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A GAME OF MURDER

~~REMOVED~~

~~1/2/58~~

A Story.

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A GAME OF MURDER

People seemed to be more abandoned and socially daring before the war. They're quieter nowadays, as if they can no longer rely on the tolerance and sympathy of other people if they do something extravagant, and as if a law existed that inside your home you can indulge the human passions but outside in the street you must keep your face straight, your hands as near as possible to your sides and your gaze abstract. ~~A feeling of citizenship has settled everywhere.~~

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^{Arthur}
~~Ben~~ used to stand in the street and take off his khaki jacket, then try to get it back on again with all sorts of antics, putting his arm through one of the pockets; turning it upside down and trying to fit it over his head, while we all watched from an upstairs window, roaring with laughter. He used to come over on Sunday mornings before dinner, when there was a smell of ^YYorkshire pudding and mint sauce. The men--- he, my brother and my father---used to go down to the pub at the end of the street for about an hour, and return merry. He was in the Territorials, and they had their church parade near by every Sunday morning at about eleven, which was why he visited us ~~in~~ in his uniform. His buttons ~~were always~~ ^{were always} brightly polished and his puttees---the same as those worn in the first War---were wound neatly round his ankles. His cap had a bright artillery badge and a stiff peak that I found very

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ugly: insect-like and ungenerous, for some reason.

He was very firmly built, nearly all muscle, and he had a pale, unhealthy face, with dull eyes which often smiled, ^{good-}~~wickedly~~ ^{natured but} and sometimes mockingly ^{hard.} and ~~cruelly~~. When he gave a demonstration of squad drill at the local Territorial Hall, where he went after office-hours twice a week, he would stamp his feet down so hard that his cheeks quivered, and it seemed to give him a satisfaction beyond humour. Then he imitated the Sergeant Major's scream, his voice echoing down the long street, making it appear that he was blowing his words through an immense moustache. He belonged to barrack life. There was something angular and mechanical about him, so that the drilling didn't seem an outrage to his body. His jokes were callous and muttered, with a theme of deathly physicality, and he ~~giggled~~ ^{laughed} in a precipitous, ^{devil-may-care} ~~devil-take-the-hindmost~~ way. He drank a lot of dark beer and incited my brother, ~~who was~~ a ~~man~~ more delicate and retiring person, to a kind of unwholesome competitiveness, the idea being to smoke as many cigarettes and drink as much beer as possible, and stay up late. They used to go out almost every evening together looking for girls, and after about two years ^{of this} my brother went down with a fever and was in hospital for several months. But ^{Arthur} ~~he~~ wasn't affected ^{by his} ~~at~~ ^{life.} He looked just as muscular and his face seemed to be slightly yellow by nature.

He used to talk between thin lips, hissing, and giggled lightly after nearly everything he said. I remember that one evening he and another friend gathered round my brother's chair and started talking in ~~very~~ subdued voices about a party they were going to have at our home. They took no notice of me.

and probably thought I was too small to understand. They talked about a woman I knew, a friend of my mother's called Mrs Carr, who was older than they were and in the ripe period of life. She was small and attractive in a challenging, unvoluptuous way, with slightly prominent teeth and bright eyes. ~~She was probably in her early thirties.~~ I heard my brother say, "Well, last time she as good as promised me...", and ~~Ben~~^{Arthur} ~~giggled~~^{made his}. She was "game". The other friend said something about the "goods" being "on a plate". But he had a healthier and more boyish face than the other two, and a certain fastidiousness was disturbed in him by this talk. Then they decided on a plan of action, which I couldn't understand.

The night of the party came and "murder" was played. My mother disliked this game very much, but she said little. It meant switching out ~~the~~ the lights and having people wandering all over the rooms and stumbling into each other in the darkness, waiting for someone to scream ~~out~~ when touched by the "murderer". She used to sit by the fire in the front room with her hands clasped together and a shawl or jumper over her shoulders, exactly as she did when there was a ~~bad~~ thunderstorm.

~~Ben's~~^{Arthur's} idea was to select a "murderer" from among certain male accomplices, who would prolong the game as long as necessary. It was played about seven times, between nine o'clock and midnight, in a growing mania dominated by the spirit of ~~Ben~~^{Arthur} and my brother. Mrs Carr was there, laughing and looking round quickly with her bright eyes. ~~Mr Carr~~^{Her husband rather} was a silent, listless man, ~~with eyes which had been exhausted of their normal power and were now watery, with great bags under them, but still had a narrow, peering lecherousness that seemed their last~~

~~source of light.~~ ^{and his eyes} / To me ~~they~~ had a glint of complicity in them when ^{he} ~~they~~ looked at his wife. I remember that when my mother went into hospital for an abscess to be removed from her womb, caused by my birth, he gave my father a ~~watery~~ glinting look and said, "Too much friction, ^{Jack} ~~Bill~~, eh?" ^{and chuckled} ~~and I hated him~~ ^{quietly.} ~~from that moment.~~

I wandered about the rooms in the darkness with everybody else, feeling people pass me and not knowing who they were. Someone kept pulling the lavatory chain, producing a loud clang and a rush of water, which made everybody laugh, because the game required such an eery silence. The chain was pulled more and more with every game, until the tank didn't have time to fill up and only made an empty clang. Sometimes I brushed past two people standing so close together that they must have been gripping each other. Nothing whatsoever could be seen, because the curtains were tightly drawn. Sometimes I felt one of the young men's strong hands explore my body briefly, to ascertain my sex. I wondered with a shiver of embarrassment whether one of these hands might belong to my brother. In his bedroom, which was tiny, with only a bed and a chest of drawers, there was always the worst press of people; ~~and more seemed to go on there.~~ ^{A certain respect was shown my parents' bedroom.}

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About the time of the fourth game I was standing against one of the walls in my brother's room and heard Mrs Carr's whisper nearby, "No, don't---don't---" Then there was another whisper, "What's the matter?" I went towards the door and realised that it was being held closed from inside, by someone ^{other} ~~else~~ than the person with Mrs Carr. This was probably the stratagem, worked out like a plan of battle. I returned nearer

the bed and at once felt Mrs Carr's slim arm---I had no doubt it was her, from the voice---and realised she was in a kind of awkward embrace with someone. There was a lot of movement on the bed, and gasps, and again, in a fainter voice,

J ~~she said~~ "No, don't---"

Then the door opened and I felt my way out, not wanting to see anything when the lights went up. I went back to the front room where the fire was blazing and my mother was sitting alone. The room was ^{neutral,} out of the game. At last the lights went ^{on} ~~up~~ and everybody came back blinking and laughing, saying things like "Was that you---I wondered what the devil it was!" and "Somebody scared the life out of me!" Mrs Carr was looking rather ^{abashed,} ~~silly,~~ ~~with~~ her eyes cast down. She refused to play in the next game, and sat with my mother. But ^{Arthur} ~~Len~~ and my brother didn't seem to mind.

At the end of every Sunday-night party, about half-past eleven, there was a light supper of cold meat and pickles and tea served in the back room. Mrs Carr was still mute, and she no longer looked round her with bright, quick glances. Mr Carr was laughing, without making a sound. He sat with ^{Arthur} ~~Len~~ and my brother near the fire-stove, while she seemed to be alert to everything they said, in case it concerned her. The other people *J* at the table were talking and laughing so much that this wasn't noticed.

Len was whispering something to Mr Carr, who kept glancing at his wife with slow, glinting eyes. She blinked, looking down. Then ^{Mr Carr} ~~her husband~~ said ~~to Len~~ with a wry little smile, "Yes, that's right, the same happened to me---never ^{again,} ~~again,~~ I said, never again!"

^{Arthur}
~~Len~~ laughed, ^{glancing sideways} ~~looking~~ at my brother, and asked, "Why, what happened?"

"Well, the gun went off---touched off if you see what I mean---accident---but never again, oh no!"

Again ^{Arthur} ~~Len~~ laughed, this time throwing back his head.

"The gun with the cannon balls, you mean?"

"That's right! How did you guess?"

And to match ^{Arthur's} ~~Len's~~ strident, rushed giggle, filling all the room, Mr Carr smiled in ^{his glinting} ~~a watery~~ fashion and looked slowly across at his wife again.

Afterwards, when everybody had left the house and my brother had gone out for ^{his} late-night stroll with ^{Arthur,} ~~Len~~ my mother said to my father with tight lips, while they were doing the washing-up, ^{together} "I hate that damned game".

There were no more large parties like that because my brother went into hospital soon afterwards, and then the War broke out. One Sunday morning a few days before the ultimatum to Germany ^{Arthur} ~~Len~~ came over in his uniform ^{again} and told us he was being mobilised. He didn't seem sorry. He followed the statement with his rushed giggle, making war seem a ~~part of~~ vast tomfoolery. My father was working in the back garden and we were watching him from the open window. It was a bright morning and the blinds had been drawn half-down, giving the room a special summer glow ^{that was associated} ~~(that belonged)~~ for me ^{with} cold salad teas and short-sleeved shirts, and made life ^{seem} less gaunt and strict. My father didn't know that ^{Arthur} ~~Len~~ had arrived. He went on working quietly, tending his favourite flowers, the gladioli. I had been practising with a ^{child's} shot-gun in the garden and had just laid it on the table. It was a peculiar ^{instrument} ~~thing~~.

It fired little shots of potato very fast. You pushed the end of its bore into a raw potato so that a juicy little pellet was left inside.

"How do you use that thing?" ^{Arthur} ~~son~~ asked. He spoke with some surprise, because at first he ^{id} thought it was a toy gun, but when he looked closer he saw the dangerous-looking spring.

I brought him a half-used potato and showed him how to do it. He nodded and filled the bore, then raised the gun level to his eyes.

"I'm the best shot in the troop", he said, then, under his breath, "Watch out, ^{Jack} ~~Bill~~." ^(who was just)

He levelled the sights at my father, bending in the garden below, and fired. My father sprang up at once, clasp- ing the back of his neck, and looked up at the window with his mouth open. ^{Arthur} ~~son~~ was laughing, and my brother was smiling constrain- edly.

"What the hell was that?" my father ^{shouted up,} ~~said~~.

"Only a bit of potato, Bill!"

"What?" It dawned on my father that ^{it} ~~this~~ was ^{Arthur} ~~son~~, and ~~then~~ he ^{saw the gun.} ~~what he had done.~~ But he didn't smile. He pursed his lips

a little and asked quietly, a very faint trembling in his voice, "You'd better be careful what you're doing, hadn't you?"

In ^{Arthur's} ~~his~~ smile there was often a great openness and charm. ~~He would sometimes look at me with a kind of wonder- ing affection.~~

He could see my father was really hurt, and he stopped giggling. His lips were moist and hovered for a moment between shame and a smile. He turned away from the window and after a silence in which none of us seemed to move he went into the scullery and began joking with my

mother.

In the evening he found me sitting in my brother's bedroom. My parents had gone out and my brother was sitting in another room. He smiled at me and sat down on the bed. He ruffled my hair, then began slapping me in a playful way. I laughed, thinking that he would stop after the first slaps, but he became more violent until he was gripping me by the shoulders and pressing them together with a strange inward grimace, his face absolutely set, pale and thin-lipped as always. Then he began slapping me very hard, even round the face, and the more he did so the more I tried to laugh, so as to minimise the strangeness of it. My brother must have heard the slaps in the other room but he made no movement. Len was sweating and didn't seem to know what he wanted. Then he pinched me in the back with a sudden ferocious effort and left the room, his walk slow and forlorn.

Later I went out into the back-room where he and my brother were sitting. It was quite silent. The window was open and there were distant sounds of children playing, and a train passed far away. He was leaning back in his chair gazing at the ceiling, his eyes narrowed and a certain pain in his face. There were still the traces of sweat on his brow and upper lip. It was just as if he was trying to fathom something.

A year later, on a dusty, torporific day, when the back-room was again in a quiet glow, I heard that he had been killed in Germany. He hadn't joined the army after all, but applied for the Air Force, because he hated the "square-bashing" involved in the Artillery. He had trained, and flew over Germany on one of the first bomber raids.

Somebody said he'd fallen out of the plane alive, after it had been hit by flack. I imagined him hurtling down towards the earth, unseen at night, and I always imagined that he didn't cry out, only waited, his eyes fixed before him with a certain curiosity and charm, wondering what fate had governed his life, and removed him so soon.