Eric Lambert

The Twenty Thousand Thieves

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In the pictures in the Versailles Gallery it's all generals, flags 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 very 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 X; 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.

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COLONEL Ormond Fitzroy was addressing the Second X Battalion. The five companies, each one hundred and thirty strong, were drawn up in hollow square formation around their commander, who was attended by Mick Varney, the regimental sergeant major. "Groggy Orme", as he was known to the men, was yellow-eyed from too much whisky the night before. He was inclined to speak petulantly and be less meticulous than usual about his accent:

"You are sadly mistaken if you imagine that being in a strange country and due to meet the enemy, perhaps in the near future, means that there will be any relaxation

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 saluted 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 lineal descendant of one of the most famous figures in Australian history, the possessor of fabulous areas 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 somewhat 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 Sixth 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 Gilbertson, 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 resentment 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 well envy. Strikes are unknown and agitators are shot. While men are dying overseas, people in Australia see fit 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 muttering in Six Platoon now resolved plainly into the voice of Andy Cain:

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

"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 heeded any more of the colonel's words. The speculation was too intense: what would Andy get for this? Had the colonel seen it?

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

"What did you do it for?"

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

"If you must know," Andy told them tiredly, "I did my 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 poor bastard."

"He's a fascist," 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.

"I don't see what there was to get so excited about," said Percy Gribble.

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

"Yes, I do call it a war effort, and this is a damned good unit, and Fitzroy'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

war's going to drag on for years and years. Look after yourself; make a career of it."

"Is that what you're doing?"

"More or less."

"Why did you join up, Frank?"

"Experience—a free tour. Why did you?"

"It seemed the right thing to do."

"You must be unique. Do you know why most of this battalion joined up? Adventure; to get away from a wife, or the police. Some of them have been on the track or out of work for years, and the army means three meals a day and a bed to sleep in. But you—you're a patriot."

"I'm an anti-fascist!"

"You take life too seriously, Andy."

"Do I? That's the worst of us half-baked socialists."

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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 zig-zag 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 blades 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.

It was Dick's intention to buy a curio of some sort to send home to his family. The shop was stacked with the typical mixture of jewellery and assorted trash; olive-wood boxes and bowls, filigree brooches, photographs, hideous silk scarves, phoney Arab daggers; all at prices giving the shopkeeper something like a hundred per cent. profit.

He spent some time choosing a present, assisted by the young Jew in charge of the shop, finally deciding on an olive-wood bowl. During this time a Jewish girl had entered the shop.

"How much?" he asked the shopkeeper.

"Twelve hundred mils."

"Twelve hundred!"

He would have argued, but he felt it beneath his dignity as a soldier. He took out his wallet. A hand suddenly appeared over it, the hand of the Jewish girl. She stood in front of Dick and spoke rapidly to the man in Hebrew. Then she turned to Dick and said in good English:

"You must not pay that much money. It is only worth eight hundred mils."

She turned again to the young Jew and spoke more Hebrew to him. He smiled at her in a propitiatory way, spread his hands, and nodded.

"He will take eight hundred," she told Dick.

"Thank you very much!" he stammered, taken aback by the rapidity of the episode. He counted out the money and took the bowl. She accompanied him from the shop, after a parting shot at the lad.

In the road, she turned to him and said earnestly:

"It is not right that the shopkeeper should rob you like that. You did not mind my interference?"

"Not at all!"

In the same earnest manner she went on: "It is easy for many people to hate Jews. When they are like the man in the shop some people feel they have a right to hate them."

She was tall, broad-hipped and very brown-skinned. Her hair was jet-black, and smoothly set on the head. Her lips were large and vividly red, without lipstick. She wore a white blouse and a short, faded blue skirt.

"Australian shopkeepers are no better," he told her. "It's just that we find it harder to forgive a foreigner."

They were outside the café by this time. He was conscious of a desire to know this girl more intimately. Intrigued and flattered by the incident in the shop, he felt himself impelled by his self-esteem to carry this relationship further. In her large vital way she was attractive. He asked her if she would have a cup of coffee with him."

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

Delighted, he accepted the invitation. She told him her name was Naomi. She led him off the road, along a path through an orange grove. A short walk brought them to the top of a slope. She paused, indicating the scene below them. What he saw was like a small township, laid out to an orderly plan, surrounded on its edges by a farm and a sea of orange groves.

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

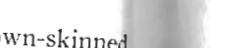
"A Kibbutz?"

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

"A communal settlement! Are you all Communists?"

"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.



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

Such occasions were as the breath of life to Varney. Of a legendary stupidity, he knew Army Law and all the items of a battalion's routine down to the last shred. He was an encyclopædia of every useless, pettifogging, archaic detail of military correctness. A battalion parade, the drilling of a squad, the "criming" 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.

"Pris-nah n'escort . . . 'alt!"

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

"Pris-nah n'escort — queek . . . march!"

"Pris-nah n'escort . . . 'alt!"

Andy found himself facing Colonel Fitzroy.

The charges were read and Andy pleaded guilty.

The colonel studied the charge sheet at unnecessary length, finally raising his fine dark eyes to regard Andy coolly and malevolently. He smoothed his straight black moustache with his thumb, then suddenly slapped 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 me you posturing, whisky-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 robot soldiery 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 unsoldierly offence that has ever come under my notice. It's—it's—it's——" Fitzroy felt for the right word, suddenly found it. "It's anarchy!" 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 of the whole business. He wanted to escape from this Orderly Room and this specimen of inherited privilege. What was the use of butting 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 a Nazi! 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' pack drill, or the R.S.M.'s commands as he was marched out. They gave him back his hat and he walked unseeingly down the road, confused, hopeless and ashamed.