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THE RED PLANET

BY

WILLIAM J. LOCKE

AUTHOR OF "THE WONDERFUL YEAR," "JAFFERY,"
"THE BELOVED VAGABOND," ETC.

*Not only over death strewn plains,
Fierce mid the cold white stars,
But over sheltered vales of home,
Rides the Red Planet Mars.*

NEW YORK: JOHN LANE COMPANY
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THE RED PLANET

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

IDOLS

JAFFERY

VIVIETTE

SEPTIMUS

DERELICTS

STELLA MARIS

THE USURPER

WHERE LOVE IS

THE WHITE DOVE

SIMON THE JESTER

A STUDY IN SHADOWS

A CHRISTMAS MYSTERY

THE WONDERFUL YEAR

THE FORTUNATE YOUTH

THE BELOVED VAGABOND

AT THE GATE OF SAMARIA

THE GLORY OF CLEMENTINA

THE MORALS OF MARCUS ORDEYNE

THE DEMAGOGUE AND LADY PHAYRE

THE JOYOUS ADVENTURES OF ARISTIDE PUJOL

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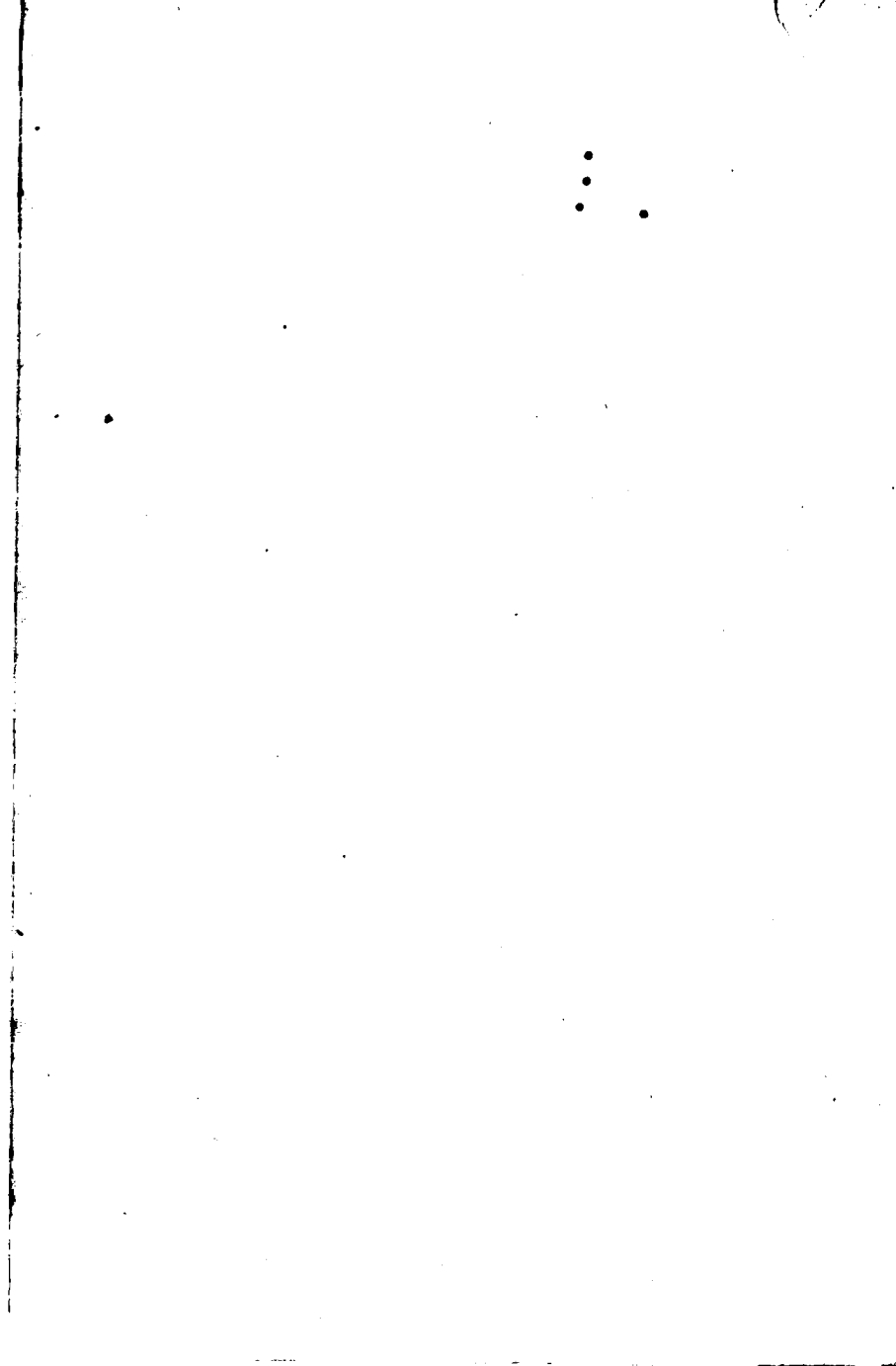
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CHAPTER I

LADY FENIMORE'S compliments, sir, and will you be so kind as to step round to Sir Anthony at once?"

Heaven knows that never another step shall I take in this world again; but Sergeant Marigold has always ignored the fact. That is one of the many things I admire about Marigold. He does not throw my poor paralysed legs, so to speak, in my face. He accepts them as the normal equipment of an employer. I don't know what I should do without Marigold. . . . You see we were old comrades in the South African War, where we both got badly knocked to pieces. He was Sergeant in my battery, and the same Boer shell did for both of us. At times we join in cursing that shell heartily, but I am not sure that we do not hold it in sneaking affection. It initiated us into the brotherhood of death. Shortly afterwards when we had crossed the border-line back into life, we exchanged, as tokens, bits of the shrapnel which they had extracted from our respective carcasses. I have not enquired what he did with his bit; but I keep mine in a certain locked drawer. . . . There were only the two of us left on the gun when we were knocked out. . . . I should like to tell you the whole story, but you wouldn't listen to me. And no wonder. In comparison with the present world convulsion in which the slaughtered are reckoned by millions, the Boer War seems a trumpery affair of bows and

arrows. I am a back-number. Still, back-numbers have their feelings — and their memories.

I sometimes wonder, as I sit in this wheel-chair, with my abominable legs dangling down helplessly, what Sergeant Marigold thinks of me. I know what I think of Marigold. I think him the ugliest devil that God ever created and further marred after creating him. He is a long, bony creature like a knobbly ram-rod, and his face is about the colour and shape of a damp, mildewed walnut. To hide a bald head into which a silver plate has been fixed, he wears a luxuriant curly brown wig, like those that used to adorn waxen gentlemen in hair-dressing windows. His is one of those unhappy moustaches that stick out straight and scanty like a cat's. He has the slit of a letter-box mouth of the Irishman in caricature, and only half a dozen teeth spaced like a skeleton company. Nothing will induce him to procure false ones. It is a matter of principle. Between the wearing of false hair and the wearing of false teeth he makes a distinction of unfathomable subtlety. He is an obstinate beast. If he wasn't he would not, with four fingers of his right hand shot away, have remained with me on that gun. In the same way, neither tears nor entreaties nor abuse have induced him to wear a glass eye. On high days and holidays, whenever he desires to look smart and dashing, he covers the unpleasing orifice with a black shade. In ordinary workaday life he cares not how much he offends the æsthetic sense. But the other eye, the sound left eye, is a wonder — the precious jewel set in the head of the ugly toad. It is large, of ultra-marine blue, steady, fearless, humorous, tender — everything heroic and beautiful and romantic you can imagine about eyes. Let him clap a hand over that eye and you will hold him the most dreadful ogre that ever escaped out of a fairy tale. Let him clap a hand

over the other eye and look full at you out of the good one and you will think him the Knightliest man that ever was — and in my poor opinion, you would not be far wrong.

So, out of this nightmare of a face, the one beautiful eye of Sergeant Marigold was bent on me, as he delivered his message.

I thrust back my chair from the writing-table.

“Is Sir Anthony ill?”

“He rode by the gate an hour ago looking as well as either you or me, sir.”

“That’s not very reassuring,” said I.

Marigold did not take up the argument.

“They’ve sent the car for you, sir.”

“In that case,” said I, “I’ll start immediately.”

Marigold wheeled my chair out of the room and down the passage to the hall, where he fitted me with greatcoat and hat. Then, having trundled me to the front gate, he picked me up — luckily I have always been a small spare man — and deposited me in the car. I am always nervous of anyone but Marigold trying to carry me. They seem to stagger and fumble and bungle. Marigold’s arms close round me like an iron clamp and they lift me with the mechanical certainty of a crane.

He jumped up beside the chauffeur and we drove off.

Perhaps when I get on a little further I may acquire the trick of telling a story. At present I am baffled by the many things that clamour for prior record. Before bringing Sir Anthony on the scene, I feel I ought to say something more about myself, to explain why Lady Fenimore should have sent for me in so peremptory a fashion. Following the model of my favourite author Balzac — you need the awful leisure that has been mine to appreciate him — I ought to describe the house in which

I live, my establishment — well, I have begun with Sergeant Marigold — and the little country town which is practically the scene of the drama in which were involved so many bound to me by close ties of friendship and affection.

I ought to explain how I come to be writing this at all.

Well, to fill in my time, I first started by a diary — a sort of War Diary of Wellingsford, the little country town in question. Then things happened with which my diary was inadequate to cope. Everyone came and told me his or her side of the story. All through, I found thrust upon me the parts of father-confessor, intermediary, judge, advocate, and conspirator. . . . For look you, what kind of a life can a man lead situated as I am? The crowning glory of my days, my wife, is dead. I have neither chick nor child. No brothers or sisters, dead or alive. The Bon Dieu and Sergeant Marigold (the latter assisted by his wife and a maid or two) look after my creature comforts. What have I in the world to do that is worth doing save concern myself with my country and my friends?

With regard to my country, in these days of war, I do what I can. Until finally flattened out by the War Office, I pestered them for such employment as a cripple might undertake. As an instance of what a paralytic was capable I quoted Couthon, member of the National Convention and the Committee of Public Safety. You can see his chair, not very unlike mine, in the Musée Carnavalet in Paris. Perhaps that is where I blundered. The idea of a shrieking revolutionary in Whitehall must have sent a cold shiver down their spines. In the meanwhile, I serve on as many War Committees in Wellingsford as is physically possible for Sergeant Marigold to get me into. I address recruiting

meetings. I have taken earnest young Territorial artillery officers in courses of gunnery. You know they work with my own beloved old fifteen pounders, brought up to date with new breeches, recoils, shields, and limbers. For months there was a brigade in Wellings Park, and I used to watch their drill. I was like an old actor coming once again before the footlights. . . . Of course it was only in the mathematics of the business that I could be of any help, and doubtless if the War Office had heard of the goings on in my study, they would have dropped severely on all of us. Still, I taught them lots of things about parabolas that they did not know and did not know were to be known — things that, considering the shells they fired went in parabolas, ought certainly to be known by artillery officers; so I think, in this way, I have done a little bit for my country.

With regard to my friends, God has given me many in this quiet market town — once a Sleepy Hollow awakened only on Thursdays by bleating sheep and lowing cattle and red-faced men in gaiters and hard felt hats; its life flowing on drowsily as the gaudily painted barges that are towed on the canal towards which, in scattered buildings, it drifts aimlessly; a Sleepy Hollow with one broad High Street, melting gradually at each end through shops, villas, cottages, into the King's Highway, yet boasting in its central heart a hundred yards or so of splendour, where the truculent new red brick Post Office sneers across the flagged market square at the new Portland-stone Town Hall, while the old thatched corn-market sleeps in the middle and the Early English spire of the Norman church dreams calmly above them. Once, I say, a Sleepy Hollow, but now alive with the tramp of soldiers and the rumble of artillery and transport; for Wellingsford is the centre of a district occupied by

a division, which means twenty thousand men of all arms, and the streets and roads swarm with men in khaki, and troops are billeted in all the houses. The War has changed many aspects, but not my old friendships. I had made a home here during my soldiering days, long before the South African War, my wife being a kinswoman of Sir Anthony, and so I have grown into the intimacy of many folks around. And, as they have been more than good to me, surely I must give them of my best in the way of sympathy and counsel. So it is in no spirit of curiosity that I have pried into my friends' affairs. They have become my own, very vitally my own; and this book is a record of things as I know them to have happened.

My name is Meredyth, with a "Y," as my poor mother used proudly to say, though what advantage a "Y" has over an "I," save that of a swaggering tail, I have always been at a loss to determine; Major Duncan Meredyth, late R.F.A., aged forty-seven; and I live in a comfortable little house at the extreme north end of the High Street, standing some way back from the road; so that in fine weather I can sit in my front garden and watch everybody going into the town. And whenever any of my friends pass by, it is their kindly habit to cast an eye towards my gate, and, if I am visible, to pass the time of day with me for such time as they can spare.

Years ago, when first I realised what would be my fate for the rest of my life, I nearly broke my heart. But afterwards, whether owing to the power of human adaptability or to the theory of compensation, I grew to disregard my infirmity. By building a series of two or three rooms on to the ground floor of the house, so that I could live in it without the need of being carried up and down stairs, and by acquiring skill in the manipulation of my tricycle chair, I can get about the place pretty

much as I choose. And Marigold is my second self. So, in spite of the sorrow and grief incident to humanity of which God has given me my share, I feel that my lot is cast in pleasant places and I am thankful.

The High Street, towards its southern extremity, takes a sudden bend, forming what the French stage directions call a *pan coupé*. On the inner angle are the gates of Wellings Park, the residence of Sir Anthony Fenimore, third baronet, and the most considerable man in our little community. Through these gates the car took me and down the long avenue of chestnut trees, the pride of a district braggart of its chestnuts and its beeches, but now leafless and dreary, spreading out an infinite tracery of branch and twig against a grey February sky. Thence we emerged into the open of rolling pasture and meadow on the highest ground of which the white Georgian house was situated. As we neared the house I shivered, not only with the cold, but with a premonition of disaster. For why should Lady Fenimore have sent for me to see Sir Anthony, when he, strong and hearty, could have sent for me himself, or, for the matter of that, could have visited me at my own home? The house looked stark and desolate. And when we drew up at the front door and Pardoe, the elderly butler, appeared, his face too looked stark and desolate.

Marigold lifted me out and carried me up the steps and put me into a chair like my own which the Fenimores have the goodness to keep in a hall cupboard for my use.

"What's the matter, Pardoe?" I asked.

"Sir Anthony and her ladyship will tell you, sir. They're in the morning room."

So I was shewn into the morning room—a noble square room with French windows, looking on to the wintry garden, and with a log fire roaring up

a great chimney. On one side of the fire sat Sir Anthony, and on the other, Lady Fenimore. And both were crying. He rose as he saw me — a short, crop-haired, clean-shaven, ruddy, jockey-faced man of fifty-five, the corners of his thin lips, usually curled up in a cheery smile, now piteously drawn down, and his bright little eyes now dim like those of a dead bird. She, buxom, dark, without a grey hair in her head, a fine woman defying her years, buried her face in her hands and sobbed afresh.

"It's good of you to come, old man," said Sir Anthony, "but you're in it with us."

He handed me a telegram. I knew, before reading it, what message it contained. I had known, all along, but dared not confess it to myself.

"I deeply regret to inform you that your son, Lieutenant Oswald Fenimore, was killed in action yesterday while leading his men with the utmost gallantry."

I had known him since he was a child. By reason of my wife's kinship, I was "Uncle Duncan." He was just one and twenty, but a couple of years out of Sandhurst. Only a week before I had received an exuberant letter from him extolling his men as "super-devil-angels," and imploring me if I loved him and desired to establish the supremacy of British arms, to send him some of Mrs. Mari-gold's potted shrimp.

And now, there he was dead; and, if lucky, buried with a little wooden cross with his name rudely inscribed, marking his grave.

I reached out my hand.

"My poor old Anthony!"

He jerked his head and glance towards his wife and wheeled me to her side, so that I could put my hand on her shoulder.

"It's bitter hard, Edith, but —"

"I know, I know. But all the same —"

"Well, damn it all!" cried Sir Anthony, in a quavering voice, "he died like a man and there's nothing more to be said."

Presently he looked at his watch.

"By George," said he, "I've only just time to get to my Committee."

"What Committee?" I asked.

"The Lord Lieutenant's. I promised to take the chair."

For the first time Lady Fenimore lifted her stricken face.

"Are you going, Anthony?"

"The boy didn't shirk his duty. Why should I?"

She looked at him squarely and the most poignant simulacrum of a smile I have ever seen flitted over her lips.

"Why not, darling? Duncan will keep me company till you come back."

He kissed his wife, a trifle more demonstratively than he had ever done in alien presence, and with a nod at me, went out of the room.

And suddenly she burst into sobbing again.

"I know it's wrong and wicked and foolish," she said brokenly. "But I can't help it. Oh, God! I can't help it."

Then, like an ass, I began to cry, too; for I loved the boy, and that perhaps helped her on a bit.

CHAPTER II

DULCE et decorum est pro patria mori. The tag has been all but outworn during these unending days of death; it has become almost a cant phrase which the judicious shrink from using. Yet to hundreds of thousands of mourning men and women there has been nothing but its truth to bring consolation. They are conscious of the supreme sacrifice and thereby are ennobled. The cause in which they made it becomes more sacred. The community of grief raises human dignity. In England, at any rate, there are no widows of Ashur. All are silent in their lamentations. You see little black worn in the public ways. The Fenimores mourned for their only son, the idol of their hearts; but the manifestation of their grief was stoical compared with their unconcealed desolation on the occasion of a tragedy that occurred the year before.

Towards the end of the preceding June their only daughter, Althea, had been drowned in the canal. Here was a tragedy unrelieved, stupid, useless. Here was no consoling knowledge of glorious sacrifice; no dying for one's country. There was no dismissing it with a heroic word that caught in the throat.

I have not started out to write this little chronicle of Wellingsford in order to weep over the pain of the world. God knows there is in it an infinity of beauty, fresh revelations of which are being every day unfolded before my eyes.

If I did not believe with all my soul that out of