

TO MEET HIS SON

Eddy Mason was not used to trains, having kept closely to his village and thus having little experience of them, but after the first few hours of travel he managed to doze off a bit, when his rest was suddenly pierced by a cruel and terrible thought: maybe he misread the letter from the hospital advising him that his son was alive and a patient at that institution. Maybe the letter was intended for someone else and a new and careful scrutiny of the name or address would forever doom his hopes of seeing George again! He sat bolt upright and withdrew with a shaking hand the letter from his inside pocket, to read it once again as he had already done so many times, to ask the gods once more to tell him that what he believed to be true was true.

And true it was! Carefully, not only moistening his finger to go over every word but also to mouth each word as he vaulted over it, like someone leaping from stone to stone over an abyss, he was once again assured that his son, who had been serving with the British Army in the War and who had gone missing in April 1917 was alive, three years later. The War Office letter said so, and now there can be no mistake! Jubilant, he raised his modest eyes upward and said aloud, "Thank you, Lord!" But someone else, another passenger in the compartment, did not share Eddie's exultation. Seated across from him, a large woman in a pince nez and wearing a hat like a box, had cleared her throat so noisily that she obviously intended to admonish him that his bizarre conduct had offended the peace and propriety of his fellow travelers.

"Sorry, forgot myself, didn't I?" he said apologetically to her, including in his embarrassed smile the three male occupants of the compartment. "My son's come back

from the War, alive, after being missing for three years, you see!” He paused, eagerly looking from person to person, awaiting someone to invite him to relate his wondrous story - and he wasn’t disappointed. The stolid silence wrapped about his companions fell away as they listened and asked questions, bending forward with a solemn intensity to hear every word of a story which they might hope would be theirs as well, even though they knew that those they lost rested forever in a churchyard nearby. And when the train stopped at Chilton and he disembarked, they took his huge suitcase for him to the platform, clapping him on the back, a burly Irishman pressing his flask of whiskey on him and the fierce lady with the pince nez saying, “Such a shame your wife can’t be here, such a shame”. Then the train pulled out, and him with two and half miles to go to reach the hospital as the stationmaster told him.

He didn’t have the copper for a taxi- he’d borrowed half the passage back and forth from the bartender, an old friend from school days, who’d also loaned him the suitcase. So he’d have to hoof it. That was all right, even with the big suitcase. But he wished his wife Susan could be there with him, just as the lady on the train had said. Susan hadn’t been well, but nothing too serious, the doctor had said; but when they didn’t hear from George, and they knew that a big push by the Hun had started at that time in 1917, their fear grew ever stronger that their son had been killed but not identified, as was so often the case. They wrote to his battalion commander hoping for reassurance, but there had been no reply; his unit too, they imagined, had disappeared too, having been gathered up in the great maw of destruction. After that, and after the great silence descended upon them, she fell into a despondency, lost any interest in living, and just faded away. Her deathly pallor at the end stayed with him when he sat by her side,

holding her hand, unable to do anything for her, and after she died he declined too. He had recently to his surprise but not to his dismay realized that he had stopped eating: “Never got around to it, don’t seem to miss it either”, he thought one afternoon when he realized that two days had gone by. “The bed’s the place,” he said to himself, pulling the covers to his throat and gratefully welcomed the onrushing dark.

But now the letter has changed everything. His son was alive, and the hospital had written that he could bring him home today! He needn’t look again at the letter to remind himself of that; he had memorized the document so profoundly that he swore it would be the last word on his tombstone. They said that George “was as well as could be expected, and we should be pleased to have the opportunity to discuss with you in person or by telephone whether you wish to bring your son home or leave him for some time with us.” He decided immediately to take him home –today. They’ll go out to the pond for fishing, like the old days. Why not? What else did it mean, “as well as could be expected” if not that his big strong son was just as he was before!

He should get going – it was almost noon and he had a way to go. He bent forward, grasped the clumsy suitcase with his gnarled hands scored by the heavy work of years on the farm, and with one fluid movement hoisted the swaying object to his right shoulder. “All right, eh, George?” he grinned, revealing his few stained teeth. “I’m on my way”.

It was early afternoon on the spacious grounds of the hospital, and Mrs. Celia Addison could be found as usual seated on her favorite bench near a brilliant display of white and delicate pink peonies, the flowers in which she especially delighted. The sunlight on this June day was strong enough to warrant the use of her floppy blue

hat, which unfortunately concealed from view her fiercely red hair, laced recently with traces of grey. She was reading her Trollope novel while her son Brian, a patient at the institution, peacefully slept in a wheelchair beside her.

From time to time she would look over to Brian to be sure that he was comfortable, and it was in the course of completing a minor adjustment of his sleeves – they were too tight for so warm a day – that she happened to notice a man just coming from the archway of ash trees which make up the pleasant entrance to the grounds, and who was coming along the path in her direction. What interested her was the fact that he was bearing on one of his shoulders a very large package of some sort, which for someone so small seemed likely to bring him to his knees at any moment. And nonetheless, the man came on doggedly without halting until, as he came near her, he tripped suddenly over a rise in the path, dislodging the suitcase from his shoulder, which fell heavily to the ground. “Oh, please”, Celia said, rising in alarm, “don’t make such a noise. My son is not well.” A quick alarmed glance was, however, enough to reassure her that Brian was still sleeping comfortably and that all was well.

Eddy was aghast; the thought that he might distress the mother and her disabled son deeply affected him. “I’m truly sorry, Miss,” he said earnestly, “I didn’t see it coming.”

“Of course it wasn’t your fault,” she said in a quiet, pleasant voice. “I shouldn’t have said that.” She looked at him with what appeared to be a kindly appeal for his forgiveness. “And Brian is sleeping very nicely.” A bit of a smile touched her lips as she gazed at the up-ended item that Eddy had carried with him until now. “Such a large suitcase!”

“Yes, Miss, it is,” he said proudly, leaning down to dust it off with a quick hand and place it on its proper side. “It’s just that I don’t know how big a kit my boy George will want to bring back. He’s coming home today.” He savored the opportunity which this pleasant lady had given him to say “my boy”, “his house”, his “coming home” and other loving phrases that he thought were never to be said again.

“Is he!” Celia almost gasped in astonishment. “How wonderful!”

“Yes, Miss, I have the hospital’s word for it. He’s top flight.” And unable to restrain himself, knowing that he should not exult while the boy sat silent in his wheelchair, he nonetheless could not restrain his happiness. “We’ll go fishing tomorrow.”

“How wonderful for you!” She smiled compassionately, so pleased for him, a little man so battered and worn, now with something he can live for! She knew what it meant to have your son with you, though not, alas, in such brimming health. She would have to wait before her Brian was ready to go home. “I know these splendid things do happen, but I’ve not seen them myself,” she said fondly, extending a gentle hand to stroke her son’s auburn hair. He was a young man of nineteen, with his mother’s sensitive mouth and clear skin. The long lashes over his eyes were those of a sleeping choir boy.

“And your son,” Eddy said, now abashed. “I hope the same luck for him.”

She looked gratefully at him, her china blue eyes direct and resolute. “I don’t know when the day will come when we’ll return home. But I don’t complain; at least I have him with me. So many don’t.” She spoke softly, looking away toward the green lawns over which patients and visitors were slowly walking. There was no occasion to

trouble him with the story of what happened to Brian – there are so many stories now! The Germans dug a great mine under the British troops and when they set it off, a huge mountain of earth came crashing down, burying so many, over a hundred according to the records. The remainder of the regiment couldn't do very much digging to see if any survived – they were under fire - but someone noticed Brian's arm moving just at the edge of the mound, and they brought him out. All of his clothes had been torn away by the bomb.

It seemed, to her mild surprise, that her visitor did not seem anxious to rush off but instead was waiting for her to say something more, so she told him that it was going to be a long, long effort by the two of them, her husband and herself, before Brian could come home. Their periodic visits to the hospital had left them shocked; the staff were as kind as could be imagined, but they were overstressed, and the boy had become as thin as a shadow about to depart from this world. So it was agreed that Celia would stay near the hospital with Brian while her husband would remain at home and keep on the job, so that there would be some money for her. The hospital was very accommodating to her in this respect. But oh, it hurt to leave her husband; she missed him and it hurt her to think of him sitting alone in their flat in the evening, but they were prepared to make the painful sacrifice for Brian's sake. She almost began to cry when she thought about everything, but she knew not to do that, because if you do you may not stop, and braced herself up and fought it back. And she knew she was luckier than many.

“I'm sorry, “ she said, rising up, “I'm keeping you from your son. You should go along now, and...”

Suddenly, a noise, horrible and unearthly, a bellowing shout, then an agonized wail that seemed to issue from the ground itself until Eddy saw that it emanated from the boy in the wheelchair, a hideous cry to the heavens repeated over and over again, the wheelchair vibrating with his demented rocking back and forth in outrage, his feet slamming against the ground in monstrous accompaniment. His face was so hideously contorted, the pupils of his eyes rolling under his lids so that only the whites showed, like a beast of some kind, that it seemed to Eddy not kin to anything human, except in nightmare. He stepped back with fear and awe from the maelstrom, and watched with amazement as Celia was instantly at the wheelchair seeming to melt into its very structure, soothing Brian with her hands moving along his chest, murmuring to him while she stroked his tossing head, whispering to him, as one does with a rearing, plunging horse maddened by something terrifying, until a minute or two later the terrible sounds subsided, and the boy closed his eyes again, to withdraw into the silence from which he came.

Waiting, panting lightly, she stood over Brian, watching him carefully until she assured herself that the seizure had been overcome and there was no more emergency, and then went behind the wheelchair to gently massage his shoulders and to caress his hair. "I'm so sorry," she said to Eddy, "it's so unpredictable. But I imagine you know all about that." But she could see from his pallor and from his staring eyes that he had been disturbed by Brian's outburst; well, it was understandable, he must have endured so many of such trials with his son that he was repelled by witnessing someone else's, particularly when it's happening on the very eve of his departure from such things! Odd, though, that she had never seen him; perhaps he couldn't come very often. "Brian's

doing so much better now; it used to be that we could never stop these scenes.” She shuddered lightly. “But I think he knows me now,” she said with pride. “He trusts me.” And then her blue eyes flared up, burning with fervor. “We’re fortunate to have a hospital for these cases, but it remains so important that there is someone visiting here from a boy’s family. Like you. And what is so sad is that there are boys here who are completely unknown because they were left far behind on the battlefield, without identities, and too disturbed even to say their names so that their families can be informed that they are alive.” She sighed deeply, shaking her head, and, folding her hands in her lap and there was silence.

“Oh,” she said, suddenly emerging from her reverie. “I’m still keeping you from your son. I’m afraid I’ve said that more than once during our talk.”

“These are things that need knowing,” he said, “I thank you for it.” But he did not want to go yet. He had found their brief silence very pleasing. He felt that her kindness had reached him like a warm, gentle wave from the sea, and that she had shared her goodness with him together with Brian, and that he was safe only so long as he was to linger within its influence. But he knew that it was time to move on, to find George. He bent down and carefully seized the suitcase – which seemed somehow so heavy - and lifted it to his shoulder.

“Please tell your George that Celia Addison says hurrah!” she said with all the pluck she could muster, and she smiled happily when she saw how his face brightened up.

“I will, and Eddy Mason – that’s me – says thank you!” His gnarled face returned her smile, and he started up the path, but stopped suddenly, remembering something. He

placed the box down, and took from his jacket the letter he had received from the institution and glanced quickly at it. "Mrs. Addison," he said, "can you tell me where..." He was uncertain and looked again at the document. "Can you tell me where the Administrative Building is?"

"Oh, yes," she said quickly, pointing in the proper direction, "it's that large building over there, with the four columns."

After he had thanked her and gone, she suddenly asked herself aloud: "But he *must* know where it is; surely he's been here before!" Her face flushed with crimson as she struggled to understand, but then Brian was complaining about something which she thought was his shoe and she quickly forgot about Eddy in the task of caring for him.

As he toiled slowly on in the hot sun, the massive building now not far away, a sudden numbness struck his legs from the rear, a numbness that left him quivering in the midst of the path, preventing him from going forward and terrifying him in the fear that he would have to collapse right there or shout miserably for help to the people passing by. But he found there was enough muted response in his legs to enable him to drag himself to a bench which fortunately was vacant. Resting his elbows on his knees he brought his hands to his eyes and closed them. In that dark region, he was not alone - sudden bursts of yellow light and strange circular colors swelled and faded before him, perhaps as in Hell, he thought.

George was not coming home today. He knew that now. In fact, he had sensed it from the beginning, but could not face it. He knew that his son invariably would have telephoned or written one of his breezy letters of one or two sentences when he wanted something, like "Dad, they're letting me out of this place - come get me. Heat up the fish

and chips! And I've got a thirst for my ale"! And when they said in the letter to him that George was as "good as could be expected", he realized now that it meant something far more painful than he had been willing to admit.

Just then, the voices of what seemed to be persons engaged in a quarrel intruded on his thinking, and irritably he raised his head to see who had disturbed him. Three people were coming down the lawn from the building. They appeared to be a man and his wife, who had joined arms with a very young man, really a boy, who was walking so fast between them that his parents had difficulty restraining him. They were pleading and exhorting him to slow down, but the boy did not heed them. His dark hair and fine clear features would have been handsome but for his cold, expressionless face and eyes so glazed that they seemed almost sightless. He watched the three rush past in their hurried pace down the lawn.

Perhaps, thought Eddy, watching them in their struggle together, it would have been easy for the parents to have given the whole matter up and left the boy with the hospital staff and never looked back. But they did not; they stood in, and what they did, he could do as well. After all, as Mrs. Addison said, it was a rare thing to have your son with you when so many did not. He would see this through. He stood up and looked for a moment across the lawn for her. Yes, she was still there, in the late afternoon, reading her book, with Brian resting next to her. Good. He looked at his jacket to see that it was as ship shape as he could make it, picked up his suitcase, and went on to meet his son.

END

Bob Greenspan.