

"PASSPORT TO HELL"

(Continued from inside front cover)

looked after schoolmaster or ghostly consoler.

The first necessity was money. Starkie thought of the people in Invercargill who might at a crisis lend him money; and the list, when he considered it, was uncommonly small. But in the end he pitched on a friend of his father's—David Kidson, the blacksmith. He caught the smith in his forge, mellow-tempered from the first of a cider brew, and had two pounds in his pocket and a clap on his shoulder almost before he had begun his story. Breathless with this success, he crept around the railway station, bundled himself into a train, and paid the guard for his ticket to the Bluff, where lurked in his memory the wettest little tavern he had ever struck.

When he got there he found that war had cast a gloom over a once companionable pub, and without waiting time came back to the Club Hotel, otherwise Mrs. Wooten's. Here he found what he wanted—soldiers of the King drinking his Majesty's health. Nobody minded telling him about soldiering life, especially when he pulled a crisp note out of his pocket and paid for a round like a man and a brother. By and by Starkie struck what he wanted, a comrade who couldn't hold his liquor. The comrade's name was Alec, for which Starkie liked him none the better; but he looked after Alec like a father after his first-born, presuming that the father wanted the first-born to die of alcoholic poisoning. Six o'clock closing, that most devastating custom of the New Zealander's country, emptied the soldiers out of the bar; but for Alec the fun was only beginning. Starkie purchased two bottles of whisky and took his victim into town to enjoy the martial pleasures of whisky, women, and song. Every step was a risk, but necessary. The bottles did their best—but Alec, though by now in a condition of alcoholic love for all the world, miraculously kept on his feet. Starkie glowered at him, haunted by a dread vision of a six o'clock train and Alec on it. . . . It wouldn't do. His arm around the waist of his erring friend, he steered him gently over the rough-metalled streets to the little house where dwelt an old relative of his, Dick Harris.

Dick Harris had a brew of his own. He didn't uncork it for all the riff-raff in Invercargill, but it wasn't hard for Starkie to whisper his plans while Alec finished the last amber drops of the whisky. A bald head nodded.

"How'll you keep on your feet, boy?"

"God knows. I haven't had enough to feed a sparrow the last three days, and it won't take much to knock me out. What can I do?"

The old man patted his shoulder. "Leave it to your uncle, boy," he chuckled. "Tea laddie, tea . . . horrible womanish stuff—but it'll do for you now. Get in there and keep your clobber cheerful."

At 5.30 in the morning Alec, with the rug drawn over him, had been sprawling in sleep for three hours. Some subconscious prompting half woke him. He stirred, stretched his arms, groaned, "Oh, God! . . ."

Old Harris pounced on him like a hawk.

"One more drink, my boy—a toast to all you brave soldiers going away tomorrow."

Outside the dawn was blue in the tangled trees. Harris had pinned the heavy plush curtains together; there was no light in the room but the splutter of candles, replaced so that their stubs were not too near the

warning leap and flutter of death. Alec blinked, reached out his hand, tipped the glass.

"Toas—Brave boys—goin'—!" His head dropped. His mouth opened wide in a rattling snore.

"Yes," said old Harris with satisfaction, "that one was a knock-out drop." His horny hand caught Starkie a tremendous blow on the shoulder. "Run, you bloody young cub! Run for it! Half an hour and you're clear."

One moment to wring that knotted old hand and he was out in the ice-cold air. It wasn't, thank God! perfectly light. Out of breath, a shadow among a thousands other shadows, he landed on the station, buried through the crowd to Captain Grey.

"Beg to report a man sick, sir. He can't leave today."

For a moment Captain Grey stared in silence at Alec's papers. Then he laughed.

"Give me those tickets."

Starkie handed them over. Very carefully Captain Grey crossed out Alec's fair name. "Now," he ordered, "get on board that train."

There were about four hundred men in the draft. Mc Starkie, still breathless from running, it seemed incredible that tears should be streaking the sun-burnt faces of so many among them. Women, patient little ghosts in black, lifted up heavy children in their arms, and the men piled against the carriage windows, or still crowding the station, bent down their heads and kissed again and again the curve of a woman's face, a sleepy child's face. The big feather-laden hats of the women were tilted back at absurd angles by the men's rough embraces; their veils, spotted with big black velvet dots, were torn like cobwebs. A very old man, whose rheumy eyes didn't seem to focus their blank stare on any particular face, went past the window leaning on a heavy ash-stick, and groaning, "Eee, dear! Eee, dear!" Then a young woman in grey tweeds, healthy as a sheep-dog, dashed up to Starkie, flung her arms around his neck and crushed her fresh lips against his mouth. He was taken by surprise, but the whole impulse of his being suddenly and fiercely wanted her.

Before he could speak or touch her, she thrust into his hand a little hold-all with cards of darning-wool, black and white threads, pins and needles, ran to the next window and repeated the performance. Craning as far from the carriage window as he dared, Starkie saw her breasts taut and her apple-red cheeks streaming with tears as she lifted herself to embrace another man. He felt furiously jealous and contemptuous. It takes a war to get some of them like that about the whole world of men. . . .

Behind the wood pillars and dingy brown walls of the station, the little he could see of Invercargill was a cup of mist, almost sapphire blue. The minute hand of the station clock jerked itself forward like a cripple on his sticks. A party of men started singing "Tipperary". That somehow flicked a spark of enthusiasm into the wet faces of the women on the station. Some of the twisted mouths laughed, others shouted stupid, pathetic words of farewell. "Take care of yourself" "Come back soon!"

The train's whistle shrieked, the crowded blur of faces and waving hands was jolted a pace backwards. Against the dark blue cup of the morning, men and women set their lips and unknowingly pledged one another.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE KHAKE PLACE

The storeman opened his little slit of a mouth and gabbled, without pause for breath: "Two shirts—two singlets—two underpants—two socks—two boots—knife—fork—spoon—plate—blankets—sign here—Correct?"

Starkie, who had lost count somewhere about the underpants and had not the faintest idea whether his kit was in order or not, nodded speechlessly and signed as he was bid. He was given his tent number—D Lines, Tent Number Eight. "Hop along and you'll find the rest of Otago there, all hoozey!" grumbled the storeman.

Starkie hopped. Finding his way to Number Eight, D. Lines, meant negotiating a route through a sea of mud, yellowish-brown, like his newly issued Khaki. For three days before the arrival of Otago Fourth, rain had pelted down on the flat spaces of the Trentham Camp, and the rabbit-warren trenches were awash. This was Flanders, however, and you could sleep in a bell-tent. Starkie found his, bobbed under the tent-flap, and then cast one despairing glance at the outer world. There were already seven men seated in his tent, and they weren't strictly speaking men at all—they were monsters.

An enormous voice bellowed at him, "Siddown!"

Another enormous voice shouted, "Take a hand!" and he observed that the giants were playing Rummy. One of them had flaming red hair; another's nose was sunburned and peeling cruelly in a bright red face. The second largest of the giants stuttered horribly and talked more than the rest put together. Their boots, their bodies, their voices, overflowed the tent, and they all looked too large for their uniforms. Even in gaol, man to man, Starkie had been as substantial as the average warder, and better than most. Here he was the baby, and he wasn't surprised when a booming voice elected him mess orderly. Sadly he asked for a list of his duties.

"It means that you go get our tucker, see?"

"And get in good and early, before the cookhouse is rushed."

"And see there's enough straw in the tent for decent beds."

"And when there's latrine duty, you're it."

"And you answer the roll call for two if one of us don't want to play."

"And you do what you're told, see?"

Starkie saw. He nodded. Then a laugh rumbled from one of the giant's stomachs, a hand like a leg of mutton smote him horribly between the shoulder-blades. He was introduced in turn to the gentleman with the sun-burned nose, Jim McLeod—court title, "Fleshy"; "Ginger" Sheeth; "Sinner", whose fifteen stone drew him the pet name "Goliath"; "Stuttering Bob" Butts, Jack Frew, and Matthews, who was a sheep-owner and was to be known as "Farmer Giles".

"You gotta have a name," Fleshy told him. "Let's have a look at you. Yes, you can be Coon."

After that there was a scrimmage. Starkie, disliking the race of Coons and any personal reference to his own dusky complexion from strangers. When the scrimmage was finished, everybody was happy, particularly Fleshy and Bob Butts, who before reaching Trentham had taken the precaution of absorbing a good deal of beer.

Starkie secured their first dinner from the cookhouse, an enormous leg of mutton. This Fleshy under-

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