

# KNOWN AS A DIVERSION

BY SEAN LINNEHAN

THEY should have started in darkness — the rawest one of the lot knew that — but here they were walking into the east with the sun before them. Not that they could see it. It may have been there, somewhere in that blazing emptiness of eastern sky, something that looked like a sun instead of this flame that poured into their hurting eyes from far behind the . . . what — trees? Trees, yes. Trees not bare in winter, green in summer: now with so many changes they were sometimes white, sometimes black, and you were aware of them only when they got between your eyes and the morning. Here it was now, the whole thing roaring bright ahead of them instead of darkness with a chance, and themselves walking silly into a fine kettle.

In the night they had come far and, becoming lost, had bedded not a fling away from their objective — a road with a pretty green slope. Dawn was a great joke on Fred and the officer sprawled in sleep by the side of an abandoned latrine. The awakened men laughed at the sight, and when the officer awoke he was sick. At the order they moved irregularly toward the road laughing quietly, trying not to let him see their laughter, and Fred, (frightened, it being the first time for him like the others) laughed with the rest. Some dirty trick on all of them, falling anywhere on the clods for a snooze and the unbroken road right there.

Down in the road they sat in two lines

on the far slope, sat in the right place with the right men on either side, nervously watching the daytime come and some of the grass green and wet, some dead and wet, not all green as it seemed from the field. Two sharing a can of food, and water out of the can; no smoke and no noise and no kidding about daytime either; that's what it was now. They chewed the green grass and the dead grass but it tasted funny and they knew why. They spat it out and carefully examined the nose clamps and mouthpieces hung on their chests, sat in their correct places, eyes trailing the officer as he crouched by, and day coming down the slope opposite. The officer looked nervous and they became more nervous, sitting quietly in the sunken road, no talking, taking light breaths and an occasional deep one that trembled the ends of their fingers, their uniforms tight across the chest, and tensed muscles beginning to ache, wondering what it would be, worrying about what it would be, and behind their eyes as in a picture the sight of themselves not alive. One of them read *Common Prayer* the wrong way, back to front, turning the left pages with a well-spittled finger; another tended his nails; some fingered their nostrils; and one had a notebook on his knee, a pencil in his right hand and that hand steadied with the left, writing on leaf after leaf, Edward G. Holden, U. S. A., Edward G. Holden, U. S. A., Edward G. Holden, U. S. A., tearing out the leaves and tucking them in his pockets,

his helmet lining, his shoes, his equipment, page after page after page. . . .

With the right men beside him, Fred sat in his place and watched the officer who had been sick walking all bent over, up and down the road looking north mostly, looking back toward the north over his shoulder when he walked south. Sometimes the officer noticed the men sitting there looking at him. He would blush a little and frown as if he had remembered something important and then he would bustle off and whisper to one of the other officers. The men liked him and often made little jokes with him, but they understood that everything was strange now, strange and too sudden and too real. The quiet sharp tap of his heels on the road stopped, and they looked at him standing there facing north, but nothing moved, nothing was moving on the road, and when he finally sat on the grass making gentle blasphemies they let out their breath in unison.

They became aware of one another, looked at one another smiling a little, some leaning back on their elbows, faces to the sky, and many touching their hands to other sleeves. They should have started in darkness, they all knew that much, and here the day at their backs was mirrored on the opposite slope, a foot deep band of it that cancelled their job and left them trembling happily with relief. Maybe some other morning while it was still dark they would go beyond the road, but soon now the officer would stand and they would all go back, quietly. Then some food inside, a good smoke, a lot of jokes and nobody hurt; nobody lost.

## II

Fred's stomach knotted up again when he saw the man cycling down the road from

the north. The man wore a blue uniform and white canvas shoes. Though he wasn't going fast his arms jiggled because the front wheel had a spliced rope around it instead of a tire. The officers ran and stood grouped in the center of the road. The cyclist dropped his white feet to the ground, fished out a paper and sat crouched over the handlebars. The captain wrote in a book, the cyclist showed a watch for corrections, then turned his wheel and went bouncing up the road like a bat out of hell.

The men couldn't believe the order; they obeyed it, the lines spread wide with yards between each man, first line kneeling on the slope and second line standing crouched in the road behind them, but dear Holy God, officers—it's daytime! The officer who had slept in that place with Fred knelt over his watch, right hand raised. His men looked at him, hearts kicking in fright and throats choked with it, dry tongues making the shape of words, eyes exchanging the frightful meaning of the words: "This is me . . . this is happening to me. . . ." The two lines strung far behind the slope and there was plenty more than a foot of sunlight showing across the way. The officer smiled (first time for him like the others, but wanting passionately to be a good officer), walked up the slope and waved his hand leisurely above his head. He waved his hand like a brakeman, as if he were doing a delicate job but had done it many times before, and those kneeling arose, placing their feet carefully as they went up the slope, the second line stepping forward and kneeling in turn on the grass. They saw the first line pause when the glare hit their eyes, pause, then walk timidly over the rim and out of sight.

Fred was crying a little when the second line went up the slope, really crying, and

when that blast of light cut at his eyes more tears spilled out, but the smarting caused that. There was never anything like the sun that morning. It went right through Fred's closed eyes; he felt as if the color was being bleached right out of them and for over a minute he walked with his left hand feeling out in front of him like a blind man.

The lines went forward stumbling and sightless, marching in softly broken unison with only the rustle of trouser legs and the pat of accoutrements heard, the heavy boots making no sound on the earth, the earth making a sigh under them, and the men making a sigh unheard in the tap and slither of movement.

The first thing Fred saw when he opened his eyes was a stone shining red as a diamond, just a glimpse of it before it went under his foot, and the next thing he saw was his right hand, startling in its whiteness against the oiled darkness of the rifle stock. He knew the hand was filthy, yet in the strong light it appeared rosy and tender and embarrassing as a girl's. The field, though, was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. The line ahead walked shrouded to the knees in a golden mist and the light fell around them heavy as rain. Gold-sparkled men in a golden mist walking under a white sky toward the far off things of trees. The distant men in his own line had the blurred golden appearance, but those near him and himself seemed only remarkably clean — and that beautiful white hand!

Looking at the field you could not say it was simply earth with a sunrise on it; it was more than that — more living than that — for its scars, veiled in the gentle grass of spring, held a warning the men could feel as they walked the face of it in their dreadful quiet uncertainty. They peered anxiously under the light, ducking

their heads the better to see, but they saw only the trees, indistinct and far away as ever, and the line ahead walking.

How far had they come, how far must they go? Keeping the lines straight had occupied their first moments, had given them a chance to disregard their fright, but now with the lines moving automatically the fear returned. Was there no end to the field? It lay before them, swirling to the rim of the world, themselves trudging steadily yet getting nowhere, the sun burning away the outline of the trees and the silence lying over them with an edge like a knife.

Nothing happened. They had prepared themselves as best they could, each in his own way, for the expected, but none had anticipated this. In the road they had inspected their equipment, reviewed in memory the informal scraps of advice given them by veteran instructors, recited their prayers or curses; they had left the road which was theirs and walked into a quiet golden land, an uncharted land in which they found themselves impotent. Of what use their training? You cannot puncture light or rip the belly out of silence. Listen to it. Nothing at all happened, sun and quiet were the enemy, and because of that they felt doomed — that they would walk their lives away never to see the road again. They thought of this and suddenly, within five paces, they were out of step and the lines were buckling. A hiss of orders swept the lines and they re-formed, slowing to the regular walk, but whatever their reasons may have been in the road and in the first moments, they marched now simply because it proved something to themselves.

Fred was crying again. His feet sprawled and tripped him when he tried to march properly and he was compelled to adopt an odd swinging gait that threw his legs

forward from the hip. His uniform was pasted to his body and the white hand ached, thrusting its pain the whole length of his arm. Yards separated him from the men at either side, yards between them and those beyond, and so down the line. He felt conspicuous and lonely. He had tried not to think, but ahead was the first line, sparse and unprotected as his own, targets seeking a thing they couldn't see. Nothing but sun and the field, and the silence that was like a dirty practical joke. They can see us all right, he thought. The hell with them! He licked at his tears and noted how dull and swollen his tongue felt. He thought: We're up the creek all right . . . someone's ballixed up the whole business . . . we'll get it right between the eyes, no fear. He walked without hope, tears running into his mouth. Walked sobbing across the endless field because it proved something—something bitter and sublime.

### III

From far ahead came a clipped chatter, silenced almost before it began, familiar yet strange; a sound he had often heard before, going away from him, but which now came for the first time directly to him. Three men in the first line dropped quietly, lay rolling in the golden haze, and Fred stared at a row of dust bushes sprouting magically, wavering and dissolving in the mist between the lines. He stared unbelieving at a cat that came bounding across the field, tail erect and hair bristling, watched it slide on its haunches to a ludicrous stop when it reached the puffs of dust.

Others were crying now, the retching lifeless sobs of ill-treated children. Voices made obscene undramatic statements. "Almighty God!" shouted one terrified voice.

"Father of all mercies!" At which another shrieked, "Shut up shut up shut up!" There was only the one short burst—a spurt of noise in the silence—then the silence and the men walking through it. The first line closed the gap and floundered on, following the pace and the example of the young man who wanted to be a good officer.

The cat didn't pay any attention to the second line as it passed. Some of the men called, "Kitty, kitty!" but the cat was lost in study of the dust balls. It stalked around the phenomena, then reared swiftly and swatted at the vague outlines with graceful forepaws. Fred watched the cat while it remained in sight, fascinated by its indifference.

His line spread as it neared the three men, spread wide to pass around them, and Fred could see they weren't golden any more. He could not make out who they were. It was hard enough to recognize the men marching beside him, so changed were they, and these men on the ground bore no resemblance to anyone he had ever known. He was sure he knew them yet he could not place them. One just lay there, another was spread awkwardly with round eyes and round mouth making a silent, surprised "oooh," and the third lay on his face, his legs jerking. When Fred was abreast the one with jerking legs pushed himself up and snapped at his shoulder with his teeth. He raised himself with one arm, snapped at the shoulder and fell exhausted, his head and good arm scrabbling in the grass. Fred dropped to his knees, nauseated. Someone booted him and he ran sick and bawling to his place in line, shoulders hunched and one hand on his helmet. His tears caught the light and his eyes felt as if they were full of cut glass. He couldn't see anything but the flame inside his head. The trees were lost

in the glare, the lines, blinded, looked at the ground where their feet walked, avoiding the mounds and holes in their path.

The second silence didn't hold for long. The chattering started again, remote as before, from two directions. From the right came, *pat pat pat pat*, an answering from the left, then the right again, then the two of them half together, *pat pat pat-apata pat pat*. The center of the first line toppled and as the line advanced the gap widened left and right, leaving an irregular wedge of bodies pointing toward the line in the rear, and the second line was dropping a trail from its extremities as it moved forward. Handled, twirling objects, shining black against the sun — seeming to drop from the sun — splintered with a dazzling cough and left a fan of smoke waving in the air. The lines weaved crazily and fell apart into broken groups of individuals, the maneuver became men, and the men, disorganized and beaten, fell to the ground.

The officer was inside the spearhead of bodies. His first line, the remaining ends of it, lay with their faces pressed into the earth not listening to his shouts. He cursed them but he knew it was futile; knew now that he'd never be much of an officer, and doubted if the greatest in the world could make these men rise. Who could blame them? By God, you couldn't see anything! They could only guess at things like this and when they saw their fellows dropping one after the other who could blame them for stopping? The whole thing was cut and dried — impersonal as a lunatic's workshop. For a moment he stood silent and irresolute, then in a last attempt ran to them pleading, and dropped neatly in a blank space of the wedge.

The ragged end of the spray kicked up blades of grass in front of Fred, shot them into the air where they fluttered for a

moment, then glided to the field. A noise reminded him of the day long ago when he had seen a crazy man. It was in a crush of people at a street corner, and the nut, in passing, stooped to Fred and whispered gaily, "Chongedy ongedy onnng. . . ." He felt exactly the same tight horror at the sound of the ricochets whipping past in their rocketing flight, "Chongedy ongedy onnng. . . ."

The chattering, after a few spasmodic warnings, stopped. There were scattered single reports, high pitched and sounding deadly and aimed, but over that noise the voices could be plainly heard. One said, "I want a drink of water, please . . . please give me a glass of nice cold water . . . I'm very thirsty, dear . . . please give me some water. . . ." A thin pleading, over and over and over. A man in a hole held the wet tatter of his hand before him, crying sadly, "Oh my . . . oh my oh my oh my." A man ahead drove those around him frantic. His face was streaked red, he lay on his back strangling and the noise from him was worse than all the others. Scattered about lay men not so much on the earth as in it. They were finished. They had returned to the earth, and heaping it over them could make them no more completely a part of it than they were now. And from the suffering and the mutilated came a whisper, a summons, an unconscious sigh from those returning. . . .

This is what it's like, thought Fred. If any bastard ever asks me, I'll tell him this. I'll tell him everything. About this field, and the noises, and the dying, and lying here like this with a thing in your hands that might as well be a bubble pipe for all the good it is. I'll tell about the man you could smell like an animal with his shattered legs kicking, and trying to draw the pain out of his shoulder with his teeth



like it was a splinter. I'll tell any bastard that wants to know the sight of a man opened up the front with his pants ballooning in the time it took him to fall, splashing his life out in a wave when he hit the ground. And kicking me to my feet like an animal when I got sick, whoever it was, only I'm no better, I got nothing left in me and all I want is to get away from here out of this awful thing, dear Jesus. You walk around in broad daylight. . . . I can't even see a damned thing . . . He cried with his face in the grass, and prayed some more, and cursed.

#### IV

There came a shock through the earth that bounced hard against his chin, a rush and a crash, and in a wide sweep, from the north curving down across the plains to the south, the black earth thrust upward through the haze, churned deafeningly before them. In the north, blue figures swarmed out of the pits on the face of Smallpox Hill, raced to the foot and formed their lines close to the crumbling wall. To the south, brown lines marched slowly, the sun making a blaze on their weapons.

The first line of Fred's company ran back, the second line rose and they mingled irresolutely, wondering if they could go back. They didn't wait long. From beyond the wall came quick scattered jabs that roared into the field, and there weren't many standing when the range lifted to the fields behind the road.

It happened quickly. Helpless and bewildered the lines ran, tried to run through it, and for many it was seeing the burnt loud redness before them and earth blackening the sky as the iron went in. Fred ran and was thrown on his back, rose, and was knocked forward by the sweep of a blast from behind. Stunned and deafened,

blood running in his throat and dripping from his nose, he knelt not unaware of his danger but too addled to care. As he rose, something sharp and heavy dug into his shoulder and he felt the breath of a wail on his cheek. He turned his head and there was the cat, wild-eyed, trying to bury its head in his ear. With a steadying hand on its rump, Fred walked toward the road croaking to himself, "Crazy cat bastard . . . of all goddam impositions. . . ."

He walked the field that had been so golden and green, walked through a pall of smoke and earth, watched it rip apart to show the forms of running men and glimpses of the dark line ahead that was the road. Something tripped him and he fell into a hole sending the cat sprawling, but after a rapid doubtful swaying it flung itself back to his shoulder. He had to leave the hole. It would have been fine shelter, but it was newly made, hot, with streamers of heavy smoke bubbling out of it. The cat bounced and yowled in Fred's ear as he slogged along, landing heavily on his heels. There came another push from behind that shoved him stumbling off balance, arms outstretched, then a hard rap on the sole of his boot and when he put that foot on the ground he fell.

It was a relief to lie on the ground not giving a damn, knowing all that might happen, yet without any fear. He looked down his nose at the redness of it, then ahead, seeing the cat's last leap and disappearance into the road. He saw a row of bursts in the field where he had slept, one-two-three-four; watched the clods fall and lighter dust sway gracefully as it settled; looked about him and saw the quietness, indistinct plumes of smoke whirling slowly through the pall, light seeping into the rifts, and it was over—in that field at least. From the look of the field everything must have been as bad as he thought.

It hadn't been just fright. Heads appeared above the slope and men with brassards on their arms, stretcher bearers, ran into the field. Down the line a horse bucked up the slope and galloped unsteadily across the field, trailing straps of harness. The small figure of a man ran after it with a pistol in his hand. The horse would stop, then when the man neared, it would gallop off in another direction. Fred didn't think the horse was hurt until he saw what was hanging from it wasn't all harness.

"How do you feel?" came filtering through the head noises, and Fred turned to see a grinning giant of a fellow looking down at him. "How do you feel?" he shouted again.

"Okay," said Fred, and began to rise but when he put that foot under him it felt like standing in a marsh. One knee on the ground and one foot up, his head going forward slowly, but the big guy caught him, said, "Look out there, kiddo," and then in the big guy's arms he was being carried to that wonderful road. Not so good though. The wet cloth cold, the foot feeling empty, something missing in his head. The wet shirt made him tremble and he hoped the big guy didn't notice it. He could feel the strong legs moving underneath and a voice said, "How's it feel, bein' a punchin' bag, kiddo?" which didn't mean anything except he would float away like a balloon if the big guy didn't hang on. They went sliding down a long hill and Fred was peeved when the big guy let go and he kept going, away down where it was dark because his head was inside an old punching bag full of white-wash.

He was lying at the side of the road when he came out of it. He watched horses trot by. They looked tremendous from the ground and the wheels of the field pieces seemed misshapen as they

rolled past. When he looked toward his feet he saw the top of a man's head, and raised himself just as the man cut the boot away.

The man said, "Hello, Jack," held the boot up, and, "By Jesus, it ripped the sole of it right off!" he said. "How do you feel?"

Fred nodded, looked at the mess uncovered, then looked away. A battery plowed up the slope going full tilt. They'd have some ride across that field. There was a knot of men, a couple of squads, gathered down the road. Some of them sat, heads between knees, and the rest stood there waiting. Fred's company. Waiting for orders. The captain lay with a red-streaked face, the shavetail with the delicate stomach went down as the grass blades danced to the tune of Chongedy ongedy onnng. . . .

"Any officers get back?" Fred asked. The man shook his head. He was carefully slitting the sock. "Sergeant is all I saw but I don't think he can walk." He lifted away the pieces of sock.

Fred saw where the toes were, where the bones, sickly white, now were, and laid himself back on the road. "Not so bad, Jack," the man said.

Not so bad. With a guy swabbing busily at an embryonic limp, nothing inside but a sick loathing and it's not so bad. Well anyway he'd never have to go through it again. He was finished, thank God.

All this time there had been distinct crashes in the east, but suddenly they rose to a sustained roar as of all the noise in the world let loose. The first-aid man listened. "Counter attack!" he shouted. After a few minutes it died away, and leaning again over the foot he said, "I guess the attack's a success. I guess you guys took them in all right."

Fred raised himself. "What do you

mean, 'took them in'?" The first-aid man looked up, surprised. "Don't you know? You guys were just the subsidiary attack. It's known as a diversion," he explained.

Fred heard someone behind him say, "I guess this guy's name must have been Edward G. Holden," and someone else laughed.

A big pack of gauze lay on the wound and he watched the man wrap bandages around the foot. There was a wide stain on the cloth at first, but the man wrapped quickly. The stain got smaller and smaller.

The foot looked like a loaf of unbaked bread stuck on the end of his leg.

He lay back then, waiting to be carried away, and immediately wished he hadn't for as his head touched the ground there came the first exquisite surge of in creeping pain, deep waves of it that overlaid his hatred and self-disgust, squirmed over his muscles, throbbed in his belly, sent the sweat runnelling into his eyes, and Fred — digging his elbows and the back of his head into the road — knew only that it was going to be worse. Much worse.



## SHE DWELLS WITH MUSIC

BY CHARLES NORMAN

SHE dwells with music in my mind,  
Sweet airs and sad that have no end;  
Music as mournful as the wind  
Is his who has but love to friend.

All day he hears thin music clear;  
The sound made by a falling leaf  
That falls and fades in a pool of air,  
Is not more fragile than this grief.