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Autor: Owen, Jason
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I BLOODY KNOWS YOU! - The crow of memory

by JASON OWEN

From time to time over the years Desmond had seen the face—crossing roads, passing by only a yard from him, yet never looking at him twice. He himself had always given that doubled glance, recognising, sure that the face belonged to the man he had known far away in Germany in the immediately post-war years; with whom he had laughed and drunk and sung, on high, way up on top of hills, ridiculously young and carefree players at enemy occupation. He had not been particularly close to this particular man; they had not had sufficient in common—lads of different backgrounds, different interests. They had merely been fellow-members of a great big group of young corporate camaraderie. But one significant thing they would come to share, in their futures after their parts in the occupation game were over. In advance it bound them a little more closely together. The thing was a city, as yet miles away, across water; but it was the city to which they would both inevitably return. But Desmond knew well enough that he, educated in the English upper-crust way away from his home, would return there as practically a stranger. Not one young buck did he know with whom he might effervescently pursue the bubblingly bacchic ways learned in Germany, already there as a surge and an urge in his fit young blood-stream. Even with a kind of dread he looked ahead to the loneliness which, as well as freedom, would ironically await him in his native province. But here in Germany was a man who had a key, already the firmly rooted native. Understandably he had clutched at him: «Taff,» he said. «when we get back we must have a meet-up, you and me, have a drink together some time, talk about these good times. OK?»

«Sure,» Taff had said. «Let's do that then.»

So they had expressed intentions and exchanged the addresses to go with them. And indeed Desmond had written, after he'd flopped about for some aimless companionless weeks, finding nothing to tether him around the comparatively unfamiliar corners. But he had never received a reply. Once he had even travelled to a suburb of the city to a pub which Taff had described, hoping that he might see him there and find 'member-ship' of something or other. But he hadn't. It had been a dully lifeless interior which he had found and as quickly left.

All of three years had gone by after that before he saw the face for the first time on home ground, crossing a road, registering not one spark of recognition as it passed by. But it was too distinctive a face to mistake: aquiline nosed, thick black eye-browed, slightly haunted eyes. After the unanswered letter Desmond could only presume a conscious ignoring, a snub. And now he had no longer the same gaping need for companionship which had made him clutch at some, at any sort of human continuity. He had filled in the gaps, found his own set, traced his own paths, made new good times. Certainly he did not now accost the man, turn in his tracks and rush back across the road after him, with a «Taff . . . boyo . . .!» He had let him pass, like the past they had shared.

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Many more years had gone by, many gaps had been made and then filled. At intervals during them the face had reappeared around other corners; sometimes after six years, sometimes after six months. But recently Desmond had begun to see with more regularity the man who, he was sure, had once been Private Beynon; but it was no longer crossing roads. The face had begun to appear from time to time, briefly but significantly, in the certain below-stairs bar which Desmond himself had gradually come to frequent over the years. It was a somewhat shabby and tatty hide-away for a furtive minority: where in the main the customers were after one thing only, or one thing beyond what they could order over the counter. You might enter casually, coincidentally, once—but it was not a bar which opened with obviousness onto a street. You might return if you thought the condition of the draught Worthington good. But there would be insufficient to attract you back unless you had other motives. To return was almost to commit yourself to certain human proclivities. That Beynon—or the man Desmond still presumed to be Beynon—belonged to that band had been immediately evident to Desmond the first time he had seen him there. The self-effacing entry and passage to the bar, the covert glance around the other faces on show in the talent market once his drink was in his hand: all this betrayed him to the experienced eye. 'So old Beynon's on this game as well!' he had thought with wry amusement. 'Well, well . . . Whoever would have thought it of him—or of me—back there in Deutschland all those years ago.'

Always, the times after that, Beynon saw—must have seen—Desmond's face as he made his quick survey of the talent; and always he passed immediately over it. At this remove it was quite conceivable that he now no longer recognised him; Desmond was well aware that his own face had changed considerably. Beynon's had not: it was comparatively unwrinkled, unclouded; and most important of all, not one grey strand was to be seen amidst the still thick, still black, still wavy hair. Quite apart from however else he may have changed, Desmond's hair had gone prematurely very grey. He envied Beynon, especially down there below-stairs.

*

One Saturday, with only fifteen minutes of British 'opening time' left to go and nothing in sight which would keep Desmond from catching his last, prematurely early train into the castration of suburbia, Beynon entered, crossed with long soft-soled strides from door to bar. Since the last time that Desmond had seen him he had grown a beard, as luxuriantly black as the hair on his head and above his eyes, but in no way disguising the doggedly distinctive face. As if to dispel any notion that he was there only because the draught beer was well kept, Beynon did his coursing gaze around the faces which were still there, uninvited to parties, too lazy to go off to the brighter offerings of dock-land: the dregs of a Saturday night. He took in Desmond's with the most perfunctory of glances and as usual passed it over blankly and quite unattracted.

About Desmond that night were the small effects of alcohol and the much bigger effects of boredom, which he was prepared to do almost anything to relieve. 'I suppose it *is* Beynon,' he thought. 'Although, after all this time, how can I be sure? He may even be only a myth of my imagination!' Suddenly he remembered—and actually grinned to himself, remembering—an incident which had happened to him in the subway at this time on a Saturday night and almost as many years ago as he had actually known Beynon. A real young tough,

about the same age as himself, had suddenly appeared before him and announced loudly and even triumphantly: «I knows you!». Desmond had looked at him blankly and astonished. «I'm sorry . . .» he had spluttered. But he could not convince the man that he had never seen him before in his life. In a huff he had stalked off, protesting as if to preserve his honour, in a voice which echoed down the subway and at which people turned: «I bloody knows you!» 'But tonight I'm going to find out!' decided Desmond. 'Once and for all!' Why should I let him bloody well get away with it? I may as well at very long last satisfy one small lingering point of curiosity as a gesture to a deadly dull evening.' He moved to the bar, wishing in any case to order up one more beer while there was still time. At the bar beside Beynon was an empty place. The moment was completely convenient. Desmond tapped the arm nearest to him and «Excuse me for asking this, but I would like to know: Is your name Beynon?» he said.

The face looked at him without one flicker of recognition. There was hesitation and a pause—as if he had actually been caught in an illegal act, rather than being merely in an accepted spot for access to it—before the man said, almost hostilely: «Yes, my name is Beynon.»

Quickly and self-consciously, already regretting, Desmond went on: «Only I think that we were together in Germany, o a number of years ago now . . .»

Beynon continued to look at him while the association of the word 'Germany' registered for him and then suddenly, incredulously, glowingly, his face crumbled into a great big beam and «Why! It's Desmond . . .!» he cried. «Well, I'll be damned! Desmond . . . I'd never have recognised you. Never! You've changed so much! You've become so full in the face. I mean, the Desmond I remember had a thin face.» And he drew in his cheeks to show what he meant, to reproduce the almost haggard boyish face which had been Desmond's face then, the eyes shining with almost unnatural largeness above the pronounced cheek-bones and rosy cheeks, almost the face of a young consumptive, with all the intensity of feeling behind it to back up that impression. For a moment Desmond also saw himself as he had been then. «I guess I'm a pretty changed person,» he offered (and suddenly it came to him quite how changed he was). «After all, it's all of . . . 18 years. But you haven't changed! Anyway, I'm glad you remember me . . .»

«Remember? I'll say I remember! Those two months I spent with your lot were the only two I ever enjoyed in the army. God, they were great times! Do you remember those weekends up at Scharfoldendorf . . .? I'll never forget them: the singing and the drinking and the laughing and the dancing. And Ben . . . I wonder what happened to Ben . . .» «oh, I'm still in touch with Ben,» said Desmond, seeing the great big brown shining eyes of Ben and thinking how the hair above them had not changed colour but had now completely gone and how little they'd really had in common the last time they'd met. «As a matter of fact, he married a girl from these parts. Her people kept a pub in the Valleys. I went to their wedding. But, d'you know—I'm sorry, but I don't even remember your first name—if I ever knew it. 'Taff' is all I remember.»

«O yes, you knew it all right,» said Beynon. «You was the only one who ever called me by it. You said: 'I just can't call you Taff'. It's Jack,» he said. «But you used to say 'Jeck'!» He grinned, mimicking an accent different to his own local one. «You don't mind me saying so, do you?» «Christ, man!» said Desmond.

«You know, I tried to get in touch with you years ago. You wrote me a letter, telling me to contact you.» But Desmond could no longer remember even writing the letter. «Perhaps I did,» he said. «Honestly, after all this time I just don't remember.»

«But it must have got under the mat in the hall.»

(‘A likely story!’ thought Desmond unconcernedly.)

«... and I didn't find it for some time. And then I looked in the telephone book and there were four Pezzacks but none that lived where I remembered that you said you lived. And you'd told me to ring so's we could get together, like.» ‘Another palpable lie,’ thought Desmond remotely—there had only ever been two Pezzacks in the book—but this enthusiasm doesn't seem counterfeit. And the memory...

«I remember you was going back to Oxford,» continued Beynon eagerly. «You wanted to teach English. Yes, that's the only thing you wanted to do.»

«Well, I went and that's what I'm doing,» said Desmond. «Once I thought I saw you, years ago in the Clarence Bar.» The allusion to the Clarence was significant; it had once provided a similar availability far more notoriously and smartly and above-stairs.

«But the bod I thought was you disappeared and I was going to ask him when he come back if he was Des Pezzack, but he didn't come back.»

«It could have been me,» allowed Desmond, also admitting to Clarence attendance, in order to balance things.

«But you, Jack?» he asked. «How's it been with you over all these years?»

«O married, you know, three kids. I'm an electrician at the Steelworks. Got my trade certificates and all that. I trained when I come back from the Forces; went on one of them rehabilitation courses. Now you look like Des Pezzack!» he broke off delightedly from his account of himself to say; «now when you've got your finger tip at the corner of your mouth like you've got it now...»

Desmond looked in the mirror behind the bar to see how he'd got it; but the gesture meant nothing to him.

«I remember you always used to put it that way before.»

Memory... memory...: of faces one thing, but of facts another.

«Do you remember the bar up at Scharfoldendorf where we spent all those hours with Ben and the rest and you played the piano?» In a sort of blur Desmond did.

«And do you remember that last weekend when all the rest had gone and there was just you and me in the Dive Inn beside the swimming pool?»

‘The Dive Inn, God!’ thought Desmond, recalling suddenly but only vaguely. «It was a very little bar, wasn't it?» he asked.

«No, about the size of this one, but it was alcov'd off—that's what you probably remember. And some people came over and said could they join us and we had the hell of a time, just when we were missing the others so much and we thought the weekend was going to be so flat.»

Beynon's memories bounced on and on, enclosing himself and Desmond in a sort of oblivion, detaching them from the rest of the bar's rather sad, seedy flotsam and the «Time, gentlemen, please!» and the «Let's have your glasses now!» and the «Hurry along, sir!» And Desmond felt quite seriously depressed that he remembered so little himself: the Bills and the Jeans and the Basils that Beynon had churned up for him. ‘Why live at all, if it's all going to fade so

quickly and so thoroughly?' he wryly thought. 'They told me I'd lose my memory if I did it so much when I was young...'

«And do you remember the night we all went singing and dancing down the street after playing bingo for beer in the NAAFI and how we all caught that Kleinbahn, wasn't it they called it?—that little railway that used to go clanging its bell across the fields. You was the ring-leader; said we all had to ride once on the last one of the night, over to Bad Eilenstein and back. And what was it you sang?—'And we'll all go riding on the Kleinbahn; to a new land far away!' Yeah, that was it!»

Beynon chuckled away reminiscently and very dimly Desmond heard again the bell clanging across the fields, felt the kick of his young leg as he aimed his toes towards the moon in mock song and dance.

'Christ! the man even remembered the name he—infant that he had been—had given to his cigarette lighter...'

«Percy Craven... Have you still got Percy Craven?» Beynon was asking.

«Percy Craven? Percy Craven?»

He had to have it explained to him: a name he had invented in his own youth.

But, although he was depressed by his failure to retain all these details in his own mind, Desmond welcomed the reminder of, the re-introduction to, his former self and his former times.

«Yes, I remember lots of things you said,» said Beynon. «You told me about a film you'd seen called 'Mayerling'» (he gave it the anglicised pronunciation). «You said,» Beynon recalled and quoted, very precisely, eighteen years later: 'Charles Boyer was a man of blood and passion then, not one of your lily-livered, unfeeling Hollywood heroes, such as he became'. Yeah, that's what you said, and you described how the vein throbbed at the side of his temple and how the mirror distorted his image when he shot at his reelection and splintered the glass.» And Desmond Pezzack looked at him in wide-eyed, sieve-brained astonishment, hearing an opinion of his which he himself had quite forgotten now quoted verbatim. But now they were chucking them out of the bar and, as they went, Beynon asked: «And you, Des? What about you? You married?» «No,» said Desmond, «I'm not married» and very deliberately he added: «Which explains a little more what I was doing in that bar tonight than what you were.»

«I suppose so,» agreed Beynon with an open grin, both of them slipping easily into honesty now 18 years later.

«You're unhappily married, then?» Desmond asked.

«Lord, no! It's just that I like both, I guess!» The pink mouth, emphasised by the thick black surround of moustache and beard, grinned again.

«But did you know it then, back there?» Desmond followed up.

«No. Well, yes. I never had, mind. But I knew I wanted to, like. And do you know who with?»

«Ben?»

«No—you!»

«Christ!» Desmond gave a great big guffaw up into the night, piercing the drizzle. «God, that's rich!»

Beynon shared the joke. He put his hand on Desmond's shoulder to tell him so.

Their laughter subsided and «God, I was green in those days,» said Desmond. «Do you know, I didn't even realise that you opened your mouth and

let your tongue have a field-day when you kissed? I honestly thought you kept your lips tight-closed and just pressed mouths together like crazy! No wonder the girls up at Scharf never came back for a second go!» «It was the psychiatrist at the rehabilitation centre who first put me on the way,» said Beynon. «I often wondered whether I only did it in the hope that I'd get a better job! But I don't think so. I hope not,» he added honestly.

«But you got married nevertheless.»

«O yes.»

«I think I was a little in love with Ben,» said Desmond.

«I know,» said Beynon.

«But whether I really admitted it to myself and whether the others guessed—all of us so bloody green—I don't know. But I don't think old Ben twigged. Although there probably had been some schoolboy play in his past. He was a bit of a sexy beast.»

«I often wondered if there had been anything there—later on,» said Beynon. «There was all that talk about the showers.» «Christ, yes!» said Desmond, with another start of memory. «We used to go down there when pissed as newts and do song and dance routines, quite starkers. There were three of us: Ben, me, and I can't for the life of me remember who the other one was... Johnny, it was surely?» he hazarded, pleased to bring a name out of the barrel himself. «And it couldn't have been more innocent. Although I must have got a kick just out of being naked. I think I said once to Ben: 'Ben, I'm afraid I'll get a beat or something'. And he said: 'So what! Good for you! So will I probably!' And he laughed like hell just as he always did. And it still couldn't have been more innocent. And you remember how it ended? With me slipping on the proverbial soap and waking up the next morning with blood all over the pillow and having to have three stitches in my head when we got down from the hills—if you put your hand there, you can feel them still. I went around for the rest of the week bandaged up to look like the bloody King of Siam—a fine advertisement for the Occupation! I've been back to Germany, you know; many times since then.»

«Back to Scharf?» asked Beynon, rejuvenatedly eager.

«No: I've followed practically every other river—Rhein, Neckar, Mosel, Lahn, Main, Elbe—but never the Weser. I've gone on my tod, travelling around on one-night stands. Learning the language, you know.»

«I remember you said one night up at Scharf—the night after the others had left—: 'Jack, we ought to be bloody well shot being out here and boozing our nights away and never learning the language. It's a wonderful opportunity and we're going to regret it for the rest of our days.'»

«It wasn't so easy nevertheless, with the ban on frating and all the inequality of living standards which made human exchange so difficult. I remember trying it once. God, I think I looked 12 in those days, and there I was occupying! They were so bloody proud and they forced practically a whole cherry tart on me which must have used up a month's ration of cooking fat. The whole family was summoned and they trouped silently around the table all staring at me and none of us could say anything. They didn't have English, I didn't have German. The last one to come to the table had to hobble in. He'd lost a leg on the eastern front. His eyes were dark, beneath as well as in themselves. He never smiled. I did, like fury. I never went back. I was too damned embarrassed. But, of course, that Germany doesn't exist any more... He thought

suddenly of the red-brick phoenix of Münster unrecognised one afternoon as the train from Hamburg swept through the sunlit golden corn of Westphalia. He had recalled himself in the same town at the age of 20, returning to 'occupy' one New Year's Day, eyes filmed over in youthful incomprehension and despair at the craters and the rubble seen through an early dusk and drizzle. This was one thing which he still remembered very clearly. But he didn't share this particular memory with Beynon; Beynon who was now saying: «There was a decent old girl in the house we were billeted in. I stopped the lads throwing ripe raspberries at a portrait of her old dad in the sitting room. And I rescued some bits of china for her as well.»

«Of course, I'd never been to bed with anyone then whose parents had died at Auschwitz,» mused Desmond. «But, then, I'd scarcely been to bed with anyone at all,» he added reflectively, re-meeting now so forcibly his former self.

Lost in their exchange, they were progressing slowly along the rain-washed, light-reflecting pavements of the main street of the city. «Here, stop a minute,» said Beynon next, «and write your name on the back of this, will you?» He thrust an envelope towards Desmond. «I want to see when I get home if your signature's the same as it was! I've got it on the back of that shield of Schaumburg-Lippe» (he pronounced it entirely correctly, remembering all with such clarity) «you tore down in the Dive Inn and made everyone sign their names on the back of it on my birthday. It was my twenty-first. I can remember I wanted to stroke your back when I got a bit boozed. But I didn't dare; although I think I managed to touch you on some pretext or other...»

«The Dive Inn...» reflected Desmond. «It was appropriately named, wasn't it? That's just what we used to do: starkers, when we had a load on. Until that night I nearly drowned... Do you remember?» he asked, as he suddenly did himself with a slight shiver. «And would have if it hadn't been for Ben. I was a lousy swimmer at the best of times, but with my belly full of all that beer and the sudden shock of hitting the cold water...»

«Yes, I remember,» said Beynon, «and how lovingly Ben tried to keep you warm after he'd fished you out. How I envied him...!» And then he connected past and present with the sudden crow of: «Now you look like Des Pezzack again!»—just as if Des Pezzack truly existed no more. They were leaning up against the front of a shop, the provincial evening already dead without even reaching 11 o'clock, last 'buses to the suburbs of the city already pulling out. «Side face,» continued Beynon; «but full face I wouldn't recognise you from Adam.»

«And a funny thing happened to me, you know, up there at Scharf.» It was Desmond now who was reflecting. «Some of it's coming back to me now. I was really a little bit worried, being able to recall so little... But this I must tell you about! It was one of those really wild nights and in the middle of it I suddenly saw a vaguely familiar face which I couldn't quite place. We exchanged a nod across the room and then I threw myself back into the frolics; but the swirl of them brought me later on next to the owner of that remembered but unidentified face. Without any ado, he said to me: 'I'll always remember you—you tried to get into bed with me one night!' I stopped very short and I must have gone very red—I wasn't as innocent as all that! And then something echoed remotely out of my subconscious: how, in the middle of a night, after a very drunken bout, I'd had to get up to empty my bladder and how, while stumbling back down the long, dimmed corridor of the barrack-block on my return trip,

I'd mistaken the door of my bunk, gone into the wrong room and been about to get into what I thought was my own bed, only to find another body there, which was awoken by my efforts and voiced some 'what the hell!' After some fuzzy apology I'd found the right door and the right bed and slept the incident into complete oblivion, where it would otherwise have remained . . . Meeting you tonight's turned out to be a bit like that . . . But I must go now or I'll miss my last train and it's too far to walk and you can hardly invite me back to share a bed with you and your wife . . .!»

«I'll come with you to the station,» said Beynon, putting his hand on Desmond's shoulder again.

«I've seen you around quite a few times over the years, you know,» said Desmond.

«Why the hell didn't you speak, then?»

«Well, after all these years I wasn't quite sure—although you've changed scarcely at all—and, besides, you always looked right through me, without a spark of recognition. It was obviously chicklets you were after, man—like the sort I was once!»

«Well, don't be annoyed,» said Beynon; «but, honestly, getting out so little, unless they're something really special, unless they look like a film-star, if you like . . . Like you used to look, if that's any consolation! How old are you now, anyway?» «38,» said Desmond.

«No!» said Beynon, almost incredulously. «I'm 39 already and I thought you were older than me» (and meaning: 'By Christ you look it!').

«Well, I'm 39 next month but I'm staying 38 until the verly last minute I am! Anyway, you look 10 years younger than me, so what you worried about?»

«Yes, but you must have lived a hell of a lot more than me to look like that; and I'm jealous!» retorted Beynon.

«Well, jealous or not, I'm very glad I spoke to you tonight, man; and I'm genuinely sorry I didn't it a long time ago.» After such an orgy of generous, enthusiastic memory, was it not reasonable to discount all the previous thoughts of snubbing, to give the benefit of doubt?

«Yes, you should have!» reproved Beynon. «But, now that you have, I'd certainly like to see you again. I'll have a good excuse for the wife tonight all right; something I can really tell her about!»

«What you doing a fortnight tonight? If you're around then, I'll be below-stairs some time during the evening. Look in! Or, if you can't make it then, here's my card; give me a ring or drop me a note» (the million Pezzacks in the directory; all the envelopes hidden under the hall-mat). «OK? And, Jack, thank you for fancying me when I was a bloody chicklet!»

He grinned mischievously; and for Beynon there was a twinkle to it that reminded him a little more of the young man he'd known—and fancied.

Standing at the barrier to the subway, he said: «Well, who knows, Des . . . It might be possible to make up for some lost time, recapture some of that past . . .»

A fortnight that night? Another eighteen years hence? He gave a grin and waved his arm as Desmond went running down the subway towards his last train, which he knew would clang no bell as it went its way through British fields in another decade. But, had there been a moon that night, he felt that he might have made the gesture of a high kick towards it, for old revived times' sake.

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DER GEDIEGENE TREFFPUNKT IN BASEL

Die Gitarre brachte es an den Tag

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Schweizer Presse, Juli 1966

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