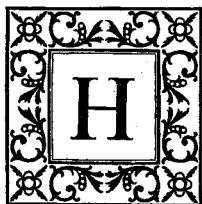


# A Son at the Front

BY EDITH WHARTON

BOOK IV

XXXII



HEAVILY the weeks went by.

The world continued to roar on through smoke and flame, and contrasted with that headlong race was the slow

dragging lapse of hours and days to those who had to wait on events inactive.

When Campton met Paul Dastrey for the first time after the death of the latter's nephew, the two men met with a long hand-clasp and then sat silent. As Campton had felt from the first, there was nothing left for them to say to each other. If young men like Louis Dastrey must continue to be sacrificed by hundreds of thousands to save their country, for whom was the country being saved? Was it for the wasp-waisted youths in sham uniforms who haunted the reawakening hotels and restaurants, in the frequent intervals between their ambulance trips to safe distances from the front? Or was it for the elderly men like Dastrey and Campton, who could only sit facing each other with the spectre of the lost between them? Young Dastrey, young Fortin-Lescluze, René Davril, Benny Upsher—and how many hundreds more each day! And not even a child left by most of them, to carry on the faith they had died for. . .

"If we're giving all we care for so that those little worms can reopen their dance-halls on the ruins, what in God's name is left?" Campton questioned.

Dastrey sat looking at the ground, his grey head bent between his hands. "France," he said.

"What's France, with no men left?"

"Well—I suppose, an Idea."

"Yes. I suppose so." Campton stood up heavily.

An Idea: they must cling to that. If Dastrey, from the depths of his destitution, could still feel it and live by it, why did it not help Campton more? An Idea: that was what France, ever since she had existed, had always been in the story of civilization; a luminous point about which striving visions and purposes could rally. And in that sense she had been as much Campton's spiritual home as Dastrey's; to thinkers, artists, to all creators, she had always been a second country. If France went, western civilization went with her; and then all they had believed in and been guided by would perish. That was what George had felt; it was what had driven him from the Argonne to the Aisne. Campton felt it too; but dully, through a fog. His son was safe; yes—but too many other men's sons were dying. There was no spot where his thoughts could rest: there were moments when the sight of George, intact and immaculate—his arm at last out of its sling—rose before his father like a reproach.

The feeling was senseless; but there it was. Whenever the young man entered the room Campton saw him attended by the invisible host of his comrades, the fevered, the maimed and the dying. The Germans had attacked at Verdun: horrible daily details of the struggle were pouring in. No one at the rear had really known, except in swift fitful flashes, about the individual suffering of the first months of the war; now such information was systematized and distributed everywhere, daily, with a cold impartial hand. And every night, when one laid one's old bones on one's bed, there were those others, the young in their thousands, lying down, perhaps never to rise again, in the mud and blood of the trenches.

Even Boylston's Preparedness was beginning to get on Campton's nerves. He tried to picture to himself how he should

exult when his country at last fell into line; but he could realize only what his humiliation would be if she did not. It was almost a relief, at this time, to have his mind diverted to the dissensions among the "Friends of French Art," where, at a stormy meeting, Harvey Mayhew, as a member of the Finance Committee, had asked for an accounting of the money taken in at Mrs. Talkett's concert. This money, Mr. Mayhew stated, had passed through a number of hands. It should have been taken over by Mr. Boylston, as treasurer, at the close of the performance; but he had failed to claim it—had, in fact, been unfindable when the organizers of the concert brought their takings to Mrs. Talkett—and the money, knocking about from hand to hand, had finally been carried by Mrs. Talkett herself to Mr. Campton. The latter, when asked to entrust it to Mr. Mayhew, had refused on the ground that he had already deposited it in the bank; but a number of days later it was known to be still in his possession. All this time Mr. Boylston, treasurer, and chairman of the Financial Committee, appeared to think it quite in order that the funds should have been (as he assumed) deposited in the bank by a member who was not on that particular committee, and who, in reality, had forgotten that they were in his possession.

Mr. Mayhew delivered himself of this indictment amid an embarrassed silence. To Campton it had seemed as if a burst of protest must instantly clear the air. But after he himself had apologized for his negligence in not depositing the money, and Boylston had disengaged his responsibility in a few quiet words, there followed another blank interval. Then Mr. Mayhew suddenly suggested a complete reorganization of the work. He had something to criticize in every department. He, who so seldom showed himself at the office, now presented a list of omissions and commissions against which one after another of the active members rose to enter a mild denial. It was clear that some one belonging to the organization, and who was playing into his hands, had provided him with a series of cleverly falsified charges against the whole group of workers.

Presently Campton could stand it no

longer, and, jumping up, suddenly articulate, he flung into his cousin's face a handful of home-truths under which he expected that glossy countenance to lose its lustre. But Mr. Mayhew bore the assault with urbanity. It did not behove him, he said, to take up the reproaches addressed to him by the most distinguished member of their committee—the most distinguished, he might surely say without offense to any of the others (a murmur of assent); it did not behove him, because one of the few occasions on which a great artist may be said to be at a disadvantage is when he is trying to discuss business matters with a man of business. He, Mr. Mayhew, was only that, nothing more; but he *was* that, and he had been trained to answer random abuse by hard facts. In no way did he intend to reflect on the devoted labours of certain ladies of the committee, nor on their sympathetic treasurer's gallant efforts to acquire, amid all his other pressing interests, the rudiments of business habits; but Miss Anthony had all along been dividing her time between two widely different charities, and Mr. Boylston, like his distinguished champion, was first of all an artist, with the habits of the studio rather than of the office. In the circumstances—

Campton jumped to his feet again. If he stayed a moment longer he felt that he should knock Mayhew down. He jammed his hat on, shouted out "I resign," and stumbled blindly from the room.

It was the way in which his encounters with practical difficulties always ended. The consciousness of his inferiority in argument, the visionary's bewilderment when incomprehensible facts are thrust on him by fluent people, the helpless sense of not knowing what to answer, and of seeing his dream-world smashed in the rough-and-tumble of shabby motives—it all gave him the feeling that he was drowning, and must fight his way to the surface before they had him under.

In the street he stood in a cold sweat of remorse. He knew the charges of negligence against Miss Anthony and Boylston were trumped up. He knew there was an answer to be made, and that he was the man to make it; and his eyes

filled with tears of rage and self-pity at his own incompetence. But then he took heart at the thought of Boylston's astuteness and Miss Anthony's courage. They would not let themselves be beaten—probably they would fight their battle better without him. He tried to protect his retreat with such arguments, and when he got back to the studio he called up Mme. Lebel, and plunged again into his charcoal study of her head. He did not remember having ever worked with such supernatural felicity: it was as if *that* were his victorious answer to all their lies and intrigues...

But the Mayhew party was victorious too. How it came about a mind like Campton's could not grasp. Mr. Mayhew, it appeared, had let fall that a very large gift of money from the world-renowned philanthropist, Sir Cyril Jorgenstein (obtained through the good offices of Mmes. de Dolmetsch and Beausite) was contingent on certain immediate changes in the organization ("drastic changes" was Mr. Mayhew's phrase); and thereupon several hitherto passive members had suddenly found voice to assert the duty of not losing this gift. After that the way was clear. Adele Anthony and Boylston were offered ornamental posts which they declined, and within a week the Palais Royal saw them no more, and Paris drawing-rooms echoed with the usual rumours of committee wrangles and dark discoveries.

The episode left Campton with a bitter taste in his soul. It seemed to him like an ugly little allegory of Germany's manoeuvring the world into war. The speciousness of Mr. Mayhew's arguments, the sleight-of-hand by which he had dislodged the real workers and replaced them by his satellites, reminded the painter of the neutrals who were beginning to say that there were two sides to every question, that war was always cruel, and that how about the Russian atrocities in Silesia? As the months dragged on a breath of lukewarmness had begun to blow through the world, damping men's souls, confusing plain issues, casting a doubt on the worth of everything. People were beginning to ask what one knew, after all, of the secret motives which had impelled half-a-dozen

self-indulgent old men ensconced in Ministerial offices to plunge the world in ruin. No one seemed to feel any longer that life is something more than being alive; apparently the only people not tired of the thought of death were the young men still pouring out to it in their thousands.

Still those thousands poured; still the young died; still, wherever Campton went, he met elderly faces, known and unknown, disfigured by grief, shrunk with renunciation. And still the months wore on without result.

One day in crossing the Tuileries he felt the same soft sparkle which, just about a year earlier, had abruptly stirred the sap in him. Yes—it was nearly a year since the day when he had noticed the first horse-chestnut blossoms, and been reminded by Mme. Lebel that he ought to buy some new shirts; and though to-day the horse-chestnuts were still leafless they were already misty with buds, and the tall white clouds above them full-uddered with spring showers. It was spring again, spring with her deluding promises—her gilding of worn stones and chilly water, the mystery of her distances, the finish and brilliance of her nearer strokes. Campton, in spite of himself, drank down the life-giving draught and felt its murmur in his veins. And just then, across the width of the deserted gardens he saw, beyond a stretch of turf and clipped shrubs, two people, also motionless, who seemed to have the same cup at their lips. He recognized his son and Mrs. Talkett.

Their backs were toward him, and they stood close together, looking with the same eyes at the same sight: an Apollo touched with flying sunlight. After a while the pair walked on again, against a background of evergreens, slowly and close to each other. George, as they moved, seemed now and then to point out some beauty of sculpture, or the colour of a lichen on an urn; and once they turned and took their fill of the great perspective tapering to the Arch—the Arch on which Rude's Maenad-Marseillaise still yelled her battalions on to death.

### XXXIII

CAMPTON finished his charcoal of Mme. Lebel; then he attacked her in oils. Now

that his work at the Palais Royal was ended, painting had once more become his only refuge.

Adele Anthony had returned to her refugees; Boylston, pale and obstinate, toiled on at Preparedness. But Campton found it impossible to take up any new form of beneficence; his philanthropic ardour was exhausted. He could only revert to his brushes, and shut himself up, for long solitary hours, in the empty and echoing temple of his art.

George emphatically approved of his course: George was as insistent as Mrs. Brant on the duty of "business as usual." But on the young man's lips the phrase had a different meaning; it seemed the result of that altered perspective which Campton was conscious of whenever, nowadays, he tried to see things as his son saw them. George was not indifferent, he was not callous; but he seemed to feel himself mysteriously set apart, destined to some other task for which he was passively waiting. Even the split among the "Friends of French Art" left him, despite of his admiration for Boylston, curiously unperturbed. He seemed to have taken the measure of all such ephemeral agitations, and to regard them with an indulgent pity which was worse than coldness.

"He feels that all we do is so useless," Campton said to Dastrey; "he's like a gardener watching ants rebuild their hill in the middle of a path; and knowing all the while that hill and path are going to be wiped out by his pick."

"Ah, they're all like that," Dastrey murmured.

Mme. Lebel came up to the studio every afternoon. The charcoal study had been only of her head; but for the painting Campton had seated her in her own horsehair arm-chair, her smoky lamp beside her, her sewing in her lap. More than ever he saw in the wise old face something typical of its race and class: the obstinate French gift, as some one had put it, of making one more effort after the last effort. The old woman could not imagine why he wanted to paint her; but when one day he told her that it was for her grandsons, her eyes filled, and she said: "For which one, sir? For they're both at Verdun."

One autumn afternoon he was late in getting back to the studio, where he knew she was waiting for him. He pushed the door open, and there, in the beaten-down attitude in which he had once before seen her, she lay across the table, her cap awry, her hands clutching her sewing, and George kneeling at her side. His arm was about her, his young head pressed against her breast; and on the floor lay the letter, the fatal letter which was always, nowadays, the explanation of such scenes.

Neither George nor the old woman had heard Campton; and for a moment he stood and watched them. George's face, so fair and ruddy against Mme. Lebel's rusty black, wore a look of boyish compassion which Campton had never seen on it. Mme. Lebel had sunk into his hold as if it soothed and hushed her; and Campton said to himself: "These two are closer to each other than George and I, because they've both seen the horror face to face. He knows what to say to her ever so much better than he knows what to say to his mother or me."

But apparently there was no need to say much. George continued to kneel in silence; presently he bent and kissed the old woman's withered cheek; then he got to his feet and saw his father.

"The *chasseur Alpin*," he merely said, picking up the letter and handing it to Campton. "It was the grandson she counted on most."

Mme. Lebel caught sight of Campton, smoothed herself and stood up also.

"I had found him a wife—a strong healthy girl with a good *dot*. There go my last great-grandchildren! For the other will be killed too. I don't understand any more, do you?" She made an automatic attempt to straighten the things on the table, but her hands beat the air and George had to lead her downstairs.

It was that day that Campton said to himself: "We shan't keep him in Paris much longer." But the heavy weeks of spring and summer passed, the inconclusive conflict at the front went on with its daily toll of dead, and George still stuck to his job. Campton, during this time, continued to avoid the Brants as much as possible. His wife's conversation was in-



tolerable to him; her obtuse optimism, now that she had got her son back, was even harder to bear than the guiltily averted glance of Mr. Brant, between whom and Campton their last talk had hung a lasting shadow of complicity.

But most of all Campton dreaded to meet the Talketts; the wife with her flushed cheek-bones and fixed eyes, the husband still affably and continuously arguing against Philistinism. One afternoon the painter stumbled on them, taking tea with George in Boylston's little flat; but he went away abruptly, unable to bear the interminable discussion between Talkett and Boylston, and the pacifist's reiterated phrase: "To borrow one of my wife's expressions"—while George, with a closed brooding face, sat silent, laughing drily now and then. What a different George from the one his father had found, in silence also, kneeling beside Mme. Lebel!

Once again Campton was vouchsafed a glimpse of that secret George. He had walked back with his son after the funeral mass for young Lebel; and in the porter's lodge of the Avenue Marigny they found a soldier waiting—a young square-built fellow, with a shock of straw-coloured hair above his sunburnt rural face. Campton was turning from the door when George dashed past him, caught the young man by both shoulders, and shouted out his name. It was that of the orderly who had carried him out of the firing line and hunted him up the next day in the Doullens hospital. Campton saw the look the two exchanged: it lasted only for the taking of a breath; a moment later officer and soldier were laughing like boys, and the orderly was being drawn forth to shake hands with Campton. But again the glance was an illumination; it came straight from that far country, the Benny Upsher country, which Campton so feared to see in his son's eyes.

The orderly had been visiting his family, fugitives from the invaded regions who had taken shelter in one of Adele Anthony's suburban colonies. He had obtained permission to stop in Paris on his way back to the front; and for two joyful days he was lodged and feasted in the Avenue Marigny. Boylston provided him with an evening at Montmartre,

George and Mrs. Brant took him to the theatre and the cinema, and on the last day of his leave Adele Anthony invited him to tea with Campton, Mr. Brant and Boylston. Mr. Brant, as they left this entertainment, hung back on the stairs to say in a whisper to Campton: "The family are provided for—amply. I've asked George to mention the fact to the young man; but not until just as he's starting."

Campton nodded. For George's sake he was glad; yet he could not repress a twinge of his old dormant jealousy. Was it always to be Brant who thought first of the things to make George happy—always Brant who would alone have the power to carry them out?

"But he can't prevent that poor fellow's getting killed to-morrow," Campton thought almost savagely, as the young soldier beamed forth from the taxi in which George was hurrying him to the station.

It was not many days afterward that George looked in at the studio early one morning. Campton, over his breakfast, had been reading the *communiqué*. There was heavy news from Verdun, and from east to west the air was dark with calamity; but George's face had the look it had worn when he greeted his orderly.

"Dad, I'm off," he said; and sitting down at the table, he unceremoniously poured himself some coffee into his father's empty cup.

"The battalion's been ordered back. I leave to-night. Let's lunch together somewhere presently, shall we?"

His eye was clear, his smile confident: a great weight seemed to have fallen from him, and he looked like the little boy sitting up in bed with his Lavengro. "After ten months of Paris—" he added, stretching his arms over his head with a great yawn.

"Yes—the routine—" stammered Campton, not knowing what he said. Yet he was glad too; yes, in his heart of hearts he knew he was glad; though, as always happened, his emotion took him by the throat and silenced him. But it did not matter, for George was talking.

"I shall have leave a good deal oftener nowadays," he said with animation.

"And everything is ever so much better organized—letters and all that. I shan't seem so awfully far away. You'll see."

Campton still gazed at him, struggling for expression. Their hands met. Campton said—or imagined he said: "I see—I do see, already—" though afterward he was not even sure that he had spoken.

What he saw, with an almost blinding distinctness, was the extent to which his own feeling, during the long months, had imperceptibly changed, and how his inmost impulse, now that the blow had fallen, was not of resistance to it; but of acquiescence, since it made him once more one with his son.

He would have liked to tell that to George; but speech was impossible. And perhaps, after all, it didn't matter; it didn't matter, because George understood. Their hand-clasp had made that clear, and an hour or two later they were lunching together almost gaily.

Boylston joined them, and the three went on together to say goodbye to Adele Anthony. Adele, for once, was unprepared: it was almost a relief to Campton, who had winced in advance at the thought of her warlike attitude. The poor thing was far from warlike: her pale eyes clung to George's in a frightened stare, while her lips, a little stiffly, repeated the stock phrases of good cheer. "Such a relief . . . I congratulate you . . . getting out of all this *paperasserie* and red-tape. . . If I'd been you I couldn't have stood Paris another minute. . . The only hopeful people left are at the front. . ." It was the formula that sped every departing soldier.

The day wore on. To Campton its hours seemed as interminable yet as rapid as those before his son's first departure, nearly two years earlier. George had begged his father to come in the evening to the Avenue Marigny, where he was dining with the Brants. It was easier for Campton nowadays to fall in with such requests: during the months of George's sojourn in Paris a good many angles had had their edges rubbed off.

Besides, at that moment he would have done anything for his son—his son again at last! In their hand-clasp that morning the old George had come back to him, simple, boyish, just as he used to be; and

Campton's dread of the future was lightened by a great glow of pride.

In the Avenue Marigny dining-room the Brants and George were still sitting together about the delicate silver and porcelain. There were no flowers: Julia, always correct, had long since banished them as a superfluity. But there was champagne for George's farewell, and a glimpse of rich fare being removed.

Mr. Brant rose to greet Campton. His concise features were drawn with anxiety, and with the effort to hide it; but his wife appeared to Campton curiously unperturbed, and the leave-taking was less painful and uselessly drawn out than he had expected.

George and his father were to be sent to the station in Mr. Brant's motor. Campton, as he got in, remembered with a shiver the grey morning, before daylight, when the same motor had stood at the studio door, waiting to carry him to Doullens; between himself and his son he seemed to see Mr. Brant's small suffering profile.

To shake off the memory he said: "Your mother's in wonderfully good form. I was glad to see she wasn't nervous."

George laughed. "No. Madge met her this morning at the new *clairvoyante's*. —It does them all a lot of good," he added, with his all-embracing tolerance.

Campton shivered again. That universal smiling comprehension of George's always made him seem remoter than ever. "It makes him seem so old—a thousand years older than I am." But he forced an acquiescent laugh, and presently George went on: "About Madge—you'll be awfully good to her, won't you, if I get smashed?"

"My dear boy!"

There was another pause, and then Campton risked a question. "Just how do things stand? I know so little, after all."

For a moment George seemed to hesitate: his thick fair eyebrows were drawn into a puzzled frown. "I know—I've never explained it to you properly. I've tried to; but I was never sure that I could make you see." He paused and added quietly: "I know now that she'll never divorce Talkett."

"You know—?" Campton exclaimed with a great surge of relief.

"She thinks she will; but I see that the idea still frightens her. And I've kept on using the divorce argument only as a pretext."

The words plunged Campton back into new depths of perplexity. "A pretext?" he echoed blankly.

George drew a deep breath. "My dear old Dad—don't you guess? She's come to care for me awfully; if we'd gone all the lengths she wanted, and then I'd got killed, there would have been nothing on earth left for her. I hadn't the right, don't you see? We chaps haven't any futures to dispose of till this job we're in is finished. Of course, if I come back, and she can make up her mind to break with everything she's used to, we shall marry; but if things go wrong I'd rather leave her as she is, safe in her little old rut. So many people can't live out of one—and she's one of them, poor child, though she's so positive she isn't."

Campton sat chilled and speechless as the motor whirled them on through the hushed streets. It paralyzed his faculties to think that in a moment more they would be at the station.

"It's awfully fine: your idea," he stammered at length. "Awfully—magnanimous." But he still felt the chill down his spine.

"Oh, it's only that things look to us so different—so indescribably different—and always will, I suppose, even after this business is over. We seem to be sealed to it for life."

"Poor girl—poor girl!" Campton thought within himself. Aloud he said: "My dear chap, of course you can count on my being—my doing—"

"Of course, of course, old Dad."

They were at the station. Father and son got out and walked toward the train. Campton put both hands on George's shoulders.

"Look here," George broke out, "there's one thing more. I want to tell you that I know what a lot I owe to you and Adele. You've both been awfully fine: did you know it? You two first made me feel a lot of things I hadn't felt before. And you know this is my job; I've never been surer of it than at this minute."

They clasped hands in silence, each

looking his fill of the other; then the crowd closed in, George exclaimed: "My kit-bag!" and somehow, in the confusion, the parting was over, and Campton, straining blurred eyes, saw his son's smile—the smile of the light-hearted lad of old days—flash out at him from the moving train. For an instant the father had the illusion that it was the goodbye look of the boy George, going back to school after the holidays.

Campton, as he came out of the station, stumbled, to his surprise, on Mr. Brant. The little man, as they met, flushed and paled, and sought the customary support from his eye-glasses.

"I followed you in the other motor," he said, looking away.

"Oh, I say—" Campton murmured; then, with an effort: "Shouldn't you like me to drive back with you?"

Mr. Brant shook his head. "Thank you. Thank you very much. But it's late and you'll want to be getting home. I'll be glad if you'll use my car." Together they strolled slowly across the station court to the place where the private motors were aligned; but there Campton held out his hand.

"Much obliged; I think I'll walk."

Mr. Brant nodded; then he said abruptly: "This *clairvoyante* business: is there anything in it, do you think? You saw how calm—er—Julia was just now: she wished me to tell you that that Spanish woman she goes to—her name is Olida, I think—had absolutely reassured her about . . . about the future. The woman says she knows that George will come back soon, and never be sent to the front again. Those were the exact words, I believe. *Never be sent to the front again.* Julia put every kind of question, and couldn't trip her up; she wanted me to tell you so. It does sound . . .? Well, at any rate, it's a help to the mothers."

### XXXIV

THE next morning Campton said to himself: "I can catch that goodbye look if I get it down at once—" and pulled out a canvas before Mme. Lebel came in with his coffee.

As sometimes happened to him, the

violent emotions of the last twenty-four hours had almost immediately been clarified and transmuted into vision. He felt that he could think contentedly of George if he could sit down at once and paint him.

The face grew under his feverish fingers—feverish, yet how firm! He always wondered anew at the way in which, at such hours, the inner flame and smoke issued in a clear guiding radiance. He saw—he saw; and the mere act of his seeing seemed to hold George safe in some pure impenetrable medium. His boy was actually there, sitting to him, the old George he knew and understood, essentially vividly face to face with him.

He was interrupted by a ring. Mme. Lebel, tray in hand, opened the door, and a swathed and voluminous figure, sweeping in on a wave of musk, blotted her out. Campton, exasperated at the interruption, turned to face Mme. Olida.

So remote were his thoughts that he would hardly have recognized her had she not breathed, on the old familiar guttural: "Juanito!"

He was less surprised at her intrusion than annoyed at being torn from his picture. "Didn't you see a sign on the door? 'No admission before twelve'—" he growled.

"Oh, yes," she said; "that's how I knew you were in."

"But I'm *not* in; I'm working. I can't allow—"

Her large bosom rose. "I know, my heart! I remember how stern you always were. 'Work—work—my work!' It was always that, even in the first days. But I come to you on my knees: Juanito, imagine me there!" She sketched a plunging motion of her vast body, arrested it in time by supporting herself on the table, and threw back her head entreatingly, so that Campton caught a glint of the pearls in a crevasse of her quaking throat. He saw that her eyes were red with weeping.

"What can I do? You're in trouble?" he asked.

"Oh, such trouble, my heart—such trouble!" She leaned to him, absorbing his hands in her plump muscular grasp. "I must have news of my son; I must! The young man—you saw him that day you came with your wife? Yes—he

looked in at the door: beautiful as a god, was he not? That was my son Pepito!" And with a deep breath of pride and anguish she unburdened herself of her tale.

Two or three years after her parting with Campton she had married a clever French barber from the Pyrenees. He had brought her to France, and they had opened a "Beauty Shop" at Biarritz and had prospered. Pepito was born there, and soon afterward, alas, her clever husband, declaring that he "hated grease in cooking or in woman" ("and after my Pepito's birth I became as you now see me"), had gone off with the manicure and all their savings. Mme. Olida had had a struggle to bring up her boy; but she had kept on with the Beauty Shop, had made a success of it, and not long before the war had added fortune-telling to massage and hair-dressing.

"And my son, Juanito; was not my son an advertisement for a Beauty Shop, I ask you? Before he was out of petticoats he brought me customers; before he was sixteen all the ladies who came to me were quarrelling over him. Ah, there were moments when he crucified me . . . but lately he had grown more reasonable, had begun to see where his true interests lay, and we had become friends again, friends and business partners. When the war broke out I came to Paris; I knew that all the mothers would want news of their sons. I have made a great deal of money; and I have had wonderful results—wonderful! I could give you instances—names that you know—where I have foretold everything! Oh, I have the gift, my heart, I have it!"

She pressed his hands with a smile of triumph; then her face clouded again.

"But six months ago my darling was called to his regiment—and for three months now I've had no news of him, none, none!" she sobbed, the tears making dark streaks through her purplish powder.

The upshot of it was that she had heard that Campton was "all-powerful"; that he knew Ministers and Generals, knew great financiers like Jorgenstein (who were so much more powerful than either Generals or Ministers), and could assuredly, if he chose, help her to trace her boy, who, from the day of his departure for the



front, had vanished as utterly as if the earth had swallowed him.

"Not a word, not a sign—to me, his mother, who have slaved and slaved for him, who have made a fortune for him!"

Campton looked at her, marvelling. "But your gift as you call it . . . your powers . . . you can't use them for yourself?"

She returned his look with a tearful simplicity: she hardly seemed to comprehend what he was saying. "But my son! I want *news* of my son, real news; I want a letter; I want to see some one who has seen him! To touch a hand that has touched him! Oh, don't you understand?" she gasped.

"Yes, I understand," he said; and she took up her desperate litany, clinging about him with soft palms like medusa-lips, till by dint of many promises he managed to detach himself and steer her gently to the door.

On the threshold she turned to him once more. "And your own son, Juanito—I know he's at the front again. His mother came the other day—she comes often. And I can promise you things if you'll help me. No, even if you don't help me—for the old days' sake, I will! I know secrets . . . magical secrets that will protect him. There's a Moorish salve, infallible against bullets . . . handed down from King Solomon . . . I can get it. . ."

Campton, guiding her across the sill, led her out and bolted the door on her; then he went back to his easel and stood gazing at the sketch of George. But the spell was broken: the old George was no longer there. The war had sucked him back into its awful whirl-pool—once more he was that dark enigma, a son at the front. . .

In the heavy weeks which followed, a guarded allusion of Campton's showed him one day that Boylston was aware of there being "something between" George and Madge Talkett.

"Not that he's ever said anything—or even encouraged me to guess anything. But she's got a talking face, poor little thing; and not much gift of restraint. And I suppose it's fairly obvious to everybody—except perhaps to Talkett—that she's pretty hard hit."

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"Yes. And George?"

Boylston's round face became remote and mysterious. "We don't really know—do we, sir?—exactly how any of them feel? Any more than if they were—" He drew up sharply on the word, but Campton faced it.

"Dead?"

"Transfigured, say; no, trans—what's the word in the theology books? A new substance . . . somehow. . ."

"Ah, you feel that too?" the father exclaimed.

"Yes. They don't know it themselves, though—how far they are from us. At least I don't think they do."

Campton nodded. "But George, in the beginning, was—frankly indifferent to the war, wasn't he?"

"Yes; intellectually he was. But he told me that when he saw the first men on their way back from the front—with the first mud on them—he knew he belonged where they'd come from. I tried hard to persuade him when he was here that his real job was on a military mission to America—and it *was*. Think what he might have done out there! But it was no use. His orderly's visit did the trick. It's the thought of their men that pulls them all back. Look at Louis Dastrey—they couldn't keep him in America. There's something in all their eyes: I don't know what. *Dulce et decorum*, perhaps—"

"Yes."

There was a pause before Campton questioned: "And Talkett?"

"Poor little ass—I don't know. He's here arguing with me nearly every day. She looks over his shoulder, and just shrugs at me with her eyebrows."

"Can you guess what she thinks of George's attitude?"

"Oh, something different every day. I don't believe she's ever really understood. But then she loves him, and nothing else counts."

Mrs. Brant continued to face life with apparent serenity. She had returned several times to Mme. Olida's, and had always brought away the same reassuring formula: she thought it striking, and so did her friends, that the *clairvoyante's* prediction never varied.

There was reason to believe that George's regiment had been sent to Verdun, and from Verdun the news was growing daily more hopeful. This seemed to Mrs. Brant a remarkable confirmation of Olida's prophecy. Apparently it did not occur to her that, in the matter of human life, victories may be as ruinous as defeats; and she triumphed in the fact—it had grown to be a fact to her—that her boy was at Verdun, when he might have been in the Somme, where things, though stagnant, were on the whole going less well. Mothers prayed for "a quiet sector"—and then, she argued, what happened? The men grew careless, the officers were oftener away; your son was ordered out to see to the repairs of a barbed-wire entanglement, and a sharpshooter picked him off while you were sitting reading one of his letters, and thinking: "Thank God he's out of the fighting." And besides, Olida was *sure*, and all her predictions had been so wonderful. . .

Campton began to dread his wife's discovering Mme. Olida's fears for her own son. Every endeavour to get news of Pepito had been fruitless; finally Campton and Bolyston concluded that the young man must be a prisoner. The painter had a second visit from Mme. Olida, in the course of which he besought her (without naming Julia) to be careful not to betray her private anxiety to the poor women who came to her for consolation; and she fixed her tortured velvet eyes on him reproachfully.

"How could you think it of me, Juanito? The money I earn is for my boy! That gives me the strength to invent a new lie every morning."

He took her fraudulent hand and kissed it.

The next afternoon he met Mrs. Brant, walking down the Champs Elysées with her light girlish step. She lifted a radiant face to his. "A letter from George this morning! And, do you know, Olida prophesied it? I was there again yesterday; and she told me that he would soon be back, and that at that very moment she could see him writing to me. You'll admit it's extraordinary? So many mothers depend on her—I couldn't live without her. And her messages from her own son are so beautiful——"

"From her own son?"

"Yes: didn't I tell you? He says such perfect things to her. And she confessed to me, poor woman, that before the war he hadn't always been kind: he used to take her money, and behave badly. But now every day he sends her a thought-message—such beautiful things! She says she wouldn't have the courage to keep us all up if it weren't for the way that she's kept up by her boy. And now," Julia added gaily, "I'm going to order the cakes for my bridge-tea this afternoon. You know I promised Georgie I wouldn't give up my bridge-teas."

Now and then Campton returned to his latest portrait of his son; but in spite of George's frequent letters, in spite of the sudden drawing together of father and son during their last moments at the station, the vision of the boy George, the careless happy George who had ridiculed the thought of war and pursued his millennial dreams of an enlightened world—that vision was gone. Sometimes Campton fancied that the letters themselves increased this effect of remoteness. They were necessarily more guarded than the ones written, before George's wounding, from an imaginary H. Q.; but that did not wholly account for the difference. Campton, in the last analysis, could only say that his vision of his boy was never quite in focus. Either—as in the moment when George had comforted Mme. Lebel, or greeted his orderly, or when he had said those last few broken words at the station—he seemed nearer than ever, seemed part and substance of his father; or else he became again that beautiful distant apparition, the winged sentry guarding the Unknown.

The weeks thus punctuated by private anxieties rolled on dark with doom. At last, in December, came the victory of Verdun. Men took it reverently but soberly. The price paid had been too heavy for rejoicing; and the horizon was too ominous in other quarters. Campton had hoped that the New Year would bring his son back on leave; but still George did not speak of coming. Meanwhile Bolyston's face grew rounder and more beaming. At last America was stirring in her

sleep. "Oh, if only George were out there!" Boylston used to cry, as if his friend had been an army. His faith in George's powers of persuasion was almost mystical. And not long afterward Campton had the surprise of a visit which seemed, in the most unforeseen way, to confirm this belief. Entering his studio one afternoon he found it tenanted by Mr. Roger Talkett.

The young man, as carefully brushed and arrayed as usual, but pale with emotion, clutched the painter's hand in a moist grasp.

"My dear Master, I had to see you—to see you alone and immediately."

Campton looked at him with apprehension. What was the meaning of his "alone"? Had Mrs. Talkett lost her head, and betrayed her secret—or had she committed some act of imprudence of which the report had come back to her husband?

"Do sit down," said the painter weakly.

But his visitor, remaining sternly upright, shook his head and glanced at his wrist-watch. "My moments," he said, "are numbered—literally; all I have time for is to implore you to look after my wife." He drew a handkerchief from his glossy cuff, and rubbed his eye-glasses.

"Your wife?" Campton echoed, dismayed.

"My dear sir, haven't you guessed? It's George's wonderful example... his inspiration... I've been converted! We men of culture can't stand by while the ignorant and illiterate are left to die for us. We must leave that attitude to the Barbarian. Our duty is to set an example. I'm off to-night for America—for Plattsburg."

"Oh—" gasped Campton, wringing his hand.

Boylston burst into the studio the next day. "What did I tell you, sir? George's influence—it wakes up everybody. But Talkett—I'll be hanged if I should have thought it! And have you seen his wife? She's a war-goddess! I went to the station with them: their farewells were harrowing. At that minute, you know, I believe she'd forgotten that George ever existed!"

"Well, thank God for that," Campton cried.

"Yes. Don't you feel how we're all being swept into it?" panted Boylston breathlessly. His face had caught the illumination. "Sealed, as George says—we're sealed to the job, every one of us! Even I feel that, sitting here at a stuffy desk..." He flushed crimson and his eyes filled. "We'll be in it, you know; America will—in a few weeks now, I believe! George was as sure of it as I am. And, of course, if the war goes on, our army will *have* to take short-sighted officers; won't they, sir? As England and France did from the first. They'll need the men; they'll need us all, sir!"

"They'll need *you*, my dear chap; and they'll have you, to the full, whatever your job is," Campton smiled; and Boylston, choking back a sob, dashed off again.

Yes, they were all being swept into it together—swept into the yawning whirlpool. Campton felt that as clearly as all these young men; he felt the triviality, the utter unimportance, of all their personal and private concerns, compared with this great headlong outpouring of life on the altar of conviction. And he understood why, for youths like George and Boylston, nothing, however close and personal to them, would matter till the job was over. "And not even for poor Talkett!" he reflected whimsically.

That afternoon, curiously appeased, he returned once more to his picture of his son. He had sketched the boy leaning out of the train window, smiling back, signalling, saying goodbye, while his destiny rushed him out into darkness as years ago the train used to rush him back to school. And while Campton worked he caught the glow again; it rested on brow and eyes, and spread in sure touches under his happy brush.

One day, as the picture progressed, he wavered over the remembrance of some little detail of the face, and went in search of an old portfolio into which, from time to time, he had been in the habit of thrusting his unfinished studies of George. He plunged his hand into the heap, and Georges of all ages looked forth at him: round baby-Georges, freckled school-boys, a thoughtful long-faced youth (the delicate George of St. Moritz); but none

seemed quite to serve his purpose and he rummaged on till he came to a page torn from an old sketch-book. It was the pencil study he had made of George as the lad lay asleep at the Crillon, the night before his mobilisation.

Campton threw the sketch down on the table; and as he sat staring at it he relived every phase of the emotion out of which it had been born. How little he had known then—how little he had understood! He could bear to look at the drawing now; could bear even to rethink the shuddering thoughts with which he had once cast it away from him. Was it only because the atmosphere was filled with a growing sense of hope? Because, in spite of everything, the victory of Verdun was there to show the inexhaustible strength of France, because people were more and more sure that America was beginning to waken . . . or just because, after too long and fierce a strain, human nature always instinctively contrives to get its necessary whiff of moral oxygen? Or was it that George's influence had really penetrated him, and that this strange renewed confidence in life and in ideals was his son's message of reassurance?

Certainly the old George was there, close to him, that morning; and somewhere else—in scenes how different!—he was sure that the actual George, at that very moment, was giving out force and youth and hope to those about him.

"I couldn't be doing this if I didn't understand—at last," Campton thought as he turned back to the easel. The little pencil sketch had given him just the hint

he needed, and he took up his palette with a happy sigh.

A knock broke in on his rapt labour, and without turning he called out: "Damn it, who are you? Can't you read the sign? *Not in!*"

The door opened and Mr. Brant entered.

He appeared not to have heard the painter's challenge; his eyes, from the threshold, sprang straight to the portrait, and remained vacantly fastened there. Campton, long afterward, remembered thinking, as he followed the glance: "He'll be trying to buy this one too!"

Mr. Brant moistened his lips, and his gaze, slowly detaching itself from George's face, moved back in the same vacant way to Campton's. The two men looked at each other, and Campton jumped to his feet.

"Not—not—?"

Mr. Brant tried to speak, and the useless effort contracted his mouth in a pitiful grimace.

"*My son?*" Campton shrieked, catching him by the arm. The little man dropped into a chair.

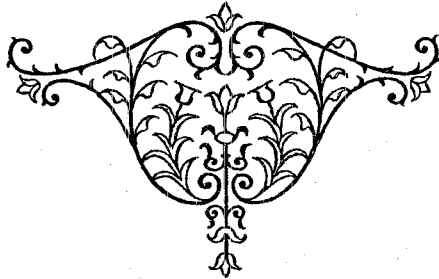
"Not dead . . . not dead . . . Hope . . . hope . . ." was shaken out of him in jerks of anguish.

The door burst open again, and Boylston dashed in beaming. He waved aloft a handful of morning papers.

"America! You've seen? They've sacked Bernstorff! Broken off diplomatic——"

His face turned white, and he stood staring incredulously from one of the two bowed men to the other.

(To be concluded.)







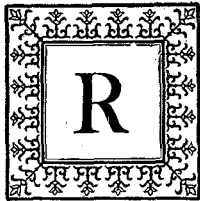
He'd camp on the critters' tails till they'd use all the energy they had to get out of the way.—Page 186.

## Cattle Rustlers

BY WILL JAMES

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM DRAWINGS BY THE AUTHOR

Will James says of his cowboy articles and drawings: "Yessir, as the cowboy speaks, by all means, is the way I intended the article to be published. Good English is fine, but it don't git there. I've records to show that I've lived the life further and deeper than very few cowboys have. I've worked at it for a living and it's all I know. I'm proud to say that I'm a cowpuncher, and not of the 1923 variety. I'm known as the cowboy artist without my saying so—it's taken for granted, for how can one know without really having the experience?"



**R**AGGED, bewhiskered, narrow-brained, cruel, and mighty dangerous to all folks, specially women, unscrupulous, with a hankering to kill and destroy all what he runs across, leaving nothing behind but the smoke, and a grease spot, is the impression folks get thru the movies and other fiction of the cattle rustler and horse-thief.

I don't blame them folks for shivering at the thought of ever meeting such a bad hombre, but they can rest easy, 'cause there is no such animal in the cattle rustler. Picture for yourself a man sleeping out under the stars, watching the sunrise and sunsets, where there's no skyscrapers or smoke to keep him from seeing *it all* acting that way or being what *they* say he is.

When I speak of cattle rustlers, I don't mean them petty cheap crooks what's

read dime novels and tries to get tough, steals some poor old widow's last few "dogies" 'cause they ain't got guts enough to get theirs from the big outfits what keeps riders the year 'round—they kind don't last long enough to be mentioned anyhow—and I always figgered the rope what kept 'em from touching the earth was worth a heap more than what it was holding.

There's cases where some cowboy what's kind of reckless and sorta free with his rope, might get a heap worse reputation than what he deserves; and he gradually gets the blame for any stock disappearing within a couple of hundred miles from his stomping ground. Naturally that gets pretty deep under his hide, with the result that he might live up to his reputation, he figgers he just as well, 'cause if he gets caught "going south" with five hundred head he won't get hung any higher than he would for running off with just some old "ring boned" saddle horse.