

POSTPONEMENT

SERGEANT WATSON looked around and only with difficulty were his eyes able to pierce the darkness. He had not long been carried in and the stretcher-bearers had left him. Nobody else seemed to be about and there was no sound of life. As his eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness he saw, or thought he saw, on a level with himself dim shapes on either side and all around. Then he became sure that these were the bodies of other men. He listened for some companionable sound; he strained with eyes and ears. At last he came to the conclusion that he, living, was in the company of the dead. Men asleep, even in good health, punctuate the night with groans, and murmurs and grunts; but here all was silent in a silence undisturbed by any rustle of movement, not even a drawn-out breath. "So these are dead men," he thought, "and this the silence of the grave."

The sergeant supposed that he must have been wounded seriously. No doubt it had been considered useless for the doctors to spend on him time that could be turned to good purpose for the needs of others. Yes, that was it. He would soon be dead, and everything was convenient here for dead men. The dead were all gathered together. Then he went over the events of the last thirty-six hours. They had marched out from Jerusalem to Jericho. He remembered thinking how very desolate the road and countryside had been—just the place where a man might easily fall among robbers. The enemy had been encountered by the railway line, and the beauty of the misty blue mountains of Moab had surprisingly distracted him from the matter-of-fact details of warfare. He still had his eyes lifted up to the mountains, when he had been hit. Then finding himself on the ground, he had suddenly realized that the hot messy liquid oozing from his body was his blood, pumped up violently from somewhere between chest and arm. He had been unable to do anything to it, but after a long time the wound had been sealed by a clot forming on the surface. After what seemed to be hours he had been picked up, and

he had heard someone say, "Send him down to Enab." He supposed this was Enab, the part of Enab reserved for the dead. If he were with the dead, it would be, he realized quite dispassionately, because his state was irremediable by any skill of doctor, surgeon or nurse.

Without any panic, and this surprised him, he began to prepare for death. With simplicity he said over all the prayers he was able to remember. With a curious confidence—and he knew somehow that it was all very strange—he was prepared to drift quite deliberately into sleep with the certainty that his waking would be in eternity. It seemed astonishing that so ordinary a person as Sergeant Watson of the London Regiment should be finding death without its sting and shorn of victory. Of course he was sorry for the sins in his life, and thank God, he had kept up his religious duties. It was all most surprising. One did expect to have to encounter a little fear when death actually beckoned. Anyway, he had done his best to die just in the prepared kind of way he had always hoped and it would be good to sleep now. So he slept.

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He was aware of a large vaulted space half defined by peculiar contrasts of light and shadows. Heaven, he thought at once, appears to be arranged after all very much in the manner of Doré. Suddenly he heard the silver summons of a far off bell and away in the melting distance between two thin spears of light came the words: Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus. Certainly this must be Heaven and there away, so far away, must be the four living creatures of the Apocalypse who rested not night and day singing, "Holy, holy, holy." All the same it was all very familiar; but it was very remarkable that he had arrived so easily. It was rather a surprise that he had not been held up by any turnstiles—a very prosaic thought.

While he was adding his thankful adoration to the cry of the four living creatures, the bell tinkled again. He slewed himself into a painful sitting posture and gave a cry of disappointment.

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He was able to see where he was. The great church was packed with prostrate men, most of them in the unmistakable rigidity of death. At the far end was the altar with two candles alight and, in the midst, a priest stretching up his hands as the bell tinkled once more. Sergeant Watson looked up: "So I am to wait, Lord?"

JOHN PREEDY.