

"Oh," said Herbert, "you mean me? You fooled me with the Mister, you know. Please just call me Herbert, like the other bints, I mean friends do."

Herbert sank into the chair and carefully placed his hat under it. He was about to throw away his cigarette butt, which up till now had been hanging from his lower lip, on to the floor but he noticed just in time that it was carpeted. While Mrs. Birtles was pouring out a cup of tea, he stubbed it out on his boot and flicked it over his shoulder. He hoped no one noticed but it went suspiciously near the food table.

Mrs. Birtles thrust into his unsteady hands a fragile, miniature cup, saucer, and plate, complete with teaspoon and cake fork. Poor Herbert felt the sweat break on his ruddy brow. And then to make matters worse, the vicar was thrusting a plate of sandwiches and another of biscuits under his nose. What was he to do? It was worse than when the orderly officer fell in the grease trap and the C.O. was bel-lowing for Herbert. He tried to work it out. If he took the plate in one hand and the cup and saucer in the other how could he oblige the vicar? He solved it by carefully lowering the whole of the stores on to the carpet and leaving both hands free. The old chap had been standing there quite a while and Herbert felt he had to make amends.

"I'll take a couple of each," he said. "Save you coming back, eh?" And he stacked the rations on the little plate. Mrs. Birtles seemed to have a few clues because she produced a small table for him, and left him free to look at the other *bints*, *signoras*, he corrected himself as he looked round the circle.

"And what did you do in the army?" one of the *signoras* asked in a kind voice.

Herbert looked at the vicar. He didn't like embarking on his old Dig-stories after the old bloke had been so decent. No, he would tell the truth this time. Besides he was not likely to get any free drinks anyhow.

"Most of the time I was a sanitary fatigue," he told them modestly. "I saw a bit at Cassino but I got the sh-shivers and had to evacuate in a hurry."

"Quite," said the vicar, with a slight cough. "And I am sure you are so glad to be back? Where do you come from?"

"Taranaki," said Herbert defensively, "and I don't want the usual cracks either."

"I'm sure you don't," said the vicar. "Nothing would be further from my mind. Are you staying long in Christ-church?"

"Not over Sunday," replied Herbert, wondering if the old chap made his parades compulsory or not. "I'm going on to Dunedin. They tell me there's still plenty of plonk and pretties down there. There will need to be, you know, especially after Trieste."



"Alf and I were just like this and that"