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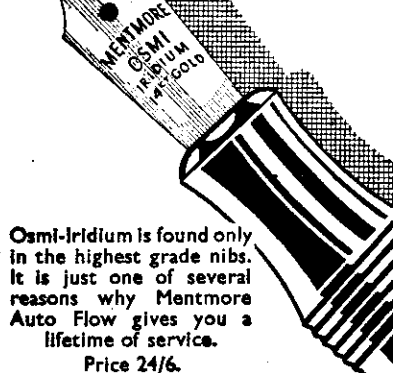


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## SHORT STORY

# CHRISTMAS LEAVE

Written for "The Listener"  
by BARBARA DENT

HE remembered the night he had shinned up the pole and stolen the light bulb out of pure, impotent frustration. Once he had it, he hadn't known what to do with it, and had dropped it over the little bridge into the stream on his way back to the tent.

That was the way he felt about it all—destructive. He wanted to smash things. He wanted to destroy, as if to ruin material things, the huts, tents, crockery, uniforms, trucks—any of the gear about him, would somehow smash the horrible system and achieve freedom for them all.

It had been too much for Blue. Blue had gone over the fence—taken to the hills a month ago. Of course they'd found him—he hadn't enough bush craft to look after himself in that waste of tussocky, volcanic desert and bush-thick ranges. He'd come out to steal food and they'd caught him. Now he was behind bars. No one knew what was going to happen to him, but everything was rumoured.

Well—he could understand Blue. He could understand anyone going berserk. No sort of mutiny or violent revolt would have amazed him, no extreme measure that a man might take to recapture freedom—but what did constantly perplex him was the sheep-like docility of nearly all of them. They cursed and grumbled, they scowled and groused—but they never did anything. And he knew that in a crisis the majority of them would line up obediently on the side of law and order, while fellows like Blue, and himself (yes, he would be on Blue's side) received the judgment.

It was so intangible. He felt he was being slowly strangled, yet he couldn't name the killer. On this barren, bitterly windswept plateau, gales roared down the camp streets and round the huts and tents continually, yet he felt he never drew a breath of fresh air. Only when they went out on the hills for manoeuvres did he really feel in some measure free, and that his body and soul were his own. Yet even then the clothes he wore were a convict's, and the whole game of war they played was the system of his bondage.

HE knew his feelings were beyond reason. There was a war. Men had to fight. The Japs might come—something had to be done about it. Oh yes, he knew it all. Duty and patriotism and the only honourable thing to do—all that. Who didn't know it off pat? But he still hated the uniform. He still felt a convict in it, he still felt the camp was a prison, and that never again would he breathe free air and do as he wished when and how he wished. It was as if the whole atmosphere was poisoned, and, fighting the slow strangulation of it, he must hit out wildly all about him, or else—and this was, he knew, the wisest way—become so cunningly clever that he could play their own game better than they.

But Jim darling, she'd said, they'd put you in prison, and that would be even worse.

Yes—that would be worse. And he knew that that alone was what kept him from making a final dash for it. He couldn't make up a whole string of

clever-sounding arguments like some of those intellectual chaps he'd heard talking before and at the beginning of the war. He didn't know any statistics, or much about international affairs, or exactly where a man's duty lay, or even what was finally right and finally wrong. He only knew that to put him in this uniform and subject him to this routine, to confine him in this particular area and order his whole day from rising to going to bed again, to try to fit him into one particular mould together with these thousands of others, was to him iniquitous. He didn't know the rights



"He raced for the moving carriage"

and wrongs for all those others. He didn't know the whys and wherefores of the whole business itself—he only knew that for him to subject himself to it was a sin against himself: It was making him wither away inside, making a sawdust man of him, a dummy, dead in the most vital place.

HE felt life—he didn't think it. In his simple, untutored way he had a poet's response. He loved to lie out alone on a tussock hilltop with all the grandeur of mountain and desert about him and the larks above. He loved to lie there in the sun under the broad sky, and dream away hours. What passed through his mind he never examined or knew—he was simply being, close to some life-giving essence whose nature he never questioned, and whose presence he didn't even know of.

So to him freedom was essential.

It was not an abstract theory, an intellectual argument, a balanced thesis—no—it was just the way he felt in the garden on a Saturday afternoon in old trousers and a torn shirt, or how it was to watch Peg dive into the river and then swoop after her, or to say, Let's go to the pictures to-night, or, Where'll we spend Christmas?

It was in the way he felt, not in any thoughts or aspirations.

It was to twine Peg's thick, short, brown hair in his fingers, to hear her pad barefoot down the passage in the mornings, or say, Have some more salad, Jim? on a Sunday evening.

THEY had only been married three months when he had been called up, but already his life had settled into a pattern that was so wordlessly satisfying that he never wanted it to change until he died.

But the pattern had been shattered, and he had been unable to piece it together again on the too rare week-end leaves. He was as perplexed and truculent as a caged animal.

And now all Christmas leave had been cancelled.

Of course anyone could see the logic of it—the Jap scare, the whole country on the alert—but somehow it didn't matter in the face of this shattering disappointment. Somehow one's personal frustration was of far greater concern than any Jap scare or any alert.

The whole camp seethed. Mutiny was as near as it could be without actually breaking out. There were threats and sullen faces. Every order was obeyed truculently, and hatred smouldered in nearly every eye. Leave had been rare enough already from this isolated, wind-blown prison—and all had counted on the Christmas break, counted with a painful hunger on the renewal of those contacts that would make life seem a human, sensible affair again, counted on all the foolish fun of the day itself, on the family reunion, on the clandestine lovers' meeting, on the rowdy party or the desperate drinking bout—counted ultimately on leaving behind this barrack of ordered road and square, of neatly ranked lines of tents, of bitter wind and barren landscape, of endless and unnatural male company.

God—makes you wonder if skirts still exist, Shorty had said.

And now it was all cancelled.

For weeks they had lain in the tents at night, listening to the trains, imitating the whistles like kids, chanting,