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THE KILLER...

HARRY raised the old-fashioned Service revolver and squinted along the sights. The late-flowering orchard and the brightening oaks lay at his mercy; the unwavering muzzle held at bay the pale sky and the few rising clouds. He squeezed the trigger. The world which, murdered, should have fallen blasted to the grass, stared imperturbably back and a sparrow, ignorant of its danger, flew down from a tree.



Harry tried again; the hammer was stiff and, though he was growing up, he hadn't the strength to prise it back. The gun, at first so rare a find, irritated him now.

He was growing up, and his sense of fantasy could no longer transform the painted toys of his childhood; but this, so old and so inefficient, fell almost as greatly short as did the toys. He put both thumbs over the hammer and tried to pull it back: the metal cut into his flesh but the hammer would not move. What a frost, he thought.

The guns he knew, from comic strip and film, made this one seem a clumsy and ancient toy. Here was no blue-steel barrel, no faultless and accurate and lethal machine, no trigger that moved at even a feather's touch. He looked at it: and it was old and rusty with its dull aluminium colour pitted and discoloured with age. He took it in both hands, pressed the hammer against the edge of the table, and very slowly it came back. The gun was cocked. Now, as he raised it, though its chambers were empty, it seemed deadlier. He sighted at the sparrow and pulled the trigger; it took both hands to move it. The hammer fell forward and a piece of metal dropped to the floor.

Harry examined the damage, picking the piece of metal from the kitchen mat. His make-believe was defeated. He threw the gun back into the cupboard, back among the other souvenirs, the bayonet, the dress sword that was stuck fast in its scabbard, the unprimed Mill's bombs, the tarnished medals.

What a frost, he said to the empty room.

* * *

HE went through the orchard and let himself out through the rustic gate and walked into the garden through all the new growth of spring. His uncle was thinning rows of carrot seedlings, kneeling above them where they grew in the garden bed.

Hallo there, he said.

Hallo, Harry said.

He watched the thick slow fingers—the thick gold wedding ring—pluck and pick among the rows. Their slowness irritated him. He was a town boy, never really happy on these visits to a country uncle, and slightly contemptuous of the slow unending round—chore after chore as he thought of it—jobs which, once done, had only to be done again

... A Short Story by MAURICE DUGGAN

and again. It did not occur to him that his uncle might enjoy it.

Are all those yours? he asked. All those swords and things?

You've been looking at the armoury, his uncle said. Yes, they're mine.

Were you in the war? Harry asked. But he didn't need to see his uncle's nod to know the answer. His mother had shown him photos: newly commissioned, uncle was back from leave, in a war that seemed to Harry even more remote than the wars whose dates had troubled him all through term; a plodding war without spectacle or speed, without real bombs or real weapons—men in aeroplanes firing at one another with rifles—a war much different to the one which he had followed, through headline and photograph, with excitement and with envy. That was a war: it came closer to his own conception; it moved with speed; it was filled with heroes, with men in flying kit running through the rain to their planes, vapour trails in the sky, dogfights, men in tanks racing over deserts, men in submarines, parachutists. . . Hundreds of thousands of heroes, without a stake in life or vegetable gardens or orchards or chores, marched grim-jawed before his eyes.

He did not care to tell his uncle he had broken the revolver.

I was looking at the bayonet, he said.

A wicked looking thing, his uncle said.

Harry continued to watch the hands with their slightly spatulate fingers plucking down the row.

Some of the blokes made bread-knives out of them when they got back, his uncle said. Turning the swords into ploughshares, if you see what I mean.

Did you kill anyone? Harry asked.

The hands were still; they lay, pale earth-streaked animals, slightly stirring on the earth.

I fired five shots, his uncle said. I was one of the lucky ones. All my shots were fired on the rifle range.

Harry stared.

I got five bulls, though, his uncle went on. But I wouldn't ask anyone to believe that. First time I'd fired a rifle, too.

Almost resentfully Harry decided that it was true. (Don't think Tom stupid, his mother had said. It's only that he's