

CHRISTMAS LEAVE

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BEHIND the shadow of the trucks Jim crept up till he was almost opposite the front carriage. The nearest picket was about the same distance as he from the carriage door, and quite ignorant of his presence. The train gave a low whistle and began to move. It was now or never. He leapt across the truck couplings and raced for the moving carriage. The picket yelled and raced too. The train was gathering speed.

Hi! Stop! Hi! yelled the picket.

Jim made a last tremendous spurt and grabbed the rail, hauling himself up on the carriage step and opening the door just as the picket's hands slid down his back as he too leapt on the step.

Jim slammed the door behind him and held the handle. The picket shouted and banged. The train gathered speed. If the picket didn't drop off soon he wouldn't be able to, and passengers would be out to see what all the clamour was about.

As if he realised his own danger, he gave a last shout and bang and disappeared. Jim sat limply on the floor. He was shaking all over.

Pull yourself together man—it's not over yet.

He took off his boots and wrung out his socks and trouser legs and packed away his waterproof. The picket might notify others at the next stop and there might be a search for him. He had to find a hiding place. In the first carriage lights were on, and curious eyes watched him as he walked through. He went on to the second carriage where the tumult of his arrival had not been heard, and, finding two seats back to back, threw his greatcoat on the floor and crawled in on it.

Blessed relief to lie down! But he could not relax for fear of pickets at the next station. He looked out the window as the train drew in, and sure enough, there were the uniformed figures pacing the platform and peering in windows. He was out the offside door before the train stopped, and the enginedriver and fireman didn't seem to think it queer that he should show such an interest in the engine at that time of night, and cheerily explained this and that to him while they went a few chains up the line for water.

He stood outside on the carriage step till the train gathered speed after the station. It was unlikely that, if there were pickets at any other station, they

would bother to search the train, so he curled up under the seats and slept unbrokenly.

* * *

THE sun was up when he left the train at his own station. Remembering the rumours that police had been asked to pick up stray soldiers, he went out across the sidings, dodging among trucks and carriages. Then he was in a taxi, and he was safe.

It wasn't seven o'clock yet. The town was still half asleep. He looked at the peaceful, flower-filled gardens, at the trees lining the streets, at the neat houses, and at the early churchgoers walking peacefully along, and he was amazed. It all seemed beautiful as a story told in childhood. It was so peaceful and beautiful, so colourful and green, that he wanted to laugh for joy. After the isolation of the camp in its desert waste, its nearest township thirty miles away, its only beauty that of abandonment and barrenness, this cultivation, these peopled gardens, were like the voice of a loved one.

He stopped the taxi at the corner. He wanted to walk up the well-known street alone. She would not be expecting him. He wanted to walk in the gate quietly and naturally as if he did it every day as he once had done.

He wanted to savour the whole ritual of this homecoming fully and slowly as if it were to be the final one, and must last forever.

As he turned up the street the Christmas church bells were pealing. Peace on earth, goodwill towards men, they chanted. But the beautiful irony of it was lost on Jim, for as he put his hand on the little back gate that he himself had made, as he paused there, filthy and aching weary, in the still, sun-steeped, early morning, he thought, She's got the garden in good trim, and there was nothing but peace and goodwill in his heart.

The camp on the bitter, isolated plateau was another life away. He was home. This air he breathed was free. Temporarily his soul was his own.

Bing in Perpetuo

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