

## The Return of the Soldier

**R**EBECA WEST, who, it seems, lives in London and not in *Rosmersholm*,



*Rebecca West*

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has hitherto been known by her dramatic criticism and similar articles in British and American reviews. *The Return of the Soldier* is the first work of fiction from her pen that we have read. To say that it is unusual is not enough; it is a perfect gem. The author writes like a philosopher of the James school but more like William than Henry. The psychological problem of the soldier's return to England from the battlefields of France with fifteen years wiped from his memory, is handled in a masterly way, but the book is more than a study in divided personality; it is a noble piece of literature. The soldier has forgotten his wife, but remembers Margaret, whom he had loved in his boyhood, a girl of humble station, but the finest character in the book. The luxury of the soldier's home to which he returns to mend, if he can, his broken life; a place of gracious spaces, of exquisite surroundings, of ordered seemliness, is in sharp contrast to the abode of Margaret:

Wealdstone is not, in its way, a bad place; it lies in the lap of open country, and at the end of every street rise the green hills of Harrow and the spires of Harrow School. But all the streets are long and red and freely articulated with railway arches, and factories spoil the sky-line with red, angular chimneys, and in front of the shops stood little women with backs ridged by ~~cheap~~ stays, who tapped their upper lips with their forefingers and made other feeble, doubtful gestures, as though they wanted to buy something and knew that if they did they would have to starve some other appetite. When we asked them the way they turned to us faces sour with thrift. *It was a town of people who could not do as they liked.*

And here Margaret lived in a long road of red-brick boxes, flecked here and there with the pink blur of almond blossom, which debouched in a flat field where green grass rose up rank through clay mold blacked by coal-dust from the railway.

Margaret's house "did not even have an almond-tree." But her personality was sounding thru her squalor "like a beautiful voice singing in a darkened room." Kitty, the forgotten wife, is a slight, unformed girl beside her, and the cousin, who tells the tale, an unhappy ghost. All three women love "the soldier," and the terror of his lapsed memory is a very real tragedy:

Indeed, grief is not the clear melancholy the young believe it. It is like a siege in a tropical city. The skin dries and the throat parches as tho one were living in the heat of the desert: water and wine taste warm in the mouth and food is of the substance of sand; one snarls at one's company; thoughts prick one thru sleep like mosquitos.

It is a temptation to quote many of the luminous sentences lavished on this brief story. The Freudian theme is presented delicately, with the restraint of fine art and deep feeling. The outcome is as natural as the coming of a gray dawn, after the mystery of darkness. The soul of man is a strange and lonely region peopled by many fantoms; only a great joy or a sharp pain may dispel them.

*The Return of the Soldier*, by Rebecca West.  
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