“BEER?”

“Yes, beer.”

I gave the order and the waiter brought the bottles and two glasses. We poured out our own, tipping the glasses and holding the tops of the bottles close to the glass.

“Cheers,” I said.

He nodded. We lifted our glasses and drank.

It was five years since I had seen him, and during that time he had been fighting the war. He had been fighting it right from the beginning up to now and I saw at once how he had changed. From being a young, bouncing boy, he had become someone old and wise and gentle. He had become gentle like a wounded child. He had become old like a tired man of seventy years. He had become so different and he had changed so much that at first it was embarrassing for both of us and it was not easy to know what to say.

He had been flying in France in the early days and he was in Britain during the Battle. He was in the Western Desert when we had nothing and he was in Greece and Crete. He was in Syria and he was at Habbaniya during the rebellion. He was at Alamein. He had been flying in Sicily and in Italy and then he had gone back and flown again from England. Now he was an old man.

He was small, not more than five feet six, and he had a pale, wide-open face which did not hide anything, and a sharp pointed chin. His eyes were bright and dark. They were never still unless they were looking into your own. His hair was black and untidy. There was a wisp of it always hanging down over his forehead; he kept pushing it back with his hand.

For a while we were awkward and did not speak. He was sitting opposite me at the table, leaning forward a little, drawing lines on the dew of the cold beer-glass with his finger. He was looking at the glass, pretending to concentrate upon what he was doing, and to me it seemed as though he had something to say, but that he did not know how to say it. I sat there and picked nuts out of the plate and munched them noisily, pretending that I did not care about anything, not even about making a noise while eating.

Then without stopping his drawing on the glass and without looking up, he said quietly and very slowly, “Oh God, I wish I was a waiter or a whore or something.”

He picked up his glass and drank the beer slowly and all at once, in two swallows. I knew now that there was something on his mind and I knew that he was gathering courage so that he could speak.

“Let’s have another,” I said.

“Yes, let’s have a whisky.”

“All right, whisky.”

I ordered two double Scotches and some soda, and we poured the soda into the Scotch and drank. He picked up his glass and drank, put it down, picked it up again and drank some more. As he put down the glass the second time, he leaned forward and quite suddenly he began to talk.

“You know,” he said, “you know I keep thinking during a raid, when we are running over the target, just as we are going to release our bombs, I keep thinking to myself, shall I just jink a little; shall I swerve a fraction to one side, then my bombs will fall on someone else. I keep thinking, whom shall I make them fall on; whom shall I kill tonight. Which ten, twenty or a hundred people shall I kill tonight. It is all up to me. And now I think about this every time I go out.”

He had taken a small nut and was splitting it into pieces with his thumb-nail as he spoke, looking down at what he was doing because he was embarrassed by his own talk.

He was speaking very slowly. “It would just be a gentle pressure with the ball of my foot upon the rudder-bar; a pressure so slight that I would hardly know that I was doing it, and it would throw the bombs on to a different house and on to other people. It is all up to me, the whole thing is up to me, and each time that I go out I have to decide which ones shall be killed. I can do it with the gentle pressure of the ball of my foot upon the rudder-bar. I can do it so that I don’t even notice that it is being done. I just lean a little to one side because I am shifting my sitting position. That is all I am doing, and then I kill a different lot of people.”

Now there was no dew left upon the face of the glass, but he was still running the fingers of his right hand up and down the smooth surface.

“Yes,” he said, “it is a complicated thought. It is very far-reaching; and when I am bombing I cannot get it out of my mind. You see it is such a gentle pressure with the ball of the foot; just a touch on the rudder-bar and the bomb-aimer wouldn’t even

notice. Each time I go out, I say to myself, shall it be these or shall it be those? Which ones are the worst? Perhaps if I make a little skid to the left I will get a houseful of lousy women-shooting German soldiers, or perhaps if I make that little skid I will miss getting the soldiers and get an old man in a shelter. How can I know? How can anyone know these things?"

He paused and pushed his empty glass away from him into the middle of the table.

"And so I never jink," he added, "at least hardly ever."

"I jinked once," I said, "ground-strafing I thought I'd kill the ones on the other side of the road instead."

"Everybody jinks," he said. "Shall we have another drink?"

"Yes, let's have another."

I called the waiter and gave the order, and while we were waiting, we sat looking around the room at the other people. The place was starting to fill up because it was about six o'clock and we sat there looking at the people who were coming in. They were standing around looking for tables, sitting down, laughing and ordering drinks.

"Look at that woman," I said. "The one just sitting down over there."

"What about her?"

"Wonderful figure," I said. "Wonderful bosom. Look at her bosom."

The waiter brought the drinks.

"Did I ever tell you about Stinker?" he said. "Stinker who?"

"Stinker Sullivan in Malta."

"No.11 "About Stinker's dog?"

"No.11 "Stinker had a dog, a great big Alsatian, and he loved that dog as though it was his father and his mother and everything else he had, and the dog loved Stinker. It used to follow him around everywhere he went, and when he went on ops it used to sit on the tarmac outside the hangars waiting for him to come back. It was called Smith. Stinker really loved that dog. He loved it like his mother and he used to talk to it all day long."

"Lousy whisky," I said.

“Yes, let’s have another.”

We got some more whisky.

“Well anyway,” he went on, “one day the squadron got orders to fly to Egypt. We had to go at once; not in two hours or later in the day, but at once. And Stinker couldn’t find his dog. Couldn’t find Smith anywhere. Started running all over the aerodrome yelling for Smith and going mad yelling at everyone asking where he was and yelling Smith Smith all over the aerodrome. Smith wasn’t anywhere.”

“Where was he?” I said.

“He wasn’t there and we had to go. Stinker had to go without Smith and he was mad as a hatter. His crew said he kept calling up over the radio asking if they’d found him. All the way to Heliopolis he kept calling up Malta saying, have you got Smith, and Malta kept saying no, they hadn’t.”

“This whisky is really terrible,” I said.

“Yes. We must have some more.”

We had a waiter who was very quick.

“I was telling you about Stinker,” he said.

“Yes, tell me about Stinker.”

“Well, when we got to Egypt he wouldn’t talk about anything except Smith. He used to walk around acting as though the dog was always with him. Damn fool walked around saying, “Come on, Smith, old boy come on,’ and he kept looking down and talking to him as he walked along. Kept reaching down and patting the air and stroking this bloody dog that wasn’t there.”

“Where was it?”

” Malta, I suppose. Must have been in Malta.”

“Isn’t this awful whisky?”

“Terrible. We must have some more when we’ve finished this.”

“Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

“Waiter. Oh waiter. Yes; again.”

“So Smith was in Malta.”

“Yes,” he said. “And this damn fool Stinker Sullivan went on like this right up to the time he was killed.”

“Must have been mad.”

“He was. Mad as a hatter. You know once he walked into the Sporting Club at Alexandria at drinking time.”

“That wasn’t so mad.”

“He walked into the big lounge and as he went in he held the door open and started calling his dog. Then when he thought the dog had come in he closed the door and started walking right down the length of the room, stopping every now and then and looking round and saying, “Come on, Smith, old boy, come on.’ He kept flipping his fingers. Once he got down under a table where two men and two women were drinking. He got on to his hands and knees and said, “Smith, come on out of there; come here at once,’ and he put out his hand and started dragging nothing at all from under the table. Then he apologized to the people at the table. “This is the hell of a dog,’ he said to them. You should have seen their faces. He went on like that all down the room and when he came to the other end he held the door open for the dog to go out and then went out after it.”

“Man was mad.”

“Mad as a hatter. And you should have seen their faces. It was full of people drinking and they didn’t know whether it was them who were crazy or whether it was Stinker. They kept looking up at each other to make sure that they weren’t the only ones who couldn’t see the dog. One man dropped his drink.”

“That was awful.”

“Terrible.”

The waiter came and went. The room was full of people now, all sitting at little tables, talking and drinking and wearing their uniforms. The pilot poked the ice down into his glass with his finger.

“He used to jink too,” he said.

“Who?”

“Stinker. He used to talk about it.”

“Jinking isn’t anything,” I said. “It’s like not touching the cracks on the pavement when you’re walking along.”

“Balls. That’s just personal. Doesn’t affect anyone else.”

“Well, it’s like car-waiting.”

“What’s car-waiting?”

“I always do it,” I said.

“What is it?”

“Just as you’re going to drive off, you sit back and count twenty, then you drive off.”

“You’re mad too,” he said. “You’re like Stinker.”

“It’s a wonderful way to avoid accidents. I’ve never had one in a car yet; at least, not a bad one.”

“You’re drunk.”

“No, I always do it.”

“Why?”

“Because then if someone was going to have stepped off the kerb in front of your car, you won’t hit them because you started later. You were delayed because you counted twenty, and the person who stepped off the kerb whom you would have hit-you missed him.”

“Why?”

“He stepped off the kerb long before you got there because you counted twenty.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“I know it’s a good idea.”

“It’s a bloody marvellous idea.”

“I’ve saved lots of lives. And you can drive straight across intersections because the car you would have hit has already gone by. It went by just a little earlier because you delayed yourself by counting twenty.”

“Marvellous.”

“Isn’t it?”

“But it’s like jinking,” he said. “You never really know what would have happened.”

“I always do it,” I said.

We kept right on drinking.

“Look at that woman,” I said.

“The one with the bosom?”

“Yes, marvellous bosom.”

He said slowly, “I bet I’ve killed lots of women more beautiful than that one.”

“Not lots with bosoms like that.”

“I’ll bet I have. Shall we have another drink?”

“Yes, one for the road.”

“There aren’t any other women with bosoms like that,” I said. “Not in Germany anyway.”

“Oh yes there are. I’ve killed lots of them.”

“All right. You’ve killed lots of women with wonderful bosoms.”

He leaned back and waved his hand around the room. “See all the people in this room,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Wouldn’t there be a bloody row if they were all suddenly dead; if they all suddenly fell off their chairs on to the floor dead?”

“What about it?”

“Wouldn’t there be a bloody row?”

“Certainly there’d be a row.”

“If all the waiters got together and put stuff in all the drinks and everyone died.”

“There’d be a godalmighty row.”

“Well, I’ve done that hundreds of times. I’ve killed more people than there are in this room hundreds of times. So have you.”

“Lots more,” I said. “But that’s different.”

“Same sort of people. Men and women and waiters. All drinking in a pub.”

“That’s different.”

“Like hell it is. Wouldn’t there be a bloody row if it happened here?”

“Bloody awful row.”

“But we’ve done it. Lots of times.”

“Hundreds of times,” I said. “This is nothing.”

“This is a lousy place.”

“Yes, it’s lousy. Let’s go somewhere else.”

“Finish our drinks.”

We finished our drinks and we both tried to pay the bill, so we tossed for it and I won. It came to sixteen dollars and twenty-five cents. He gave the waiter a two-dollar tip.

We got up and walked around the tables and over to the door.

“Taxi,” he said.

“Yes, must have a taxi.”

There wasn’t a doorman. We stood out on the kerb waiting for a taxi to come along

and he said, “This is a good town.”

“Wonderful town,” I said. I felt fine. It was dark outside, but there were a few street-lamps, and we could see the cars going by and the people walking on the other side of the street. There was a thin, quiet drizzle falling, and the wetness on the black street shone yellow under the lights of the cars arid under the street-lamps. The tyres of the cars hissed on the wet surface.

“Let’s go to a place which has lots of whisky,” he said. “Lots of whisky and a man with egg on his beard serving it.”

“Fine.”

“Somewhere where there are no other people but just us and the man with egg on his beard. Either that.”

“Yes,” I said. “Either that or what?”

“Or a place with a hundred thousand people in it.”

“Yes,” I said. “OK.”

We stood there waiting and we could see the lights of the cars as they came round the bend over to the left, coming towards us with the tyres swishing on the wet surface and going past us up the road to the bridge which goes over the river. We could see the drizzle falling through the beams of their headlights and we stood there waiting for a taxi.