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"A taxi collected him one night at four minutes to five"

SHORT STORY

TIME CREDIT

Written for "The Listener"
by J. S. HEPBURN

THERE was really no story in Douglas Mason — not in Douglas Mason alive, anyway. About Douglas Mason dead, though, there was this very interesting fact—that he skipped out of this life with 25 minutes 12 seconds up his sleeve.

Alive he was just a kid at Kilbirnie, pictures on Saturdays, holidays at Plim-merton, Wellington College, first eleven, Customs Department, eighth reinforcements, Tunisia, Sangro, Cassino, R.S.A. badge, and a crook stomach. But dead he showed a profit of exactly 25 minutes 12 seconds; that and a few quid in the Post Office was his balance when a taxi collected him one night as he jumped a Karori Park tram at four minutes to five.

I'd known him when a Spandau or an eighty-eight could have got him any hour of day or night—but, no, he has to go and get it at four minutes to five on the road to Karori. I'd hauled him off the tracks at Bab-el-Louk station in Cairo when it was just a drunken toss-up whether we both went under the train—but his curtains had to come in a taxi on the road to Karori.

Douglas Mason was no hero and he wasn't smart. I know some fellows who have made hundreds since they came home, but all Douglas made was 25 minutes 12 seconds. Of course, he'd also helped to make some oppressed nations free, and he'd made a home and a fairly good garden. Whether or not his home and his garden were any better for the extra 25 minutes 12 seconds he spent in them I don't know. Maybe he could have spent another 30 years round and about if he'd done as I told him, and waited until that Karori tram stopped at nights instead of jumping off it six seconds beforehand. I know, because I often used to ride on the same tram and I used to count seconds after Douglas jumped off. It was always six when the car stopped. I was only up to three the night the taxi got him.

FUNNY, you know, when you think back to how fellows in the Army overseas used to figure out what they'd

do when they got home. And all that happened when we did get home was that I used to work out how much time Douglas would save in a year if he saved six seconds a day for five days a week. I never could remember my figures from one night to the next, so I used to work it out again every time. Five times six are thirty—half a minute a week—but it was better to call it twenty-four seconds a week, because we usually stayed in town for a beer on Fridays. Even if he jumped off the tram before it stopped then, I didn't count that. It's funny the things you figure out sometimes. It always kept me going until I came to my stop, anyway.

I see a lot of people in this town who jump off the trams before they stop, and they always remind me of Douglas now. It's only just saving a few seconds, but they certainly do mount up. Sometimes it doesn't seem to make sense, when you think that people have been away from home for perhaps nine or ten hours and yet they jump off moving trams just to get home a few seconds earlier. You can't do anything at home or in the garden in those few seconds, but maybe it is worth something when you add it up over a long period. At the end of this life you have gained quite a lot of time. That's if a taxi doesn't get you too soon.

DOUGLAS MASON seemed different overseas. He was always fairly slim, of course, and rather serious, but he looked different when his face and neck and hands were brown, with a grey jersey sticking out under his battledress. He kept his straight brown hair shorter in the Army, too. There was always that serious touch about him, though. He was the kind of fellow, even in the Army, that everyone called Douglas, never Doug. He became a corporal and then a sergeant at the finish. I reckon he'd have done better, too, if he'd cared less what people thought about him. I don't suppose he was what you'd call

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