

# Modest Man

By Walter Davenport

*Peace has its perils as well as war—  
take it from Sergeant Bracci*

**A**BOVE the heads of Sergeant Bracci and Private Poole a fan of machine-gun bullets swished the village of Mercidieu.

Bracci and Poole were safe enough, hunkered in the short trench which was the battalion's observation post. And the battalion half a mile back in the village was as secure as soldiers have any right to expect to be, keeping to the short spurs of lateral streets and off the star-lit Briey Road.

The Germans had retired northward, covering their retreat with harassing troops, two squads of which, with machine guns, occupied an ammunition magazine tunnel in the side of Mount Mauvais commanding the Briey Road and neatly stoppering Mercidieu.

From his muddy sanctuary Sergeant Bracci contemplated the brilliant heavens, occasionally giving Private Poole the benefit of his opinions on war and peace, all pessimistic.

"Another thing, Pooley," he said. "There ain't no use wishing the war was over either because, while there mightn't be so much noise, things is going to be just about as bad off. Do you know what's going to happen?"

"When?"

"When do you think I'm talking about? When the war's over. Listen: When the big elks back there get all through thinking up ideas for you and me to lick, and ship us back to Pittsburgh, do you think all them generals and majors and captains is going to be satisfied going back to what they was doing for a living before the war? They are like hell."

Poole received this depressing view of the future in silence. Perhaps it was quite too much for him. That his buddy might have ample time to ponder on the outlook, Bracci said no more for a few moments. But he did not remain idle.

He elevated his helmet on the point of his bayonet until it was above ground. He held it there expectantly. Nothing happened to it and he lowered it.

"Too dark for the snipers," he said. "And the machine guns is too high. But tomorrow morning ain't going to be nobody's birthday unless somebody knocks them Jerries off out there on the mountain."

"What about when the war's over and the Colonel and them back there have to go to work?" demanded Poole earnestly.

"What's going to happen," said the Sergeant, "is this: They're all going into politics, that's what. The old man'll probably run for governor or somepin, which is as good a break as we can expect, I guess; but all the rest of them is going to run for mayor of Pittsburgh and the ones who don't get it will have to take somepin else. Yessir, Pooley, about the only things you and me are going to miss is the noise. We'll be taking our orders as usual from the same guys only we'll be paying for our chow instead of getting it off the government free—when we get it. Yessir, Pooley, it's going to be about the same

only its going to cost us more dough."

A particularly vicious burst from the machine guns on the mountainside diverted his attention. Long, searching and derisive, they blazed down upon Mercidieu to flatten their leaden venom against the pock-marked walls, like a bedeviled blind man lashing out in fury with his stick.

**B**UT, the breezy whimper of the bullets dying away, Bracci dismissed the aimless assault with a shrug and single-mindedly pursued his chosen topic:

"Of course, not all of them is going into politics, especially lieutenants. I know two lieutenants who are going to

marry a couple of million dollars and I wouldn't be surprised if there was more. From what I heard all the rich women back home have gone nuts over lieutenants. What you going to do, Pooley?"

"When?"

"When the war's over in spite of them leather legs back in headquarters."

"Mebby," said Poole slowly, "mebby I'll get married."

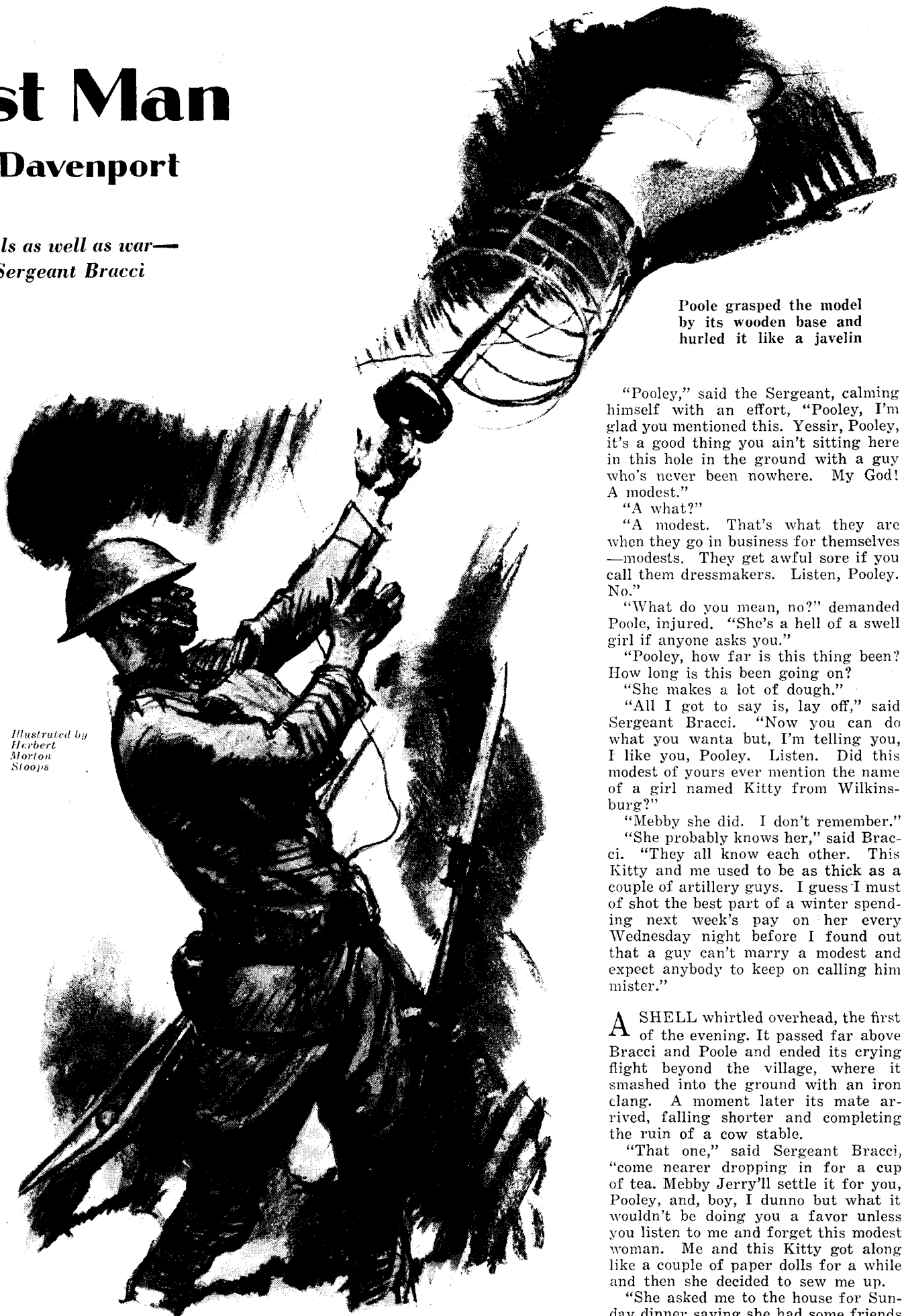
"Who to?"

"She's a dressmaker."

"She's a what?"

"She makes dresses," explained Poole a little defiantly. "Sews 'em. Why? She's in business for herself."

Illustrated by  
Herbert  
Morton  
Stoops



Poole grasped the model by its wooden base and hurled it like a javelin

"Pooley," said the Sergeant, calming himself with an effort, "Pooley, I'm glad you mentioned this. Yessir, Pooley, it's a good thing you ain't sitting here in this hole in the ground with a guy who's never been nowhere. My God! A modest."

"A what?"

"A modest. That's what they are when they go in business for themselves—modests. They get awful sore if you call them dressmakers. Listen, Pooley. No."

"What do you mean, no?" demanded Poole, injured. "She's a hell of a swell girl if anyone asks you."

"Pooley, how far is this thing been? How long is this been going on?"

"She makes a lot of dough."

"All I got to say is, lay off," said Sergeant Bracci. "Now you can do what you wanta but, I'm telling you, I like you, Pooley. Listen. Did this modest of yours ever mention the name of a girl named Kitty from Wilkinsburg?"

"Mebby she did. I don't remember."

"She probably knows her," said Bracci. "They all know each other. This Kitty and me used to be as thick as a couple of artillery guys. I guess I must of shot the best part of a winter spending next week's pay on her every Wednesday night before I found out that a guy can't marry a modest and expect anybody to keep on calling him mister."

**A** SHELL whirtled overhead, the first of the evening. It passed far above Bracci and Poole and ended its crying flight beyond the village, where it smashed into the ground with an iron clang. A moment later its mate arrived, falling shorter and completing the ruin of a cow stable.

"That one," said Sergeant Bracci, "come nearer dropping in for a cup of tea. Mebby Jerry'll settle it for you, Pooley, and, boy, I dunno but what it wouldn't be doing you a favor unless you listen to me and forget this modest woman. Me and this Kitty got along like a couple of paper dolls for a while and then she decided to sew me up."

"She asked me to the house for Sunday dinner saying she had some friends she wanted to see me. I went, Pooley, and believe me that modest never saw me no more unless it was by accident. The friends she wanted to see me was six dames."

More shells came over, this time a flock of them ominously bracketing the village. Sergeant Bracci listened expertly.

"Jerry," said he, "is tired retiring and is going to sit down for a while. Those ash cans are just to remind us not to get fresh. Somebody's apt to get hurt if he keeps that up. You and me, we're all right as long as we don't get a direct one or Jerry don't hit that house there."

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# At Sea

## By William O'Brien

### The Story Thus Far:

LATE the night before sailing, Hardy, the purser of the freighter Delkirk, is assaulted and the safe robbed of jewels and currency. He is taken to the hospital and the ship sails for Southampton on schedule bearing all who were aboard the night before, with the addition of the famous detective, Windy Costello. The passengers are Mr. and Mrs. Duval, a dancing team; Reverend Dr. Hornsby, a sanctimonious clergyman; Ling Foo, a Chinese merchant; and Miss Jennifer Green.

As soon as the ship is well under way Captain Andrews calls all the passengers into the cabin to question them. It is discovered that Duval had once been in jail for thievery, but his wife insists that he has gone straight since. Hornsby testifies to having seen Jennifer Green moving down a corridor with an empty bird cage. Miss Green admits this but says she stumbled over it in the dark. From Mrs. Duval it is discovered that the cage had been brought aboard by Foo filled with pigeons.

Detective Costello quietly remarks on the fact that schemes had recently been successful whereby stolen goods were transported by carrier pigeons.

The gathering suddenly see the implication and turn toward Foo. He jumps up, covers them with a revolver, escapes from the cabin, and disappears.

### III

THE locked cabin door didn't remain locked very long, but by the time it was opened there was no Chinaman. Not any sign of a Chinaman! It was as though the sea had swallowed him. During that afternoon and some of the days that followed this thought kept recurring to Andrews—perhaps the sea had swallowed him. The ship was searched, ransacked, combed and curried for Foo—and no Foo was forthcoming.

Andrews stormed often enough at his crew. He would accuse the searchers of making but a half-hearted effort, but when he himself headed them on another search, he returned as empty-handed as when he set out. The ship was scoured from truck to keelson without avail.

It was a day of terror for the passengers, intensified because Foo was a Chinaman. There is always something subtly terrifying in the unknown. Had the fugitive been an American, they would have been frightened, but they would have had some background of knowledge of the man; he would be one whose ends were the same as their own, his motivations the same, even if his practices were devious and vicious. But a Chinaman—he was the incalculable alien. What sinister designs shaped themselves back of those pleasant, hard, black eyes? What was he going to do, and how would he do it?

The endless afternoon wore into evening. The passengers, with the exception of Costello, had spent almost the entire day thus far huddled together in the saloon. Andrews, looking in shortly after dinner, felt a sudden contempt for the whole sorry lot of them—always excluding Jennifer. And she had been magnificent. She apparently appreciated their horror and felt it. But she fought herself clear of it.

"I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes if I may, Captain," she said.

"Certainly," he answered. She led the way out on deck. Mrs. Duval looked after them beseechingly as though to

hold them in the room, but said nothing. Dr. Hornsby and Duval merely seemed downcast.

"That's a pleasant lot you're penned with," he said, immediately differentiating her from the others.

"They're frightened," she said in a matter-of-fact tone, with no hint of accusation in it. She came right to the point: "Captain, haven't you any pistols or revolvers—two, at any rate—which you could give to the men? They probably do not know how to use them, but it would buck the whole party up a lot. We feel so defenseless now. And we are. You and Mr. Costello probably both have guns and probably both know how to use them. But we have no protection. Every time a sailor walks past a porthole we get a fearful fright. It is really rather awful."

"Why, yes," he answered. "I can give them guns." He paused. "Why doesn't Costello stay with you?" he asked.

"I don't know. That was one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. Won't you speak to him? It would have an instant effect on all of us if he stayed with us. He has some idea of meeting any situation which may come up. We haven't. He would be a rallying point—for our courage if for nothing else."

"I don't quite understand why he stays away. Probably he's conducting some private investigation of his own in his own way. However, I will talk to him. I think I can persuade him to stay with you."

Jennifer had made both of her points with unexpected ease. She followed up:

"Haven't you any clue as to what became of Foo?"

"Not one—not a single one. I'm almost tempted to believe that he has gone over the side. I know, though, that he hasn't. Why I know it I can't say." He stopped in his walk and leaned on the rail at the stern of his ship. Jennifer paused beside him. "You know, Miss Green, the whole affair hasn't unscrambled itself in my mind yet. Why did he make that dramatic exit? We had not proven a thing. Duval and his wife were under suspicion. So were you. So was Johnson. And so was Foo. We didn't have a thing on him. I've puzzled over it, but I'm still at sea."

He switched the subject suddenly. "How have the men been behaving?" he asked.

SHE thought a moment. "Well, Duval is shot to pieces—no backbone at all. But he does have moments of cheerfulness. I think by tomorrow he will recover a lot. I really think he knows something about Foo and is keeping his mouth shut. Frankly, that's an unsupported guess, though. Even yet we haven't learned to trust one another. Hornsby is different. He says very little. Occasionally he quotes some little verse from his Bible—to comfort us. I suppose that he's frightened, but I don't know. He sits in the corner and looks like a man who has his back to the wall. That's sort of silly. He's really been

very nice. But I don't think he'll be much help if anything happens."

Andrews stared over the sea into the gathering night. The ship pitched forward in the slow, majestic rhythm he loved. Jennifer, beside him, felt the first sense of peace and security she had experienced that day. She watched the huge following wave, always about to collapse on them, but never quite making it. Suddenly she wanted to forget Foo and everything his name connoted.

"A ship's wake is a lovely sight," she said and stared along the widening white avenue running into the twilight.

He did not answer at once. Then he laughed shortly and said, "It is. Do you know, I hadn't seen it as a thing of loveliness, and I was looking at it when you spoke? All I saw was a straight line. To me that means that Johnson at the wheel is holding us on a true course. Many men, you know, never do get the feel of a ship, and you can check it by the snake's course they steer." There was a little pause. "It's pleasant to see through another's eyes once in a while." He turned and smiled at her.

HIS smile was an infrequent one, but it was engaging and ingenuous. She—well, she liked it. But it was too disarming, and she did not relish being disarmed.

He went on: "I suppose every sailor man that ever sailed the seas has said it—but it's a lonely life—and lonelier when you get your ship. This is my second. I've served eight years as a master. My first ship never carried passengers. This one does, but I never know them. I wouldn't know this present set—and you—if it weren't for this Hardy affair."

Now, a man talking to a woman in this vein can be either absurd or appealing. It depends on the listener. Jennifer thought him rather too appealing. She switched quickly back to the subject which, two minutes ago, she had striven to avoid.

"Captain, there's one thing I do not understand. You remember when we first talked about the robbery?"

He nodded, his eyes running down the straining, turning log rope. She went on:

"Why did you tell me that you knew who it was that did it?"

Again he waited before replying: "You know, I was sure that some time soon you were going to ask me that. I've been trying to make up an answer. It isn't a very good one, but it's just about true. In the first place, I thought if I took the bull by the horns and pretended to each passenger in turn that I knew all about the matter, that I might get a reasonable basis for inquiry. It didn't work out, as you know."

She waited for him to continue, but he did not. There on the stern of the ship they seemed far away from every-

one. Such sounds as they heard, the gurgle of slipping water, the musical crash of the straining ship's plates and the steady, humming vibrations of the engines, were so much thrilling silence. She broke it:

"You say, 'in the first place.' You imply that there are other reasons."

"Well, there was one other reason. I've been thinking how to put it into words. It was like this." His speech was fumbling, quite apart from his usual terse manner. "I—I thought I might interest you. I thought I might prolong our talk." He reddened, and his words came with a rush: "It was silly, wasn't it?"

She stiffened suddenly. "Very silly," she said. "Let us go back to the saloon."

Andrews had recovered himself entirely when they reentered the saloon. He took immediate command. He said to them all, "I've been thinking your situation over, and Miss Green has explained what an unhappy one it is. I am going to issue a revolver and cartridges to each of you men. If either of you see Foo, do not hesitate to use it. I will assume the entire responsibility for any trouble which may ensue if Foo is wounded—or killed."

DR. HORNSBY was especially grateful for this.

"I was a fair shot with one when I was a boy, Captain. Before I dedicated my life to the service of the Lord, I would prowl about the downs at night shooting at hares. If you have ever attempted this exercise, you will realize how difficult it is. I had a very fair proficiency."

"Good," replied Andrews laconically. "I'll send them in to you right off. Now, I have one other suggestion to make. Act on it or not, as you see fit. I think it would be well if you all slept together here in the saloon. I can have two cots rigged up for the ladies, but you gentlemen will have to sleep on the lounge." He was referring to a hard plush lounge which ran around the entire saloon. "This may be uncomfortable physically, but you will be safer than if you were scattered all about the ship."

Mrs. Duval spoke up eagerly: "Please send the cots, Captain. I have been so scared. I couldn't sleep otherwise."

They all agreed that this was the best arrangement, though it proved a rather awkward one. They necessarily had to make their toilets in the privacy of their several staterooms and then appear in dressing gowns. But anything was better than a lonely night and the possibility of the demoniac Foo appearing.