

THE FORUM

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A NON-PARTISAN MAGAZINE OF FREE DISCUSSION.
IT AIMS TO INTERPRET THE NEW AMERICA THAT
IS ATTAINING CONSCIOUSNESS IN THIS DECADE.
THE FORUM GIVES BOTH SIDES. WHATEVER IS
ATTACKED BY CONTRIBUTORS THIS MONTH MAY
BE PRAISED IN LATER ISSUES

TOLD BY THE SCHOOLMASTER

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WE all remember still, I suppose, the singular beauty of the summer when the war broke out. I was then schoolmaster in a village on the Thames. Nearly fifty, with a game shoulder and extremely deficient sight, there was no question of my fitness for military service, and this, as with many other sensitive people, induced in me, I suppose, a mood abnormally receptive. The perfect weather, that glowing countryside, with corn harvest just beginning, and the apples already ripening, the quiet nights trembling with moonlight and shadow, and, in it all, this great horror launched and growing, the weazening of Europe deliberately undertaken, the death-warrant of millions of young men signed. Such summer loveliness walking hand in hand with murder thus magnified beyond conception was too piercingly ironical!

One of those evenings toward the end of August, when the news of Mons was coming through, I left my house at the end of the village street, and walked up towards the Downs. I have never known anything more entrancing than the beauty of that night. All was still, and colored like the bloom of dark grapes, so

warm, so tremulous. A rush of stars was yielding to the moon fast riding up, and from the corn-stooks of that early harvest the shadows were stealing out. We had no day-light-saving then, and it was perhaps half-past nine when I passed two of my former scholars, a boy and a girl, standing silently at the edge of an old gravel pit, opposite a beech clump. They looked up and gave me good evening. Passing on over the crest, I could see the unhedged fields to either hand; the corn stooked and the corn standing, just gilded under the moon; the swelling Downs of a blue-gray; and the beech clump I had passed, dark-cut against the brightening sky. The moon itself was almost golden, as if it would be warm to the touch, and from it came a rain of glamour over sky and fields, woods, downs, farmhouses, and the river down below. All seemed in a conspiracy of unreality to one obsessed, like me, by visions of the stark and trampling carnage going on out there. Refuging from that grim comparison I remember thinking that Joe Beckett and Betty Roofe were absurdly young to be sweethearting, if indeed they were, for they hadn't altogether looked like it. They could hardly be sixteen yet, for they had only left school last year. Betty Roofe had been head of the girls, — an interesting child, alert, self-contained, with a well-shaped, dark-eyed little face, and a head set on very straight. She was the daughter of the village laundress, and I used to think too good for washing clothes, but she was already at it and as things went in that village, would probably go on doing it till she married. Joe Beckett was working on Carver's farm down there below me, and the gravel pit was about half way between their homes. A good boy, Joe, freckled, reddish in the hair, and rather too small in the head; with blue eyes that looked at you very straight and a short nose; a well-grown boy, very big for his age, and impulsive in spite of the careful stodginess of all young rustics; a curious vein of the sensitive in him, but a great deal of obstinacy too, — altogether an interesting blend!

I was still standing there when up he came on his way to Carver's and I look back to that next moment with as much regret as to any in my life.

He held out his hand.

"Good-bye, sir, in case I don't see you again."

"Why, where are you off to, Joe?"

"Joinin' up."

"Joining up? But, my dear boy, you're two years under age, at least."

He grinned. "I'm sixteen this month, but I bet I can make out to be eighteen. They ain't particular, I'm told."

I looked him up and down. It was true, he could pass for eighteen well enough, with military needs what they were. And possessed, as everyone was just then, by patriotism and anxiety at the news, all I said was:

"I don't think you ought, Joe; but I admire your spirit."

He stood there silent, sheepish at my words. Then:

"Well, good-bye, sir. I'm goin' in to —ford to-morrow."

I gave his hand a good hard squeeze. He grinned again, and without looking back, ran off down the hill towards Carver's farm, leaving me alone once more with the unearthly glamour of that night. God! what a crime was war! From this hushed moonlit peace boys were hurrying off to that business of man-made death as if there were not Nature's deaths galore to fight against. And we, — we could only admire them for it! Well! I have never ceased to curse the sentiment which stopped me from informing the recruiting authorities of that boy's real age.

Crossing back over the crest of the hill towards home, I came on the child Betty, at the edge of the gravel pit where I had left her.

"Well, Betty, was Joe telling you?"

"Yes, sir. He's going to join up."

"What did you say to him?"

"I said he was a fool, but he's so headstrong, Joe!" Her voice was even enough, but she was quivering all over.

"It's very plucky of him, Betty."

"M'm! Joe just gets things into his head. I don't see that he has any call to go, and, — and leave me."

I couldn't help a smile. She saw it, and said sullenly:

"Yes, I'm young, and so's Joe; but he's my boy, for all that!"

And then, ashamed or startled at such expansiveness, she tossed her head, swerved into the beech clump like a shying foal, and ran off among the trees. I stood a few minutes, listening to the owls, then went home and read myself into forgetfulness on Scott's first polar book.

So Joe went, and we knew him no more for a whole year. And Betty continued with her mother, washing for the village.

In September, 1915, just after term had begun again, I was standing one afternoon in the village schoolroom pinning up on the wall a pictorial piece of imperial information for the benefit of my scholars, and thinking, as usual, of the war and its lingering deadlock. The sunlight slanted through on to my dusty forms and desks, and under the pollard lime trees on the far side of the street I could see a soldier standing with a girl. Suddenly he crossed over to the school, and there in the doorway was young Joe Beckett, in his absurd short-tailed khaki jacket, square and tanned to the color of his freckles, looking indeed quite a man.

"How d'you do, sir?"

"And you, Joe?"

"Oh! I'm fine. I thought I'd like to see you. Just got our marching orders. Off to France to-morrow, been havin' my leave."

I felt the catch at my throat that we all felt when youngsters whom we knew were going out for the first time.

"Was that Betty with you out there?"

"Yes, — fact is, I've got something to tell you, sir. She and I were spliced last week at — mouth. We been stayin' there since, and I brought her home to-day, as I got to go to-night."

I was staring hard, and he went on hurriedly:

"She just went off there, and I joined her for my leave. We didn't want any fuss, you see, because of our bein' too young."

"Young!"

The blankness of my tone took the grin off his face.

"Well, I was seventeen a week ago, and she'll be seventeen next month."

"Married? Honest Injun, Joe?"

He went to the door, and whistled. In came Betty, dressed in dark blue, very neat and self-contained; only the flush on her round young face marked any disturbance.

"Show him your lines, Betty, and your ring."

The girl held out the official slip, and from it I read that a registrar had married them at — mouth, under right names and wrong ages. Then she slipped a glove off, and held up her left

hand, — there was the magic hoop! Well! the folly was committed, — no use in crabbing it!

“Very good of you to tell me, Joe,” I said, at last. “Am I the first to know?”

“Yes, sir. You see, I’ve got to go at once; and like as not her mother won’t want it to get about till she’s a bit older. I thought I’d like to tell *you*, in case they said it wasn’t all straight and proper.”

“Nothing I say will alter the fact that you’ve falsified your ages.”

Joe grinned again.

“That’s all right,” he said. “I got it from a lawyer’s clerk in my platoon. It’s a marriage all the same.”

“Yes, I believe that’s so.”

“Well, sir, there she is till I come back.” Suddenly, his face changed, he looked for all the world as if he were going to cry; and they stood gazing at each other exactly as if they were alone.

The lodger at the carpenter’s, three doors down the street, was performing her usual afternoon solo on the piano: “*Connais-tu le pays?*” from *Mignon*. And whenever I hear it now, seldom enough in days contemptuous of harmony, it brings Joe and Betty back through a broad sunbeam full of dancing motes of dust; it epitomises for me all the *Drang*, — as the Germans call it, — of those horrible years, when marriage, birth, death, and every human activity were speeded up to their limit, and we did from year’s end to year’s end all that an enlightened humanity should not be doing, and left undone most of what it should have done.

“What time is it, sir?” Joe asked me suddenly.

“Five o’clock.”

“Lord! I must run for it. My kit’s at the station. Could I leave her here, sir?”

I nodded, and walked into the little room beyond. When I came back she was sitting where she used to sit in school, bowed over her arms spread out on the inky desk. Her dark bobbed hair was all I could see, and the quivering jerky movement of her young shoulders. Joe had gone. Well! That was the normal state of Europe, then! I went back into the little room to give her time, but when I returned once more, she, too, had gone.

The second winter passed, more muddy, more bloody even than the first, and less shot through with hopes of an ending. Betty showed me three or four of Joe's letters, simple screeds with a phrase here and there of awkward and half-smothered feeling, and signed always: "Your loving hubby, Joe." Her marriage was accepted in the village. Child-marriage was quite common then. In April it began to be obvious that their union was to be 'blessed' as they call it.

One day early in May I was passing Mrs. Roofe's when I saw that lady in her patch of garden, and stopped to ask after Betty.

"Nearin' her time. I've written to Joe Beckett. Happen he'll get leave."

"I think that was a mistake, Mrs. Roofe. I would have waited till it was over."

"Maybe you're right, sir, but Betty's that fidgetty about him not knowin'. She's dreadful young, you know, t'ave a child. I didn't 'ave my first till I was twenty-one."

"Everything goes fast these days, Mrs. Roofe."

"Not my washin'. I can't get the help, with Betty like this. It's a sad business this about the baby comin'. If he does get killed, I suppose she'll get a pension, sir?"

Pension? Married in the wrong age, with the boy still under service age, if they came to look into it. I really didn't know.

"Oh! surely, Mrs. Roofe, but we won't think about his being killed. Joe's a fine boy."

Mrs. Roofe's worn face darkened.

"He was a fool to join up before his time; plenty of chance after, seemingly, and then to marry my girl, like this! Well, young folk *are* fools!" . . .

I was sitting over my Pensions work one evening, a month later, for it had now fallen to me to keep things listed in the village, when someone knocked at my door, and who should be standing there but Joe Beckett!

"Why! Joe! Got leave?"

"Ah! I had to come and see her. I haven't been there yet, — didn' dare. How is she, sir?"

Pale and dusty, as if from a hard journey, his uniform all muddy and unbrushed, and his reddish hair standing up anyhow, — he looked wretched, poor boy!

"She's all right, Joe. But it must be very near, from what her mother says."

"I haven't had any sleep for nights, thinking of her, — such a kid, she is!"

"Does she know you're coming?"

"No, I haven't said nothing."

"Better be careful. I wouldn't risk a shock. Have you anywhere to sleep?"

"No, sir."

"Well, you can stay here, if you like. They won't have room for you there." He seemed to back away from me.

"Thank ye, sir, I wouldn' like to put you out."

"Not a bit, Joe. Delighted to have you, and hear your adventures."

He shook his head. "I don' want to talk of them," he said darkly. "Don't you think I could see 'er to-night, sir? I've come a long way for it, my God! I have!"

"Well, try! But see her mother first."

"Yes, sir," and he touched his forehead. His face, so young a face, already had that look in the eyes of men who stare death down.

He went away, and I didn't see him again that night. They had managed apparently to screw him into their tiny cottage. He was only just in time, for two days later Betty had a boy-child. He came to me, the same evening, after dark, very excited.

"She's a wonder," he said, "but if I'd known, I'd never ha' done it, sir, I never would. You can't tell what you're doing till it's too late, it seems."

Strange saying from that young father, till afterwards it was made too clear!

Betty recovered quickly and was out within three weeks.

Joe seemed to have long leave, for he was still about, but I had little talk with him, for, though always friendly, he seemed shy of me, and as to talking of the war, — not a word! One evening I passed him and Betty leaning on a gate, close to the river, — a warm evening of early July, when the Somme battle was at its height. Out there hell incarnate; and here intense peace, the quietly flowing river, the willows, and unstirring aspens, the light slowly dying; and those two young things, with their arms

round each other, and their heads close together, — her bobbed dark hair and Joe's reddish mop, getting quite long! I took good care not to disturb them. His last night, perhaps, before he went back into the furnace!

It was no business of mine to have my doubts, but I had been having them long before that very dreadful night when, just as I was going to bed, something rattled on my window, and going down, I found Betty outside, distracted.

"Oh, sir, come quick! They've 'rested Joe."

As we went over, she told me:

"Oh, sir, I was afraid there was some mistake about his leave, — it was so long. I thought he'd get into trouble over it, so I asked Bill Pateman" (the village constable) "and now they've come and 'rested him for deserting. Oh! What have I done? What have I done?"

Outside the Roofes' cottage, Joe was standing between a corporal's guard, and Betty flung herself into his arms. Inside, I could hear Mrs. Roofe expostulating with the corporal, and the baby crying. In the sleeping quiet of the village street, smelling of hay just harvested, it was atrocious.

I spoke to Joe. He answered quietly, in her arms:

"I asked for leave, but they wouldn't give it. I had to come. I couldn't stick it, knowing how it was with her."

"Where was your regiment?"

"In the line."

"Good God!"

Just then the corporal came out. I took him apart.

"I was his schoolmaster, corporal," I said. "The poor chap joined up when he was just sixteen, — he's still under age, you see, — and now he's got this child wife and a new-born baby!"

The corporal nodded. His face was twitching, a lined, decent face with a moustache.

"I know, sir," he muttered, "I know. Cruel work, but I've got to take him. He'll have to go back to France."

"What does it mean?"

He lifted his arms from his sides and let them drop, and that gesture was somehow the most expressive and dreadful I ever saw.

"Deserting in face of the enemy," he whispered hoarsely. "Bad business! Can you get that girl away, sir?"

But Joe himself undid the grip of her arms, and held her from him, bending, he kissed her hair and face; then, with a groan, he literally pushed her into my arms and marched straight off between the guard.

And I was left in the dark, sweet-scented street, with that distracted child struggling in my grasp.

"Oh! My God! My God! My God!" over and over and over. And what could one say or do?

All the rest of that night, after Mrs. Roofe had got Betty back into the cottage, I sat up writing in duplicate the facts about Joe Beckett.

I sent one copy to his regimental headquarters, the other to the chaplain of his regiment in France. I sent fresh copies two days later with duplicates of his birth certificate to make quite sure. It was all I could do. Then came a fortnight of waiting for news. Betty was still distracted. The thought that, through her anxiety, she herself had delivered him into their hands nearly sent her off her head. Probably her baby alone kept her from insanity or suicide. And all that time the battle of the Somme raged, and hundreds of thousands of women in England and France and Germany were in daily terror for their menfolk. Yet none, I think, could have had quite the feelings of that child. Her mother, poor woman, would come over to me at the schoolhouse, and ask if I had heard anything.

"Better for the poor girl to know the worst," she said, "if it is the worst. The anxiety's killin' 'er."

But I had no news and could not get any at headquarters. The thing was being dealt with in France. Never was the scale and pitch of the world's horror more brought home to me. This deadly little tragedy was as nothing, — just a fragment of straw whirling round in that terrible wind.

And then one day I did get news, — a letter from the chaplain, and seeing what it was, I stuck it in my pocket and sneaked down to the river, — literally afraid to open it till I was alone. Crouched up there, with my back to a haystack, I took it out with trembling fingers.

“Dear Sir,

The boy Joe Beckett was shot to-day at dawn. I am distressed at having to tell you and the poor child, his wife. War is a cruel thing, indeed!”

I had known it. Poor Joe! Poor Betty! Poor, poor Betty! I read on:

“I did all I could; the facts you sent were put before the Court Martial and the point of his age considered. But all leave had been stopped; his request had been definitely refused; the regiment was actually in the line, with fighting going on, — and the situation extremely critical in that sector. Private considerations count for nothing in such circumstances, — the rule is adamant. Perhaps it has to be, — I cannot say. But I have been greatly distressed by the whole thing, and the Court itself was much moved. The poor boy seemed dazed; he wouldn't talk, didn't seem to take in anything; indeed, they tell me that all he said after the verdict, certainly all I heard him say was: ‘My poor wife! My poor wife!’ over and over again. He stood up well at the end.”

He stood up well at the end! I can see him yet, poor impulsive Joe. Desertion, but not cowardice, by the Lord! No one who looked into those straight blue eyes could believe that. But they bandaged them, I suppose. Well! a bullet in a billet more or less, what was it in that wholesale slaughter? As a raindrop on a willow tree drips into the river and away to sea, — so that boy, like a million others, dripped to dust. A little ironical though, that his own side should shoot him, who went to fight for them two years before he needed, to shoot him who wouldn't be legal food for powder for another month! A little ironical, perhaps, that he had left this son, — legacy to such an implacable world! But there's no moral to a true tale like this, — unless it be that the rhythm of life and death cares not a jot for any of us!