

Title

Pied Piper

By
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Woodstar Publisher, 2015

About this eBook

“ *Pied Piper* ” by Nevil Shute

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BISBN 978-999-2727-04-15 (pdf)

BISBN 978-999-2727-05-15 (mobi)

BISBN 978-999-2727-06-15 (ePub)

Published in electronic format, March, 2015 by Woodstar Publisher S. A.

Available electronically at ***eBookstore Bird***.

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PIED PIPER

Chapter 1

His name is John Sidney Howard, and he is a member of my club in London. I came in for dinner that night at about eight o'clock, tired after a long day of conferences about my aspect of the war. He was just entering the club ahead of me, a tall and rather emaciated man of about seventy, a little unsteady on his feet. He tripped over the doormat as he went in and stumbled forward; the hall porter jumped out and caught him by the elbow.

He peered down at the mat and poked it with his umbrella. "Damned thing caught my toe," he said. "Thank you, Peters. Getting old, I suppose."

The man smiled. "Several of the gentlemen have caught their foot there recently, sir," he said. "I was speaking to the steward about it only the other day."

The old man said, "Well, speak to him again and go on speaking till he has it put right. One of these days you'll have me falling dead at your feet. You wouldn't like that to happen - eh?" He smiled quizzically.

The porter said, "No, sir. We shouldn't like that to happen."

"I should think not. Not the sort of thing one wants to see happen in a club. I don't want to die on a doormat. And I don't want to die in a lavatory, either. Remember the time that Colonel Macpherson died in the lavatory, Peters?"

"I do, sir. That was very distressing."

"Yes." He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Well, I don't want to die that way either. See he gets that mat put right. Tell him I said so."

"Very good, sir."

The old man moved away. I had been waiting behind him while all this was going on because the porter had my letters. He gave them to me at the wicket, and I looked them through. "Who was that?" I asked idly.

He said, "That was Mr. Howard, sir."

"He seemed to be very much concerned about his latter end."

The porter did not smile. "Yes, sir. Many of the gentlemen talk in that way as they get on. Mr. Howard has been a member here for a great many years."

I said more courteously, "Has he? I don't remember seeing him about."

The man said, "He has been abroad for the last few months, I think, sir. But he seems to have aged a great deal since he came back. Getting rather frail now, I'm afraid."

I turned away. "This bloody war is hard on men of his age," I said.

"Yes, sir. That's very true."

I went in to the club, slung my gasmask on to a peg, unbuckled my revolver belt and hung it up, and crowned the lot with my cap. I strolled over to the tape and studied the latest news. It was neither good nor bad. Our Air Force was still knocking hell out of the Ruhr; Rumania was still desperately bickering with her neighbours. The news was as it had been for three months, since France was overrun.

I went and had my dinner. Howard was already in the dining room; apart from us the room was very nearly empty. He had a waiter serving him who was very nearly as old as he was himself, and as he ate his dinner the waiter stood beside his table and chatted to him. I could hardly help overhearing the subject of their conversation. They were talking about cricket, re-living the Test Matches of 1925.

Because I was eating alone I finished before Howard, and went up to pay my bill at the desk. I said to the cashier, "That waiter over there - what's his name?"

"Jackson, sir?"

"That's right. How long has he been here?"

"Oh, he's been here a long time. All his life, you might say. Eighteen ninety-five or ninety-six he come here, I believe."

"That's a very long time."

The man smiled as he gave me my change. "It is, sir. But Porson - he's been here longer than that."

I went upstairs to the smoking room and stopped before a table littered with periodicals. With idle interest I turned over a printed list of members. Howard, I saw, had joined the club in 1896. Master and man, then, had been rubbing shoulders all their lives.

I took a couple of illustrated weeklies, and ordered coffee. Then I crossed the room to where the two most comfortable chairs in my club stand side by side, and prepared to spend an hour of idleness before returning to my flat. In a few minutes there was a step beside me and Howard lowered his long body in to the other chair. A boy, unasked, brought him coffee and brandy.

Presently he spoke. He said quietly, "It really is a most extraordinary thing that you can't get a decent cup of coffee in this country. Even in a club like this they can't make coffee."

I laid down my paper. If the old man wanted to talk to me, I had no great objection. All day I had been working with my eyes in my old-fashioned office, reading reports and writing dockets. It would be good to take off my spectacles for a little time and un-focus my eyes. I was very tired.

I felt in my pocket for my spectacle case. I said, "A chap who deals in coffee once told me that ground coffee won't keep in our climate. It's the humidity, or something."

"Ground coffee goes off in any climate," he said dogmatically. "You never get a proper cup of coffee if you buy it like that. You have to buy the beans and grind it just before you make it. But that's what they won't do."

We went on talking about coffee and chickory and things like that for a time. Then by a natural association we talked about the brandy. He approved of the club brandy. "I used to have an interest in a wine business," he said. "A great many years ago, in Exeter. But I disposed of it soon after the last war."

I gathered that he was a member of the Wine Committee of the club. I said, "It must be rather interesting to run a business like that."

"Oh, certainly," he said with relish. "Good wine is a most interesting study - most interesting, I can assure you."

We were practically the only people in the long, tall room. We spoke quietly as we lay relaxed beside each other in our chairs, with long pauses between sentences. When you are tired there is pleasure in a conversation taken in sips, like old brandy.

I said, "I used to go to Exeter a good deal when I was a boy."

The old man said, "I know Exeter very well indeed. I lived there for forty years."

"My uncle had a house at Starcross." And I told him the name.

He smiled. "I used to act for him. We were great friends. But that's a long time ago now."

"Act for him?"

"My firm used to act for him. I was a partner in a firm of solicitors, Fulljames and Howard." And then, reminiscent, he told me a good deal about my uncle and about the family, about his horses and about his tenants. The talk became more and more a monologue; a word or two from me slipped in now and then kept him going. In his quiet voice he built up for me a picture of the days that now are gone forever, the days that I remember as a boy.

I lay smoking quietly in my chair, with the fatigue soaking out of me. It was a perfect godsend to find somebody who could talk of other things beside the war. The minds of most men revolve round this war or the last war, and there is a nervous urge in them which brings the conversation round to war again. But war seems to have passed by this lean old man. He turned for his interests to milder topics.

Presently we were talking about fishing. He was an ardent fisherman, and I have fished a little. Most naval officers take a rod and a gun with them in the ship. I had fished on odd afternoons ashore in many parts of the world, usually with the wrong sort of fly and unsuccessfully, but he was an expert. He had fished from end to end of these islands and over a great part of the Continent. In the old days the life of a country solicitor was not an exacting one.

When he spoke of fishing and of France, it put me in mind of an experience of my own. "I saw some chaps in France doing a damn funny sort of fly fishing," I said. "They had a great bamboo pole about twenty-five feet long with the line tied on the end of it - no reel. They used wet flies, and trailed them about in rough waters."

He smiled. "That's right," he said. "That's how they do it. Where did you see them fishing like that?"

"Near Gex," I said. "Practically in Switzerland."

He smiled reflectively. "I know that country very well - very well indeed," he said. "Saint-Claude. Do you know Saint-Claude?"

I shook my head. "I don't know the Jura. That's somewhere over by Morez, isn't it?"

"Yes - not very far from Morez." He was silent for a few moments; we rested together in that quiet room. Presently he said, "I wanted to try that wet-fly fishing in those streams this summer. It's not bad fun, you know. You have to know where the fish go for their food. It's not just a matter of dabbing the flies about anywhere. You've got to place them just as carefully as a dry fly."

"Strategy," I said.

"That's the word. The strategy is really just the same."

There was another of those comfortable pauses. Presently I said, "It'll be some time before we can go fishing out there again." So it was I who turned the conversation to the war. It's difficult to keep off the subject.

He said, "Yes - it's a very great pity. I had to come away before the water was fit to fish. It's not much good out there before the very end of May. Before then the water is all muddy and the rivers are running very full - the thawing snows, you know. Later than that, in August, there's apt to be very little water to fish in, and it gets too hot. The middle of June is the best time."

I turned my head. "You went out there this year?" Because the end of May that he had spoken of so casually was the time when the Germans had been pouring into France through Holland and Belgium, when we had been retreating on Dunkirk and when the French were being driven back to Paris and beyond. It didn't seem to be a terribly good time for an old man to have gone fishing in the middle of France.

He said, "I went out there in April. I meant to stay for the whole of the summer, but I had to come away."

I stared at him, smiling a little. "Have any difficulty in getting home?"

"No," he said. "Not really."

"You had a car, I suppose?"

"No," he said. "I didn't have a car. I don't drive very well, and I had to give it up some years ago. My eyesight isn't what it used to be."

"When did you leave Jura, then?" I asked.

He thought for a minute. "June the eleventh," he said at last. "That was the day, I think."

I wrinkled my brows in perplexity. "Were the trains all right?" Because in the course of my work I had heard a good deal about conditions in France during those weeks.

He smiled. "They weren't very good," he said reflectively.

"How did you get along, then?"

He said, "I walked a good deal of the way."

As he spoke, there was a measured crump ... crump ... crump ... crump as a stick of four fell, possibly a mile away. The very solid building swayed a little, and the floors and windows creaked. We waited, tense and still. Then came the undulating wail of the sirens, and the sharp crack of gunfire from the park. The raid was on again.

* * * * *

"Damn and blast," I said. "What do we do now?"

The old man smiled patiently. "I'm going to stay where I am."

There was good sense in that. It's silly to be a hero to evade discomfort, but there were three very solid floors above us. We talk about it, as one does, studying the ceiling and wondering whether it would support the weight of the roof. Our reflections did not stir us from our chairs.

A young waiter came in to the room, carrying a torch and with a tin hat in his hand.

He said, "The shelter is in the basement, through the buttery door, sir."

Howard said, "Do we have to go there?"

"Not unless you wish to."

I said, "Are you going down there, Andrews?"

"No, sir. I'm on duty, in case of incendiary bombs, and that."

"Well," I said, "get on and do whatever you've got to do. Then, when you've got a minute to spare, bring me a glass of Marsala. But go and do your job first."

Howard said, "I think that's a very good idea. You can bring me a glass of Marsala, too - between the incendiary bombs. You'll find me sitting here."

"Very good, sir."

He went away, and we relaxed again. It was about half-past ten. The waiter had turned out all the lights except for the one reading lamp behind our heads, so that we sat there in a little pool of soft yellow light in the great shadowy room. Outside, the traffic noises, little enough in London at that time, were practically stilled. A few police whistles shrilled in the distance and a car went by at a high speed; then silence closed down upon the long length of Pall Mall, but for some gunfire in the distance.

Howard asked me, "How long do you suppose we shall have to sit here?"

"Till it's over, I suppose. The last one went on for four hours." I paused, and then I said, "Will any one be anxious about you?"

He said rather quickly, "Oh, no. I live alone, you see - in chambers."

I nodded. "My wife knows I'm here. I thought of ringing her up, but it's not a very good thing to clutter up the lines during a raid."

"They ask you not to do that," he said.

Presently Andrews brought the Marsala. When he had gone away, Howard lifted up his glass and held it to the light. Then he remarked, "Well, there are less comfortable ways of passing a raid."

I smiled. "That's true enough." And then I turned my head. "You said you were in France when all this started up. Did you come in for many air raids there?"

He put his glass down, seven eighths full. "Not real raids. There was some bombing and machine gunning of the roads, but nothing very terrible."

He spoke so quietly about it that it took a little time for me to realize what he had said. But then I ventured,

"It was a bit optimistic to go to France for a quiet fishing holiday, in April of this year."

"Well, I suppose it was," he replied thoughtfully. "But I wanted to go."

* * * * *

He said he had been very restless, that he had suffered from an urge, an imperious need to get away and to go and do something different. He was a little hesitant about his reasons for wanting to get away so badly, but then he told me that he hadn't been able to get a job to do in the war.

They wouldn't have him in anything, I imagine because he was very nearly seventy years old. When war broke out he tried at once to get into the Special Constables; with his knowledge of the Law it seemed to him that police duty would suit him best. The police thought otherwise, having no use for constables at his age. Then he tried to become an Air Raid Warden, and suffered another disappointment. And then he tried all sorts of things.

It's very difficult for old people, for old men particularly, in a war. They cannot grow accustomed to the fact that there is little they can do to help; they suffer from frustration, and the war eats into them. Howard fell into the habit of ordering his life by the news bulletins upon the wireless. Each day he got up in time to hear the seven o'clock news, had his bath, shaved, and dressed and was down to hear the eight o'clock, and went on so all day till after the midnight news, when he retired to bed. Between the bulletins he worried about the news, and read every paper he could lay his hands upon till it was time to turn the wireless on again.

He lived in the country when the war broke out. He had a house at Market Saffron, not very far from Colchester. He had moved there from Exeter four years previously after the death of his wife; as a boy he had been brought up in Market Saffron and he still had a few acquaintances in the neighbourhood. He went back there to spend the last years of his life. He bought an old country house, not very large, standing in about three acres of garden and paddock.

His married daughter came back from America and lived with him in 1938, bringing her little boy. She was married to a New York insurance man called Costello, vice-president of his corporation and very comfortably off. She'd had a spot of bother with him. Howard didn't know the ins and outs of it and didn't bother about it much; privately he was of the opinion that his daughter was to blame for the trouble. He was fond of his son-in-law, Costello. He

didn't understand him in the least, but he liked him very well.

That's how he was living when the war broke out, with his daughter Enid and her little boy Martin, that his father would insist on calling Junior. That puzzled the old man very much.

Then the war broke out, and Costello began cabling for them to go back home to Long Island. And in the end, they went. Howard backed up Costello and put pressure on his daughter, in the belief that a woman who is separated from her husband is never very happy. They went, and he was left to live alone at Market Saffron, with occasional week-end visits from his son John, a Squadron Leader in the Royal Air Force.

Costello made a great effort, in cables many hundreds of words long, to get the old man to go too. He wasn't having any. He said that he was afraid of being in the way, that a third party would have spoilt the chance of reconciliation. But his real reason, he admitted, was that he didn't like America. He had crossed the Atlantic to stay with them when they had first been married, and he had no desire to repeat the experience. After nearly seventy years in a more equable climate he found New York intolerably hot and desperately cold in turn, and he missed the little courtesies to which he was accustomed in our feudal life. He liked his son-in-law, he loved his daughter, and her boy was one of the great interests in his life. Not all these motives were sufficient to induce him to exchange the comfort and security of England grappling in battle to the death for the strange discomforts of the land that was at peace.

So Enid and her boy sailed in October. He took them to Liverpool and saw them on the boat, and then he went back home. From then onwards he lived very much alone, though his widowed sister came and stayed with him for three weeks before Christmas, and John paid him several visits from Lincolnshire, where he had a squadron of Wellington bombers.

It was lonely for the old man, of course. In the ordinary way he would have been content with the duck shooting and with his garden. He explained to me that he found his garden really more interesting in the winter than in the summer, because it was then that he could make his alterations. If he wanted to move a tree, or plant a new hedge, or dig out an old one - that was the time to do it. He took great pleasure in his garden, and was always moving things about.

The war spoilt all that. The news bulletins penetrated every moment of his consciousness till he could no longer take pleasure in the simple matters of his country life. He fretted that he could get nothing to do, and almost for the first occasion in his life the time hung heavily upon his hands. He poured his mind out irritably to the vicar one day, and that healer of sick souls suggested that he might take up knitting for the troops.

After that, he took to coming up to London for three days a week. He got himself a little one room flat in bachelor chambers, and took most of his meals at the club. That made things easier for him. Travelling up to London on Tuesday absorbed the best part of a day, and travelling down again on Friday absorbed another one; in the meantime odd duties had accumulated at Market Saffron so that the week end was comparatively busy. In this way he created the illusion that he had enough to do, and he grew happier in consequence. Then, at the beginning of March, something happened that made a great change in his life. He didn't tell me what it was.

After that, he shut up the house at Market Saffron altogether, and came to London

permanently to live mostly at the club. For two or three weeks he was busy enough, but after that time started to lie heavy on his hands again. And still he could get nothing to do in the war.

It was spring by then, and a most lovely spring it was. After the hard winter we had had, it was like opening a door. Each day he went for a walk in Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, and watched the crocuses as they came out, and the daffodils. The club life suited him. He felt as he walked through the park during that marvellous spring that there was a great deal to be said for living in London, provided that you could get away from it from time to time.

As the sun grew stronger, the urge came on him to get away from England altogether for a while.

And really there didn't seem to be any great reason why he should remain in England. The war in Finland was over, and on the western front there seemed to be complete stalemate. Matters in France were quite normal, except that upon certain days of the week you could only have certain kinds of food. It was then that he began to think about the Jura.

The high alpine valleys were too high for him; he had been to Pontresina three years previously and had been very short of breath. But the spring flowers in the French Jura were as beautiful as anything in Switzerland, and from the high ground up above Les Rousses you can see Mont Blanc. He wanted passionately to get where he could see mountains. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills," he said, "from whence cometh my help." That's how he felt about it.

He thought that if he went out there he would be just in time to see the flowers come poking through the snow; if he stayed on for a month or two he would come in for the fishing as the sun got warmer. He looked forward very much to fishing in those mountain streams. Very unspoilt they were, he said, and very fresh and quiet.

He wanted to see the spring, this year - to see as much of it as ever he could. He wanted to see all that new life coming on, replacing what is past. He wanted to soak himself in that. He wanted to see the hawthorn coming out along the river banks, and the first crocuses in the fields. He wanted to see the new green of the rushes by the water's edge gleaming through the dead stuff. He wanted to feel the new warmth of the sun, and the new freshness of the air. He wanted to savour all the spring there was this year - the whole of it. He wanted that more than anything else in the world, because of what had happened.

That's why he went to France.

He had much less difficulty in getting out of the country than he had expected. He went to Cooks, and they told him how to set about it. He had to get an exit permit, and that had to be done personally. The man in the office asked him what he wanted to leave the country for.

Old Howard coughed at him. "I can't stand the spring weather in England," he said. "I've been indoors most of the winter. My doctor says I've got to get into a warmer climate." A complacent doctor had given him a certificate.

"I see," said the official. "You want to go down to the south of France?"

"Not right down to the south," he said. "I shall spend a few days in Dijon and go to the Jura as soon as the snow is off the ground."

The man wrote out a permit for three months, upon the grounds of health. So that wasn't very difficult.

Then the old man spent a deliriously happy two days with Hardy's, the fishing tackle makers in Pall Mall. He took it gently, half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the afternoon; in between he fingered and turned over his purchases, dreamed about fishing, and made up his mind what he would buy next... .

He left London on the morning of April the 10th, the very morning that the news came through that Germany had invaded Denmark and Norway. He read the news in his paper in the train on the way to Dover, and it left him cold. A month previously he would have been frantic over it, jumping from wireless bulletin to newspaper and back to the wireless again. Now it passed him by as something that hardly concerned him any more. He was much more concerned whether he had brought with him enough gut casts and points. True, he was stopping for a day or two in Paris, but French gut, he said, is rotten stuff. They don't understand, and they make it so thick that the fish can't help seeing it, even with a wet fly.

His journey to Paris was not very comfortable. He got on to the steamer in Folkestone harbour at about eleven in the morning, and there they sat till the late afternoon. Trawlers and drifters and paddle steamers and yachts, all painted grey and manned by naval ratings, came in and out of the harbour, but the cross-Channel steamer stayed at the quay. The vessel was crowded, and there weren't enough seats for lunch, and not enough food if there had been seats. Nobody could tell them what they were stopping for, although it was a pretty safe guess that it was a submarine.

At about four o'clock there were a number of heavy explosions out at sea, and soon after that they cast off and got away.

It was quite dark when they got to Boulogne, and things were rather disorganized. In the dim light the Douane took an age to pass the luggage, there was no train to meet the boat, and not enough porters to go round. He had to take a taxi to the station and wait for the next train to Paris, at about nine o'clock. It was a local train, crowded, and running very late. It was after one o'clock when they finally did get to Paris.

They had taken eighteen hours over a journey that takes six in normal times. Howard was tired, very tired indeed. His heart began to trouble him at Boulogne and he noticed people looking at him queerly; he knew that meant that he had gone a bad colour. However, he had a little bottle with him that he carried for that sort of incident; he took a dose of that when he got into the train and felt a good deal better.

He went to the Hotel Girodet, a little place just off the Champs Elysées near the top, that he had stayed at before. Most of the staff he knew had been called up for military service, but they were very kind to him and made him comfortable. He stayed in bed till lunch time the first day and rested in his room most of the afternoon, but next morning he was feeling quite himself, and went out to the Louvre.

All his life he had found great satisfaction in pictures - real pictures, as he called them, to

distinguish them from impressionism. He was particularly fond of the Flemish school. He spent some time that morning sitting on a bench in front of Chardin's still life of pipes and drinking vessels on a stone table. And then, he told me, he went and had a look at the artist's portrait of himself. He took great pleasure in the strong, kind face of the man who had done such very good work, over two hundred years ago.

That's all he saw that morning at the Louvre. Just that chap, and his work.

He went on next day towards the Jura. He was still feeling a little shaky after the fatigue of the crossing, so that day he only went as far as Dijon. At the Gare de Lyons he bought a paper casually and looked it over, though he had lost all interest in the war. There was a tremendous amount of bother over Norway and Denmark, which didn't seem to him to be worth quite so much attention. It was a good long way away.

Normally that journey takes about three hours, but the railways were in a bad state of disorganization. They told him that it was because of troop movements. The Rapide was an hour late in leaving Paris, and it lost another two hours on the way. It was nearly dinner time when he reached Dijon, and he was very thankful that he had decided to stop there. He had his bags carried to a little hotel just opposite the station, and they gave him a very good dinner in the restaurant. Then he took a cup of coffee and a Cointreau in the café and went up to bed at about half past nine, not too tired to sleep well.

He was really feeling very well next day, better than he had felt for a long time past. The change of air, added to the change of scene, had done that for him. He had coffee in his room and got up slowly; he went down at about ten o'clock and the sun was shining, and it was warm and fresh out in the street. He walked up through the town to the Hôtel de Ville and found Dijon just as he remembered it from his last visit, about eighteen months before. There was the shop where they had bought their berets, and he smiled again to see the name. Au Pauvre Diable. And there was the shop where John had bought himself a pair of skis, but he didn't linger there for very long.

He had his lunch at the hotel and took the afternoon train on into the Jura; he found that the local trains were running better than the main line ones. He changed at Andelot and took the branch line up into the hills. All afternoon the little engine puffed along its single track, pulling its two old coaches through a country dripping with thawing snow. The snow slithered and cascaded off the slopes into the little streams that now were rushing torrents for a brief season. The pines were shooting with fresh green, but the meadows were still deep in a grey, slushy mess. In the high spots of the fields where grass was showing, he noticed a few crocuses. He'd come at the right time, and he was very, very glad of it.

The train stopped for half an hour at Morez, and then went on to Saint-Claude. It got there just at dusk. He had sent a telegram from Dijon to the Hôtel de la Haute Montagne at Cidoton asking them to send a car down for him, because it's eleven miles and you can't always get a car in Saint-Claude. The hotel car was there to meet him, a ten-year-old Chrysler driven by the concierge, who was a diamond cutter when he wasn't working at the hotel. But Howard only found that out afterwards; the man had come to the hotel since his last visit.

He took the old man's bags and put them in the back of the car, and they started off for Cidoton. For the first five miles the road runs up a gorge, turning in hairpin bends up the side of the mountain. Then, on the high ground, it runs straight over the meadows and between the

woods. After a winter spent in London, the air was unbelievably sweet. Howard sat beside the driver, but he was too absorbed in the beauty of that drive in the fading light to talk much to him. They spoke once about the war, and the driver told him that almost every able-bodied man in the district had been called up. He himself was exempt, because the diamond dust had got into his lungs.

The Hôtel de la Haute Montagne is an old coaching house. It has about fifteen bedrooms, and in the season it's a skiing centre. Cidoton is a tiny hamlet - fifteen or twenty cottages, no more. The hotel is the only house of any size in the place; the hills sweep down to it all round, fine slopes of pasture dotted here and there with pinewoods. It's very quiet and peaceful in Cidoton, even in the winter season when the village is filled with young French people on their skis. That was as it had been when he was there before.

It was dark when they drew up at the hotel. Howard went slowly up the stone steps to the door, the concierge following behind him with the bags. The old man pushed open the heavy oak door and went into the hall. By his side, the door leading into the estaminet flew open, and there was Madame Lucard, buxom and cheerful as she had been the year before, with the children round her and the maids grinning over her shoulder. Lucard himself was away with the Chasseurs Alpains.

They gave him a vociferous French welcome. He had not thought to find himself so well remembered, but it's not very common for English people to go deep into the Jura. They chattered at him nineteen to the dozen. Was he well? Had he made a good crossing of the Manche? He had stopped in Paris? And in Dijon also? That was good. It was very tiring to travel in this sale war. He had brought a fishing rod with him this time, instead of skis? That was good. He would take a little glass of Pernod with Madame?

And then, Monsieur votre fils, he was well too?

Well, they had to know. He turned away from her blindly. "Madame," he said, "mon fils est mort. Il est tombé de son avion, au-dessus de Heligoland Bight."

Chapter 2

Howard settled down at Cidoton quite comfortably. The fresh mountain air did him a world of good; it revived his appetite and brought him quiet, restful sleep at night. The little rustic company of the estaminet amused and interested him, too. He knew a good deal of rural matters and he spoke good, slightly academic French. He was a good mixer and the farmers accepted him into their company, and talked freely to him of the matters of their daily life. It may be that the loss of his son helped to break the ice.

He did not find them noticeably enthusiastic for the war.

He was not happy for the first fortnight, but he was probably happier than he would have been in London. While the snow lasted, the slopes were haunted for him. In his short walks along the roads before the woodland paths became available, at each new slope of snow he thought to see John come hurtling over the brow, stem-christie to a traverse, and vanish in a white flurry that sped down into the valley. Sometimes the fair-haired French girl, Nicole, who came from Chartres, seemed to be with him, flying along with him in the same flurry of