

“The Joy That Kills”

THE sun was setting behind the Glenboragh hills. Helen watched it from the pond at the top of Harrow's Heath.

The air was keen and exhilarating, and Helen's cheeks glowed red with it; but there was a shade of sullenness on her handsome face and the blue eyes that should have been kindly and sweet shone with something akin to fierceness. She stood looking out towards the sunset but her thoughts were of a scene far removed from these Scottish hills.

Down under the almost bare trees at Hamplead's Heath she could see a couple sitting where the leaves had fallen thickest. One was Khaki-clad—that Khaki that one was accustomed to see everywhere. The other was a girl, perphas such a girl as she had been, not two years ago, when she and Joe had stood here on this hill at their last meeting.

She watched the couple jealously, but presently her heart softened, for it was not an unkind heart, and all its passing bitterness and grief came into her eyes. Perphas they too were saying good-bye as she and Joe had had to say it—were saying it with brave hearts and high courage, thinking not of the long weeks without news which perchance lay before them; nor of cold, dreary nights in muddy trenches, but of brave deeds and gallant doings.

No glory, no praise, not even any news. Yes that was the awful part of it; that ghastly word “Missing”—seven weeks now, and still missing!

She saw Joe, in her dreams, lying in some forsaken field, with his face turned to the sky, wounded, suffering or dead. And then again she saw him a prisoner. Joe a prisoner with the Germans. He had no love of Germans at the best of times, and now, perphas, to be occupied under their rule, most likely starved, ill-treated and insulted!

Yes, she began to be sure of it. Joe was dead: she would never see him again. The tears blinded her: she no longer saw the couple under the tree in the dusk, nor the fading crimson of the sunset sky. She

was very cold. The cold recalled her to herself; it was getting late, and she had promised to go and visit Joe Wallace's mother.

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Mrs. Wallace sat by the fire knitting. She looked up with a welcome smile on her gentle face as the girl came in. But Helen did not guess the longing behind the parted lips and the anxious eyes.

"No letter, of course?" said the girl, with a quick impatient sigh, as she stood warming her hands at the fire.

The elder lady only dropped her eyes and shook her head, for her unspoken question was answered.

"There will never be any news," said the girl, in a voice struggling with emotion. "It is foolish to think of it anymore."

Joe's mother stretched out a frail hand and laid it on the girl's arm.

"That is not right," she said. "We must never lose hope or trust or courage. God does everything for the best. Joe was doing his duty wherever he was," added the mother, with a high head and a brave eye, "and that he was doing it with as many comrades as brave as he, is what we ought to be proud of. It is not only individual deeds of valour that tell; it is the patience, the endurance, the discipline of the many."

"But even the regiment has never been mentioned! Other regiments have been praised in the papers, but one has no word of the —th. One doesn't even know where it has been."

"It is not for us to dictate to those who are leading us in any way, my child. The day may come when we may know all. All our brave men will have contributed to the victory, if victory is to be ours. And, it will be! it will be! God defends the right."

"Oh it's a cruel, cruel, war!" replied the girl, "How can God have allowed it?"

The elder woman had laid down her knitting: she sat gazing into the fire, her thin hands crossed upon her knees.

"Poor child" she said. "I know how hard it is. Yes, I know. But, as for God's part in the matter, do

you think that you and I are competent to judge of that? Do you think we are trying as we ought to appreciate the immensity of God when we presume to criticise the vastness of His purpose."

There was a silence in the little room. The darkness had quite fallen. Helen began to put on her furs.

"Good bye" said she, in a gentle voice, "I must get home now. Of course if there is any news—but there won't be any news. Good-bye. I will come again soon."

The door of the room closed after her; then the front door of the little hall slammed. The mother sat alone in the growing darkness. She did not ring for a lamp; the fireside was a better companion for her thoughts. Her heart was full of sorrow for the inevitable pain of the girl who had yet to learn how to acquire resignation. But as for herself she found consolation in the thought that she was only one sorrowing mother among many. All she prayed for was that he might not suffer too much and that he might be brave whatever befell.

The postman ran up the little steps outside, and knocked on the door. Her heart gave a leap as it always did at that sound, but she waited patiently until the little maid turned up the light and brought in the letters.

She took them without much interest, for she saw at a glance that the one which she still hoped for was not there; bills, circulars and one in an unknown handwriting. "Honoured Madam," it began, and she turned to the signature "William Hickson." The name said nothing to her, but the first few words of the letter said quite enough.

"....I know you will pardon me for writing, but I thought you would like to have what news I can give you of your son, Lieutenant Wallace. It was in Belgium, ma'am, in the days when we had some of the hottest work. There was a bridge to be destroyed. If the Germans had managed to get hold of it, the whole of the country behind would have been open to them. Your son stood by the bridge with a torch of plaited straw in one hand and a light in the other,

wating the command of his officer. Then we saw the torch flare and the commanding officer walked backwards across the bridge. He was the last to leave. Your son ran along the planks under the bridge rubbing the blazing torch to the paraffin-soaked boards. The German rifles did not get him ; he finished his job, but at the last moment he fell into the river. Then one of the Germans from the other side crawled forward and pulled him ashore—dead or alive ma'am, we did not know, but we all hoped it was dead, because your son did not wish to be a prisoner. He both wished for and deserved a soldier's death and I am sure he got it."

She sat with the letter in her hand for a long time, but she no longer saw it. She was not conscious of anything but just a sense of thankfulness in the midst of sorrow.

Slowly the dream melted and the consciousness of the moment returned. She decided to send this news to Helen, but as she took up her pen the garden gate slammed and a buoyant voice pierced the silence of the quiet road. The tone was full of excitement. It was the girl's voice and the mother knew from it that she, too, must have some news.

Hurried steps crossed the threshold. Yes a heavy tread as well as a light one. "Mother, mother" cried Helen, "Joe is not dead after all! and he did do a glorious thing! and the Germans saved him and he's She was going to say "And he is here," but suddenly her voice stopped, for the figure before her swayed where it stood and the face was ashen grey.

"Joe, Joe," screamed the girl.

A tall soldier with eyes anxious in his bronzed young face started forward. "I warned you to be careful, dear," he whispered, as he supported and kissed the fainting woman, "We had better send for the doctor."

The girl dashed from the room while the young man laid his mother on the couch. "I'm back you see, darling, safe and sound," he whispered tenderly.

And as her blue lips parted trying to smile, her eyes sought his. There was thankfulness and peace in them.

The girl came back again.

"He is coming directly. But she'll be all right in a minute won't she?"

The soldier's arms were around his mother, but his eyes sought for an instant the eyes of his future wife. But she guessed what he knew, and her head went down on his shoulder. The two wept softly, for the joy that was wine to them had been too heavy a draught to the woman who had suffered so silently.

On the couch the mother lay dead—a happy smile on her serene face.

L. C. '21.



Variety's the very spice of life,
That gives it all its flavour.

—Cowper.

Some temptations come to the industrious, but all temptations attack the idle.—Spurgeon.

They are never alone who are accompanied with noble thoughts.—Sidney.

Wit now and then struck smartly shows a spark.
—Cowper.

For the world was built in order
And the atoms march in tune ;
Rhyme the pipe, and time the warder,
The sun obeys them, and the moon.

—Emerson.