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The Pomp of Yesterday

Joseph Hocking

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'THE POMP OF YESTERDAY'

by

JOSEPH HOCKING

Author of 'All for a Scrap of Paper,' 'Dearer than Life,'
'The Curtain of Fire,' etc.

"Far famed our Navies melt away,
On dune and headland sinks the fire,
Lo, all the pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre.
God of the Nations, spare us yet!
Lest we forget, lest we forget."
RUDYARD KIPLING.

Hodder and Stoughton
London — — New York — — Toronto

JOSEPH HOCKING'S GREAT WAR STORIES

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David Baring
The Trampled Cross

"Let us never forget in all that we do, that the measure of our ultimate success will be governed, largely if not mainly, by the strength with which we put our religious convictions into our action and hold fast firmly and fearlessly to the faith of our forefathers."

Extract of speech by General Sir William Robertson.

March 2, 1918.

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FOREWORD

It is now fast approaching four years since our country at the call of duty, and for the world's welfare entered the great struggle which is still convulsing the nations of the earth. What this has cost us, and what it has meant to us, and to other countries, it is impossible to describe. Imagination reels before the thought. Still the ghastly struggle continues, daily comes the story of carnage, and suffering, and loss; and still the enemy who stands for all that is basest, and most degraded in life, stands firm, and proudly vaunts his prowess.

Why is Victory delayed?

That is the question which has haunted me for many months, and I have asked myself whether we, and our Allies, have failed in those things which are essential, not only to Victory, but to a righteous and, therefore, lasting peace.

In this story, while not attempting a full and complete answer to the question, I have made certain suggestions which I am sure the Nation, the Empire, ought to consider; for on our attitude towards them depends much that is most vital to our welfare.

Let it not be imagined, however, that *The Pomp of Yesterday* is anything in the nature of a polemic, or a treatise. It is first and foremost a story—a romance if you like—of incident, and adventure. But it is more than a story. It deals with vital things, and it deals with them—however inadequately—sincerely and earnestly. The statements, moreover, which will probably arouse a great deal of antagonism in certain quarters, are not inventions of the Author, but were related to him by those in a position to know.

Neither are the descriptions of the Battle of the Somme the result of the Author's imagination, but transcripts from the experiences of some who passed through it. Added to this, I have, since first writing the story, paid a Second Visit to the Front, during which I traversed the country on which Thiepval, Goomecourt, La Boiselle,

Contalmaison; and a score of other towns and villages once stood. Because of this, while doubtless a military authority could point out technical errors in my descriptions, I have been able to visualize the scenes of the battle, and correct such mistakes as I made at the time of writing.

One other word. More than once, the chief character in the narrative anticipates what has taken place in Russia. While I do not claim to be a prophet, it is only fair to say that I finished writing the story in August, 1917, when very few dreamt of the terrible chaos which now exists in the once Great Empire on which we so largely depended.

JOSEPH HOCKING.

March, 1918.

CHAPTER I

THE MAN WITHOUT A PAST

My first meeting with the man whose story I have set out to relate was in Plymouth. I had been standing in the harbour, hoping that the friends I had come to meet might yet appear, even although the chances of their doing so had become very small. Perhaps a hundred passengers had landed at the historic quay, and practically all of them had rushed away to catch the London train. I had scrutinized each face eagerly, but when the last passenger had crossed the gangway I had been reluctantly compelled to assume that my friends, for some reason or other, had not come.

I was about to turn away, and go back to the town, when some one touched my arm. 'This is Plymouth, isn't it?'

I turned, and saw a young man. At that time I was not sure he was young; he might have been twenty-eight, or he might have been forty-eight. His face was marked by a thousand lines, while a look suggestive of age was in his eyes. He spoke to me in an apologetic sort of way, and looked at me wistfully.

I did not answer him for a second, as his appearance startled me. The strange admixture of youth and age gave me an eerie feeling.

'Yes,' I replied, 'this is Plymouth. At least, this is Plymouth Harbour.'

He turned toward the vessel, and looked at it for some seconds, and then heaved a sigh.

'Have you friends on board?' I asked.

'Oh, no,' he replied. 'I have just left it. I thought I remembered Plymouth, and so I got off.'

'Where have you come from?'

'From India.'

'Where did you come from?'

'From Bombay. It was a long journey to Bombay, but it seemed my only chance.' Then he shuddered.

'Aren't you well?' I asked.

'Oh, yes, I am very well now. But everything seems difficult to realize; you, now, and all this,' and he cast his eyes quickly around him, 'seem to be something which exists in the imagination, rather than objective, tangible things.'

He spoke perfect English, and his manner suggested education, refinement.

'You don't mind my speaking to you, do you?' he added somewhat nervously.

'Not at all,' and I scrutinized him more closely. 'If you did not speak English so well,' I said, 'I should have thought you were an Indian,'—and then I realized that I had been guilty of a *faux pas*, for I saw his face flush and his lips tremble painfully.

'You were thinking of my clothes,' was his reply. 'They were the best I could get. When I realized that I was alive, I was half naked; I was very weak and ill, too. I picked up these things,' and he glanced at his motley garments, 'where and how I could. On the whole, however, people were very kind to me. When I got to Bombay, my feeling was that I must get to England.'

'And where are you going now?' I asked.

'I don't know. Luckily I have a little money; I found it inside my vest. I suppose I must have put it there before— —' and then he became silent, while the strange, wistful look in his eyes was intensified.

'What is your name?' I asked.

'I haven't the slightest idea. It's very awkward, isn't it?' and he laughed nervously. 'Sometimes dim pictures float before my mind, and I seem to have vague recollections of things that happened ages and ages ago. But they pass away in a second. I am afraid you think

my conduct unpardonable, but I can hardly help myself. You see, having no memory, I act on impulse. That was why I spoke to you.'

'The poor fellow must be mad,' I said to myself; 'it would be a kindness to him to take him to a police station, and ask the authorities to take care of him.' But as I looked at him again, I was not sure of this. In spite of his strange attire, and in spite, too, of the wistful look in his eyes, there was no suggestion of insanity. That he had passed through great trouble I was sure, and I had a feeling that he must, at some time, have undergone some awful experiences. But his eyes were not those of a madman. In some senses they were bold and resolute, and suggested great courage; in others they expressed gentleness and kindness.

'Then you have no idea what you are going to do, now you have landed at Plymouth?'

'I'm afraid I haven't. Perhaps I ought not to have got off here at all. But again I acted on impulse. You see, when I first saw the harbour, I had a feeling that I had been here before, so seeing the others landing, I followed them. My reason for speaking to you was, I think, this,'—and he touched my tunic. 'Besides, there was something in your eyes which made me trust you.'

'Are you a soldier, then?' I asked.

'I don't know. You see, I don't know anything. But I rather think I must have been interested in the Army, because I am instinctively drawn to any one wearing a soldier's uniform. You are a captain, I see.'

'Yes,' I replied. 'I'm afraid my position in the Army is somewhat anomalous, but there it is. When the war broke out, I was asked by the War Office to do some recruiting, and thinking that I should have more influence as a soldier, a commission was given me. I don't know much about soldiering, although I have taken a great deal of interest in the Army all my life.'

He looked at me in a puzzled sort of way. 'War broke out?' he queried.

'Is England at war?'

'Didn't you know?'

He shook his head pathetically. 'I know nothing. All the way home I talked to no one. I didn't feel as though I could. You see, people looked upon me as a kind of curiosity, and I resented it somewhat. But, England at war! By Jove, that's interesting!'

His eyes flashed with a new light, and another tone came into his voice. 'Who are we at war with?' he added.

'Principally with Germany,' I replied, 'but it'll take a lot of explaining, if you've heard nothing about it. Roughly speaking, England, France, and Russia are at war with Germany, Austria and Turkey.'

'I always said it would come—always. The Germans have meant it for years.'

'The fellow is contradicting himself; he begins to have a memory in a remarkable manner,' I thought. 'When did you think it would come?' I asked.

He looked at me in a puzzled way as if he were trying to co-ordinate his thoughts, and then, with a sigh, gave it up as if in despair. 'It is always that way,' he said with a sigh, 'sometimes flashes of the past come to me, but they never remain. But what is England at war about?'

'I am afraid it would take too long to tell you. I say,' and I turned to him suddenly, 'have you done anything wrong in India, that you come home in this way?'

I was sorry the moment I had spoken, for I knew by the look in his eyes that my suspicion was unjust.

'Not that I know of,' he replied. 'I am simply a fellow who can't remember. You don't know how I have struggled to recall the past, and what a weary business it is.'

I must confess I felt interested in him. That he had been educated as a gentleman was evident from every word he spoke, and in spite

of his motley garb, no one would take him for an ordinary man. I wanted to know more about him, and to look behind the curtain which hid his past from him.

'I'm afraid I must be an awful nuisance to you,' he said. 'I'm taking up a lot of your time, and doubtless you have your affairs to attend to.'

'No, I'm at a loose end just now. If you like, I'll help you to get some other clothes, and then you'll feel more comfortable.'

'It would be awfully good of you if you would.'

Two hours later, he sat with me in the dining-room of a hotel which faced The Hoe. His nondescript garments were discarded, and he was now clothed in decent British attire. That he had a good upbringing, and was accustomed to the polite forms of society, was more than ever evidenced while we were together at the hotel. There was no suggestion of awkwardness in his movements, and everything he did betrayed the fact that he had been accustomed to the habits and associations of an English gentleman.

After dinner, we went for a walk on The Hoe.

'It would be really ever so much easier to talk to you,' I said with a laugh, 'if you had a name. Have you no remembrance of what you were called?'

'Not the slightest. In a vague way I know I am an Englishman, and that's about all. Months ago I seemed to awake out of a deep sleep, and I realized that I was in India. By a kind of intuition, I found my way to Bombay, and hearing that a boat was immediately starting for England, I came by it. It was by the merest chance that I was able to come. I had walked a good way, and was foot-sore. I had a bathe in a pond by the roadside, and on examining a pocket inside my vest I found several £5 notes.'

'And you knew their value?' I asked.

'Oh, yes, perfectly,' he replied.

'Did you not realize that they might not belong to you?'

'No, I was perfectly sure that they belonged to me, and that I had put them there before I lost my memory, I can't give you any reason

for this, but I know it was so. I have just another remembrance,' he added, and he shuddered as he spoke.

'What is that?'

'That I had been with Indians. Even now I dream about them, and I wake up in the night sometimes, seeing the glitter of their eyes, and the flash of their knives. I think they tortured me, too. I have curious scars on my body. Still, I don't think about that if I can help it.'

'And you have no recollection of your father or mother?'

He shook his head.

'No memories of your boyhood?'

'No.'

'Then I must give you a name. What would you like to be called?'

He laughed almost merrily. 'I don't know. One name is as good as another. What a beautiful place!' and he pointed to one of the proudest dwellings in that part of the country. 'What is it called?'

'That is Mount Edgumbe,' I said.

'Mount Edgumbe,' he repeated, 'Edgumbe? That sounds rather nice.

Call me Edgumbe.'

'All right,' I laughed; 'but what about your Christian name?'

'I don't mind what it is. What do you suggest?'

'There was a scriptural character who had strange experiences, called Paul.'

'Paul Edgumbe, — that wouldn't sound bad, would it?'

'No, it sounds very well.'

'For the future, then, I'll be Paul Edgumbe, until — my memory comes back; — if ever it does,' he added with a sigh. 'Paul Edgumbe, Paul Edgumbe, — yes, I shall remember that.'

'And what are you going to do?' I asked. 'Your little store of money will soon be gone. Have you any idea what you are fit for?'

'Not the slightest. Stay though — ' A group of newly-made soldiers passed by as he spoke, and each of them, according to the custom of soldiers, saluted me. 'Strapping lot of chaps, aren't they?' he said, like one talking to himself; 'they'll need a lot of licking into shape, though. By Jove, that'll do.'

'What'll do?'

'You say England is at war, and you've been on a recruiting stunt. That will suit me. Recruit me, will you?'

'Do you know anything about soldiering?'

'I don't think so. I remember nothing. Why do you ask?'

'Because when those soldiers saluted me just now, you returned the salute.'

'Did I? I didn't know. Perhaps I saw you doing so and I unconsciously followed your lead. But I don't think I do know anything about soldiering. I remember nothing about it, anyhow.'

This conversation took place in the early spring of 1915, just as England began to realize that we were actually at war. The first flush of recruiting had passed, and hundreds of thousands of our finest young men had volunteered for the Army. But a kind of apathy had settled upon the nation, and fellows who should have come forward willingly hung back.

I had been fairly successful in my recruiting campaign; nevertheless I was often disappointed at the lack of enthusiasm manifested. I found that young men gave all sorts of foolish excuses as reasons for not joining; and when this stranger volunteered, as it seemed to me, unthinkingly, and without realizing the gravity of the step he was taking, I hesitated.

'Of course you understand that you are doing a very important thing?' I said. 'We are at war, and fellows who volunteer know that they are possibly volunteering for death.'

'Oh yes, of course.' He said this in what seemed to me such a casual and matter-of-fact way that I could not believe he realized what war was.

'The casualty list is already becoming very serious,' I continued. 'You see, we are having to send out men after a very short training, and thus it comes about that the lads who, when war broke out, never dreamed of being soldiers, are now, many of them, either maimed and crippled for life, or dead. You quite realize what you are doing?'

'Certainly,' he replied, 'but then, although I have forgotten nearly everything else, I have not forgotten that I am an Englishman, and of course, as an Englishman, I could do no other than offer myself to my country. Still, I'd like to know the exact nature of our quarrel with Germany.'

'You've not forgotten there is such a country as Germany, then?'

'Oh, no.' And then he sighed, as if trying to recollect something. 'I say,' he went on, 'my mind is a curious business. I know that Germany is a country in Europe. I can even remember the German language. I know that Berlin is the capital of the country, and I can recall the names of many of their big towns,—Leipzig, Frankfurt, Munich, Nuremburg; I have a sort of fancy that I have visited them; but I know nothing of the history of Germany,—that is all a blank. Funny, isn't it?' and then he sighed again.

'As it happens,' I said, 'I have to speak at a recruiting meeting to-night, here in Plymouth. Would you like to come? I am going to deal with the reasons for the war, and to show why it is every chap's duty to do his bit.'

'I'd love to come. My word! what's that?'

Away in the distance there was a sound of martial music, and as the wind was blowing from the south-west the strains reached us clearly. Evidently some soldiers were marching with a band.

'It's fine, isn't it!' he cried. He threw back his shoulders, stood perfectly erect, and his footsteps kept perfect time to the music. I felt more than ever convinced that he had had some former association with the Army.

On our way to the recruiting meeting, however, he seemed to have forgotten all about it. He was very listless, and languid, and depressed. He was like a man who wanted to hide himself from the crowd, and he slunk along the streets as though apologizing for his presence.

'That's the hall,' I said, pointing to a big building into which the people were thronging.

'I shall not be noticed, shall I? If you think I should, I'd rather not go.'

'Certainly not. Who's going to notice you? I'll get you a seat on the platform if you like.'

'Oh, no, no. Let me slink behind a pillar somewhere. No, please don't bother about me, I'll go in with that crowd. I'll find you after the meeting.' He left me as he spoke, and a minute later I had lost sight of him.

I am afraid I paid scanty attention to what was said to me in the anteroom, prior to going into the hall. The man interested me more than I can say. I found myself wondering who he was, where he came from, and what his experiences had been. More than once, I doubted whether I had not been the victim of an impostor. The story of his loss of memory was very weak and did not accord with the spirit of the men in the anteroom, who were eagerly talking about the war; or with the purposes of the meeting. And yet I could not help trusting in him, he was so frank and manly. In a way, he was transparent, too, and talked like a grown-up child.

When I entered the hall, which was by this time crowded with, perhaps, two thousand people, I scanned the sea of faces eagerly, but could nowhere see the man who had adopted the name of Paul Edgecumbe. I doubted whether he was there at all, and whether I should ever see him again. Still, I did not see what purpose he could have had in deceiving me. He had received nothing from me, save his dinner at the hotel, which I had persisted in paying for in spite of his protests. The clothes he wore were paid for by his own money, and he showed not the slightest expectation of receiving any benefits from me.

Just as I was called upon to speak, I caught sight of him. He was sitting only a few rows back from the platform, close to a pillar, and his eyes, I thought, had a vacant stare. When my name was mentioned, however, and I stood by the table on the platform, waiting for the applause which is usual on such an occasion to die down, the vacant look had gone. He was eager, alert, attentive.

Usually I am not a ready speaker, but that night my work seemed easy. After I had sketched the story of the events which led to the war, the atmosphere became electric, and the cause I had espoused gripped me as never before, and presently, when I came to the application of the story I had told, and of our duty as a nation which pretended to stand for honour and truth, and Christianity, my heart grew hot, and the meeting became wild with enthusiasm.

Just as I was closing, I looked toward the pillar by which Paul Edgecumbe sat, and his face had become so changed that I scarcely knew him. There were no evidences of the drawn, parchment-like skin; instead, his cheeks were flushed, and looked youthful. His eyes were no longer wistful and sad, but burned like coals of fire. He was like a man consumed by a great passion. If he had forgotten the past, the present, at all events, was vividly revealed to him.

Before I sat down, I appealed for volunteers. I asked the young men, who believed in the sacredness of promises, in the honour of life, in the sanctity of women, to come on to the platform, and to give in their names as soldiers of the King.

There was no applause, a kind of hush rested on the audience; but for more than a minute no one came forward. Then I saw Paul Edgecumbe make his way from behind the pillar, and come towards the platform, the people cheering as he did so. He climbed the platform steps, and walked straight toward the chairman, who looked at him curiously.

'Will you take me, sir?' he said, and his voice rang out clearly among the now hushed audience.

'You wish to join, do you?'

'Join!' he said passionately, 'how can a man, who is a man, do anything else?'