

SHORT STORY

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fortitude that had always been hers in trouble, as I had known she would; deeply stricken, but bringing reason and a balanced mind to her aid. And she had other more tangible help, that is, if sincere heartfelt sympathy and expressions of love and respect for the dead are a help to the living—and I think they are. After a while she brought them out for me to read—those letters she had been receiving for weeks. There were so many of them, those tributes to Hugh; sincere and moving letters; from the headmaster of his secondary school, from the other masters, all testifying to his outstanding qualities, regretting the loss of the man he would have been; letters from his commanding officer, from his fellow-lieutenants, from his men, bearing witness to his deserved popularity, his courage, and his modesty with it all; letters from friends in the district, and from friends in the town where he had worked for a couple of years after leaving school; letters from his employers there. Letters that would fill any mother's heart with pride, even if the pride had to be mixed with almost unbearable pain. So many tributes! I read them through, and I knew they were utterly sincere, knew them deserved, sympathised with my friend with a genuine ache at my heart for the boy who was gone; and added my verbal tribute.

But not the other; not the written one. I did not mention it. Somehow I kept thinking against my will of that other mother a little way down the hill; so many tributes here—one would not be missed.

* * *

ON my way home, I stopped a second time at that other home; I leaned from the car when Fred's mother left the veranda where she had been sitting and came towards me. I began what I had to say quickly and without stopping to think; I felt a liar and a hypocrite, and I wanted to get it over.

"The piece you read in the Journal," I said, "the piece you liked so much—I wrote it. I hadn't meant to say anything about it—I know it's not very good." I hoped she would take my confusion for modesty, and I think she did. She said warmly, "Fancy that; fancy that now! I thought it was lovely, because it reminded me so much of Fred; fancy you writing it—"

I started my engine. It would be easier to get the lie out if things were not so quiet, so peaceful; if I could not

hear the sleepy drone of the bees, the shrill piercing cry of the cicadas, see the lovely butterflies hovering over the flowers in the dying sunlight. Perverse memory brought me a sudden sharp clear little picture through the curtaining years of Fred slowly, methodically grinding one of the fragile, beautiful things into the dust at his feet, while furious, weeping little girls came running: for me. I shut the eyes of my mind to the picture, and looked instead into the worn face close to mine.

"Well, I just thought I'd like you to know—I thought it might comfort you to know that the boy—in that sketch. . . ." How to say it? But somehow it was suddenly easier as I saw the eager look which was spreading over the face of Fred's mother as she caught half incredulously at what was coming, as I saw the sudden convulsive tightening of the hands resting on the car door. "The boy," I ended quickly, "was meant for Fred." All at once, in place of my reluctance, I felt an urgent need to see her convinced, believing—the gladness of those tired eyes—. "Yes, of course," I said again, "no wonder you were reminded of Fred; teachers, you see, get to know boys ever so much better than anyone else does, and the boy in the sketch was Fred."



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Any person failing to furnish a return at the prescribed time is liable to a penalty up to £100.

J. M. PARK,
Commissioner of Taxes.