

Tomorrow

Jeffery Farnol

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Tomorrow

By Jeffery Farnol

Dawn with a rolling mist and, to right and left of the muddy trench, long lines of spectral figures that shifted restlessly with glint of bayonet, or leaned inert peering in the one direction; and over all, a strained expectancy.

"Another two minutes, Bob, old man!" said Major Grice, glancing at his wrist watch.

"Absolutely!" nodded Captain Robert Finch, peering at his own watch. "To a dot! In another ninety secs it's hey for old Fritz. And, by the way, George, old bean, this makes the third time we've been over, you and I—"

"Not fergittin' y'r 'umble servant, sirs!" said a hoarse voice, and out of the mist rolled the squat figure of Tom Skeet, the major's ubiquitous batman. "And three times is lucky—leastways if it ain't all I says is—"

"What, are you there, Tom?" said the major, steady gaze on his watch dial, "you don't have to come, y' fool!"

"That's eggs-ackly why I'm a-going, sir," answered Tom, fixing his bayonet with elaborate care, "when you goes over, sirs, wot I says is—let 'em all come, 'specially me. And if we're lucky it'll be a blighty one for all three of us, and—"

The major raised his hand, Captain Finch blew his whistle, from behind came the crashing thunder of their supporting artillery; then was a confused scrambling, a clatter of accouterments, and officers and men were up and over the parapet.

"Good luck, Bobbie!" said the major.

"Same to you, George, old pal!" A quick meeting of hands that gripped hard, and the mist had swallowed each from the other's sight.

Captain Robert Finch trudged forward, revolver in hand, every sense alert, keen eyes glancing left and right at the grim specters that plodded with him through squelching mire and over shapeless, ghastly bundles half buried in the dreadful mud.... A man cried suddenly in a shrill, strange voice ... somebody groaned, but the thin khaki line, thinner now and thinning every moment, tramped doggedly forward, on and into a mist denser for the smoke and fume of bursting high explosive, a mist wherein uprose sudden vague shapes, dim-seen yet full of menace.

"Yo-ho, lads—bayonets all! Steady now—come on!" shouted Finch and began to run. Men all about him who strove together, gasping ... staccato rifle shots with the thud and clink of bayoneted rifles in vicious thrust and parry ... wild outcries, cheers ... and the thin khaki line floundered on.... His revolver empty, Captain Finch snatched up a chance rifle and plunged forward; howling cheerily at his men, though rather breathlessly, he saw the earth yawn at his feet, felt a sudden shock and, tripping, plunged over and down....

Capt. Robert Finch, or rather all that a German hospital and prison camp had left of him, stared at the crumpled five-pound note with haggard eyes but a twisted smile on his scarred face, and from this to the dress suit lying upon his small, dingy bed, carefully brushed to woo the pawnbroker's disparaging eye.

"Welcome, stranger!" quoth the captain, as he smoothed out the note. "They were cheerier days when I rammed you away in that old suit. Yes. Absolutely! Well, hail and farewell, kiss Uncle good-by—so! And now let us square our account with the Wiggins." Saying which, the captain struggled up from his one crazy chair and limping forth from the dingy room descended many stairs to a dingier basement pervaded by an aroma of soapsuds and stewing linen, for it was washing day. Rapping smartly on a half-open door he was answered by a voice high-pitched and querulous:

"If them's the coals, shoot 'em in the yard. If it's the milk—no. If it's the baker—two, and crusty—"

"Mrs. Wiggins, 'tis your humble lodger—" The door swung open and the lady of the house appeared—tall, bony, bare-armed and damp.

"Lord!" exclaimed Mrs. Wiggins.

"Quite!" nodded the captain, "for I'm about to surprise you," and he tendered her the five-pound note. "With humble thanks for past forbearance."

"But, sir, I thought you tol' me you was—"

"Destitute? Mrs. Wiggins, I was, and therefore dug up my last asset, my dress suit—haven't worn it for years—and going through the pockets found this crumpled fiver and hasten to pay what I owe you. How much do I owe, by the bye?"

"One pound, eighteen shillin's an' tenpence 'alfpenny, sir, which is Gawd's gorspel truth, to be exact."

"Well, let's make it an even two pounds, Mrs. Wiggins."

"'Eavings forbid, sir! Don't go throwin' your money about so outrageous. I'll take me just due. Won't ye sit down while I get change? An' 'ow's your pore back today?"

"Thanks, no worse than usual," he answered, sinking gratefully upon the hard chair she proffered.

"Ain't you got no friends nowhere, sir?" she inquired, groping blindly in the dark cupboard, "never no friends at all? Nobody as might 'elp you a bit—and you so poorly and sick-like?"

"There was one man," answered the captain, smiling a little wistfully. "Yes, I had one friend who would have been only too jolly glad ... regular pal ... good old George! ... But I fancy he must have been killed like so many others of the best."

"Why then, Cap'n Finch, wot abaht a nice cup o' tea? Kettle's on the b'il—an', say, a nice bit o' cold mutton?"

"Thanks awfully ... but no, thanks! I'll toddle forth tonight and peep into a restaurant and perchance snatch a bone or so...."

"It's a-goin' to be a nasty night, sir; look at them clouds!"

"Oh, I don't know; it may cheer up presently."

The captain smiled, nodded, buttoned his thin coat and with opera hat cocked at slightly defiant angle limped cheerily away. Reaching the haunt of taxis he hailed one and was driven westwards to a certain snug restaurant where he had been wont to see familiar faces in kinder days. But tonight it seemed larger, more imposing, and as he glanced wistfully around he felt himself a stranger, embarrassed by the air of opulence and gay chatter, ignored by the busy waiters until he ventured to accost one and was shown to a table in a remote corner.

A cocktail warmed him, dinner and a choice bottle comforted him.... And then he heard a well-known, chuckling laugh and starting round espied Major Grice—"old George" himself—not ten yards away!

Instinctively he rose and limped eagerly towards his boyhood friend, scarred face radiant.... Now at this moment the major's dinner companion was in deep converse with the wine steward ... Captain Finch stumbled forward, hand outstretched, a hand thin and tremulous—and then "old George" glanced up, looked him in the eyes and turned away....

The captain's outstretched hand dropped, the words of joyous greeting died upon his lips and, turning hastily, he limped blindly out and away—to be followed by a politely impertinent waiter with his bill and a staring attendant with his hat and coat.

"Blimy!" exclaimed Tom Skeet, valet and general factotum to Major Grice. "Crumbs!" said he, glancing from newspaper to his buxom wife. "Jest 'ark to this, old lady!" And he read as follows: "'A inkwest was held upon the body of Captain Robert Finch, M.C., one of the Old Contemptibles, who was severely wounded during the advance beyond Wipers. Evidence showed the unfort'nate man to have been in very needy circumstances. A verdic' was returned of soocide while of unsound mind!' ... And 'twere me as taught 'im to ride—'im an' the major both, as lads! And

now—Gawd! The major was only talkin' about 'im today and wonderin' wot 'ad become of 'im. They ain't never met since that mornin' as we went over together when Cap'n Bob got took prisoner and the major got blinded.... And now, sooicide —Gawd!"

[The end of *Tomorrow* by Jeffery Farnol]