Eric Lambert

The
Twenty Thousand
Thieves

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NEWMONT, MELBOURNE
1951
In the pictures of the Versailles Gallery it's all geraniums, lilies and clouds. But in reality it's mud and lice.

—"The Fall of Paris," by Ilya Ehrenburg.

What do they know of the world? Does living mean quite simply, Mother, to die young?

Good for this, good for that. My good friends I am leaving—

Twenty years old — good for the armed forces.

Louis Aragon.
This book has a twofold dedication: To those who died in the war against fascism and to those among us today who fight resurgent fascism and its plot to destroy the peace.

Respectfully I salute them.
This is a novel about Australian soldiers in the Second World War. There was no such battalion as the Second N; I have tried to make its members typical of many Australian infantrymen. Therefore the main characters depicted herein are composites of many men. To say that they have no relation to living persons nevertheless would be true—for the men on whom I chose to base them are dead.
CONTENTS

Book 1: The Plain
Book 2: The Fortress
Book 3: Unrest on the Plain
Book 4: Victory

Glossary
of discipline. I have built up an esprit de corps in this unit second to none in the A.I.F. and as long as I command it, it will remain so. I will not tolerate slovenliness, either in dress or bearing. I still insist that officers be ashamed on appropriate occasions. We are entering the final and most important stage of our training. It is up to every man to make as efficient a soldier of himself as possible. You have a proud tradition to uphold; the eyes of your country are upon you. Wherever you came from and whatever your plans for after the war, forget them. Forget everything except that you are over here to do a big job. I know that some of the weaker minds among you are regretting that you ever joined up to fight for your country. It is too late now. You are in the army, you are in my battalion, and, by God, I will make you or break you. . . ."

Helped by his liver, he was wound up now and the troops, knowing him of old, resigned themselves to half an hour of it at least. The linear descendant of one of the most famous figures in Australian history, the possessor of fabulous acres of grazing property, a member of a family whose name was a byword, he had taken command of a battalion that was prepared to stand something in awe of him. A few months' experience of him and his ways had dispelled all this.

The clipped tones proceeded:
"Without detracting from the magnificent exploits of the Ninth Division, it should not be forgotten that they defeated an army that had no desire to fight. Sooner or later we will meet the German and will find him a much tougher proposition. . . ."

Captain Caffert, commander of B Company, became conscious of restiveness and muttering among the men behind him. He turned and sternly caught the eye of
Lieutenant Crane. The lieutenant turned round to Six Platoon and whispered scornfully:

"Shut up!"

He faced his front again, quite unaware of the recent fact he had caused behind him. Lieutenant Crane was often unaware of such things.

"The German nation has many advantages over us," proceeded the colonel. "It has been arming and training for war for a long period. It has a unity that we might envy. Strikes are unknown and agitators are abroad. While men are dying overseas, people in Australia seem to go on strike rather than produce the weapons of war. Some of our trade unions seem to be composed largely of traitors and saboteurs, . . ."

The mutterings in Six Platoon now resolved plainly into the voice of Andy Cain:

"There aren't any bloody unions in Germany. They're all slavey."

"Quiet!" whispered Sergeant Lucas.

"Quiet, my foot! I'm not standing here and listening to him praising Hitler."

Then, to the consternation of B Company, Andy Cain walked slowly off the parade ground.

Not one member of Six Platoon felt any more of the colonel's words. The speculation was too intense about what would Andy get for this? Had the colonel seen it?

They did not have to wait long. When they came back to their laces after the parade, Andy was sitting in his tent calmly awaiting the consequences. They crowded into the tent, vociferous and sympathetic.

"What did you do it for?"

"Yes, why did you? No one takes any notice of old Omah."

"If you must know," Andy told them sternly, "I did say block. I detest the man and I just couldn't stand there any longer and listen to that bullshit. He's a bloody Nazi!"

"It was only the grog working out," said Chips.

"He's not a bad fellow, after all," insisted Andy. "I was a fool to do what I did—no point in it. Still, I'm glad I did it."

They murmured their sympathy again.

"Don't see what there was to get so excited about," said Percy Grabble.

"You wouldn't?" said Andy.

"As a matter of fact," continued Percy, "I agree with him. These coal-miners and others ought to be pulled into gear. They're ruining the war effort."

"What was effort?" Dooley Franks asked him. "Do you call this a war-out a war effort?"

"Yes, I do call it a war effort, and this is a damned good unit, and Fitzeroy's a good C.O."

"You'll get your stripes, Perce!"

"You make me sick!" exclaimed Dick.

The voice of Sergeant Lucas interrupted them.

"Outside, everybody! Break up this mothers' meeting."

Lucas detained Andy as he came out.

"Afraid it's a crime sheet for you, old timer. You're under open arrest."

"You surprise me," murmured Andy.

Lucas chuckled.

"You're a world-beater! Whatever possessed you to walk off a C.O.'s parade?"

"A principle, I suppose. I doubt if it's much use explaining to you."

The handsome sergeant grinned at him.

"I got rid of my principles some years ago. Look here, Andy, where will this sort of business get you? This
Six Platoon was dismissed at three o'clock that afternoon. It was still warm and sunny. Dick was making his way over the hill to a small Jewish settlement. At the summit he turned and stood surveying the scene below him. The plain made a wonderful pattern: a small white huddle of Jewish houses; a rambling grey Arab village; a dark square of orange grove; the raw red of a ploughed field; the zigzag of a cactus-flanked lane; the white ribbon of a new road in curves and angles; and a cluster of army tents that looked like some foreign growth. The sun came through the clouds, falling over the peaceful land in broad patches of light.

The settlement was half a dozen houses on either side of a lane. The fronts of two of them had been turned into places of business: one into a café, the other into a curio shop.
THE TWENTY THOUSAND THIEVES

In the same earnest manner she went on: "It is easy for many people to hate Jews. When they are like that, they hate them."

She was tall, broad-shouldered and very brown-skinned. Her hair was jet-black, and smoothly set on the head. She wore a white blouse and a short, faded blue skirt.

"Australian shopkeepers are no better," he told her.

"They were outside the cafe by this time. He was conscious of a desire to know this girl more intimately. Probably the incident in the shop, the fit of

frightened, he accepted the invitation. She told him her name was Naomi. She led him off the road along a path to the top of a slope. She paused, indicating the scene laid out to an orderly plan, surrounded on its edges by orange groves.

"You have never been a Kibbutz before?" she asked.

"A communal settlement. This is where I live."

"By no means!" She took his question as a joke.

"There may be one or two Communists. Come, We will go to my house and on the way I will explain to you."

She led him down the hill.

THE PLAIN

Andy Cain was escorted to the Battalion Orderly Room the next morning. Regimental Sergeant-Major Varney revealed them outside.

"I could not drink that coffee," she said in the same direct fashion. "It is ridiculous. But perhaps you would like to come to my house and drink coffee with me?

Turkish coffee?"

Amused, he accepted the invitation. She told him her name was Naomi. She led him off the road along a path to the top of a slope. She paused, indicating the scene laid out to an orderly plan, surrounded on its edges by orange groves.

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Such occasions were as the breath of life to Varney. Of a legendary stupidity, he knew Army Law and all the terrors of a battalion's routine down to the last shred. He was an encyclopedia of every useless, pettifogging, intricate detail of military correctness. A militaristic parade, the drilling of a squad, the "clicking" and sentencing of some unhappy soldier; the adherence to military precision until it became pure farce; these things brought joy to his dull mind. He was a living, infallible, sub-human mass of rules and regulations.

"Praiseworthy escrito... ah!"

He deposed Andy of his hat, as was the procedure with prisoners. He knocked at the door of the colonel's office and opened it.

"Praiseworthy escrito... qued... marche!"

"Praiseworthy escrito... ah!"

Andy found himself facing Colonel Pirray.

The charges were read and Andy pleaded guilty.

The colonel signed the charge sheet at unnecessary length, finally raising his fierce dark eyes to regard Andy coolly and malignantly. He smoothed his straight black moustache with his thumb, then stubbily skipped the charge sheet with the back of his hand.
"This is utterly fantastic!"

Andy was silent. He wondered if Fitzroy knew his reason for leaving the parade. (A hundred to one he does, but he's too damn conceited to let on. Go on, sentence him you prancing, wholly-swilling swine!)

But it was not going to end as simply as that. The colonel was in the mood to expand on this outrage. If Fenchurch Street was the delight of Sergeant Major Varney, the relish of his own words was necessary to the colonel.

He settled back in his chair to enjoy himself.

"The sheer impudence of this takes my breath away! Apparently you were neither sick nor drunk, and I take it you are not insane. Your action is indefensible! You offer your commanding officer a gratuitous insult by walking off his parade for no apparent reason. However, I am not looking at this in a personal light. (Not much, you aren't.) It is the most unpardonable offence that has ever come under my notice. It's—it's—"

Fitzroy felt for the right word, suddenly found it. "It's amenable!" he ended victoriously.

He was now thoroughly pleased with himself. He straightened up and became businesslike:

"Well, have you anything to say?"

He half-closed his eyes and watched Andy shrewdly.

He knows! thought Andy. If I say nothing, that will give him a victory over me, and that's what he's after—What a mind he's got! What power, he thought, for such a man to have. Suddenly he felt sick at the whole business. He wanted to gape from this Orderly Room and this specimen of inherited privilege. What was the use of putting your head against the brick wall of his position and power? Such men always had the whip hand; such men always would. Only a fool would make such a gesture against the colonel as he had. Let him talk like—

"No, sir! Look after your own principles and hang the rest! Let him have his little triumph!"

"No, sir, I have nothing to say."

He hardly heard the sentence of fourteen days' hard labor, or the A.S.M.'s commands as he was marched out.

They gave him back his hat and he walked uneasily down the road, confused, hopeless and ashamed.