

TRUANT

MAURICE ROWDON.

Full length film story.

The story begins with the evacuation of school children from London in the summer of 1939. The war has not yet broken out. For JOHN, who is already eighteen, it is a welcome change of air: he looks longingly at the Hampshire hills and woods when the train arrives. This is just like a holiday, but a strange and ecstatic one---a holiday from which he will never go back, a trip inot a life about which he can predict absolutely nothing, as vague as the marvellous warm haze that hangs over the fields as they assemble in groups for their billets. He will be called up soon, if there's a war. But he feels there won't be. Everybody feels the same. Yet there is something wild in Hitler's speeches; and something ineffectual in Chamberlain's, that tell him that war will come. Yet the sense of a holiday remains. It is in the air. But he remembers his parents. His last glimpse of the London backstreet where he lives was a troubling one.

The village has a pond and elm trees: the roads are virtually empty of traffic---business has slowed up, which adds to the sense of holiday and peace. He is given a billet with three or four other boys: the woman who owns the house is a drunkard, which suits him and the other boys wonderfully; they take her cigarettes, which she doesn't notice, and help her down her sherry, which amuses her. She slurs her words, sitting at the kitchen table, talking about the husband who was brutal to her, and seeming to enjoy the idea of brutality. He discovers the war means freedom, but perhaps a freedom too broad---it brings feathers to his belly. He goes for walks. The leisured weeks pass. War is declared but nothing changes. His mother writes that the air raid siren sounded just as war was being declared, but nothing happened.

He returns to London for a 'holiday', this time back into his past. Croydon aerodrome is bombed while he is there. He is walking home from the library when the siren goes. The streets are utterly deserted; not a soul their whole length. He has never seen the streets like this before. He passes a solitary man leaning against his gate in the silence, and he says to him in a half hysterical merriment, 'Another false alarm.' But the man simply stares before him, with a set face, not even glancing in JOHN's direction. And in that man's face JOHN reads the whole of the next four years.

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When he returns to the country a girl's school has moved near by, of a higher class than his own. Some of the senior

boys of his 'poor' school are invited by one or two liberal-minded teachers of the girl's school to tea. He is one of them. He meets the geography teacher and his wife: he likes their easy behaviour; their house is cluttered up with babies and dirty washing up and books. For them inviting his class was a kind of social experiment: he is their reward; they find him bright and imafinative. One evening, in the dusk, when they are all sitting round in the teacher's house, with the windows open, at the foot of a steep green hill, not a sound coming from outside, KATHY comes in and says a brief and awkward 'Hullo', and sits herself down without a word. She is one of the girls from the teacher's school. JOHN watches her in the darkness---black hair that makes her face seem to shine, and gleaming teeth and eyes: they are both quite still, while the others talk: they say nothing, and she leaves. Softly the geography man's wife asks him, 'Did you like Cathy?' and he says briefly, thinking that he is revealing nothing, 'Yes.'

JOHN and CATHY meet again. They go for a walk. He falls in love. They sit on a path in the woods at dawn, after being at the teacher's house all night, talking: she throws twigs at him playfully; they kiss. They creep into the kitchen of his billet just as the sun is coming up: they are cold and hungry, he wraps his thick jacket round her. The copper pans gleam on the wall in the first sun.

One morning he is lying in bed at the teacher's house and suddenly writes on a piece of paper, 'I am happy. I want to write this now so that I always know, whatever happens to me in the future. I am happy, now.' He tells KATHY on one of their walks that it feels like playing truant, from reality. The war has all but disappeared. Yet something must happen. This makes their love all the more ecstatic. They have long hours at night in each other's arms, with the window open at their side. He listens to the news on the radio that Russia has allied herself with nazi Germany, and sees what must happen for the first time: doom seems to hang over the mahogany wireless set, in the empty sitting room of his billet. England will be invaded: he is trained, desultorily, a little, to put sugar in German petrol tanks, cut trees across the road, destroy the little rustic bridges. Yet he can't believe the idyll will end. It is endless: no time is involved. KATHY gets into trouble at school for staying out at night, always rushing off in the afternoons. Their love has a kind of local fame.

KATHY is a tomboy, gay, quick, with bright cheeks that swell like two apples when she smiles. She is from an intellectual family: and a communist, like her mother. The time comes for both she and JOHN to leave school. They go to London. For a time she lives at his parents' home with him. It is her first experience of working class life: she is entranced,

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fascinated by the people her mother has always idolised. She loves the little rituals of teatime, in the snug, tiny back room overlooking the garden. Her communist conscience has begun to trouble, since she left school: she must find work in a factory, she must do something useful. She knows that the pact with Russia will not last long: her mother has been quite clear about that. She must do something against nazism, and towards the revolution that will certainly come to England when the war is over. She and JOHN sit in the upstairs bedroom. One evening, quite unaware of what he is saying, he murmurs to her, 'You know, this can't last.' She says, catching a certain tone in his voice, 'What do you mean?' He says in reply, 'Are we going to marry?' She says, 'I hadn't thought.' 'Yes,' she adds, 'I suppose.' He is silent. 'What's the matter?' she asks him. He says, 'We need our freedom. You might not want to stay with me always. We might want some variety.' She asks, 'Don't you want me any more?' 'Yes, yes. Always.' And they are silent again.

They go to pubs. An eleventh-hour bohemianism has entered English life, a touch of squalor and self-indulgence. They meet all sorts, painters, ballet dancers, theatre people. They tend to live at night. KATHY leaves for a trial week at a factory near Aldershot: when the week is over she returns to the London home but finds no one there; and she has no key; so she pulls up the cover of coal-hole and gets in through the coal cellar. When his parents come home there is a great gossip about it: the neighbours are told: 'Thought we had burglars in!' He comes home and hears it. Then his parents go out to a whist drive. KATHY says, 'John, I've got something to say.' And he goes pale, seeing her face. 'I slept with somebody,' she tells him. 'I went back to the school for a night, and Stan's brother was staying, on leave. It wasn't really sleeping with him. We were naked. We kissed each other, that's all. All over. And said darling. But not more.' He is wild, smacks her face. His own face changes: it loses its simplicity, readiness for joy. Her face becomes set too, as if she has forced some compassion out of herself. She never forgets the smacks he gave her, nor does he. They are no longer really youths. She reminds him about what he had said about their needing variety.

They take a ~~flat~~ ^{flat} together, nearer the West End: flats are going now. The raids start, beginning with the raid on the Docks one Saturday afternoon: in broad sunlight: they watch the tiny gleaming planes in formation high in the sky, like slippery little fish, out of reach to the flack of the aircraft guns. They don't go into a shelter, JOHN and KATHY; the young never do. They sit up at night talking, in drinking parties, with the raids going on outside: the walls shake, there are near-misses, the guns pound away. When there is a the hurtling whistle of a near-miss they smile at each other, sitting on the floor, drinking, smoking.

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He isn't happy: life is bleak. He doesn't know what to do: really he is waiting for his call-up papers, and it doesn't seem worth while getting a job: she starts work in a London factory, and he lives on what she earns. He becomes empty gay and useless: the sight of him with his long hair and extravagant shirts makes her communist conscience wild, especially after eight hours at the factory. He is playing the fool one evening, putting on a spotted cravat and dark glasses, and she screams, 'Take them off! take them off!' and smacks his face, flinging the glasses to the floor. Afterwards, in the contrite silence, she says, 'I enjoyed it, living with your mum and dad. But why aren't they militant? Working people aren't militant enough. They're asleep! It was a disappointment really, though I loved it.' It is clear to him that she is also talking about him--the disappointment she feels in him too. He says, 'I'd rather be human than militant.' She says, 'Try it, in this war.' 'I'll always try,' he tells her.

She stays away from him one whole night. This time she really does sleep with somebody, without enjoying it. She tells him afterwards, with wasted eyes, 'I did it to get rid of you. To get you out of my body. I don't know why.' She flirts ostentatiously. She falls in love with a student--really just an infatuation, which she realises. She and JOHN see little of each other. They meet for the last time on a railway-platform, she has the student's long college scarf round her neck, like an emblem: but she says, 'Don't take this as final darling. You were right. We've got to have our freedom.'

His call-up papers arrive. It is summer again. He takes the train to his camp, the same that took him to the Hampshire village for evacuation. As a recruit he is shouted at, dropped into ten-foot pits, made to scale rope-heights, cross rivers hanging in full-kit; he is fired at with dummy bullets. But it makes no impression on him. The report is that he seems half doped. The officers look at him commiseratingly, from a distance, biting their lips. He catches clap--an adventure in a disused railway tunnel. His officer snaps, 'I don't like my men going with women.' And he is got rid of as soon as possible, on an overseas posting: an infantry unit where you are more expected to lose your life than not. But he is healthy at last. They couldn't stop the good air and exercise and wholesome food from sinking in. He disembarks in Algeria, in the blinding summer sun, and his pale London skin succumbs to sunburn at once, and he combines it with dysentery, through drinking at the tented bar. He lies in the sweltering bivouac under the mosquito net with KATHY's photograph at his side, looking at it again and again, rushing off to the open air latrine in the noonday heat every few minutes, sick and weak.

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He embarks again for Italy: again it seems that war will evade him, since Italy has just signed an armistice and Sicily is in Allied hands. He lands at Salerno, on D-day plus 8, in the dusk, and hears a man with red tabs on his shoulders (a brigadier) telling a few men in a low voice, 'I want you to go up to that road fifty yards ahead and plonk yourselves down and stay there, even if Jerry attacks, even if he walks over your bodies.' He thinks this is a manoeuvre. Even the mortar bombs that come whizzing over he takes as dummy bombs. Only next day does he realise that they are on a narrow strip of beach, with the Germans pushing them into the sea. It is touch and go. But he seems to know nothing about fear. He is gay, they nickname him the laughing boy. He only flings himself to the ground at the whistle of a shell because he sees the others doing it. Really his truancy has still not ended. But it soon does.

His baptism of fire is really after the Salerno ~~haphazard~~ situation has cleared up and they are advancing. The two men he is with on a terraced vineyard are caught by shrapnel: one dies, with holes in his back. A quick explosion and it was over. War is quite different from what he expected. It is mostly quiet, with sudden deafening noises, or a quick whizz and a death, in a moment. It is haphazard, you lose yourself all the time, there seems to be no guiding principle. He cries when the man dies, standing with an old woman who shakes her head. That is the moment of the death of his truancy: the laughing boy is dead too. He looks longingly at the little photograph by his bed, until it becomes just dots on a piece of paper, not a real face any more.

A friend writes to him that KATHY is behaving 'strangely', with other men: he doesn't know what JOHN knows, that their affair is over. The friend says she wears a scarf round her hair, and trousers, like all the munitions girls, or rather like munitions girls in the first war: she is ostentatiously unfeminine, and communist. JOHN writes to her and gets no reply. He realises he is quite alone. And in some way he must prove himself for her, or for some woman there might be in the future: he begins to identify the war with his own struggle. At his first attack, at the river Volturno, half the men turn back, run away from the line. He vomits with fear as he runs in the dark. He lies at the bottom of a vast shell hole quivering with terror as the German 'wailing Winny' hurls mortar bombs over in handfuls of six, screaming across the night sky. He can feel the trembling of the man next to him too. A man is wounded above, cries out. Stretcher bearers pass the lip of the shell hole and call down for help: 'We've got wounded up here, give us a hand you blokes, they're dying up here', while the wounded man goes on crying, 'No, please no, no!' But neither

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JOHN nor the other man move. He is a coward. When he and two of his mates run up against a German sentry later that night, having got into enemy lines by mistake, he proves this even more by running away and not even pausing for the others, though one is short and fat and carrying all the equipment. When they are resting after that attack he lies shivering in his bivouac unable to sleep for fear of a shell dropping or a sudden attack, though this is five miles behind the lines. He tells the others this when they are eating from their mess-tins, and one of them says with a smile, 'That's guilt.' They accept cowardice easily.

But these words change him. In the next attack his company probe forward deep into the enemy line and take a house exposed to enemy fire on three of its sides. The officer is killed and an enemy tank appears, but JOHN to his astonishment finds himself rallying all the men, going from one to the other asking them if they want to be cowards: the gunners are missing, perhaps wounded or lost, and only their signaller is there: he arranges through the radio to bring down fire on the house itself, where they are sitting, to stop any attack from outside. The fire comes down just as the Germans begin their attack (which he predicted) at dusk: miraculously they avoid the house itself but disperse the Germans, six of whom surrender at the windows. He finds himself elevated to a non-commissioned officer, in charge of a platoon. The story of what he did goes the rounds. They expect him to be decorated, they finger the place on his jacket where his decoration will be pinned. He doesn't smile. He is more violently unhappy than he has ever been in his life.

This misery only lifts a week later, when he is standing at the window of a farmhouse with a machine-gunner and a dozen Germans appear at pointblank range hurrying across the field, ignorant of the fact that they are being watched. The gunner is just about to pull the trigger when JOHN lays his hand on his arm and shakes his head silently. The Germans, stumbling and frightened, hurry away to safety. JOHN hears that snatch of conversation again in his mind, 'Try it, in this war', and his reply, 'I'll always try-' (to be human). He realises what a deathly objective it is, to try to prove yourself in war.

The war ends and he returns to greater bleakness than before. He remembers her 'Don't take this as final'. London is sad, dirty, stripped of spirit. He phones from a kiosk where someone has vomited, and the directories are torn to shreds, the phone itself almost hanging from its hinges. He catches sight of KATHY in a crowd of students at the canteen where she goes: she points him out to the man she is with, who looks at JOHN inquisitively. Then they both turn away from him, the young

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man with an embarrassed expression. JOHN is now an awkward, thick-necked, impulsive person, unable to manage a real conversation, always knocking things over. He hurried away. He knows that KATHY is doing canvassing work for the labour party and tries to get on the same group of streets, and follows her, but she always evades him. It reminds him of deadly reconnoitring in the war. She is at the corner of the street, looking womanly, collected, smooth-faced, and then she is gone again. He gives up, exhausted. He returns home to the snug little room overlooking the garden: only this hasn't changed. The clock ticks in the same way. The little school at the end of the road has been blown to bits. The street has lost its windows several times. His parents give a kind of party for him but he sits awkward and ungainly, not knowing any of the people, from across the road, from two doors away. A married couple fight, she smacking his face, he wrenching her arm. There is an air of misery. The older people look on, at a quite new world. A piece of shrapnel has penetrated the back window, and made a tiny hole. He stands there one morning peering at it, fingering it, dreaming, thinking of the past, quite friendless now. At that moment the post brings him a thick envelope: his mother hands it to him. It tells him that he has been mentioned in despatches for gallantry: it bears the king's facsimile signature. He screws it up, and fingers the tiny hole.

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