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DON'T WAIT FOR HARRY

C. Hall Thompson

THE YOUNG MAN sat at the table and watched the couples on the dance floor; the room was crowded and a little smoky. You could hear the Italian soldiers at the bar laughing like hell. He wondered if it would end up in a brawl, the way it did, sometimes when there were women involved. He unbuttoned his tunic pocket and took out a package of cigarets; they were thin, white, cork-tipped American cigarets. He lit one and put the packet back, buttoning it in. He blew out smoke through his nostrils, sitting sideways with one elbow on the smeary wooden table, twisting a glass of grappa in his long, brown fingers, and watching the couples.

You could pick Harry out easily; you could always pick Harry out of a crowd without half trying. He danced with the girl, holding her tight up against him, and her slim, dark arm was around his neck, their faces were touching, and when they turned the right way, he could see her eyes closed, and her lips touching Harry's cheek. He felt suddenly ashamed; it was like watching a bedroom scene in the movies; you enjoyed it too much, and it went deep inside you, and twisted around, warm and exciting. He turned his eyes away and took a swallow of grappa. The orchestra went on. Cloying, sweet bitter music. What the hell, he thought, it's none of my business. Then he saw Quienti limping toward him, smiling.

"Hello, Quienti," he said.

"Hello, Maggiore," Quienti smiled. "How are the operations at the hopsital?"

"All right," said the young man, whose name was Richard Wayne. "All right, I guess. Sit down."

"Si, Maggiore."

"Have a drink."

"Yes, thank you." Quienti called for a glass, and poured himself some grappa. The small orchestra stopped playing, and the couples stood still for a moment; then the music began again, and they went on dancing. Quienti looked at Richard Wayne.

"I am glad to see you get a rest, from the operations, I mean," he said.

"I ought to be back there, now," Richard Wayne said. He kept looking out on to the dance floor.

"There is much work?"

"Much. Too much. The advance across the River has sent many back. Now, Massico Ridge is to be fought. The ambulances can hardly handle it."

"It is good you could rest a little, anyway," Quienti said. "There are many guns in the north tonight. There is light in the sky."

"I saw it when I left the hospital," Richard Wayne said. He drank the last of his grappa, and filled the glass again. "How is the ankle, Quienti?"

"Better, Maggiore," said Quienti. "Si, much better. I walk now, without too much pain. I cannot yet dance."

"You should walk with a cane."

"It is tiresome." Quienti smiled, and looked down at his right ankle. "The job you did was a good one. I thought I would lose the foot."

"So did I," Richard Wayne said.

"Still. . . ." Quienti looked wistfully at the couples on the floor, dancing, close-touching, bodies yielding, warm-sweet contact, dancing, and feeling the music inside them. "Still, I should wish to dance. . . ."

"You will, soon," Richard Wayne told him. He found himself looking out at Harry and his girl again. They seemed unconscious of everything about them; the girl had leaned her head back and her lips were close to Harry's; she said something, you could see her lips moving, and Harry smiled whitely, holding her more tightly.

"The girls make it better," Quienti said.

"Yes."

"They make it seem more human, more like the days before the war. After a while, with them, you do not mind so much going back to it. . . ." Quienti's voice trailed off a little. He saw Richard Wayne watching the two on the dance floor. "Harry does well by himself," he said after a little while. Richard Wayne looked at him and smiled.

"Harry always does well by himself," he said.

"You have got to be careful of these girls of the officers' house, though. There is no telling about any of them."

"She is not of the house," Richard Wayne said.

"No?"

"No. She is from the hospital."

"Do you know her?" Quienti asked. He poured more wine in both glasses, and crossed his legs, looking now with interest at the girl.

"Not well," Richard Wayne said. "She is of your country. She volunteered as a helper. Like a female orderly."

"She looks to be from the north," Quienti said. "By the brownness of her skin, from the farms."

"Yes, I think so."

"What is she called?"

"Theresa."

"It is a good name," Quienti said, sipping the red wine, washing it about in his mouth, and finally letting it trickle down. "She is not like these others then. . . ."

"No," Richard Wayne said.

"It is too bad," Quienti said to his glass.

"What's too bad?"

"That she should be for Harry."

"Shut up."

"Why shut up? It is no secret; they make no secret of it the way they dance. On the floor, holding each other, they say to everyone, in silence, 'See, we have been together; we are for each other.' These things I understand."

"You're a wise man."

"No," said Quienti seriously. "But, of these things I have knowledge. I have seen a girl like that many times. Your Theresa is for Harry."

"What if she is?"

"You know as well as I know, Maggiore. We both have known Harry Morse. And I say it is too bad for the girl. . . ."

The troubled look came into Richard Wayne's face again; he looked out at the dance floor. What the hell, he thought. Why should it concern me. Why should I worry. If she got herself in for something like this, that's up to her, young, and brown and rich-bodied, it was

bound to happen sometime, only it had to be Harry Morse, of all the swell, nice, lousy guys to be for, it had to be him. She was young, she was only eighteen maybe, at the outside, and she had come off a farm, with dark, rich hair, and browned skin, and young, lovely body, and she had wanted to help nursing. She spoke only Italian, and when she laughed it was way down in her throat and she blushed a little so that the soft mounds of her cheeks would be glowing. And now, she picks Harry Morse out of the whole damned crowd to fall in love with. Harry had been around; he wasn't handsome, but he was blonde, and he had a smile, and a way, and he had always been in love or just out, or about to fall in again. It was crazy, and sad, and Richard Wayne wondered why he should worry himself about it.

"You think she's in love with him?" he asked Quienti, coming back from far away.

"She is not in love with you," Quienti said.

"The hell you say!"

"It is too bad she is not in love with you," Quienti said, seriously.

"What about me being in love with her?"

Quienti smiled.

"Have some more grappa, Maggiore," he said.

The jerk. The wise dago jerk, Richard Wayne thought. You can fool them about so damn many things, but don't try it about emotions; they've got too many of them, themselves; they know all about them.

"Shut the hell up," he said, weakly.

"Si, Maggiore."

The music had stopped, and the couples drifted back to their tables, in dark, hot corners of the large low room, hands locked palm to palm, heads close, arms about each other; an emaciated Italian tenor was singing a thin, lonely love song, now. In the dim lights of the officers' house, the hard faces of the girls softened a little, their bodies seemed fresh and young and not so used and experienced. Harry and the girl came up to the table where Richard Wayne and Quienti sat.

"Hello, Federico," Harry said, smiling at Quienti. He pushed a chair in for the girl. She was glowing a little; she smiled at Quienti, too.

"How is the leg?" she said.

"It is fine, signorina," Quienti said. "The Maggiore and I have been watching you dance. I envy Harry, so much."

"Don't let this Italian take you away from me, Tess," Harry said

"It is impossible," said Quienti. "I only wish I had a better leg so as to give you competition on the dance floor, eh?"

"It would be fun," Theresa said, softly. She kept looking at Harry when he sat down, they held hands on the table. Richard Wayne called for glasses and a bottle of vermouth. He felt sick inside, watching them; his throat was thick and he could not speak when he watched the long suppleness of the girl's arm, and the brownness of her throat where a miniature pulse throbbed warmly. He concentrated on pouring the wine.

"Perhaps another time, when the ankle has healed, eh?" Quienti was saying.

"You won't have any competition, then," Harry told him.

"What do you mean?"

"I go back to the front soon. . . ."

"How soon?"

"Eleven days," Theresa said.

"It is too bad," Quienti said.

Richard Wayne swallowed the wine, feeling it spread war through his tired loneliness. He tried to keep himself from saying it, but in the end, it came out. It sounded hollow and dry, and the voice did not seem his own.

"Are you going to get married?" he said.

Harry looked at him for a while, and he wasn't smiling; the girl was young and blushing, and there was honest liking in her face, that contrasted with Harry's indignant expression.

"When Harry comes back," Theresa said softly.

"Not before he leaves?"

"No," Harry said. "There is too little time. We want to do right. These things take time. . . ."

"Si," Quienti said behind his wine glass. "These things take much time; they should be thought out; a lot of things should be thought out."

"We are to get married when the war is over," the girl said; it was as though she were saying tomorrow. Richard Wayne felt tired, and he felt as though he wanted to smash the smile that had come back off Harry Morse's face. He lit another cigaret and offered them around. Quienti took one.

"And Ricardo will be the best man," Theresa said, smiling at him across the table.

"Si," said Quienti. "And I shall give the bride away. . . ."

The girl was looking into Harry Morse's face; there was youth and sacrifice, and love and everything else in her face. It was crazy, Richard Wayne told himself, nobody could be hurt, the way she was going to be hurt; it was crazy and cruel, and somehow worse than the bloody messes that war made of things. Harry had her believing all that stuff about weddings, he had her thinking it could be, he had her dreaming, and in eleven days he would be away, and if he ever came back, it would be with the same story, after the war, after the war was the time for the wedding, and there would never be an "after-the-war" for him.

"We owe a great deal to Ricardo," Theresa was saying. "We should never have met but for the chance he gave me to nurse you in the hospital. . . ."

"We both owe a lot to the hospital," Harry said.

"All three of us," Quienti said, through a haze of smoke. The Italian soldiers at the bar were laughing boisterously, and swearing at the bartender. The music had started again, and a few couples were back on the floor. Richard Wayne felt tight and angry inside, and he knew he had to get away from Harry Morse if only for a little while. He got to his feet and managed a smile at the girl.

"I know one thing you owe me," he said, feeling foolish and like a movie actor speaking lines. "You owe me a dance. . . ."

The girl smiled, and patted Harry's hand; Quienti looked deeply into his glass, and Harry said: "Don't keep her too long, Rick."

Then, they were on the floor, and she was in his arms, her right hand and wrist against his, her fingers warm and slim; her body was against him, the long, scalding-cool length of it, making him want her, making him wish he was away and hating her and loving her and wishing he had killed Harry Morse on the operating table. She was light and warm in his arms, and he wanted to hold her as Harry had held her, to feel her lips part against his, knowing that it was right, and she was for him, not for Harry; only he knew it would be no good, he knew that Quienti had been right, and he knew, somehow, that all his love could do for her was make her sorry for him, and he didn't want that.

"Do you want to marry him, Theresa?" he said.

"What, Ricardo?" She had been somewhere, far off, not in his arms at all, and the knowledge of it hurt him.

"I said do you want to be married to Harry?" he repeated.

"Yes. Terribly . . ."

"It is a long time to wait . . .," she added.

"Get him to marry you now, then."

"I would rather wait if Harry wants me to."

"There is talk in the hospital," he said. "You must be more careful."

"We are as married now," Theresa said, simply.

"You've loved him from the beginning, haven't you?"

"Yes, . . . from before the beginning, I think. . . ."

"But you must be more careful in the hospital. All the nurses know about you. It doesn't make your name good."

"I do not care," the girl said. "We are as married, now. It has been that way from the first."

They danced for a while in silence; the music seemed very distant. He wanted to tell her it was no good; he kept hearing himself saying forget it, he's no good, he's not for you, he's for lots of girls like you all over, anywhere, anytime, but not for any one of you in particular; damn it, can't you see that, can't you understand. Instead he danced feeling the music far away, and finally he said:

"Are you going to have a baby?"

"I do not know," the girl said.

"What if you do?"

"It will be all right. It will be beautiful."

Yes, he thought, beautiful, like hell, going through all the pain of all the waiting, knowing in the end that this was all that she would ever have of Harry, all she would ever know of him, beautiful. . . .

"If you are going to have one," Richard Wayne said, "you should tell Harry. . . ."

"I am not sure. . . ."

"He should know. . . ."

"I would rather he didn't. It might spoil what time we have left; it might scare him. It does not scare me. . . . I do not want him to know. I am not sure. . . ."

"It's up to you," he said.

Of course it's up to her, you damn fool, he said to himself, you're not right meddling in any of it, it's her game, hers and Harry's, as she's calling the signals, and if that's the way she wants it, there's nothing anybody can do about it. Except take care of her when the time comes.

time came, keep her here, and take care of her, and try to help her through everything. Forget it, let Harry worry about it, let the whole damned world worry about it, but let her be happy while she can. He wanted to tell her everything; he wanted to say to her, forget about him, don't wait for him, never wait for Harry, because Harry's not the kind of guy who comes back, don't wait, don't wait too long and be too hurt by it. He did not speak again; they danced in silence until the music stopped and then they went back to the table.

Harry stood up.

"Think ~~we~~ ought to go now, Tess," he said.

"If you want to. . . ."

"Yes."

"All right, darling. . . ."

Take her now, you louse, Richard Wayne thought, take her now, and go to bed with her and make love to her, and know her lips and her brown, hot body beside you, know her love and her passion, in the dark, in the quiet, love-singing, sweet-burning dark, in the night. Go ahead, and see if I give a damn. She's no different than the rest. No, that was wrong. She was different, and just because she wasn't for him, that was no reason to throw mud at it, to make it nasty and cheap; he knew anything she did could never be that way; he knew it was real, and he wanted to say she was wonderful. He wanted not to be bitter.

"Take care of her, Harry," he said.

"We'll do all right, won't we, honey?" Harry said. The girl looked full and lovely; she smiled and her face was dark and warm.

"Love is a lovely thing," Quienti said. "I wish I had a better ankle so that I could fall in love. . . ."

"Dancing is a part of love," Theresa said.

"It is true, signorina. It is very true."

"Goodnight, Ricardo," Theresa said.

"Goodnight."

"Take care of the ankle, Federico," Harry said.

"Si. Goodnight, signorina. Goodnight, Harry."

"Goodnight."

"Be good," Richard Wayne said.

He sat down, and watched them, walking away through the eye-stinging mist of smoke. The Italians at the bar talked loudly; one of the girls was sitting on the bar and her skirt was well above her knees.

She was drinking beer, and kissing each of them in turn. With each kiss there was a new burst of laughter. He lost the girl's figure, treating in the maze of people, but he could still see Harry's blond head above the others.

"You believe me now, Maggiore?" Quienti said.

"Believe what?"

"That she is for him?"

"I never said she wasn't," Richard Wayne said.

"But a man can wish, can he not?"

"Go to hell."

"Have some more vermouth, Maggiore." Quienti filled the half-empty glasses; a little of the wine slopped over in his saucer. "There is much firing in the north; there will be much work at the hospital tomorrow."

Richard Wayne swallowed the vermouth in a gulp. He kept looking into space.

"She thinks she is going to have a baby," he said.

"It is natural," Quienti said.

"It's a hell of a thing," Richard Wayne said.

"Forget about it, Maggiore," Quienti said. "For a while she will be happy. That is all she will ask. You will see. A moment's happiness. That is all any of them ask, with the right man. It is of no use to think about it."

"No," Richard Wayne said. "I can't stop thinking about it."

"Drink the wine," Quienti said, softly. "Drink the wine, and listen to the music, and after a while, the forgetting will not be so hard."

The laughter kept coming in undulant waves from the bar; Richard Wayne poured more wine and sipped it. The Italian tenor was singing again, high and threadbare and sad. Quienti caressed his bad ankle with a long thin hand. He watched the slow, warm, lovely movements of the dancers.

"I shall be able to dance soon, I think, eh, Maggiore?" he said.

"In a little while," Richard Wayne said. After a time, he got up and paid his check; he went out into the cold night and walked back to the hospital through the darkness. Far to the north, the sky grew ruddy and then black again. There was still fighting in the mountains.