

# Survivors

A Short Story by  
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THREE miles from the aerodrome they passed a new housing development with the red clay cut of a partly-finished street through it and a white sign on the corner: Hillary Heights Road.

"It must be pleasant to be a national hero," Grant said.

Gwen looked at him with a smile. "During the war you were all heroes," she said.

"But that was a long time ago."

He had never thought, when he set off this morning on a brief buying trip to Auckland for the firm, that he would run into her like this, on a casual aeroplane trip. It had been a long separation, and although a friend had told him she had never married, he had generally speaking forgotten her, to the extent that he hadn't consciously tried to find out what she was doing in the years since their companionship during the war. He had resented her going off with her air force pilot, who was subsequently killed, and besides, he had been too busy trying to salvage his shattered personality from the wreckage caused by the fighting in Italy. He had been so absolutely bent on ensuring his survival in the crumbling post-war years that he hadn't had time to think about her since he had come home to his civilian job in New Plymouth. He hadn't married, either, though he had been tempted often enough by a soft voice and a pretty figure among the lovely Taranaki girls. There had seemed in the meantime to be something more important to do.

Now he was excited at having met her again. They had sat beside each other in the plane and talked about old times, and it started him thinking about how things had been between them in those days.

"We had a lot of fun together, didn't we?" he said.

"Yes. We were younger then."

The big airways bus straddled the road like a tank. They passed a truck loaded with building timber, and went down a steep hill between the vineyards and market gardens. The vines lay bare in the sunshine, and in a ploughed paddock he saw grey ironbark pumpkins piled like boulders under a long wind-break of pine trees. At the entrance to several farms there were boards advertising tree tomatoes for sale, and at one place some wilted bunches of flowers stood like faded emblems in old jam pots. As they came down another hill past the Waikumete cemetery with its brick crematorium and the white slabs of graves extending to the edge of a scrub wilderness, the bus stopped to let a funeral procession go by.

"Look," she said. "All the taxis are empty."

There were six of them behind the hearse, each with a driver nonchalant at the wheel.

"Six empty taxis," he said. "It's something to remember Auckland by."

"What do you mean?"

"You're forgotten when you're dead."

"Why, that's a crazy thing to say."

On a hill near the road he could see the old site of anti-aircraft guns where he had been in camp during the early part of the war. As they came up to the Avondale crossroads he saw Tom Andrews standing at the kerb with two children beside him. He hadn't seen him for years, either. He waved out but the

bus went past too quickly and he didn't know whether Tom had recognised him.

"Who was that?"

"Tom Andrews. We used to be drinking companions. We were all in camp here once, waiting for the Japs to arrive."

"But they never came."

"Tom got a medal later on, at Alamein. He was a very brave soldier. Lately, I believe, he's been in hospital with amoebic dysentery, a hangover from the war."

"Of course, things were different in those days," she said.

"Yes. We all thought we were going to die."

"All I can remember now is Yanks. They were everywhere. They gave us a good time."

Grant lit a cigarette. "Tom's married now," he said. "Those were probably his children."

"Perhaps his wife thought she was marrying a hero."

"We all have to be disillusioned some time."

She laughed, and he remembered how even and white her teeth were.

"I could have married anyone I liked, then," she said.

"I would have married you."

She started to laugh again, putting her head to one side in her amusement and looking at him from the corner of her eye. "Well, you were a sort of hero to me, I suppose."

Grant didn't reply, but stared serenely out of the window at the landscape and the thickening mass of buildings on both sides of the road.

"What are you doing up here now?" he asked.

"I'm visiting a friend."

"Yes," he said. "You always had plenty of friends."

He paused again, and then waved at the new white bungalows and the occasional factories with huge windows and surrounding green lawns. "The progress there's been here the last few years is astonishing," he said. "But I don't feel that we're a part of it. We seem to have been left over from an earlier epoch, like tuataras."

"Perhaps you are right, but what do you want to do about it?"



"With his broad shoulders he looked like a sporting type"

He began to think it was his turn to laugh.

"I've only got a few days here," he said, "to visit one or two of these factories and place some orders for the firm. Then I go back to New Plymouth. I thought you might like to have dinner one night with me at the hotel."

"I can't," she said. "I am visiting a friend."

"One evening shouldn't hurt."

She didn't say anything for some time, and when she did speak it was about another matter.

"Of course, there are just as many heroes today as there were in the war years," she said.

He really did laugh now. He was feeling jubilant. "The spirit of adventure is supposed to have gone from our youth. Haven't you read about it in the newspapers?"

"Nonsense," she said. "It's a different kind of heroism, that's all."

"You mean we don't have to go to the South Pole or explore the Amazon

to show how good we are? Or get into uniform again?"

"Exactly. Everest is only one thing. There's enough adventure for most of us these days in getting married and raising a family."

"Good," he said. "We agree on something, then."

They were in the city now, and the bus turned into a side street to avoid the traffic. Rows of old wooden houses with elegant cornices and rusted iron roofs stood as if empty in their weedy sections. They passed through a district of warehouses and oil-stained garages and then they turned again, up past the Customs House and down the last little rise into Queen Street. Noon shoppers pushed across the corner while the bus driver waited for the lights to change. They flicked to green and he let in the clutch and moved over the street, and pulled up at the Air Centre.

Grant lifted down her bag from the rack. She took a piece of paper from her purse, wrote a telephone number on it and gave it to him.

"Give me a ring in a day or two and perhaps I will come."

"That's a good idea, Gwen," he replied.

He watched her leave the bus ahead of him, moving with that smoothness he remembered. The jewels at her neck sparkled as she turned and smiled at him. He took down his own bag and as he paused on the footpath he saw a man come up and speak to her. With his broad shoulders and snappy suit he looked like a sporting type, a footballer, or perhaps a mountaineer.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" he heard the man say.

They walked away together and Grant put the paper in his pocket. Six empty taxis, he thought, and laughed at his private joke. There were other kinds of death, but it occurred to him that he was at last on the road to regaining his complete integrity. He picked up his suitcase and started to walk along the two blocks to his hotel. He was suddenly very pleased with the world. After all, he thought, touching the piece of paper with his fingers, it might be true that for most men there was only one woman, but on the other hand, it wasn't everyone who had a second chance, either. In some things the only condition seemed to be simply what he had always within the limits of his honour striven for, merely a matter of survival.

## DX NOTES

MANY New Zealanders who served in Japan will remember the Britcom Broadcasting Station, at Kure, which recently celebrated its eight anniversary. The Australian Army Amenities Service put the station on the air in 1946 and its troubles were many. When the station (then only 10 watts) was ready to go on the air frequencies were changed, which started a frantic search for a suitable crystal. Someone got a crystal, not the right one, but a crystal nonetheless. After a day and a night of grinding, technicians got it down to the right frequency. The station had plenty of other troubles, too. The studio was completed two months behind schedule. Space was scarce. Shortage of staff caused engineers and announcers to work far into the night. A 200-watt station replaced the 10-watter, and more or less regular broadcasts began. Progress was rapid after this. A 1000-watt shortwave station was added in November of 1946, followed two months later by another. Programmes became

more polished, more staff arrived, transcribed shows began arriving regularly from England and Australia, and the record library grew steadily. Today the station is highly organised with a staff of 30. One of the first staff men was Second Lieutenant Pat Kavanagh, son of the famous Ted, and another was Sergeant Geoff. Falkiner, formerly of the Old Vic. Programmes are broadcast daily from 6.30 a.m. to 11.0 p.m., with the sign-off at midnight at weekends. Transcriptions are supplied by the ABC, CBC, NZBS and the U.S. Armed Forces Radio Service. Request sessions are most popular. Three sessions are broadcast each day, with long sessions on Friday and Saturday nights. Listeners also vote on other programmes. One particular Australian serial was voted out by Australians, but kept on the air at the request of British and American listeners. The BBS has survived earthquakes and typhoons, frequent power failures and many minor setbacks. Once a trespassing dog upset a boom microphone on top of a woman announcer. It pinned her to the desk while her shrieks for help went over the air. Many New Zealanders have heard BBS on shortwave,

but as far as is known it has yet to be heard here on its broadcast frequency of 1470 kilocycles.

### Around the World

DURING the next few weeks short-wave listeners will find signals at night showing a big improvement. European signals will be heard in the 25, 19 and 16-metre bands. The BBC Pacific Service is expected to revert to the 8.0 to 8.45 p.m. transmission. Holland's popular "Happy Station" programme by Eddy Startz will again be a listening favourite on Sunday evenings from 10.30 p.m. on 15220 and 17770 kcs. in the 19 and 16-metre bands.

**Indo-China:** Radio France Asie, Saigon on 15430 kcs. (19-metre band) provides the latest news from Indo-China at 10.0 p.m. On Fridays at 9.30 p.m., musical requests and answers to listeners' letters are broadcast.

**Japan:** Radio Japan's summer schedule broadcast to New Zealand from 9.0 to 10.0 p.m. daily is now carried on 11770 kcs. (25 metres) and 9695 kcs. (31 metres). News is presented at 9.2. Listeners' letters are answered at 9.30 on the second and fourth Mondays of the month.

N.Z. LISTENER, OCTOBER 8, 1954.