

THE SECRET BATTLE

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The secret battle by A. P. Herbert

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BY

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I AM going to write down some of the history of Harry Penrose, because I do not think full justice has been done to him, and because there must be many other young men of his kind who flung themselves into this war at the beginning of it, and have gone out of it after many sufferings with the unjust and ignorant condemnation of their fellows. At times, it may be, I shall seem to digress into the dreary commonplaces of all war-chronicles, but you will never understand the ruthless progression of Penrose's tragedy without some acquaintance with each chapter of his life in the army.

He joined the battalion only a few days before we left Plymouth for Gallipoli, a shy, intelligent-looking person, with smooth, freckled skin and quick, nervous movements; and although he was at once posted to my

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company we had not become at all intimate when we steamed at last into Mudros Bay. But he had interested me from the first, and at intervals in the busy routine of a troopship passing without escort through submarine waters, I had been watching him and delighting in his keenness and happy disposition.

It was not my first voyage through the Mediterranean, though it was the first I had made in a transport, and I liked to see my own earlier enthusiasm vividly reproduced in him. Cape Spartel and the first glimpse of Africa ; Tangiers and Tarifa and all that magical hour's steaming through the narrow waters with the pink and white houses hiding under the hills ; Gibraltar Town shimmering and asleep in the noonday sun ; Malta and the bumboat women, carozzes swaying through the narrow, chattering streets ; cool drinks at cafés in a babel of strange tongues ; all these were to Penrose part of the authentic glamour of the East ; and he said so. I might have told him, with the fatuous pomp of wider experience, that they were in truth but a very distant reflection of the genuine East ; but I did not. For it was refreshing

to see any one so frankly confessing to the sensations of adventure and romance. To other members of the officers' mess the spectacle of Gibraltar from the sea may have been more stimulating than the spectacle of Southend (though this is doubtful); but it is certain that few of them would have admitted the grave impeachment.

At Malta some of us spent an evening ashore, and sat for a little in a tawdry, riotous little café, where two poor singing women strove vainly to make themselves heard above the pandemonium of clinked glasses and bawled orders; there we met many officers newly returned from the landing at Cape Helles, some of them with slight bodily wounds, but all of them with grievous injury staring out of their eyes. Those of them who would speak at all were voluble with anecdotes of horror and blood. Most of our own party had not yet lost the light-hearted mood in which men went to the war in those days; the 'picnic' illusion of war was not yet dispelled; also, individually, no doubt, we had that curious confidence of the un-blooded soldier that none of these strange, terrible things could ever actually happen to

us ; we should for ever hang upon the pleasant fringes of war, sailing in strange seas, and drinking in strange towns, but never definitely entangled in the more crude and distasteful circumstances of battle. And if there were any of us with a secret consciousness that we deceived ourselves, to-night was no time to tear away the veil. Let there be lights and laughter and wine ; to-morrow, if need be, let us be told how the wounded had drowned in the wired shallows, and reckon the toll of that unforgettable exploit and the terrors that were still at work. And so we would not be dragooned into seriousness by these messengers from the Peninsula ; but rather, with no injury to their feelings, laughed at their croakings and continued to drink.

But Harry Penrose was different. He was all eagerness to hear every detail, hideous and heroic.

There was one officer present, from the 29th Division, a man about thirty, with a tanned, melancholy face and great solemn eyes, which, for all the horrors he related, seemed to have something yet more horrible hidden in their depths. Him Harry plied