

"AN AVERAGE FATHER OF AN AVERAGE SON IN TIME OF WAR"

Following is the text of the postscript delivered after the nine o'clock news tonight by an anonymous father of a son in the services:-

The night before our boy went away to the Navy was one of the worst in my life.

Peter is only one of many millions of boys who in these last few years and in all the great countries of the world, have been called up for service. We had known since 1939 that it was quite likely to happen to him. For at least a year his mother and I had been preparing ourselves both practically and psychologically for the event. But when the moment came it seemed unbearable that we should have to lose him. The thought of millions of other parents in the same position did not help us in the least. Within our small world, made up of certain affinities and affections and ways of doing, Peter was unique; and with his departure that familiar world must cease to exist.

All this came to me as I was working in the garden on the Sunday evening before he went. I was planting out lettuce seedlings at the time, when suddenly a sort of dark film of concern came between my eyes and the gophered edges of the little plants. It was something I hadn't thought of before - that this was Peter's last night at home, under our roof and our care. The long years of childhood were over at last. Even his boyhood was at an end. The State was taking him to serve his country as a man; and not for him or for his mother or for me would it ever be the same again. This was final.

And, of course - blurring my vision of those irrelevant lettuce seedlings - a whole string of sentimental pictures flashed before my eyes. The baby who lay on a cushion before the fire in a cottage at Dymchurch and kicked his legs as if he were winning a bicycle race. The little boy in covert coating, very proud of a small, switchy cane I had bought him, who used to go down the Finchley Road with me of a Saturday evening to buy the papers - and to think that he used to take my hand! Then the big boy - nearly six feet of him - putting the shot farther and with a greater ease than any of his schoolfellows could compass, shoving like a Trojan in the pack of the School XV. Always the boy with a queer, stoic reserve of his own; so that, whatever his faults, deceit was never one of them.

Peter was always very much himself. And as the hour of his call-up approached you could see (although nothing was said) that the prospect was at once alarming and enchanting and that it was having a profound and searching effect upon him - as if he were eager to get away if only to end the suspense, and then to match his strength against the strength of other men and to explore (for the first time on his own responsibility) the brave, new world; although, Heaven knows, it seems a sad and battered and embittered world to those of us who marched to the drums in 1914.

This restlessness took many forms, but I watched it come to its climax on that very Sunday on which I myself first knew his going to be a personal tragedy. That afternoon he went off alone and climbed a hill, 2,000 feet high. That was always Peter's way. Hills were his private mystery. He professed to be interested in the phenomena of weather and geology and so on, but I think he was unconsciously the poet, his reserved temperament happiest when he was alone in high places. That afternoon he was away for four hours - alone; and I wonder what he thought..... I rather think he went up there to say his own private farewell to the Scottish countryside in which he had spent most of his boyhood. He said that it had been overcast towards the North over the Grampians, but that he could see clearly far to the South, towards that English Border he had to cross the next day. And he spent a long time that evening pouring over Ordnance Survey Maps.

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And then he went away. His letters assure us that he is perfectly happy, and vastly interested in his naval training and amused by his companions. Don't blame Peter if I have given this story a wistful and sentimental turn. That is entirely my doing; this is just a father's view of the transaction. I fancy that the boy has by now completely forgotten any deep emotion he may have known in the hour of departure. He is meeting novelty and challenge - while his mother and I are left with so much less to occupy our minds.

I'll confess that the affair left me for a day or two after he had gone with an odd little feeling of embitterment. Too many of one's acquaintances (one thought selfishly and foolishly) took it too lightly. "Oh, yes! Somebody told me Peter was going to the Navy - or was it the Tanks?" One or two people made jokes about Peter coming home on his first leave in bell-bottomed trousers; and that didn't seem to me funny at all. And then - to be perfectly honest - one even started to resent the approaches of those many good people whose sympathy and concern were of the most touching sincerity.

Above all, I blundered through my daily tasks, cursing Hitler and the Germans for creating a machine and forcing us in self-defence to create another machine, into which my son, and millions of other people's sons, had to be drawn.

Out of all this restlessness and instability of mood there grew in my mind at length a little cloud of thought no bigger than a man's hand, that still seems to me to cast a shadow over every household in this country. With a queer envy I began to think of those many friends of mine - clever, well-educated, responsible - who have never had, or never seen fit to have, any children at all. It was only too easy to resent the fact that such as Peter must march in defence of those who deliberately don't provide their own defence, but I found myself much more seriously concerned to reflect on a declining British population in general, and, in particular, on the rapid decline in precisely those groups of society that are most prosperous and best fitted by education at least, for leadership. It so happened that I had been researching, for quite other purposes, into the small, unimportant history of my own family, and I had discovered that, in the year 1906, I had had 33 full cousins alive and in vigorous health. Some of the men among them had served in the South African War; many more were destined to fight in the First German War. Whereas, in 1943, Peter has only four full cousins, two of them girls; and he and another boy cousin are the only representatives of our direct family line in the services today.

I am not suggesting that service in the armed forces is either the ideal occupation for a young man or a right measure of civilisation; but it is a convenient yardstick for my present purposes; and, turning the thought over in my mind, I became a little afraid, thinking of France, for instance, and of Britain's huge responsibilities.

But being only Peter's father, I simply know that my son has been caught up in a machine, whatever the relative importance of the weapons and the men that compose its strength. I can remember well enough my own, quite inglorious, service in the infantry in the last war, and I know that even that relatively primitive machine had its enchantments for youth - the rough comradeship of men divorced from normal society, the thought-saving charms of discipline, the interest of weapons, with the romantic hope of a scrap at the end of the long series of route marches and days on the ranges.

They don't go in for route marches nowadays, our soldiers, and they don't go in for accurate, long-range musketry. It's all weight of fire-power now. Even in Peter's choice, the Navy, anybody who has seen a modern ship of war knows that it is just a bag of mechanical tricks, with gadgets that do most of the calculations, and even some of the thinking, for the seamen and the gunners.

Let me admit in the same breath that the glory of human courage and resourcefulness has most obviously not departed. Onslow was not fought through her action without the undying fire being, in the heat of battle, greater than the guns and engines it controlled. You cannot read of Wingate's column in Burma, or of those roving desert columns that scouted and stabbed for Montgomery in North Africa; you cannot so much as think of the Eighth Army, without realising that victory, success in war, is still (all things being equal) to the high of heart.

"All things being equal" .... One group of Englishmen - or Scotsmen or Welshmen or Irishmen - against an equal group of Germans with an equal distribution of weapons. We're not worrying about that. But the universal aim in war nowadays is not equality in manpower; it is superiority in arms - such a superiority as the Germans loosed against Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, and so on until the bright military banner of France itself was a thing to be kicked along the gutters by weasel-faced boys of the panzer divisions. And need we delude ourselves into fancying that it is anything but the combined industrial power of Britain and the United States that, by God's grace, assures us victory at last?

No; I'm still frightened in the shadow of the machine; and I am left wondering, asking questions...I wonder, for instance, about the differences between Peter's generation and mine. In one of his Monday talks not long ago Jack Priestley expressed this for our generation by wishing that some typical young men of the Forces would come to the microphone to tell us what they think about it all; what they feel, what they hope, what they dream - if they do hope and dream at all. How my Peter feels about it I can't tell with certainty, but I am tolerably certain that he likes his Service just because it is orderly, novel, right in the stream of current endeavour, and because it gives him amusing instruments to play with. About a month before he went away he said one curious thing. In a foolish, expansive moment at the family supper table I had said that I thought the war might be over by the autumn; and he said with the greatest gravity; "If that's true, a lot of us boys will be disappointed."

I keep asking questions - and cannot answer them...I have to remember that the motor-car, which is still an enchanting novelty to me, is of no more interest to Peter than a cow or a lamppost. I have to try to remember that the Spitfire is to him what a twelve horse-power motor car is to me. I have to remember that, for him, the telephone and the radio are like the water and the gas, laid on, and not the miracles they still are to me. I have still more carefully to remember that, for Peter, these four years of war - an ageing and confused and occasionally bitter business for a man of my generation - have been for Peter in his most impressionable years a phase of extreme orderliness; of learning the art of war in his school JTC; of having his school curriculum largely directed towards the technical; of joining the Home Guard and falling in love with the Vickers machine-gun; of having his food and his light and heat and travel and so forth carefully (if generously) rationed to him by the State...Peter, has, in fact, now lived one-fifth of his life under control; under those controls which, we are told, may survive as acts of good government into the post-war period. And I hope you will forgive me if I am just a wee bit afraid that a lot of lads of his generation may take all these services for granted, and be perhaps too dependent on an infallible Universal Provider behind them, only too willing to surrender individuality for freedom to play with the toys of peace - or war.

This is all very tentative, I know. I'm only groping and perhaps too emotionally...as for Peter himself, I'm really not worried much. I can't claim to know that boy through and through, but I do know that he is a person in his own right, with his own inviolable secret; and I am quite sure that if he survives the physical dangers he will return to climb that hill again, and gaze over the Scottish shires - North to the Grampians, South to the Lamermuir's - and be himself once more; free, individual. But I cannot be quite sure. From now on, there must be many moments in which I shall know that travail of spirit which came upon me as I was planting out lettuce seedlings on the eve of his departure.

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