



But lovers in wartime
Better understand
The fullness of living
With death close at hand.
—“The White Cliffs.”

WAITING for me at the station was my host, a casual young man dressed in blue velvet trousers, an open-necked shirt, and sandals. I had not seen him since his marriage to my friend Gay three months before. His face was pale, and there were shadows under his eyes, which held the far-away look of exhaustion. He greeted me, stuck the unlit butt of a cigarette into his mouth, picked up my suitcase and led the way to the car. He asked me to drive, “I’m so damned tired Gay says I’m not safe,” and sank into the seat beside the driver’s. I lit his cigarette. “Poor Jem, you do look worn out. Did you sleep badly last night?” I asked sympathetically. He grinned. “I was flying, you fool,” he said amiably. “You go left here and then carry straight on.” He shut his eyes and we drove in silence through the flat countryside. Cultivated acres stretched to the horizon, unhedged slabs of colour. The pale green patches of oats shimmered like pools of water in the corn. “It’s like France, isn’t it,” said Jem without opening his eyes; “it only lacks poplars.” Shadows of aeroplanes waved across the fields; they were flying low. The women and children stopped working to watch our car go by. We drove over a bridge spanning a straight little river that looked like a canal, past a couple of windmills, and into the village. Jem woke up and lit his cigarette, which had gone out again. “The cottage is on your right, by that yard. There’s Gay.”

She was talking to a landgirl who had come with the milk. “I was that glad to see the car come back from the camp this morning,” I heard the girl say. She had brought six eggs, a present from the farmer she worked for. “The people

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THE writer of this sketch is a granddaughter of a former Governor-General of New Zealand, Lord Plunket. She is 22 years of age, and during the Battle for Britain ran single-handed a shelter for 500 of London’s East-enders.

round here are all like that,” Gay told me, “always giving us presents, and so thoughtful; and all the villagers watch for Jem’s car to come back from the camp when he’s been on operations. They’re the kindest people we’ve ever met in our lives.” Another farmer came in later, shyly, to offer his car if Jem was getting short of petrol. “End of the month it is now, and I wondered as he might be lacking. Bit late this morning, weren’t he; the wife and I were glad to hear the car.” We had tea, and discussed the potato prospects. “They’re all like that,” said Gay again when he had gone. “So kind. Jem and I can’t get over it.”

LATER we went down to the tiny pub which was thronged with people. Elderly farmers moved stiffly to the benches where they sat drinking beer and surveying with tolerance the capers of those intruders, the young men of the R.A.F., who had turned their country inn into a schoolboys’ common-room. There were a few women there, farmers’ wives and villagers, and each one murmured to Gay as she passed, “I was so glad, this morning...” Jem and Gay played darts. I found myself talking to an Indian pilot, a New Zealand gunner, and a Canadian observer. We drank beer, and they made plans for the Squadron dance, a fortnight ahead.

“Dave not here?” asked the Canadian presently.

“He went missing last night. Didn’t you know?”

“No. What’s his wife done?”

“She’s gone back to her family. She was up at the camp this afternoon, looking for his car. Of course, he’d left it in some damn fool place, she couldn’t find it for ages. Dave would.”

“He just would,” the Canadian agreed.

I talked to a pilot whose right foot was bandaged and propped on a chair in front of him. He had lived in Germany before the war. Hanover and Cologne, he told me; he had loved Cologne. “I’ve been back there, since,” he said meditatively, “three trips.”

Towards closing time we became serious, put trivialities aside. The farmers joined us, and we talked urgently about the weather. Good for potatoes, low cloud, ground mist, too little rain—and there were endless references to the “Met. man.” The conversation ended when the pub shut at ten. Jem and Gay and I walked back to the cottage in the darkness; at few minute intervals aircraft soared over our heads—bomber planes taking off from the camp, bound for Germany.

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NEXT day was hot and still. Gay and I went to church, leaving Jem asleep. “He flies near enough to Heaven,” she said. He got up just before lunch, and sat in the garden writing letters slowly. “Dave’s wife and mother,” explained Gay. “I must write, too.” We listened to the one o’clock news. “All our aircraft returned safely...” Jem switched it off. “We’re in a good run,” he said. “Hope it doesn’t break.” Gay touched wood.

He went to the camp in the afternoon and Gay and I sunbathed. He returned at six and had a bath. We dined early. “We’ll go on the river to-morrow,” Jem said, “if it’s fine like to-day, which it should be.”

He had to go at nine. He stood by the door, patting his pockets. Gay sat still at the end of the table. Her face was sharp in the candlelight. “Torch, cigarettes, handkerchief, matches, wallet, and petrol and water in the car,” she recited.

“O.K. Good-bye, my darling.” He took his forage cap from the hook on the door and went. We heard the car drive away.

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“WHEN we’ve washed up,” said Gay, “we’ll do the flowers.” We made bright patterns with marguerites, honey-suckle, cornflowers and sweet peas. The scent of stocks came to us through the open window. Gay stood there, sniffing. She looked into the sky. “Very clear,”

she said, “and there’ll be a moon later. Let’s do the blackout.” We carried plywood frames covered in black material and fitted them into the windows. Then we lit cigarettes and went into the sitting room. Gay sat by the wireless.

“There’s dance music at ten-fifteen,” she said. “What’s the time now, I wonder?” “Ten,” I told her. We heard the church clock strike, and before it had chimed twice, the roar of a plane, low over the cottage it seemed, and the hum of a second one in the distance.

Gay jerked the wireless on. “Nearly time for Mr. What’s-his-name’s band; can you hear chamber music for ten minutes?”

We listened to the wireless until after the midnight news. The house was very quiet.

“The moon will be up now,” said Gay. She went to the bookshelf. “I have to be careful with my bedtime stories; gripping but not too real they have to be.” She chose four books.

We went upstairs. From my bed I could see across the passage the four slits of light that bounded Gay’s door. They were still there when I went to sleep.

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I WAS awakened at six by the triumphant noise of returning aircraft. I counted ten, but did not know how many had gone out. There was no sound of movement in the house, and I fell again into uneasy sleep.

At eight I woke and went downstairs. It was a chilly morning. I looked on the nail for Jem’s cap. It wasn’t there. I went into the kitchen. Gay was leaning out of the back door.

“Hello,” she said, “there’s quite a heavy ground mist.”

“Jem back?” I heard myself ask.

“Yes, he’s in bed; he got back half an hour ago. It may be hot, though, when the mist has risen. It’s lovely on the river when it’s hot.”

That morning we went shopping in the village. The grocer had some chocolate in. Gay asked for a packet. “My husband likes chocolate puddings. How much is it?”

He slipped it into her basket. “Nothing to you. We was glad to hear the car, this morning.”

Gay and I walked home.

“People are so kind,” she said. “Jem and I really can’t get over how kind they are.”