



Speed the plough

A SHORT STORY

Written for "The Listener"

By

"ETAOIN"

I FIRST ran up against Fred Gray in 1932. In these days he was one of the temporary clerks in the local Unemployment Office and I had just joined the reporting staff of the evening daily. Being raw and green, I got all the monotonous work to do, writing progress reports on the Mayor's winter relief fund, calling at the City Mission and the soup kitchens, watching the distribution of free blankets to sustenance workers and then writing all about how grateful they were, or ought to have been. Looking back, I can see I didn't find it as depressing as I ought, but I was young then and the young are a bit callous, or maybe just ignorant. I know I used to get as marked as hell when I was pulled off my usual round just because there was a chance of a riot providing a good story.

That, of course, was in the days when I still thought that journalism was a romance instead of a racket. I can remember how I used to sit back after writing a stick of local copy and think that the couple of hundred words I had written would go (with luck) to the lines and then on to the stone, and by and by they would be printed perhaps fifty thousand times by the rotary. I used to think, Gosh! that's ten million words. And I'd think of the thousands who (with luck) would read these millions of words that I had written, and then, as like as not, I'd stick my hat on the back of my head and offer to take young Harding, who sat next me, out for a shandy. That just shows how green I was.

ANYWAY, having the calls I did, it was natural that I came up against Fred, who had a desk next the counter of the Unemployment Office. He was a decent chap, quiet and conscientious. It seems rather strange now, but first and last it was his conscientiousness that struck me. For that matter, though, we both were in those days. Anyone was, who had a job then. You just

fogged yourself along because there was always at the back of your mind the thought that if you didn't you'd be one of the queue yourself, instead of talking to them from the other side of the counter or writing them up for the benefit of those who still had full bellies, and blankets, and fires in their grates. When you weren't telling yourself how lucky you were that your salary had been docked only twenty per cent. instead of a hundred, the chief or the managing director was. And you felt they were right.

Not that Fred was one of the full-bellied ones. Temporary clerks were not much better off than the relief workers they interviewed and I don't think many of them more than smelt a square meal for months on end. Certainly, Fred didn't look healthy. He was about the average height but he just didn't have any beef on him. His knuckles showed through the skin and where his wrists stuck out of the frayed sleeves of his old blue serge jacket you could see the sinews running over the bones like strings over the neck of a violin.

In that, of course, he was like thousands of others but when I got to know him better I found that he was a bit different from the average run of his kind. Most of them got to the stage when they took their bad luck as a matter of course. They saw so much misery they got case-hardened to it and when you are worrying about how to pay your board and get your shoes mended at the same time you don't usually have time to worry much about your own usefulness to society. But Fred was different and before long I could see that he was troubled by more than the immediate problems of existence. I suppose the psychologists would say he was thwarted, but the trouble with Fred was that he didn't know what was thwarting him. He didn't like his work, yet it wasn't the harrowing aspect of it that troubled him as much as what he called its general pointlessness. But when I asked him what he would like to do instead, he would laugh—it was a fatuously academic question then—and say, "I dunno, yet."

THEN, of course, we all turned the corner one day and Labour got in (or Labour got in and we all turned the corner, whichever you prefer), and Fred found one morning that he was working in an Employment Office instead of an Unemployment one. And at our office there was a general move up and I found myself rising in the social scale from the unemployment round to the police and court calls, and thereafter I didn't see very much of Fred. He was a quiet, decent sort of chap, as I said, and you don't run up against that type much around the watch-house and the courts.

But though I wasn't seeing him day in and day out, I sometimes met up with him in the street and I noticed that

though he had got himself a new suit he hadn't put on much flesh and he had still that worried look on his face, or rather behind his eyes. Like a man who's looking for something but isn't quite sure what it is.

During the next two or three years, as I learned from time to time, he was transferred around various clerking jobs in different Government offices in the city but in none of them did he seem to find work to his own satisfaction though, knowing him as I did, I was sure that whatever he got to do he did it well.

Anyway, the years passed and in my case I seemed to be getting into a rut. It's that way in newspaper offices if you aren't careful and especially if there are no staff changes making for more room at the top. I kept plugging round to the cops every day until I felt more at home in the station than I did in my own sitting-room, and one Supreme Court session followed another until I could have picked (or packed) a jury as well as any K.C.

Then came the war, and for a while that gummed up everybody's routine. You'd write a perfectly good story about something or other only to find it turfed out to make room for a late cable on the siege of Warsaw or a column of blurb from Hitler's latest speech. As McDonald, the manager, said, he couldn't have got more space if he had been the best advertiser on our books.

WELL, in the middle of this muddle, I have to pound round to the drill-hall to do a descriptive story and I am just busting into the room where they are conducting the medical examinations when the door opens and out walks Fred. And he is not looking too good, either. He says "Hullo" kind of absently and while he is dressing I take a quick peek at all the brawny torsos and have a word with one of the doctors. Then I skin out again and haul Fred away for a swift bun-and-tea.

He is pretty much under the weather and explains that he thought that if he could have just got into uniform he would have felt he was doing something really useful. Now he has been rejected and has got to go back to the desk again, and that is going to be even worse than it was before. Of course, I do my best to point out, without laying it on too thick, that I think he has been doing a pretty useful job for a long time now, and for sweet Fanny Adams in the way of thanks, but it doesn't seem to convince him and by now I am beginning to feel a bit hazed myself.

I roll a cigarette and take a good pull at it and then I say: "Ever thought about going farming, Fred?"

He looks as if he is beginning to get interested, but then he shakes his head and says he has no practical knowledge. I point out that he has an average share of intelligence and that the farmer in this war is going to be as important as the soldier, maybe even more so, man for man. At that he looks more interested again and I can see that the idea is sinking in, so I swallow the last of my tea and beat it back in time to catch the first edition.

After that episode I didn't see Fred for about a week or ten days, and then one Monday afternoon I ran into him on our stairs just as I was knocking off for the day. He was a bit more excited than I remember seeing him before and the reason was that he had just managed to land a job on a mixed farm about thirty miles out of town. He could hardly stand still, he was so pleased with himself; but though he had a bit of a sparkle in his eye I could see that he was still on the under-nourished side and I felt he was going to find farming a bit hard to start with. However, we both went over to the George and had a couple of handles to celebrate and then I went home.

I got a brief letter from him about a month later just saying how much he was liking the life, only wished he could do more but he got damned tired at times. I never heard from him again.

THEN, early last November, I happened to be in the Senior's office at the station getting some advance dope on a court case. I had squeezed all I could out of the old fellow and was on the point of going when he asked me to let the office know that there was an inquest on that afternoon. "Farm-labourer chap, name of Gray," he said, peering at the blue form. I bent over his shoulder. It was Fred all right. "Inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of Frederick Gray (32), single, labourer."

I went to the inquest myself. Formal evidence of identification was given by the farmer who had employed Fred. It appeared that Fred's nearest relative was an aunt in Australia. The farmer chap was the only important witness. He described how he had found Fred.

"Fred—the deceased, I mean—was ploughing the home paddock when I last saw him alive," he said, "that would be about half past nine in the morning. He should have come in home for a bit of lunch at noon; when he hadn't showed up at one I went out to give him a call. I could see the horses standing at the plough but I didn't see him at first. Then I saw that he was lying on the ground behind the plough. I ran over to him. He was lying on his face in the furrow and I knew right off he was dead. When I turned him over he

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