BOYLAN, of the Polar Failure especially, but an old head for the war stuff, with young Darnton had pulled together through the waiting days in Belgium—nothing much going out, but pale death and red war making pictures in their brains that burned for answer. Between them they had seen the butcheries and blackenings of Liège, Namur and Charleroi; of many lesser towns besides, and were hung up now in Laraffy, which had escaped wrecking so far, and was still trying to pursue its regular business in the mighty tension. The two correspondents had come in two weeks before with a German reserve column, which was now anointing the French vineyards. They lived together, under the eye of the German garrison, in the club room of socialists who no longer foregathered.

Darnton was out on the night that Major Ulrich, their official suppresser, called with the announcement that two would be permitted to go on into France with a column leaving to-morrow.

"It may be you will watch us enter Paris," he said to Boylan.

"My young friend Darnton will be glad to hear that, Major."

"Where is Mr. Darnton to-night?"

"He's calling on a lady—"

"Ah, yes, Miss Coolidge of America—the paint-tube lady. She is going on up to Holland to-morrow with other foreigners who have remained thus far."

Major Ulrich was a bit bright with wine, but not so as to rock. He would have remained longer, but Boylan wanted to see Darnton and to do other work, so did not suggest opening anything. He liked the younger man more than Darnton knew, and likings of this sort were not even occasional. Boylan was nearing fifty—a man all in one piece—thick, hard, scarred with la viruela, a saber sweep, a green blue arc in his throat where some dart or arrow had torn its way in between the vital columns. His head was bald and wrinkled, but very big, his neck and jaw to match, his eyes a soft blue that once had been his secret shame—a man often called to the glare.

Just now Boylan was in the street—on the way to the house where a few courageous Americans beside Miss Coolidge had stayed as long as permissible. Darnton would be there. . . . A certain dead cavalry horse was powerful in the air. Boylan knew exactly where it lay, for it had called attention for three days—saddled and all. . . . . He pushed open the hall-day door, and heard Darnton's voice. The place was dim. They neither saw nor heard him. The huge scarred head of the old warwolf withdrew jerkily.
What he had to say would have to wait until Darnton came. Boylan went to his own quarters and sat by the open window. He was accustomed as any man can be to unremoved horse by this time. It came steadily to his nostrils, mingled with the leathery smell of his own field-outfit in the room. Presently he looked at his watch, and snapped the case shut with a crack. The strength of his fingers would have broken a filbert.

Then he muffled his machine in a blanket and went to work.

Darnton was thirty with a year or two, a strong quiet force, though his only previous war-work had been the Balkan preliminaries. All these years, though he had made many men like him, he had moved to and fro without a touch of the crippling emotions which Marthe Coolidge had so suddenly called. Without many words she had made him ashamed of the present work, for he had been an exploiter of war, considering it the ranking adventure, the big gun sport which called brave men. With her in his mind—and she had not been elsewhere of late—there was something gross and unendurable in the ravage everywhere.

"These are not times for a man to whimper," he was saying (about the time Boylan ducked his head back from the hall way door), "but I haven’t done so hard as to let you go——"

He had not heard of his own leaving—only that she and the others were going north to Holland the next day——

"I’ll watch for your work," she said. "I’ll probably get down toward Paris—if it holds. Anyway I’ll watch——"

... It was queer to find you here—queer, and has been hard sometimes to remember that we are in the heart of The Great War. You’ve spoiled everything——"

She smiled. "That had to come—I mean for you to see it all differently."

"We need each other’s eyes to get along——"

... I’ve moved about here for days in some kind of a dream," she whispered, "as if something were dead inside. The world has gone insane——"

"Go up into Holland—to Flushing or Rotterdam and wait——"

"Yes, I’ll wait and watch for you. ... Good-by. ... Oh, we’ll meet again—eye to eye——"

Darnton found the big belted one at work when he reached quarters, was growled at, heard the news and was glad.

Deep afield with the German reserves and caught at last in the edge of the great battle. ... After eternal days it seemed to both Boylan and Darnton that they were forgotten—as a pair
of buttons on the German uniform—forgotten because they served and were not in the way. All that had not to do with Marthe Coolidge was black as the Belgian night to Darnton’s thoughts, but Boylan was always by. He could not have managed but for that. There were days in which it appeared that half the world was down and bleeding; the other half trying to lift, pulling at the edges of the fallen, as one would pull at a stupefied body in a burning house. At night, through the silence between the cannon, sometimes over the vineyards through cold rains, there came to their ears the sound of church-bells. The German officers declared there were no such sounds.

“If I ever get out of here, I’ll write one thing—one battle till I die—one story—and I’ll call it Vintage ‘Fourteen.’”

For they were fighting in the vineyard of France, and what a fertilizing it was—phosphor and potash and nitrogen in the perfect solution of human blood . . . Boylan saw more and more that Darnton was queer.

“I can’t write,” the younger man said. “I feel like one man dying under a mountain of dead. I don’t want to live. I don’t want to die. I believe it’s all one, and that this is the end of the world.”

Darnton could work, however. Day and night he tugged at the dead and the dying in the field and in the field hospitals.

“The world calls this the great German fighting machine,” he would say, “but we’re inside. We can’t call it that. It’s the most pitiful and devitalized thing that ever ran up and down the earth. And it doesn’t mean anything. It’s all waste—like a great body killing itself piece by piece—all waste and death.”

He tried to make death easy for a soldier here and there, but there was so much. His clothing smelled of death; and one morning before the smoke fell, he saw the sun shining upon the vineyard—and the thought held him that the vineyards were immortal, and men just the dung of the earth . . . One night Boylan asked as they lay down:

“Who are you?”

“Darnton.”

“Yep, and I’m Boylan. You’re at liberty to correct if wrong. Are we ever going to die or get out?”

“I don’t know . . . Boylan, you’ve been good to me. We’re two to make one—eye to eye—”

“You’re making a noise like breaking down again—don’t Darnton. I’ve gone on a bluff all my life. I’m a rotten sentimentalist at heart—soft as smashed grapes. It’s my devil. If you break down I’ll show him to you —”
“It wouldn’t hurt you to bellow like a girl.”
“Maybe not, but I’d shoot my head off first.”
“Did you see the old leprous peasant today? He was humpbacked, and he had no lips, but teeth like a dog. He pulled at the soldier’s stirrup as we rode into town. The soldier was afraid and shot him.”
“Shut up, Darnton, or you’ll get me. I’ve shown you more now than living soul knows —”
“You ought to show it to a woman. A man isn’t right until a woman knows him in and out.”
“For the love of God—go to sleep!”

They sank into restless, haunted, death-ridden dreaming; and so it was many nights, until the dawn that they fronted an abrupt rive, saw the rising vineyards opposite and were swept possibly by mistake into the center of comprehensible action—a picture lifted from the hundred mile ruck.

The little town, so far nameless to them, stood on the slopes about a half mile up from the river, overlooking the vineyards and in the midst of them. A quick-fire gun or two was emplaced in that vicinity, and two batteries of bigger bores (that they knew of), higher on either side. Infantry intrenchments that looked like moletracks from the distance corrugated the slopes in lateral lines, and roads came down to the two bridges that spanned the swift stream, less than a mile apart.

The morning was spent in artillery duelling. The French seemed partly silenced at noon. At no time was their attack cocky and confident. The Germans determined to cross in the early afternoon. This movement was not answered by excessive firing. German cavalry and small guns on the east bridge, heavy masses of helmets took the west. Boylan and Darnton rode with the artillery. Even as the German forces combined for position, the firing of the French was not spiteful. There seemed a note of complaint and hysteria. There was no tension in the German command; it was too weathered for that.

Now the cavalry went into action and guns moved away farther to the east for higher emplacement.

“They’re going to charge the horses up into the town. They haven’t much respect for the infantry trenches,” said Boylan.

At that moment, Darnton got a clearer mental picture of Marthe Coolidge’s face than had come for weeks. Often at night he had tried to think just how she looked, but it was easier to remember something which Darnton designated secretly as her soul. She passed in a flash.
His body was bent in the concussion from behind; the turf rocked with it. He turned and saw the middle stone abutment of the nearer bridge lifted from the stream, the whole background sky black with dust and rock. Then, just as he thought of it, the west bridge went. He spoke before Boylan, and rather unerringly, as one does at times coming up from a dream.

“They’ve trapped what they think they can handle—and fired the bridges by wire.”

Boylan said: “I can’t call it German stupidity, because it didn’t occur to me that the bridges were mined. . . . Oh, God, it’s to be another leisure spraying. We’re in the slaughter-pen. . . . . . God, man, look at the horses!”

It had been too late to call back the cavalry. Darnton’s eyes followed Boylan’s sweeping arm. The horsemen were in skirmish among the grapes, just breaking out into charge. The town above and the emplacement adjoining which had kept their secret so well, were now in a blur of sulphur from mitrailleuses turned upon the cavalry charge. The whole line went down in the deluge—suddenly vanished under the hideous blat of the machines—whole rows rubbed into the grapevines—a few beasts rising empty! shaking themselves and tumbling back—no riders. Darnton turned to the infantry in formation on the western slopes. The French fire was not lax now, not discouraged in the least, nor hysterical. It was cold-blooded murder in gluttonous quantity.

Boylan and Darnton forgot themselves. Cavalry gone—they turned to the west and saw the poor men-beasts in rout. Even the infantry comprehended the trick, and felt something superhuman behind it. They rushed back towards the river—swift, ugly with white patches and unfordable, requiring a good swimmer. . . . . . The eyes of Boylan turned back to the horse. He had always loved the cavalry—ridden with the cavalry always by preference—but Darnton was watching the river—the hands up from the center of the river. . . . . .

They were alone, and now the French machines were on the German batteries not yet emplaced, none unlimbered. It was as if the wind carried them the spray from the sweeping fountains, turned from the horse to put out the guns. Darnton was hit and down—hit again and the night slowly settled upon him, bringing the bells.

“Who are you?” someone piped sharply in French.

“Two American correspondents. I can take care of this man.”

It was the voice of Boylan, very weary. Darnton felt the heavy, hard hands that had been tugging at his flesh for hours.
The Frenchman said: “American correspondents . . . . search . . . . if true, conduct them to the English camp.”

Then Boylan’s voice. “Yes, he’s hard hit and heavy as hell. Passports in hip-pocket. . . . . . I’ll carry him. . . . . thanks —”

It seemed part of an eternal night. Darnton only knew, and that from time to time, that he had messages to carry.

“There’s no other way—I’ve got to get through the lines —”

“Quite right,” Boylan panted.

“I don’t want to fail. She wouldn’t look twice at a man who failed —”

“Hell, child, sit still. She’d look twice if you failed a thousand times. . . . Hai, don’t tear open a man’s bridle-arm. What is it?”

“He was humpbacked—no lips—teeth like a dog—and the trooper shot him.”

“I know, but he’s dead. His back is straight now—don’t look any worse now than ten thousand other. . . . . .”

Boylan was trudging after a French sentry—the English camp ahead. They passed sentry after sentry each time deadly waiting.

“Hai, you,” he called at last to the soldier, “I can’t go any further. ‘Send a wagon. Tell the English two American correspondents are sitting out here—one with a bullet or two through his chest.’ ”

He sank down with Darnton, badly bandaged across his lap.

“I never knew it to fail,” he muttered. “The man who wins a woman gets the steel when it’s anywhere in the air, but bullets fly wide and knives curve about a lonely maverick who has lost all his heart winnings.”

They found Boylan so, the jaw clenched, the huge scarred head bare and covered with night dew, his friend breathing. It was all on the wire that night.

SOME unique thing, Boylan that rock of a man, had found in Darnton. For seven days and nights—(though broken with incredible fatigues, a yellow line of bone-color showing across his nose under his eyes)—Boylan sat by in cars and ambulances until they reached the city of the womenfolk and a regular Parisian bed. What he gave to Darnton was clear, what he took from a man down, and a woman’s property at best, is not known. Perhaps in the great strains and pressures of the campaign he had seen Darnton’s soul, the mechanism and light effects appertaining, and found it true. It may be that Boylan had never been quite sure that a man-soul could be true, and having found one, was ready to go the limit. That’s only a hazard.

Darnton himself didn’t know. He was a lump—one little red
lamp burning in that big house of a man—flickering, at that, its color bad, its shadow monstrous. Every one but Boylan had declared that he would die from that wound in his chest.

Boylan was sitting now—the seventh afternoon—at the edge of the Parisian bed, when he heard a voice below. His jaw clenched as it had done that night outside the British camp. The woman had found them.

"I was waiting in Flushing, as he said, when I read the story of his wound, and the way you brought him through to the English lines, I can’t get over that."

"Humph," came from Boylan, as he watched her, for her eyes were upon the bed.

Darnton was still afar off.

The woman saw the situation at once; in fact, she saw the woman in Boylan, the mysterious drugged secret creature, which he designated his devil on occasion. The great war-man gave her credit for no such penetration. Miss Coolidge kept herself second, never played the love-lady, advised, assisted, would not let Boylan go.

"He is knit to you. He will die if you go," she said.

Another time she told him: "Oh, you won’t understand. I know what you are and what you’ve done. You can hate me all you wish, but you’ve got to take what I give you—"

"You’re an all right young woman," Boylan remarked. "I knew that before Darnton did." In something like panic, he added: "He’ll know you to-night. He’s cool. He’ll pull through. He’ll know you to-night, and then I go."

"Not until he sees you—"

It wasn’t that night, but the next morning Darnton opened his eyes with reason and organization back. He saw Boylan.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello, boy."

Darnton looked beyond him, and around the room.

"Go to sleep," said Boylan.

"I won’t."

"Then wait a minute."

Boylan came back with her. Darnton managed to get his knuckles up to rub his eyes.

"He’s back with us," Boylan whispered.

"Don’t go," she pleaded.

"Don’t be a fool," said Boylan.

She bent over Darnton, lower and lower. It was against nature for them not to forget themselves for a moment, and Boylan was away and in the streets.
ABSENCE

He saw Paris with eyes that seemed to have dropped their scales. It was very early and still wet. An old charwoman was sitting in the entrance of a dairy shop, weeping for her only son. Boylan stopped. She was very poor and weak.

"Come, Mother," he said, lifting her.
She looked into his face in a way that rowelled the man.
"Come on," he said softly. "We'll have breakfast, and you'll tell me. I belong to the widows and fatherless, too."
So they rocked away together.

ABSENCE

YOU need send me no costly presents
To remind me of you.
Momently I am reminded.
I hear a snatch of a song.
Oh, it puts me into the mood I was in one tender
September evening when you sang to me.
I hear no more of the song that is near,
Only your voice which is far away.
I catch an odor from a rose garden and remember all
the sweet rosebuds you have fastened into my hair
with kisses.
Everything beautiful speaks to me of you.
In everything, beautiful or no, I feel the essence of you, the strength of you, the broad humanity.
Weary, I lean upon you, Happy, I drink deep of you,
Ambitious, I work alongside you, Climbing the hills,
I catch hold of your hand, my comrade, Loving, I kiss you fervently.
Thus am I with you in spirit
Until that moment of happiness
When I hold you close to my heart,
And know that, for a time at least,
No space can separate us.

ETHEL MARJORIE KNAPP.