

Roupy

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From the park came the scent of trees. The river was a black background for the swans. The soldier looked back along the road and wanted to tell the strange young man about how these things touched him, but it was only when you weren't with anyone that you could say these things. He supposed the young man called Peter Doyle was regretting having wasted a day with him. Some day he'd . . .

Back in his room Peter took pencil and paper and wrote «John Hickey — soldier — likes polishing floor — green eyes — will probably —» Then he stopped. He would never know anything of this man, all you knew were scraps of talk. It was terrible not to know what the soldier was thinking or saying now.

Lying awake in bed the soldier wondered whether to pray for a fine day on Wednesday or a wet one. Each would have advantages.

ROUPY

by Karl Eske

On the road leading from St. Quentin to Ham, Signal Unit, 825 was putting up the network for H. Q. They used extra thin poles with the thinnest wire so that progress could be speedy in the wake of the army.

Signalman Karl Folker pushed the poles with a big hammer into the hard crusted earth. Usually this was a boring kind of work but it was different today; he was living in the ecstasy of victory, he felt in himself the pressure of advance and all this was mixed up with and woven into his delight in the blue sky and yellow earth. However, his delight was not without shadows. The uncultivated earth around him, as far as he could see held only trenches, held by the English a couple of hours ago. Now it looked to him as though this earth was eternal, all-knowing in the middle of the war; earth thrown up and trampled down and into which blood was soaking. And there was something invisible too. Do you know the air of March blowing softly over the sunny fields; this air which you seem to drink when you breathe it too deeply, sanity, calling you back to reality?

THIS IS ROUPY, could be read in large, white block letters on a crumpled wall which was all that remained of a little house standing at the entrance to the village of Roupy.

«What cruel irony!» Karl Folker thought, «this description on ruins: THIS IS . . .!» He knew too, that his condition was psychological and that for the most part he was still under the spell of the horror which he had experienced daily during the past weeks of the battle of St. Quentin. He was unable to realise from where this preference of his for the empty ruins of war arose. All he knew or even only felt was that they meant to him, despite their apparent crazed appearance, an insistence to find his lost balance of integrity, in this, the Eternal Now. He was happy when he saw grass grow out of the ruins, or he dreamt how once mankind, relieved from the slavery of war, would rebuild all this — yet one secret the ruins kept; if it was not the symbol of death could it be the song of life and death together, with its Higher Third, Harmony, of and above them?

Karl Folker and his buddies moved on and along the long road of advance among the remains of the village of Roupy. Somewhere around here should be the trucks which had gone ahead with all the baggage. The soldiers were tired and walked loosely; the day had been long and the work hard.

Slowly evening fell and the blue sky of the day changed into the pale colours of dusk. Karl Folker had left the others behind where the men had now camped, and walked alone: he was deep in thought and gazed into the ditch where some soldiers, killed in action — Germans und Englishmen — were lying near cartridge belts and broken machine guns. As he began to walk further on, he saw another young soldier some distance away who gazed as he did at the same spectacle. Though Karl had looked at him fleetingly the impression was sufficient to surprise him. Not that the other soldier was in any way conspicuous; on the contrary. But Karl Folker felt a sudden kinship with the other which he was unable to explain and yet which charmed him all the more. He did not believe that he had seen the other before. He had not even received a fixed impression of what the young soldier looked like though he had turned towards him with a quickly awakened strong susceptibility. Karl's feelings were so unreal and dreamlike that he was not even able to pin down the details of features and lines of the face of the other. Though inexplicable, he sensed that the soldier was exceptionally goodlooking. This impression was strengthened when the other made a full turn and looked at him full in the face with eyes of extraordinary depth.

Only a couple of hours ago the armed forces with their iron, sweat and dust had passed this way. Dead bodies lay still among the ruins; there was blood, drying in the sun and brains were scattered in the road. Karl Folker was not able to connect all this with the fact that here a young man could stand, a young man in all his beauty and life. But the enchantment coming from this unknown soldier by a superhuman law at this hour and this place, drew him irresistibly and he felt strengthened in the knowledge of this feeling being mutual: they felt a sudden clarity and found themselves in a circle of energy, closing them in and lifting them over the limited happenings of their surroundings. So it happened. There was no element of surprise when they walked on together. They spoke of nothing for that might have spoilt their finding of each other. They later talked only of everyday things and then all the more excitingly essential and enchanting they found the sound of their voices, and the awareness of nearness. Their steps were light and like all their other movements were dictated and measured by the mutual fate in whose wake they followed.

There was still the palest of glimmers in the sky when the two arrived at the trucks which were standing the farthest from Roupy. They went into a shed, once part of a smithy and still filled with tools. The shed was so low, one had to bend when moving. They pushed the tools aside, put their blankets on the floor and started a fire — more to enjoy the dancing flames than to create a feeling of warmth.

When their eyes looked at each other in the light, they knew their bodies belonged each to the other. They felt they had known each other in eternal fraternity. They kissed and shivered in their kiss until they were relaxed in their enchantment that had bound them together.

When the fire had died down they put their overcoats over themselves and lay in a tight embrace. Through the defective part of the tiled roof above them

a few stars were shining and the moon shone her beams upon them. They were quite close to each other and breathed the beloved smell of their bodies. They did not hear the noise of an aeroplane, nor the ghostly metal-like singing as it shot downwards that, like a nightmare, lay on thousands at the same hour. Only when a bomb crashed, did the two realise the danger. But they stayed in their embrace. However, the feeling of acute danger to their lives, added to their power in neverending giving and deepened their readiness for receiving. Whilst around them the bombs whizzed round and exploded, they rose the heights of their union until they had become one.

The light of early morning found them awakening still in their embrace. The freshness and cleanliness of their lips told them that their rapture had been complete and knew no staleness. They parted from each other in the knowledge that their experience had been unique and would know no repetition.

During the day Karl Folker did his duty with mechanical punctuality; there was a veil between him and the world. His ears took in the thunder, so well known, from the big guns of the advancing army. There, ahead of him, was the goal of his friend whose regiment had been thrown into battle to relieve another unit. He would never see him again but he was waiting for a sign that would be given as the last manifestation of the law which had governed them during the night at Roupy.

Several days later at the beginning of April, when the German offensive had long since been called to a standstill at Montdidier, the Signal Unit, 825 was erecting connections at Doge, on the fields near Faverolles. The unusual posture of a dead French soldier forced Karl Folker to look at him. He saw the young virile body from whose lips blood had spurted forth and the blue eyes were open as though the dead soldier was still seeing the world around him. His arms were stretched as though he would draw a beloved body into his embrace. Then Karl Folker realised that fate had taken its full course and this dead French soldier was the sign he was waiting for.

Heavy and crushing loneliness descended upon him and he saw the utter futility of all that happened.

(Translated by R.B. and B.W.)

Note: This story from the first world war was published in German in 1924 in DER EIGENE, the first homophile monthly ever published. THE CIRCLE reprinted it in German in 1952.

BOOK-REVIEW

SAM, a novel by Lonnie Coleman, D. McKay Company, Inc., New York, 3.95 dollars.

There is a growing tendency in homosexual novels appearing both in England and in the United States to let the 'gay' hero live 'happely ever after'. We are no longer facing the murder or suicide chapters at the end of such novels, but meet people who — like the hero in «A Way to Love» by James Courage — break up a homosexual relationship for valid reasons of their own. We are finally allowed to meet others like Sam, the publisher-hero of this new American novel who finds in the end what he has been seeking. With courage and in defiance of the laws of society, they accept good fortunes when it is offered to them and