten regularly and determinedly. He had rested. He had obeyed instructions as submissively as a slave. But it was no good. He couldn't get ahead of it at all. On his feet a dozen times now but the result was always the same. Up would go his temperature. And the daily ordeal with the thermometer, what unnecessary agony it was, to feel the heat in one's cheeks as the afternoon advanced, to lie still with a bumping heart. As if one could control a rising pulse! To wait, sucking the little tube whose verdict meant so much and to take a hurried look before the nurse came back. He was sick to death of it all—a few hours up; then back again to bed. The doctor's instructions were always so detestably amiable when they were unpleasant. A rapid glance at the chart and then—

"Still a bit unsettled, eh? I think, Sister, this chap could have another day or two in bed just to make sure."

A bit unsettled, eh? That was putting it mildly. Once again an eternity of drab routine with the intermittent doctor's visits . . .

But the old boy was usually right. He knew his job. That couldn't be denied. But what could a doctor do after all? Fat lot of curing they ever did! Put you to bed and hope to God you'd get better. If you did they'd take the credit and

if you didn't . . . well, it was just bad luck, that was all.

The old chap was so confoundingly non-committal. He told you nothing. True, if you pressed him, he'd let you have it; but somehow one was loth to ask. But then cowards are always afraid of the truth. So one just stood there abjectly, breathing and coughing as required while the examination went on . . . and then perhaps he'd concentrate on one spot, listening more intently. But he'd give nothing away and you'd make your own conjectures, which were always depressing. He'd make notes on his chart and you'd cast a furtive glance, wondering vaguely and fearfully what those crosses meant . . .



* * *

THE water-carrier arrived. Each day he brought drinking water in buckets from a spring in the hills. It was delightful to drink—cool and crystal clear. Some day, Colvin told himself, he was going to find that spring. He had pictured himself scrambling down the hillside and cooling his

face in the water. If he could reach that stream, he felt, the tide would have turned. It symbolised all his fervid longing for the unattainable—to be strong enough to breast that hill as Henley did; to bear those heavy pails with such ridiculous ease. He would never be able to do it now.

Henley approached the bed with a jug of water in his strong brown arms. He was good to look upon. His hair was bright with a lustre from sun and wind. It seemed to Colvin that he bore his manifest wellbeing with a certain arrogance, that he was aware of the contrast between himself and the bed-patients and that it gratified him.

Colvin closed his eyes again. His dejection was heavier now. Did he really want to live? Not particularly. But nobody, however ill, admitted that. It just wasn't the thing. But why such ridiculous pretence? He had lost the capacity for enjoying life . . . beauty . . . it depended so very much upon how one approached it . . . the dewy mornings, calm, bright and clear when not only a thousand birds but the whole world was singing . . . the common sounds, always sharper and clearer in the undisturbed silence . . . the clanging of the milkcans, the plop, plop of horses' feet, and light-hearted whistling, to him they were merely depressing—the prelude to the ordeal of another day.

* * *

OTHER sounds in the ward ceased suddenly before the regular pound of the doctor's feet. To Colvin the approach had always evoked a suggestion of nervousness—a momentary flutter of hope or dread, he didn't quite know which. But to-day, no, he wasn't interested.

The doctor had stopped and was standing at his bed. The leaves of the chart were being slowly turned. Colvin opened his eyes. The old chap for some reason or other was deliberating. Then he spoke briskly to the nurse. But Colvin knew he was only speaking to himself, really.